

**Boundaries:
Dichotomies of Keeping In and Keeping Out**

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**Boundaries:
Dichotomies of Keeping In and Keeping Out**

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How to Empower Gypsies: An Ethnographic Study

Elisabetta Di Giovanni

Abstract

The work focuses on the case of the nomad camp of Palermo, in southern Italy, where three groups of 'Gypsies' have been living for twenty-five years, in ghetto-like conditions. This camp represents a world outside the city, or rather a confined microcosm, with, except for volunteer workers, sporadic contact with the people of the city or the public administration. This means that there is no inter-relationship between the camp and the outside world. On the contrary, for the so-called host society, the three different groups represent a sort of generic and nebulous whole, cut off in a green area, surrounded by a high wall. Not seeing them means not caring about them, their living conditions, their culture and their identity. The only interaction between 'them' and 'us' happens when the Romani women leave the camp every morning and walk the city streets; children wander about alone, begging for food; little boys are disguised as girls in order to make passers-by feel sorry for them and so forth. On the other hand, younger *Gypsies* prefer traffic lights as a place to beg for money. It is widely acknowledged that in the minds of local people there is widespread ethnocentric prejudice, especially in terms of marginality and xenophobia. Local inhabitants tend to assume that their western, urban space is being invaded by this unpleasant microcosm, which really ought to stay within its own boundaries. Within this ethnic framework, I would like to suggest social intervention through the empowerment approach described by Montero, and 'street level bureaucracy'¹ in order to create an initial social security cushion on the long road towards social inclusion.

Key Words: Community psychology, Gypsy empowerment, Roma studies.

1. Palermo Case Study

As in the case of most big cities, Palermo (Italy) has had to tackle the continuous rise in illegal immigration. The Roma/*Gypsies*, who account for a modest share of these immigrants, often lead erratic lives in tough conditions, and represent the most neglected group in the city. With their children often being dismissed as simply smelly and dirty, it goes without saying that it is difficult to evade racism and marginalisation. In the succinct words of many social workers who deal with the Roma community: working with the Roma people is not easy; it is often a delicate balancing act in which the building of trust is the real challenge. A volunteer once told me that 'The

Roma, if they can, will sooner or later curse you'! The truth is that they represent an ethnic minority that has historically been so oppressed and persecuted to the point that they have acquired a strong spirit of survival, employing approaches and strategies that help them to 'adapt' to the host society in which they are guests.

The Roma settlement of Palermo is located in an area of the natural park of the Favorita (the 'Real Parco della Favorita', conceived by Ferdinand III of Bourbon at the end of the 1700s), at the foot of Monte Pellegrino, both declared natural reserves since 1995. There were originally three communities cohabiting in this camp: Muslim Kosovars, Orthodox Christian Serbs and Orthodox Christian Montenegrins, but the latter abandoned the city in September 2008. All the families seem to have been happily settled for about 20 years, with only occasional nomadic ventures, linked to specific events such as baptisms, circumcisions, weddings, funerals, religious feasts etc., during which whole families are reunited. The environmental and social conditions of degradation, also due to the war that convulsed the Balkans (Kosovo and Serbia), represent the basis for the break-up of the Roma communities in Palermo. They lived in the same ghetto in three adjacent areas, distinctly separated from each other, inhabited by Kosovo Muslims, Serbian Orthodox Serbs and Montenegrins respectively. These groups, among which there are cultural and religious differences, have coexisted more or less peacefully for about 20 years in conditions of extreme environmental degradation and in the absence of the most basic structural and social services. The Muslims live in small single-storey houses built out of brick, or any other material that might prove suitable; the Orthodox Christians, however, both Serb and Montenegrin, live in shacks made of wood, raised from the ground on stacks and with a sloping roof. Both types of houses usually have a single living-space (only occasionally two), with basic furniture, mostly salvaged from dumps, usually concentrated with the beds, kitchen and living space.

For many families, toilet facilities and sewerage systems are non-existent. Therefore, many Roma are accustomed to outdoor toilets, which are usually made from recycled material, behind the shacks, for the exclusive use of the individual family. The availability of water depends upon delivery from the five silos located in the municipal area; the water is then collected in bowls or in small tanks near the houses. Wood stoves are used to heat the water.

In the '90s, the mayor issued an ordinance to provide for the distribution of principle services: electricity, water, urban transport, sanitation and epidemiological control of the environment (disinfection, vaccination of children, etc.). The camp, even today, is a mish-mash of power cables crossing the *drustvo*, which is the open space in which children play games and which is the hub of all daily social interaction. This official order

is the only one that regulates, in some way, the use of services by the Gypsies. No other act has been deliberated since the early '90s and successive city councils have almost completely entrusted the Roma issue to a social promotion group in Palermo (Roma Office), which champions their unstable and difficult processes of social inclusion, whilst the demands of the Roma reverberate endlessly. During the four years of research, the justification for this absence of public administration was the illegality of the settlement and the inability to proceed in an area subject to building restrictions. So the Roma issue has never come up again and is not currently on the agenda of local policy makers, except for order of 12/02/99 ('Urgent measures for the elimination of serious health risks in the Gypsy camp of the Favorita').

