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THE ROLE OF PLAY IN THE FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY
Gypsy Children in Home and School Contexts

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Drawing on data from a three-and-a-half-year ethnographic study of Gypsy life in England, this article explores the orientations of Gypsy children toward play and the way in which play operates to affirm a separate identity and enforce boundaries. The apparently uncontrolled, and at times destructive, behavior of Gypsy children in a social/play context has been perceived by some observers as a barrier to educational progress. To illustrate and explore some of these themes, a number of vignettes are provided, through which patterns of play behavior are considered in different contexts, structured and unstructured, in home and school settings. Throughout the discussion, there is a search for socio-cultural interpretations of play patterns that appear to differ from norms of the mainstream group, and an attempt is made to consider ways in which such patterns might fill a vacuum created by the erosion of traditional identity markers.

Keywords: Gypsy children; play; identity; cultural production/reproduction; boundary maintenance

Beyond passing comment in wider research projects—a handful of allusions made to distinctive patterns of play among Gypsy children (see, e.g., Okely 1983; Reger and Gleeson 1991; Smith 1997)—there has been little attempt to explore the implications of the perceived differences between the play of Gypsy children and the play of other children or to provide any analysis in a wider cultural framework, in particular in the context of evolving identity.1

Linnekin and Poyer’s (1990) dichotomy between Lamarckian and Mendelian models of ethnicity (i.e., cultural identity based on environment, behavior, and social flexibility, as opposed to descent) provides a useful starting point for the exploration of Gypsy identity. Despite references to lineage and differentiation between groups that are, or are not, deemed to be “true Rom,” most observers have identified certain characteristics as being more integral to group membership, highlighting a variety of identity markers (see below). For Barth (1998), in the determination of ethnic identity, the cultural features of greatest import are boundary connected: “the diacritica by which membership is signalled and the cultural standards that actors themselves use to evaluate and judge the actions of ethnic co-members, implying that they see themselves as playing the same game” (Barth 1998, 6). However,

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changes of Gypsy lifestyle in the United Kingdom (UK) in recent years are resulting in a gradual erosion of long-established identity markers and a blurring of boundaries. While it seems evident that distinctive ethnic identities can survive, even in the absence of traditional identity markers (Gay y Blasco 1999), this can be manifested only through the persistence or augmentation of traits emphasizing otherness. Mechanisms used for remaining apart have not as yet been explored in depth.

This article investigates the interface between play and identity in home and school contexts, in particular the role of play in “authoring the self” (Bakhtin 1981). This space of self-fashioning is a social and cultural space, and “it remains, more often than not, a contested space, a space of struggle” (Holland et al. 1998, 282). Furthermore, this article seeks to highlight the significance of play behavior through which separate identities can be affirmed by challenges to mainstream modes of play and boundaries bolstered through distinctive and at times confrontational play.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various identity markers among Gypsy groups have been highlighted by different observers. These include speaking Romani, being nomadic, and upholding pollution taboos (see, e.g., Okely 1983; Stewart 1997; Sutherland 1975). Stewart (1997) found identity among Hungarian Gypsies to be located in action. In the view of Liegeois (1986), lifestyle is integral to the cohesion and survival of Gypsy society, along with an intolerance of deviance: “Gypsy culture is based on indescribable and intangible ways of being, on ways of doing things which, however varied and ephemeral, must conform to custom” (p. 85). Gay y Blasco (1999) found no identity markers among the Gypsies in her study but nevertheless discerned distinctive characteristics rooted in behavior and performance, along with a set of moral values that the Gitanos (Spanish Gypsies) viewed as superior to those held by the surrounding Payos (non-Gypsies).

Salient in almost all studies on the subject is a determination on the part of the communities observed to remain distinct from mainstream society. Andereck (1992) suggested that Irish Travelers in Mississippi encouraged segregation as a means of boundary maintenance and that Traveler children demonstrated an awareness of their own ethnicity
before non-Traveler children did. For them, their family or cultural group remained the main social institution for socialization. The interaction opportunities provided by the school setting, however, helped them “to become more aware of their ethnicity and provided 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.

In recent years, there have been pressures to integrate Gypsy children into the education system (Ofsted 1996; Ofsted 1999). Indeed, in view of restrictions on movement, it has become easier for education authorities to monitor the whereabouts of Gypsy children and to enforce attendance. As yet, there has been almost no attempt to evaluate the impact of such developments on Gypsy children’s sense of identity. Involvement in school can be perceived by parents as a threat to cultural traditions and values (Derrington and Kendall 2004; Kiddle 1999). Nevertheless, school can also provide a forum for the expression of difference and the assertion of boundaries (Andereck 1992; Levinson and Sparkes 2003).

Both real-world and play knowledge in Gypsy communities are shaped by distinctive cultural and environmental factors. Indeed, the real-world basis of play among Gypsy children has been noted elsewhere (see, e.g., O’Boyle 1990; Okely 1983). In Okely’s (1983) view, “creative” or “invented” play mirrored real life, and in dramatic play, Reger and Gleason (1991, 613) noted the pattern, among Hungarian Gypsy children, for children “up until the age of marriage, which may be at 13 or 14 years,” to reenact, “in elaborate and accurate detail,” events from everyday life, such as quarrels, horse dealing, or asking for a girl’s hand in marriage. Noting a propensity for social play relating to strongly differentiated gender roles at home, Szeman (1995) listed a variety of games played by young Gypsy children that she had observed in a Hungarian kindergarten, including cooking, eating, looking after children, “daddy-mummy games,” traveling in groups, jumping, and hunting for rabbits. Most of these seemed to be connected to real-life experience.

In general, however, there has been barely any study of play patterns among Gypsy children, and this has resulted in a disproportionate authority in passing remarks on apparently distinctive orientations toward play. Moreover, notable in such comments is the absence of any
reference to a wider sociocultural context, as well as a lack of understanding, that is reflected in the assertion that Gypsy children “don’t know how to play” (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1985).

The shift during the past ten years or so away from experimental studies rooted in developmental psychology and toward sociocultural frameworks for researching and understanding play (see, e.g., Corsaro 1997; Evaldsson and Corsaro 1998; Sutton-Smith 1997; Wood 2004) enables us to perceive play in different ways, ways in which children, rather than constituting a separate group (or even tribe; see, e.g., Hardman 1973; Opie and Opie 1969, 1977), act as members of their communities, replicating group acts and structures and inventing novel interpretations and variants that can both alter the directions and (re)affirm membership of their own communities. For Geertz (1975), children’s culture is not to be seen as a causal power but as a context within which their social relations can be described. More specifically, play can be perceived as a social practice distributed across a range of contexts and coparticipants and influenced by the tools and symbol systems of the culture (Wood 2004). Learning is socially mediated and constructed as children participate in shared and distributed practices that are based on combining real-world knowledge with play knowledge (Brostrom 1999; Hakkarainen 1999).

