“What’s the plan?” “What plan?” Changing aspirations among Gypsy youngsters, and implications for future cultural identities and group membership

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**Abstract**

Considering data from a research project with two Gypsy communities (2010-2012) in South West England, this article explores issues of education and identity. The two communities have contrasting experiences within the education system.

Informed by inter-disciplinary perspectives on identity and assimilation theories, the article explores these experiences within the wider context of the researcher’s work with Romani communities over the past two decades, exploring the impact of schooling on cultural identity and group membership. Questions are raised about theories concerning hybrid and multiple identities. Finally, the author emphasises the need to acknowledge the heterogeneity of minority groups in formulating policy.

Keywords

Roma; Gypsies; cultural identity; marginal/minority groups, education; inclusion; integration.

**Introduction: Education and Cultural Identity**

In many traditionally-accepted definitions, culture seems to be something encased and molded, without plasticity or fluidity. However, the extent to which culture is ‘shared’ is unclear. Advocating an open-ended, interpretive view of culture, Barth (1969) suggested that cultural meaning is unequally distributed in populations and is not a shared framework or paradigm. Increasingly, there has been a movement away from static constructions of both ‘culture’ and ‘identity’, and also recognition of individual difference within groups (see e.g. Asher, 2008; Irizarry, 2007; Mishra & Shirazi, 2010). Cultural histories cannot be traced in an unbroken line from some fixed origin; they are distinguished by discontinuity, differences and social displacement (Hall, 1993:394-5). Cultural identities undergo constant transformation; they are a matter of *becoming* as much as of *being*; there are contingent, political, economic, and social forces intersecting to create variations. In effect, the individual is able to move between ‘identities’. There occurs conscious hybridization and engagement in the process of constructing a discursive narrative of the self in which culture is made malleable as part of the act of social survival. Cultural hybridity is a “reactive, self-defining strategy forged within the context circumscribed by unequal power relations between dominant and subordinate minority cultures; as such it is always partial and provisional” (Rassool, 1999:28). Rather than disappearing or assimilating, communities evolve new, hybrid forms, adapting network systems accordingly. In effect, this entails the minority culture protecting itself through a process which preserves certain features to prevent inter-generational breakdown, while at the same time, resisting external attitudes, values and lifestyles. In this way the minority culture seeks an accommodation with the outside world. However, if one takes a less monolithic view, in which beneath the surface, pressure in conflicting directions is being applied to *cultural plates* by various sub-groups, according to differential factors, such as gender, age and socio-economic situation, the situation looks less predictable. Under such pressures, I would suggest, a certain degree of duplicity is required on the part of some group members who are seeking to change yet wish to avoid conflict or potential alienation from other community members. For Gypsies, the tendency of some individuals to *vanish* seems to be a consequence of a powerful group response to perceived assimilation.

There is an immense optimism inherent in concepts such as flexible, multiple, multi-faceted and hybrid identities (see e.g. Bhabha, 1994; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996; Pieterse, 2004). As boundaries blur, individuals inhabit a third space (Bhabha, 1994). Such thinking links with earlier theories, and indeed, and connects not merely to crossing boundaries but to multiple identities (DuBois, 1903). Indeed, DuBois connected *hybridity* with *double consciousness*. As noted by Iyall Smith (2008, p7), this is distinct ‘because it explicitly embodies multiple identities instead of crossing identity group boundaries’. There is a danger of concentrating on the empowering elements here, and of overlooking rather *darker* outcomes that might arise when conflicting cultural expectations converge within a single individual. In such circumstances, we might consider diffused (Akhtar, 1984) and fragmented identities, the latter of which can be a particular pattern within Roma communities (McGarry, 2010). Specifically, there is a need to address the dilemmas of *marginality* (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1974), inhabiting two worlds without fully belonging to either.

Social identity theory was helpful in suggesting the ways in which choices operate for individual minority group members. Tajfel (1982:331-5) identified different kinds of assimilation, covering a spectrum of contexts from situations likely to lead to full group assimilation to those in which individuals from minority groups were confronted by choices likely to result in partial and disjointed membership across groups. Along with Turner (1975), Tajfel also proposed the concept of social competition, whereby the aspirations of the minority group move closer to those of the majority while a separate identity is retained – i.e. the achievement of parity alongside culturally difference.

This goal has been particularly elusive for members of certain minority groups, and positions taken towards education need to be understood within the framework of wider social and psychological structures (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). A commitment to the retention of separate (or oppositional) identities does not leave much freedom for manoeuvre within mainstream educational environments for individuals from marginalized groups.

