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The play behaviours of Roma children in Transylvania

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“Here I am, in a Transylvanian Roma village, wondering whether the poverty of the environment affects the play behaviour of the children. These are the most materially deprived children in Europe. Most of them live in over-crowded homes made from mud and wood, with no running water, power, or sanitation. The only toys are those donated by charities, or scrounged from the skips around the nearby town. The children have no personal possessions at all. What they have is shared with everyone else, not so much in a spirit of community, but rather because there is no way of keeping anything private.

Why then, are these children the happiest you're ever likely to meet? Maybe it's because they're free to play wherever, and with whatever, they want. Maybe it's because they're playing with close friends and relations. Maybe it's something to do with the strength of their common culture. Maybe it's the wonderful sunny weather. Whatever the cause may be, the energy and enjoyment of the children's play is there for all to see. Sadly, the exuberant joy of the summer months, is in stark contrast to the misery of the winter, when temperatures can fall as low as -25°C, and children die from disease and malnutrition.”

(Diary Extract 5th August 2009)

Background

For the past 15 years I have been involved in working with disadvantaged groups in Romania. Originally this took the form of therapeutic work with abandoned and abused children in a Transylvanian paediatric hospital (Brown & Webb 2005). That led to the establishment of the *Aid for Romanian Children* charitable trust in 2003 (see www.arccharity.org). The trust was set up to fund certain aspects of the work in the hospital, and also to work with children in Romania's numerous Roma villages. The Roma, known locally as tsigan (or gypsies), are routinely discriminated against in terms of jobs, housing, education, even access to medical care, despite such discrimination being illegal within the European Union. Officially they make up less than 3% of the population, but unofficially the figure is probably nearer 9% (NDI 2003), making them the largest ethnic minority in any country in Europe. In recent years our charity has worked extensively with Roma children and families, providing food, clothing, medicines, housing repairs, education programmes, and summer camps (run by students from Leeds Metropolitan University). For the sake of clarity it is important to note that these Roma people do not fit the western stereotype of the nomadic gypsy living in a caravan, selling pegs and lucky heather to passers-by. Some of these families have lived in the same area for centuries.

The Roma are justifiably suspicious of outsiders. However, through the work of the charity it was possible to establish good relations with many local people. That gave me access to an otherwise fairly closed community. The children who live in these villages are among the most materially disadvantaged in Europe. However, having worked with the children over many years, I have become increasingly aware that despite their material deprivation, they could not really be described as play deprived – a condition which Hughes suggests is a result of “a chronic lack of sensory interaction with the world” (2000: 21). In fact their play is extremely social and highly creative. That realisation prompted the research study which is at the heart of this article. The focus of the study was to examine in depth the phenomenon of play within one of these small communities.

The original intention was to use a mixed methods approach - a combination of observations of children in the public arena, and structured interviews (Bell 2010), using a local interpreter. In practice the interviews proved extremely difficult to conduct, as the children had no understanding

of the concept of an interview. They either interpreted the exchange as a sort of test, or as a completely inexplicable event, with the result that there was very little variety in the answers. I also quickly became aware that some of the questions were inappropriate. For example, one of the questions asked for information about what the children played when they were alone. Most of the respondents looked confused about this, and it soon became apparent that these children are never alone. Another question asked them about special places to play, but (as will be discussed in detail later) the children commonly play all over the village in a communal manner, so they had hardly any concept of personal space. After twelve unproductive interviews I abandoned that approach, and decided to concentrate on the observations.

Naturalistic observations took place during the summer of 2009, and totalled around 100 hours. Dunn (2005: 87) suggests there are three characteristics of this form of observation that give the resulting data special significance. Such observations provide:

- a) a window to the social worlds of the child
- b) an opportunity to understand situations that have emotional significance to the child
- c) evidence of real-life experiences, and the child's reaction to them

All this proved to be the case.

Approximately 200 children between the ages of 7 and 14 live in the village at the heart of this study - albeit there is no census information to confirm the exact population. It is not possible to give an accurate figure of how many children were observed during the study – certainly in excess of 150.