METHOD

To explore the play patterns of Gypsy children in the home environment, the meaning and use of possessions, the social dimension of the play patterns of Gypsy children, and their behavior in schools, this article draws on data generated from a three-and-a-half-year, ethnographically informed study (1996–2000) that focused on the interface between Gypsy culture and the educational system. In the early phases of the research process, a period of 101 days was spent in seven schools in the southwest of England (five primary schools, for seven- through eleven-year-olds; and two secondary schools, for eleven- through sixteen-year-olds), during which time forty-seven Gypsy youngsters were interviewed and observed in both classroom and playground settings. Access was gained to these schools via the officer of the relevant county traveler education service. The purpose of research was explained, in
general terms, as “the experiences of Gypsy children in school and the home-school interface.” A field role in each school was then negotiated.

During lesson observations, specific aspects relating to the social and educational experiences of Gypsy children were monitored on different occasions (e.g., interactions with teachers, interactions with both Gypsy and non-Gypsy children, or engagement with educational tasks). Playground observation was conducted on different occasions at both the individual and group level from a variety of vantage points. Whenever possible, the children who had been observed were subsequently engaged in formal interviews or informal discussions so that their perspectives on events could be considered.

Of the forty-seven Gypsy children in schools, thirty-one were engaged in individual, formal, and structured interviews that focused on their attitudes and values regarding schooling, aspirations and concerns, narrative skills, and use of leisure time. These took place within the school and normally lasted thirty minutes. The children were given the choice as to whether the interviews were tape-recorded. The majority of those involved were quite happy for the interviews to be tape-recorded. Informal discussions were also conducted with these and other Gypsy children during break times and recorded as field notes.

During the school-based phase of the study, it became evident that the focus needed to be extended to incorporate the home/school interface and that this would necessitate visits to Gypsy sites. Because of the variety of backgrounds among the children encountered in the first phase of the study (English Travelers [Romanichals], Scottish Travelers [Nachins], and Irish Travelers [Minceir]), the decision was made to visit as many different sites as possible. A total of twenty Gypsy sites were visited in the UK, with the majority visited being in the southwest of England. Of these sites, twelve were visited on more than one occasion. The total number of site visits was thirty-six. Access to ten sites was initially negotiated via fieldworkers employed by the county traveler education services. Their role was to provide links between education, health services, and the home, with a view to safeguarding the educational (and social) welfare of children from Traveler families. These fieldworkers provided introductions to those living on sites and generally tried to ensure that this first encounter ran smoothly. Sometimes, these fieldworkers adopted the role of gatekeeper and sometimes that of sponsor. In each case, there was an element of risk in the threat posed to sometimes fragile relationships constructed with great care during a
period of time between fieldworkers and Gypsies. Access was also facilitated on some sites by Gypsy children who had already participated in the school-based phase of the study.

Where access could not be facilitated by fieldworkers, sites were visited unannounced and an attempt was made to negotiate access. When making unannounced visits, in recognition of attitudes regarding Gypsy females interacting with non-Gypsy males, the initial strategy was to arrive at the site when the men were likely to be home, usually in the late afternoon or on weekends. An approach would be made either to a (Gypsy) site manager or directly to adults who were outside working. The purpose of the research was then explained in terms of their children’s general experiences of the educational system. At times, it was clear that this explanation was not believed and that the visit was perceived as a pretext for something more “official.” At other times, there was a willingness by individuals or groups to engage in conversation. A common occurrence was to be sent away and told to return on another occasion for an interview to take place. On returning at the specified time, something had come up, the person failed to attend the arranged meeting, or in the cases of Gypsies who had stopped at a site temporarily, the whole group might have moved on. As a result, the process of gaining access and collecting data remained problematic throughout the study.

Where access was granted to a Gypsy site, it allowed for informal conversations, interviews, and the gathering of observational data (e.g., patterns of interaction between adults and children, use of free time, and play activities). During this phase, the investigation evolved in terms of direction and emphasis, becoming more defined and generating substantial data sets. Data pertaining to different aspects of the study could be reviewed and analyzed subsequently within specific conceptual frameworks. Cultural barriers against engagement with the education system became more evident, and within this, a number of themes emerged, including knowledge/skills gained at home; orientations toward roles according to age and gender; orientations toward time and space; patterns of play and work; changing attitudes, values, and lifestyles across generations; and the impact of education on both lifestyle and identity.

It is important to record variations of geographical locations/surroundings and physical conditions of different sites. As noted in a number of reports (e.g., DES 1985; Niner 2003; Taylor 1988), Gypsy sites
are often unauthorized and illegal as a result of the severe shortage of official sites and are commonly in deprived, ill-maintained, vandalized conditions, with those living on them under the constant threat of eviction. DES (1985) linked living beside industrial estates, garbage dumps, or sewage works with Gypsy perceptions of the way in which society viewed them and their heightened sense of alienation. Many of the sites visited during the course of this research faced a combination of the following problems: poor sanitary conditions deriving from a lack of basic facilities, such as hot and cold water, mains electricity, refuse removal, prevalence of rodents, and so forth; inconvenient locations for access to shops, education, medical care, and other services; and proximity to sources of air and/or sound pollution, in the forms of, for instance, main roads, dual carriageways, motorways, air bases, factories, refineries, power stations, chemical plants, sewage works, and rubbish tips. Some were on wasteland, some marshland. This could be described as inhabiting "marginal space" (Kendall 1997; Sibley 1995), and clearly, the physical nature of the different sites was a significant factor in perceptions and use of space and, especially with regard to this article, in the shaping of children’s play patterns. Frequently, it seemed that while there was plenty of outdoor space for children to use, this was not laid out or equipped in any formal manner, and in all likelihood, the areas involved would not have been considered suitable by adults in mainstream society for safe play.

Details of both the observations and the informal discussions were recorded in a field diary. With their anonymity guaranteed, fifty adults (twenty-seven males and twenty-three females) agreed to take part in formal interviews. These interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to up to two hours in duration and usually occurred inside trailers, but also in a number of other contexts, including instances outside trailers, and on occasion in houses, cars, or pubs. Almost without exception, a preference was expressed not to have the conversations recorded. At one level, this was one way of retaining control over the encounter. At another level, there were clearly anxieties that individuals might be identified via having their voices recorded and that recordings could be used against them for “official” purposes.

During interviews, an informal style was adopted, and the format of the interview was flexible, ranging from thematic or semistructured to unstructured in nature, with the adult Gypsies involved. This
seemed a pragmatic strategy in dealing with (initially, at least) reluctant respondents (see, e.g., Adler and Adler 2002). In certain instances, participants seemed to speak most freely when they selected the topics for discussion and framed them within a life history context. This non-hierarchical, dynamic, and fluid frame to the interviews was deemed to be important in establishing trust and rapport with the participants. Nevertheless, certain topics remained problematic. For example, when discussing home life, a number of participants seemed to become suspicious, as if a boundary were being transgressed by an outsider. At other times, it appeared that participants were not so much unwilling to speak but were simply unable to do so because such activities were mundane and taken for granted by them on a daily basis. Observation in the home setting proved to be a particularly challenging task among participants interviewed on a single occasion, and these often involved groups that were still following nomadic patterns. Even with participants visited on several occasions, it was necessary to negotiate a framework for observation. A useful strategy here was to try to ensure that observation was ensued by discussion of issues that had arisen. On certain occasions, too, it was agreed that joint observation should occur, involving certain children in conjunction with myself. Each of these strategies enabled parents to monitor the observation process and facilitated the growth of trust. At the same time, the strategies allowed for a comparison of (a) child/adult and (b) insider/outsider perspectives.

