Chapter 6

The Rom in Australia: Their Customs, Beliefs and Values

Introduction

This chapter contains the main empirical findings of the research and fieldwork stages with respect to the ethnographic aspects of the study. It describes Romani society and the rules which govern it in an Australian context, and sets out to define the sociological and cultural aspects of their behaviour relevant to this study. It has brought to light much needed current and topical information about the Rom and the prevailing conditions in an Australian context through ethnographic description of two groups of Rom, one Lovara, the other Ganeśti, living in Australia. It is based on fourteen months of participant observation and a lifetime of experience. This chapter builds on the general information given in Chapter Two by providing an Australian

perspective. It provides the background information on the Romani society needed to understand fully the attitudes of the Rom towards education and what they perceive to be mainstream institutions. This subject is explored further in Chapter Seven.

This chapter will give details about the structure of the *familiyi* in Australia, new arrivals, Romani society, the institution of marriage, adult roles, language, the role of Romani associations and politics and the degree of prejudice and racism in Australia.[1]

Some Statistical Data

The Rom in Australia comprise individuals and *familiyi* from a wide variety of national and ethnic backgrounds. Survival techniques mastered over the years include merging with the host society often to a point of invisibility. The extent to which this ability to camouflage one's true identity is successful has been discussed on many occasions, not the least of which is in an article written by Colin Plummer in April, 1881 under the heading 'Why there are no Gipsies [sic] in Australia.' This article tells why the author believes there were no Gypsies in Australia in 1881 and why it was unlikely that the resident population would ever increase. It discusses a preposterous scheme to educate Gypsy children in England and subsequently send them out to Australia.

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[1] The following definitions are from *Collins New English Dictionary*, Harper Collins, London, 1997.
In this source, prejudice is defined as an unreasonable or unfair dislike or preference An intolerance of or dislike of people because they belong to a specific race.
Racism is defined as hostile or oppressive behaviour towards people because they belong to a different race. The belief that some races are innately superior to others because of hereditary characteristics.

The scheme never commenced as not even one 'known Gypsy' applied for the free passage as advertised. The author concluded his discussion with the statement that 'the likelihood of this mystic people being acclimatised on Australian soil, other than as members of the industrial community, is steadily diminishing, and there is no reason for believing that the Australian of the future will become familiar with the presence of a race whose origin yet remains one of the unsolved secrets of history'.[2]

There are hundreds of Romani *familiyi* in Australia, numbering some 16,500 individuals.[3] Many of these people are also 'hidden', in that they are not on electoral rolls, nor do they take part in Census Statistics which makes them difficult to identify and locate. Others describe their ethnicity either as Australian or as the country from which they emigrated. It is rare for Rom in Australia to acknowledge their heritage to an outsider, unless it is for the specific purpose of making money or some other often unspecified goal. The majority of Rom are concentrated in the major cities, because it is easier to find work. Those Rom who responded in the survey as residing in smaller cities and towns, generally moved between three and four towns looking for work. Due to the lack of permanent housing, moving between caravan parks is preferred and often required.[4] See Table 1 below.

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2 C. Plummer, 'Why There Are No Gipsies in Australia', *Victorian Review*, 1 April, 1881, quoted in A. McRobbie, 'Gypsies' in *The Australian People*, ed J. Jupp, AGPS, Canberra, 1988, p. 534.

3 B. Kurda & R. Young, 'Illiteracy: An Australian Focus'. Results of the Survey conducted by Romani International - Australia Inc. Adelaide, July, 1995, p. 2.

4 B. Kurda & R. Young, July 1995, pp. 6-12.

39%	NSW of which	93% were residing in Sydney and / or Newcastle, 3% i ı Goulbourn / Yass / Wagga Wagga, 1% i ı Griffith, and 3 % n Northern NSW Coastal Towns
19%	VIC of which	87% were residing in Melbourne, 7% i ı Geelong, 3% i ı Ballarat, and 3% i ı Albury / Wodonga,
21%	WA of which	68% were residing in Perth, 27% in Fremantle, and 4% i ı Kalgoorlie,
5%	SA of which	91% were residing in Adelaide, 2% i ı Pt Augusta / Pt Pirie / Whyalla, and 7% i ı Coober Pedy,
14%	QLD of which	65% were residing in Brisbane / Gold Coast, 30% in Northern Queensland Coastal Towns, and 5% i ı Northern Queensland Inland Towns
1%	NT of which	88% were residing in Darwin 8% were residing in Alice Springs / Tennant Creek, and 4% i ı Katherine
1%	TAS of which	60% were residing in Hobart, and 40% in Northern Tasmanian Coastal Towns

Information Source: B. Kurda & R. Young, 'Illiteracy: An Australian Focus'. Results of the Survey conducted by Romani International - Australia Inc, Adelaide, July, 1995, pp. 6-12.

Table 1: The Roma in Australia - States and Cities of Residence

Family Ties

Groups of Gypsies in Australia are Roma, Sinti and Romnichel. As outlined in Chapter Two, one's place in Romani society is determined according to one's *natsia*, *vitsa*, and *familia*. Each *natsia* has its own dialect of Romanes, the Gypsy language (though these are mutually comprehensible), customs and traditions. Intermarriage between *natsia* is becoming more common. Although not generally looked upon favourably, these marriages are much preferred to marriage with a non-Rom. In Australia, the main *natsia* include Barjam, Ćergaśi, Ćurara, Ganeśti, Kalderaś, Lovara, Maćvaya, Miloseśti, Romungre, and Ursari.[5]

Each *natsia* is usually composed of one or more *vitsi* (pl of *vitsa*), although in Australia, it is quite common for a *natsia* to contain only one *vitsa*. The *vitsa* is considered to be the most important unit of identification, because of its role in the social organisation of Romani life. Members of the same *vitsa* are considered to be relatives and as such they can be called upon in times of need. Each *vitsa* may have its own king and queen, who are considered to be the heads of all the constituent *familia*. This is a purely honorary title and often awarded only on death of the individual. In Australia, some *vitsi* include Balić, Gahan, Gapinko, Johannes, Morośovesti, Ramanoski, Sitar, Stefio, Yvonavić, and Zekić.

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5 These *natsiyi*, *vitsi* and *familiyi* include only those of whom I have personal knowledge, and who participated in the survey conducted by Romani Australia - International Inc. It is unlikely to be a complete list.

The smallest is the *familia* or extended family. In Australia, these *familia* and the residential units or households within the *familia* are not willing to be identified. The reasons given for this are many and varied, but the common theme is fear of prejudice from landlords, caravan park owners and other individuals with whom they came into contact on a daily basis. However, some did admit that they had taped a segment of a 'current affair show' on SBS which portrayed a Romani family applying for refugee status in Australia and that they used this segment when they wished to show someone about the life of the Rom in Australia.[6]

Differences in customs and traditions between *natsia* are slowly becoming blurred due to the extent of intermingling and intermarriage by the third Australian generation. Whilst no studies which look into the structure of, and relationships between *natsiyi* and *vitsi* have been conducted in Australia, it is an issue of limited consequence to the Rom in Australia. The *vitsa* and *natsia* to which one belongs is asked upon initial meeting, and not often followed up. The issue of paramount importance is whether you are Rom or not. This is possibly because there are so few Roma in Australia and that it is a pleasure to meet someone of the same heritage.

Two Rom who feel compatible on their first meeting may look a long way back into their family trees in an effort to find a point at which they were related. Similarly, two Rom who feel the opposite may also look with the hope that there is no connection. The only exception is when a person is felt to be covering up some flaw in their

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6 *Nothing To Sing About* (video recording), SBS Television, 14 November 1996.

history or if they are caught in an outright lie as we evidenced in the following incident, as related to me by Michael:

> We were sitting around our club in Sydney one Saturday night, and a friend of ours brought in a stranger. Someone asked which *vitsa* he belonged to, as was the usual custom. The stranger replied that he belonged to a very prominent *vitsa* related to the Queen of the Gypsies who died in 1982. At this, one of the men in our group sat bolt upright and started asking some very pointed questions. Now, every *vitsa* might have its own *King* and *Queen*, but there was only one [Queen] who died in 1982. The stranger should have been alerted then but he fell straight into the trap and began giving some explicit details about *his familia*. Once it was felt that the bait had been taken sufficiently, the man turned around and said 'Well then, we must be brothers, that's my family you are talking about.' The stranger was never seen again. Immediately after the stranger left, everyone fell on the friend who had brought him to the club, hounding him with questions until they had satisfied their curiosity. After that he didn't really come up again in our talks, except sometimes as a joke.[7]

The formation of alliances between individual *familiyi* and *vitsi* appears to depend mainly on the degree to which customs and traditions are followed. There are many

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[7] Michael, Personal Interview, Wollongong, 13 July, 1996.

differences between customs followed by the different *vitsi*, but these differences are well tolerated provided the degree to which they are followed is similar. After the death of a much-loved member of a particular *vitsa*, Roma from all over Australia gathered in Melbourne for his funera . There were several different *vitsi* represented. Custom dictated that there should be three days of mourning during which time there must be no washing, television, coo ing, singing or dancing, followed by the burial of the deceased. Some of the *familiyi* from different *vitsi* finished their mourning on the third day, whilst others finished it the next day. This discrepancy was not a divisive issue and everyone was satisfied that customs had been followed correctly. Those *familiyi* who did not follow any cust om similar to this were not permitted entry to the mourning area by the *familia* of the deceased.

New Arrivals

Many Roma on arrival in Australia have found it difficult to move comfortably within the Australian Romani culture. The Australian Roma feel threatened by their 'modernness' and because of their a parent disrespect for the old Gypsy customs. It would appear that here in Australia, as in the United States, Roma still practise many of the old customs and living by the rules of traditional society, whereas in Europe, it appears that Roma have mostly integrated or assimilated into mainstream culture. Possibly this is caused by the fact that only the wealthy and assimilated Roma migrate here, or perhaps it is because some have taken on a facade of a Gajé religion for its

chameleon effect because of persecution in Europe.[8] This practice is not necessary in Australia as there are many different religions openly practised here. The policies of multiculturalism have also had a tremendous impact on the rights of all people to practice and respect their own cultures. Some of these Rom find that, despite no longer having to maintain that facade, their children have already lost the Gypsy religion, language, customs and beliefs.

Romani Society

The life of the Rom in Australia revolves around the *familia* with little tolerance of outside interference of either Roma or Gajé origin. The typical *familia* consists of two or three generations with the married children of the grandparents and their children. (See Table 2 and Figure 2 Below). Inter-familial relationships are strong and are cultivated, filial respect and obedience is automatic and there is no evidence to suggest that there is any degree of inter- or intra- generational conflict. Sibling rivalry is rarely encountered, and you will find in many cases that there are quite large families living in relatively small areas quite contentedly.[9] When I asked several key informants for possible reasons why there was so little fighting, they just shook their heads at me and said 'I don't know, we just don't'. Further digging revealed no better answers and it

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[8] Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1994, p. 90.

