



ROMA GATE PROJECT

“If you want to work, you need to speak the language of the employer”

Roma migrants narratives of agency
and insecurities in Pietarsaari



Deaconess
Foundation



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Images: Roma women's ceramics made in a Roma Gate project's workshop



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PIETARSAARI

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Background for the research project



The social status of the Roma in Bulgaria and Romania in their countries of origin is often weak. The reasons for emigration are related to the poverty and discrimination experienced in the countries of origin but also to the hope of finding a job and thus a better life. According to studies, barriers to employment in Finland are often linked to low levels of education at both the basic and vocational level, lack of work experience, lack of language skills and discrimination. (HDL Hanksuunnitelma 2020; Enache 2020; Granqvist, Enache & Dorofte 2016). Studies carried out in Finland on racialised immigrants show that immigrants face exclusion from the Finnish labour market or are employed in sectors characterised by uncertainty and poor working conditions (Könönen, 2018). Similarly, in Finland, Roma and “visible” immigrant Roma often face discrimination because they are branded Roma. (Flour, Ärling, Karinen, Luukkonen, Oosi, 2019).

The Roma from Eastern European countries who came to Jakobstad have settled there permanently and got a job. Their employment relationships at the local level are characterised by a diversity of

employment relationships, flexibility and low wage levels, which leads to job and income insecurity, leaves them feeling temporary and incompetent. Their bargaining power on the labour market is weak (Hanksuunnitelma, HDL 2019), which partially limits their scope for action.

The research project is part of a larger project under way at the Helsinki Deaconess Institute, the aim of which is to increase the inclusion, educational level and employment of immigrant Roma in Jakobstad. Improving the inclusion of Roma is linked to strengthening their economic, educational, social and cultural living conditions.

At the beginning of the article, we present the main research objectives and research questions, and matters related to the collection and analysis of research data. The article is data-driven in nature, which means that we examine the themes that have emerged from the material in using agency concepts from different disciplines. The agency theory is, therefore, the common thread in the different chapters of our article.

In the chapter *Perspectives on agency*, we examine the most important multidisciplinary theories related to agency. In the chapter *Multidimensional nature of agency construction and integration into working life*, we describe the obstacles, challenges and opportunities that the interviewees have encountered in seeking employment, settling down and exclusion from the working life. We examine the resources they have in their lives and in their everyday interactions, and what they rely on. In the chapter *bounded agency* we examine the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees on the impact of their Roma origin on the labour market and on social and community activities.

In the chapter *Relational agency*, we use the interview material and literature to examine how the agency is attached to relational situations. The last chapter, *Presence, interaction and everyday agency*, is a concluding chapter, in which we discuss the possibility of immigrants of Roma origin becoming active actors in Finnish society.

The main objective of the research and the research questions

The main objective of the research is to define, together with the immigrant Roma, their own agency

- What opportunities and obstacles do Roma with an immigrant background see in building their own agency?
- To what extent do immigrant Roma experience that the structures and circumstances determine their status, and what is the latitude between their freedom of choice and their responsibility?
- What hidden and visible structures have Roma immigrants encountered and how have the structures restricted their agency?
- How have immigrants of Roma origin preserved and rebuilt their agency?



Collection and analysis of research data

11 Roma immigrants were interviewed for the study in Jakobstad. Experience experts working on the Roma Gate (Romaniportti) project contacted the interviewees. The experience experts asked which project participants would like to participate in the interview study. There was a total of nine interviews. Three interviews included a couple. The interviews were conducted in English, Romanian and Bulgarian. The interviews were held at Jakobstad City Hall in the premises of the Roma Gate project. The interviewee(s) and project manager Milla-Camilla Jylhä were present at the interviews. Project expert Anca Enache from the Helsinki Deaconess Institute participated in the interviews a few times. Interpreting was organised over the phone or through Teams.