Bearing in mind these methodological dilemmas, data from interviews and observation is presented here. All the names used are pseudonyms (unless otherwise requested). It is important to bear in mind that despite the number of participants in this study, they represent a relatively small section of the wider Gypsy population. Moreover, in the UK alone, Gypsy communities are a heterogeneous group. Nevertheless, certain features and attitudes seemed salient across those communities. The following key themes are discussed here: the erosion of traditional identity markers, the play patterns of Gypsy children in the home environment, the ownership and use of toys, fighting and play fighting, the sociocultural context of Gypsy children’s play, and the social behavior of Gypsy children in schools and on the playground. To explore some of the issues raised, field notes of one observation, in which a play bus visited a Gypsy site, are also provided.
THE EROSION OF TRADITIONAL IDENTITY MARKERS

Can you “unbecome” a Gypsy? If your parents are a Gypsy, you’ve got to be a Gypsy. Fifty percent of our community live in houses. Are you going to turn round and tell them [that] you’re not viable, you don’t exist? If you lose your language, and you’re no longer on the road, you’ve lost your identity. (John, a half-Gypsy in his forties who spends much of his spare time building traditional-style vardos, or Gypsy wagons)

The current state of flux in Romani culture across Europe (Fraser 1995; Gheorghe 1997) is manifested in the UK in a lack of sites and difficulties of movement caused by economic factors and legislation restricting a nomadic lifestyle (Hawes and Perez 1995; Levinson and Sparkes 2004; Niner 2003), commonly perceived (see, e.g., Liegeois 1987; O’Boyle 1990) as being central to Gypsy identity, and by the gradual loss of traditional languages. The loss of a syntactical structure in the use of Romani in the UK was noted more than three decades ago (see, e.g., Hancock 1971; Reiss 1975), since which time there have been suggestions of a lexical decline, particularly among younger Gypsies (Fraser 1995).

Many of the participants in this study were involved in radical lifestyle changes. For both adults and children, the act of traveling seemed to represent a symbolic, as well as a physical, act. Those who no longer followed nomadic patterns were sometimes perceived by other Gypsies as having lost more than a lifestyle. Yet while adults often rationalized such lifestyle changes, stating quite commonly that it was a temporary outcome of some contingency, one that changed nothing integral to a sense of self, and asserting their intent to return to the road at some unspecified time, children seemed to interpret the change of lifestyle as something more fixed. Jade (aged seven), for example, told Anna (aged eight) that she could no longer consider herself to be a Traveler, simply because the family of the latter had moved from their trailer into a house. Similarly, Ivan (aged ten) announced that he “used to be a Gypsy” before his own family moved from their caravan into a house. In each case, identity would seem to be linked to lifestyle and location rather than culture, ethnic origin, or belief systems. Evident from those involved in this study were the multiple functions of regular movement, whether social (e.g., family reunions, weddings, etc.), economic, or just
pragmatic (evading police prosecutions or altercations with rival families). Beyond all of these, there remained recurrent references to the practice of nomadism as an assertion of “Gypsiness,” which can be, at times, something rather defiant (“I seen this film the other night, Mad Max. We Gypsies is just like them. Always on the move and fightin’. Can’t keep us down. No one can” [Ethan, in his thirties]). This sort of spatial and cultural opposition to mainstream society has been noted by other observers (e.g., Kendall 1997).

Similarly, participants in this study tended to confirm the decline in the use of Romani. Quite commonly, this was attributed to an increase in schooling. As with nomadism, Romani performed a symbolic, as well as a communicative, function. Language can act as “not only a unifying factor, but also a defense mechanism” (Lehmann 1996, 118). On some sites, certain people were disparaged on the grounds that they did not speak Romani. Those who did use the language often did so in an aggressive manner while also protecting its secrecy, as shown by the following conversation with Seline and Roseanne (aged ten and nine):

Seline: We sometimes speak our own language... when we don’t like something about people.
Roseanne: We call them names. We’ve got our own words, but I’m not telling you, ‘cos it’s our code. Shorkers are shoes, rackne means girls, gille means boy, shil is hair. ... But, you know, I could be makin’ up all them words.
Researcher: Why would you want to do that?
Roseanne: ’Cos it’s things for our people, not yours.
Researcher: What do you think would happen if people who weren’t Gypsies got to know it?
Seline: You’d know what we were saying.
Roseanne: You might use it against us.
Researcher: In what way?
Roseanne: Maybe to find out all about us.
Seline: He’s trying to do that now.
Roseanne: I know. That’s why I might be making some words up.

Nevertheless, adult participants bemoaned the fact that many children no longer know more than a handful of Romani words. Other identity markers, too, seemed to be vanishing:

Julie (aged nineteen): I’m a Traveler.
Researcher: What does that mean to you?
Julie: I was just born into it, that’s all. Actually, Travelers are different. Gadje² [non-Gypsies] people are very dirty. I seen ‘em washing in the same bowls they use for cleaning cutlery. Me mum and dad are in houses now. They talk different, not like they used to. Dad’s with . . . one of your sort. He’s gone dirty in ‘imself. She don’t do the floor. There’s bits of bread down the cooker. I’m ashamed of him. And Mum. Don’t use our words anymore, our language. They talk like your sort.

Cleanliness and language use are more than physical things here; they are connected with ritual, symbolism, and identity. Of course, the situation varied between communities, but in general, as with other identity markers, there seemed to be a sense of dislocation and fluidity. Nevertheless, in almost all cases, there remained the strong impression of individuals who wished to continue to delineate themselves from mainstream society. Though not explicitly referred to as defining a separate identity, features of children’s play often seemed to reflect the purposes of the more overt, traditional identity markers.

GYPSY CHILDREN IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT: 
PLAY AS PREPARATION FOR LIFE

It is important to recognize that sites do not conform to the same spatial and temporal rules that are likely to exist elsewhere. The Gypsy child lives in an environment in which animals are being tended, wood cut, car engines repaired, and so forth, and this is liable to impinge on play patterns. This entails an emotional as well as a physical landscape.

Some observers have depicted Gypsy children’s play as mimicry of real work, for instance, watching men dismantling scrap and then doing the same thing with toys. Such apparently “destructive” and “inconclusive” play may have some purpose, and may be “strongly role oriented,” and might be viewed as evolving naturally into economic activity such as separating ferrous and nonferrous metals and identifying, retrieving, and cleaning spare parts (Adams et al. 1975). In effect, the tools employed by children in the undertaking of play are determined by the socioeconomic environment. An enculturation into distinctive patterns of play emerges as an outcome of the tools at hand. Considering the difference of outlook and values between Traveler and non-Traveler children, an Irish Traveler (quoted in O’Boyle 1990) drew attention to the contrasting experiences in childhood, suggesting that if placed on a
dump, the settled person’s child would run for comics and books while the Traveler child would seek out copper and brass and that while the settled child might wonder at the discarding of valuable things, the Traveler child would simply see an opportunity to make some money. The Traveler perception of the world was seen by the speaker as a consequence of having grown up amid greater hardship. The expectation that Gypsy children will contribute to the family from an early age, referred to by numerous observers (e.g., Carter 1996; Liegeois 1987; Okely 1983), can be interpreted in different ways. For example, the Gypsy child might seem disadvantaged in that certain forms of play become a luxury beyond his or her reach. On the other hand, the Gypsy child might be considered to enjoy a position of advantage through the easy access to a fuller and more equal role in family and communal life that accrues from responsibilities.