[9] The largest *familia* I encountered was eight adults and four children, living in a two bedroom house.

is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to suggest reasons as to why this might be so.

Figure 2: A Three Generation *Familia*

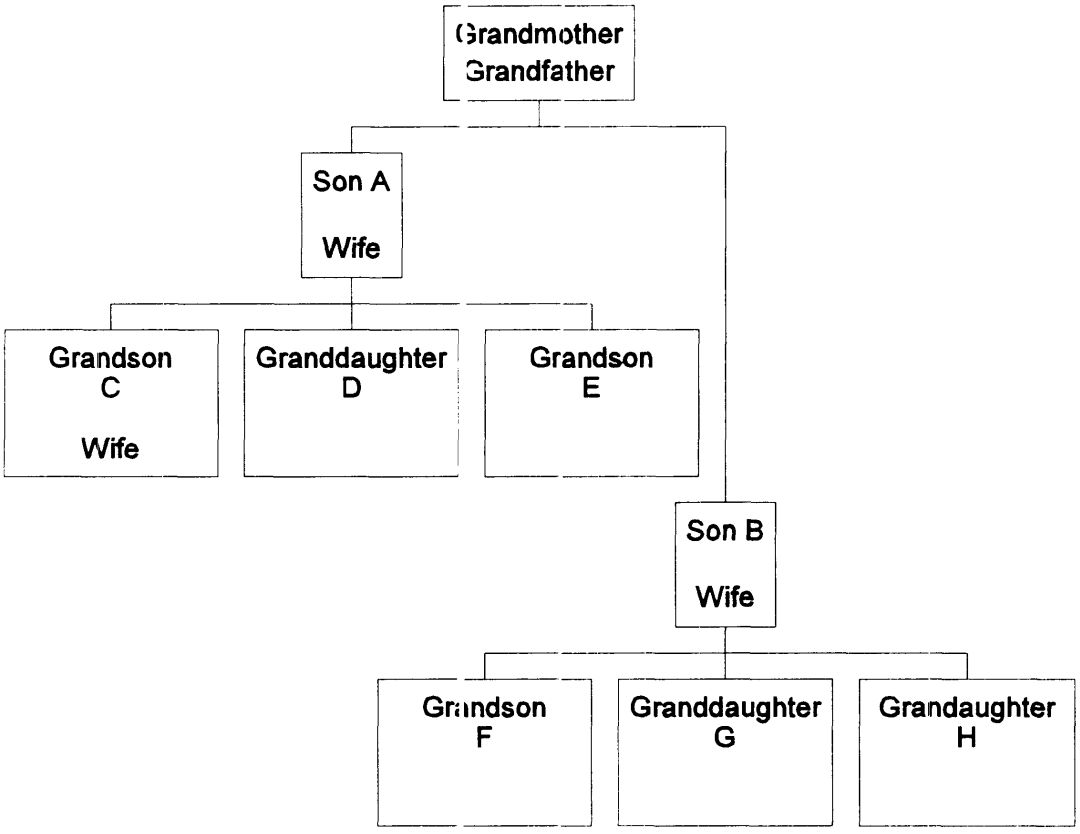


Table 2: Several *Familiyi* Groups in Australia

as at 26 July, 1997.

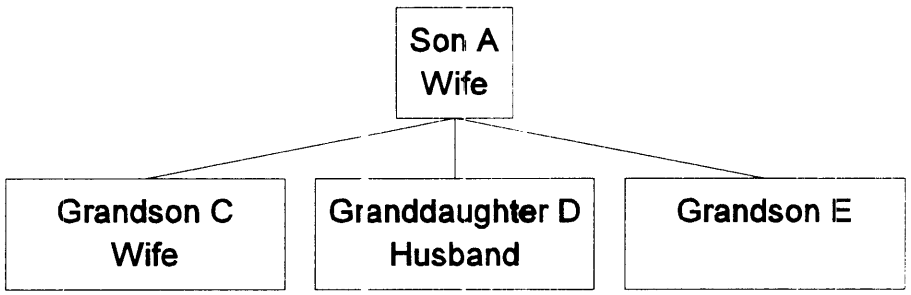
**Familiyi* A & C Consist of Three Generations and

***Familiyi* B & D Consist of Two Generations.

Gender (Age years)	Marital Status	Spouse (Age yrs)	# Children	Ages
***Familia* A**				
Male Parent (58)	Married	Wife (53)	4	31, 27, 21, 16
Female Parent (53)	Married			
Female A (31)	Promised		2	*4½, 3, Pregnant
Female B (27)	Married	Husband (28)	1	5, Pregnant
Male C (21)	Married	Wife (18)	None	Pregnant
Male D (16)	Promised	Girl (14)	None	
***Familia* B**				
Male Parent (37)	Married	Wife (36)	4	14, 11, 5, 2
Female Parent (36)				
Male A (14)				
Female B (11)				
Male D (5)	Promised	*Girl (4½) (From *familia* A)		
Female E (2)				
***Familia* C**				
Male Parent (49)	Married	Wife (47)	5	28, 23, 21, 15, 11
Female Parent (47)				
Male A (28)	Married	Wife (20)	2	3, 1½
Male B (23)	Married	Wife (25)	3	7, 4, 2, Pregnant
Female C (21)	Promised	Boy (19)	None	Pregnant
Female D (15)				
Male E (11)				
***Familia* D**				
Male Parent (39)	Married	Wife (32)	4	16, 12, 9, 6
Female Parent (32)				
Female A (16)				
Female B (12)				
Male C (9)				
Female D (6)				

On the death of both grandparents, Sons A and B may each form their own *familia* (see Figure 3), but they would generally live in close proximity to each other. Otherwise, depending on the strength of the *familia* whilst the grandparents were alive, the two sons (in this example) may stay together to consolidate their power base, with the eldest, or most outspoken being elected the leader. Community leaders are those who are able to liaise both between the different families and government departments. They are often but not always well educated, but their power does not depend on either their wealth or the level of their education. They would, however, always be the most outspoken and dominant member of the local community or *familia*.

Figure 3: Possible *Familia* of Son A, After the Death of Both Grandparents. A Two Generation *Familia*



The Rom in Australian feel that it is the strong social cohesion provided by the *familia* that is standing between continuation of tradition and disintegration of the Romani culture. This strength is reinforced by a range of factors which may include relatively frequent movement (See Table 2). The decision to travel is often cited as the need to find work. However this reason, particularly in Australia, generally proves to be less of a motivating factor than habit and desire. The main inhibiting factor for travel in Australia is distance.[10]

There is little work between the major country towns and cities and one may travel for days without sighting a town large enough to provide work. Most of the Rom in Australia are relatively sedentary for this reason, however, travel is still used to effect social control. Travelling is widely stated to be the most effective means of preventing close alliances between members of the *familia* (adults and children alike) and resident Gajé populations. This is a subtle means of control ensuring that strong alliances with Gajé families are not easily maintained and are easily broken.

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[10] Michael, Personal Interview, Wollongong, 13 July, 1996.

Table 3: Travel Itinerary for *Familiyi* A & B

for the Periods of Observation 1996

Familia B	Dates of Residency	City	Travel Dates	Destination
February	1st - 17th	Melbourne	17th - 19th	Adelaide
	20th - 28th	Adelaide		
March	1st - 31st	Adelaide		
April	1st - 30th	Adelaide		
May	1st - 7th	Adelaide	7th - 10th	Sydney
	11th - 24th	Sydney	24th - 25th	Wollongong
June	25th - July 14th	Wollongong		

Familia A	Dates of Residency	City	Dates	Destination
July	1st - 3rd	Adelaide	3rd to 5th	Wollongong
	6th - 14th	Wollongong	15th	Sydney
August	15th - 21st	Sydney & Environs	22nd - 24th	Adelaide
	24th - 31st	Adelaide		
September	1st - 30th	Adelaide		
October	1st - 23rd	Adelaide	23rd	Melbourne
	24th - 27th	Melbourne	28th	Adelaide
	28th - 31st	Adelaide		
November	1st - 8th	Adelaide	9th - 12th	Brisbane
	13th - 17th	Brisbane	18th - 28th	Cairns, Daintree, Adelaide
	29th - 30th	Adelaide		

Michael was hanging around with a group of young Gajé and Alaina (his wife) was not happy about it. He would often go out until late at night drinking and playing pool. She had just found out that she was pregnant with their first child and although Michael claimed to be happy about it, it was only after she told him that he started this new behaviour. She confided to her mother-in-law, Maria, that she was pregnant and her concerns about Michael. Without a word to anyone else, Maria announced that they were going to travel up to Brisbane to see some relatives who were in trouble. She needed give no more details and within two days they were gone. When they came back, about a month later, some of the group had moved away and Michael was given so much work to do he had little time to be going out. The problem had been effectively solved without anyone having to lose face and there were no arguments. In a later interview with Michael, I carefully broached the subject. It was apparent that he knew the reason for the decision to travel but was not willing to admit it. He had accepted the verdict that his behaviour was unacceptable with good grace and had put the incident behind him. The only alternative for him, leaving the *familia* was an option but not one he obviously wanted to entertain.[11]

Girls, and in fact all children, especially those of a potentially marriageable age, are not encouraged to leave the *familia* or mix with Gajé children. Karen was allowed to play with the children next door, on an irregular basis, until she turned twelve. From that day she was given more duties for the care of her younger siblings and many new household responsibilities which left no time for playing with the other children. She

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[11] Michael, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 29 November 1996.

was expected to behave as an adult a ıd at all *familia* gatherings she joined the women rather than the children. This was a sign of increased status for Karen and she did not mind the sudden loss of play time. Although Karen is not yet promised in marriage, it is interesting to note that there was no period of time allocated for her to be a 'teenager' and accordingly, Karen's behaviour pattern did not seem to indicate that she needed this period of adjustment so common in Western society. Although marriages are now occurring later in life (the youngest now is probably about 16), there appears to be no time when children are confused as to whether they should behave as an adult or child. They know their place in society and are content to be there.

Other factors that strengthen the cohesiveness of the *familia* include the use of Romanes, the rules of hospitality, the careful use of distinctive / traditional clothing, the reputation of the *familia*, respect of each member for the *familia*, and encouragement of marriage within the *natsia*, but outside the *vitsa*.

All four concepts of *marimé* (as discussed in Chapter Two) are widely observed in Australia although they are very much less rigorously imposed. Except in a few exceptional circumstances, I have not heard the actual word being used. The threat of being declared *marimé* is usually enough to stop most Rom from committing the transgression in the first place. Only once have I heard of a whole *familia* being declared *marimé*. They were cast out from Romani society for 'dobbing in' other members of their *vitsa* when two women in the *familia* were jailed. The *familia* which

was living in Hobart at the time of the incident has since moved to Brisbane. Whilst there have been some small skirmishes, there have been no incidents major enough to warrant a full *Kris* in living memory of my key informants. Most conflicts are resolved within the *familia* quickly and quietly.

