

Hard to Reach Groups

This purpose of this essay is to explore the sociology of Traveller communities. It will examine the risks and resilience synonymous with nomadic lifestyle as well as barriers to engagement, and the potential for social exclusion and marginalisation. This assignment will also consider how theory and policy relate to culture, identity and labelling, and seek to establish some of the motivations that inspire Travellers to live, and sustain, a life on the road.

When the most recent UK census was conducted in 2011, there were around 63,000 travellers recorded (Parliament. House of Common, 2018, p.10). The questions directed towards Gypsy and Traveller communities were framed differently dependent upon which area of the UK that was being addressed. The reason for the questionnaire being worded differently in Northern Ireland as opposed to Wales for example was an attempt to establish the ethnicity of the respondents. The briefing paper recognised that collecting data from Traveller communities had been historically difficult.

The Office for National Statistics (2014) (ONS) explored the findings of the census to determine what conclusions could be drawn regarding Gypsy and Traveller characteristics. The ONS, whilst acknowledging the difficulty of obtaining accurate figures for Traveller communities, made reference to estimates from other sources that suggest that the true number of Travellers in the UK could be as many as between 82,000 and 300,000. The ONS suggested the decision to include the Gypsy and Traveller tick box on the census was at the request of local authorities, charities and governmental departments. The hope was that the data could be used to help deal with the inequalities, discrimination and deprivation that these ethnic groups were subjected to.

A recent project through the NHS (2019) by the Doncaster Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) was initiated with the aim of improving the health and well-being of Gypsy and Traveller communities. With an estimated 4000-6000 Gypsies in the Doncaster region, the CCG worked in conjunction with Community Journalists to try and overcome barriers to engagement, barriers that they believe are contributing to a life expectancy some twenty years lower on average amongst Traveller communities. The CCG are hopeful that specialist training and innovative approaches to engagement will help to reduce the health inequalities faced by Travellers. The most recent data published that the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2017) estimated that life expectancy for Gypsies and Travellers at

approximately ten years lower than the national average and that mothers were twenty times more likely to experience the death of a child.

An article for BMC Public Health suggests a significant factor in the health concerns of Traveller Communities is a low take-up of preventative health measures, such as immunisation. Jackson et al. (2017) conducted the cross-sectional study of 174 Travellers from a range of six different Traveller communities including Roma, Irish Gypsy Travellers, English Gypsies and Scottish Show people. A number of common obstacles were reported across the communities, with issues such as poor literacy, language barriers, mistrust – in health professionals as well as in the vaccines – and also discrimination.

It has been widely acknowledged that Gypsies and Travellers are amongst the most disadvantaged of ethnic minority groups. Lloyd and McCluskey (2008) referred to a statement by the Commission for Racial Equality that described the discrimination Travellers were subjected to as “the last ‘respectable’ form of racism”. The purpose of the article by Lloyd and McCluskey (2008) was to research the complexities of educational policies in regard to Gypsies and Travellers in England and Scotland, paying attention to policy and practice in respect of social inclusion. The evidence uncovered by the study suggests that government initiatives have been somewhat successful in promoting inclusion for children that were marginalised through disabilities and additional needs, including sensory, emotional and behavioural difficulties but less so when it came to cultural and socioeconomic marginalisation. The observation was that children with recognised disabilities became the responsibility of specialised staff, trained to meet their particular needs. They suggested that the unique complexities of the relationships between schools, Traveller pupils and their families meant issues of exclusion were not being sufficiently addressed and that by highlighting minority cultures, in some instances, risked exacerbating social divisions and stigmatisation further still.

Policies, however well-intentioned, can sometimes create as many problems as they solve. Myers (2015) believes that Gypsies have “rarely been served well by policy-makers in the UK”. The Department for Communities and Local Government (2015) introduced a Planning Policy for Travellers in 2015 that was intended to increase the number of appropriate sites for Gypsy and Traveller communities, respected Traveller culture and ensured fair treatment, reduced the number of unauthorised camps whilst minimising tensions between Travellers and local communities. Myers (2015) argues though that the legislation that underpins Gypsy

and Traveller policy dates back to the fifteenth century and considers mobility as an essential requirement to be classed as a Gypsy.

The policy outlined a three-point clarification process to establish Traveller ethnicity. One of the central requirements of the policy surrounded the issue of mobility. If for the purpose of education, health or employment a Traveller ceased to travel, they would then lose their Traveller ethnicity status and consequently their right to planning permission (The Conversation, 2015).

Contradictions such as these make access to secure accommodation difficult, and in turn create problems in accessing health care and education.

Gypsy Traveller lifestyle, and in particular the wedding traditions of young Gypsy brides became the subject of a Channel 4 documentary series 'My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding'. An article in The Guardian that appeared following the final episode, recalled the original aim of the programme that was intended to shed light on the problems faced by traveller communities such as marginalisation, discrimination, poor health and low life expectancy. Bindel (2011) suggests that the show did little to highlight these issues and instead it sensationalised the apparently extravagant wedding celebrations, largely ignoring the health and social problems aside from what seemed like a token gesture in the final episode.

What Julie Bindel (2011) experienced for herself when she visited the Traveller's site was accounts of domestic abuse, forced marriage, poor health and abject poverty. The caravans, kept immaculately clean and tidy were not reflective of the poor sanitary conditions found in the separate toileting and bathroom facilities. A lack of running water within the Traveller's own accommodation means occupants – including young children – are forced to make their way to external amenities in all weathers and conditions.

