

Childhood in a rom/gypsy camp in southern-Italy: an anthropological perspective

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The object of the study is the *Rom/gypsy* camp in Palermo, Sicily, in the south of Italy, where three groups of so-called “gypsies” or “travellers” live together; they originally came from the Balkans and have been settled in this zone for twenty years. Out of a population of about 300 individuals, as many as 55 children go to 7 different schools. The study is carried out using the anthropological method of participant observation. The aim of the research, which is still going on, is to monitor the progress of their schooling and to study their parents’ roles; particular attention is given to the fundamental interplay of relationships and socio-educational intervention in the capable hands of volunteers and the public administration. In fact, the latter have represented and continue to represent a solid support network during this process of encouraging the *Rom/gypsy* families to send their children to school. This support is needed right from the initial accompanying phase, and especially during the delicate support phase, from the moment the children pass from the *Rom/gypsy* world to the non-*Rom/gypsy* world of the “others”, the *gagé*.

Introduction

As in the case of most major cities, Palermo (Italy) has had to tackle the continuous rise in illegal immigration. The *Rom/gypsy* add up to a small slice of these immigrants, often leading an irregular existence in tough conditions, and representing the most neglected group in the city. With their children often simply being dismissed as smelly and dirty, it goes without saying that it is difficult to steer clear of racism and marginalisation. The methodology used for the research was that of participant observation (Malinowski, 1922), by means of direct observation of the camp and in two of the seven schools, along with the administration of free interviews with the two *Rom/gypsy* cultural mediators, volunteers from local associations, a head-master and various teachers of *Rom/gypsy* children in the city of Palermo.

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Social depiction of the *Rom/gypsy*.

The *Rom/gypsy* are people with no land and with no homeland. They are of Indo-European origin; the word *Rom* in their language, Romany, actually means “man”. The *Rom/gypsy* are a minority community of people that have for centuries lived in close contact with other communities; they are characterised, above all, by the way in which they relate to the *gagé* society, with whom they have to co-habit, and the way in which they assimilate the cultural elements of their host nation and re-work them in order to ensure their own cultural survival. It is precisely because of this continuous osmosis between the *Rom/gypsy* and majority society that all their behaviour is the result of an on-going process of adaptation during this indispensable co-habitation. Each group is merely the fruit of a particular type of acculturation that renders it “other” from the *gagé*, as well as the other *Rom/gypsy* groups, who might have had contacts of a different type.

What certainly unites all “gypsies” is the awareness of belonging to a despised and endlessly ostracized minority.

There are other cultural aspects linked closely to this marginalisation and consequent dispersion, including a social organisation based on the family and the family group, which serve to secure a defence (but not only) against the outside world. These are elements of extreme importance in dictating the direction of one's life and in the understanding of one's existence. What is "right and fair"? What determines one's behaviour in daily life and understanding of reality? The ethno-centric prejudices to which the *Rom/gypsy* are generally subjected (and in the specific case-study in the Campo della Favorita in Palermo, Sicily, southern Italy) are the consequence of a dominant, ruling culture, which is for the most part literary and self-referential. The mechanism by which one is susceptible to social depictions and the decisive role that these play, is well-understood. What is familiar, and what is not, are aspects of two separate spheres replete with ideas and beliefs, and consensual universes (i.e. places in which each subject wishes to feel at home, safe from risks and conflict).

Social depictions conventionalise objects, people and events, in accordance with a certain process of categorisation; furthermore, they are descriptive, they are imposed and handed down, and are the product of an entire series of elaborations and successive changes over a period of time, and over several generations. All systems of classification, all images and all descriptions circulating in society implicate a stratification in the collective memory and a subsequent reproduction in language, which invariably reflects past knowledge and which overwhelms the limitations imposed by the available information (Farr, Moscovici, 1989, p. 30).