Some of the interviewees were employed at the time of the interview. They work in the cleaning industry

or in agriculture, for example. The interviews were carried out during the coronavirus pandemic that had resulted in reduction of the number of jobs in certain sectors, which increased job uncertainty among the Roma population. Participants in the interviews were of different ages: young people aged 20 and people over 50. The interviewees have lived in Finland for different lengths of time. Some had only come to Finland a year ago, and some had been in the country for 10 years. Ten of the interviewees were from Bulgaria and one from Romania.

The research material was collected through semi-structured interviews. The themes for the research interviews were built using the theoretical concepts related to agency. The research data was analysed using data-driven content analysis as part of qualitative research methods.



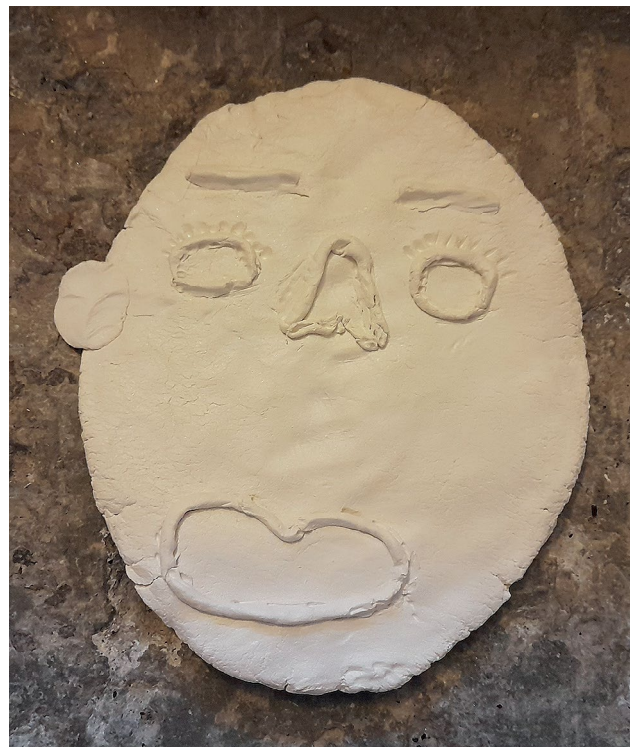
Ethical aspects of the research project – ethical aspects of the mission

In our research project, we have taken into account and followed the principles of responsible conduct of research in order that the study can be considered ethically acceptable and reliable and the research results reliable. We have already begun the ethical evaluation of research when designing the research topic, and we will look at ethical issues throughout the research process. The starting points for responsible conduct of research include acquiring the necessary research permits from the Helsinki Deaconess Institute, careful and precise working methods in research work, recording results, presenting and evaluating the results, appropriately citing publications of other researchers and taking into account possible aesthetics in evaluation and decision-making. (The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2012, 6.)

Ethical reflection is central to our research project. We have met and interviewed Roma immigrants, who are in many ways vulnerable both in their countries of origin and in Finland. We are aware that our research is ethically localised and represents so-called critical social research that strives to promote social justice (e.g. Harinen 2014, 64.) As researchers, we are aware of our own role as a researcher and our activities in interview situations in order to achieve maximum reliability. Throughout the research process, it has been important for us to act as ethically, effectively and purposefully as possible and with the utmost respect to cultural sensitivity.

In the study on immigration and immigrants, we have also recognised our role as representatives of the so-called majority of the population. This involves an ethical assessment of how we approach and examine the daily and private lives of the Roma migrants involved in the study. The ethical principles of research include giving priority to the interests, wishes and rights of the interviewees. We consider it particularly important that the interviewees are informed in their own language of the objectives of

the research and that their anonymity is protected throughout the research process. They may also choose to discontinue their participation in the study at any time. We have distributed the consent forms translated into their own languages to Roma migrants taking part in the interviews, and the cover letter explains the purpose of the study. They are given the opportunity to ask further questions and clarifications in connection with the study. Interpreting is always available during the interviews.