Initially the technique adopted was one of narrative description (Sharman et al 2004), simply sitting as unobtrusively as possible, and making notes. Later on, this became mixed with participant observation, as the children began to warm to the idea of a playworker in their midst. Moving away from straightforward observation might be considered risky, in terms of the potential for 'researcher effect'. However, a playworker is better suited to the role of a participant observer than most researchers, because s/he is less likely to fall into the trap identified by Corsaro (1985), namely that adults find it hard to avoid being proactive in children's settings. When that happens, when the adult starts leading the play, it becomes hard to be sure whether the behaviours being observed are normal everyday occurrences, or merely evidence of the children responding to the influence of the adult. The playworker, on the other hand, regards it as a fundamental part of their philosophy that the child's agenda should be taken as the starting point for any adult-child interaction. Therefore, playworkers don't seek to influence children's play, but rather wait to be approached (Hughes 1996: 51). That aspect of their professional practice makes playworkers especially suited to Corsaro's 'reactive strategy' (1985: 28), which encourages researchers to avoid behaving like adults. Corsaro suggests that if researchers are to be effective in children's contexts, they need to set aside their adult prejudices and be responsive to the child. The playworker's reflective analytic approach (Hughes 2001) is well-suited to this, since it seeks to respond to children's cues rather than instigate activity. Goncu (2007) suggests that trying to understand the play of children in one culture through the lens of a theory developed in another culture will be limited in its scope to the commonalities between the two cultures. However, the playwork approach is not to apply any existing theory, but simply to observe and record, and hopefully learn from the children.

Ethical Issues:

All of the Social Research Association's (2003) standard ethical considerations were addressed. For example, all interviews and observations took place in public areas, so I was never alone with any individual child at any time. In line with the playwork ethos, the interests of the children were always given priority. There were no identifiable risks to either the participants (or myself) from anything that was done during the study. Good health & safety practices were maintained at all times; for example a risk assessment was undertaken in relation to the timing and location of the observations, with the result that no observations were conducted after dark. This was regrettable because the children certainly don't stop playing when it gets dark.

Information about the purpose of the study was made available to anyone who requested it. The outcomes of the interviews have not been included in the findings, and so the elaborate steps taken to confirm participants' consent are largely irrelevant. The information sheets, which were framed with the interviews in mind, were nevertheless made available to anyone who questioned my presence in the village. They were framed in simple language to make it easy for everyone to understand, and also to facilitate translation. Those residents who were unable to read were given an extended explanation via a local trusted interpreter. It was made clear to participants in conversation, and on the information sheets, that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time. This principle was in force right up to the end of the data collection phase. In the event no-one ever asked to withdraw, or for their data to be withheld.

Participants were not offered any inducement to take part. No participants are mentioned by name, and since there are numerous Roma villages throughout Transylvania, their anonymity will be well protected. All data was securely stored at all times, in password protected files, and was destroyed once the study was finally completed. The steps taken to protect the privacy of participants should also help in that regard.

There was a range of considerations specific to children. For example, do they fully understand the meaning of complex terms? No such terms were used in the interviews, and since these were subsequently abandoned, this was not considered to be an issue. The nature of the research substantially reduces the problem of informed consent. Alderson (1995) stresses the importance of making sure a child is capable of giving "informed consent"? However, since the interviews were abandoned that became less important. Given the safeguards regarding privacy and anonymity, the issue of informed consent was not regarded as a serious obstacle to proceeding. After all, the participants could not come to any harm as a result of their participation, and they might even benefit from it. Nevertheless, researchers should always question whether children ever feel powerful enough to "withdraw". Again, this is less of a problem for a playworker. I have worked with children for more than thirty years, and have developed a strong awareness of when children have 'had enough'. In this case, given the non-sensitive nature of the subject matter, and the fact that the observations were conducted in public places, this did not present as a problem.

Finally it is worth noting that in the UK anyone who works with children undergoes regular scrutiny from the Criminal Records Bureau. I am checked bi-annually as a direct consequence of the sensitivity of my work.

Observations - some striking factors

At first sight the mass of data gained during the study appeared quite chaotic. However, careful application of a thematic analysis approach (Howitt and Cramer 2007) quickly revealed a number of themes, which were then used to bring some coherence to the findings. The themes identified were:

- Playing everywhere and with anything
- Engagement with the environment
- Creativity and the theory of loose parts
- Boisterous physical activity
- Semi-organised games
- Chanting games

Obviously there is considerable overlap between these categories, as will be apparent from the various illustrative examples given under each subheading. Nevertheless, it is helpful for the purpose of analysis to separate the themes out.

