

Moving communities: a process of negotiation with a Gypsy minority for empowerment

ISABEL CRESPO, CRISTINA PALLÍ & JOSÉ LUÍS LALUEZA

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT *This paper describes the process by which the relationship between university workers and members of a Gypsy community evolved. Transformation in the relationships between the two, in terms of knowledge, trust, and affect, in turn transformed the nature of the work undertaken. What started as research on the community changed into research within and of the community. The process is discussed in terms of empowerment, community psychological practice and participatory action research.*

KEY WORDS *Minorities; empowerment; cultural change; community negotiation; gypsy culture*

RESUMEN *Este artículo describe el proceso de cambio de la relación establecida entre miembros de una universidad y miembros de una comunidad gitana. Las transformaciones que dicha relación experimentó, en términos de conocimiento, confianza y afecto, acabaron alterando la naturaleza del propio proyecto. Lo que empezó siendo una investigación sobre una comunidad, fue transformándose en una investigación en la comunidad, con la colaboración de la comunidad. El artículo discute este proceso se discute en términos de 'empowerment', psicología comunitaria, e investigación-acción.*

PALABRAS CLAVES *Minorías; competencia comunitaria; cambio cultural; negociación comunitaria; cultura gitana*

Introduction

The development of social intervention has often been regarded as a mere application of 'knowledge', 'methods' and 'techniques' obtained through basic research. This conception of intervention reproduces not only a great divide between 'theory' and 'practice', but also between 'professionals' and 'lay people', where the former are supposed to have a privileged access to knowledge which enables them to intervene in the lives of the latter.

These assumptions have been challenged from different positions [1], which, despite their differences, have in common a political concern informing

Correspondence to: Isabel Crespo Garcia, Department de Psicologia de l'Educació, Facultat de Psicologia, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona 08193 Bellaterra (Barcelona), Spain. E-mail: dehisi@seneca.uab.es

their points of view and practices. They all denounce how, understood in this way, intervention systematically excludes the so-called ‘subjects’ from the production of knowledge, constructing them as passive, and resulting in an exercise of power. The ‘potential you’s’ with which professionals could engage in conversations (Shotter, 1989) are thus silenced in a movement which serves the mastery and control of the different disciplines. And this can be so regardless of the good intentions with which researchers approach target groups—like when the objective is to liberate or improve conditions of oppressed groups (Lalueza, Crespo, Pállí & Luque, 1999).

However, whereas those different perspectives agree on the harmful (even if not intended) effects of constructing a passive subject, there is no consensus as to how these exchanges between social professionals and minority collectives should be. Many proposals are directed towards the achievement of a more dialogical situation (Fine, 1994; Montero, 1994b; Sampson, 1993), through which people are empowered and the privileged role of the professional is questioned. Moreover, the need for ethical positioning as a previous condition for engaging in practice, making explicit where you stand, is emphasised.

This positioning at the outset is, however, not only sometimes difficult to know and make explicit but, above all, does not depend entirely on ourselves. Rather, the very relationships established with the group determine to a large extent one’s sequence of positions. Strongly though we believe political compromise should inform any such engagement, not being open to the relationship would mean running the risk of closing the dialogues before starting. Our positioning can therefore never be fixed completely beforehand.

In this context, we would like to outline a community project in which the authors, together with a Gypsy community, are co-engaged; and especially, to explain how we came to face a situation in which all the above concerns were relevant. Not that this paper will make any attempt to provide an answer to the question of how an ideal intervention should be—we do not believe such an answer exists. We will explain how, in spite of our starting point being one of ‘studying the other’, we ended up in quite different a position. Nevertheless, and this will be our main claim throughout the whole paper, neither when looking for answers nor when changing positions were we alone, but in very good company. It is this ‘populated’ (Billig, 1994) trip, this trajectory through different positionings, that we want to relate: how we were moved by the Gypsy group, i.e. moved by something other than ourselves. But, before we start, it will be necessary to give some details of the context in which this particular group lives.

The historical context of Spanish Gypsies

In Spain, the Gypsy ethnic group forms the main cultural minority, one that has coexisted, albeit not always comfortably, with the rest of Spanish society for 500 years. However, although they have a visible presence in Spain, recognised for their own folklore and their impact upon Spanish culture more generally, their own ways are little known to the dominant majority. In other words, they have

their own culture, traditions and community laws, all of which have more depth and complexity than is perceived by or revealed to outsiders. However, since most Gypsy people in Spain are economically deprived and educationally disadvantaged, it is important to note that the more general impacts of poverty and exclusion permeate many of the features of their culture. This is worth noting, given that, on trying to understand some of their cultural practices, it is often impossible to discern which characteristics stem from Gypsy traditions and laws, which characteristics can be attributed to being a minority group, and which have developed because of poverty and exclusion (San Román, 1994). It is this confusion that has undoubtedly contributed to the creation and persistence of certain stereotypical images.