By mechanisms of *anchoring* (i.e. reducing unusual ideas to ordinary categories and images) and *objectification* (i.e. translating what is in the abstract mind into something that exists in the physical world), we generate social depictions, establishing a positive or negative relationship with the paradigms stored in our memory. The question of social depictions and the encounter/clash with "what the other is", within a community, underlines the difficulty in approach and interaction between members of a community. In this case, the local population tends to evaluate the *Rom/gypsy* community not for what it really is, in all its singular uniqueness, but in function of its belonging to an apparently homogeneous group, thus considering certain peculiar and socially significant features as discriminating elements. The origin of the stereotype lies here with a number of features that can seemingly be applied to entire social groups; in fact, it is these that dictate relationships between resident citizens and members of the *Rom/gypsy* community (erroneously judged as an indistinct

whole). One element that emerged from the research was the fact that ethno-centric prejudice is not one-way but reciprocal, since it is instigated and maintained by both groups (citizens v *Rom/gypsy*). The more the resident citizens of Palermo accentuate their prejudicial attitudes towards the *Rom/gypsy*, the more the latter tend to hide themselves behind their culture and their world; this then creates a vicious circle and thwarts the possibility of thinking of the city in terms of a shared space, a place where one can meet and relate to another, in accordance with the paradigm of differences as conceptualised by Bateson (1976, 1984, 1997).

The *Rom/gypsy* in Palermo can be divided into three distinct groups: the Muslim Kosovars, the Christian-orthodox Serbs and the Montenegrins, who are of mixed religions.

This last group is made up of families who stop off in Palermo for a short time before moving on, whereas the first two groups, the Kosovars and Serbs, can by now be considered part of the scenery, since they have lived in this city for over ten years. The families only exercise a seasonal nomadism, linked to particular events such as baptisms, circumcision, weddings, funerals, religious celebrations etc., during which the families often all re-unite.

The exodus of the *Rom/gypsy* families, and their arrival in Palermo, was sparked off by the environmental and social decline, as well as for family reasons, and above all by the war that destabilised the Balkans (Kosovo and Serbia). The groups live in the same camp in three adjacent areas that are, nevertheless, distinct from each other, and inhabited by Muslims from Kosovo, Orthodox Serbs and Serbian Montenegrins respectively. These groups, among whom there are cultural and religious differences, have lived together more or less peacefully for about 15 years in conditions of extreme environmental degradation, with a total lack of the most basic structural and social services. The Muslims live in single-storey shacks, built of tuffaceous bricks and covered with metal sheeting and whatever else might serve as a covering; the Orthodox Christians, both Serbs and Montenegrins, live in shacks made of wood and raised from the ground. These hovels have a single living-area fitted out with the basics, as often as not, skilfully re-cycled; beds and cooking facilities are also jammed into this small living-space. For some there is no bathroom, and there is no regular sewerage system; they have been forced to use open land, while some have improvised underground waste containers to be used as family toilets. They wash by gathering water from the water-tanks in basins or in small cisterns close to their dwellings; in order to heat the water they employ wood-stoves. In the original 80 families, going back to the 80s,

50 % of the entire *Rom/gypsy* population in the Favorita nomad-camp was made up of children; today the number is down to about 20 nuclear families, again with a notable percentage of children. In fact, many *Rom/gypsy* have preferred to leave in search of more hospitable destinations and cities, which might respond to their working, legal and living needs.

Belonging, relational dynamics in the camp, non-conformity outside.

From the point of view of organisation of family groups, the *Rom/gypsies* living in Palermo also adopt a system of unilinear lineage, of a patrilinear and patrilocal type; the son takes on the social identity and the cultural heritage of the father's family; he remains with this family even in the case of separation or the death of one of the spouses, whether this person be *Rom/gypsy* or "non-gypsy". The wife too acquires the identity of the husband; if she marries a *Rom/gypsy* she becomes a *Rom/gypsini*, if she marries a Serbian, Albanian or Italian *gagio* she becomes a Serb, an Albanian, or an Italian. In every shack or caravan there are at least two families, the original one and the young couple with any children born from their co-habitation or marriage. Generally marriages are between non-blood relations, or occasionally between second or third cousins.