2. Work with the Roma Community: Between Practice and Intervention Strategies

In the Palermo camp there are two distinct communities; the Roma Cergara and Montenegrin Serb Roma ethnic groups. The first, consisting of about 60-70 members, has the characteristics of a real in-group, independent and bound by strong kinship ties. This is also confirmed by the horseshoe arrangement of wooden barracks, where the *drustvo* (the open communal space) is a place of meeting, exchange, relationships and participation. If a member wants to be alone and not share space with the others, the only possible option is to leave the ghetto and immerse oneself in the outside world of the Gage (i.e. non-Roma) by withdrawing to one's home.

This profile, however, is not applicable to Roma Xoraxané Muslims living in the camp. They number about 300, with a significant presence of children. Rather than membership it would be appropriate to speak of groupship, since they make up an aggregate of small groups in accordance with the lay-out of the housing, which is not, of course, accidental but the result of a precisely defined design. A sense of community arises among the members of a subgroup and not among the Muslims as a whole. Thus, the relational dynamics take place in many backyards and, moving from one to another, involve a metaphorical 'entry' or 'exit' from the context of the *bari familia* (the extended family). The profile and the declaration of membership clearly emerges when the Roma in all three communities constitute a cohesive front, united against the city. Generally speaking, all *Gypsies* vaunt their membership of a supra-category, i.e. the 'Roma people,' with neither geographical nor temporal boundaries.

From a preliminary analysis, it is clear that we should focus on the predominant issue of what I call the 'Roma system'. Because of the significantly disadvantaged socio-economic conditions and low expectations regarding their future life, the Roma have developed a high level of adaptation and have also introduced a vicious circle welfare system,

nourished by the host society, for basic and other necessities. This system is known to predominate and stands out as the main way to empowerment. This does take time and support, but often, the emergencies of everyday life force the most willing to fall back on a life of almost total dependence on others. Michael Alexander developed a pattern of host-stranger relationships, which provides an interesting theoretical framework; after studying in detail various local action plans aimed at immigrants in many cities, he has refined two methodological tools applicable to any context, in order to assess the feasibility and the possible effectiveness of local policies.

Labour migrant settlement requires more than just ‘problem solving’ in areas such housing or the job market. It often requires a redefinition of the nature of the city as a local society, based on varying attitudes towards the presence of these Strangers. The local authority may regard labour migrants as a passing phenomenon best ignored, as a threat to stability, or as an opportunity for change in neighbourhoods or in the city as a whole (...). These attitudes and assumptions are expressed by local authorities in often seemingly disconnected such as neighbourhood renewal, vocational training and provision of municipal services. Despite this complexity, I posit that these municipal attitudes or assumptions towards these Strangers (guest-worker migrants turned ethnic minorities) are an important variable in local policymaking towards migrants.²

According to Alexander, we can distinguish two ordering schemes: *policy domains* and *policy alternatives*. The first cover four thematic areas: legal-political, socio-economic, cultural-religious and spatial. The *legal-political domain* intimates immigrants’ or ethnic minorities’ inclusion in the local conurbation. Specifically, it provides migrants with civic status, consultative structures and the municipality’s relationship to migrant associations and mobilization. The *socio-economic domain* includes a greater number of local policy areas, such as social services, education and integration in the labour market. The *cultural-religious domain* concerns policies related to the recognition of the migrants’ otherness. Unfortunately the attitude of local authorities towards ethnic minorities generally ranges from abandonment to despair and, occasionally, to support. Lastly, *spatial domain* development concerns housing policies and symbolic use of urban space (i.e. mosques).

The second ordering scheme focuses on five types of policy reaction, each expressing a different attitude or intervention by the local

municipality (in these four coordinates) with regard to the migrants. This intersection gives rise to: the *transient* attitude, characterised by non-policy towards migrants; the *guest-worker* attitude, characterised by short-term solutions, in which the presence of the migrant population is acknowledged but considered temporary; the *assimilationist* attitude, where immigration is a permanent phenomenon but the diversity will eventually disappear discouraging public displays of ethnic and religious difference; the *pluralist* attitude, in which the otherness of immigrants is recognized and ethnicity is considered a positive integration factor for migrant inclusion and for the city as a whole and the empowerment of communities is a goal achieved through a process of simultaneous synergy between social actors and native hosts; and the *intercultural* attitude, logged over the last ten years, without regressing to the assimilationist attitude which creates an intercultural vision of inclusion and stresses the need for the common growth of a multiethnic city. It represents a reaction to pluralist policies, where the risk is to overemphasize the ethnic-communitarian element, perpetuating the stigmatisation and segregation.

