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SO DUKHALMA

What makes me suffer

The inner disadvantage of Roma young people
and families in institutional settlements

December, 2015

«Like stray dogs,
they have chucked us here
and said "Let's see what happens"»



THE CONTEXT

For over twenty years the politics of the 'camps' has negatively affected the lives of the Roma in emergency housing. In various regions of Italy, i.e. Lazio, Lombardy, Campania and Piedmont, the disadvantaged Roma are allotted spaces similar to refugee camps, inhabited exclusively by other Roma families, often without basic facilities and outside of city centres. The shocking material conditions and human-rights violations associated with these "camps" have been amply documented, but less attention has so far been paid to the relation between the living environment of the 'nomad camp' and the psychic and immaterial welfare of those who live there.

THE RESEARCH

A minor who has been born and brought up in a mono-ethnic and overcrowded space, a minor who has experienced repeated evictions, for whom blazes and fires are common events, a minor who has no access to basic services and who suffers discrimination on a daily basis – how can such a young person live his or her experience? How do these circumstances condition such a person's inner world, and how do they impinge on the family?

These are the questions that have guided the *So Dukhalma* research.



THE METHODOLOGY

The investigation has adopted a mixed methodology. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with privileged informants; through mask-making workshops intended for minors between 8 and 15 years of age, Roma and non-Roma, living in 'camps' and in conventional housing; through interviews with two groups of Roma families, homogeneous in terms of migratory history, belonging to the same familial networks, but with different living conditions – one group resident in an institutional settlement in Rome (the 'village of solidarity' of Castel Romano) and the other in conventional housing (some occupied buildings renewed by them). Before being assigned two opposite housing destinies, these two groups lived together in the 'tolerated camp' of Vicolo Savini. The interviews followed the format of the psychotherapeutic approach developed by the Scuola Etno Sistemico Narrativa of Rome, resisting the temptation to diagnose and attentive to the complexities of inner disadvantage.

WHEN POLITICS BRINGS DISADVANTAGE

According to the World Health Organisation, inner disadvantage mirrors the socio-economic context and is sensitive to the so-called social determinants of health: low income, discrimination, social exclusion, cultural deprivation and inadequate housing are all factors with a strong negative effect on psychic wellbeing – and all of these apply to the lives of the Roma who have been displaced in the 'villages of solidarity'. Such risk factors are counterposed by factors of resilience or of protection, which are themselves also partly linked to the external context. Especially for minors in the adolescent phase, the first factor of resilience is the family: not only because it can act as a protective defence against the outside, but also because it can provide potentially useful role models. The robust family structures that are generally encountered within Roma communities constitute a basic indispensable element for dealing with the presence of risk factors, and with the absence – as it will show – of other protective factors. Roma minors can in fact count on numerous adult mentors, and the value of the family is often mentioned in the interviews as being what constitutes their identity and differentiates them from the non-Roma.



The second protective factor in order of importance is school: school affects the sense of self-realisation and the perception of one's own capacity to respond to social expectations (and also to family expectations, in those cases where the family espouses educational standards). In this sense, school can provide a channel of self-affirmation that is capable of resisting other channels that might compromise the minor's psychological, social or physical wellbeing. One important symbolic aspect inherent in school attendance is the requirement of a commitment to long-term planning, a most necessary feature especially for those who spend all their time, at home, in empty play and inactivity, without any challenges that might help to raise self-esteem. The educational projects within the 'villages of solidarity' have been failures, and the minors' experience of school has been one of frustration, discomfort and utter lack of achievement. Many parents, during the interviews held in the camp, described how their children would spend whole days in the settlement without taking part in any external activity or any recreation, in a state of extreme boredom and apathy.



«My daughter spends all her time in front of the television. When I call her she reacts with anger, she doesn't want to be touched by anybody, she only wants to watch TV»

Many actions carried out by the minors seem to be dictated by boredom: some adolescents spend all their time applying make-up, as though they had nothing else to do, or else eating in a compensatory manner, as though with a deep emotional hunger. Others express this same feeling, boredom, by watching TV uninterruptedly, refusing to do anything else and responding aggressively to proposals of any other kind of activity.



«The youngsters here have nothing to do, they're edgy, they slam doors, they act weird, they get aggressive, they blow their fuse, they hit each other. Here the mentality blocks you. You don't go out, you always see the same faces. The youngsters get bored and thump one another, people fight over nothing because there's nothing else to do! There's no other way to let off steam. Teenagers are usually active, they want to go out. Here they can't. Here the head doesn't work, the brain is pea-sized.»