Marriage

Marriage of a Rom with a Gaji is relatively unusual in Australia, but it is tolerated provided the woman is brought into the *familia* and follows all of the customs as, or even more strictly, than the rest of the *familia*. Marriage of a Romni with a Gajo is never tolerated.[12] A marriage such as this would result in automatic and immediate expulsion of both the Romni and her husband from the community, with re-acceptance of the Romni only after final breakup of the marriage. The reason given to me by Maria for this practice, is that the Gaji are usually willing to enter the Romani community and fully commit themselves to Romani society, embracing its culture and traditions. Those who do not are quickly shunned. The Gajo on the other hand, by past experience, are rarely willing to commit themselves to such an extent and remain on the periphery of society, often causing feelings of unease and stirring the other young Rom to rebellion as it were. The other more traditional reason, that the racial

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[12] Rom = male Gypsy, Gaji = female non-Gypsy, Romni = female Gypsy, Gajo = male non-Gypsy

purity of the Rom rests squarely on the shoulders of the women, is possibly at the bottom of this tradition, but if it is, the Rom in Australia are unaware of it.[13]

Traditionally, marriages were performed at a very young age (twelve to fourteen years). Today the average age of a new couple is a little bit older (sixteen to eighteen years). Western civil or religious marriage ceremonies are rarely performed. Traditional Romani ceremonies can be quite elaborate for a first marriage and will take place over at least three days and nights, some of the new arrivals in Australia having had seven day ceremonies. The number of official marriages in Australia has increased since the granting of a religious licence to a prominent Romni in Australia, as this has meant that ceremonies can now take place according to Romani customs.

The 'political' manipulation of marriage and therefore the creation of new familial ties is still controlled by the grandparents or elder members of the *familia*. Formal promising of young children is not practised as strictly now as it used to be, however it was very popular among the first generation Australian Rom. It is still common among the wealthy and influential *familiyi* to ensure a strong power base for the next generation. Those marriages arranged by the elders are generally engineered to create stronger familial ties and often a sense of 'family' obligation between two *vitsi*. Arranged marriages are usually organised in consultation with the young people

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13 C. Miller, 'American Rom and the Ideology of Defilement', in *Gypsies, Tinkers and other Travellers*, ed. F. Rehfisch, Academic Press, 1975, p. 45.

involved, and often suggestions of suitable partners are put forward by the young people themselves.

Most socialising of Romani children is with other Romani children. As there is little outside contact, these 'arranged' marriages are generally accepted by all parties. The parents of both children have a say in how they are brought up, especially the parents of the boy. This is because it is usually expected that the girl will join into the boy's *familia* on full payment of the bride price, although the status of the *familiyi* involved will also have some bearing on this. If this mutually set price cannot be met by the groom's parents, then the boy would move into the girl's *familia*. The bride price is determined by the standing of the girl's *familia* in the community. One example of a recently arranged marriage is that between Cynthia (four and a half years of age) and Colin (five years of age) who were promised in April 1997:

> Cynthia was two when we first thought that she and Colin would make a good match. Cynthia's *familia* had come over to Perth and Colin was hiding behind the curtain. He didn't come out until after she had gone. I was really surprised because he had spent the whole day talking about the girl with the chocolate eyes and he was really looking forward to seeing her again. The next day, when they came over, he played with her all day and was very possessive. He wouldn't let anyone else play with her.[14]

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[14] George, Personal Interview, Sydney, 17 August, 1997.

Long negotiations followed, extending over about two years duration with both *familiyi* skirting around the issue. There was never any direct discussion of the proposal, but everyone involved understood the unspoken proposal and a non-formal agreement was reached. In April of 1997, Colin's father put forward a formal proposal of marriage and this was accepted by Cynthia's grandmother as she was the *phuri dai*, or head of the *familia*.[15] Little discussion was required on the day as formal conditions would be discussed at a later date when the children are of a more marriageable age. During this long 'engagement', both children will grow up knowing that they will be married, but there is a mutual understanding that the arrangement can be broken by either side, should either *familia*, or the children, be unwilling to continue. Cynthia's grandmother, Maria described Cynthia's reaction as one of acceptance:

> She was very happy to be marrying Colin, although she couldn't understand why she had to wait so long. She became coy when we first told her, but quickly overcame this as she fell into her new role, as Colin's future wife, with ease. She has become used to the idea that Colin is her 'special friend' and that they 'will get married when she is as big as her mama'. They get along very well - encouraged by us, of course - and have already started practising their adult roles. Cynthia put her doll tea set in her hat so that she could take it to

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[15] Phuri dai translated literally means old woman, it is however a term of respect given to the oldest, most respected female member of the *familia*.

> Colin's house. As soon as we arrived there, she set about making a cup of tea for Colin.[16]

It does, perhaps here, warrant a note of explanation about the expected social roles of the children and adults in Romani society. It is the role of the women to provide the hospitality in her home. She, her unmarried daughter/s or her last married daughter, will place the food on the table when the guests arrive if it is not already there. They will ensure that all the utensils are available and that cups are never empty. The men of the house have the responsibility of making sure that the quality and quantity of food is second to none. It is a matter of pride that the rules of hospitality are followed and that every occasion is more lavish than the last.

Adult Roles

The decline in the availability of traditional occupations for the men has resulted in a blurring between the provider roles of the men and women. For example, as George explained, he would sometimes take on a supportive role:

> I have been looking for work for a while now and at the moment there's nothing around. I was thinking we should go to Sydney but then Jackie got an offer to set up her *ofisa*[17] in a shop close to here.

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16 Marie, Personal Interview, Sydney, 30 May, 1997.

17 An *ofisa* is the room / shop in which a fortune - telling business is conducted.

> It looks as though it will be quite a good money-maker for us. We'll probably stay here while she's doing okay.[18]

George went in first to assess the premises, and fix it up as the walls needed a bit of painting. He helped Jackie put up the decorations, which were mostly things from home and they managed to make the place look quite exotic. His next job was to ensure that the rest of the household ran smoothly, allowing Jackie to concentrate on her business. He would never concern himself with the actual running of the household as this was being done quite capably by their eldest daughter (fourteen years of age), but he keeps an eye on the administration side of it. This status quo will remain for as long as Jackie's *ofisa* continues to flourish.

The men are still responsible for the physical protection and the maintenance of the social standing and prestige of the *familia*. From a young age the males in each *familia* perform manual tasks, the young boys learning their trade from their father. The Rom in Australia are very determined that they will not go into wage labour type of employment. They are almost always found to be self-employed, semi-skilled tradesmen. The most common trades practised in Australia include gold smithing, leatherwork, fixing and servicing jacks, fixing and painting roofs, tin-smithing and general handy-man farm work. Unfortunately, there was in 1995, a spate of bad publicity surrounding shonky roofing practices which were publicly blamed on

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[18] George, Personal Interview, Melbourne, 15 February, 1996.

Gypsies, but was actually committed by a group of Irish Travellers.[19] This has caused a downturn in suitable work in that area, one which was previously quite a stable market for the Rom. With the availability of this type of work decreasing, more attention has been turned to other trades include buying old cars and doing them up for resale, fixing antiques, playing music in clubs, cleaning businesses, home medicine industry, and the hospitality and entertainment industries. Many Rom now will go into small business for themselves, usually choosing businesses which will enable them to employ the whole *familia* rather than one which might turn over a high profit. There are no Rom that I have encountered in Australia that are employed in typical wage-labour jobs. This type of work is not even considered when looking for ways to generate income, although it is common for many of the newly arrived Rom from Europe to start in this kind of work until they have accumulated enough capital to quit and do their own thing as they did in Europe.

The women generally turn to work such as fortune telling, working for the *familia* business and looking after the *familia*. They also ensure that the children are instructed traditionally. This means that the children of mixed marriages - Rom men and Gaji wives - are disadvantaged as the wife has no traditional knowledge to impart to the children. This broken chain can only be fixed if the Gaji is taken in by the *familia*. She is then treated as a Romni and taught the traditions, customs and way of life, in the same manner as all young Romani girls. In this case, the children would be taught the traditional skills, such as fortune-telling and cards, by the grandmother,

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[19] *The Gypsy Roofers* (video recording) SBS Television, November 1995.

especially if she is held in high regard by the other Romnia for her skills. Kathy recalls all the girls in her family sitting on her mother's bed, asking her questions that her mother would answer by reading the cards. The girls were never left in doubt about how the answers were found to their unspoken questions. They were taught how to read people and instinctively guess what the question was likely to be. She recalls that her mother rarely missed a question that they were asking and that this early training was later used to demonstrate how to deal with all aspects of dealing with people, not just when fortune-telling.[20]

Finding work is still the paramount concern in the eyes of most older Australian Rom for whom the thought of relying solely on a government handout is not attractive.[21] Although the women may be the main money earners, providing clothing and food for the *familia*, many Australian families are becoming increasingly reliant on Government assistance for survival. The income generated by each member of the *familia* is collected by the head of the *familia* and used or given out where needed. In return, the *familia* provides economic security, education and protection for each person within its ambit. Each individual works for the benefit of the group. There are times when the needs of the individual people of the group are placed secondary to the needs of the group because each individual is dependent on the group for survival.

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20 Kathy, Personal Interview, Sydney, 21 August, 1996.

21 Group Discussions, Wollongong, 28 May, 1997.

Mardie wanted $80.00 to buy more stock for her *ofisa*. She felt that she had been working hard, bringing in good money to the household and that this $80.00 could be used to generate more income. Joseph needed $120.00 for a new motor part in his truck. The truck was sometimes used to pick up jacks that needed fixing. It was decided, by all the working members of the *familia*, to buy the stock for the *ofisa* as this could generate income more quickly and Joseph could have the use of George's truck to pick up jacks when needed.[22]

Language

Most Roma in Australia speak English as their first language. This is in part attributable to the considerable distances between towns and cities in Australia and the thin spread of people across the land. Sixteen thousand, five hundred Roma spread over the vast expanse of Australia makes for small concentrations of Roma in most towns. Added to this is the fact that the different *natsiyi* may not talk to each other, particularly if one *familia* follows the traditional customs and the other does not. This means that the exposure to English is great and the exposure to Romanes is often limited. The older Rom still speak Romanes, on every occasion possible, although it is rarely used now for more than just friendly greetings, except where they are in a gathering of other Rom speaking Romanes. The Romanes is in fact a type of pidgin language, a mixture of Romanes and English words, nevertheless it is still understood

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22 Veronica, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 3 January, 1997.

by newly arrived European Roma in Australia. Few of the later generations are able to speak Romanes, but they all could when they were young, and they can still understand the language.

Romani Associations

There are several Romani associations in Australia. The three major associations are based in South Australia, New South Wales and Western Australia. The Romani Community WA in Perth describes its activities as cultural, educational, and sporting/recreational. It is a large association that formed out of the Macedonian Association in Perth by a desire of the younger Roma to take an active pride in their heritage. Their President is Mr Islam Abduramanoski.