**The schooling of Gypsy groups in the UK context**

*“Assimilationist policies have not led to integration, nor to adaptation and harmonious co-existence, but to the marginalization of Roma/Gypsies”* (Liegeois & Gheorghe, 1995:12)

Gypsy/Roma and other Traveller groups across the UK have certain shared elements of cultural history, values and beliefs, though there are also differences. Estimates of Gypsies living in the UK vary. The 2011 census indicated 54, 895 people self-identifying as Gypsies or Travellers. However, other statistics estimated a population of ‘up to 300,000 Roma and Travellers’ (Council of Europe, 2012). The partial *invisibility* of these communities has facilitated school-avoidance. Across these communities, the traditional pattern has been one of disengagement from the education system at key transition points - by the age of fourteen, if not earlier - (Derrington & Kendall, 2004; Wilkin et al, 2010). More extensive education has been viewed as being incongruent with economic lifestyles and with a distinctive cultural identity.

Engagement with the education system on a collective basis might be viewed as strategic in the light of perceived in-group needs for only a certain proportion of literate / educated group members (Levinson, 2007; Liegeois, 1998). Participants in my previous research projects have suggested that this preference for limited engagement was condoned by educational welfare officers, whose role was to bring Gypsy youngsters into school but who frequently appeared to accept the compromise of achieving the attendance of a proportion of children from families and communities. Some of these children have referred to themselves as ‘scapegoats’. There are suggestions of collusion by schools, with absences unreported and alleged invitations to Gypsy children *not to appear* at school, for instance, during times of inspections or public examinations. This reflects the tension between pressure on schools to increase participation and pressure to improve performance. GRT youngsters - (Gypsy/Roma/Traveller has become the preferred term in official documents) - have been identified as the group with the lowest rates of attendance and academic attainment (Archer & Francis, 2007; Ofsted, 2006). These are the youngsters who are deemed to be ‘most at risk’ (Ofsted, 1999), continuing to ‘linger on the periphery of the education system’ (Ofsted, 2003). It has been suggested that some 12,000 GRT children are not even registered for school (Bhopal & Myers, 2008).

Despite a plethora of reports (e.g. DCSF, 2003; 2008; 2009; Ofsted, 2003; 2006), policy-makers still appear to miss the point as to the underlying reasons for partial engagement and modest outcomes. Through the reductive process of equating performance with attainment, and through organisation and analysis of examination data by ethnicity, community needs and aspirations are overlooked, while diversity within the group passes unrecognised. Crude averages based on group examination results might generate improved overall targets in the longer term, but hardly confront more complex and nuanced factors or address local or internal, cultural difference. The focus of most reports has been on attainment. The particularly low attainment of GRT pupils has been attributed (Wilkin et al, 2010) to a complex range of factors, including barriers that prevent them from fully accessing the curriculum, lack of engagement, interrupted education and past negative experiences of school. GRT pupils are far more likely to be placed in SEN (Special Educational Needs) groups, and significantly more likely than any other group to be excluded for behavioural reasons (Lloyd & McCluskey, 2008). There are also instances of self-exclusion (Padfield, 2005). Gypsy children have often described secondary education as boring, irrelevant and demeaning ( Levinson & Sparkes, 2003), seeing little point in a school curriculum that seems disconnected from their family business and lifestyle (Padfield, 2008), and that is alien to cultural life and identities in the home setting (Derrington & Kendall, 2004). Past reluctance amongst GRT families to encourage children to remain in mainstream schooling in the UK has centred around apprehensions that immersion in schools is not only about assimilation but also that education will undermine Gypsy knowledge (Kiddle, 1999). When asked what they would like from school, many adults and youngsters refer to basic literacy and numeracy skills. Others argue for the teaching of skills that are relevant to traditional Gypsy vocations, such as courses in car mechanics.

In recent years, patterns of engagement within the education system have been affected by the pressure on schools to promote inclusion, and perhaps, more significantly, by shifting economic circumstances whereby it has become difficult for Gypsy communities to pursue traditional occupations (Hawes & Perez, 1995; Levinson, 2013). While Myers et al (2010) have suggested a growing *pragmatism* among Gypsy parents, an acceptance that better futures for their children depend on increased participation within the education system, facilitating access to new employment opportunities, there has been little consideration of how such a pattern operates across different Gypsy families and communities, and almost no reflection regarding the wider social and psychological ramifications of inclusion.

In general, families still express a strong desire to preserve identities that are very different from those of mainstream society. They are wary of employment opportunities that will result in the fragmentation of families. A common occurrence in my recent research projects is for parents to express strong pride in the achievement of their children at school while expressing apprehension that it will lead to them taking on *non-Gypsy* jobs.