Perspectives on agency

The main theoretical framework of the study relates to the concept of agency. Agency has been examined in a wide range of disciplines. In social sciences, agency can be defined as one of the basic concepts (Giddens 1984); in psychology, agency is often associated with self-efficacy and agency within the life course (Bandura 2001, Hitlin & Elder 2007); in educational sciences, agency is associated with the construction of educational and professional careers (Biesta & Tedder 2007). Common to the definition of a concept is its association with activity, initiative actions, autonomy, and the ability and resources to influence one's own life.

However, in human sciences the fundamental question remains the same: what is the relationship between an individual and the possibilities created by the structures? Both social sciences and psychology and behavioural sciences on one hand emphasise social and structural explanations and on the other hand explanations stemming from an individual. Concepts such as class, role and habitus have been associated with personal factors, especially in social sciences. When talking about personal factors, self-efficacy, motivation, will, freedom of choice and a sense of coherence are often mentioned. (Kauppila et al. 2015).

Anthony Giddens (1991) defines agency as an intentional act that an individual does or does not carry out. In the conceptualisation of structures in social sciences, it is essential to note that the structures do not actually exist, there are only structural features of social and systems composed of operational practices. In Giddens' theory, structures and actions are closely interrelated, and the focus is on the duality of structures. Structures limit and determine, but also enable and guide the activities of both individuals and groups of people. In other words, people adopt and reconstruct structures with their actions, and at the same time they are able to exploit them for their own benefit and to support their actions. The structures thus create both boundaries and scope for action.

From the perspective of agencies, neoliberalism speaks of building a new kind of self. Such selfhood can be thought to include the idea of a responsible actor, a person who is constantly aware of their choices and acts rationally in their life in order to achieve goals (see, for example, Helne 2009).

For example, Kaarina Mäkinen (2012) writes about the marketing of selfhood, the requirements for becoming the "good guy" behind the construction of agency. These are self-development choices and actions that aim to improve one's own position, gain recognition and new opportunities in working life (see, for example, Keskitalo-Foley & Komulainen & Naskali 2010).

At the same time, when there is an attempt to adapt a person to be the actor in their life, there is also a desire to bind the person to the relationship between power and culture as a social actor. The requirement for an active agency can create experiences of worthlessness, inadequacy, fear and frustration. The value of self is determined by the exchange value, but in the face of ever more comprehensive and rapid social changes, the achievement of an adequate exchange value may be beyond the reach of many (e.g. Silvasti & Lempiäinen & Kankainen 2014, 10–19). In the Nordic countries, employment is often defined as a way of becoming a full member of society (Kvinonos, 2019). This is why those migrants in particular who fail to find employment are easily labelled as "unwanted individuals".



At the gates of working life in work trials and short-term employment

The Roma immigrants we interviewed experienced their attempts of participating in society within the thematic spectrum of disappointment and rejection.

The interviewees describe a circle of hope, disappointment and trying again.

"No one has helped. They ask you in the interview if you have a driving licence? Then you have to wait. And I wait and wait and wait. And nothing, everyone is friendly, but no one calls." (interview, 6 woman).

The interviewees have been in short-term employment relationships. Some have been placed in work trials, but the transition to work has not been successful. Employment is often hampered by a lack of sufficient language skills. The majority of the interviewees speak Bulgarian, Romanian and Roma. Employers expect jobseekers to speak Finnish or Swedish. Interviewees often do not have networks and contacts for potential employers in the region. Some jobs require your own car, as there is no regular public transport in the region.

First, I lived in (----) and worked in a campsite. I mowed grass with a tractor;

I painted walls. (---) I first worked in an amusement park. But now it's closed.

For 6 years, I worked for a company that ran an amusement park and a campsite, but always as a trainee. (interview 11, male)

Labour market surveys show, for example, that race and gender no longer define the division into "good" or "bad" jobs. According to studies, this division is now more defined by atypical employment relationships and poorly paid jobs, which are offered especially to migrants (e.g. Hudson 2007). In addition to atypical employment relationships, citizenship is a factor that also determines bad employment relationships more than race and gender (aforementioned work). According to Laura Mank and Markku Sippola (2015), the so-called "new job theories" and precarisation studies pay attention

to uncertainty as a new norm in the labour market and life. In our opinion, the standard of uncertainty describes the labour market status of Roma immigrants who we interviewed in Finland well.

