

Discursive subjugation and the ways out: Narratives of othering among Czech Roma mothers

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This paper introduces the analysis of biographical interviews focusing on the negotiation of the day-to-day child-raising by Czech Roma mothers. We demonstrate the narrative reflection of ethnic identity, as well as coping strategies and ways out of the discursive subjugation of being marginalized by ethnic othering. We present coping strategies based on 1) vacillating between refusal and resigned acceptance of the negative discourse among the ethnic majority, 2) claiming normality through universal humanism, the submission of racialized microaggression, and the psychologizing of an aggressor, and 3) embracing family pride and social dissent. We find that primary socialization is an important element in tackling the discursive subjugation of ethnic othering. Further, we outline suggestions for the following research of othering mechanisms that seem to endure in European societies in terms of the reproduction of social inequalities.

Keywords: biographical research, Roma people, coping strategies, identity, mothering, othering, primary socialization, social inequalities, social exclusion, Czechia

Introduction

This paper is historically anchored in the period following the Second World War, when thousands of Slovak Roma people came to the Czech lands in order to contribute to the post-war reconstruction of industry and city landscapes. This historical course of events is part of a wider demographic trend of labor migration in the late twentieth century, considered one of the milestones in modern European migration history (Castles and Miller 1998). An international perspective on narratives collected among Czech Roma mothers reveals the wider context of the narrators' everyday lives. The contemporary Czech cultural and social macro context is hostile toward Roma people, underpinned by structural racism and antigypsyism (Rostas 2017) which have been historically reproduced through centuries of marginalization and persecution by local populations and governments (Nečas

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1999). This negative relationship is also embedded in the very term “Roma,” often discussed among the Czech social science community (Obrovská and Sidiropulu-Janků 2019). Looking at the term from an emic perspective, it has replaced the exonym “Gypsy,” which had been dominant in the Czech lands until the 1990s, even in professional discourses. Nevertheless, as a lived term, the denomination “Gypsy” prevails, and the term “Roma” is, in contrast, sometimes perceived as alienating and offensive. This ambiguity reflects the nature of Czech Roma relationships until now. In this article, we use the term Roma without quotation marks, but we are aware of this terminology’s complex and contested nature.

Even nowadays, Czech Roma, as well as other darker-skinned outgroup members in Czech society (Alexander 1988; Janků 2003), face negative stereotyping, low expectations, and structural inequalities in many institutional domains, including education, the job market, housing, and so on (FRA 2022). Roma families often live in deprived conditions and low-quality housing (e.g. lodging houses, public hostels) and often in multigenerational households, as a reaction to poverty (Čanigová and Souralová 2022). Even though some people subjectively perceive the situation as less oppressive than before, recent research shows rather the opposite (Cviklová 2015; FRA 2022; Obrovská and Sidiropulu-Janků 2021). Therefore, we posit the fact that for generations Czech Roma have been – and continue to be – discriminated against and stigmatized as an analytical presupposition for our analysis. Czech Roma deal with stigmatization based on visible differentiation due to skin pigmentation, as well as intersectional forms of social marginalization, and as a consequence, they have developed and share complex compensating mechanisms. Roma mothers, who often possess low education, face severe marginalization in the job market, instead taking on the role of main caregivers in large families (Broekhuizen et al. 2019).

The role of a mother is closely interlinked with gender stereotypes, and achieving distance from normative ideals of motherhood may be especially challenging for socially disadvantaged people (Arendell 2000) who, in the case of Czech Roma, also face racialization by ethnic majority Czechs. An emancipatory parenting model is typically absent in the narratives of Roma mothers (Sidiropulu-Janků and Obrovská 2023). Previous research has also pointed to “othermothering” (Collins 2000), namely, the phenomenon of Roma girls taking care of younger siblings and the household (e.g. Levinson and Sparkes 2006). In contrast, boys are reminded of their future duties as fathers and breadwinners. This strongly embedded gendered normativity of Roma parenting is further cemented by Roma mothers’ socially scarce living conditions, in which public social service surveillance is present. This scenario is historically connected to socialist ideology, intertwined with

pronatalist and eugenic discourses (Hašková and Dudová 2020; Schmidt 2016), which closely regulated and disciplined the reproductive behavior of those women who did not undergo medical screenings, had too many children, or did not fit the ideal of socialist childcare. Roma women represent a group typically framed as the “biounderclass” (Prajerová 2018), excluded from the “quality population,” prevented from having children, and forced to undergo sterilization (Schmidt 2016).

In 2018, a large-scale international biographical study among mothers was conducted as part of the research project “Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society” (ISOTIS). The country-specific analysis of 25 biographical interviews among the Roma minority with Czech Roma mothers uncovered a complex course of events related to dealing with the moments of othering that accompany the mothering practices of Czech Roma women. We explore their multiple self-perceptions of the ethnic, racial, cultural, and gendered parental layers of identity, thus shedding light on the intersections of such social categories; ethnicity, race, social class, and gender can overlap and exert strong symbolic as well as material power (Lareau 2011).