In observing children at home in this study, the norm was for children to be in mixed age groups, an aspect that would appear to shape play patterns. Although some children spoke of playing games at home, their games often seemed to merge into work, a feature that was confirmed by other observers:

Location comes into it. I don’t know if Gypsy children play much on site with siblings and neighbors. Their lives involve many grown up activities, “real” preparation for work—from caring for horses and other animals to repairing and maintaining vehicles to cutting logs to preparing meals and caring for the trailer as well as socializing with visitors. (Miranda, fieldworker)

On a number of occasions, adults reported that children were out “playing,” yet subsequently, it transpired that they were, in reality, doing jobs to help the family. This might have been because parents did not want to give the impression that their children were exploited; alternatively, it might derive from a different perception of “playing.” Children themselves tended to be divided between explanations of playing and helping when reporting their activities on such occasions.

There are further, deep-rooted social factors underlying play patterns. For example, children are rarely alone. Anna (in her sixties) was one of a number of older participants who suggested that it was not “natural” for children to play on their own, an attitude also noted among Spanish Gypsies (Carter 1996).
USE, ABUSE, AND “MISUSE” OF TOYS

A central feature of play in wider society is the use of “toys,” which is not to suggest that “play” cannot be envisaged without “toys.” “Toys” are perceived in certain ways, and like “play” itself, this is culture specific. Szeman (1995) noted a paucity of toys among the Gypsy children she was observing in an Eastern European context, and relatively few possessions were evident among the Gypsy children encountered during this study. As suggested by Kiddle (1999), a lack of space in trailers is an obvious explanation for this, although it should be acknowledged that the evidence of this study suggested that the situation did vary. A growing number of children would appear to possess their own television sets and computers, and many children have possessions that non-Gypsy children would be less likely to own, for instance, animals such as chickens, goats, and horses. On one site, a boy, no more than fourteen years old, was keen to show off his car. At another site, two boys, who were younger still, brought out their motorbikes. A few girls produced expensive jewelry that they had been bought. What seems significant is not merely the value of such items but that these things were not representationa; they were all real. Similarly, children were regularly observed “playing” with things that would not be considered as “toys” in wider society—mechanical items, bits of engines, and so forth. In general, there seemed to be few toys, which is not to say that dolls, teddy bears, and other toys were entirely absent. In some homes, the children seemed to have far more toys, and the parents in such cases often remarked how they themselves had never had such things. Overall, there were very few books, though quite a few children had videos.

At times, there was a suggestion that there was no reason for simulated play when there was the option of something more authentic:

Our kids have real things to play with—you know, like animals to look after and bits and bobs of old car engines to repair—not dolls and toys. See, so they’re out there learnin’ about proper things, you know, what’ll help them get on in life, while Gadje kids is just playing about, all babylke. (Julie, aged nineteen)

Fieldworkers reported that the children they worked with preferred real items, such as gold, clothes, videos, and horses, as presents rather than toys or games. They reported, too, almost unanimously, that when toys were present, they were treated with a complete lack of care (a
finding also noted in the context of Spanish Gypsies by Gay y Blasco (1999). During observation in this study, although toys were not witnessed in the process of being broken, broken toys were frequently seen. And while attempts were not made to measure the precise amount of time children spent with particular toys, the general impression was of things being discarded after brief periods of play. In general, children encountered were in the company of friends, older sisters, aunts, mothers, or grandmothers, and this was an inevitable factor in the ways they played. The impression was that for the most part, the interactions with those around them took precedence over the engagement with toys, and despite the lack of any “hard” evidence for this, there was corroboration in comments made by outsiders:

Gypsy children don’t play games; they reenact life. (Theresa, primary school head-teacher)

Some fieldworkers reported that Gypsy children tended to reject educational toys. In fact, this may have been less an eschewal of the toys themselves than the exclusion of an alien culture. It seems significant that some of the youngest children observed appeared to show a marked preference for toys and books that made reference to their own background, such as jigsaws depicting traditional Gypsy scenes, model horses, tractors, and books about the lives of Gypsy Travelers.

The apparently destructive behavior of Gypsy children in the classroom with regard to school property (see, e.g., DES 1985; Taylor 1988) needs to be interpreted in the context of the home environment. Orientations toward play cannot be accurately evaluated through an assessment of damage to toys at school and a stock taking of working toys at home. As noted by Okely (1983), who argued that the allegation that Gypsy children possessed few toys was “meaningless,” there is simply not the same division between work and play as in mainstream contexts “since children are directly involved with adult work where again there is not a rigid work-leisure distinction as in a wage-labor economy” (Okely 1983, 163). Indeed, it seems important for outsiders to recognize that rather than constituting “vandalism” or “dysfunctional” play, the dismantling of toys can be construed, more often than not, as imitation of real-life behavior among adults (i.e., scrap breaking).

Szeman (1995) also referred to a tendency not to observe rules during game playing, a feature reported a number of times during this
study. Fieldworkers noted that there was little interest in games that
demanded long periods of concentration, such as chess or scrabble.
This was attributed to factors such as “a natural restlessness.” They also
noted that Gypsy children, especially boys, reacted in a particularly bad
way to losing, and it was suggested by several fieldworkers and teach-
ers that problems developed when they tried to enforce sharing and turn
taking. In particular, this seemed to involve boys:

Games are the worst. It’s easy to lose control. Some of the Traveler boys
can just be completely wild. Maybe it’s this tough, macho thing from
their homes, I don’t know. But they seem to be trying to dominate every-
one else through violence. (Richard, primary teacher)

There was this teacher at the primary school, never had any dealings with
the Traveler children. Kept trying to get them to wait and take turns.
‘Course, it was just making things worse: most of them paid not the least
bit of attention. (Dylan, social worker)

Such comments reflect established practices surrounding play in the
school environment, implying some sort of juxtaposition between
home and school cultures. In the rejection of expectations regarding the
social niceties of play, Gypsy children would appear to be challenging
established notions and discourses.

FIGHTING AND PLAY FIGHTING:
THE VALIDATION OF VIOLENCE

While standing, chatting to some of the adults, a fight suddenly broke
out between two of the boys. Three aspects were immediately striking:
(1) the unfairness of the match—one of the boys is about 15, heavily
built, and often aggressive. The other boy can be no more than 11 or 12.
He is very slight, and usually extremely mild and quiet; (2) the ferocity
of the encounter—punching, gouging, kicking, butting, biting, grabbing
hold of sticks and anything else on the ground with which to hit/stab; (3)
the lack of intervention by any of the adults.