Playing Everywhere and with Anything

Colin Ward (1978) suggested children will play everywhere and with anything, which is clearly the case with these Roma children. However, their attitude to property may be even more anarchistic

than Ward envisaged. Regardless of ownership they wander from yard to yard in a fairly indiscriminate manner. That opens up all sorts of play opportunities that would not be available in cultures where the concept of private property is generally understood and accepted.

I witnessed an example of this on one of my last days in the village, when children acted out an elaborate role play in the front yard of the house next door. The Romanian version of rummy is played with a set of 'bones' (plastic tablets with card symbols on one face), and involves making similar combinations to poker (numerical runs, three of the same number, collections of the same suit, etc.). Each player has fourteen bones, which they arrange on a wooden rack. The object is to collect sets of three or four bones until you have used all fourteen. Players take turns to pick up bones from the stack, and throw away unwanted bones. I watched a group of men playing this game one evening, sitting around a table in the yard next door to my usual observation point. Each time someone lost he had a garland of leaves placed on his head. The more he lost, the more leaves were added to the garland. There was a lot of laughter, and a great amount of arguing and shouting involving participants and audience alike.

The next afternoon a group of children wandered into the same front yard, and positioned themselves around the same table and began to play a mock game of rummy. They role played exactly what I had witnessed the day before. They used old roofing tiles as a rack for their non-existent 'bones'. They did a lot of shouting, and penalties were awarded, by making the 'losers' wear a garland of leaves (just like the adults). The 'game' of rummy was not in any way real, but was played for more than an hour. Even more amazing was the fact that they gathered an audience of young children who stood and watched the game for the last 30 minutes, joining in with the arguing and shouting.

This example is both charming and instructive. Obviously it provides an illustration of the children's imagination and creativity. It also demonstrates something quite fundamental about the nature of play, namely the value of freedom. The children were free not only to come and go as they pleased, but also to control what Hughes (2001) calls the intent and content of their play. The role play could not have happened in a culture where "an Englishman's home is his castle", where people who come through the garden gate uninvited are regarded as intruders, and where "children should be seen and not heard". The fact that the children felt free to occupy the same space that had been the scene of the original game, made the role play that much more real, both for them and their 'audience'. Thus, in some small way, we have an example of children learning that they are capable of controlling "their own little microcosm of the world" (Sutton-Smith 1992).

Engaging with the Environment

Hughes (2001) argues that a child's interaction with the environment is fundamental to their future development, and that this needs to take place at a very basic elemental level. For Hughes, and many others in the playwork world, a healthy play environment contains lots of opportunities for children to dig holes, light fires, interact with animals, etc. In the village those opportunities exist in abundance, and the children take full advantage. For example, on one occasion a number of children came into the yard where I was sitting and began to dig into a pile of hard core, which had been stored in readiness for concreting a swing frame. The children filled buckets, which were then 'transported' about a metre away and tipped into a pile. Eventually the whole pile was 'transported' back again. This took nearly an hour, and involved a great amount of discussion. Without question this activity had physical and intellectual benefits, but it was clear that the most immediate outcome for the children was the social satisfaction of being part of a shared activity.

Another example of the children's engagement with the environment in the manner recommended by Hughes was the Big Turkey Race. There is a woman in the village who keeps ducks, geese, turkeys, cows, etc. The turkeys in particular roam around the top end of the village unhindered. As has already been mentioned these children play with anything and everything. On this occasion two boys created a race track, and invented turkey racing. The track was delineated with bits of wood, string and rocks. Each child chose a turkey, and held it at the start line until one of the

two boys gave the signal to start. The children then 'encouraged' their turkeys to run along the track, sometimes merely by standing behind it clapping, sometimes by tapping it with a stick. Each race took about 10 minutes, because the turkeys were not especially co-operative. Later the same day, the boys tried a similar game with ducks, only to find the ducks were even less enthusiastic than the turkeys.