We focus on the narratives of belonging and ethnic othering among Czech Roma mothers, exploring interpretations of the positive experiences of belonging and coping strategies, along with the negative experiences of being othered based on ethnicity, within both formal and informal settings. During our research, we have given voice to our research participants, while avoiding stereotyping and essentialism. These contradictory efforts accompany much research conducted among Roma. In this article, we argue strongly for the potential of biographical research to avoid epistemic injustice (Klyve 2019), by showing the analytical and heuristic value of complex biographical narrative gathering, analysis, and interpretation. Narrative competence is not a matter of formal education or a shared cultural code; rather, it resides in the functionality of the biographical method. Therefore, we argue that epistemic justice is embedded in the biographical method itself because it has the potential to bring attention to the complexity of human experience and prevents labeling and stereotyping. At the same time, it offers plasticity in understanding the nuances of lived identity and its various layers. In the case of our research, these layers include parenting, mothering experiences, early childcare, Roma ethnic minority identity, living in Czech society, and experiences with the pre-school and elementary education systems. In this respect, we do not perceive “Romanifying science” as analytically specific in comparison to other identity layers of the meaning-making processes among research participants that we addressed in order to give them space for narrating their life conditions and contributing to epistemic justice (Klyve 2019).

Ethnic/racial othering: Towards narrative coping strategies

Othering as a process of recognizing and/or creating the *other* has a long tradition in Western thinking and social order, either as mere dialectic opposition to a *familiar* self, or as a *power tool of oppression*. Some scholars refer to the Greek philosophers Parmenides and Plato “who defined the Other in relation to the Same” (Kearney 2003: 7), while others refer to the master-slave dialectic of Hegel that, besides following social philosophical traditions, underlies Spivak’s well-known notion of othering (Jensen 2011: 64). The postcolonial debate and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) anchors othering in the critique of the social order, while Erving Goffman’s focus on the dynamic processes of social interaction on the micro level have drawn attention to the individual level of response to symbolic social oppression. In Goffman’s writing on stigma, for example, he describes “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (1963: Preface). Some scholars focus on the analysis of othering as a mechanism that explains the liminal spaces of the human psyche reflected in cultural conditions and in diverse forms of estrangement (Kearney 2003; Kristeva 1995; Said 1978). Others devote attention to the psycho-social mechanisms induced by othering mechanisms in social interactions (Abutbul-Selinger 2020; Goffman 1963; Jensen 2011; Sue et al. 2007).

In our analysis, we follow the latter approach, focusing on the diversity and narrative disposition among forms of dealing with othering reflected across generations in the life stories of Czech Roma mothers. We bear in mind the intersectional nature of othering acts as perceived by the mothers, and highlight the suitability of the biographical method for its analysis (Rodríguez-Reche and Cerchiaro 2023). We closely follow the conceptual tradition on othering that portrays it as a process of creating distance and of excluding outgroup members from the core-group solidarity (Alexander 1988; Janků 2003), all of which can manifest in different ways.

Based on his ethnographic research among ethnic minority youth in Denmark, Jensen (2011) presents two types of reactions to othering. One can either *capitalize* on the fact that they are being othered, or *refuse* it either by disidentifying with the ethnically defined identity, or claiming a normality that stands outside ethnically defined boundaries. Inspired by Jensen’s approach, we unpack the diversity of reactions to othering in the narratives of Czech Roma mothers. Besides encompassing vivid examples of explicit othering, the biographies of Roma mothers demonstrate more subtle forms of the ethnic/racial boundaries that Roma mothers face on an everyday basis. Such othering experiences and strategies for dealing with

them function as facilitators of identity construction and boundary work processes (Barth 1969).

In this article, we elaborate both kinds of othering experiences, i.e. the more explicit ethnic othering, such as insults, assaults, attacks, scornful jokes, etc., as well as implicit and less obvious manifestations, such as microaggressions or tacit everyday insults (Abutbul-Selinger 2020). While most research in the field of ethnic and racial studies thematizes explicit and public forms of marginalization on the macrolevel, such as state, national, and policy discourses (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), recently, scholars have begun to stress everyday ethnicity, lived realities, and ordinary experiences (Brubaker et al. 2008). As Tremlett (2017: 736) pinpoints, “[P]ortraying the ‘everyday ethnicity’ of Roma is about questioning the established ‘norm’ from which contemporary negative dominant portrayals continue to be circulated.” At the same time, the theoretical shift to everyday ethnicity corresponds to the critique of primordialized and essentialized notions of ethnic groups as being composed of a stable, unchanging set of cultural traits (Barth 1969; Brubaker 2004; Jenkins 1997). This shift is represented, for instance, by Brubaker’s (2004) critique of analytical groupism, which instead of considering ethnic groups as basic units of social reality, and thus, primary analytical units, stresses the ways social reality is produced through the practical acts of ethnic classification and identification. Everyday ethnicity is thus depicted as multiple and dynamic, sometimes reproducing structural classifications and official discourses in a top-down manner, sometimes bringing forth unexpected meanings and overtly challenging the cycle of suppressive ethnicization.