During the interviews with the families it was often noted that in the containers there are no toys or games for the children and that in the 'village of solidarity' there is no space for any kind of sporting activity. Some minors express their anger and irritation in violent gestures, such as slamming the door every time they leave the container, or else in self-harming behaviour, such as repeatedly and furiously banging their head against the wall. The behaviour observed during the research in the camp evinced a level of anger that is not externalised in controlled and conscious activity aimed at the wellbeing of the person, but rather in uncontrolled and instinctive actions, dysfunctional and destructive of healthy living.

Anti-social behaviour of this type was not found amongst the Roma living in conventional housing, where the minors seem far more serene and where the adolescents engage in sporting activities, have social relations with external people, take part in recreations such as disco dancing, and – unlike those who live in the 'camp' – form mixed relationships, Roma with non-Roma. In the 'villages of solidarity', because of the distance from the city-centres, relationships and interchange with external people are extremely difficult. The youngsters have absolutely no access to areas of shared socialising. The activities they can carry out in their free time are extremely few and are conditioned by the need to remain inside the 'camp': this means that they have a great deal of dead time and this increases the risk that they will abuse drugs and alcohol. It was no part of this research to identify which psychoactive substances were in use in the 'camp', but it was nevertheless observed the presence of all the risk factors that favour their abuse: lack of planning, aimlessness, low value placed on educational success, low educational expectations, poor relations with teachers and fellow-pupils, lack of trust in one's own abilities.



Another protective factor is the relation with the community: to feel capable of contributing to the life of a group larger than and different from the family, to perceive expectations and to receive requests for responsible behaviour from the local community, to frequent areas of social encounter, and to participate in organised activities – all of these enhance the wellbeing of the minor and reinforce his or her ability to overcome disadvantage. All of them are completely lacking in the typical isolation of the Roma 'villages of solidarity', which deprive their residents of regular contact with the external world. Like school, active participation in the social context is a form of self-affirmation, a way of declaring one's own existence to the external community: as we shall see, the set-up of the 'camp' imposes a relational modality based on assistance, and a way of existing that in the eyes of the external world passes through the identity dimension of a person in receipt of assistance.



ADULTS AND FAMILIES

Homes are places that to varying degrees identify or determine the cultural background and the social belonging of the group who live there, they retain the memories, they influence behaviour and create habits, giving form to individual and collective representations. In this regard, it is striking how the residents of the "camps" describe themselves using the language and images of the majority society, resorting to the topos belonging to a wide range of negative stereotypes referring to them. "You become worse here, the worst of all the Gypsies ... what shit life that of the Gypsies" (a man living in the "village of solidarity" of Castel Romano, March 3, 2015). To describe his discomfort, E. compares and defines his malaise as a condition even worse than that of the "Gypsies" using this term in a derogatory manner and distancing himself from the category to which resort to indicate the last threshold of unease - that they would cross - and laying an extremely negative value on the whole group of the "Gypsies." When we ask to another householder what it means to be a "Gypsy", since this word is used by him abundantly during the interview to define the community he belongs to, he replies: "Before we were called "nomads", now they call us "Gypsies" (a man living in the "village of solidarity" of Castel Romano, January 24, 2015), as if the character of his identity would be reduced to the terms chosen by the majority society. This is a symptomatic element that put in evidence the lack of leadership in one's own life, a fact that shows the powerlessness experienced not only when making materials and daily choices (related for example to the working or housing condition and so on), but also when claiming the right to self-assertion, to build and choose independently - or at least equally with the external world - the way through which describing oneself and consequently one's identity, both individual and social. This dynamics represents the exact reversal of linguistic ethnocentrism, a cross phenomenon among different human groups, a form of power and assertion of an identity group over others consisting in the introduction, in one's own language, of a different term, usually derogatory, but correct as ethnonym to designate a group that is external. The use of the word "Gypsy" by the Italian society is a manifestation of linguistic ethnocentrism, and it is striking how much this word has been absorbed by the Roma for describing themselves. In this way, they seem to completely accept the majoritarian ethnocentrism, passively adapting to the role of "others", chosen from the external world, and accepting a relation of unbalanced power that put them even beyond the extremity of the relation between the powerful and the humble.

The research points out that the individual identity coming into sight is often defined or at least conditioned by the context of the "camp" and that the feeling of lacking authority and power to change is a common perception.

A complete passivity and a lack of power over oneself perception and over the definition of one's identity appear clear and both of them are mainly dependent on the external context because this rules the access to rights, guides the life style, suggests the word that has to be used for name oneself, defines one's responsibilities.