Creativity and the Theory of Loose Parts

Simon Nicholson's *Theory of Loose Parts* holds that "in any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kinds of variables in it" (Nicholson 1971: 30). In this village the "number and kind of variables" is enormous in one way, and miniscule in another. On the one hand the children seem to regard anything left lying around as something that may be played with. On the other hand they have no personal possessions such as toys or board games. The artifacts they play with are almost entirely recycled scrap. This may be slightly dangerous at times, because of the splinters and sharp edges. Clearly, rooting around in a skip for your next plaything carries with it health and safety risks. However, it definitely encourages combinatorial flexibility; a process which Bruner (1976) suggests is the initial building block for human creativity.

During the observation period I witnessed numerous examples of children making use of loose parts in their play.

- An old bicycle tyre was bowled along like a hoop, and subsequently used as hula-hoop. Eventually it was discarded, and later claimed by two children who twisted it into a figure of eight around themselves. Then they hopped down a hill, eventually tumbling into a heap at the bottom. Despite the cuts and bruises they repeated this at least a dozen times.
- A piece of corrugated iron roofing was used as a channel to get water from one bucket to another, and then back again (for no obvious reason – maybe, just as a sort of practice play).
- An upturned dish doubled as a hat
- Fertilizer sacks helped create a competition - not by hopping along in the sack like a traditional sack race, but with the sack covering the head, while negotiating an obstacle course. Later the sacks were used to collect nettles, presumably for soup.
- A long length of bright blue string was used to delineate the playing area, and also the net, for a game of football tennis
- Grass was tied up as a sheaf, with one end whipped tightly. When tossed into the air the whipped end naturally made the whole thing fall to earth like an arrow. This was also used as the touch mechanism in a game of chase – the sheaf being thrown by the chaser.
- A large piece of polystyrene foam was used as a goal post, but blew away when the wind rose. It was also used to model a face.
- The lid from a tin of paint substituted quite well for a Frisbee in a game of Frisbee football.
- A plastic bottle with a string tied around the neck made a musical noise (sort of) when swung round. Alternatively the string was held in one hand, while the bottle was kicked away from the player. On another occasion the string was tied fairly tightly round a telegraph pole. Flat nails were hammered in a circle around the pole to stop the string from slipping down. The bottle was then used like a 'swing ball', but played with feet, rather than a racquet. This didn't work very well, but certainly illustrated the creativity of the players.

Boisterous Physical Activity

One of the main characteristics of play in the village is the very physical nature of the interactions. There was a lot of falling over because of the rough terrain, and lots of shouting and tears, but these are pretty hardy children, who get back to playing as soon as the tears stop. Very often they return to playing the same game as the one that resulted in the accident in the first place. This sort of boisterous physical activity seems to be taken for granted by the children. I witnessed small children playing a game that involved trying to slap each other's face while at the same time

dodging out of the way. Salter (1980) calls this type of activity a terminal game – in other words, a game where the aim is purely to avoid a negative outcome, which is potentially painful, and sometimes disastrous, but nonetheless inevitable.

The forfeits involved in the children's games are unusual. For example, losers sometimes have to wear a garland of leaves on their head. More often, a stripe of toothpaste is smeared onto the face of a loser. Sometimes the children's games have quite scary outcomes. For example games of 'cops and robbers' are generally played at night-time. Any robber who is caught is likely to be tied up and left all alone for a while. I heard of one game where the robber was taken to a nearby field where he was tied to a tree and left there for hours, and I was assured that was not unusual.

Semi-organised games

The children are extremely social in their play, and regularly engage in semi-organised games. Sometimes they organise the games themselves, but they seem to get much more engaged when a friendly adult takes the lead. That happens far more frequently in this village than might be expected in the UK. Some games, such as football and tennis, are the same as elsewhere in the world, albeit they are not always played with the standard equipment. Some are essentially local variations on well known games. For example *Baldog*, which is played with 5 tin cans, a bucket, and lots of old tights made into a soft ball, is a complicated variation on dodge-ball.