Romani International - Australia Inc. amalgamated in 1997 with The Romani Kumpánia association to form Romani Union - Australia Inc. This large association represents the cultural, educational, religious and political needs of all Roma in Australia. Romani International - Australia Inc. was formed in 1975 by Boso Kurda and the executive council was composed of the heads of the largest families in the Eastern states of Australia. In 1980, there was a major push for recognition of the Romani people and the association was officially incorporated. Their President was Mr Boso Kurda who remained as the head elder when Marni Morrow was elected President in 1980.

The Romani Association of Australia is composed mainly of academics who do not appear to be of Romani descent, and a few Romnichels (English Gypsy / Travellers). They are a largely social group who study aspects of Gypsy folklore, inform the Gajé about the Gypsies thereby increasing the profile of the Gypsy people in Australia. The association was founded by Ken Lee (a Romnichel and university lecturer in Newcastle) in 1990 and their current President is Jimmy Storey.

Prejudice and Racism

Much of the prejudice seen by the Rom in Australia emanates from people from a British or European background, in particular those who are recent arrivals in Australia.[23] These people have brought the prejudices of their own culture with them to Australia as was shown in a recent SBS documentary.[24] Conditions are felt to be easier here than in Europe. It is acknowledged that prejudice here is not as openly expressed as in Europe.[25] Perhaps because of the relative invisibility of the Roma in Australia, the Australian people have relatively little chance to display their prejudice and racism. Perhaps it is because most of the prejudices that seem to follow skin colour variations and other racial differences are more noticeable in mainstream areas, such as education and employment, in which the Roma do not participate.[26] That is

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23 Group Discussions, Sydney, 30 May 1997.

24 *Nothing To Sing About* (video recording), SBS Television, 14 November 1996.

25 M. Morrow, *The Romani People In Australia*, ABC Radio, 15 January, 1993.

26 Not all Roma are dark-skinned, and in some *familiyi* there is a wide colour variation.

not to say that the Rom are not victims of prejudice or racism. The media is one avenue where hidden prejudices are verbalised, often using journalistic licence to justify images created to play on other people's fears. The behaviour of one Romani person is visited on all the Rom because there are so few reported incidences in the daily media. There was, in 1993, a segment on 'Australia's Most Wanted' about missing children. It was taped in an Australian police station and prominently featured the song:

> 'My mother said, I never should,
> Play with the Gypsies in the wood ...'

At one stage in this segment, there are two young girls playing on a set of swings, one gets off and walks away. She slowly fades into the background, while the song is being repeated over and over again.[27] There are also, almost daily instances of Roma being turned away from caravan parks. When owners realise that there is more than one van wanting entry into their park, they suddenly become full.[28] The Rom in Australia make no fuss of these incidents, and in response to questions about this, they answer that this is normal and accepted treatment to be expected by the Rom, 'if we make too much noise, we may yet be subjected to the same kinds of treatment that we hear about in Europe and England, nobody knows we exist here, lets leave it that way'.

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27 *Australia's Most Wanted : Missing Children Segment* (video recording), SAS 7, 9 February 1993.

28 Group Discussions, Adelaide, 4 January, 1997

Unfortunately, even honest attempts to present information about the Rom may result in the propagation of untruths and half truths. The words of a Rom are spoken in the context of their culture, with all their own understanding behind them. These verbalised words are spoken with the assumption that the listener understands, and is not hostile to the Romani culture. In reality, this assumption may be inaccurate and overly optimistic. Gajé listeners (who may have their own ethnocentric conceptions of Romani culture) bring their own cultural background with them, and translate these words into phrases that often bear no similarity to the original statement.

Conclusion

This chapter has taken a brief look at Romani society in Australia, mainly through the eyes of two *familiyi*, one Ganeśti and the other Lovara. Although there appear to be many minor differences in the traditions followed by each *familia*, the overall cultural similarity is quite striking, showing that despite outwardly different exteriors, the main tenets of Romani culture hold fast. The interactions of these *familiyi* with mainstream Australian culture give great insight into how living in Australia, and the interactions with traditional Australian culture, have modified or impacted on the traditional lifestyle of the Rom who have chosen to make Australia their home.

At no time during the period of this research was a Romani person encountered who, having lived in Australia for some time, was so unhappy that there was no other option, but to leave. However, every Rom I spoke to had relatives overseas whom they wanted to visit. Given that the Rom always move in packs and never singly, travelling overseas from Australia is an expensive exercise.

This chapter, together with Chapter Two which gives an insight into the traditional culture of the Rom over many centuries, shows how the Rom have adapted their lifestyles to move with the host, or dominant culture. Despite the fact that most Roma claim that they live outside of the dominant culture of the country of their residence, this culture has still had a major impact on their lives. Adapting the traditional lifestyle of the Rom to the unique Australian climate and way of life can be difficult but the results prove that for the Rom this is a rewarding experience on the whole.

The Rom who have only recently arrived here find it hard to adjust to the demands that the mainstream culture make on them. Their way of earning an income, for example, shows that methods profitable in Europe are often not effective here. They also find that the insular nature of the Australian Roma cold and disheartening. It takes a period of adjustment first to mainstream Australian culture, after which they find themselves much more at home and able to move in Romani society more easily.

This chapter is deliberately devoid of any discussion of formal education in order to give the reader time to immerse in Romani culture. This will enable them when

reading the next chapter, 'Educational Experiences of the Australian Rom', to see these experiences from a Rom point of view, from outside the confines of their own traditions and culture. The issue of formal education is perhaps, the only real area of dissent, where the Rom want no part of Australian culture and it is one of such significant proportions as to warrant a chapter of its own.

Chapter 7

Educational Experiences of the Australian Rom

Introduction

This chapter outlines some of the experiences of Roma in Australia and their experiences with the Australian Education System. In particular, this chapter describes the experiences of four key informants in mainstream Australian schools, as related during interviews and gleaned from participant observation during this study. Simon, who is now sixteen years of age, would be classified as an early leaver (before the age of fifteen). Karen, who is eleven years of age, is still struggling to come to terms with the school system in an effort not to become an early leaver. Kathy, who is thirty-one years of age, is a university graduate despite being labelled as incapable by her school. She now has children of her own and is reluctant to send them to school. Peter, who

is nine years of age, has recently been permanently removed by his parents from the mainstream education system due to a lack of inter-cultural understanding and the unwillingness of the parents to re-expose their son to the possibility of similar circumstances.

One of the most startling revelations in this research was that, of the forty school-aged Romani children with whose *familiyi* I am closely acquainted, thirty three of these children have received less than three years of solid education at primary level and of these, only eight should have been in this position as they have not yet completed grade three. Of these forty children, twenty-two are primary school age and eighteen are secondary school age. Of the primary school age children, fourteen are currently in school, or receiving education outside the school system, the other eight are of various ages and have attended school for varying lengths of time, but none for more than three years. All the children had been placed in the appropriate grade for their age, without regard for the amount of education they had previously received (except for the two children in grade one). Of the secondary school age children, the two who are still receiving education are being taught at home by their mother who is an overseas trained teacher. The remainder left before the end of primary school. The level of educational attainment of these children appears to depend to a large extent on the attitudes of the parents, and the degree of education which they themselves have had (either in Australia or the country they were living in before migrating to Australia).

Traditional Attitudes

It is possible that some of the antipathy towards education among the Rom may be founded in traditional attitudes. It is well known that this antipathy has frustrated efforts to rectify their seemingly disadvantaged position. Because the Rom face so many challenges in mainstream society, retaining their sense of self worth and identity is seen to be dependent on the maintenance of the differences between Romani and Gajé society. The Rom are extremely protective of all the factors upon which their sense of being and identity are dependent, and this has resulted in a tendency toward total exclusivity. School is seen as an institution which is exclusively and totally part of an environment perceived by the Rom as coercive. Even in Australia, education and the school environment have been a means for the implementation of forced assimilation and therefore reproduction of the values of the dominant culture. From this perspective, education confronts the Rom as an alien institution, and one which wants to take their children from them.[1]

In Australia, there are many Roma who are suspicious and even hostile towards Gajé institutions, especially the school. They feel that the education provided by the Romani way of life provides life skills much more vital to survival than a school-based education, that is, education provided in an environment in which the children possess much cultural capital. Most Roma who have this belief have not even seen the inside of a school building, let alone spent time within its walls. Those Rom who have never

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1 J. Liégeois, *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers*, trans. S. ní Shuinéar, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1994, p 207.

attended school appear to be unconcerned about their lack of education and on the whole unconvinced of the value of attending mainstream schools. In particular, the stories that they hear about the experiences of others in mainstream education strengthens their resolve not to send their children to these institutions.

One of the most often mentioned concerns was that the Rom feel that the Gajé education system does not uphold any of the traditional Romani values. In addition to this, it is felt that Romani children are natural scapegoats for gangs, because they are different and tend to be quiet and withdrawn around strangers.[2] Due to the affordability of housing, the state schools in the areas in which Romani people live tend to be quite rough. There are many reports of children wearing knives to school, tucked into their socks to avoid detection. At the slightest report of any skirmish at the school, Romani parents pull their children out. Often, those parents who have had no experience of education for themselves, tend to imagine that the schools are meeting places for juvenile delinquents and drug addicts.[3]

Romani children are considered to be potentially marriageable at an early age and since many marriages are still family orchestrated, the parents fear that their children may succumb to peer pressure and disgrace their *familiyi* by sexual involvement with Gajé, or using drugs. It is rare for a Romani child of five or six to go to school. Therefore, by the time they do go to school, the children no longer 'fit' the norms

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2 Group Discussions, Sydney, 10- 2 May, 1996.

3 Group Discussions, Sydney, 10- 2 May, 1996.

expected of children within the Gajé education system. Because their education has been scant, or non-existent, the children are older than the Gajé children in the same grade. Because of this, Romani children are usually labelled as slow, backward or dumb, which often has the effect of making the boys belligerent or difficult to manage, whereas the girls tend to lose any self-confidence they had before starting school. Both boys and girls tend to just drop out, with the blessing of the parents.

Peter is one example of a young boy removed from the mainstream education system because of difficulties such as those described above.

Peter

Peter (nine years of age) has recently been permanently removed by his parents from the mainstream education system. Following is an account of the incidents leading up to this decision. It is a result of many personal interviews with his parents and Peter himself.

Peter was enrolled in a state-run distance education school for 1997.[4] Despite efforts by Peter himself, and his family, he could not keep up with the workload set by the

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[4] The distance education schools provide formal education at a primary and secondary school levels. They cater for students who are itinerant or live in isolation and are unable to attend a school regularly. Each state has its own school with teachers who liaise with the students. The role of the parent / supervisor is usually to assist with distribution of materials and direct the proceedings. It is a requirement that this parent / supervisor must be literate and this means that most Romani families cannot use this service.

school. Because he was having difficulties with certain areas of the work, his teacher gave him some extra remedial homework to do. Although he was told that he could work at his own pace, it was a continual source of aggravation for the school. They were continually pushing him to do more work which was upsetting to Peter as he was already doing his school work with his sixteen year old sister, often starting at eight in the morning until eight at night.