Afterward, I asked Norman, one of the men who appears to be of a
rather gentle disposition, why they had let the fight go on for so long. He
told me that the boys had only been “playing” and that in any event, the
younger boy had to learn to look after himself. When I asked him what
he thought about the behavior of the older boy, there was no expression
of disapproval. (Field notes, January 1998, at Site N, Devon.)
It would appear that the notion of play here is quite different than that of the surrounding society. While fighting might well be commonly viewed as a natural, even desirable, feature of male development, a violent outburst such as that witnessed above would more likely be interpreted as a breakdown of the normal play patterns and would seem to go beyond the rough-and-tumble considered the norm among boys (Pellegrini 1991). The inequality of the contest would have more probably engendered some form of intervention, and the older boy would be more likely to have incurred disapproval. However, in the context of Gypsy experience, where both intergroup and intragroup fighting are commonplace, there is the impression here of play as a preparation for life. There is also the potential for a more immediate gain in the form of enhanced status: even in a one-sided encounter, the mere act of engagement is likely to be viewed with more favor than the avoidance of a fight. As one mother observed after her son had been beaten up by an older boy, “at least our Sean didn’t just stand there and take it: ‘e ‘ad a go.” Once again, such features were corroborated by other observers:

Children are left to sort out differences by themselves, and this can involve ferocious fighting. I remember Tanya coming to school with bruises—her mum was quite open that she was too weak and her older brother had caused them in play fighting to toughen her up. (Miranda, fieldworker)

Quite violent play fighting, involving both boys and girls, seemed to be approved of by participants in this study across the age range. For Jasmine (aged nine), fighting in a home setting appeared to relate to hierarchies. She said that she had a fight with a cousin, Crystal (aged eight), “to keep her in her place,” while she had repeatedly kicked another cousin (Barney, aged nine) to demonstrate publicly that she “could get the better of a boy” and to “remind him that his family was useless” and “not as important” as hers. Jasmine and a group of her friends agreed that it was important for girls to learn to look after themselves. Indeed, an impression given by a number of adults, too, was that without such preparation in an intragroup play environment at home, their children would be less equipped to survive in a hostile, intergroup context. Numerous children in this study spoke of getting involved in fights at school to defend other Gypsy children. Ben and Rob (aged eleven) agreed that non-Gypsies were inferior because they did not know how to fight and failed to support one another. Meanwhile, Sue-
Ellen (aged ten) was also scathing about the lack of group solidarity among non-Gypsies, appearing to see nothing contradictory or paradoxical in her observation that “although we fight amongst ourselves, we always stick together.”

All of which did not preclude the occasional mixed message from parents about fighting. One father admitted to giving the following advice to his son as a way of dealing with the (non-Gypsy) bullies who were picking on him: “get ‘em on the floor, give ‘em a kicking, then run like fuck.”

**PLAY IN A SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT: ORIENTATIONS TOWARD CHILDHOOD/ADULTHOOD**

In the analysis of play patterns among Gypsy youngsters, it is important to consider structural features of Gypsy communities, in particular the way in which these act to shape the growth of orientations toward age that are likely to differ from those encountered in mainstream society. In her study of Irish Travelers, O’Boyle (1990) provided the following statistics that were relevant to her study: 50 percent of the Traveler population was estimated as being under fifteen years of age, “very few” Travelers reached the age of sixty-five, and the median age was fourteen (compared to twenty-seven among the settled population). Against such a background, the impulse toward the early acquisition of adult roles becomes more understandable. Moreover, such a tendency is augmented by certain social attitudes, O’Boyle observing, for instance, that parents encourage daughters to marry early, “in order to keep them out of ‘trouble’ in an increasingly permissive environment” (p. 24).

“Insider” perspectives (such as those offered by Cannon and the Travellers of Thistlebrook [1989] and Smith [1997]) tend to confirm accounts of non-Gypsy observers that imply a perception of childhood in which roles diverge markedly from those prevalent in mainstream society. It is an alternative model in which children appear to display greater social and economic equality and in which, to the outsider, childhood itself might appear to be relatively truncated. In such contexts, the constrictions of age barriers in work and socialization tend to be far less marked than those in mainstream society. Such a picture was
generally confirmed in this study. This was manifested in different ways. For example, it was common to find that children were not at school but instead out working with other family members. In one case, a fifteen-year-old boy was located driving his van. He was making deliveries in a business run by himself, in which he sometimes employed older family members. In talking about this, the boy concerned was quite dismissive of those in his own age group who were still at school, and this was consistent with the seemingly self-aware manner in which Gypsy boys were observed from a very young age to be acting like men to gain status (see Levinson and Sparkes 2003). It was also indicative of the wider scenario of children working with adults, part of a “coherent education towards independence” during which “experience, exploration, initiative and responsibility are rewarded” (Liegeois 1987, 46). One feature of this is the “instrumentalism” of Gypsy education (Lee and Warren 1991), and it is evident that learning paradigms, as well as orientations toward age, are in conflict with the norms of mainstream society.

From an early age, children appear to be integrated into adult life and involved in what is effectively an apprenticeship. J. R. (in his twenties), who kept a collection of battered, old vehicles outside his trailer, commented that while working on an engine one day, he had asked Billy (his six-year-old son) to change the sparkplugs: “they didn’t need changing or anything; I just wanted to see if he could do it.”

Common among a large proportion of participants was the conviction that the knowledge acquired at home was more useful than that learned at school. Examples of skills to be acquired at home were selling various items, telling fortunes, tree surgery, putting tarmac onto driveways, fitting PVC windows, repairing vehicles, and looking after home and family. It was felt that Gypsy children were more mature and responsible as they contributed to the family from an early age. Socializing with adults often entails the sharing of tasks, and inevitably, this has an impact on time and opportunities for play:

Girls do everything. What do boys do? Well, Traveling boys, like, go out ‘awkin’ after school and everything. Girls should basically be at home, housewifing. Cooking, cleaning, washing—all that can’t be done in an hour. She has to do the hoovering, wipe around, clean the bath, clean the floor, make the beds, wash the kitchen . . . feed the dogs, shop. It’s a full-time job! And she has to go out hawking. There’s no time for nothing. (Val, aged eleven)
The expectation that girls, in particular, would take a share from an early stage in family chores inevitably has its impact on opportunities for play. Katy (aged eight) said that she had almost no time to go out with her friends to play. At the same time, she showed a great deal of pride in her adult responsibilities. Crystal (aged eleven) suggested that she could play while she was feeding animals and looking after her younger brothers. On one occasion, Crystal expressed some contempt for a group of children (aged around eleven to fifteen) who were running around wildly outside her trailer, chasing one another. She said that she preferred to be helping her mother. When asked if she had always undertaken jobs at home, she replied that her mother had only really started to make demands during the past year and that before that she had often been told to go outside and play. In general, the impression was that expectations of support from children (and daughters, particularly) were highest in families that were still following traditional nomadic or seminomadic patterns. Inevitably, changing socio-economic patterns, and in particular a movement away from predominately nomadic to sedentary lifestyles, is leading to changes in the home environment. Gypsy participants in this study, as well as field-workers, frequently described recent change in terms of a breakdown. A growing number of families are reported as being dependent on benefits, and there are also reports of growing intergenerational conflict and an increase of alcoholism and drug abuse among teenagers. A more static lifestyle has also led to different engagements with specific schools and communities. Nevertheless, despite a number of participants referring to a loss of cohesion between family members and greater intergenerational divisions in recent times, attributed to factors such as loss of nomadic patterns, movement to houses, and difficulties gaining employment in family groups, many of those in this study who spoke on the topic suggested that the continued hegemony of family, not peer, influence remained. Children spoke of intergenerational activities; during recreation, as well as work, time was not spent necessarily within their peer group. Stan (aged seven), whose family lived permanently on one site and who was one of a number of children described by a fieldworker as having “lost their traditions and [having] become like any other estate children,” nevertheless said that he liked best “going lamping [catching rabbits] and picking mushrooms with granddad and Uncle Jim.” Similarly, Becky (aged nine) said that her mother was her best friend and confidante, while Chantelle (aged
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thirteen) observed that non-Gypsy girls would think she was “sad” if they discovered that the person whose company she most enjoyed was her grandmother. In the context of such shared time with older family members, intergenerational relationships are liable to determine the nature of play. At the same time, the outcome can be patterns of interaction that are rather disconcerting to outsiders:

Some of the children don’t know how to interact with adults in a way we would call appropriate. Take Buz—totally uncontrolled. Only four-and-a-half; just joined us. I knew there’d be problems and sent him to meet the ed. psych. [educational psychologist]. He walked in there. “Right,” he said. “Right,” the ed. Psych. said back, totally surprised. This was Grandad greeting the other men. That’s all that Buz was doing. (Theresa, head-teacher of primary school)

Finally, it should be noted that observation during this study suggested that Gypsy children spend little time on their own. It has been suggested that being alone is, in itself, mistrusted in Gypsy communities (Carter 1996). This, in itself, is an important factor in shaping patterns of play.

Up to this point, the focus of this discussion has concerned Gypsy children in a home environment. An interesting situation for analysis is one in which they are presented with a novel play context, one that involves rules and expectations that are constructed by an external culture.

PLAY AS THE EXPRESSION OF A SEPARATE IDENTITY

BREAKING RULES AS ANARCHY OR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: OBSERVATION OF A GROUP OF GYPSY CHILDREN ON A PLAY BUS

Hesitate to board the bus. The din is phenomenal. And as yet there are three adults on the bus, a non-Gypsy (female) helper and two of the mothers. About a dozen children are on the bus, a mixture of girls and boys ranging from 2 to 16 years of age. My first conversation is with Aaron, the community bus driver, who is standing at the steps, leaning against the outside of the bus, looking rather like a man sent across the
prairie with a wagon train that has just been attacked by a group of very rowdy Apaches. He seems to be trying to ignore the fact that the bus is shaking from side to side as if about to topple over. Between anxious glances over his shoulder, he tells me the following: “what you notice about the kids on sites like this is way they always hang back at first, then barge on. The first time there was all this fighting. When I tried to find out what in the blazes was going on, it turned out to be that they’d brought all their family feuds onto the bus. Some kids felt they had the right to grab things off others because of that; some wouldn’t play with others. You know one woman on this site told me that she wouldn’t let her children play with the Gypsy kids! The kids here are amazingly assertive. They don’t ask for things; they demand them. There’s no queuing, no turn taking. I’m not letting them make badges this time. The last time they were off selling them as soon as they were finished. This is a play bus, for goodness sake!” (field notes, July 1997, Site I, Somerset)

During the session on the bus, Aaron’s mood veers from serenity to extreme frustration. The children have boarded the bus with confidence and grown increasingly raucous. Some of the older ones have been extremely rough from the outset, tripping one another up as they boarded the bus. The oldest children, particularly the girls, are looking after the younger ones, as well as teasing them. Two of the older boys have been suspended from school; one has been excluded. These boys are particularly wild on the bus.

Toys and games are taken out and get scattered around. The books remain untouched on the shelves. Some of the children are rushing around the bus, tooting the horn and letting off the fire extinguisher. Paintings are made and hung outside, remaining uncollected by all but one child at the end. Face painting grabs the attention of all children for a time. Otherwise, the children move very quickly between activities. They do not appear to be concentrating much on any of the activities. All the time they are playing, they are also engaged in interactions.

Mothers appear at intervals. The children seem to respond instantly to parental admonition. Otherwise, they seem to ignore the (non-Gypsy) adults, adopting instead an air of defiance when they are told off. The mothers ignore this, even when the children are quite rude. When the fieldworker they know, and I feel, trust, asks them to tidy up, the children almost ignore her. One boy is particularly aggressive. “You’re just a Gadja. I’m telling my dad.” The fieldworker observes later how helpful this boy has always been in the past. She suggests that his behavior might be due to the fact that he is on his own territory now, in front of his friends. It would in all likelihood entail a loss of face to be seen taking orders from (1) a non-Gypsy and (2) a female, especially as he was being asked to clear up—a woman’s job.
By the end of the morning, the bus looks like a bomb has hit it. I ask whether this is not invariably the case, wherever it is. Aaron replies that it only occurs here but suggests that the problems have been due to the behavior of two or three of the boys. He then becomes apoplectic on discovering that the screws holding the back panel of the bus have been taken.

Comment

Clearly, I have been witnessing “play,” but what sort of play? The children have not appeared to accept any “rules.” In many ways, they have behaved as if they were outdoors. They have been unruly, practically uncontrollable, though most appear to know the boundaries that would mean exclusion, keeping just on the right side for a brief time after each final warning. Badge making and face painting are the activities several of the children tell me they enjoy the most. Aaron tells me that they immediately perceived the opportunity to make money out of the first of those activities. This seems consistent with the concept of a society in which the children are treated like small adults, with expectations that they will start to contribute to the family livelihood while still at school (teenagers often have their own trailers, so a form of independence is achieved earlier).

Why do the children not play games in the manner expected by the non-Gypsy organizers? Is it perceived as babyish to do so? Is horseplay the only acceptable form of play? The children seemed generally to be engaged in activities in twos or threes. Play, then, would seem to be part of a social process, connected to the establishing and maintaining of specific relationships, as well as to the development of interpersonal skills. This might have something to do with the fact that books were ignored, as reading is generally an individualized, private process (though at school, I have noticed that the children will often gravitate toward the (picture) books and enjoy having stories read to them). Similarly, the more structured play options, such as board games with turn taking, fixed rules, and so forth, tended to get overlooked. Yet the riotous, expressive play did not necessarily signify a lack of cooperation, for the children were interacting with one another throughout the session.

A further possibility is that the children have also been mapping out the boundaries between the Gypsy and the non-Gypsy worlds; they have been discovering precisely how far they can go. A bonus element of fun might well be getting one over on the “Gadje.” Thus, the process might confirm antagonistic relations with non-Gypsies while also entailing status enhancement within their own group.
Another possibility is that the children’s behavior is often restricted by adults in their own community, who would never let them get away with such riotous behavior at home but who might tolerate such behavior, or even encourage defiance outside the group. “They (children) have to learn to be tough to survive”; “they have to learn to stand on their own feet”; “they have to learn to deal with the Gadje”; these are some of the comments Gypsy adults have made. Here is a chance to practice such aptitudes.

Finally, it might be relevant to consider the physical context. If most play in Gypsy society occurs outdoors and involves largish groups of children, then a play bus is not only an artificial situation for play but one that imposes strange physical boundaries. What might be manifesting itself here is a particular orientation toward space, one that operates, perhaps, in a similar way to the school classroom. It is not so much the nature of the activity that is at issue but the context in which that activity occurs.