Many interviewees emphasise the importance of their own initiative and the use of their own networks to find work. In the study of agency, active agency has been examined from the perspective of many different disciplines. In psychology, agency is often associated with self-efficacy and agency within the life course (Bandura 2001, Hitlin & Elder 2007); in educational sciences, agency is associated with the construction of educational and professional careers (Biesta & Tedder 2007). Common to the definition of a concept is its association with activity, initiative actions, autonomy, and the ability and resources to influence one's own life.

"The TE office has never helped. You can find jobs by calling the boss directly or through friends." (interview 3, male)

"a person needs to be alert and seek for (jobs and opportunities) themselves." (interview 3, male)

Sociological research sees agency as an interaction between individuals and social structures and institutions (such as the welfare service system, employment services or the KELA). The multidisciplinary study of the life course approach, on the other hand, sees individuals building their own course of life through the structure of social and cultural opportunities, which the social environment offers them. (Kauppila & Kauppila 2015.) From the latter perspective, the agency of the interviewed Roma is built on informal structures and networks often outside the society.

For the interviewees of Roma origin, relatives, friends and locals who have previously moved in and are involved in spiritual movements are important:

"relatives have helped, my brother helped me get a job." (interview 3, male)

"big deal, important for everyone in the family, brothers, sisters, parents, wife... all left (for Finland) at the same time. And it's important to work." (interview 1, male)

"How did I find TE services... There was a man in Jakobstad. He lived in a house. There was a church on the first floor, and the man lived on the second floor. He was a priest. I didn't have a place to stay, and he took me in. I helped him, and sometimes he took me to work with him. I didn't pay him rent. He said: You don't have any money, so you can help me sometimes. Then he said: I'll try to find you a job. I went to the TE services with him. He spoke their language and said (to the clerk): He lives with me, he has a family, he has no papers, nobody helps him, what is he supposed to do? Next thing I know, they sent me to the police station so I could get registered. He found me a place work trial place. I worked there for six years. He met the owner with me and told them I was a trustworthy person. He vouched for me. I was accepted to work for three days (probationary period). When they saw me paint two cabins inside and out, the owner came and said I could continue." (interview 11, male)

The importance of relatives and the Roma community living in Finland was important to the interviewees. However, the interviewees also spoke about their wish for autonomy and independence from other people, relatives and especially from social institutions, such as KELA or TE services.

There is consensus in many disciplines that it makes sense to talk about agency only when the individual has the opportunity to act, make choices and make sense of the situation (e.g. Ronkainen 2008.) In this case, the analysis of agency also takes a stand on the concepts of power and freedom. For example, Bourdieu (1990) considers that the activities of an individual are determined and enabled by social, social, cultural and material structures. Different agency concepts thus open up different perspectives on the individual's operating capacity in relation to the structures around them (Silvonon 2015).

"a better life would mean that I could study and would not depend on anyone" (interview 2, male)

In Anca Enache's (2020) study on building the agency of Roma children, the researcher emphasises the importance of people, cultural and social practices, institutions and environments around them, and then again their own memories, skills and physical environment when it comes to agency. According to Enache, the agency of Roma children is not just about gaining autonomy, but rather building relationships with relatives, family and surrounding social structures. It is also important to take into account the limitations of agency: race, age, gender and citizenship from social structures and categories, which in turn shape the agency of children in the process of family migration. For example, the difficult financial situation of a family limits the agency of a child and the whole family, but at the same time difficult living conditions can become a strength in terms agency building.