«You can feel what you want, but people at the end judge you always a Gypsy, they don't make any difference, we are all the same for the others»

The way the residents of the "camps" talk about themselves and their condition is surprisingly homogeneous and uniform – regardless of differences in terms of level of education, economic activities and so on; it is a "closed story", repetitive, shaped and flattened on the representation that the external world has drawn for them. This dynamics puts in evidence how much the representation of the other and the lack of alternative identities are pervasive and violent in terms of power. By the way people interviewed in the "camp" describe themselves, it seems that there is only one possible identity, an only narrative, an only feasible destiny.

The recurring themes in the interviews, dealt with words often identical by the residents of the "village of solidarity" are: the assimilation of their living space to an island ("This is an island, the Island of the Famous"), image used as a metaphor of isolation and constriction inside a parallel space; the presence of rats, snakes and wild boars, which does not belong to the realm of the imaginary and that is a real problem for families; the possibility of "starve" unless a private transport take them to the food services (also this aspect disclosing the unease caused by isolation); the contrast between Roma and non-Roma deviance, the first relating to thefts, the second one to murders of children and relatives – episodes that, as claimed by the people interviewed, could never take place among them; the positive myth of Germany, which is opposed to the country in which they live, Italy, whose policies are considered as the main cause of any negative aspect of their lives.



*«In the next future,
I would like that my nephew studies,
does some sport and learns singing.
But I know that she will get married at 16,
she will have many children
and she will live like a Roma woman»*



This last point leads to a further phenomenon: the attribution of responsibility of one's own condition to the exterior. Specular, this condition is unchangeable except through the intervention of others, of institutions, associations, etc. The impression one gets is that Roma do not feel at all protagonists of their existence, they feel completely powerless in front of life and all depends on external factors. In their narratives there is no investment in the future, everything is trapped within a welfare logic: during the interviews conducted, it seems that the only identity that could be interpreted and proposed to the external world, as in a script, is that of people in receipt of assistance in toto. This aspect also emerges from the language used, a language where Roma are always presented as passive object and never as the subject of actions of change: "If anybody helps me, this year I'm going to Bosnia – although over there I have nothing [...] They do not help us in anything" (a man living in the "village of solidarity" of Castel Romano, March 3, 2015). "I hope to have a house, just give me a home. They don't give us an employment [...] If they give us a home, I don't want to stay close to the other Gypsies" (a woman living in the "village of solidarity" of Castel Romano, January 10, 2015). These statements, almost absent in the interviews with the Roma living in conventional homes, imply a passive vision of the self, of themselves as recipients of choices, active and dynamic of others. From work to home, everything seems to be a matter of external grant and not an individual achievement. "The boys were born here, yes, they can live outside, if they are given a possibility, if they are given a council house. And if they are given a job, so the children can live healthily. At the moment no, they don't grow in a healthy way" (a woman living in the "village of solidarity" of Castel Romano, February 26, 2015).

The coincidence between Roma identity and the identity of people in receipt of assistance is interpretable as a consequence of twenty years of welfare-policy conceived on the basis of ethnicity and targeting Roma. Imagining the life cycle of a child raised in a "camp", it is easy to find continuously this bond between being object of specific welfare interventions and being Roma: during childhood, the minor has a house and a right to housing different from the others because he/she is a Roma that needs to be supported; during his/her schooling he/she is accompanied to school by a special school-bus being a Roma that needs to be supported; at school, his/her ethnicity leads the way the relations develop and his/her school performance and even attendance are judged with different tools from those used for the other pupils by teachers. During the years of maturity it is quite common that even the access to work is determined by the condition of a Roma that needs to be supported and living in a "camp" (consider the work grants awarded in the "camps" and there occurred, so that the residents of Castel Romano see them as the only formal source of jobs offered by the associations that work in the "camp" and to be carried out inside the settlement). The most serious aspect of this mechanism is that the relation built with the majority society, interpreted not only as an institution, passes mainly through the assistance channel, which therefore becomes the main relational modality between the "camp" and the external world. This link, powered mutually, is a living tool, that means that Roma are considered by the outer world and exist for the majority society only and mainly through the role of people in receipt of assistance.