There is considerable diversity found among different Gypsy collectives. It is true that all of these collectives share basic features and practices which enable them to articulate their identities around a worldwide Gypsy people, which extends itself beyond national borders. These commonalities notwithstanding, differences and local diversity can be found on comparing collectives from different countries, different regions within a country or even different places within a city. These differences refer mainly to the degree of nomadism and settlement, and the kinds of relationships maintained with majority groups. At an economic level, whilst most of them are predominantly in the lower social class, not all Gypsy groups are poor. Thus, we should be wary of conveying a misleading image of homogeneity which conceals the richness and diversity of Gypsy life.

Nowadays, in Spain, most Gypsy collectives are settled, not nomadic. They are, therefore, already in relationship with the institutions of the majority group. Gypsy relationships with the rest of Spanish society have oscillated across a wide range; from peaceful coexistence, through a strong assimilationist pressure at some moments, to explicit persecution at others. For that reason, it is not surprising to find among Gypsies a deep distrust of social institutions—i.e. the police authorities, judiciary, civil and military administration, education and the Church—all of which are perceived as being distant from, and alien to, their own culture.

Consequently, the schooling of Gypsy children has always been problematic. Schooling has been seen as a bureaucratic requirement, if not a more explicit imposition of power which appears strange and arbitrary. Before the last 20 years or so, the presence of Gypsy children at school was rare, their education consisting of what Rogoff (1990) calls 'guided participation' in an informal context: children used to learn by participating in the activities carried out by their parents and relatives, activities generally oriented towards trade, recycling and flamenco art.

With the end of the Franco dictatorship in Spain in 1977, and with the new schooling programmes that followed it, low performance and high truancy among Gypsy children were detected, leading to some interventions. These interventions, however, were implicitly or explicitly based on the notion of 'deficit'. That is, the difficulties in the schooling of Gypsy children were

explained by the existence of 'handicaps'—these being considered a consequence of poverty and exclusion in more politically liberal analyses, or as simply inherent to Gypsy people in other, more traditional, analyses.

Why do we need more research?

Our present work originated by accident, out of a situation experienced as a professional failure. In a previous project, one of us (see Crespo, 1998; Crespo, Lalueza & Perinat, 1994) met five Gypsy girls in residential child care, who were receiving formal education in a normal school together with Payo [2] children (i.e. non-Gypsy Spanish children) whose academic results were generally good. However, a problem emerged when, after 2 years of formal education, the girls' extended families expressed an interest in re-taking charge of them. Pleasing as this news might have been to the social workers concerned, the girls themselves rejected the kind of life their families were offering them. They preferred to stay in care until they were no longer minors.

In trying to make sense of that situation, we need to recognise that the effects of schooling were not only a matter of providing some compensation for the handicaps which were allegedly working to prevent the girls from taking advantage of educational resources. Rather, the failure of their de-institutionalisation indicates what some leaders of the Gypsy community had already realised. Not only does schooling involve access to knowledge and tools, but it also involves the definition of new goals, values, personal projects and differentiated identities. It is precisely this new individualised definition of themselves that, in the case of the Gypsy girls, did not fit the community (collective, not individual) project offered to the girls by their extended families. The school, in other words, defines different subjects to (and hence different subjectivities from), those developed in the traditional context of informal learning in the community [3]. The schooling process alters the very definition of a 'person', and fosters the construction of new subjects. This reminds us once more of the impossibility of understanding development as a universal process, a homogeneous and unchangeable trajectory unique to all cultures, which is simply modified by the external influence of the society. Our experience made it clear that it is not enough to consider culture as a source of variability, as a variable (Gauvain, 1995). Rather, it needs to be brought to the fore as a necessary dimension in the explanation of development (Lalueza & Crespo, 1996).

According to this theoretical perspective, it was clear that if we wanted to understand the problem caused by schooling, to plan an applied project, or to understand the very process of development and change in the Gypsy community, we first needed to get to know the ecological and social context of that community (Lalueza & Crespo, 1996). Therefore, we decided to conduct research into the values, goals, traditions and representations that mediate the development of Gypsy children. But, even though our intention was to study their customs and practices, the contacts and the relationships established eventually led us in another and unexpected direction.