The interviewees state that their own agency and initiative are linked to the children's well-being:

"I am self-motivated. In Bulgaria, I didn't have the opportunity to give a better future (to the children), which is why I am self-motivated. I don't want my children to lack anything." (interview 3, male)

"I'm prepared to give my children anything." (interview 3, female)

The interviewees do not only practice agency in Jakobstad, but also in their home regions of Bulgaria or Romania. Some have more contact with relatives living in their home country than others. Most of the interviewees talk about their contact with friends and relatives. They also travelled to their homeland every year. At the time of the interviews, no travel had taken place due to the pandemic. Some of the interviewees talked about renovating the buildings in Finland or building a new building there. Although none of the participants spoke about moving back to Bulgaria or Romania for the time being, they are involved in property maintenance in the country of their origin, if the economic situation allows. Studies on immigration show that remittances are often linked to properties, with houses being a sign of success and social mobility (Lopez 2015). Also in the case of the Bulgarian and Romanian Roma living in Jakobstad, the opportunities for success and well-being are also more tangible in their localities than in Finland (Grill 2016). To sum up, immigrant Roma operate across borders in their social relations with friends and relatives in their home country, and they also invest capital in construction projects in their country of origin.

Relational agency – bounded agency/agency developed or not developed in relationships

In the relational agency approach, the individual agency is viewed as part of social relationships and as an ability to take a direction in the increasingly complex network of living (Vanhalakka-Ruoho 2015, 40–44.) Bandura (2006) structures agency as a cognitive, self-regulating and reflecting process. In this case, the emphasis is on interactive agency, as distinct from agency that is entirely determined by the individual and then again agency that mechanically regulates the environment. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define relational agency as agency that arises as a result of interaction. This means that agency is not isolated from social systems and power relationships, but also not exclusively dictated by them.

Interactive, relational agency means simply that a person does not practice their agency in a vacuum, but the relationship between person and their environment is dynamic and interactive. The material, social and cultural environment affects people by providing the conditions for action and social interaction.

The interviewees describe the situations and periods through which they have learned to hide or remain silent about their Roma background:

“Nowadays when you say you are from Romania, they keep their distance. Because they see on television what’s happening in Helsinki. That’s why. Before, when the Finns saw that you were poor, they might have bought you a box of food. They were very friendly.” (interview 11, male)

The researchers also talk about *bounded agency* (Aaltonen 2013), which means that activities are intertwined with the social context. This means that actors are bound to a number of temporal and relational arrangements. In order to attain activity, it must be set to a time dimension. In the

interviews, the intertwining of agency and the time dimension of activity can be seen, for example, in the aforementioned material extract, where the interviewees have learned to hide and keep quiet about their background over time and through social interactions. Interestingly, the interviewees also seem to carry stigmas created for Roma immigrants who have migrated to the country in the past.

The interviewees say:

“When I came here, the employers asked me where I was from. When I told them I was from Bulgaria, they said, ‘Aha’. There’s nothing I can do about the fact that there have been people who have done something wrong before me. We have to pay the consequences. We have to pay for their mistakes. You can hear from the tone of voice of the employer that ‘aha, you’re from Bulgaria or Romania’.” (interview 1, male)

“I don’t know....we have a bad name. The new guy pays for the mistakes of the people who came before him. It’s not everyone’s fault. Back in the day, you would get a job, go to a bank and get a loan, this was 10 years ago, then someone may not have paid the loan back, and this has created a negative mark.” (interview 1, male)

Action should not therefore be seen as a one-way process that is moving forward, but as a struggle and perseverance within the actor. (Honkasalo et al. 2004). Even if agency is not concrete activity, the individual is aware of their own and others’ possibilities and limitations (Lehtola 2013, 5–6). Social sciences discuss the possibility for an individual to build a life of their own in a self-reflexive (e.g. Giddens 1990) process of becoming an actor and being able to control one’s own life.