**Work and Identity**

*Every Gypsy man calls his enemy a Gadje, and to a Rom that's the greatest term of abuse: if you’re a Gadje, you’re no longer a Rom.* John, 40s

A binary view of the world, such as that articulated above, restricts scope for manoeuvre. As noted by Petrova (2003), the norm for Romani communities is to term all non-Gypsies as ‘gadje’. Participants in my own studies have appeared to confirm the point. When I asked one group how, for instance, Black communities in the UK fitted people in with this classification, I was told that they were just ‘Black gadjes’. Problems are manifested in terms of both schooling and work, in that traditional identity markers for Gypsies in both UK and US contexts have been non-engagement with schools, marriage at a young age, and also, the pursuit of certain occupations, involving self-employment and manual skills (Silverman, 1988; Smith, 1997). Children seeking to remain at school for longer than the group norm run the risk of jeopardising their Gypsy identities; indeed, opting for work outside the spectrum of normal Gypsy jobs is liable to be viewed as betrayal of heritage.

There is a growing body of literature around occupational identity (e.g. Christensen, 1999; 2004, Kielhofner, 2002, Phelan & Kinsella, 2009), and it is accepted that different types of employment are integral to identity formation (Luyckz et al, 2008). Phelan & Kinsella (2009) have argued the need to incorporate social and cultural perspectives on work identity so as to extend beyond the current emphasis on individualistic frameworks. Considering issues of acculturation, identity and employment among immigrant groups in Sweden, Nekby & Rodin (2010) concluding that a strong attachment to the ethnic group was not detrimental for employment outcomes. But this depends on the precise relationships and nature of boundaries between the groups concerned, and one cannot necessarily equate a sense of identity among one group with that of another in a different context and historical relationship with the surrounding mainstream communities. Specific cultural identities determine social and economic interactions. Internalization and identification lead to the construction of categories that shape choices (Akerlof & Kranton, 2010). Social exclusion and restricted economic opportunity result in oppositional cultures defining themselves through differentiation and exclusion. In an economic context, there are two choices for the individual, entailing either the persistence of an oppositional identity or complicity with the dominant, mainstream identity. The second option is liable to lead to alienation from those who remain within the oppositional group.

In the Romani context, relationships with mainstream communities have been problematic. Historically, Gypsies in the UK occupied certain niches in terms of agricultural and industrial work that allowed them to continue a nomadic existence while making a living from the surrounding non-Gypsy communities. The jobs concerned became associated with their own sense of *Gypsiness*. Occupational identity became particularly significant given the erosion of other traditional identity-markers, such as nomadism and language. Across Gypsy communities in Europe and North America there have been reports of both self-esteem and a sense of separateness, acquired not only through specific trades that are thought of as being *Gypsy*, but through skills passed across generations that have given these occupations a kind of mystique, a *Gypsy* way of doing jobs (see e.g. Beissinger, 2001; Silverman, 1988). Ironically, one of the central tenets among Gypsies themselves links occupational adaptability to survival. However, this tends not to include certain types of work, such as office jobs.

**Methodology**

This article draws on data gathered during a three year project (2009-2012) involving youngsters (aged 11 to 17) living on two Gypsy/Traveller sites in South West England. The research sought to inform the debate on the 14-19 strategy for improving outcomes from the perspective of vulnerable groups. In particular, it addressed many of the needs highlighted in recent reports (e.g. DCSF, 2008; Wilkin et al, 2010) in the context of educational inclusion of Gypsy Roma Travellers (GRTs) in UK schools. It was set up as a participatory action research project, designed to provide information and support for schools, other agencies, policy-makers, etc., but most importantly, to help Gypsy/Traveller youngsters and their families to reflect on educational experiences, opportunities and outcomes. One objective was to contrast culturally situated discourses with official discourses of 14-19 progression routes. A further objective was to compare insider perspectives across generations. Understandings were sought as to how the voices and perspectives of young participants might inform the ways of constructing bridges between the milieus of school/work and families/communities, as distinct from reliance on policy-directives. A central intention was that the direct involvement of youngsters in the research process should enable participants to reflect on educational processes in which they are engaged, and facilitate the evolution of in-group, peer-support structures.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to follow a consistent, uniform approach across the communities involved. The intention had been to utilise a central core of around six children (aged 10-16) from each site, reviewing their own progress and feelings about school experiences and future careers over a two year period. This group would work outwards as co-researchers, investigating the experiences and aspirations of peers. In the case of Site A, those numbers were maintained, with eight individuals (five girls and three boys) acting as a constant core group. They met with the PI on five occasions, participating in workshops designed to support their skills as researchers. These workshops included discussion of interview techniques, and considered ways of organising, representing and understanding data, as well as helping youngsters to reflect on their own experiences. In the intervening period, the youngsters involved also worked closely with a member of the research team [a Teaching Assistant responsible for Gypsy Roma Traveller Liaison]. They participated through semi-structured and unstructured interviews and focus group meetings, and through the collaborative gathering and production of evidence (with the support of the liaison teacher), in the form, for instance, of power-point displays, that captured their evolving views of education and their hopes for the future. Particularly gratifying was their contribution at a final conference during which the underlying issues were discussed with older community members and stakeholders from across southern England. The evidence from this research supports the argument that young people from minority and marginalised backgrounds are capable of sophisticated reflection about shifting and intersecting identities (Stewart, 2008). A further six youngsters from Site A (four girls and two boys), as well as two mothers, provided supplementary evidence.

