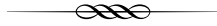


INTRODUCTION



Beginning of February 2002: I was sitting in a poorly lit council chamber, around a large square of tables with approximately twenty other people. Sitting alongside me were two Romany Gypsies, Janey and Robert, whom I had worked with for almost four years – I was a development officer for a local charity. Also present were representatives of various departments of the council and other service providers: health workers, education workers, police and so on. We were all there with the same purpose in mind – to decide upon a course of action for the council regarding the presence of an unauthorised camp of Gypsies in the area. It was expected that the adoption of a particular response would also outline how the council should deal with complaints it had received from housed residents and local business owners in the area where the camp had set up.

For two hours or so we talked around the various issues, explored different options, sought clarification, made suggestions and so on. At the end of the two hours no definite decisions had been made and everybody was left with a shared sense of frustration – we had got precisely nowhere. To me (and to others I spoke to after the meeting) it felt like the meeting had achieved nothing at all. What was all the more frustrating was that it had achieved nothing at all despite the fact that for the first time not only had some members of the Gypsy Traveller population been invited along, but two had actually shown up. Before the meeting it was thought that asking Gypsies and Travellers about what they wanted and what they might suggest as possible courses of action would help the process – in the end it seemed as if it had simply muddied the water and that even less had been achieved than usual.

At the end of the meeting – after I had said goodbye to Janey and Robert – I went to speak to Mark, a council officer I knew quite well. Mark asked if I thought there would ever be a solution to the problems involved in trying to provide for Gypsies and Travellers. My response was ‘No, it’s not about solutions – it’s all about how well you dance.’ Mark and I both laughed at this – he understood what I meant and responded with a small turn across the council chamber – nonetheless, it wasn’t a satisfactory explanation although there was a grain of metaphorical truth in it. I still could not really understand how it was that a group of people could come together with a shared intention to achieve an agreed end, and yet could go away, after two hours of what had seemed to be reasonably

constructive talk, having achieved nothing – not even a greater understanding upon which to base any future decisions. It did feel as though we had simply been dancing around the crucial issues.

This book is the result of my desire to try and untangle exactly what was going on at the meeting, why no resolution could be reached – and why we were all left with a dull sense of frustration.

Book Structure

Metaphors are things we think with (Quinn 1991: 68) and this book is informed by those metaphors I find particularly useful and illuminating. For the most part I have ditched the dance metaphor and those that are most apparent in the text are visual metaphors – perhaps especially the major, organising image of the wasteland wherein burns a fire surrounded by darkness. This image is an echo of a favourite image of the Gypsies I worked with – a campfire burning on ground where Gypsies are camped – and with it I structure the work into three sections: ‘The Wasteland’, ‘The Fire’ and ‘The Dark’. The first section deals with the theoretical and background information upon which the study rests, setting out the context in which the research was carried out and in which the book was written. The first chapter deals specifically with the theoretical background to the study, the ideas that place the following ethnography in the context of anthropological and other academic trains of enquiry. This chapter is specifically concerned with two issues that crop up repeatedly in the following chapters. The first is the concept of boundaries – a metaphor used repeatedly in anthropology and ethnography but which is nevertheless simply that, a metaphor. The second theme is that of the socially constituted and distributed nature of what might be termed ‘identity’.

The second chapter of the first section elaborates upon the ideas introduced in the first chapter, examining what it means to view some metaphors as useful or illuminating or appropriate and others as less so. This chapter also sets the study within a methodological frame, focusing on ethical issues, particularly those tied up with issues of representation.

The final chapter of the first section places the study within a geographical, historical and political context. The people that this book is about lived and worked in a specific place at a specific time and the events I describe take place against a particular visual and political backdrop. It is my hope that describing some of the history and appearance of the area will bring it more to life in your mind’s eye and by making it more easily imaginable make it more easily enjoyable.

In the second section, ‘The Fire’, the main grounds of my argument – my analysis of why the meeting described above could not reach a resolution – are outlined. In ‘Stories and Teaching Gypsiness’ I explore the

role of stories in the intersubjective process of socialisation, describing in detail some of the ways this process is played out amongst the Gypsies I worked with.¹ Anthropologists have noted the various practices of child rearing in different cultures (e.g. Mead 1931; Mead and Macgregor 1951; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986; Schieffelin 1990) and have shown how the ways in which we are brought into this world and the ways we are cared for have a significant impact upon the ways we learn to behave and the ways we understand others. In this chapter I examine these arguments specifically with reference to ways of using and thinking about language and speaking and even more specifically how these processes become evident in the ways that stories are told and used both by Gypsies and by non-Gypsies I have worked with.

