

Identity Formation and the Collective Self

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Introduction

In this paper I will be looking at the concept of identity within Gypsy Traveller communities as I understand it. I am not a gypsologist neither do I see Gypsy Travellers as clients in my therapy practice. My work with Gypsy Travellers is to help families access the education system and that involves working with the families but also working with schools and professionals within the system to challenge stereotypical negative views of the Gypsy Traveller community. I know to some extent I am going to be in danger of offering up another form of stereotypical theorising about this same group, but I hope it will be seen that the issues I raise are about acknowledging and respecting another way of being. What I want to try to do here is to highlight a number of the issues that my work in education has made me think about in relation to my clinical practice. These issues relate to the concept of identity formation, the nature of the collective self, the notion of homeland, and the social inclusion remit. I will also briefly comment on why I think that Gypsy Travellers are so feared and hated.

Tens of millions of people in today's globalised world are on the move. Migration, mobility, asylum, dislocation and displacement are potent themes. They alert us to the human consequences of economic and ideological dictates in terms of the suffering of forced separation, loss and trauma.

There is no doubt that these human upheavals are a challenge for us all, in terms of how we perceive ourselves in the light of the confrontations with difference, that is an essential part of this process, and not just in terms of theoretical conceptualisations, but in actual everyday experience. To allow difference to really exist and not merely to be tolerated is hugely difficult.

This is how I would see the challenge that the Gypsy Traveller has for us non-Gypsies. Their capacity over many centuries not to be assimilated, or even to a large extent to be integrated, and their ability to maintain a strong cultural difference, even in the light of unremitting hostility, is fascinating and perhaps potentially informative for us.

Gypsy Traveller is now the official terminology. It is a generic term which covers many different Gypsy groups, the main ones being Romany Gypsies, those who have been in the UK for centuries, the Roma who have migrated from Eastern Europe and the Balkans this century, and Irish, Scottish and Welsh Travellers. They are recognised as an ethnic group and a defining characteristic of that is their heritage of nomadism.

Gypsies are thought to have originated in India and have made their way across Europe reaching Britain in the 16th century. People at that time believed that they originated from Egypt, hence the name Gypsy, yet in spite of being experienced musicians, entertainers and skilled craftsfolk, they were lumped together in the then current category of 'vagrant' and have, as it were, remained there ever since.

They have been the scapegoats in many of the countries where they have stopped. In communist times in Eastern Europe, for example, they had their wagon wheels removed and their horses shot so that they could not travel. In fact, the desire to sedantise them has been extensive. In general it can be said that there have historically been four ways in which Gypsies have been treated by the authorities in their attempt to control what they regard as

‘the Gypsy problem’ – extermination, assimilation, exclusion or containment. The fear of the uncontrollable is what is at work here, the fantasy of which can be seen in the myths that exist about Gypsies’ predilection to violent feuding and to passionate seduction. Indeed, the wiles of the Gypsy are part of collective mythical thinking.

Over centuries and continuing well into current times, Gypsy Travellers have been vilified and persecuted. It is only fairly recently that it is officially acknowledged that at least half a million Gypsies were exterminated in the Holocaust along with Jews, communists, gays, the disabled and other marginalised groups.

I could give a whole lecture on the extent of the prejudice heaped onto Gypsy Travellers and demonstrate without much difficulty how it persists unregulated today. Only recently a Scottish MP was reported as referring to Gypsies as ‘vermin that has to be got rid of’. There was no massive outcry about this neither was there when Jack Straw, Home Secretary at the time, talked about Travellers in racially provocative and highly offensive manner. It is somehow seen as acceptable that Gypsy Travellers deserve the insults that they get because they are not prepared to go along with the system that others have to follow. Comments and views on Gypsy Travellers are simply not part of the political correctness debate. It would be seen as outrageous if many of the comments they receive were directed against any other ethnic group - and rightly so.

I mention this not to merely catalogue this hostility but to place their lives in a realistic context. This hostility that they have encountered wherever they have gone has caused them to be consistently on the move, forced to flee, forced to encounter new cultures and to make each their home.

But let us take a closer look at the concept of self, which is so rooted in a 20th century mentality. It is fundamentally a lone self, an individual self, which is dependent on the other but is desirous to be separate and 'other' itself.