In Romani studies, the debate regarding the proper conceptualization of ethnicity/race is ubiquitous and highly conceptual, as well as ethical. Our argumentation regarding othering and narrative coping strategies is anchored both in the discourses of ethnicity *and* race. The context of post-socialist Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, where the population is rather socio-culturally homogeneous, differs from countries with long histories of colonialism and migration. Racial diversity and inequalities based on race are thus not so central in the CEE social space, compared to the North American context, for example, in which race is one of the core categories causing structural inequalities, revealed more than four decades ago by feminist theorists of intersectionality (Alarcón 1981). Nevertheless, the lived experience of Czech Roma mothers speaks to the validity of perspectives on racialized oppression and racial microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007), especially in its power to frame differences as essential, inherited, embodied, and not changeable. Therefore, in line with Sciortino (2012), we argue for a more integrated approach to ethnicity, race, and nationality, one

that sees them as a family of forms of cultural understanding and social organization (Brubaker 2009). We sympathize with Sciortino's decision just to use the term *difference* "as a synthetic label" (2012: 383). While ethnicity, race, and nationality can be considered semantic categories related to social identity, distinctions such as race/ethnicity, and civic/ethnic are powerful binary codes and categories of practice that structure narratives endowed with powerful symbolic and social power. We are aware that as an analytical category the distinctions between ethnicity and race can obfuscate much more than they clarify (Brubaker 2009), and our analysis of the narratives supports such an approach. Nevertheless, especially on the macrolevel, the terms ethnicity and race still play an important symbolic and structural role in association with othering, worthy of explicit reflection. In our analysis, we focus on narratives depicting experiences that reveal the ethnic/racial identity of both Roma mothers and their children, as well as on the coping strategies in response to othering. We consider biographical research methods an important and encouraging tool for non-essentialist treatment of complex experiences in the ethnic minority interactional context. We also reflect on the phenomenon that we call "discursive subjugation," when the narrators are (more or less successfully) looking for proper, comfortable, and subjectively authentic narrative forms when it comes to reflecting on experiences of othering and identity construction. At the same time, we are interested to discover whether and how explicit and implicit forms of ethnic/racial othering are internalized, challenged, or completely refused by Roma mothers and if/how ethnic/racial boundaries are solidified or rather crossed.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this article is based on a sub-study of the larger ISOTIS research project conducted in 11 European countries in the years 2017–2019, which focused on unraveling the complexity of educational inequalities and developing tools for tackling them at the level of schools, communities, and family environments. The European comparative biographical sub-study looked more closely into how disadvantaged families perceive, interpret, and negotiate their day-to-day situation in bringing up their children, reflected in the informants' life stories across ethnic-cultural minority and low-income groups (Nurse and Melhuish 2018). The biographical interviews consisted of three parts: 1) a spontaneous life story narration, honing in on the issue of the target child's education and development, including filling out a family tree; 2) clarification of the narrative, in which the researcher posed narrativizing incentives for each of the events mentioned; and 3) a semi-structured section, covering the key themes of child care and educational support. The analysis

consisted of synchronized steps across the country teams, according to a coding tree that was discussed step by step and augmented by new ideas from all the teams. At the same time, each national team maintained a record of country-specific and especially rich topics as they emerged during the analysis. In the case of Czechia, the topics revealed through the analysis concerned existing discourse on Czech Roma relationships and ethnic identification.

For the purpose of the Czech country-specific analysis on othering that we present in this article, we formulated two analytical areas of focus:

- I. Which situations reveal ethnic/racial identities or facilitate the ethnic/racial boundary work of Roma mothers and their children?
 - How do they cope with situations forcing negative ethnic/racial identity or enabling positive feelings of belongingness?
 - How do they cope with explicit acts of othering (either based on ethnic minority identification or racialized oppression)?
 - How do they cope with implicit ethnic/racial othering and/or invisible boundaries?
 - Which paths do they choose/follow to exit discursive subjugation?
 - How do these experiences affect mothers' choices regarding the socialization of their children?

- II. Experiencing othering in their daily life as a mother of a child, or experienced by the child and perceived by the mother, which narrative strategies are used by Czech Roma mothers
 - to be able to find traces that facilitate an identity project towards more dignified and open-ended life prospects and narrative streams?
 - to be able to find a way to connect to the presumably normative ideas of a fitting social existence?
 - to reconcile with existing discourse and the associated reality (and thus supporting oppressive or othered social position of oneself)?