Other games are far more local, and may even be unique to the Roma community, although it is not possible to be sure. *Cik* also uses a ball made of old tights. It has players standing with one foot in a hole in the ground, before batting the ball away so that they can run around. There are a number of quite detailed rules, and the object for both teams is to get their feet into the holes. *I Want My Boyfriend* involves a complex story about someone coming to steal bread. The most complicated game I came across was *Picka* which translates as *Pick*. I shall use the rules of this game to illustrate how complex some of these games can be. The game is played with two sticks, one around 60cm long with a point at one end, and one around 12 cm long with two pointed ends. Any number can play in two teams. The teams take turns, one team hits, the other tries to catch. The smaller stick is laid over a small hole in the ground, and the position is marked clearly. The larger stick is pushed under it by the first player, who uses it to flick the smaller stick as far as possible. If an opposition player manages to catch it, then the hitter is out, and the next person is in (rather like baseball or rounders). If the stick is not caught, then the second move is to use the larger stick to flick the smaller stick in the air, and hit it as far as possible. That is done by hitting one end of the small stick downwards with the larger stick, which makes it spring upwards, and allows it to be hit again, sometimes a long way by a skilled player. The player gets three attempts at this. Wherever the stick finally lands, the player then estimates how many stick lengths there are between that point and the starting point. If there is no challenge to his claim, the player is awarded that many points. If the other players think he is overestimating, they can challenge, and the distance is measured. If he has overestimated he is awarded no points, and is out. If he has not overestimated, he is then awarded double the points. If, while attempting to strike the stick he has missed, one of the other players can put the stick on his foot and flick it back towards the starting point, doing this as many times as there were misses. The hitter then lays the big stick down on the starting point, and the thrower gets one chance to hit it with the small stick. If he fails, the hitter gets another turn from the start. The game continues until all the team are out. A note is made of the total points, and then the other team takes their turn, trying to amass more points. With sticks flying through the air this can be quite a dangerous game.

Some games have fewer players. For example a game that has similarities to hopscotch involves a chalked grid of two rows of three boxes. Starting on the left-hand side, the boxes are numbered upwards: 1, 2, 3; then back down the right-hand side: 4, 5, 6. A stone is thrown into the square marked 1. The player then tries to move the stone from 1 through to 6 while hopping on one leg. The aim is to work right round the grid, starting at square 1, then starting at square 2, and so on round all six squares.

Penzezni (coins) has two players, each with a coin. The players agree a target line in the mud, sand, grass, etc. Player 1 throws the coin, aiming to get as near to the target line as possible, without going over. Player 2 does the same. They continue throwing until one player thinks she has thrown her coin close enough to the other coin to be able to touch both coins with the span of her hand. If she can do so she wins both coins; if not the other player wins both coins

Chanting Games

The girls in particular do a lot of skipping, like children everywhere, except that the skipping rope in this village is either a piece of discarded electric cable, or several pairs of tights wound together lengthwise extremely tightly. The skipping is often aligned with rhythmic chanting. Some of the chants are associated with complex clapping routines. Curiously, in most cases the chants don't make much sense. For example, one of the chants goes like this:

Angela, Miss Angela
Viva, Come fa
Angela, Angela, Miss Angela
Viva, Come fa
Istanbul, Istanbul
Cheeky, Cheeky, Boom Boom
I Love You!

The last line is usually accompanied by a finger being pointed at someone. This strange mixture of languages, including Italian and English, presumably doesn't mean very much to these Hungarian speaking Roma children, but that doesn't have any impact on the enthusiasm with which the chant is delivered. Three 7 year old girls taught me the chant, but these chants are clearly not the preserve of the girls, because when I mentioned this particular chant to some older boys (probably around 16), they started chanting it immediately, with the same eagerness as the little girls.

Sometimes the chants are aligned with complicated actions, which the children know so well they make the routine look simple. It is only when they try to teach it to someone else that the complexity becomes obvious. For example, the following chant is usually accompanied by a mixture of clapping and 'dancing', mainly in the form of hopping from one position to the next.

<u>Romanian</u>	<u>English Translation</u>
O Rus asa	Like a Russian
În Castela	In a castle
Cu Gulliverul	With Gulliver
Se dansează	Is dancing
Un danse model	A model dance
Stânga stânga	Left, left
Dreaptă, dreaptă	Right, right
Față, față	Face to face
Stânga, dreaptă	Left, right
Si pe un piciorul	And on one leg
Stop	Stop

This chant makes slightly more sense, but it is in Romanian, and these children speak Hungarian. Thus, once again it is unlikely the words are understood by the chanters, so presumably the words and actions are transmitted from one generation to the next, without the need for translation.