Negotiation

In order to study their cultural context, we tried to establish contact with a Gypsy community. After some effort, we managed to speak to some of its representatives. Specifically, we met with Raimundo and Ramon, members of the *Asociación Gitana de Badalona* (Metropolitan Area of Barcelona) [4]. This Association represents the interests of the Gypsies settled in Sant Roc, a district built at the beginning of the 1970s, with a high population of members of the Gypsy ethnic group, most of whom came there from slums in the 1950s and 1960s.

During our attempt to become accepted, so as to be able to study their educational practices, we engaged in several conversations with members of the Association. It soon became clear that, without these members' approval, we would never be allowed to enter their world. Those first contacts were not taken up formally (e.g. in the form of meetings which may have been culturally alien), but through a series of seemingly informal conversations. If in the beginning we thought it would be a matter of arriving, asking for their permission, and waiting for the verdict, we soon realised that this was definitely not their method of decision making. The conversations, seemingly a pure interchange of opinions which had no clear aim, were eventually read as an opportunity for both parties to understand and get to know the other and their intentions. We told them of our objectives, interests and proposals, and they explained to us their own point of view on the issues discussed, while they were evaluating the potentially beneficial consequences of our proposals.

We engaged in many conversations (many!), in which we had the feeling of being put to the test. But not only were we examined in respect to our professional interests, but also, and mainly, with respect to our ethical position, our personal and political understanding of their particular position as a minority. They wanted to know, for instance, why we were interested in studying them and what we wanted this knowledge for. At that point, one of our explicit objectives played a crucial role: our intention that the knowledge about the Gypsy collective produced in our research should transcend its academic context and be returned to the collective itself. Indeed, we did not want to limit ourselves to gathering information about them and then merely go back to our university context. We wanted, first and foremost, this knowledge to be to the advantage of the Gypsy community.

This approach to research (actually, very close to community psychology and participatory action research) was shared by our contacts in the Gypsy community. They rejected from the beginning any collaboration which relegated the community to a passive role, as only a mere object of study in the hands of some experts. Although we thought at the beginning that all the community had to do was give us permission to study them, they made it very clear that the single available option was a collaboration between both parties. Looking back, we are now completely convinced that this coincidence in, let us say, the political project informing both points of view, was more responsible for

reaching an agreement to collaborate than the concrete actions proposed. Indeed, the process aimed to establish a dialogue in which efforts were directed to establish an equal interchange—without denying the power dimension that imbues every relationship.

The possible use of the knowledge produced in the research, and how our presence there could be to the community's advantage, was indicated to us in our conversations. Some of the needs of the very community emerged during these interviews. When we were open about our interests of contributing to the community, they started mentioning projects and activities which could be carried out in order to improve, in one way or another, the conditions of life of the community. After more dialogue, a deal was reached concerning co-operative research; then, as a kind of exchange, access to knowledge about their culture, as a token of joint community interventions.

Nevertheless, this was just a first agreement between the university team and the leaders of the Association. But one more element was needed before starting our collaboration: permission from the leaders of the community. The day that Raimundo and Ramon introduced us to Tío Emilio [Uncle Emilio]—the leader in Sant Roc, respected by all members of the community—we knew the process of negotiation was bearing fruit. After several more conversations, and after closing a deal by giving our word, the grounds for a collaboration were settled. Thus, if throughout the process some elements characteristic of community psychology and participatory action research were precipitating, eventually we engaged in a community intervention. Now it was no longer a matter of accomplishing both 'our' objectives and 'their' objectives, but of construing the situation in terms of, and of accomplishing, common objectives.

A process of empowerment

Several projects were designed with the aim of obtaining the empowerment of the Gypsy community, although here we will present only one of them, the most relevant for the present concerns. But before doing so, though, we should make explicit some of the agreements reached on matters of ownership. As we have said, the leaders of the Gypsy Association wanted an active role in the projects. They did not want social agents to come and solve their problems, but resources in order to do it themselves. They wanted to be the protagonists of their own change, and 'speak with their own voices' (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996). Partly because of this, they prefer us to identify them with their real names, rather than making their presence invisible behind anonymity. They wanted the readers to know that it is they who are introducing changes in the community, it is they who are able to discuss how to bring about changes.

Nevertheless, they look for empowerment and accountability in front of society, not within the academic community. Thus, while authorship in projects related to administration, public opinion and funding organisations is always shared between the university team and members of the Association, they showed no interest in participating in the elaboration of scientific papers. This

is why their names do not appear as authors in the present paper, for instance. However, books directed not to the academic community but to society in general are a completely different matter. In these situations, authorship is always shared, as agreed. This is the case, for example, of a published book, elaborated out of some recorded interviews, where the Gypsies themselves describe their own culture [5].