When it came time to re-enrol Peter, the distance education school denied him entry as the teacher felt that he would be better suited to contact schooling even if he was only at school for a few weeks in each term. The distance education school Principal told Samara that he had already discussed Peter with the school Principals in their local area, all of whom had apparently stated that they were prepared to cope with a student who would leave the school to go travelling for several weeks of each term. Samara felt that they had just wiped her and Peter off because he was too difficult a case for them. She was upset because they had been discussing her behind her back with no consultation of any sort. It was very obvious to her they had no intention of discussing it any further with her.

In week three of the school term, Samara and her husband decided to give Peter a chance at the local primary school. This was the first time he had attended a local primary school. In the second week of attending school, Peter was returning home each day upset and withdrawn. When I visited the family, he had bruises on his

forehead. His mother said Peter wc uldn't explain, she thought he was just having difficulties fitting into a new school and didn't press for any details.[5]

In his second week, Peter came hon e from school with a bite mark on his hand, the skin had been broken and there w s extensive bruising around the area. Both the Principal and Vice Principal of the school came to visit Peter and his parents, to apologise over the incident and to e xplain the circumstances as they saw them.[6]

In his third week of school, week si . of the term, Peter said he wasn't going back to school anymore and became very agitated. When his father and mother insisted on a reason he told them that the childre n had been teasing him. He had been happy to wear his new pants because he thou ht they looked very cool but one of the girls had called him a sissy. Eventually he agr ed to go back to school and give it one more try.

A few days later, Peter came home with his face cut and bruised all down one side. He said that one of the boys who ha d picked on him received one day in detention as punishment, because of this, the b y's friends had set upon him and given him a beating. This time both Peter's pa ents decided they could not send him back to school ever again. I persuaded them to go to the school and try to find out what happened from the teacher.

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5 Samara, Personal Interview, Ade laide, 13 February, 1998.

6 This incident was not recorded c n Peter's Report Form.

His mother went to the school and talked to the teacher. She was told that there had been numerous instances of trouble with Peter, starting in week six. Samara informed the teacher that Peter had been coming home long before this with bruises on his face and in one instance, a bite of his hand. The teacher said it was because Peter was different to the other children that they seemed to be picking on him. She couldn't tell Samara any more than that because the teacher in charge on all the occasions in weeks four and five, was new and unaware that she was required to make incident reports. Apparently both Peter and another boy had been counselled at the time.

The teacher got out Peter's school report. She told Samara that there was also a report of sexual harassment on Peter's record. Samara was devastated, and asked what he had done, as he was only nine years old and still a little boy. She was told he had called a girl 'a slut'. Samara felt that Peter had been tried in a school court and found guilty of a serious crime without a chance to defend himself.

She went home and talked to her husband all night. They questioned Peter and he agreed that he had called her names when she wouldn't stop saying 'sissy, sissy, sissy'. He didn't even know the meaning of the word he had used. They contacted the school to ask for a copy of his report and to ask if the words sexual harassment could be removed because Peter had previously had no concept of the word, or the implications of its use, but the teacher refused to be swayed.[7]

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[7] A copy of this report has been included as Appendix C.

During one of the earlier interviews I had asked why Peter had been taken out of the school system for getting into a few scrapes. Surely, despite the apparent severity of the bruises and bite, they were part of coming to terms with a new environment, especially one such as the school playground. Peter could be moved to a different school.[8] They agreed, however, it took many hours of personal discussions, and my absolute guarantee that Peter's name would be protected, for the real reason to come out about why they were so adamant about not returning Peter to school.

The building of trust with such an issue of importance was not an easy task. Here was a hard-working family, considered by their community to be leaders in upholding Romani customs and traditions. They do not drink, smoke, gamble or swear and yet they are facing an unthinkable judgement of *marimé* on their son, imposed without proper trial, by Gajé who understand nothing of their culture.

While they do not condone Peter's behaviour, Tom knows that should this label on Peter ever come to light, it could affect the whole family. Peter's father feels his son has been branded a criminal at the age of nine. He is worried that this judgement will affect the rest of his life. 'After all, who would want their daughter to marry a sexual deviant'.[9]

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[8] Samara, Tom, Personal Interviews, Adelaide, 20 March, 1998.

[9] Tom, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 31 March, 1998.

Peter has been removed from the school and as yet all attempts to find a suitable system of schooling for Peter have been futile. His family feel that removing their son from any future contact with the education system will make sure it does not happen again, but nothing will ever take away the hurt and embarrassment of this incident.

The question must be asked, why did it take so long for Peter to receive assistance from the teachers? Both the Principal and Vice Principal had visited the home of Samara and Tom and yet there is apparently no record of this in Peter's file. Peter came home on several occasions with bruises and once with a bite and there was no record of this in his file. The report form shows that when Peter had finally approached the teacher to ask for help, the teacher filled out the report saying Peter 'claims harassment'. To Samara and Tom, this implied that, despite the evidence, it wasn't really a case of harassment, Peter was just saying it to get himself out of trouble. [10]

Jackie

Jackie, (thirty-six years of age), has had little formal education. She periodically attended primary school in a small town in mid-Victoria, but left at grade five when the *familia* moved to Sydney. She didn't go to school there, every time the truancy officer came to visit, the *familia* moved to another caravan park, outside the jurisdiction of that particular officer. 'When it got really bad, us kids went to stay with

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[10] Samara, Tom, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 31 March, 1998.

our cousins for a while.'[11] Jackie has some very basic reading and writing skills - enough to read the newspaper looking for work for her husband George. She won't write because she feels that it looks like a child's scribble.

> 'I'm not sorry that I didn't go to school. I didn't learn much while I was there. My mum taught me how to read the cards and tea leaves and all that stuff. I work the markets around Melbourne mostly, but some in Sydney. George never went to school and between the two of us, we do okay. We might be on Social Security, but so are lots of people who have got an education.'[12]

George

George (thirty-seven years of age) went to school for two days. On the second day, he and some of the other boys were naughty. There was no explanation of expected behaviour, setting of rules, or explanation of punishments, the teacher simply called them in, made them all hold out their hands and they were smacked with a ruler. In George's own words:

> I hadn't never been hit before, not even by my dad, so there was no way I was gonna let no teacher do it to me. I run all the way home,

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11 In Australia, everyone even remotely related is called a cousin. Jackie, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 31 March, 1996.

12 Jackie, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 31 March, 1996.

but by the time I got there, the teacher was already there. It didn't matter what anyone said, I wasn't going back to that school. That was the only school I ever went to. After that I just worked with my dad.[13]

Karen

Karen is eleven years of age. Her parents recently took her out of the local primary school which she had been attending for about five months. Her parents decided to remove her from the school after she was subjected to a psychological assessment, performed at the request of her grade teacher. The assessment was a *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children III* (WISC Test), it was administered by an independent psychologist not attached to the school. The test results were given to Karen's *familia* with no formal explanation. They asked their next door neighbour to read the report to them.

Karen's *familia* lead a traditional relatively nomadic lifestyle. The majority of their *familiyi* are concentrated around northern Brisbane and they travel frequently from Brisbane to Melbourne, passing through Adelaide and Darwin if there are good reports of work. The *familia* has been unable to travel due to the illness of the youngest child, now aged two. She has been diagnosed as suffering from asthma and sleep apnoea (a disorder in which infants stop breathing whilst asleep) and is under the care of a paediatrician. They have had to limit their travel to gatherings such as

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[13] George, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 31 March, 1996.

weddings or other important family occasions. This forced period of inactivity and the uncertainty surrounding the baby's health problems resulted in the *familia* deciding to purchase a home to use as a base from which they could travel quickly and more economically.

Karen and Henry had periodically attended school in both Victoria and New South Wales where they had been to about six different schools. They had been enrolled for the whole of 1996, relatively successfully, with the distance education school. However, when they applied in 1997 for re-enrolment in the School, they were informed that as they had a permanent address, they were no longer eligible and that they would be required to enrol the children at the local school.

Both school-aged children were enrolled at the local primary school. Difficulties arose right from the beginning of the school year with Jackie, Karen's mother, having a series of disagreements with the Principal. She now feels that she has had enough and her children cannot be expected to return to the school. When asked to describe some of her difficulties, she replied:

> When we enrolled the kids at the school, I told [the Principal] that they were learning the Gypsy language at home and that I didn't want them to learn another language. Karen has trouble learning other languages, Gypsy is enough. The Headmaster said that they had to learn German because it was compulsory. I told him that the Romani

> people were persecuted by Hitler in the Second World War and that because of this I could not make my children learn this language. He said that we would have to take the matter up with the education department people or go to another school. I didn't know what else to do, so Karen had to learn German.[14]

The final incident that actually led to the children being permanently removed from the school was the school's assessment of Karen. On the Monday on which the assessment took place, Karen was staying with her aunt as her parents and some of the other children were away for five days. Karen had not been able to accompany them as she had a sick pet to care for. Even though Karen had not attended school on that day, the school counsellor phoned the aunt and insisted that she come in for the assessment. Karen's aunt took her to the school because Karen was too scared to go in by herself. However, the psychologist would not let the aunt go in with Karen. He told her to go home and wait for Karen to come back.

Karen attended the school for the remainder of the term. However, the number of unexplained absentee days increased dramatically. Her parents became increasingly worried as she withdrew further into herself. Her school diary reflected that she was having difficulties keeping up in class and would not participate in any class activities. She stopped doing her homework. She refused to play with the children who lived next door and who went to her school and she wouldn't go out anywhere with the

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[14] Jackie, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 5 May, 1997.

familia, except under duress. At the start of the holidays, Jackie suggested to Karen that she not go back to school the next term. This meant that Henry also would not be returning to the school. He was quite happy about that. By the end of the holidays, Karen had returned to her normal self. She had regained her confidence and self esteem. One of Jackie's main concerns was that this report would follow Karen from school to school. Karen was the only one of her children who had shown any real interest in learning to read and write and Jackie wanted to make sure that she was given every opportunity. However Jackie felt that this school was totally inappropriate and she was going to wait to see if there was a better school with which any of her relatives were familiar.

A meeting was called by the Principal of the school when Karen and Henry didn't return to school in term two. The Principal had phoned Jackie and threatened to report her to the attendance officer if Karen and Henry were not returned to the school on the following Monday. Jackie's immediate response to this was to call Romani International - Australia Inc. to seek advice. The association's solicitor recommended that they ask for a meeting with both the Principal and the District Superintendent provided the family also had representation (either legal or an elder from their own community). Present at the meeting were Karen's parents, the School Principal, the District Superintendent, a representative of Romani International - Australia Inc. and myself as observer.[15]

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[15] Adelaide, 5 May, 1997.