The *kumpania*, i.e. a number of families belonging to the same group or sub-group, provides a sense of solidarity and union, determines relations with the outside world and responds to the daily and economic needs of the group. Within this group, therefore, wrongs are righted, fines are paid, members are protected from the laws of the *gagé*, all earnings are divided up in the form of food and drink.

Inside the Palermo camp the three communities, as already mentioned, lead separate lives; the meeting place *par excellence* for all three groups is the yard, on to which all the homes of the extended families (composed of parents, unmarried children and all married sons with their families) look out. Inside and outside the yard a child is identified by the name of its father to indicate its belonging to a family group (as well as a home). In particular, the yard is seen not only as a physical place but as a place where people enter into relations or not, where "one sits down" or "one doesn't sit down", according to whether there is any bad blood or one person wants to avoid another. In the first years of its life it is the mother who brings up the child, also helped by the other women in the family. Then, with the passing of the years there is a change in behaviour according to the sex of the child: the male starts to follow his father and imitate his behaviour, whilst the female takes her mother as her role-model.

The *Rom/gypsy* child grows up as part of a closely-knit group comprising several generations: grandparents, parents and also uncles and aunts, elder siblings and possibly cousins. The elderly constitute a link with the past, with tradition, and possess a strong sense of their origins and their group identity. The parents represent the model to be imitated, i.e. what one should become when one grows up. Elder brothers and sisters represent a mediation between the parents' generation and the child's generation. These are perhaps the people who are dearest and nearest to the child, with a relationship that is on an equal footing, but at the same time instructive. So every child finds himself in the position of being brought up and bringing up. This network facilitates the passing on of behaviour and values, which are reinforced the moment they are learnt, because they need to be used as models for others.

From his earliest years the *Rom/gypsy* child has ample freedom of action and initiative, which is certainly greater than that of a European child of the same age. His preferences and skills are encouraged, making him responsible from an early age for eventual risks and failures; the children are accustomed to participating in everything taking place within the group; they are informed of events, good and bad, and intervene in the adults' debates with questions and comments. Through his participation the child serves his apprenticeship as member of the group, in which he feels fully incorporated. Apart from the peculiar relationship with the *gagé*, the upbringing of *Rom/gypsy* children is not very different from typical upbringing in all the poorer societies. In our western society the human child is over-protected when he/she is small, but starts to lose importance when growing up, until in old age he/she is considered almost devoid of social value; in poorer societies the child has to begin very early to be useful to others, and his social importance is minimal until he can start to bring some concrete benefits to the other members of the group (Saletti, 2003). Self-sufficiency and independence constitute two fundamental paradigms in the *Rom/gypsy* child's enculturation process; the child has to have the capacity to resolve the problems of daily life in the world of the *gagé*; he quickly learns to get used to their hostility.

In the organisation of daily life in the camp, the state of relationships plays a key role in the accompanying of the children to school. Only the *Rom/gypsy* cultural mediators rise above any possible conflict within the group, in order to accompany children from all groups to school, without distinction, but with particular attention to the smaller ones from their own family group.

The trip from camp to school, in certain Italian cities, is done in school buses provided by the local council; except for one brief period, this has not happened so far in Palermo. Some parents accompany those children with basic schooling by car, loading in as many children from their own group as possible; or on foot, accompanied by cultural mediators or the parents themselves. Zaja is a Muslim "gypsy", who arrived in Palermo about 20 years ago and then moved on to Brescia, in northern Italy. In an interview given a few years ago she tells how her children went to school because education offered the only form of escape from a status of poverty and degradation: "They (the "gypsy" children) have changed, let's say, much of our culture and they've gone over to yours. They were the first to go to school, from the whole camp! I used to go regularly, I took them to school and that was it. Then, after our meetings, I'd go and tell them all off (the *Rom/gypsy* parents). Send your kids to school, then we'll have more rights, more, let's say, respect, because we mustn't do the gypsy bit, taking the kids to the traffic lights, on the road...you know? Because you have to change from this to that, don't you?"