IN THE PLAYGROUND: SOCIAL BEHAVIOR OF GYPSY CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS

It is interesting to consider the implications of all this for schools. When Gypsy children enter a rule-bound, institutional environment, their behavior sometimes causes bemusement and/or concern among fellow pupils, teachers, and auxiliary staff. A classroom assistant in one playground, for example, drawing attention to one group of Gypsy children who were huddled together in a group, and another, who were racing around rather wildly, remarked that they simply did not know how to play. Staff at other schools, too, reiterated that view (which is on record at a more official level; DES 1985) when confronted by play behavior that was not legitimized in the school environment.

Gypsy perspectives on the playground provided rather different views. Children interviewed during the course of this study often showed a desire to distance themselves from non-Gypsy pupils. One view, expressed on a number of occasions, was that non-Gypsy children were childish. Not one of the four girls (aged nine and ten) involved in the conversation below was observed on a single occasion playing or socializing with non-Gypsy children; beyond the briefest of passing interactions, they displayed indifference or hostility:
Sara-Kay: They [Gadje girls] don’t play like us. They play posh. They don’t sit on the wall; it’s too dirty. They’ll sing things like “Ring a Rosies,” babyish games.

Roseanne: Sometimes they [Gadje girls] sing or dance at the front. They think they’re the Spice Girls. We listen to them but we don’t think we are them. That’s babyish. We’re into fashion. We’ve got the clothes and the posters. But we don’t think we’re nobody else.

Seline: We don’t like Gadje girls.

Leanne: We hate them.

Seline: They’re the virgins.

Sara-Kay: We hate virgins.

Leanne: Gypsy girls are best. Gadje girls are babies. They play baby games.

Researcher: What sort of games do you play?

Seline: Boyfriends and girlfriends.

Sara-Kay: Sex and kissing.

Seline: Mummies and daddies.

Leanne: Traveling girls.

Roseanne: Kissers and shaggers.

The likelihood of some degree of bravado on the part of the girls involved here, not to mention contrary evidence from slightly older Gypsy girls suggesting the high value placed on the protection of their own unsullied sexual reputations, demands the exercise of caution in the interpretation of the above dialogue. However, several issues emerge for consideration. In the first place, there would appear to be a conviction that non-Gypsy girls behave differently—being too soft and “posh” to sit on walls. The other girls are still pretending to be Spice Girls, while they are part of some more adult, real world. The non-Gypsy girls are sexually inexperienced, yet there are certain contradictions. Earlier, in the same conversation, some of the non-Gypsy girls had actually been criticized for being sexually provocative, behaving like “slags,” with their legs wide apart. Now they are derided for being “virgins.” There are further ambiguities. Clearly, the girls wish to be perceived as more adult than their non-Gypsy counterparts. A strong sense of the girls’ own sexuality emerges in the games they play. Gypsy girls play grown-up games, yet somewhat incongruously, between the “sex and kissing” and the “kissing and shagging” comes Seline’s “mummies and daddies.”

Despite the intention of these girls to impress the researcher with their relative maturity, their claims are at least partially supported by
comments made by teachers and fieldworkers, who on several occasions reported instances in which they had often felt concern about the stage Gypsy girls were at in comparison to the overall peer group:

One thing about the girls, is—well, you know their parents always going on about them picking up *bad habits* at school, well it’s all a bit ironic. You watch them: having a laugh, acting like little kids one moment, but they’re the ones who are more grown up. In ways their parents would not like and never admit. (Erica, secondary teacher)

We’ve been speculating about Melissa for some time. She’s nine going on nineteen. She and this fourteen-year-old have been an item for some time. She’s already part of an adult world. (Theresa, primary school head-teacher)

The distinction between the “babyish” games played by the non-Gypsy girls (above) and those preferred by the Gypsy girls suggests different manifestations of “role-play,” the games of the Gypsy girls connecting more closely to the “real world.” There is undisguised disdain for their non-Gypsy counterparts, for “playing posh,” refusing to get dirty, and pretending to be what they were not. The subtle distinction in the positions taken to the Spice Girls—the Gypsy girls listen to them and like them, but “we don’t think we’re nobody else”—implies a certain eschewal of fantasy play. Apart from the feeling of superiority, there is a sense of worldliness and realism in this. Their subsequent conversation about the responsibilities they had at home, and their expectations of being married and having their own children by the time they were “probably fifteen, definitely seventeen,” gave the impression of a truncated childhood; by nine or ten, they already seemed to have passed beyond the realms of certain “play.”

Among boys, too, there was frequently the impression of a preference to remain apart. Wayne (aged eleven) and Barney (aged nine) reported that they avoided the non-Gypsy boys at school, as they got picked on when they joined in, and in any event, they said that they were generally left out of playground games. It is true that bullying incidents against Gypsy children had been reported at the school, yet none of these had involved Wayne or Barney, and Wayne, in particular, was rather feared by classmates. Moreover, on a number of occasions, they were each observed to turn down offers to join in soccer games, something both Wayne and Barney excelled at and listed as a favorite activity. When asked about this, they said that they did not want to play with
non-Gypsies. Barney added that his father had told him to stick close to Wayne and the other Gypsy boys and not get involved with the other children. At a different school, meanwhile, Reggie (aged ten), said that he and his friends had been excluded by non-Gypsy boys from the soccer game, on the grounds that they were “too rough.” The way the game was played by the non-Gypsy boys, he said, was “gay.”

A rather segregated pattern in the playground was a feature of many schools in this study. In a couple of instances, head-teachers acknowledged situations in the not-too-distant past whereby Gypsy children had been sent out into the playground at different times from other pupils. More common than such temporal arrangements, however, was spatial regulation through the establishment, by the children themselves, of specific zones in playgrounds denoting ownership. The impression given by most teachers and fieldworkers was of the Gypsy children grouping together at break times, a situation that frequently resulted in fighting. This was confirmed by a number of Gypsy youngsters:

See up there, that’s our end of the playground. They (non-Gypsy children) never come up there, and if they do, we make sure they don’t stay. (Woody, aged ten)

A few children have spoken not only in terms of defending their own territory but of infiltrating that of the non-Gypsy children. The social implications of this game are understood on both sides:

The Gadje—the ones who think they’re tough—are usually there at the corner of the field, so sometimes we’ll go there instead, just to show them who’s boss... If we didn’t take them on, they’d just think we was soft. (John, aged thirteen)

It was interesting that the speaker in this instance had been observed in classroom contexts to be engaged in particularly friendly, mutually cooperative relationships with non-Gypsy pupils, and indeed, there were quite a few instances of such (apparently paradoxical) situations. Among the children who spoke most resolutely about remaining separate in the playground, there were several who had attended school for relatively lengthy periods and had developed seemingly friendly and stable relationships with non-Gypsy children and staff, respectively, a situation that might be perceived as an example of “the simultaneous
growth of inter-dependence and differentiation” between groups (Tajfel 1981, 225).