The meeting was opened by the District Superintendent who inquired why the children had been removed from the school. Karen's mother, Jackie, explained briefly about the test and its subsequent effects on Karen. The District Superintendent felt that Jackie should not get herself upset over one test. There were a number of tests with which this could be followed up and that perhaps the word 'psychological' could be exchanged for 'educational'.

The Principal's reason for insisting on the assessment was that Karen had obviously had 'an unproductive couple of years' as well as having difficulty in some parts of work from the distance education school. Both parents had indicated to him that Karen was experiencing 'language problems' when she began at this latest school. The Principal had told them when enrolling Karen that a 'language test' was available and that it might be good for her, to find out where her strengths and weaknesses lay.

Jackie was upset because nobody had bothered to explain the test properly to her. She had assumed from the comments of the Principal that it was simply a test to see how Karen was progressing at school, instead of which she has been left with the feeling that Karen's home was not good enough and now her daughter was upset, didn't want to talk to anyone, to see anyone, or play with her friends.

The Principal interjected strongly at this point, with the statement that 'Jackie signed the form which stated quite clearly that it was a psychological test'. He had unfortunately, neglected to ascertain the fact that Jackie was barely literate, George,

Karen's father was totally illiterate and neither would recognise the words 'psychological' or 'educational'.

The District Superintendent went on to say that there was nothing in the test condemning either Karen or her parents. She agreed that background could be a factor in the test results, but that was not indicated in this particular report. Jackie did not agree with this statement because on the second page of the report it stated quite clearly that her performance indicated a lack of opportunity in the home environment. Her comment was that this statement made them feel like they were doing something wrong with their own child in their own home, that they had neglected her in some way. It left them with a feeling of guilt because they were unable to meet *unexplained* expectations.

Jackie could not understand why the test had been so negative - Karen had received good reports from the distance education school in 1996, despite the fact that she had been slow at returning her work. Jackie was concerned that Karen's abilities had gone downhill to such an extent that she was now being labelled as having borderline intelligence. The Principal's documented reason for requesting the assessment was 'Concerns are particularly with language - [Karen] has been doing her schooling with Open Access and [Jackie] feels this has contributed to her poor skills and lack of motivation. [Karen] is quite shy and tends to lack confidence in maths'.

The Principal said that Karen's school reports and even the test report were not that bad. The test report just confirmed Jackie's concerns about language and that there was nothing else significant. The District Superintendent asked whether Jackie or George had talked to anyone about their concerns with the school or the test. Jackie replied that she didn't know who to talk to about the school, but she had tried to talk to the Principal about the test:

> I did talk to him, I told him in front of the teacher and counsellor. He said that the psychologist would have had no idea that Karen was from a different cultural background and that she would be behind in her schoolwork because she had not had much schooling because we travel lots. My neighbour read the test results and the form I signed and where the Principal said that I was worried about Karen's language. That was rubbish. I said she was learning Gypsy at home and Spanish with the distance education school and that I didn't want her learning another language, especially German.[16]

The representative from Romani International - Australia Inc. queried whether the psychologist had been given any knowledge of Karen's background, her home life, or even how much schooling she had received. She was informed that it is a common test and intended only to test language skills, that background would have no bearing on the outcomes of the test.

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16 Jackie, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 5 May, 1997.

The Principal said he regretted that these facts had not been taken into account. He added that the report suggested that additional assessments were needed, as one report could not constitute the final say on 'who or what Karen is'. He said that perhaps Karen was just having a bad day, fretting because her parents had gone to Canberra.

Jackie felt that the really important issue was how Karen was made to feel about the test and what it had done to her self confidence. At Karen's request, the neighbour read the report to her over and over again until she felt she understood what it was saying about her. Karen's own conclusions were that:

> The teacher thinks I'm dumb, but I'm a nice girl. I talk slow and I'm not very smart when I'm talking, but when I'm not talking I'm okay. I don't know anything and I can't really do anything properly, but I can put things together well - whatever that means - even though I can't see. I'm dumb because my home isn't good enough and they want to give me some special work so I can learn how to talk like everyone else, but it doesn't really matter 'cos I'll never be as good as everyone else and I'm dumb anyway.[17]

As the meeting came to a close, it became obvious to the District Superintendent that no matter how comprehensive the discussion, the children would not return to school.

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[17] Karen, Personal Interview, Adelaide, 27 April, 1997.

Her only mission at the meeting was to ensure the continued schooling of the school-aged children in the *familia*. She asked the Principal to sign the forms to enable Karen and Henry to re-enrol in the distance education school. He refused to do so unless the family was travelling. Jackie and George both decided on the spot that they had urgent business in Melbourne that required their personal attendance and that they may return for a week but then they had to go to Brisbane. This was felt by all to be a satisfactory solution as living in a house was obviously going to hurt Karen.

One of the positive aspects of this situation is that since this difficulty with her schooling, Karen has recognised the need for increased awareness of her own cultural heritage. She feels that she can participate in Open Access surrounded by peers of her own culture without having other people's values constantly imposed on her. She has several close cousins and friends also enrolled in the distance education school who can help to provide a network of support. She feels that the criticism of the Open Access system by her local school was unjustified because even though she was a little slow under this system, she was progressing with her work and she experienced a sense of achievement when she finished each section of work. She is happy to be travelling again and though her parents may not agree, she feels that her life is back on track.

Karen's parents are not so optimistic. They feel that Karen would be much better off studying under the open access system whilst living in the stable environment that their home had become. Travelling means long periods of time when Karen does not

have sufficient time to properly concentrate on her studies. They feel that she is being disadvantaged by this forced movement. Since this meeting they have been told by the Principal of the local school, that if they return to the same city for a period of even three weeks, that Karen and Henry must return to the local school. He followed this with the rider 'because they lived on his way to school, he would know when they were home'.

In this household, there are two children of compulsory school age and one who will be of school age in mid-1997. Jackie feels that mainstream schools are not appropriate for her children and is refusing to ever send them back. A major obstacle for any person trying to assist in these situations is that if the situation looks too sticky, the family is quite prepared to take up travelling again and this means that no truancy officer would be able to locate them to make them send their children to school. The representative from Romani International - Australia Inc. was quite well aware of this at the time of the meeting described above, and was trying to avoid this situation from occurring. The representatives from the Department of Education and Children's Services were obviously unaware of this and opened the conversation with unveiled threats about reporting the family to the Department of Welfare if the children were not returned to school. Their only concern was that the school-aged children return to school. They understood none of the careful counselling that had taken place in order to persuade Jackie and George to stay in town long enough to attend any meeting.

The District Superintendent was quite angry with both the Romani International - Australia Inc. representative and myself for not forcing this family to return their children to school. This was the law and we had a duty to uphold it. We explained that had we taken that stance, the meeting would not have occurred, and that the family would not have been found for a long time, at least not until both the eldest children were no longer of school age. They would simply return to the same tactics they had previously used to evade the question of schooling. They were quite aware that there is little communication between the state education departments.

This example brings to mind many different questions on the fate of ethnic minorities in schools and the role of assessments for these children. During the meeting, the Principal agreed that the report or Karen wasn't the final say on her intelligence (despite the fact that the report said that the test was a true assessment of her intellectual abilities). He said that there were other assessments that could be undertaken 'to support the results of the WISC test'. By this time, Karen's parents had had enough, if the children could not be enrolled in the Open Access System, they would simply disappear.

Testing of school students is one of the oldest, and considered to be the most reliable, ways of determining a student's abilities and expected progress in the many different aspects of school life. These assessments are often conducted informally within the classroom, by the teacher, as a part of the daily class routine. It was apparently the

results of such assessments that led Karen's teacher to request formal assessment of Karen's learning difficulties, in particular her language skills.

Partington and McCudden discuss the validity of tests of the type applied to Karen, on children of ethnic minorities. The following discussion and interpretation of Karen's test results relies heavily on their work.[18]

The first major difficulty with the test is that the assessment is stated to be a valid and reliable assessment of Karen's true intellectual abilities. It has been shown that some parts of the WISC test are affected by the amount of formal schooling a child has received.[19] The psychologist was unaware that Karen had not attended school for most of the five preceding years. He was only aware that she had been enrolled in the distance education school for the previous year and that this was thought to be the cause of her difficulties.[20] Her lack of consistent schooling gives rise to the question of whether Karen could be expected to perform at the same level as other eleven year old students who had completed at least four full years of schooling.[21] Perhaps because of the fact that Karen could be described as a young Anglo-Celtic girl with no immediately apparent 'ethnic' background, there was no suggestion in the report

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18 G. Partington & V. McCudden, *Ethnicity and Education*, Social Science Press, Wentworth Falls, 1992, pp. 256-66.

19 G. Davidson, 'Some Social and Cultural Perspectives on Cognitive Assessment', in *Ethnicity and Cognitive Assessment: Australian Perspectives*, ed. G. Davidson, Darwin Institute of Technology, Darwin, 1984, pp. 7-14, quoted in Partington & McCudden, p. 264.

20 School Principal, Meeting, Adelaide, 5 May, 1997.

21 Partington & McCudden, p. 257.

that perhaps some of the difficulties Karen was experiencing may have been due to her cultural background, or that there was a strong likelihood that this test would find her intellectual function to be lower than normal.[22] This statement is substantiated below. The following observations and conclusions were made by the psychologist in his report on Karen's abilities. A full copy of the test results and request form are in Appendix B.

Under the category of *Behavioural Observations*, the psychologist made mention of the fact that at times Karen 'would name pictures incorrectly although she appeared to understand their use and function'. There was no mention in the report of whether the names she applied to these objects were English, or not. It is quite likely that these names may have been the correct Romanes word, or the nearest translation of the word that Karen could think of under pressure.

'She tended to give up easily on difficult tasks unless encouraged and appeared to lack confidence with the tasks presented to her'. Romani children are rarely left to accomplish difficult tasks on their own, encouragement being a normal part of family life. They would *never* be placed in a room with a total stranger who asked them unending questions, with no support from another person. A young girl would not be left alone with an older man, especially when this man happened to be a Gajo, as this could result in aspersions being cast on her purity by another unscrupulous person.

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22 Karen's school enrolment form states her family background as being part Torres Strait Islander, her father is quite dark skinned, and her mother is fair. It was assumed by the school that this was the family's heritage and naturally the father did not query this classification as due to his illiteracy, he could not read the forms.

Had the test and its circumstances been properly and fully explained to Karen's parents, they would have insisted on a third person being present for the duration of the test.

The following comments were made under the heading *Assessment Results and Clinical Observation.* 'Her range of factual knowledge, general cultural knowledge and numerical reasoning are below average for her age'. 'Her knowledge of conventional standards of behaviour, social judgements ... are well-below average for her age'. 'Her awareness of cultural values and standards are also poorly developed'. Karen was being judged for her knowledge of Western culture, given that she lives in the Romani community almost exclusively (except for the time spent at school), her knowledge and understanding of this culture would have to be minimal. Karen brought to the school very little of the cultural capital of the type tested in the WISC Test, and she was tested on none of the type of cultural capital she had gained from her own culture. She was not judged at any time on her knowledge or understanding of Romani culture, and her own culture's conventional standards of behaviour or rules by which 'social judgements' can be made. At eleven years of age, Karen was not expected to display an adult understanding of these concepts. She is not expected to take a place in Western society and therefore, these values are worthless baggage for Karen. It is likely that had she brought home too many of these 'Western values', she would have been told to forget them.