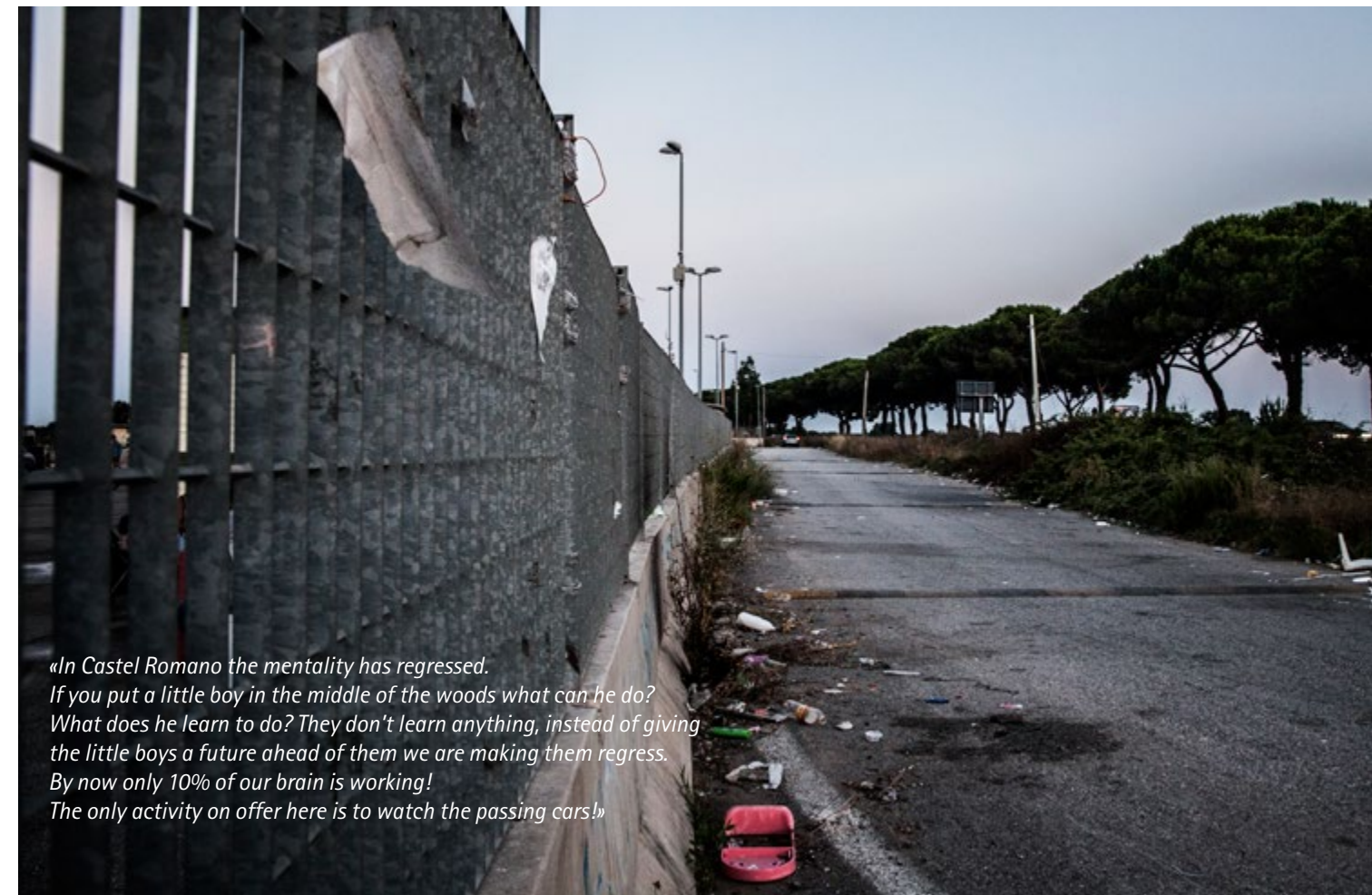


According to an operator engaged in educational projects addressed to Roma children living in "camps" as well as to Roma children living in occupied buildings, the lack of planning is precisely ascribed to the assistance dynamics: the Roma teenagers living in the occupied buildings, therefore far away from the municipal assistance circuits, appear polite and respectful, they are able to imagine themselves as "adults" and to indicate their place in the future (for instance, they know what kind of life they would like to have). Roma teenagers living in the "village of solidarity" where the operator works, instead, do not seem to have any life project, they do not demonstrate to have any relational or disciplinary skill, they have a closed and sceptical attitude towards the external world, they often exhibit feelings of anger. It is emblematic that a Roma mother living in a conventional building says that her children "took from the Italian culture the independence as a positive feature, that means to do things on your own, do not ask anyone" (a woman living in a conventional house in Rome, January 15, 2015).