Both in playground and classroom settings, most teachers who contributed to this study interpreted the (at times) unruly behavior of Gypsy children as being a deliberate challenge to institutional codes. The admission by certain schools of the practice in the not-too-distant past of separating Gypsy from non-Gypsy pupils by staggering such breaks in the school day, so as to avoid altercations, highlights the difficulties faced by integrationists. Teachers’ complaints about “wild” or even “uncontrollable” behavior of Gypsy children outside the classroom implies assumptions about norms that do not allow leeway for cultural difference. At one level, such behavior might be equated, to some degree, with the home context: the tightly controlled environment of the trailer, alluded to by Kiddle (1999) and confirmed by observation in this study, can lead to a situation in which the strong temptation is for children to let off steam once outside. Furthermore, if it is accepted that for Gypsy children, the boundaries are more blurred between “work” and “play,” it is reasonable to expect them to interpret the very concept of “break” or “play time” in a manner distinct from that of non-Gypsy classmates. At school, unruly behavior was also frequently connected to acts of defiance. Teachers suggested that Gypsy children often started fights, and on more than one occasion, it was proposed that the Gypsy pupils could not be “trusted” when allowed the freedom of break times. In the case of starting fights, however, such “misbehavior” might be perceived as role play, a means of honing skills deemed to be essential in a future, hostile environment. From the perspective of the institutions involved, what seems evident is that the cultural capital brought to school is deemed inappropriate in that setting. At the same time, there seems to be resistance at an institutional level to an increase in tolerance toward alternative forms of play (i.e., those that do not conform to mainstream, Western practice). Yet such forms of play would appear to be beneficial to cultural development and community membership, while conformity to other behaviors may be detrimental.

CONCLUSION

A number of discourse paths have been traversed here, including play as learning, play as cultural reproduction, play as imitation, play as
enculturation into rules and norms of society, and play as a site of contested power relations in which children challenge dominant modes of control. However, the central issue that has been raised concerns the ways in which Gypsy children use play to express a separate identity and reaffirm group boundaries. Evident among participants from across the different Gypsy communities involved in this study was the feeling that traditional identity markers were under threat. At the same time, there remained a commitment to a separate identity. In a school context, by subverting accepted play activities, it seemed that children were affirming this separate identity. On one level, play is about challenging authority and boundary maintenance, but it moves beyond this into a cultural practice—the formation of identity shaped on the assertion of strength, defiance, and at times, anarchy.

In the absence of traditional identity markers, Gay y Blasco (1999) found that a sense of moral superiority with regard to group values was integral to a sense of self among Spanish Gitanos. Significantly, in this study, Gypsy play behavior was perceived by Gypsy children as being superior to that of non-Gypsy children on the grounds that it was more “adult.” As noted by other observers (e.g., Liegeois 1987; Smith 1997), Gypsy children were seen to be taking a full role in community life, one that was not limited according to their peer group, involving them in relationships and hierarchies affecting their elders, a model that seems likely to be brought with them to other settings. Inevitably, these factors lead to misunderstandings on both sides. Perceptions of deliberately provocative or destructive (an interpretation commonly shared by both teachers and non-Gypsy children) behavior were countered by a sense of disparagement on the part of Gypsy children toward the “childish” ways in which non-Gypsy children played. There was a suggestion that childishness in this context entailed a lack of contact with reality. These conflicting interpretations appear, at least partially, to emanate from discrepant views as to the purposes of play, and a useful concept here might be that of apprenticeship (Rogoff 1990, 2003), and specifically the distinction between a principal apprenticeship to childhood and play, as opposed to one to the life of the family and the community (Brooker 2002).

It seems evident that in Romani communities, play fulfills an important cultural function, preparing Gypsy children for future events and enabling them to hone skills that will be indispensable in socioeconomic contexts. Ultimately, children’s games operate as situated activi-
ties during which peer cultures are formulated and social identities developed (Corsaro 1997). Gypsy children entering schools are effectively bridging contrasting communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and are often having to make choices against a background of mutual antagonism. Thus, while in the home context, Gypsy children were able to experiment with play both as cultural production and reproduction, at school, these often seemed to be overshadowed by another element. In general (though not all the time), and often by their own choice, Gypsy children remained as a separate group in the playground. As found by Andereck (1992), school provided an ideal forum for boundary maintenance, and in this context, personal and collective identities are interwoven. It has been asserted (Kenny 1993) that ethnicity is not the property of an individual, in which case, one must assume, its renunciation can never be unequivocal. There is a further inference that the decisions of the individual are liable to compromise the group. A salient feature of numerous conversations in this study is the way in which participants have suddenly relocated discourse from a first-person to a third-person perspective, which might be perceived as a “joint or communal attempt to acquire control over their lives through the establishment of a collective identity” (Corsaro 1985, 75). Of course, personal identities operate within a wider ethnicity-based configuration, but evolutions occur in a sociocultural context. As stated by Holland et al. (1998, 272), identities take us “backwards and forwards from intimate to public spaces.”

The centrality of action to identity noted among different Gypsy groups (Gay y Blasco 1999; Stewart 1997), means that the performance of any act carries the potential espousal or the eschewal of Romani identity. The most commonplace, traditional games can have different meanings according to sociocultural context (see, e.g., Evaldsson 1993). The game mentioned most frequently as a favorite, particularly by younger children in this study, was “hide and seek.” Even here, the claim could be made that in the context of Gypsy history and relationships with the outside world, children are enacting life while affirming a distinct identity. An ethnic group that uses symbols to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups is a subjectively self-conscious community that establishes criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from the group (Brass 1996). In the view of Barth
where persons of different culture interact, one would expect differences to be reduced since interaction both requires and generates a congruence of codes and values: “thus the persistence of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows for the persistence of cultural differences” (p. 16). In a context in which traditional symbols of identity become blurred against an increasingly featureless background, there is a need for consensus as to other landmarks. For Barth (1998, 15), the critical focus of investigation is “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses.” Yet it would appear here that the “cultural stuff” itself constitutes the boundary.

In view of the changing conditions in the lives of many Gypsies, it would be enlightening for some future studies to investigate behavior and attitudes more precisely according to lifestyle. Yet even across individuals living in differing contexts, this article has proposed the role of play in the enactment by Gypsy children of a distinct identity and suggests, too, the need for the investigation of any other (as yet unrecognized) identity markers. At the same time, it also highlights the need to look more closely at the meanings of play itself in mainstream, as well as minority, settings.

NOTES

1. The term “Gypsy” has been used in this article in preference to “Traveler,” the term used, in general, by those working in the field. Both terms have their own connotations. Liegeois (1986) rejected “Traveler” and “nomad” on the grounds that by avoiding any ethnic content, such labels deny the existence of a specifically Gypsy culture. The decision here has been determined to a large degree by participants’ choices; although these varied, many preferred the term “Gypsy,” often on the grounds that it distinguished them from “new age” or “new” Travelers. Some participants expressed a preference for the terms “Rom” or “Roma,” though these themselves are terms that carry different meanings to different groups.

2. The terms for non-Gypsies used in this article, “Gadjo/a” (singular) and “Gadje” (plural), and used by many participants here as both singular and plural, are also found in different spellings elsewhere (e.g., “Gorgio,” “Gauje,” and “Gadze”) and tend to have pejorative connotations.

3. Full identification of particular sites was not provided in this study, so as to protect the anonymity of participants.
REFERENCES