The youngsters from Site B, however, never became involved as co-researchers, and their input was very much as respondents working with another member of the research team. They provided data regarding their own views, without generating anything beyond that. Five boys (aged 12-13) participated in initial interviews. Group interviews then took place, involving sisters of the participants and mothers. In effect, with the youngsters from Site B, there was never the same sort of opportunity for sustained and intensive work. The research design had to be restructured accordingly into a more conventional project based around interviews with the children in the home setting. One set of interviews involved the children alone; another was conducted alongside other family members. In effect, Site B participation mirrored the partial engagement with the education system.

**Comparison across communities: Attitudes towards school**

Up until five years ago, most of the GRT pupils from Site A left school by the age of fourteen, if not earlier. At the time of this project, all of them were still attending school, aiming to take GCSE examinations in Year 11 (age sixteen), and were talking of progressing (subsequently) to college. Their attainment levels from Years 7 to 11 were comparable to those of non-Gypsy pupils – something far removed from national norms.

From the perspective of the youngsters, they seemed to be gaining mutual strength and purpose from one another’s decisions. This is not to suggest that they were uniformly positive about all aspects of school-life, and some subjects were described as being boring and pointless. In general, the girls were more positive, but there was a sense of realism across genders. In an ideal world, observed one of the boys, he would have left school already, but he felt that it was important to continue until he had acquired sufficiently high grades to enable him to achieve his goals and get a good job.

Some of the reasons for this resulted from decisions made by the school. Institutional flexibility was evident in the tolerance of frequent absences, for instance, to attend funerals or weddings, or to go to the annual Horse Fairs. The school seeks to celebrate diversity through, for instance, an annual cultural event, Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month Exhibition. Perhaps, most significant has been the utilization of a Teacher Assistant / Gypsy Roma Traveller liaison officer, who has developed stable and warm relationships with the children and their families. The sense of trust engendered by the presence of this single person seems to be of central importance, though there is also fragility in the reliance on an individual. Parents were sufficiently reassured as to allow their children to participate in school-trips, an aspect of school-life that is traditionally avoided. A relaxed relationship was also reflected in the willingness of parents to come into the school, for example, to discuss official letters on non-school matters or to get passports signed.

Socially, the Gypsy youngsters seemed to be accepted, if not fully integrated. Conflicting information emerged regarding friendships. The children asserted that they had no non-Gypsy friends; some parents countered this by saying that some non-Gypsy children had visited their site, and occasionally, there had even been invitations to birthday parties. A strong disagreement on the matter occurred during the final conference. It is possible that the mothers who argued the case were aware that their children did not mix with non-Gypsy children. Perhaps, they did not wish to give the impression that, if there were barriers to social interaction, these were imposed by their community. Alternatively, it may be that the children did have some friendships with non-Gypsy children, but felt that it was inappropriate, or somehow damaging, to acknowledge this. In this regard, it is worth recalling Andereck’s (1992) study in a US context. Andereck suggested that far from resisting separation/marginalisation, Travellers engaged with school as a means of boundary maintenance, opportunities for interaction with non-Gypsies helping them “to become more aware of their ethnicity and (providing) a means by which to practice the group’s boundary rules” (Andereck, 1992:119-20). In other words, participation in school was a means of preparing children for engagement with the wider world while remaining apart. Interestingly, one of the youngsters in this research mentioned that one reason for going to school was to learn how to deal with non-Gypsies.

Some of the Gypsy youngsters expressed regret that there were not more Gypsy children at school, and one suggestion was that separate Gypsy classrooms would be a good thing. In school, it seemed evident that, in general, the Gypsy children stuck together, but there seemed a generally calm atmosphere between them and the non-Gypsy children. This may connect to the fact that their own parents have become more embedded within the surrounding community, with some of them now working in local shops.

This was in marked contrast to the feelings of the youngsters on Site B, amongst whom there was not a single child still attending school. It is worth noting that both the children and their families were reasonably positive with regard to primary education. There was a perception that, at primary level, the teachers had demonstrated a degree of interest and care towards them. Even the other pupils were described as being ‘OK’, to the extent that, although they remained almost exclusively in friendship groups with other children from their site, some reference was made to amicable relationships with non-Gypsy children. All this changed at secondary level. Though the youngsters were interviewed separately, they provided strikingly similar data: school was irrelevant; it had nothing to offer. All the youngsters from Site B felt that there was more to be learned from within the community than at school. At school, the view was unanimous that they were loathed by teachers as well as by non-Gypsy pupils. This was seen as being deeply-rooted and intractable, as evident in one youngster’s description of non-Gypsy pupils at school: “They’re different from us; they hate us and we hate them.”