After having clarified this point, let us proceed by introducing one of the main projects that we are co-directing currently in the Gypsy community. Even though we will not describe the intervention in detail here, it is worth mentioning some of its characteristics. (For more detailed description, see Lalueza *et al.*, 1999.) The intervention consists of the creation of an institution (a new social setting), *La Casa de Shere Rom*, which organises several activities. Some of them are inspired by the project of the 5th Dimension (Cole, 1997): children are offered certain activities, which share characteristics with the tasks demanded at school—including the use of computers. The aim is to provide children with space and time to use and develop certain skills and abilities that can help them to improve their performance at school. Other activities of *La Casa de Shere Rom* consist of joint elaboration and organisation of several programmes, oriented towards the achievement of equal opportunities in education, access to jobs and promotion of women. We wanted to avoid the creation of an institution ‘just for Gypsies’, creating parallel structures and resources, thus reinforcing a division between Gypsies and Payos. Therefore, participation in the different activities is open to Payo people as well.

Thus, an immediate aim of this project can be described as empowerment, in the sense of facilitating the access of Gypsy people to the knowledge and tools of the major society. With this aim, we, the university team, contribute with people collaborating in the project, with possibilities of funding, with expertise, and also with a legitimate standpoint from which to talk to institutions (communities are not allowed to present projects asking for funding unless the community engages the help of ‘technicians’ or people considered as ‘experts’).

However, ‘providing tools’ is not the broader aim of the community intervention, for this would be to subscribe to too narrow a sense of the concept of empowerment. In fact, even though the intervention takes place in a community context, the implications go beyond it. This institution belongs to, and is controlled and managed by, the community itself, and it is placed in its own space. In other words, they are in charge of the management of a project of their own—which should allow them, at the same time, to be authors of a discourse on themselves. That is, with this intervention, not only should the community achieve greater competence in particular contexts but it should also be able to have an effect at a broader social level and alter minority/majority relationships. In effect, empowerment may remain an illusion (Serrano-García, 1984) if we stop short of this ambitions. And this is another reason why the intervention has a clearly political, and even ideological, dimension: social change and the cancelling of inequalities.

A process of mutual change

Both the process of negotiation in order to be accepted by the community and the further development of various joint actions were an opportunity for mutual learning and transformation. One of those changes was the progressive blurring and uselessness of certain categorisations. When we decided to study a Gypsy community we approached the leaders of a Gypsy Association. They were distinguished members of the community and we thought of them as spokesmen; that is, in our eyes, they were speaking on behalf of the whole community—they were mediators between the Gypsy community and us. In much the same way, they regarded us as spokespeople from all which was not ‘Gypsy’, that is, the ‘Payo’ world. In other words, all of us were defining the situation in categorical terms, i.e. ‘us’ and ‘them’.

These broad representations and gross divisions were soon thrown into question. For us, it became an uncomfortable position, since we could perceive that they were conceiving us not only as mediators between them and the majority society, but also between the university and the professional world. The distinctions were made: rather an amorphous and ambivalent mixture was assumed, as if all these institutions were one and the same thing. They first seemed to think—‘they all come from the “Payo” world’. Thus, it was important for us that the relationships between these different institutions, as well as our positions, roles and possibilities, were clarified and made explicit, in order to help members of the Gypsy community adjust their expectations of the kind of things we could offer them.

Nevertheless, this unease we were experiencing was not very different from theirs. Whereas it remained true that our ‘contacts’ were, indeed, both distinguished members and spokesmen of the community, they had to teach us that every Gypsy community was different from others. Consequently, they were not talking on behalf of ‘all the Gypsies’, but just their own community. Furthermore, they let us know that their community, far from being unified and homogeneous, consisted of different groups with differences in how they perceive and understand what ‘Gypsy life’ is, including the relationships a Gypsy group should or should not establish with Payo groups. (We will return to this below.) They, like us, had to keep a balance and play with an array of different positions and representations. And they, like us, were showing unease with a homogeneous categorisation which erases those differences and complex interactions. Indeed, the more we got to know each other, the more meaningless were those gross generalisations. Through the relationship, those categories melted to give way to an understanding of each other that, albeit being marked by this complex game of mediations, representations and membership to different groups, still left room for an understanding of each other more in relational terms.