The narrative analysis of the first part of the interviews uncovered meaning structures among Czech Roma mothers that reflect their self-conception as mothers, and indicate the narrative context of their ethnic identity. When and how is such identity activated while telling the story of her life? In addition, we focused on the narrative structures associated with mothering itself, and how ethno-cultural identity is reproduced across generations. With these structures of meaning in mind, we returned to the data in order to conduct a more thorough narrative analysis of the spontaneous life story narration, focusing on its length, whether the issue of ethnicity appeared

in the spontaneous narrative, and if yes, in what form and under which context(s).

We next selected parts of the interviews that thematized the notions of ethno-cultural identity and coping with othering, and proceeded by using the analytical method of “pragmatic refraction,” introduced by Fritz Schütze:

Pragmatic refraction means not to take verbal – here: specifically autobiographical narrative – expressions at face value, but to contextualize them, and by this to find us their social functions. (Schütze 2008: 187)

During our analysis, we focused on strategies for coping with different forms of othering by highlighting the situations of biographical importance that uncover the systems of meaning present in the parenting actions of Czech Roma mothers who decide on their mode of cultural reproduction in the private sphere. The diversity of coping strategies in response to explicit acts of othering (either based on ethnic minority identification or racialized oppression) reveals the complex internal dynamics of ethnic minorities in the contemporary European social space (Nurse 2013: 116). Despite structural and symbolic similarities in the othering actions Czech Roma mothers and their children face, the reactions to them, as well as the biographical incorporations, differ. We were looking for analytical explanations of those differences and their narrative logic, presupposing that the Gestalt perspective would uncover the systems of meaning and underlying social structures that framed the individual narratives (Rosenthal 2004). We found that during this narrative work, discursive subjugation, or the state of using inappropriate terms while engaging in “biographical work,” plays a pivotal role (Corbin and Strauss 1988 in Schütze 2008: 6). These terms are either absorbed by the narrator from shared public discourse (and in cases lacking care and reflexivity on the part of the researcher) or used by the narrator simply because they do not possess more suitable terms to describe one’s life events. Such subjugation is often observable or perceptible during the narrative process as embodied discomfort, narrative stutters, slowing down, and wriggling, as if the word they would like to use is different but has difficulties finding its way into one’s linguistic repertoire.

Analysis

In our analysis, we focus on biographical expressions among Czech Roma mothers, concerning their experiences of othering and three distinct ways of dealing with it: 1) vacillating between refusal and resigned acceptance; 2) claiming normality through universal humanism, the submission of

racialized microaggression, and the psychologizing of an aggressor; and 3) embracing family pride and social dissent. In the discussion following the analysis, we examine the interrelation of these three models for dealing with discursive subjugation and suggest directions for further research. Our findings are based on the thematic interpretive analysis of 25 narratives, as well as cross-national analysis and the overall methodology of biographical research on family experiences with educational and social support systems (Nurse and Melhuish 2018). We elaborate the three distinct ways of dealing with the discursive subjugation within ethno-cultural/racial identification and othering, presenting them in the contextualized biographical mode, using the specific cases of three mothers that demonstrate the dynamic nature of mothering (Nurse et al. 2023).

“You are black, and you will pretend to be someone else”: Between refusal and resigned acceptance

Blanka, a middle-aged mother of four children, formulates the topic of Roma identity during her initial spontaneous life narrative, in which the researcher encourages her to continue describing her life story and family relations in detail. She speaks about her husband, whom she met after already having two children:

Yeah, he worked all the time, he cared, he just wasn't like anyone else. And most importantly, he was my first Gypsy in my life. I just never wanted a Gypsy. I never felt like it. Yeah, but it's probably supposed to be like that. Gypsy to Gypsy, Czech to Czech.

This opening reflection on the ethnic minority identity of her husband nicely shows Blanka's disunity in understanding herself in terms of ethnic identification. Blanka claims to be Czech on several occasions, supporting it by speaking proper Czech, having high demands on her children's educational discipline, and keeping close parental control over their leisure time. At the same time, she feels distant from the Roma lifestyle and values, including language and habits. Her refusal stems from diverse sources. One of the strong cross-sectional tones in her narrative is the legacy of her father, a respected citizen and musician, whom she highly honors: “I am proud of how our father raised us. We were not raised among the Gypsies, so we have a completely different mentality. Or at least we try to.”

The second powerful impetus for Blanka's distance from her Roma ancestry is the awareness of differences among Roma groups and the reflection of her mixed roots in this regard. One of the notions concerning Roma ethnic minority identity is inner differentiation, which has connotations to the

Indian caste system (Budilová and Jakoubek 2005). Blanka refuses her mother's roots from Eastern Slovakia, which she considers more "backward," instead highlighting her father's legacy, coming from Western Slovakia. In short, she neither maintains connections to her relatives in Slovakia, nor expresses the need to learn the Romani language, which she considers incomprehensible, repugnant, and useless: "I love languages. All of them. But this Gypsy language, this is a catastrophe."