This fitted in with wider perceptions of an external world that was fiercely antagonistic towards Gypsies. Such was the hostility, it was asserted, that even the school bus drivers had sometimes driven past without picking them up. School was compared by several children to prison, with secondary education being noted especially for its dull routine. Subjects taught at secondary level were seen as being of absolutely no value to future life. The youngsters all argued that once they had acquired the basic ability to read and write at primary school, there was no point in staying on any longer. The last ones to stay on at school felt isolated and embattled, one participant expressing his relief when he finally succeeded in getting expelled after a fight.

Older siblings and parents suggested that there were strong cultural reasons not to attend school. A common complaint was that schools adhered to boundaries between adult and child worlds that did not operate in Gypsy society. The youngsters themselves made little effort to account for the rejection of school. The precise way in which resignation or defiance were expressed was, in itself, striking. The following exchange with a thirteen year old boy [2] was typical:

*Alfie [age 13]: I ain’t been to school for years (laughs)*

*Researcher: Why’s that?*

*Alfie: Cos we don’t do that, do we? Don’t need to go to school. That’s for Gadjes (non-Gypsies), innit. Ain’t nothing for us.*

Schooling was connected to identity. Participation at school conflicted with a sense of *Gypsiness*. Although the youngsters were interviewed individually, it is revealing that the responses were consistently in the first person plural.

**Comparison across communities: Aspiration and Cultural Identity**

The youngsters from Site A viewed progression to college as a means of achieving their goals. One boy who knew of no-one who had gone to college or university said that he would be prepared to go wherever necessary to gain qualifications. In fact, most knew of someone in the extended family or a friend who had gone on to the next stage in education, and in such cases, they expressed pride in that achievement.

With regard to future work, the youngsters from Site A expressed a range of ambitions – with jobs mentioned including hairdresser, carpenter, chef, shop-assistant, teacher, musician, soldier and paramedic. Over the two year research period these aspirations remained relatively stable, with most youngsters retaining some interest in the vocations initially selected. However, it became clear that they had not really considered the lifestyle implications involved in some instances, and when asked what they would do if the job they really wanted would mean moving away from home, the unanimous response was to reject any opportunity that entailed living apart from family. This is a dilemma that seemed to be unaddressed in their school’s attempts to include them in career planning.

The observation of one of the mothers: “True Gypsy women shouldn’t work; our way of life is dying” - reveals feelings of ambivalence, at best, with regard to her daughters’ aspirations about future careers. This mother stated that her only ambition had been ‘to get married and have children’. This expectation was the norm amongst the mothers who were interviewed, the one exception being another mother, educated at the same school in the 1980s, whose ambition had been to become a secretary. This had not transpired, as instead, she had married at the age of sixteen and stayed at home looking after the children. The fact that she is now working as a customer adviser in a local supermarket might be indicative of the economic pressures confronting her family and of a perceived need to adapt. The impression, nevertheless, was that while this particular family was more likely to support the aspirations of a daughter, they still remain in the minority. If most of the children involved in this research are going to achieve their ambitions, it is likely to be in the context of concern or opposition from parents, and will require perseverance and negotiation skills if they are to be managed within the close family relationships that currently exist.

The youngsters from Site B were not facing same dilemmas. Once again, the following responses are striking for their similarities:

*Researcher: And what will you do as a job?*

*Alfie[age13]: (Laughs) Dunno. Like what we all do, scrap and stuff like.*

*Researcher: And what’s the plan?*

*Zak [age 14]: What plan? (Laughs) Dunno. Do scrap and stuff, I suppose. I like tree cutting and stuff. They were going to send me to do some of that but it ain’t happening.*

*Researcher: Why’s that?*

*Zak: Dunno. No one wants us there. (Pause) I don’t need to go cos I’m working and stuff, anyway. And school ain’t for us anyway. None of us like it.*

*Researcher: Did you plan what you wanted to do as an adult?*

*Titch: [age 12]: (long pause) No, cos you just do what everyone else does. It’s like, you do what your dad and your granddad did, and just get on with it.*

*Researcher: Would you have liked to have done something else?*

*Titch: Never thought about it. Just doing what we all do. Get married, and kids and stuff too; that’s the way it goes. (Wanders off)*

*Researcher: And was that always the plan, to work with your Dad.*

*Joe [ age 15]: Yeah, that’s what we do, innit. We keep together.*

Above all else, the tone of the above suggests resignation, but there are other undertones. In the first place, there is a much reiterated sense of togetherness, a bond between the individual, family and community that is renewed through sharing the same jobs - “That’s what we all do”. The vocational divide between Gypsy and non-Gypsy is not just selected by Gypsies, but imposed upon them by an antagonistic external world. No opportunities through school were anticipated to pursue vocations that would be of interest (such as tree-surgery and mechanics). There is a conviction that neither schools nor careers agencies will intervene to send them in alternative directions, as “No-one wants us”; in such a context, there is no point in reflecting on other possibilities or in having ‘a plan’.