The powerlessness referred, has concrete consequences and translates into a lack of perspectives of enhancement of one's conditions. The daily activities carried out inside the "camp" seem to have no planning and refer almost exclusively to the survival sphere, for what concerns adults, while are led by boredom, for what concerns minors.

Several adults interviewed have stated that the "camp" determines the loss of their competences, acquired before being transferred inside the settlement and explain how their children, grown up exclusively inside the "village of solidarity", have not acquired any ability.



*«In Castel Romano the mentality has regressed.
If you put a little boy in the middle of the woods what can he do?
What does he learn to do? They don't learn anything, instead of giving
the little boys a future ahead of them we are making them regress.
By now only 10% of our brain is working!
The only activity on offer here is to watch the passing cars!»*



*«When I was at Vicolo Savini I did a lot of courses.
Now the certificates for these are all in the drawer.
I don't even know how to use the internet anymore
and my Italian is also getting worse!»*

In this regard it is noticeable how many parents define their children as "wild animals", unable to deal with the world outside of "the camp". Likewise it is noticeable how, also in reference to adults, the term "mad" is frequently used and how also when reporting the presence of individuals within their own group whose behaviour deviates from the norm, dehumanising images are resorted to.

«These people who are a bit crazy burn things, they throw all their garbage behind our house. Here the children are becoming like madmen. The children are always roaming around here but they never go out. If they go out they don't know where to go, how to move around. This camp is like a jungle, you see nothing here – only the ground. When the children are in a park or a garden they move like monkeys.»

(Collective interview with a group of women living in the "village of solidarity" of Castel Romano, February 26, 2015).



«They are like beasts, they're always here in the camp and when they go out and meet the other children they are completely wild. Now when I take them out a little and they are always nervous, they answer back badly and they kick out»

«Here you cannot do anything. Those who are always enclosed here become stupid, not my children though because I make them go out. The others are more aggressive, they give you trouble, they say swearwords and want to stay at home. They have lost the will to go out, even to get out from under the covers in the morning. They have become depressed»

(a man resident in the "village of solidarity" of Castel Romano, February 26, 2015).



«We are beasts, the dog of an Italian lives better»

«Castel Romano has completely changed children's way of life. Even the adults are becoming a bit mad, they become hysterical here. I see the Italian children as very different, they have opportunities. Here children have no opportunities, just one option that is always the same»

What emerges is how Roma have assimilated themselves to the stereotypes and linguistic universe of the majority society. They have adopted its terms and representations, accepting and playing out on their own the role of subalterns with all that this involves in terms of unease, dependency on living with assistance and the corresponding effects on the conception of the self.



Such a phenomenon is reminiscent of that of the "identified patient", whereby within a group context, such as that of the family, one sole person becomes invested with the malaise of the whole group. This mechanism happens in an unconscious way as unconsciously the group tends to want to maintain the status quo and to prevent the "identified patient", from emerging from the condition of disease which is in itself functional in the maintenance of the group's identity. In turn the individual or "patient", fully accepts his or her role as the scapegoat in order not to hinder the group and to mark his/her own bond of belonging to the latter. From this perspective the disease of the individual is not understood as such, rather it constitutes somewhat the individual taking charge of the malfunctioning of the group to which he/she belongs to. Similarly it seems that the only way the Roma resident in the "camp" have to bind and relate to the external world is to adhere to the expectations of the majority society, adopting the role constructed for them by policies and external representations.

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In conclusion, it is observed how the isolation and the difficulty of enjoying a socio-affective network outside the totalizing institution of the "camp" render the "camp" a space that engulfs and acts upon the identities of those who live there, having a negative impact in terms of individual planning and possibility of exit from the settlement. Risk factors are strongly present meanwhile, with the exception of the family, protection factors are inexistent. Amongst the Roma resident in the "camp" there is a notable sense of passivity towards their own lives, a total adhesion to the role that society and policies offer the residents, an absolute personification of the only role that seems possible, that of people on the margins, recipient of external help and in need of support, dependent on the exterior and deprived of the ability to imagine and to undertake autonomous paths which carry their own name.



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The reportage pictures were shot by Stefano Sbrulli, photoreporter and digital designer, at the "Solidarity Village" of Castel Romano and at some Roma families living in private houses in Rome (www.stefanosbrulli.com).

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Since 2010 Associazione 21 luglio has been working to protect and promote Roma and Sinti communities' human rights, through a constant advocacy and research activity, policy monitoring, education and raising awareness initiatives countering prejudices and undertaking legal actions, when necessary.

For further information, see: www.21luglio.org

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