Blanka admits to having Roma family roots, appearance, and certain lifestyle traits, like listening to Roma music with her husband, living in close contact with relatives in her city, and expecting her older daughter to take over part of the household duties, as she herself did in her childhood. Nevertheless, Blanka generally disapproves of the Roma lifestyle. Her connotations point to a lack of "civilized" manners (in her understanding, "civilized" equals "Czech"), an absence of functional morals and ambitions, and the abuse of the social system she sees in her neighborhood and in her own family. (Her daughter had a child at a young age and could not finish higher education, just as occurred with Blanka, she regretfully remarks.) At the same time, Blanka admits on several occasions that the lifestyle of her family does not necessarily follow all the imagined standards of "civilized"/Czech life, but somehow, she manages to draw a line between her, being of "Gypsy" origin but having Czech upbringing and education, and the rest of the "Gypsies," who, in her perspective, do not dare adopt the standards of the country in which they live. In this respect, her narrative reminds us of well-assimilated second-generation migrants who speak critically about their less-integrated ethnic peers. Blanka's narrative uncovers an understanding of her own life as a journey towards becoming an integrated, comfortable, and well-respected citizen, something she saw in her father, rather an exceptional figure for her.

Blanka's life story features a series of fails, many of them Blanka considers to be a matter of her bad choices, and she blames neither her family roots and upbringing, nor the social system and discrimination. She openly expresses hatred towards Roma, and even sympathy for (Czech) nationalist sentiments and actions, not only against Roma, but also against people of any foreign descent. She describes her landlord's reaction to some foreign workers, who were behaving disrespectfully in the neighborhood: "So, I liked that the owner came and made a fuss and said that we are still Czechs and they are the social bottom. That they will behave here as they are supposed to, or they will have to go away."

The coexistence of oppressive racist discourse and self-identity negotiation is well represented by the racist expressions that Blanka incorporates into her narrative. She even goes so far as to admit that she is a "strong patriot"

and “black racist” and would not hesitate to hurt someone, even though such expressions are performed in exaggeration. She recounts visiting the city hall social subsidies office.

She [the municipal worker] said, “Come work for us, make three months of training. And you will work with Gypsies.” I said, “I will not. First, I cannot speak the Gypsy language, so if a Gypsy would come here, I would manage nothing. I would need a translator by my side.” And second, I have such an approach towards Gypsies, that if I worked here, I would say, “Give me a tommy gun and I would just stand by this desk and fire.”

In her private life, Blanka seems to have succeeded in finding a balance in the diversity of ethnic minority identity attitudes and practices. The discrepancies tend to appear in more general social contexts, outside the sphere of familiar acquaintances, typically bound to physical appearance. That is also where she has faced openly racist disapproval, rejection, or symbolic attacks. In both cases that she recalls (looking for a job and traveling in public transport), Blanka takes on an actively self-defensive role, typically at the edge of polite behavior. This role reflects her anti-Roma speech acts in the overall context of her social self; she presents herself as a fighter for what she thinks is right, even if it offends or hurts someone: “Simply put, I was raised among you [Czechs] ..., I simply must live like a proper person.”

How can we understand this seemingly contradictory narrative of a woman, who is simultaneously dark-skinned, married to a Roma man she is very happy with, and living in a Roma neighborhood because she likes that “there is life there”? Blanka often discusses the contradictions with her husband, who, unlike her, feels pride in being Roma: “I am not ashamed that I am a Gypsy. Simply, it is just a heritage. But in terms of nationality, I am Czech.” Blanka’s narrative is interwoven with refusals from the generalized and essentialist category of “Gypsy mentality – horror and terror.” Yet, at the same time, she admits in a resigned manner, not least because of her physical appearance (that is why her husband accuses her of hypocrisy and “pretending to be someone else”), family roots, and selected parts of her biography, to having Roma identity. Furthermore, she capitalizes her Czech ethnic majority identity by emphasizing practices such as speaking “proper” Czech and raising her children in a more disciplined and performance-oriented manner than her Roma neighbors and relatives. This *mélange* aptly demonstrates the dynamics of discursive subjugation in ethnic identification, which cannot be easily ignored throughout one’s life, not only when being subjugated by othering, but also when understanding one’s own biography and reflecting on upbringing and family life.

“Bite the bullet and go on”: Claiming normality through universal humanism, the submission of racialized microaggression, and the psychologizing of an aggressor

Adriana, a single mother of three children, first mentions her ethnic minority background when describing her family tree in the second part of the interview, during the development of the spontaneous narrative. It appears that some of her ancestors and relatives still live in Slovakia, but she is not in touch with them and last traveled there at the age of six. She describes her extensive family (the family tree contains 18 people plus one unspecified family branch from Slovakia), and she maintains intense contact with some of the relatives who live in the same city as she does. Adriana barely uses any Roma ethnic minority identifier, neither the formal denomination “Roma” nor the pejorative exonym “Gypsy.” She rather uses “us/them” expressions, pinpointing the stereotypical differences in lifestyle and success in education performance.