Sporadic participation at secondary school level had not broadened their horizons. If it proved impossible for Hugo (aged 13) to do the same work as his father, there was always the option of the benefit system:

*Researcher: And what are your friends doing when they leave?*

*Hugo: Most of them don’t go anyway. We all do the same stuff, you know.*

*Researcher: What kind of stuff do you do?*

*Hugo: Just like, mostly mucking about at the moment and things.*

*Researcher: But you’ll have to work won’t you?*

*Hugo: Maybe, but there’s benefits and stuff, too, ain’t there? Like my Mum gets for looking after the kids and stuff. So we can get them, too. (Pauses) There’s like scrap and stuff which I can do, like my Dad does.*

*Researcher: And will you all do the same things, or are some of your friends learning stuff at school and college to use for work?*

*Hugo: Nah, we’ve all been kicked out of school. There’s nothing to learn from there anyway. We stay together and get what we need here.*

**Discussion**

The striking aspect of this project was the stark contrast between the experiences and aspirations of young people belonging to two Gypsy communities, living only a few miles apart. The difference of attitudes towards school can be attributed in part to the strategies and cultural environments of the schools concerned. While some explanation might lie in the efforts of one school to include the children, this only tells part of the story. Relationships between the Gypsy communities and surrounding mainstream communities are very different. At the present time, the two communities seem to be following quite different trajectories. The families on Site A seem to view their relationship with the surrounding community as being open to change; they seem willing to consider different occupations to those that had been traditional, and they seem to accept that increased participation in the education system fits in with current aspirations. This is not to say that such a situation is not precarious, susceptible to reversal through a single incident. As things stand, there is a sharp contrast; the families on Site B seem to be confronting difficulty by *battening down the hatches*.

Regarding school learning, the youngsters from Site A appeared unperturbed by traditional anxieties concerning tensions between Gypsy and non-Gypsy knowledge. The same was not the case for the youngsters from Site B - and ultimately, non-Gypsy (*Gadje*) knowledge was perceived as being of no value to them. This is more consistent with my findings over the past two decades, with participants typically expressing a preference not to move on to secondary school or to drop out by the by the age of fourteen. Boredom with education (particularly among boys) and the desire to work with adults, to perceive themselves as full community members, were usual explanations.

For those who remained at school, there was often a certain stigma about the choice. The more isolated the children remaining at school, the greater the temptation to ‘pass’ - (i.e. conceal ethnic identity). Hester (aged 17) recalled her growing isolation as relatives and friends dropped out, and the sense of hurt when non-Gypsy children expressed disbelief when informed of her Romani background. A desire to affirm group loyalty remained with her. She recounted one incident when she risked revealing her Gypsy identity while standing up for a Traveller who was being victimised by a non-Gypsy classmate. Similarly, Ollie (aged 15) recounted how he had said nothing upon witnessing a non-Gypsy classmate picking on a younger Gypsy boy, and had then spent the next few weeks looking for some justification to pick a fight with his classmate about something unrelated, something that would not reveal his own Gypsy identity. Ollie confessed to being wearied by the constant need for deception. When he met distant cousins at fairs or family events, he would pretend to have left school. At school, instead of admitting that he had been at a fair, he would say that he had been ill. Sometimes, he admitted, “it gets hard to remember who you are.” Others who remained in education longer than the norm confronted similar identity difficulties. Jem (aged 40s) had lost all contact with his brothers and sisters, and twenty years later, remained unable to come to terms with being rejected by his family for behaving in an *un-Gypsy-like* manner. At the same time, he was ‘going through the motions’ of living as a *Gadje*:

*Each morning I get up, go to my respectable job, come home, and nobody has the faintest idea that I am a Gypsy. Sometimes, some topic comes up – a Gypsy campsite being cleared, or that bloody programme ‘My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding’, where the people concerned are too thick to realise that viewers are taking the piss. And, you know, I don’t even know what to feel anymore: (it’s) like I’m wearing a mask that just puts on its own expressions.*

He posed a question: if you were truly assimilated, would you even know it? His existence seemed one of simulated assimilation.

No such uncertainties were evident among the youngsters involved in this project. The children from Site B were simply not engaging with school beyond a certain point, one youngster taking particular pride that he had not attended school since the age of ten. The children from Site A seemed to gain strength from numbers. They had made the opposite choice from that made by the Site B youngsters, and this was a group decision. Indeed, when I mentioned Ollie’s dilemma to two of the children in this project, they were curiously unsympathetic. Why had he not discussed this with family or friends? Publicly at least, they viewed his staying on at school when friends left as evidence of weakness not strength. Despite their own commitment to gaining qualifications, they confided that they would not stay on at school if their peers left.