It is important for us to make a clarification. Whilst an increase of information about the other group’s practices and perspectives has played a part in our changing relationship, it is neither the only nor perhaps the most

important factor to take into account. In this way we want to resist the reduction of the relationship to a mere cognitive encounter which is explained mainly by means of 'transmission of information'. On the contrary, we would like to draw attention to another dimension that was, as it became increasingly obvious to us, informing the relationship: the deep affective tinge it acquired.

In effect, a strong personal involvement was reinforcing the whole project, an involvement which proved vital in several aspects. To start with, this personal relationship among all of those participating in the project was a source of pleasure that impregnated as well as sustained the whole relationship. Before the adversities emerging in such a project, the personal exchanges have proved rewarding: the sharing and exchanging of experiences, getting to know each other ... This emotional dimension clearly increased the commitment of those involved, thus helping to maintain through time the efforts needed to carry out such long-term projects. This feature, we believe, is related to the shared concern about the 'sustainability' of projects.

Last, but not least, this personal involvement was directly related to a process of individual transformation: the more we knew of their perspective on life, the more our own was challenged. Indeed, not only our way of conceiving the other changed, but also the way of conceiving ourselves. Thus, for instance, the more we knew about some aspects of Gypsy family life, the more impoverished our 'Western model' seemed to be. This is not an abstract reflection: we could experience those contradictions on returning home after spending an afternoon with them. At the beginning of the project we held certain views about our personal independence and our professional career, but it was not long before those views were shaken. This is not to say that we adopted theirs, but we were moved to try and modify certain aspects of our personal lives. Likewise, in other moments of our lives not related to this project (some more personal than others), we would frequently ask ourselves whether they would agree or not with our behaviour were they to see us; or we would find ourselves putting into practice some of their advice and recommendations.

But let us be wary, for it would be all too easy to convey an idealistic image of all the exchanges going on. All those personal rewards notwithstanding, it goes without saying that the process encountered some impediments and resistance too. After all, we were part of the Payo world and, given the previous history of the relation between both groups, a certain degree of mistrust and reluctance sometimes crept in—from both sides.

Moreover, the Gypsies' experiences with social workers, educators and other professionals had not been very reassuring thus far. The majority of these professionals have approached the community with the 'deficit perspective' mentioned above, and with a lack of understanding of the social organisation and practices of gypsy collectives. Some of the social services professionals' actions have been interpreted by the community as instances of 'institutional blackmail' (e.g. not giving them economic help unless their children are properly schooled). In addition, the community bore the consequences of burn out produced by those professionals (and students doing placements) who aban-

done them once they obtained what they needed, without giving anything back in exchange.

Given this background, it was surprising how relatively easily and quickly they had accepted our presence there and our proposals. To understand this, we first need to expand more the context in which we found the Gypsy community. This is knowledge we did not have before our engagement in the process, but was progressively revealed to us throughout, and it helped us to understand why we had been so easily accepted.

A community in change

We found the community in a situation of accelerated change. Schooling is just one of the factors in a broader cultural change being experienced by Gypsy communities. Traditional jobs are no longer offering a way to make a living. The media bombard people with alternative ways of life, all of them stressing the pressure to consume and the provision of models of independent men and women. Furthermore, their involvement during the 1980s and 1990s in the consumption of, and trade in, drugs had introduced many tensions and ruptures into families and communities. All those changes go in the same direction: that of *modernisation*. By modernisation we are not referring to some supposed progress from a primitive stage to a more modern one, but rather, and only, to a process which implies a prioritisation of individuals, their futures, progress and rights, with a resultant need to acquire certain knowledge from outside the community (Gergen, 1991). This modernisation process stands against the cohesion of the community, which is based on mutual interdependence and traditions, and relies on practical and shared knowledge administrated by the elders, whose authority must be treated with respect.

The communities are well aware of all the changes they are undergoing, and try to cope with them with different strategies. The first possibility is *deculturation*. This process is characterised by the abandonment of traditional social structures and forms of relationships in the face of the pressure to individuation. However, for people socialised according to a traditional model of interdependent relationships, the loss of community referents, material and affective resources and support may lead to anomie. When operating on collectives, deculturation, together with poverty, may lead to family and community disintegration and exclusion.

Another strategy is that of collective resistance to modernisation: reinforcing familiar links, re-valourising—to exaggeration—the traditional norms and laws; and adopting attitudes of suspicion and distrust towards every influence from outside the community. In other words, it is a matter of creating what Ogbu (1994) called secondary cultural differences: creating values that, in opposition to the main society, constitute a negation of the characteristics and values of the majority. Desegregation is avoided by promoting group cohesion against a supposed external adversary—the majority society; leading to, in some cases, a further legitimisation for the exclusion of the minority. The contradic-

tions exposed by contact with the majority are frequently exacerbated, leading again to exclusion.