From Zaja's words the whole picture of the dynamics of the enculturation process becomes clear, with regard to the group of belonging, and the parallel process of acculturation/ socialisation experienced by the *Rom/gypsy* children in the host country. The vast majority of the *Rom/gypsy* people, along with their children, in Italy just as in Palermo, are illegal residents. The first problem is leaving the camp to go to school. Every time, this is a transfer from the inner community out into the external world, the city. But for the local people it is the *Rom/gypsy*, or rather the gypsies, coming out of their ghetto and walking through the city streets. Children wander around alone begging for food, some little boys dress up as girls in order to arouse more sympathy in passers-by. On the other hand, adults prefer the traffic lights as a place for begging. So, gypsy children are reckoned to be abandoned, whilst adults are deemed to be jobless and not looking for work, and always "producing" babies. In people's minds there is a lot of prejudice in terms of exclusivity; first of all the idea that their western space is being invaded by this unpleasant microcosm, which ought to stay within its own boundaries. The first hint of prejudice arises when schooled *Rom/gypsy* children (not all the children in the camp attend regularly) arrive at school. They are often late and their clothes are not always clean and tidy, because while some *Rom/gypsy* women keep their children in order, others prefer to wait for the cultural mediator to wake the children up and do everything. In this sense southern Italy is markedly backward compared to the rest of

Europe, where there are social institutions striving to put these children through school. In any case the children soon drop out. Many authors emphasise the cultural-economic factors in gypsy life and the different daily rhythms compared to those of Western society.

For adults and children to cross the physical boundaries of the camp/ghetto means crossing a symbolic threshold that opens up (or closes) to the "other world", the *gagé* community. *Rom/gypsy* children take their first steps, away from the group of belonging and towards the external population, that first morning when they finally decide to go to school. It often happens that local doctors from the Public Health Office, the Police or the voluntary services, have to sensitize women in the camp to sending their children to school. This occurs more frequently with the two Orthodox groups, whilst the Muslim group of Xoraxane have the best children's school attendance records (Appendix).

The study carried out focuses on the data from 2 schools in Palermo, over 7 school years (2000/2007). From the analysis it emerges that children go to the nearest school and over the years there has been no visible increase in the number of children going to school. From interviews it emerges that school is perceived as a *gagé* institutional instrument of education, with which the *gagé* plan the lives of their children in their own world. Because of the segregation in which they have always lived, the *Rom/gypsy* can not manage to plan a future for their children in the world of the *gagé*. It is from here that their apparent disinterest and non-acknowledgement of the educational and integrative function of school arises. Neither cultural nor educational importance is attached to it, since the children's upbringing is seen as the exclusive duty of the family and the group. What might be asked of the school is, if anything, simple practice in reading and writing skills, which are considered necessary for co-existence with the *gagé*. The socio-political situation in which most *Rom/gypsy* find themselves today, forced to rely more and more on the bureaucratic and administrative mechanisms of the *gagé*, does mean that there is an ever increasing demand for education, although to a variable extent: those groups that have always lived their own separate and marginalised lives, and consequently have had few expectations from the world of the *gagé*, are more aloof and distrustful in their attitude towards the school. On the other hand, families that have a background of greater participation also have a different attitude towards the school.