In some families, it is a matter of course and they do not make a big deal about it, because it is a matter of course. You finish elementary school, you go to high school, if you have good grades or show your talents, you can graduate, and so on. Because it is about the future. That is why there are doctors and advocates everywhere. I make a big deal about it. But we somehow cannot give this to the children, I do not know.

What can be considered a matter of education or overall habitual background, between the lines, Adriana sees as ethnicity based. But what, if anything, does it mean to Adriana to be a Roma? And does she even feel like one? The answer to this question is ambiguous, as is evident from her reasoning in reaction to a direct question regarding her self-identification.

Well, definitely, I am a Czech. I am a Roma; this I know. Do you understand me? I sometimes do not really understand myself either. I am a Czech. Here is what I think. We have Czechia, and inside, Moravia, Silesia, Bohemia, Western Bohemia, and so on. So, someone says: “I am from the south, from this part of Bohemia.” He does not say “I am a Western Bohemian.”; he says “I am a Czech.” It is the same. I know I am a Czech. But, Roma, where do I put it, when I do not have it; do you understand me? I do not know where to put it. We do not have anything. I know that I am a Czech, but I know that I am a Roma there. But there is not Silesia, Bohemia, do you understand me? Well, yeah.

Adriana analogizes Roma ethnic minority identity to the regional territorial identities of the Czech regions of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. Adriana is correct in that the age-old landlessness of the Roma population in Europe, always defined as non-indigenous, plays an important symbolic role. On the other hand, being easily identified as Roma (the Czech population

is accustomed to recognize and identify dark pigmentation and label it accordingly), imposes an ethnic minority identification agenda without permission. The implication of an external ethnic minority agenda does not necessarily impose a unified reaction. One of the signs of ethnic minority self-identification is the attitude towards the ethnic minority language and its daily practice. Adriana was raised in a fully Czech-speaking environment; nevertheless, she remembers that her grandmother used the Romani language in selected contexts and later in life, she learned the basics of the language for pragmatic reasons. In her narrative, Adriana does not show any signs of emotional attachment to the Romani language.

Interviewer: You said that your grandmother spoke Romani.

Adriana: Yes. Mainly with her brothers, when they came to visit her, or with her peers. But not with her daughters, or my father.

Interviewer: And why did you learn Romani when you were 15 years old?

Adriana: I do not know. I guess I wanted to. When we were going out, I had plenty of Roma friends and they spoke Gypsy and I did not understand them. I stood there; I did not understand what they were talking about.

Keeping in mind the notion of acts of explicit racial microaggression (Sue et al. 2007), we ask, how does Adriana react to such microaggressions? Adriana recalls the first experience of this kind spontaneously when she talks about her elementary school years.

I was happy in school since the first grade, and the teachers were satisfied with me as well. But, when I was in secondary school, around the sixth grade, my schoolmates started to mock us, even though we had gone to school together since the first grade. So, when I was a girl, I had to get tougher. It took about a year until things calmed down, maybe two years, until the eighth grade. At this time, I was not keen to go to school, [because] they mocked us all the time, and it was so-so. We were three in the school, me, my sister, and our friend, so-called Gypsies. So, the kids were simply mocking us a lot, but as a matter of fact, they did not have anything to mock us about. We were clean, we had everything in school, good grades, everything. And there were worse there, you know? There were dirty ones without snacks. But simply they had this gang, and you were for them that Gypsy....

When asked if she ever felt mistreated again, she elaborates further:

Many times, many times. Also, nowadays. I'll tell an example. I'm going from school, standing at the stop, and there are two men next to me. They're talking, and they definitely did not say it as a joke. We're standing at the traffic lights, and one says: "I'd cancel those convenience stores that are opened during the night." The latter says: "Me too." And the first one replies: "Well, these stores are only for Gypsies, for these darkies." I looked, and I thought, "How did he mean it? Could it be me?"

Why would he even...?" And I face that all the time. And then I say to myself: "You (saying such things) must have some troubles in your life. Because when a person is normally satisfied with life, then they don't search for mistakes somewhere, where they shouldn't." This is what I said to myself and then I walked away. Those situations sometimes make you so mad that you just start arguing or fighting. "Why are you saying this?" I've already learned to hold back a bit. Because be that as it may, you just know you're a Gypsy, even though you don't even know, where you're from, anything. But why? There are Indians, there are Arabs, there are the blacks, who are dark, too. Why only these Gypsies? They live kind of a noisier life, yeah? But most of them have already learned, after so many years, also another life, yeah? But it's everywhere, it's everywhere. But, after all, this person was born with the same heart, with the same kidneys, this person has everything the same.

Not fighting back when being mistreated, waiting until it passes; this is the reaction Adriana tends to adopt in diverse social situations. For example, when she explains why she lives in a public shelter, she explains that as a single mother of three children and bearing a Roma appearance, she simply does not have a chance in the open housing market. Her overall approach is well grasped in an expression she used to comment on the overall disapproving climate towards Roma people in Czechia: "It is unpleasant. But one simply has to bite the bullet and go on."