'She has a marked degree of difficulty with language-related abilities, especially with concept formation and word knowledge.' Karen's *familia* speak a mixture of Romanes and English at home. During her enrolment with the distance education school she had been learning Spanish and during her enrolment at this last school she was learning German. For a child of eleven years of age, who was having trouble adjusting to formal schooling and the use of standard English, there would have had to have been difficulties with expressing concepts.

In the section titled *Recommendations*, it was stated that 'Overall, Karen's performance suggests that she may have a specific learning problem. Such a conclusion should be regarded as speculative until specialised assessment of her language and verbal skills is conducted. It is possible that her performance indicates a lack of opportunity in the home environment'. This statement tells us that Karen is suffering from the type of deprivation described by McConnochie, in which he describes how the home environment of Aboriginal children was considered to be the cause of their cognitive retardation. One major reason for the lack of accuracy seen in these tests is that while the child may be quite competent in their own cultural surroundings, they may be unfamiliar with the same concepts applied with a Western Bias.[23] They are also profoundly affected by the amount of schooling received and Karen had not completed the expected number of years at school. For all the reasons above, not one of which was considered by the psychologist, teacher, Principal or

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23 K. McConnochie, 'White Tests, Black Children: Aborigines, Psychologists and Education', in ed. B. Menary, *Aborigines and Schooling*, Adelaide College of the Arts and Education, 1981, pp. 129, quoted in Partington & McCudden, p. 259.

counsellor, this type of test result was inevitable, disregarding to a certain extent Karen's real intelligence.

There is a distinct lack of opportunity in Karen's home in that it is unlikely that she will ever be exposed to the type of culture which would result in success at this type of test. Her parents will make sure now that neither Karen nor themselves are exposed to this kind of treatment again. She will never be returned to a mainstream school, and it is highly likely that other Romani children have been removed from their schools, in the fear that this type of treatment and similar accusations may also be levelled at them. The dichotomy between Western society and Romani society has just been widened.

Lastly, the statement that 'Standard intelligence tests measure [only] the current capacity of individuals to participate effectively in Western schools' can only be used to demonstrate that Karen cannot be expected to succeed at a mainstream school.[24]

Kathy

Following is a record of an interview with Kathy in which she talks about her experiences in school and the experiences of one of her children in kindergarten. Her personal experiences in school have led her to question whether mainstream schooling is the appropriate environment for the education of her children. Although there are

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[24] R. LeVine, 'Cross-cultural Study in Child Psychology', in P. Mussen (ed.), *Carmichael's Manual of Child Psychology*, vol. 2 3rd edn, Wiley, New York, 1970, p. 581, quoted in M. Segall et al, *Human Behaviour in Global Perspective: An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Allyn & Bacon, 1990, p. 59.

other incidents influencing her thoughts not only from within her own *familia*, but also close and distant relatives, in this interview, Kathy is discussing those instances that had the largest impact.

How many children do you have?

Two and a half, Cynthia is four and a half, Marc is three and I'm pregnant again.

Do they go to school or kindergarten?

They both went to kindergarten. They were quite happy until Marc told me at the age of three that he was ready to go into kindy (he was in junior kindy then, the children usually move into kindy when they are three and a half). He said he was a big boy now and he wanted to go into 'big kindy' with his sister and cousin. I told him that only big kids could go into kindy and that because he was still wearing pull-ups (training pants with a nappy-type lining) he would have to wait. The next day he started to toilet-train himself. He was only wearing a pull-up at night.

I made an appointment with the centre coordinator and told her that Marc wanted to move up to the big kindy. I explained that he had toilet trained himself when I told him that kindy kids didn't wear pull-ups. She told me that we would have to wait for one of the girls who was a school teacher and in charge of the kindy section to come back. She was Marc's favourite carer at the kindy and I knew he liked her the best so I didn't mind the wait. After all, it was only three weeks.

One night Marc looked at Cynthia and asked me why wasn't she wearing a nappy when he had to, I replied 'she's a big girl, so she doesn't need to, she goes to the

toilet'. Marc promptly removed his pull-up and said well I'm a kindy boy now so I'm big and I don't need one either. He was dry at night from then on.

Marc was asking me every day if he could be a big kindy boy, so after a week I went to see the coordinator again. This time I took Marc with me so that they could see that it wasn't me pushing him. This time I was told that he could go up unofficially, but that he would need to be assessed by the teacher before he could officially go up. I was a little surprised that they would need to assess a three year old child, especially one who felt so certain that he was ready to move up. This went on for the next three weeks. Marc has always been a demanding child - he has his father's temper - I'm not denying that, but what I didn't realise until after he'd left kindy was that he was getting worse. He had started throwing tantrums every time someone said 'no' to him. Naturally it was worse when he was tired, so I just put it down to the 'terrible threes' that everyone tells you about.

Every day I took Marc into the big kindy room, and I thought that everything was going OK. He seemed to be happy when I left him. Every day he asked me 'Mummy am I a big kindy boy now?'

Every day I gave him the same answer 'Of course you are, sweetheart'. The incident that prompted me to withdraw both my children from the kindergarten occurred on the day when Marc asked me (for the hundredth time) if he was a big kindy boy now. Before I had time to answer him, one of the other kindy girls said ' Oh no, he's still a baby, he just comes to visit us but he can't stay here.'

That was his last week at the kindy We organised something else straight away. I have to say that he's much calmer now that he's out of that kindy and there are no more tantrums. I don't know if it was the other kids he was mixing with or whether

he was upset deep down about not going up to the kindy group. But we were going through hell for a while there. He would throw a huge tantrum with screaming, yelling and throwing things every time he didn't get his own way. Now that he's at 'school' with the other two, he's manageable. He copes with the fact that he can't always have his own way and I can reason with him. This change was evident about two weeks after taking him away from the kindergarten.

You mentioned before that you didn't want to send them to school. Did you change your mind?

No I haven't changed my mind. They're not of compulsory school age yet, so I'm still working it out.

Why don't you want to send them to school?

I have very few fond memories of my time at school and those that I have are overshadowed by the other times. Most of my family were made to feel quite stupid at school. My children are quite bright and happy and I don't want them to end up like me with no self confidence, just because some stupid school teacher has it in for them. They've already tried it with Marc, why give them another shot?

What are they doing now?

Well, they are sort of in a school. My aunt set up a pretend 'school' in her home. They don't have to go to a government school yet so I don't have to worry about that just yet. We are teaching them how to read and write ourselves. We're also teaching them Romanes so they have good language skills.

Have you thought about which school at all yet?

We have discussed it lots, we were hoping to enrol them in the distance education school. So far we have phoned them twice, but they were so rude that we don't know whether to persevere or to try something else.

What was the problem with the distance education school?

They said you have to travel pretty well non-stop. If you stop somewhere even for six weeks, you have to send the kids to the local school. That's just ridiculous, you would just get them settled in and then they'd have to leave. There's no way I'd do that to my kids. I have spoken to two different people in the distance education school now and basically they don't want to take in any more children. I really don't understand their attitude at all. They would rather see my children not receive any education than for them to go through the distance education school, they said so to me in one of our conversations. It is really important to me that our children receive a good education but I don't believe they'll get that at normal schools.

Your family is well educated aren't they?

Mum thought that we should all be educated right up to university, so I am. Mum thought she had to persevere with me because I'm the eldest child. I went nearly all the way through school, though I didn't matriculate from a school and then I went to Uni. We went to a very exclusive private school. It cost lots of money but they didn't ask so many questions about why we weren't always at school.

What about your sister and brother?

My mum got sick of fighting the school system. They kept trying to tell her that we were too dumb to amount to anything so my sister left near the end of year eleven, when she was sixteen. She only stayed so that she could go on a school trip with her French class. They wouldn't let her go on the trip at first because her French wasn't good enough, so I coached her for the test and she did really well. After she left school she did some other study and she's a social worker now.

My brother left school when he was thirteen years of age. The truancy officer came around to our place one night looking for him, so my mother pretended to get really upset with the lady and she started crying. She told the lady that her son had run away and that instead of coming here and upsetting her, they should be out looking for her son. We never heard from them again. He hadn't really run away, he was sitting around the corner listening to every word. My brother is working in our family business now.

You said before that you didn't matriculate from a school - what happened?

The school had career counselling for all students in year ten, eleven and twelve. When my mum and I had the interview to choose my year ten subjects, the Counsellor told me that I wasn't really suited to humanities subjects and that perhaps I should stick to science. This suited me fine as I wanted to go into health studies in university. The next year, they told me that I wasn't really good at science subjects, that perhaps humanities might suit me better. I dropped physics on this advice and took up an extra humanities unit. About half way through year eleven, I found out that to do the course I wanted to do at uni, I needed to do physics. After more interviews with the

Counsellor where my mum got rea ly upset, I dropped out of English and took up studying physics outside the schoo . It was too late in the year for me to join the regular physics class. The school was pretty good in the end, the physics teacher helped me to find a really good tutor and I passed year eleven physics really well.

When I was going into year twelve, the Counsellor said that they didn't think I was well suited to the career I had chosen for myself and that I should keep my options open. It was too late as I had made up my mind.

That year was a bit messy for my family. We had a few crises that meant we had to travel interstate quite a bit. I missed about the last three weeks of term one. When I got back, mum and I went to see the Counsellor to see how I could catch up with the work I had missed. She said that it didn't really matter that I had missed so much school, because they didn't think that I should be doing matriculation. The school thought that I should be doing 'A12'. At my school, this meant agricultural science, metalwork, woodwork and art, in other words, the vegie classes, there was a really big distinction between the smart kids and the vegies at school. I had no intention of doing anything else but matric. Mum believed I could do it, and I was determined that I would.

I accepted the fact that they wouldn t let me sit for the matric exams that year. I mean they specially brought in both the Counsellor and the Deputy Principal to tell me so. As term two went on, it became obvious to me that the teachers had written me off as a lost cause. I decided to stay at school for as long as it took to find another way for me to sit the matric exams. I pulled out of school after a few weeks of term two to do private study. I enrolled in a tutoring place for coaching. It usually took only students who needed extra help, but I said I could study well by myself. I went to my

tutor for two hours every day. Then I did my homework for about another two hours and then I went to work for the rest of the day. I sat for my exams through a local TAFE College with other mature age students.

I passed really well. My worst subject was Physics but I still achieved a mark of seventy-two percent, I earned seventy-six for Chemistry, eighty-one for Maths 1S, eighty-four for Biology and eighty-six for French. I haven't ever forgotten those marks because to me they proved that the school was wrong and I was not so dumb after all. I actually went back to one reunion especially so that I could tell both the Counsellor and the Deputy Principal that exact same thing! They had been so determined to stop me finishing school and doing the matriculation exams. That was a good feeling.