After four years of participatory observation, I applied Alexander's model in order to analyse the conditions of the Roma people. After a series of qualitative interviews, I noted that the local municipality preferred to adopt a combination of transient and guest worker attitude. Mention must certainly be made of the important role assumed by the operators of services devoted to the migrant population. They have to mediate between institutional arrangements and migrants' multiform needs in their specificity, and so, their function is crucial and interpretative.³ They are real 'social entrepreneurs,'⁴ to be understood not only as responsible for third sector initiatives, but as a broader category of players able to move in finding a balance between public service and business logic, between solidarity and professional ethics. With regard to this, another closely connected concept is that of 'street-level bureaucracy,' i.e. the expansion of that effort and openness of inclusive policies, through the discretionary classification of cases and application choices. According to this hypothesis, operators can act by applying discretion, interpretive abilities and by reducing the authoritarian profile.⁵ The 'immigration practitioners,' therefore, form a community capable of providing, first of all, a network of support and a point of reference for the migrant (bewildered by definition) and the other a sort of 'social shock absorber' which contributes to a more fluid and less confrontational insertion of foreign nationals in our social and economic fabric.⁶ In the specific case of the city of Palermo, as well as other Italian cities, it must be stressed that nomadism no longer characterizes Roma communities. Another element of considerable importance is that the social inclusion of Roma cannot be treated singly; we need to analyze not only group membership, but the material context in which they move. The European Union has defined the

Roma people as an interventional priority in defining approaches, policies and lines of financing. Inclusive practices must be devised, starting with an inventory of needs and responsibilities, setting up communities dealing with employment and housing (in fact, many of these depressing areas are on the outskirts, often in the proximity of waste ground). Meanwhile, representatives of the immigrant community (respecting their hierarchical structure), should be prepared for the implications of having a right to citizenship with its accompanying duties for all resident citizens: compliance with laws, rejection of theft and begging as a means of livelihood.

3. Social Work

To better understand who takes care of the *Gypsies* in Palermo I have chosen the metaphor of the vortex. Many entities, public or private organizations and volunteers move around the camp, representing a specific point of reference for the members of the Roma communities. Of course, a specific role must be acknowledged in the Social Service Office for Children (USSM), which, since 1993, has been coordinating a round table of inter-institutional cooperation. From qualitative interviews conducted with some social workers, many interesting points emerged regarding the relationship between female doctors or social workers and Roma women. Confirming the previously mentioned theoretical points, there arose the question of networking between agencies/public services and tackling professional tasks:

Here we are dealing with a special type of patients, with many problems, how can you not bother? ... Through access to Roma camp, twice a week, we have obviously created a relationship of trust between the Roma and us, not only of a medical or preventive kind... (Woman, Doctor. Palermo Immigrants and Travellers Ambulatory).

Doctors or nurses who visit the camp become, in their turn, an interface for institutions. The concept of prevention and medical care has not yet been entirely grasped by Roma women, but persons interviewed say it is important that there is an active request and participation on the part of the Roma.

To define the *community profile*, psychologists usually identify strong and weak points of a community. In my research, I adopted this method. What emerged from local stakeholders was particularly noteworthy; according to them, the Gypsies' strength is this chameleon-like ability to welcome anyone who comes to the camp. They are basically very open and less hostile than the local people, and generally there is no trouble being accepted by Gypsies. In their ghetto, they have the ability to interplay between the inside and outside worlds. Another strong point is their great

capacity to bear frustration, the extended family, especially, being the instrument through which they can overcome logistical and economic difficulties. For another social operator, the Roma's toughness represents a strong point; in fact, despite all the vicissitudes and obstacles. They have a particularly strong sense of family; their children are well-loved and not, as is often assumed, exploited for begging. They also have an ancient culture, replete in tradition. All respondents stressed the important role played by women within the communities and in handling relations with operators. Over time, in fact, the relationship of trust between the parties was enhanced through female complicity. The aggregating power of women within the family has drawn the men towards involvement in a process, albeit slow, of self-awareness.

Regarding weak points, in the camp there are difficulties in putting together families from different ethnic backgrounds, which tends to exasperate the operator and create a deadlock. Roma are often passive; there is a basic sluggishness about them, which means they are very slow, and need to be spoon-fed in everything they do; they harbour no feelings of revenge. The young Roma males, for example, often do not know about their parents' origins, and so they tend to lose their native traditions and culture. According to one social assistant, the Roma community has the misfortune to be little known by the local townspeople; if anything they are only known through stereotypes, which are then reinforced by their going out to beg or not sending their children to school. Often when a Gypsy is taken on for work suspicions are aroused; they do not have the capital behind them in order to start small businesses, and, in some cases no skills either. They may well be unaware of how to start up work, which may be important for their personal dignity and their empowerment.