Adriana feels besieged by some habitual patterns that befall her, and despite her trials, she is not able to overcome them. She also mentions negative remarks based on her skin color, and its recognition on the streets, assuming that people making such remarks have some issues of their own. Nevertheless, she must cope with them, and her choice is to understand herself as human being, rather than openly fighting for her dignity. Adriana believes that her attackers are obviously not satisfied with their lives; the problem of structural racism is thus individualized and coded as an error of spoiled persons by Adriana. The second coping strategy identified in Adriana's biographical narrative draws from a universal humanistic approach. In her mind, every human being is equal and when she is being mistreated, she simply waits until it passes, or she finds sanctuary in her own interpretation of the situation. Overall, Adriana's narrative lacks any ethnic minority project, as intended by her ancestors for her, or to be passed on to her descendants by her. The third narrative we present contrasts with such an approach, revealing quite an opposite reaction.

"Firstly, he has to know the history of our family and then he will cope with that better": Family pride and social dissent

Cecilie starts her life story with a lengthy and rich narrative about her grandfather, a respected blacksmith, and her grandmother, a significant

woman well-versed in the school of life, moving on through the family history to her siblings, all educated, and, in her perspective, well-off. Her Roma self-conception is strong, and unambiguous.

Later in the narrative, it appears that she has developed a dissenting strategy, due to her relatively light skin tone; for example, she does not reveal in her workplace that she actually is a Roma. Although she does not admit she has experienced racism or discrimination (for instance, in access to education), she recounts many experiences of being othered and insulted in everyday settings, including the work environment. She believes that she obtained at least some of her jobs thanks to her only slightly brown skin color and is quite certain that if the employers had known she was a Roma, she would not have been hired. As Abutbul-Selinger (2020) points out, even ethnic minority members with a middle-class social status face marginalization caused by stereotypes or an occupational glass ceiling. Cecilie talked about many situations in which even her educated colleagues have made racist comments: for instance, one of her colleagues posted a hoax on a notice board about Mister Jan Hus, a famous Czech historical figure, who allegedly hated Roma people. In our interpretation, Cecilie stresses that even the educated members of the majority society engage in racism or xenophobia against Roma, somehow disrupting the supposedly emancipatory effects she ascribes to the education system. It seems that Cecilie is more fragile than she wants to admit: she has left several well-paid and interesting occupations due to various ethnic-based tensions she faced, giving preference to less prestigious occupations, for example, working as a teacher in an afterschool program at an ethnically segregated school attended by many Roma pupils. She reflects that it is relieving, offering her some space to blossom from within and fully perform her Roma identity.

Despite these conflicting identity pressures, she strives to feel like a proud Roma person. Nevertheless, this effort results in higher demands on her management of identity, as well as in psychological stress apparent from contradicting claims such as, “I do not admit the ethnic stereotypes about Roma; these do not speak to me,” as opposed to the racist incident at work with the hoax that offended Cecilie. Her story thus encompasses a mixture of pride in her Roma origins and coping strategies based on psychologizing an aggressor, which she even applied to an incident when her husband was beaten by a group of Nazis, along with references to her emotional stability (“I did not let myself be provoked”).

The deeply ambivalent tensions Cecilie faces in regard to her and her family’s ethnicity crystallize tangibly in her strategy to raise her son. Cecilie is currently looking for the right moment to tell her pre-school son that he is a Roma. She is looking for a way through, trying to pass on the pride and not

to immerse him in the hateful discourse surrounding Roma. The following passage reveals the narrative strategies Cecilie employs:

Interviewer: You said that you don't want somebody to look at (your child) in a bad way.

Cecilie: I can't influence that; it will happen. It will happen.

Interviewer: Is it happening?

Cecilie: Not yet.

Interviewer: Did you notice anything like that?

Cecilie: He goes to a kindergarten also attended by Roma kids, Vietnamese kids. However, he does not know yet that he is of Roma background. We haven't told him that yet. Once, he came home and said: "Mom, do you know that Sabina is Gypsy?" And I asked: "What does that mean?" "She is Gypsy; she is bad." So, I know that it is not the right time. Of course, we will tell him, because why should we be ashamed of that? We rather have to think about when, which will be probably after he will start attending primary school. Maybe, during primary school, not right at the beginning because he will not understand that. Actually, he knows now that it is something negative and he is in kindergarten and he knows that to be [a Roma] is something negative. So, it is a problem. ... I will do something similar with him – firstly, he has to know our family, the history of our family and then he will cope better with that.