Furthermore, in this scenario we see that the self is intrinsically fragile. It is a construction forever, potentially, about to be fragmented and which is dependent on the administrations of an (m)other. The baby is the mother's possession and the mother the baby's. The father can only be the outsider until the point at which the baby turns to the father for a representation of that which is external. It is a theory of identity formation which is hierarchically developmental and normative. It is the healthy development that we all strive for.

It may well be the case that Winnicott, for example, did not wish to imply that mother as an individual provides the facilitating environment; it can be a substitute mother, but the dyadic exclusivity remains the same. The core relationship is first and foremost a dyad.

But why must this be the case? In other cultures, and here I would class the Gypsy Traveller culture, the concept of self is simply not like this. The identifications are not first with the mother, then the father for a representation of the external, and then the wider social network. It is rather that the Gypsy experience of self is first and foremost a group-self. The emphasis on the group is everywhere. This can be seen in the practise of sharing of everything, from money to clothes to experiences and stories, to children themselves. The baby does not belong to the mother *per se*. It is the mother's but it belongs to the group.

Similarly, the child does not want for itself, it wants for the group. If you ask a Gypsy Traveller child what they want for Christmas, for example, they are more likely to talk about wanting something for their family than for themselves. If you talk to children about what they want to do after leaving school, which can be from 12 onwards in order to follow in the traditional gendered work patterns - the answer will usually be of the collective. The boys will be joining their brothers, fathers, uncles, grandfathers in the traditional work and the girls will follow their sisters, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers in child rearing and home making. This is not to say that there are never Gypsy Travellers who will want to study further, but it will be strictly within the understanding of the collective. They will do this only if it does not conflict with their assigned, and accepted, gender and cultural role.

The collective experience of self can be seen in many other forms. The major transitions in life are not to be undertaken alone. They are collectively felt and experienced. This is the same for births, illness, deaths and marriages of the members of the group. There are some great stories about hospitals being inundated by family members when a relative is ill. Caravans pull on from all over the country to be there. The hospital in Lewisham is regularly host to large numbers when any relative is taken in. There is no such thing as suffering alone. The experience is collectively felt.

This is by no means a unique occurrence - other cultures where extended families are still very much active have this same attention to a collective sense of being. But what does, in my view, remain unique is the solidness of this. It is not dying out, being substituted by making a call for example on the mobile phone; it is a physical positioning of the body in the collective space. This physical positioning of the body in relation to other bodies strikes me as a collective form of mirroring, a way of reiterating for oneself what one's identity is. It is affirmed in this way through the actual presence of others that are recognised as the same. Collectivity is essential for the survival of self. The absolute acknowledgement of this leads to a real deference of the individual to the collective with little resistance or sense of loss. On the contrary there is an overwhelming sense of gain and reward.

Part of the collectivity of self, as it were, is the ability to make many different and not necessarily hierarchical attachments which are significant. In contrast to this is our concept of making a number of attachments in a hierarchical manner. Within the Gypsy Traveller community the child is identifiable in relation not just to the mother but to the siblings, aunts, uncles etc.

As I am suggesting, within current object relations thought attachments and security are located primarily within the mother. Separation, according to Bowlby, from the mother during infancy can cause insecurity, an increase in hostility and ambivalence and can institute the mourning process at too early an age which causes the person to be stuck in despair and depression.

I would not, on one level, argue with this but I would question its universality and I would also question what we are doing to make the mother so singularly responsible for the child's well being, indeed for its mental health. There seems to me an overemphasis within object relations and indeed within society at large with the mother as the main provider of security in development. The role of siblings, cousins, aunts and peers is neglected since healthy development is seen in terms of a dyadic relationship and then a triangular and then an encounter with the society/group at large. In addition, within this model the view of the group is not seen as benevolent but rather as hostile, forever seeking to undermine the fragile sense of self that the person has struggled to establish

As it seems to me, the need for the group in Gypsy Traveller culture is not regarded as bad or unhealthy but rather as existential. It remains a source of curiosity, irritation and at times downright hostility for non-Gypsies that Gypsies Travellers usually have large families who make visits in large groups and who do not seek out solitude.