After ethnographic recognition of the Roma communities, the subsequent step consisted of defining participatory action research in order to achieve the overall goal, i.e. the Roma community's growth and empowerment. For this reason, I preferred the action-reflection-action model as defined by Montero,⁷ the purpose of which is to link community identity with social construction of citizenship within communities. I noted that in the Palermo camp this phase had already been conducted by social operators and volunteers, but with little synergy between *Gypsies*, resulting in the required meta-cognitive processes not being enhanced. It is widely accepted that the empowerment route must allow the community to 'increase the individual and group capacity of managing their lives in recognition and awareness of own resources'. To turn values into practice, my proposal is to enable the community actively and to focus on how they perceive this aim. As many authors have noted, there are certain activities accepted for applying intervention policies to *Gypsies*: coordination between private and social institutions, both in the planning and the subsequent implementation of the

interventions hypothesized; involvement of Roma groups in the planning and mediation through evaluated forms, taking into account the specificities of each group. As often happens, also as regards housing, the *Gypsies* are rarely consulted; the *non-Gypsies* agree on their own interpretation and criteria for judgement, whilst the actual requirements might well be entirely different. Confrontation might result with the resident population; occupation of a field and the arrival of a group of Roma will often lead to problems that will worsen if not well handled with a constant supply of information to increase awareness and knowledge of these people. Unfortunately, at present, the camp is often seen as the only solution; criteria for its implementation need to be outlined: to avoid mega-fields (more expensive, less comfortable and effective, less manageable), to pay attention to ethnic groups and family members, to avoid the standard camp model (common space and services), to provide facilities.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that accompaniment is a key element in the planning process of empowerment. A Roma camp, in fact, is not merely a deposit for sewerage, but hinges on relationships within it and with local urban planning. Encouraging respect for diversity and the process of integration takes time and care. Patient and sustained care, over a period of time, is now left almost entirely to individuals or non-profit agencies; it is often referred to as a mode of intervention by institutions and provides reduced and intermittent time. The accompanying project consists of continuously supporting the integration processes acting on several fronts, always keeping in mind the eventual revival of the community: work with children (schooling, animation, integration with peers), with adults (regularization, business orientation), with women (literacy, accompanying services) and also with the territorial context, school, perhaps the local parish and all the people interacting with the camp. Paternalism is not the right approach: working with migrants, particularly with Roma people, signifies involving them in a process of ideation, reflection and progressive realization of strategic action. Very often the principle difficulty is to tackle the fragmentation of the community; initially it is essential, but unrealistic, to try to involve all the families. The best tool is short, clear and incisive communication. Jealousy can often be a reaction, which takes the form of a strategy of resistance. While applying the participatory process, the social operators might witness a slow change in beliefs, self-representation and daily life, brought on by reflection and enlightenment. At this moment, the individuals who first achieved good results will turn into a positive vector inside the community; in my case study, the Roma Xoraxane founded 'Pralipè,' a socio-cultural association. Today, handling otherness represents a most important issue for all social and human sciences. As argued above,

Roma participation and Roma self-awareness might come about only with the building of concrete and effective bridges with local institutions (at every level), accompanied by synergic social action.

Notes

¹ M Lipski, *Street-Level Bureaucracy, Dilemmas of Individuals in Public Services*, Russel Sage Foundation, 1980.

² M Alexander, *Comparing Local Policies toward Migrants: An Analytical Framework, A Typology and Preliminary Survey Results*, in *Citizenship in European Cities, Immigrants, Local Politics and Integration Policies*. R. Penninx, K Kraal, M Martiniello, S Vertovec (eds), 2004, p. 63.

³ M Ambrosini, *In prima linea. Integrazione degli immigrati, politiche locali e ruolo degli operatori*, in *Costruttori di integrazione. Gli operatori dei servizi per gli immigrati*, M Ambrosini (ed), Fondazione Ismu, 2005b, p. 45.

⁴ M Ambrosini, 2005a.

⁵ M Lipsky, op. cit., 1980.

⁶ P Zanetti Polzi, *Operatori dell'immigrazione: tra solidarietà e professionalità*, in *Costruttori di integrazione, Gli operatori dei servizi per gli immigrati* in M Ambrosini (ed), Fondazione Ismu, 2005, p. 112.

⁷ M Montero, 'Community Action and Research as Citizenship Construction,' *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 43, 2009, pp. 149-161.

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