Reflection – conclusions: Interaction, presence, everyday agency

Social sciences discuss the possibility for an individual to build a life of their own in a self-reflexive (e.g. Giddens 1990) process of becoming an actor and being able to control one's own life. In any case, there is consensus in many disciplines that it makes sense to talk about agency only when the individual has the opportunity to act, make choices and make sense of the situation (e.g. Ronkainen 2008.) In this case, the analysis of agency also takes a stand on the concepts of power and freedom. For example, Bourdieu (1990) considers that the activities of an individual are determined and enabled by social, social, cultural and material structures. Different agency concepts thus open up different perspectives on the individual's operating capacity in relation to the structures around them (Silvonon 2015).

At the beginning of the article we talked about the "self-reflective" process and the construction of agency (Giddens), an ideal of neoliberalism, where the individual builds his a "new kind of self" as a responsible person who is aware of their own agency and its possibilities. According to Tiina Silvasti et al. (2014), it is a question of adapting the individual to become an actor in their own life, in which case the aspiration is to bind them to the relation of power and culture as a social actor. The requirement for an active agency can create experiences of worthlessness, inadequacy, fear and frustration. The value of self is determined by the exchange value, but in the face of ever more comprehensive and rapid social changes, the achievement of an adequate exchange value may be beyond the reach of many.

Even if the agency is not concrete activity, the individual is aware of their own and others' possibilities and limitations (Lehtola 2013, 5–6). The Roma immigrants we interviewed were more aware of their limitations than of their opportunities. Hiding and keeping quiet about one's own background is part of the perceived constraints. The interviews create an image of the sense of detachment they feel towards Finnish society. This may be due to a lack of or poor language skills, but also due to being partitioned into a specific marginal group due to the poor labour market situation. Due to work experience and poor labour market status linked to short employment relationships

and traineeships alone, the financial situation of individuals and families is also poor.

Several studies show that immigrants arriving in Finland, regardless of their immigration status, wish to enter the labour market and integrate into Finnish society through the labour market (e.g. Nieminen & Sutela & Hannula 2015). Laura Mankki and Markku Sippola (2015) state in their study that the inequality in the Finnish labour market cannot be fully explained in the light of segregation theories, for example. In a labour market survey, segregation of the labour market means segregation of social groups. According to researchers, the intersectional theory – i.e. the analysis of intersecting differences – offers an opportunity to understand the labour market position of a heterogeneous immigrant population in a more complex way. In the case of immigrants of Roma origin, intersectionality implies a simultaneous examination of a number of factors and differences related to the individual (e.g. gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status).