Conclusions

The study has some obvious limitations. It is clearly not possible to generalise from this study to other Roma villages in Transylvania. Nevertheless, the study provides a substantial snapshot of the play behaviours in this village during the summer of 2009. It is likely these behaviour patterns would be found in most Roma villages, but that could only be verified with a larger study. Also, it must be acknowledged that these observations were conducted during the summer months, when

the sun shines almost non-stop, temperatures range between 30° and 40° centigrade, and the children are playing outside all the time. Life is very different for these children in the winter, when temperatures can drop to as low as minus 20° centigrade (- 4° Fahrenheit). Informal conversations with children and adults suggest that the healthier children still spend a lot of their time outside during those months. Indeed, in past winters I have witnessed children in their determination to play, cutting 2 litre coke bottles in half lengthways, and using them as a sledge on a frozen hill. Nevertheless, it should not be ignored that the majority of these children are living in abject poverty, in over-crowded houses made from mud and wood, with no running water, no sanitation, and a poor diet. During one of our charity's hot food sessions, when the temperature stood at minus 16°, one little boy arrived wearing nothing but a vest. In these circumstances it is not surprising that the infant mortality rate in these Roma communities is around 4%.

The idea that the quality of play might be negatively affected by a child's material deprivation, which is here being questioned, is substantially rooted in the dubious assumption that human advancement is a universal positive. Working on that assumption, if children are not able to access the play experiences of their wealthier counterparts they will suffer a form of play deprivation. Indeed, it is that sort of thinking that has meant that low-income children in the USA have often been identified as those in need of play intervention (Goncu et al 1999). This is also shown in the priorities identified by the UK Government in their *Play Strategy* (DCSF 2008). Hughes (2001) takes a very different view, suggesting that if children in the more prosperous western economies are not able to access the basic elemental experiences of their predecessors (such as digging holes and making dens) then they will experience play deprivation, with dangerous consequences for both the individual and human society as a whole.

But what are the lessons from this study? The children are clearly free to explore and experiment, and the resulting creativity is often impressive. Whether or not their problem solving skills are enhanced is not clear, and would probably justify further study. The breadth and depth of their social networks is obviously expanded during their playing. There is a great deal of physical activity, with its attendant benefits in terms of motor skills development. This amount of freely chosen interaction with the environment will inevitably lead to cognitive stimulation. However, there are health and safety issues associated for children who play on rubbish tips. The children, through their interaction with a range of playmates, and their imaginative use of the variety of loose parts available in the village, are very obviously engaged in elements of self discovery. On the other hand, the generally public nature of village life may militate against play being used for reconciliation, as Freud (1974) suggests.

Gaskins, Haight and Lancy (2007) suggest there are three distinct types of society, characterised by different attitudes to play – culturally cultivated play, where play is actively encouraged by adults; culturally curtailed play, where play is actively discouraged by adults; and culturally accepted play. The Roma children's play is clearly of the latter variety. In other words, their parents expect them to play, but don't invest much time or energy into the activity. In short the activity is more than tolerated, but less than encouraged. The children are largely left to their own devices. There is very little adult supervision, and older children are generally expected to look after their younger siblings. A number of anthropological studies of cultures around the world, documenting similar improvisational propensities in the children being studied, have recorded similar findings. For example, the way in which children play anywhere and with anything, may also be found in Martini's (1994) work in the Marquesas, and in studies of the Parakana Indians living in northern Brazil conducted by Gosso, Morais and Otta (2007).

Having identified some of the positive and negative outcomes of play in this Roma village, is it possible to come to a firm conclusion about the often assumed link between material deprivation (poverty) and play deprivation? These are among the poorest, most disadvantaged children in Europe, and yet their play is rich in many of the most fundamental aspects of a healthy play experience. On the basis of this study alone it would be reasonable to conclude that the link between poverty and play deprivation is tenuous at best. However, this study was conducted during the summer, and it is possible that the quality of the children's play is somewhat diminished

during the long cold winter months. Perhaps a similar study conducted during that period of the year would go some way towards providing a clearer answer.

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