The *Rom/gypsy* have always lived precariously and in a state of continual uncertainty and this prevents them from projecting into the future; they feel they are at the mercy of fate. In

fact, at the internal social level, a certain degree of schooling can be a handicap, since it can lead to the loss of a sense of identity and cohesion. This emerged during the ethnographic appraisal of the work of Lucj, a *Rom/gypsy* cultural mediator. On the one hand, he enjoys a position of recognition on the part of his family group and a "privileged status", as a friend of the *gagé*, well-liked and with a salary from the Palermo City Council Ufficio *Rom/gypsy*; on the other hand, Lucj's excessive integration has placed him on a different plane in the eyes of the other *Rom/gypsy* in the camp, who in some cases prefer him not to accompany their children to school, or, on the contrary, want him to take on the task of keeping up relations with the school-teachers. Lucj often tells me that the teachers complain that in times of need the parents do not answer their mobile-phones, and they are therefore forced to call Lucj to intervene. Or, in order to maintain relations with parents teachers have to go to the camp itself. This is not disinterest on the part of the parents, but a momentary attribution of parenthood to the mediator, since he seems to have found his feet better in the world of the *gagé* and, so, can communicate and act more effectively.

Rom/gypsy families need to perceive a future for their children in the world of the *gagé*, in order for them to really acknowledge the value of a school education, a future not of exclusion, but of participation. The issue here goes beyond that of the school and involves the whole of society and the role the *Rom/gypsy* play in it. However, the school can play a part in this operation by endeavouring to establish relations with the families that are based on reciprocal acknowledgement, trust and respect.

As regards the intervention strategies carried out by the teachers in the two schools, outside experts were called in so as to prepare an adequate welcome and support for the children and parents, as well as providing courses teaching basic literary skills. In fact, it is often the linguistic difficulties of the *Rom/gypsy* children that constitute an insurmountable barrier for the culture of the host country, but at the same time, for them it represents firm anchoring to the group of belonging.

The lack of participation on the part of the parents leads to excessive responsibilities on the part of the children regarding their scholastic duties, which inevitably harms their approach to education.

Involvement of families in school activities represents a fundamental wedge in the process of schooling of *Rom/gypsy* children. To this end, in Palermo, the Arci Association has for over ten years now been a link in the chain of contacts with the *Rom/gypsy* community, a sort of screen cum delegation on the part of the City council to tackle

(i.e. to ignore) the problem of welcoming and integrating the *Rom/gypsy*.

The school and *Rom/gypsy* pupils

The presence of pupils from different cultures leads to conflict involving life-styles, values and behaviour; they have to live with these issues and tackle them within the four walls of the school. For the teacher it is often difficult to leave behind the safety of his or her well-established educational arrangement in order to construct a new one based on flexibility and respect for others, without the fear of ending up in a state of chaos, and having to face the dissatisfaction of Italian parents, who might be feeling that their children's education has been somewhat compromised. Of course, when these children happen to be *Rom/gypsy* the issue is even more complex.

Most of the attitudes, the behaviour and life-style of the *Rom/gypsy* children and their families are by definition considered erroneous. There does, of course, exist the vague concept of "defending cultures", but this rather restricted meaning only implies festivals, music and exotic cuisine.

As we said before, the child arriving at school brings with him an education that he has received in his own environment, which has developed in him skills that he immediately perceives as conflicting with what the school requires of him. In fact, *Rom/gypsy* education aims to develop the spirit of initiative, independence and autonomy, the ability to work out problem-solving strategies, an understanding of the environment and people, a sense of community life, a feeling for rhythm and movement. All the child's skills risk being transformed at school into handicaps; when time and space are extremely tight, personal initiative is often inhibited or repressed. It emerged from the survey that *Rom/gypsy* children prefer motor activities such as football or trekking, or more recently, swimming. On the other hand activities such as making films in some cases prove to be extremely difficult to carry out. The first step in "finding some middle-ground" should be recognition and understanding of the child's whole background. Respect for the child's own world would mean, first of all, recognising it as a culture different from, but not inferior to, one's own, and using it as a basis for educational action. In this way, the co-existence of a variety of cultures might be feasible at school, and might represent a bedrock for scholastic programming.

This does not mean that the school should adopt *Rom/gypsy* pedagogic methods or take on the responsibility of educating the *Rom/gypsy*. The parents themselves are not asking for this.

The school is, and will remain, an agent of acculturation, which can not do other than bring the minorities closer to the majority culture. The aim is to achieve a school education that is integrated with family upbringing, and complements it rather than opposes it.