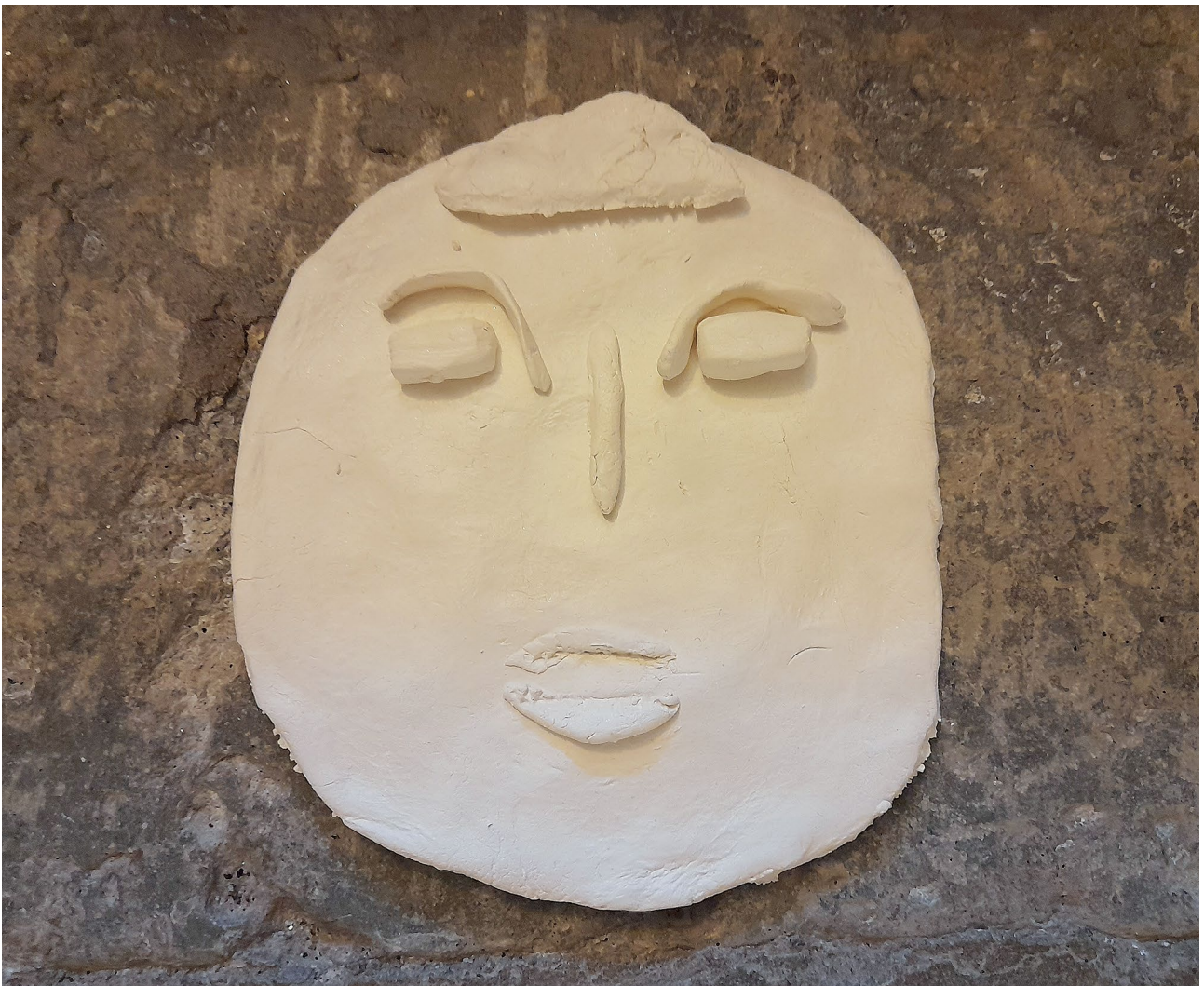
According to the traditional sociological concept, agency is defined as a rational, active, individual and autonomous activity that brings about change (e.g. Giddens 1984, 9). As a criticism of Giddens' theory, for example, Archer (2000) defines agency as an intentional, goal-oriented process that is framed by structural and cultural boundary conditions, either by preventing or enabling activities. Criticism of rational agency can be summed up in the fact that the concept of individual agency is not considered to adequately describe the diversity, coherence and temporal orientation of activities (e.g. Honkasalo et al. 2014).

The agency of Roma immigrants could be perceived as a "small agency" (cf. Honkasalo 2008), which denotes passive activity and does not automatically lead to significant changes in an individual's life or society. Rather, the agency of Roma immigrants is characterised by silence, support for children and family, community and importance of family. Their agency is not about them making individual decision about life, it but is connected in many ways to social institutions, such as the employment authorities and

Kela. Their agency is not purposeful and rational, but rather agency through an agency that is attached to everyday life. Their agency may appear invisible and passive, as well as their tendency of keeping quiet about their ethnic background. Yet their agency is resilient and adaptable, and also about choosing a less bad option.

The institutional service system should pay attention to the silent agency, persistence and social relations

of Roma immigrants. In order to gain trust, their resources, personal abilities and networks should be seen. It is important that a person of Roma origin is closely listened to when talking about their and their family's life, daily life and engagement. Their agency may not be seen as a rational, individual self-building based on active engagement, but rather as a



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The semi-structured interview frame consists of discussion areas:

My own feeling: How do I feel?

Self-efficacy: How to improve self-efficacy?

Opportunities to make an impact: As an immigrant, how can we improve our own impact in working life?

Initiative/self-motivation: How does my own motivation affect my chances of getting a job?

Impact of others/networking. What is the importance of other people/networking?

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