However, a third option is possible: a new *cultural redefinition*, which is the one chosen by the representatives of the Gypsy Association of Sant Roc. If the first way is an option for individuals, and the second one for communities gathered around families or churches, the third option is promoted by a politicised collective, composed of intellectuals and members of Gypsy associations. This new option is distinct from the more traditional position, and we can illustrate the contrast by comparing the discourse of both Tío Emilio and Raimundo.

The traditional discourse

The traditional discourse—reproduced by leaders like Tío Emilio, and reflected by the majority, or at least an important part, of the Gypsy community—is defined mainly by the concepts of exclusion, distrust, abuse—all of them presenting the Payo world as negative. At the same time, however, it is tolerant and allows relationships with this world, as long as the Gypsy identity and all its implications are protected and preserved.

The cultural redefinition discourse

The new discourse, more ‘politicised’ and with elements that remind us of the incipient nationalism in the Europe of the nineteenth century, rejects both the complete assimilation and the formation of ghettos. As a minority position, with a much more articulated discourse than the traditional one, it runs the risk of both being more radical than the rest of the society and of being manipulated by institutional power.

This discourse incorporates the notion of ‘minority’. Until recently, this notion was part neither of Gypsy vocabulary nor of Gypsy reality: which does not mean that they had not felt different. But to feel different is not the same as to articulate one’s own position in terms of minority. Only to the extent that a new identity had emerged along with a change in the kind and number of relationships with the majority society, is it possible for the concept of ‘minority’ to appear. As a ‘minority’, this discourse rejects the subordination to the dominant society, but at the same time it assumes some of its concepts, like the claims of equality and the notion of right. In spite of some remnants of passivity, this new way of ‘belonging’ implies a shift from the traditional loyalty to the clan, to the consciousness of being part of ‘a people’. As Raimundo, a representative of this discourse, says:

They let us in, but little by little—especially teachers, psychologist and people like that—but it isn’t enough yet. Let’s hope the future will be different. They must know that we are people with our own ideas, personality, roots ... that we have an identity as a ‘people’.

Those new narratives—which, as Bruner (1990) says, are constructed precisely in those cases where the constitutive beliefs of the cultural system are contradicted—may throw light on a new relationship between minority and majority. Whereas the previous narratives referred to a constant threat of the majority to Gypsy integrity and independence, therefore justifying their attitudes and practices of self-protection, the new narratives about the Gypsy people permit us to detect a change in practices. Along with the notion of progress we find a new approach to mainstream society and the acceptance of a certain degree of openness. This change is understood as necessary for the survival of Gypsy communities if they are to avoid stronger exclusion. Again, let us listen to Raimundo:

They must realise that in the near future, if things don't change, we gypsy people will have no way out but beggary. That's not fair. Instead of catching up, we're falling further behind by the moment, and we have to say it. Let's work, gypsies and non-gypsies, to make that distance smaller.

The openness of this cultural redefinition implies a new relationship with institutions. In a difficult balancing act to avoid both assimilation or exclusion, this discourse views institutions as constitutionally responsible for an improvement of their social conditions. Indeed, they correctly argue, it is their right as Spanish citizens to receive such help. But at the same time there is a reluctance over loss of autonomy and the placing of themselves completely in the hands of the institutions—for they do not lose sight of the fact that they are the institutions of the dominant majority. Hence, there is a wish to be involved also in the process of creation and development of strategic actions for social change. And by 'new' we mean a redefinition of previous relationships since, as we mentioned at the beginning, the Gypsy community has been dealing with majority institutions for several years.

And it was precisely this situation when we arrived at the Association, asking for 'permission to study them'. In their eyes, we were a good opportunity to help them create a different kind of relationship with the institutional world of the majority society, a tool to deal with some of the technical procedures, conditions which had been so far less than insurmountable. In this sense, we could say we came 'in handy' (indeed, a way of looking at it would be to say that all they had to do in order to use us was to 're-educate' us and re-shape our objectives!).