Nevertheless, Site A youngsters were considering a far wider range of occupations than those undertaken by parents and older siblings. It will be necessary to re-visit the youngsters who participated in this project at some future date to assess how life-decisions actually panned out. It will be important to evaluate the extent to which widening aspirations have been of value on a wider group, as well as on an individual, basis. A challenge for families wishing to remain as a tight unit living close by to one another is how to respond to new opportunities for family members, while balancing potentially competing opportunities of children. While there is the possibility of the movement of families away from larger communities to support such aspirations, one might note the resistance to mobility of a traditionally nomadic group. Indeed, the tight social relationships within Gypsy communities militate against individualistic constructions of nomadism.

The most obvious difference between Site A and Site B participants is the apparent accommodation among the former, with efforts to maintain a distinct identity and physical separateness while at the same time becoming more like the majority in the quest for goals shared by mainstream society. Site B participants seem to adhere more to the view that it is not possible to achieve parity while remaining different, and difference is of far greater import than parity.

Youngsters and parents from Site A seem to have accepted the need for increased participation in mainstream institutions. The youngsters see themselves as a separate group within their school, but nonetheless, as part of their school. Turner (1993) warned against *difference* multiculturalism that is liable to essentialise the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group, reifying cultures as separate entities by over-emphasising their boundedness or mutual distinctness. Turner contrasts this with *critical* multiculturalism, in which the self is construed as polycentric, multiple, unstable and unsituated, allowing for fluidity and the formation of new groups and new cultural identities. However, it might be noted that if *difference multiculturalism* is apparent here, it emanates from within the group. The youngsters from Site A are seeking new opportunities, not new groups or new identities.

**Conclusion**

This study highlights the need for investigation of diversity within groups. The stark difference of attitudes between Gypsy communities living on sites within a dozen miles of each other underlines the argument that - however inconvenient or problematic for policy-makers and practitioners - minority communities have the same rights as the surrounding mainstream society to be viewed as heterogeneous.

However, despite the differences between the communities involved in this study, there were also similarities. In each case, connections were evident between education, group membership and cultural identity. The processes of education cannot be envisaged as occurring in some neutral vacuum. There are major issues of empowerment, disempowerment, and of social justice, as forcefully articulated elsewhere (see e.g. Freire, 1986; Giroux, 2005; Kincheloe, 2008). However, while education is (among other things) clearly a political act, there is a need, also, for a depoliticized discourse. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony – the permeation throughout society of a set of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality – is a social and psychological as well as a political process. For the child caught between two landscapes with conflicting, perhaps, mutually antagonistic values, the separation of policy-makers and practitioners into ideological camps is not all that helpful. It would be more constructive to focus on discourse around the home-school and dominant-marginal culture interface.

While there remains some truth in the representation of education in this context as a site of struggle between schools and families, which will have significant implications for the social reproduction of the group (Okely, 1997), it is also important to acknowledge different ways this might be manifested given the fissures within Gypsy communities. Some communities can only perceive further damage through the education system, with cultural erosion a still greater threat than economic and lifestyle difficulties. Other communities view education as the only realistic means to improve their situation. Such differences may, in certain cases, be encountered within families.

For this conundrum to be resolved there is a need to step back from the somewhat specious, emancipatory conception of education as a site of opportunity for each individual to reach his/her potential. Education needs to be directed towards communities, as well as individuals. And if communities engage with education systems in a collective fashion, the transformative processes of education can operate across the whole group, leaving greater protection against the difficulties of assimilation at the individual level.

If we review the evidence of this (and my previous) research through the lens of social identity theory, the picture is unclear. There are individuals who fit in across the categories. Sometimes, they seem to operate across those categories, and quite often, do not conform to the predictions within any category. For example, many of those who appear to have assimilated do not appear to identify with the new group and reject the old. Most commonly, there seem to be concurrent attempts to assimilate and to resist assimilation; almost as if part of those involved were standing outside themselves, leaving them hyper-aware of feelings within their own communities. This response seems to be shaped by the relationship between Gypsy and non-Gypsy communities: for economic survival, Gypsy groups have relied upon interaction with and understanding of the mainstream population. For cultural survival, they have relied upon the maintenance of strong boundaries that enhance the perceived virtues of Romani culture while magnifying the flaws of mainstream culture. As noted by Clifford (1994), a binary relation between minority communities and majority societies structures projects of both assimilation and resistance.