As an example, I have worked with a family of nine who were housed in a two bedroom flat. It was always overflowing with people because not only were there the immediate family members but also there would frequently be other relatives visiting, stopping. The family was eventually re-housed in a mansion of a place. But what happened was, for me, very interesting. Visiting them over time in their new home, I noticed that every time they would all be in one

room, family and visitors together and the space again was completely cramped and loud, the rest of the house empty. Here too, the use of space and this continual physical reflection of self in the collective seems essential to the way of being.

The group as at core essential and vital is something not addressed in object relations, where to identify positively, is to identify oneself as a separate entity. This became clear to me when I wrote my biographical piece for this conference. What was implicitly required was for me to say what I had achieved and what my interests were. A Gypsy Traveller would have identified him/herself as part of his/her group and would have told of him/herself in relation to his/her family. (Incidentally, the object relations formation of identity does not allow either for a theorisation of twinhood or multiple births).

This leads me on to think about what it means to be at home. Clearly, an aspect of the refugee and the asylum seeker is that they have been displaced from their home, as a physical entity, which causes an internal displacement and sense of alienation. Gypsies famously have no book, no creed, no one leader, and no homeland to return to. They are not as any other diasporic group because of this. There is no dream of returning and reclaiming what was once theirs. Winnicott's paper 'Home is Where We Start From' can be re-titled here to 'Home is Wherever We Are.' A sense of security is not located in a particular place which in fantasy, or indeed reality, we can go back to. Rather it is in the internalisations of the relationships with the group over time and over generations. Gypsy Travellers, it seems to me, create a space of their own in which they can feel at home, a social space composed according to their own ethic of relatedness. It is paradoxical that of course Gypsy Travellers are nomads - and yet in some ways they are not. A place of their own, a notion of home, is not in the end a place at all, rather it is the realisation of a profound sense of life together with others.

The relationship with the land and space more generally is interesting. Land simply has use - to be pulled onto and off from. Historically, it belonged to anyone as 'common' land. However, with the increasing private ownership of land which has an impact on all of us in terms of wide open spaces, there is less and less land that is for public use. This means that it is virtually impossible nowadays to pull onto land which is common to all. Posts have been sunk on many commons to stop people pulling on. All land now, even common land, has an owner and a controller.

The place now on the margins, or even on the outside, is the Gypsy Travellers' 'homeplace' and it is becoming more and more restricted as actual land space becomes increasingly subject to rigorous planning and environmental legislation.

People's sense of citizenship has been traditionally based on a sense of belonging to a spatial territory. Gypsy Travellers ability and capacity to cross real spatial boundaries without due distress is seen as a threat. This throws into clear definition a static idealised sense of place, stationed in the past with seamless coherence of character and comforting bounded enclosure, which has been utilised, historically, to justify the exclusion of Gypsy Travellers. It

gives us an insight into the roots of anti-nomadism. As I have indicated already, the idea of a nomadic underworld has been a source of concern for European states for centuries. The efforts of the state apparatus to 'deal with' this supposed threat have always constituted a brutal and undemocratic project. It would seem that not having a specific 'homeplace' related to land cannot easily be tolerated by the settled community.

Concerted efforts have gone on over the centuries to sedantise Gypsies, so that for example, it is estimated that only one percentage of Gypsies in Eastern Europe actually are currently nomadic. 99% have been forced into settlements and even behind walls, as was the case for a time the Czech Republic. The housing conditions are appalling - perhaps the worst I have seen was a bombed out estate in the sprawling outskirts of Sarajevo in Bosnia, where there was no sanitation, no running water and no electricity. Yet, as several gypsologists who have researched various Gypsy groups note, they do not give up their identity as Gypsy or even their codes and cultural practices. On the contrary, they seem to become strengthened in their cultural identity.

All this then is to be seen in the context of an extremely hostile world which finds it very difficult to accept a way of life that does not want what is on offer and to this extent is forced to choose to be on the margins or on the outside. It begs the question about why should it be so hard for the settled community to accept this and makes us look at not only how do people cope with trauma, loss and forced separation, but also why members of the host/settled community, whose heritage may well have been as refugees, find it hard to accept anything that is different and then doubly hard if it insists on retaining its difference. The defining characteristic for me for the Gypsy Traveller culture is that they are not looking to integrate or assimilate. They actually, and very simply, just want to be able to continue their way of life with the minimum amount of hassle and to be treated with respect and be afforded the same rights as others. Why this should cause any difficulties at all is significant. In a liberal society, such as ours, this should be the right of any citizen or group, particular if they are not harming any other to live as they so choose.