However, it would not be appropriate either to conceive our relationship exclusively in terms of 'utility' (we obtain knowledge, they receive technical services); or to define our roles as mere 'technique advisers'. For, indeed, teaching and learning, planning and executing, making decisions and looking for resources were a continuous and bi-directional flux. If we are emphasising the mutual convenience of our relations, the coincidence in approaches at the proper time, it is to show that our presence there was not seen as an imposition: although in introducing certain novelty, new elements and different expectan-

cies, our presence could fit into a project of change that at least one part of the community was envisaging. With this, we do not mean to imply that our presence was simply inserted in processes that (one part of) the community was already 'naturally' and 'spontaneously' carrying out. We openly accept that, with our presence there, new processes and new elements were introduced in the community, with effects at different levels, including the way all of us define ourselves both individually and collectively. As we have pointed out, neither 'we' nor 'they' remained the same after this encounter [6].

As we have described it, this relationship with the Gypsy community can be understood as a community process, very close to community social psychology (Campos, 1996; Martin, 1988; Montero, 1994a; Sánchez-Vidal, 1991) and participatory action research (Fals Borda, 1985; Montero, 1994b; Serrano-García, 1989). Indeed, some elements and features of these approaches were precipitating throughout the process. Eventually, we engaged in a community intervention. Throughout the process, our collaboration was permeated by the difficult synthesis we have mentioned above. We (and, to reiterate, now 'we' is a conjoining of the authors and some of the Gypsy representatives) are placed in this third way or option: to accept the challenges of modernisation, but, at the same time, facilitating control from within the Gypsy community and within their own cultural parameters. The main aim, then, of our collaboration (as community psychology would put it) is the empowerment of the Gypsy community so that the community itself is able to fight for social change.

One more 'but' ...

There is (at least) one more objection to the way the intervention is conceived. But to formulate it we will need, once again, to expand the context. Traditionally, Gypsies have made their living with activities 'quite at the margins' that fit with their love of freedom and resistance to discipline. They used resources that others had dismissed before, tasks with low or no degree of formalisation, diverse and variable, without rigid and fixed routines and timetables, often outdoors. Those included recycling activities, arts, trade and ambulant selling or peddling, all of which are difficult to follow and trace. Thus, as a collective, their movements have been quite invisible; or rather, elusive, with an ambiguous presence, that enabled them to oscillate between varying degrees of public visibility. It was difficult for institutions to subject them to the visibility regimes (Foucault, 1976).

Nevertheless, it seems that the progressive development of our society, in which the state and institutions are colonising more and more spaces, are making some of their strategies to make a living impossible. To sell in markets without Town Hall permission condemns them to illegality; the sewers have been closed to public access; schooling is compulsory; their nomadic way of life has been progressively changing for a more stable (and localisable) position in neighbourhoods ... Without discussing here the value of these changes, we can

see that they all go in the direction of making the Gypsy community more visible, subjected, able to be located and possibly controlled.

If we accept this account, serious questions can be asked relating to the new project in which all of us are involved. If the Gypsy community has somehow been defined by a certain management of their own visibility and invisibility, then is this project not making them much more visible to institutions? Put differently, is this project not working towards an increasing 'subjection' of the Gypsy community to the functioning and logic of the majority group? Does it not enable the construction of subjects and subjectivities more liable to regulation? This is not a criticism we should dismiss too fast. Whereas they deserve the services and advantages they are trying to achieve from the institutions—precisely because they are part of Spanish society and pay taxes—at the same time it seems difficult to deny that this project, by trying to change the relationship with institutions, is making the community more visible and potentially subjected to those institutions.

However, it would be naive to think that this is a process provoked by this project. As we have tried to show, the community has had to front broader social changes, and these processes of subjection are already taking place. To avoid any relationship altogether with institutions is not only unrealistic but also seems to condemn the community to destructive marginality and poverty. But if so far the community has lived this relationship as completely alien and imposed, now the community wants to engage in it in a more active way. Otherwise, since changes will happen anyway, they will lack the resources to participate in them as agents. Thus, the project seeks to find ways of dealing with this increasing absorption of the Gypsy community by the rest of the society, in a way that enables the community to have an active role in all those changes. If so far the community has been the object of these changes, the project attempts to turn the community into a subject; that is, to empower the community so that it can participate actively, at least in part, in those decisions which to a large extent affect its survival and its life.

Conclusions

In this paper we have explained the beginning of a common adventure we have embarked upon. The aim was not, however, to explain the details of the project, which has been done elsewhere (Laluzza *et al.*, 1999), but to explore the process through which we became engaged in it. Thus, we have not presented the project from a finished perspective but, rather, have presented its development, following it through all the changes occurring with the forging of relationships. We have shown how the position of both the community and the researchers changed throughout the relationship. Thus, what started as an attempt to study and 'speak on behalf of the other' or 'study the other' was progressively transformed into participatory action research in a dialogical context, and finally into a community project.