Postulations regarding hybrid and multiple identities contain beguiling appeal as they imply a way forward for the individual. Such theories need to be considered in the light of evidence, with particular attention to claims of empowerment. The economic need for increased engagement with the non-Gypsy world is a catalyst for the emergence of *flexible*, *multiple* and *multifaceted* identities, as posited in different ways (cf. e.g. Bhabha, 1994; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996; Pieterse, 2004; Rassool,1999). Rassool’s proposition, however, that children can be “comfortable” with such identities seems less likely to be the case in the context of any group within which options for compromise are limited. Such a perspective is certainly not consistent with the testimony provided at the start of this discussion. I would suggest that a certain fragmentation is more likely to occur among members of communities within which any form of *accommodation* is liable to be equated with *assimilation*. In such instances, those seeking even partial integration risk accusations of group betrayal.

In theory, Third Space (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996) can constitute a zone where cultural tensions and polarities have been removed; in actuality, it is not necessarily a comfortable place to inhabit; it can be *No-Man’s Land*. There is much to be said for the idealistic argument that through the act of border-crossing, hybrids can be empowered through opportunities for new subject positions, identities, and social relations (Giroux, 1992); however, there also needs to be acknowledgement of risks. Through the act of crossing and re-crossing borders, the hybrid is no longer the same being as the individual who set out, and the process should not be perceived as some kind of transaction whereby some sort of flexibility is acquired in exchange - which is not all that useful without agency. Very often, the border-crosser may have little idea at the outset of what may emerge.

The zone of discomfort for the Romani individual has been manufactured by uncompromising binarization. This seems an extreme instance of oppositional cultural theory – a group defining itself through opposition to the dominant group (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Romani culture in the UK has been perpetuated not only through its intrinsic difference but through the proposition of polarities. My suggestion is that as traditionally accepted identity markers have begun to vanish, the individual becomes reliant on what might be viewed as some kind of *mirror signposting*. One becomes defined through non-affiliation: me being me through not being you.

When acculturation processes have occurred through extended schooling, my impression among UK Gypsies has been less about multiple and hybrid identities, and rather more about dislocated or fragmented identities. The explanation might reside in the framework for viewing the world whereby anyone who is not a Gypsy is referred to as ‘Gadje’, regardless of nationality or ethnicity. If there are only two core identities, a person with a multiple identity is a combination of the two, in this case, opposites, locked in a mutually antagonistic relationship. There is a simple choice: a person is one or the other. Hybrid or multiple identities are both a contradiction and a betrayal.

The youngsters on Site B separated Romani from mainstream pathways, rejecting the prospect of futures that were marked out for non-Gypsy youngsters. This suggestion of binary perspectives underlines the need to consider the relationships between groups and the way in which boundaries are maintained. The traditional markers of Roma/Gypsy identity have been eroded in recent decades – distinctive language use with syntactical features has become reduced to some lexical add-ons; a nomadic tradition has been undermined by restrictive legislation as well as by changing economic factors. One further way in which separate identities can be affirmed is through occupation (Liegeois, 1998; Smith, 1997). This also raises the notion of contingent identities.

Much of the work on contingent identity has been of a theoretical, philosophical nature (Gibbard, 1975; Kripke, 1980). There is a need to investigate the ways in which the concept plays out in real contexts. For communities such as Site B, where work opportunities in traditional spheres have been much reduced, the implication is of a preference for no occupation over jobs that are associated with a non-Gypsy identity. For economic success and flexibility for individuals there is a need to move away from identifications between a narrow range of occupations with Gypsy identity. However, it needs to be acknowledged that such occupations pertain to lifestyle as well as identity, and have enabled Gypsies to remain in family/small community units.

In view of the pressures on the traditional Romani lifestyle, compromise may be the path to better outcomes. If communities can retain their togetherness while accessing a wider range of opportunities that would seem the ideal, some form of accommodation without assimilation (Gibson, 1988). However, this will not be attained easily, and tough compromises will be necessary. Through *border encounters* within schools, both with different groups and with competing sets of ideas and mind-sets, Gypsy youngsters will be changed. It may not prove easy for them to criss-cross boundaries alongside older family members with entrenched views and apprehensions. The choice might still remain: to continue forward alone, or to return to the other side.

**NOTES**

1. The use of the term ‘Gypsy’ remains contested. For some, it is avoided on the grounds that it has pejorative connotations. In official documents in the UK, the term ‘Traveller’ has often been used, and more recently, the acronym, GRT (Gypsy / Roma / Traveller). In general, participants have disliked the term ‘Traveller’ on the grounds that it overlooks ethnicity, restricting identity to a lifestyle that is often no longer pursued, and linking them to other groups with no actual connection (e.g. New Travellers). The term GRT has little meaning to most Gypsies in the UK. While ‘Gypsy’ remains preferable to most of my participants, I prefer to adhere to that term.
2. Names of participants have been changed or avoided entirely, unless participants requested otherwise.

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