Cecilie's four-year-old son Cyril does not know he has a Roma background. She wants to explain this to him later, once he is more mature and emotionally stable. She is convinced that Cyril firstly has to be proud of his family and only then can he gain a more coherent sense of his Roma identity. It is apparent that Cecilie is aware of the fact that Cyril's ascribed Romaness could work as a strong disqualifying marker and thus limit her son's interactional potential (Goffman 1963). Accordingly, she is very cautious in cultivating his Roma identity (e.g. she does not teach him the Romani language). Harassment based on skin color unfortunately passes from generation to generation in Roma families. They are bringing up their children with the fear that once "identified" as Roma, they must step by step prepare an initiation procedure of sorts, trying to pass on this fact, but avoiding trauma and biographical blockade. We can only speculate if Cecilia's cautiousness will result in the assimilationist style of upbringing she experienced as a child.

In sum, although at first sight Cecilie seems to possess the biography of an integrated and self-confident Roma person, later on in the interview she exhibits her and her family's ethnicity rather ambivalently.

Conclusion and discussion

In this article, we have discussed the validity of the concept of othering for understanding the management of identity by Czech Roma mothers narrating

the conditions of their children's upbringing. By examining three analytical cases, we have shown that there are uncovered spaces between Jensen's (2011) opposing notions of capitalization and refusal. The reason for finding new forms of reaction may be both methodological and demographic; perhaps, using biographical interviewing uncovers another layer of identity politics over ethnographic observation. One of the most compelling aspects of our study is the element of primary socialization. Mothers uncover aspects of ethnic minority identification and self-identification within the frame of co-creating the social self of their offspring. Often, the question of ethnic identity comes from outside, in the form of racial microaggression (Abutbul-Selinger 2020; Sue et al. 2007). We have shown the conditions and situations in which such "identity work" must be performed within three different coping strategies: vacillating between refusal and resigned acceptance, claiming normality through universal humanism, the submission of racialized microaggression, and the psychologizing of an aggressor and embracing family pride and social dissent. Despite their diversity, all three stories have one element in common. The management of othering (cf. Goffman 1963; Rodríguez-Reche and Cerchiaro 2023) seems to be a never-ending process, a process that Czech Roma mothers have only partially under control. Racial microaggressions enter their everyday lives without their control or incentive; all they can do is to reflect, and re-act, often engaging in an inner dialogue with their own family history and self-understanding of who they are, and who they want their child to become.

To conclude, we summarize our overall findings and offer suggestions for further research:

1. *The identity process, including its ethno-cultural layer, is an ongoing, lifetime project*, while othering experiences often function as facilitators of identity construction processes and boundary work (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997). Despite being deeply rooted in childhood primary socialization, identity construction is constantly updated, and sometimes even re-socialized, from within or outside. In further research, we suggest focusing on the later life stages of ethno-cultural identity development, revolving around dating, marriage, having a family, and other significant biographical events.
2. Besides habitual or socio-economic issues, the ethno-cultural layer of the identity process is closely tied to *understanding one's own family history*. In further research, we suggest aiming at understanding the dynamics of negotiating external vs. internal factors of the identity process and designing complex methodologies that would grasp both aspects of othering in the case of ethnic minority families, or any

social group experiencing stigmatization. We have demonstrated that the biographical method has great potential in this regard (Breckner et al. 2000; Chamberlayne et al. 2000; Rodríguez-Reche and Cerchiaro 2023).

3. *Narrative biographic interviews have tremendous potential for uncovering implicit meaning structures.* The ruptures in narratives may reflect external factors disrupting the life story. In the context of Czech Roma mothers, without a doubt, the influences of othering and racial microaggression/racialization are significant (cf. Abutbul-Selinger 2020; Sue et al. 2007). Often, the spontaneous narratives of our research participants flowed seemingly smoothly, including references to ethnic identity, but ruptures and ambivalences emerged during further elaboration, especially in connection to the experiences of their children with othering and racial microaggressions. In further research, we suggest continued analysis of complex life biographies, since they have great potential in uncovering social processes that are not obvious at first glance (Nurse 2013).
4. Finally, we suggest more gender-balanced research designs, in order to explore the primary socialization processes of shaping ethno-cultural and family identity in contemporary European societies from the perspective of fathers and male caregivers. Even though research shows that *mothers/female caregivers*, if present, *tend to play the key role* in shaping ethno-cultural and family identity of the children during primary socialization (Nurse et al. 2022), it is important to keep in mind that the male caregivers' perspective on parenting remains under-researched and the family-oriented research agenda is not gender balanced (Arendell 2000; Pringle et al. 2013).

Our aim is to contribute to the research on the conceptualization of social identity facing adverse conditions, as well as to maximize the potential of biographical research for researching ethnic identity in contemporary Europe, especially in a multigenerational scope. Further, we promote using biographic research methods that open up space for sharing everyday experiences, support treating disadvantaged members of society as active agents, prevent victimization (Reimer 2016), and consequently enhance epistemic justice (Klyve 2019). Therefore, we also strongly recommend further research on the dynamics of othering and management of social identity in diverse conditions, as it can uncover and contextualize the marginalized experiences of minority groups and help to better understand the mechanisms underlying the reproduction of social inequalities and social exclusion.

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