Conclusions

On several occasions during the ethnographic observation there emerged the clear need for training for the teachers in the two schools; although they have been accustomed for years now to giving an inter-cultural slant to their teaching, they do stress their continuous need for professional in-service training.

There are many tried and tested didactic programmes that point in this direction, among which the most opportune might be:

- to organise cultural awareness programmes, which might help teachers understand their pupils better, as well as their behaviour, expectations, and ways of interacting with people, places and knowledge.
- to establish a relationship with the families, who could help in awareness development. At the same time they might pass on to their children this idea of continuity between the two worlds of the

home and school, not to be seen, therefore, as the physical/symbolic crossing of the "threshold" between the camp and the city.

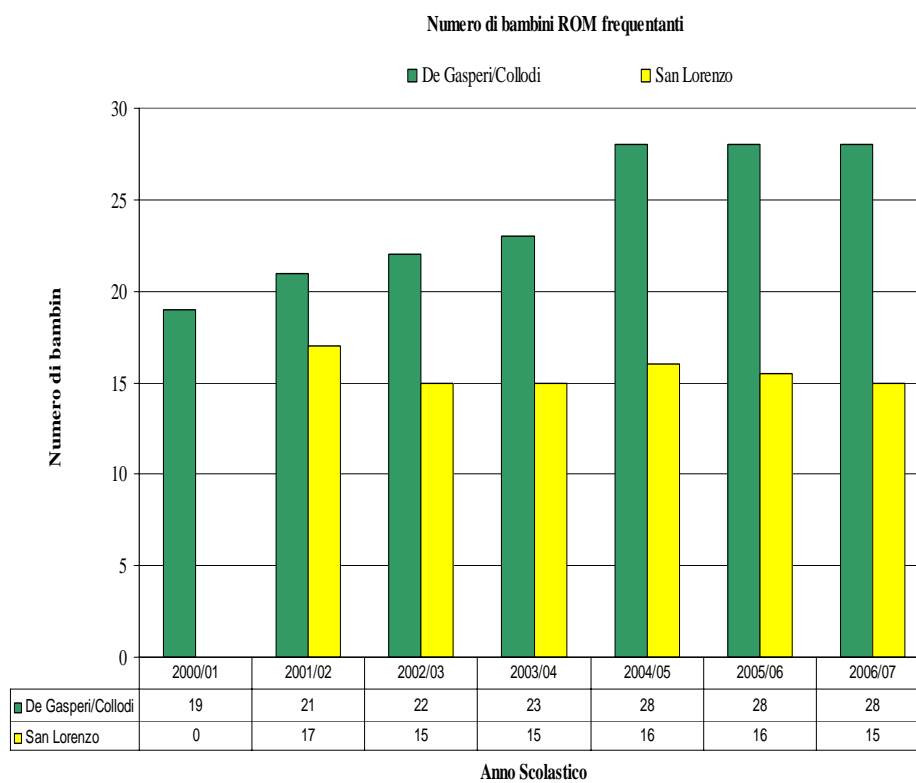
- to try out approaches to co-operation peculiar to the *Rom/gypsy* community, by co-opting, for example, the help of any siblings or cousins attending the school.
- to bear in mind the possibility, if conditions permit, of organising lessons in which all *Rom/gypsy* pupils in the school take part, where they can use their own language and their methods of communication and interaction. The possibility of bringing something from one's own world into school might be very useful both in reinforcing their own identity and as support for learning and bi-lingualism. This would naturally require the presence of someone who speaks Romany and who has a profound knowledge of the *Rom/gypsy* world. There are already several existing examples in Italy, and above all, abroad, which encourage us to look in this direction, even when the little shack knocked together in the Palermo camp and used as a school-room, has been vandalised and smeared with excrement!

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Appendix

Graph 1 – Number of Rom/gypsy children attending school (by school year and school).



Source: Elaboration from data supplied by the secretaries of the two schools.