To echo Montero's words (1988), this is not a project in the community,

but *of* the community *for* the community. The object is a tool in the community's hands to enable it to have an active role in all the changes it is experiencing. If so far the community has been the object of these changes, the project attempts to turn the community into a subject. That is, to empower the community so that it can participate actively, at least in part, in those decisions which significantly affect its life: an empowerment, though, whose goal should go beyond the borders of the community, aiming at having an effect at a broader social level and altering minority–majority relationships. It is a project which seeks to enable the Gypsy community to fight for social change. This is why we argue that the community project has a clearly political, and even ideological, dimension.

To accept this political dimension means that it no longer makes sense to try to study the Gypsy community itself—whether it is for showing its ‘exoticism’ or for comparing it with other cultures. Rather, efforts should be directed to the comprehension of power relationships between this community and dominant groups. Without this approach, we can understand neither the history of the community nor its changes. And any intervention which failed to take this broader context into account would be missing the point.

This work process did not obey a pre-established plan, a previous positioning which we simply started. Rather, the project evolved out of the everyday relations and negotiations with our interlocutors—our point of departure evolving into a multiplicity of points, a trajectory, a trip. While we were relating to the other, we were being moved by this other: ‘... just as we see movement and seek to make movement for others, we are also moved by our research fields and seek to make movement for ourselves’ (Lee, 1998, p. 475). In all our work relating to communities we should remain open to the changes that a dialogic relation with others can bring us.

Notes

- [1] Burman *et al.* (1996), Fine (1994), Íñiguez and Ibáñez (1997), Montero (1994a, b), Parker and Shotter (1990), Serrano-García (1989), Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers (1995), Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996).
- [2] The term ‘Payo’ is used by Gypsies to refer to those who are not Gypsy, regardless of their origin. While it is not pejorative, it nevertheless carries with it the implication of the differentiation ‘us/them’.
- [3] On context, development and education, see Bruner (1986, 1997); for an analysis of the role of the school shaping thought and problem resolution, see LCHC (1982).
- [4] Permission was given to identify them with their real names. Reasons for this will be clarified in the following section of the paper.
- [5] See Cerrueruela *et al.* (2001). Through more interviews, Gypsy leaders provided us with a lot of knowledge about their culture, the structure of their organisation, the norms regulating their exchanges, their laws, their values and points of view, etc., as well as the way they viewed the relationship between majority society and minority collectives. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and further revised. After some arrangements they were published as a

book, with joint ownership: both the university team and the community leaders appear as authors of this book.

- [6] Another charge here would be the accusation that, with our very presence and intervention, we are introducing to the community elements which are not traditionally part of Gypsy culture. That is, we would be contributing to the loss of 'Gypsiness', the destruction of the community. Nevertheless, we will show that this argument is misleading in several ways, since it is concealing that: (1) there are no such 'natural', stable, invariable communities. Cultures, groups, communities and any kind of collective are subjected to change. (2) The context in which the community lives has changed, is changing, and will continue to change. The question, therefore, is whether the community is ready to participate actively in those changes. (3) The problem is not in change itself, but when change is lived as an imposition. (4) These claims to preserve pure and untouched cultures bar the community from acquiring those strategies which would enable it to be an agent of its own changes.

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Biographical note

Isabel Crespo is an assistant teacher in the field of psychology teaching at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and is a consultant-teacher at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. She has coordinated the fieldwork of the research carried out by the DEHISI group in Sant Roc, as well as the current projects developed jointly with the Gypsy Association. She also coordinates the Practicum of the postgraduate course on Intervention in Childhood and Family in Social Risk. Her research interests include human development, social and community intervention, cultural psychology, intercultural education and childhood in social risk.

José Luís Lalueza is a lecturer in the Department of Education and Development of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, where he also directs the postgraduate course on Intervention in Childhood and Family in Social Risk. He coordinates the research of the DEHISI group, has participated in the fieldwork of the project in Sant Roc, and directs the 'La Casa de Shere Rom' project in collaboration with the Gypsy Association. His research interests include human development, social and community intervention, cultural psychology, intercultural education, and childhood in social risk.

Cristina Pallí is a PhD student in the Department of Social Psychology in the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and is a consultant-teacher of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, where she also teaches in the postgraduate course on Science, Technology and Society. She participated in both the fieldwork of the project in Sant Roc and the development of its analysis. She has also been working on issues of identity, cultural mobility and ethnography.