I want now, just briefly, to look at a couple of the issues around non-integration which are deeply problematic, for it makes us confront how we deal with difference.

Gunter Grass, the German writer, wrote something very pertinent on this. He said:

"Everywhere Gypsies are the lowest of the low. Why? Because they steal, are restless roam, have the evil eye and that stunning beauty that makes us so ugly to ourselves?

Because their mere existence puts our values into question. Because they are all very well in operas and operettas, but in reality they are anti-social, odd and don't fit in. Torch them shout the skinheads." (Quoted in Stewart, 1997)

This is quite significant in my view because he is implicitly saying that we can work with difference only if it does not question our own values - as long as it is safe. When not, when the 'difference' is actually often indifferent to our values, then it provokes such hostility and rage and a desire to spoil and destroy.

The suggestion here is that the perceived freedom and self-sufficiency of the Gypsy reminds the non-Gypsy of what they do not possess and how they are bound by social conventions and restrictions as to what is acceptable and good. The non-Gypsy has an available 'container' for their unwanted feelings, hence the accusations of dirt, mess, violence and theft that abound wherever the Gypsy goes. It may well be that the envied state is the capacity to be free. This perception of freedom is of course, on one level, mythical - the Gypsy code requires many restrictions and limitations, from cleansing rituals thorough to choice of love object as marriage partner. Yet the representation is very powerful - the desire to be independent, which as I have already indicated, is the aim of psychological theories and notions of maturity and mental health generally. The move towards independence and mature individuation is a desired state, safe from the terror of the dependent infant, who can only survive through the administrations of the very powerful other.

The potential refusal of the other to perform these administrations, the recognition of their capacity to deny us, leaves us in a perpetual state of terror until we achieve the capacity to manage out aloneness. The Gypsy can be seen not only as magically acquiring this state but further s/he is not regarded as experiencing this terror. The Gypsy's collective self is perpetually held in and by the group. Indeed, a common fear of crossing the Gypsy is not only the power of the curse but also the fear of the confrontation being with the whole group not the single Gypsy.

The notion of unwanted projections being contained by the racial other is not new, neither is the view that the racial other is a needed presence exactly as a home for these projections. But what I believe is different about the Gypsy Traveller as a needed container for these projections is, and this will appear quite contradictory in the light of what I have been saying up to now, that their presence is both feared and welcomed at the same time. The fact that Gypsy Travellers actually do not assimilate, the fact that they continue to pull on to various sites and then disappear only to reappear at another time, allows us to believe that our destructive impulses or unwanted projections have not destroyed them but have been tolerated. What a relief! This explains, to some extent, why there is no guilt attached to how Gypsy Travellers are treated and persecuted. They can withstand our attacks and more, they still exude vitality and verve.

In conclusion then, what I hope I have shown is how working with Gypsy Travellers has made me rethink certain assumptions that I had. It has made me question the universality of the object relations construction of identity and to ask where is the place for a theorisation of the collective self? Furthermore, in trying to understand why they are so vilified it makes me question how we cope with difference and to acknowledge how threatening it is. And does it say anything about this globalised world that we are all part of.

Perhaps globalisation actually makes us less able and willing to cohabit with difference? The current debates within cultural studies, international relations and anthropology focus on the apparent contradiction that as globalisation advances, local cultural boundaries become more bounded and rigid, for example the influxes of Roma and other refugees have not led to open borders, but on the contrary it has led to more rigid, closed and hostile borders.

It would seem then doubly difficult for people in relation to a 'difference' which doesn't seek integration, to permit them to maintain that difference. It is even more threatening to the very notion of order and society. In this light, I think the social inclusion remit must be regarded with some suspicion. As a concept it is there in our language, in our professions and target setting, in our way of looking at outcast/marginalised 'other' groups and individuals.

Social inclusion, and its partner mainstreaming, are in danger of disempowering people by making them give up their difference. And yet for whose benefit is this? As a very pleased-with-herself head-teacher said to me recently "I bet when you go to that class you won't be able to tell which are the Travellers." This was for her a shining example of social inclusion. For me, it made me think how important it was for her for difference to be made safe by making it fit in. Only then could she feel in control. Perhaps we are all in danger in our professional worlds of being more like this head-teacher than we would like to admit.

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