I then went to uni and studied for a Bachelor Degree which occupied me for seven years part-time and concurrently with a Diploma which occupied me for four years full-time. Not bad for a vegie. In my first year of uni we had to take an English comprehension test in our biology class. I obviously didn't do very well because they sent me to a remedial English class. I went to the first class, but I was the only person there who spoke English as their first language, it was so embarrassing that I didn't go back to another class. I just made sure that I got someone to check all my work before I handed it in.[25]

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[25] Kathy, Personal Interview, Brisbane, 26 October, 1997.

Simon

Simon left school at the age of thirteen. He cites the main reasons for this as:

> Even though nobody said so it was easier for everyone when I wasn't at school. I never had time to do my homework anyway and the teachers used to act like it wasn't important whether I was there or not. We went through this whole big rigmarole thing about whether it would be better for me to stay or leave school and in the end I wanted to leave. What decided it in the end was that I was treated like an adult at home, not a child and if I left school and went to work like everyone else, I could contribute more to the family, instead of just living off everyone.[26]

At the end of Grade Seven, when the reports came out, the school phoned Marie and asked her to go in for a meeting. Present at the meeting were Simon's home group teacher and the Principal. The home group teacher led the meeting by saying that although Simon had missed a bit of school, he seemed to be coping as well as could be expected with the work in Grade Seven. She wanted Marie to approve the school to conduct some tests, there were a series of 'psychological, cognitive, language and IQ tests' that they could do. The home teacher said that she thought that Simon would have to have some remedial teaching to keep up with Year Eight. The Principal explained that if the school was allowed to do these tests, they would know where

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[26] Simon, Personal Interview, Wollongong, 13 July, 1996.

Simon needed the most help. When Marie refused to allow the tests, as the school had known she would, the Principal said that Simon would never do any good at school if they couldn't find out where he was having the most difficulty. He said that Simon would struggle all the way through Year Eight.[27]

Marie suggested that if they knew he would have so much trouble in Year Eight, then he could stay in Grade Seven for one more year. That way he would have a more solid base for going up to Year Eight. The home group teacher said that because Simon was such a physically big boy, it would be better for him socially if he went up, and that Marie would just have to accept Simon would never really amount to anything academically. The home group teacher explained that in Year Eight, the school offered two streams of classes, one mainstream and the other remedial. She felt that there might be some mainstream classes that Simon could go into, but they would not know this unless Marie agreed to the tests.

Marie went home and told Simon what the school had said. She told Simon that he would need to make up his own mind about what would be best for his future. He was not to think about what was easier for everyone else, that as he was nearly thirteen, and was really an adult, he needed to think about himself.[28] Whatever decision he

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27 Marie explained later that both the Principal and the home group teacher knew that she would say no to these tests, as she had already refused to allow these tests being conducted on any of her other children who had previously gone through the school.

Marie, Personal Interview, Brisbane, 16 November, 1996.

28 Marie explained that at or about the age of twelve, Romani children assume adult status. They are used to making their own decisions, thinking for themselves and participating in the adult community. They are not used to being subordinate to others without good reason and usually full discussion being undertaken.

made for his future, the family would all stick behind him and help him to carry it through. When Simon looked at all his options, he came up with three directions in which he could go. The first was to continue at school and just make the best of it, the second was to leave school and continue his education the same way his sister had, and his third option was to leave school and just work. He started to make a list of all the good points and bad points about school and asked everyone to help him finish it (See Table 4 Below).

Table 4: Factors Influencing Simon's Decision

For School	Against Schoo	For Leaving	Against Leaving
Relaxed style of learning	The education s not suited to jo) skills	Full-time employment	No set holiday breaks
Makes allowance for teenage blues	Study not pace l for the individi al	Full-time work and study can be coordinated	Miss out on happy childhood times
Good holiday system	Compulsory subjects that ar boring	More confident in work environment than school	Only a couple of years out of the rest of your life
Friends of same age	A feeling of wasting time	Set own time for study. work and play	Once you leave you can't go back
Good social life	Frustration at r ot achieving	education to suit own pace	No school cricket or football
No pressures	Feeling inadeq iate in the system	Achievement satisfaction	Tutors don't allow for slacking
No responsibilities	Loss of self-est em	More interesting jobs	All study is exam oriented
Cricket		Make money	Lose school friends
Lots of subjects to choose from		Sisters did it	More years at school means more time to make up your mind
Being a kid	Being an adult	Local cricket	

About three weeks before school was scheduled to go back, Simon decided that if he could keep learning English and maths, then he wanted to leave school. When the school was notified that Simon was leaving, they were very concerned and several phone calls were made to Marie in attempts to convince her that Simon should return to the school. Their last attempt was when the home group teacher phoned Marie and said that the school had come up with a proposal for her which might solve everyone's problem and get Simon back to school. Marie tells the story in her own words:

> They did try to find something to help, but it was too late, Simon had already made up his mind on his decision. We told the school that he was going to go to a different school and they weren't very happy about that, they wanted him to stay.
>
> Simon's home group teacher came around to tell us about this great idea the school had. At the last teachers' meeting the school had, Simon had come up in the conversation, and they had decided that Simon would never be academically brilliant. The history teacher had commented on Simon's infuriating habit of drumming his fingers on the table in every class. The home group teacher had then spoken to the music teacher and they had come up with an idea. They had decided that his apparent sense of rhythm might be able to be developed into something really worthwhile. I wondered what they thought worthwhile meant because it sounded to me like they were

actually saying well he's useless anyway and this might be something he could make of his life.

The school was willing to donate a set of drums to Simon that he could keep at home and practice on and that they would give him a drum lesson every week, in the hope that when he became good enough, he might be able to play in the school band. I was getting more and more angry with the teacher but it was useless trying to explain that Simon didn't need their help and that we were not some charity to which they could just 'donate' things. I slipped out while she was talking to someone on her mobile phone. I asked Simon to phone some of our friends and ask them to come around for tea, we asked the teacher to stay for tea too.

After tea, we started our usual routine where we play music, sing and dance, and generally make lots of noise. Well, the teacher nearly fell off her chair when she saw Simon playing all our Gypsy songs on the guitar. He played for one of his sisters to do a Flamenco (Spanish Gypsy) dance and some of our families' traditional Gypsy dances and then he played for the other one to sing. When Simon saw the look on the teacher's face, he gave a real wicked grin and started to play some wild rock and roll songs. When she asked him where he had learnt to play, he just shrugged and said 'I teach myself'. The best part of the whole night was actually when he stopped playing the guitar and

started to play the *kaha* and the bongo drums for some different dances[29]. The teacher's jaw literally dropped, she apologised straight away 'I'm sorry, we just had no idea', I just smiled and didn't say anything, I didn't really need to, Simon had just showed them all.[30]

Conclusion

The participation of children in school relies to a certain degree on parental approval of the process. More and more, parents of school children from minority groups, such as the Rom, encounter racial/cultural difficulties similar to Peter or educational difficulties as Kathy and Simon.[31] These types of problems could get worse unless realistic noises are made at policy level which are then translated into action at the school level. Traditional Australian education is geared towards preparing Anglo-Celtic children for entry into higher education. More recently, Australian education has tried to condition students to 'join the workforce', that is undertake paid jobs, many of which are no longer there. At the same time, their basic literacy skills appear to be suffering. For example, in a statement by the SA Primary Principals Association president, Mr Travers, assures us that:

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29 A *kaha* is a wooden box, usually painted black or gold. It is played by sitting on it and beating out a rhythm. Different sounds can be made by hitting it in different places.

30 Marie, Personal Interview, Brisbane, 17 November, 1996.

31 B. Crouch, 'Parents choosing to teach kids at home', *Sunday Mail*, 9 February, 1997, p. 17.

> An obvious reason for the drop in some of the [Basic Skills Test] results this year is that a higher percentage of children with learning problems sat for the tests this year ... [He claims that] last year many of these students were among those whose parents had withdrawn them from the tests as part of the AEU boycott action ... socio-economic factors are the most critical issues driving poor literacy achievement ... There is not a state literacy problem - there is a disadvantaged children's problem .. this was strongly highlighted in the national literacy survey results.[32]

The South Australian Education Minister, Mr Lucas, says that 'a new literacy plan, which will require all students to be assessed when they start schools, will also be a powerful new tool'. The implications of this for a multicultural society and in particular those children not of Anglo-Celtic descent, are disastrous. It is interesting to note that he is suggesting is that if we assess how much Western cultural capital a child of an ethnic minority is bringing into the school when they start, we will know how disadvantaged they are and who to blame for it. The Lloyd article assumes that all children going through school are from the same cultural background and makes no allowance for those who have English as their second language. Nor does it recognise that children from minority cultures may present at school with different learning habits. It is asking us to look for who is to blame for this low level of literacy in Australia, and suggests teachers, parents and advanced technology.

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32 N. Lloyd, 'Wanted: better readers and writers, but how?', *Advertiser*, 16 October, 1997, p. 13.

Whilst it is acknowledged that children of any ethnicity need a thorough grounding in the 'Three Rs', they should also have resourcefulness encouraged and promoted. Most of the Romani children learn this characteristic from their families, both immediate and extended. The cultural capital they gain from their families could in many instances assist them to succeed in both their own culture and that of the mainstream even without literacy skills (for example, basic numeracy skills are learnt at an early stage through the use of money). Personal experience has shown that many Gajé families rely entirely on the school, as an institution of social instruction, to teach these values to their children.

As the struggle for survival gets tougher, we may find that the very attributes, the cultural capital, that Romani children possess and which some educational institutions resent - that is, a mind of their own - will stand them in good stead, provided that they become properly literate along the way. As the provision of these literacy skills is the vital stumbling block, it is the one requiring most urgent attention.

The answer to the question of the necessity of children receiving an education based on the values of the Anglo-Celtic majority may never be found. However, the law (through the Education Act, or its equivalent, in each state of Australia) states clearly that children must attend school, be it contact, home school, or distance education. Culture is not an acceptable excuse for not ensuring that children receive this education as the limits are clearly defined. All policies must be formed within these limits:

- Multicultural policies are based on the premises that all Australians should have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, to its interests and future first and foremost;
- Multicultural policies require all Australians to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society - the Constitution and the rule of law, tolerance and equity, Parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language and equality of the sexes; and
- Multicultural policies impose obligations as well as conferring rights: the right to express one's own culture and beliefs involves a reciprocal responsibility to accept the rights of others to express their views and values.[33]

This means that any solutions or recommendations must take these limitations into account. Chapter Eight puts forward suggestions for remedying this deficiency by detailing bases for the development of education policies appropriate for Roma living in Australia. It also looks at the future of education of the Romani people in Australia and discusses the applicability and usefulness of the recommendations in the Australian context.

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33 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, What is Multiculturalism*, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Canberra, April 1997.