Having laid out my general perspective I go on to examine in greater detail one aspect of Gypsy life – namely, that of ‘family’ – hence the second chapter of ‘The Fire’ is called ‘Stories and the Telling of Family’. In this chapter I explore ways in which stories weave together various ‘cultural scenarios’ (Schieffelin 1976: 3) and combine to form a cultural landscape in which the enactment and interpretation of such cultural scenarios takes place.

In many ways ideas about ‘home’ and ‘family’ go hand in hand, and, as much of my development and advocacy work with Gypsies concerned issues to do with finding places for Gypsies to set up their homes, an exploration of the notion of ‘home’ in Gypsies’ talk provides a useful expansion of the issues discussed in the preceding chapters and a link to issues discussed later. In ‘Home is Where the Heart is’ I show how the making and telling of stories together builds a sense of home that is situated in a network of relationships rather than in a place and how stories are used in the continual recreation and maintenance of this web of relationships.

In the final chapter of ‘The Fire’ I stay with the face-to-face world of the Gypsies’ families but turn towards the non-Gypsy world to see how Gypsies learn to deal with being both part of and apart from the non-Gypsy world. This chapter examines how the processes described in the preceding chapters are played out in interactions between Gypsies and non-Gypsies, keeping the notion of ‘family’ as a reference point.

Having described ‘The Fire’ – i.e. the face-to-face world of Gypsies’ families – I then go on to describe ‘The Dark’ – the non-Gypsy world in which ‘The Fire’ burns. I explore how ideas about Gypsiness and non-Gypsiness affect the interactions of people who go about their daily lives inhabiting worlds that are apparently the same but that are also worlds apart.

The first chapter, ‘The Mediated Moral Imagination’, shifts the perspective to look less at how Gypsies make sense of and to themselves and more at how they are made sense of by non-Gypsies. I show how a ‘typical’ understanding of Gypsies and Gypsiness is established through

the practice of telling stories about Gypsies. As a focus I look specifically at the stories – their telling and their enactment – that appeared in a local newspaper as the events took place that led to the meeting described at the start.

I then close in upon the interactions of people behind the story – and specifically the interactions that took place at a meeting the November before the crucial February meeting. By focusing in more detail on the interactions of people in a meeting context we can begin to see the ways in which ‘story seeds’ (Carrithers 2003) – the potential to make one sort of sense or another of the situation in hand – are proposed, used, discarded and so on.

In the final chapter of ‘The Dark’ I return to the meeting described at the beginning – now more fully equipped to examine in detail what was going on, what was achieved in that meeting, and why what had been intended could not come about. We see how the ability to engage in intersubjective interactions enables people to try to build a shared sense of purpose – a shared storyline. We also see how coming from different traditions of practice can make this process difficult as different understandings and expectations are drawn upon.

Applying Anthropology

The final point I would like to raise in this introduction concerns the relationship between applied and academic anthropology. Throughout my research the boundaries that distinguish one thing from another (Gypsies and non-Gypsies, settled and travelling people, the ‘field’ from the ‘academy’) became blurred and often seemed irrelevant or misleading. This was equally so in the distinction between different ways of putting the kinds of knowledge and understanding that ethnographic research can generate into use. Perhaps inevitably, because of the multiple roles I had throughout the project (student, development worker, advocate, friend and so on), my understanding and use of anthropology emerged as simultaneously theoretical and applied. This book is an illustration of one way in which apparently different kinds of anthropology can work together to provide understandings that are meaningful and useful for multiple audiences. Perhaps also, and I very much hope, this work can demonstrate the enormous usefulness of carrying out long-term, engaged, ethnographic work – not just for the academic discipline of anthropology but also for those engaged in policy and development work. The understandings reached and written about in this work could not have come about other than through such long-term and involved research, nor could they have come about without being engaged in both the theoretical work of anthropology and the applied work involved in development and

advocacy. That this has been a productive and useful relationship is, I hope, demonstrated in the pages that follow.

Note

1. See Trevarthen and Aitken (2001) for a useful review of research into the intersubjective processes involved in human cognitive development.