Studies in recent times have shown that reported incidents of domestic violence amongst women from Gypsy and Traveller families are disproportionately higher than the national average (First Light, 2017). Research it refers to states 60% to 80% of Traveller women are subject to domestic abuse, as opposed to the 25% of women in the wider population. They suggest that not only are they more likely to be subject to abuse but are also less likely to seek help. The strong sense of culture and tight-knit community make them less inclined to report incidents, especially in such a traditionally male-dominated environment.

An initiative by Solace Women's Aid (SWA) in conjunction with women from Traveller communities has been launched in an effort to overcome the cultural barriers and stigmatisation that prevent engagement (The Traveller Movement, 2019). The SWA offer specialist advice, confidential support and trained advocates to address complex issues and relationships. It is hoped that by enlisting the help of women who have experienced domestic abuse first-hand, it will help to build trust and encourage victims to engage.

Given the difficulties such as exclusion, discrimination and prejudice that are faced by people born into the Traveller way of life, what would then motivate someone to disregard conformity and opt for a life on the road? According to Hetherington (2000), the surge in the New Age Traveller movement in the 1980s was a rejection of societal constraints, a reaction to high unemployment, poor prospects and political disillusionment. It was about more than just living on the road, it was a search for a sense of community and belonging, outside of the mainstream. Convoys of Travellers during the summer periods of the late 1970s had been making pilgrimages to music festivals – usually free events – such as Stonehenge during the summer solstice. By the 1980s though, what began as an annual gathering was for many becoming a way of life.

Far from integrating with an already established travelling community, New Age Travellers were viewed as a completely alternative form of outcast. A debate took place in the House of Lords regarding the growing problem posed by convoys of New Age Travellers descending on rural villages, citing lawlessness, drug abuse and discarded waste. The unsuitability of the Caravans Site Act 1968, which had been aimed at traditional travelling Gypsies, meant the 1986 Public Order Act was then to be used as a first resort (Hansard HL Deb. vol.537 cc512-40, 1992). The disdain was just as evident in the House of Commons with Conservative MP Paul Marland declaring “Gloucestershire police have done a first-class job in breaking up the convoys...They call themselves new age travellers, but in Gloucestershire they are known as new age vermin” (Hansard HC vol.224, 1993).

The 1986 Public Order was itself introduced following a violent disbandment of a New Age Traveller convoy, attempting to attend the Stonehenge Free Festival in 1985. Police officers from six forces, together with the Ministry of Defence, corralled the caravan of travellers into a field and exerted a brutal show of force that “signalled a major curtailment of civil liberties” in what became known as the *Battle of the Beanfield* (Worthington, 2009). Eventually new powers were granted following another high-profile incident involving the police at

Castlemorton Common Festival in 1992. The 1994 Criminal Justice Act repealed the 1968 Caravans Act and in doing so, criminalised Gypsies and Travellers by removing local authority obligation to provide designated sites. As well as the new Criminal Justice Act, an amendment was made to the 1986 Public Order Act, introducing a new “trespassory assembly” clause, which transformed the civil act of trespass into a criminal matter.

In an attempt to distinguish the way in which modern travellers are viewed, as opposed to traditional Gypsies, Hetherington (2000, pp.101-102) contacted for comment, a representative from a local council authority in the south of England that had experienced a large influx of New Age Travellers. It became obvious during the course of the interview that the council policy for New Age Travellers differed greatly from that which applied to Gypsies. When questioned why, the council spokesman explained that it was not for reasons of disturbance, but because New Age Travellers adoption of Gypsy lifestyle was not inherent and therefore lacked authenticity. This was at a time when many of these ‘new’ Travellers had in many cases, already spent a number of years on the road, some having children born during their time on the road.

The Council want us off. I know that as soon as I get evicted off here I’ve got a fight on my hands to take my home somewhere, and I don’t want a fight. I don’t want to fight anyone, but people seem to want to fight us. (Lowe and Shaw, 1993, p.95).

Local authorities are not the only ones who have been less than welcoming to Travellers. Farmers have spread dung on fields to deter pitches being set up; rubble has piled up in lay-bys to prevent vans being parked and signs at traditional campsites refusing access (Pugh, 1994). Not everyone has been quite so hostile though. Author Jeremy Sanford welcomed Travellers to camp in the substantial grounds of his Hertfordshire home, stating, “They are doing what the Tory government urges people to do - solving their own problems by providing homes for themselves.” (Pugh, 1994).

Hetherington (1998, p.22) proposes that showing initiative in the quest for identity causes much anxiety amongst the elite, who whilst content to see resourcefulness when it comes to opportunities for social mobility, education and employment – i.e. within the bounds of social norms and established conventions – but less so when it takes the form of collective resistance. Cresswell (1996, p.21) explores the idea that this kind of transgression is not a class phenomenon but a socio-cultural problem, arising from those in power attempting to preserve “order” and curtail deviancy.

The challenges to social structure seem somewhat inevitable to Hetherington (2000, p.43), given that the New Age Traveller movement centred to a large degree around the music festival scene. Festivals, he argues, are themselves a challenge to the norm as they provide a “momentary absence” of social order. Festivals not only provided ‘escapism’ though but also an opportunity to earn some much needed income and acquire skills. Hetherington’s (2000, pp.84-85) findings regarding traveller income, lead to the conclusion that the notion of the work-shy individual, dropping-out to avoid work, is somewhat of a misconception. Arguing that to run and repair a vehicle, maintain a ‘household’, raise children and provide for a family, required a good work ethic with some considerable effort and resourcefulness. As with any societal group, there were incidents of deviancy such as theft, drug dealing and benefit fraud but what was also evident was a great deal of resilience. Many took seasonal jobs such as picking fruit or casual labour work. Others sought income from crafting or performance entertainment such as music and circus skills. A key aspect of survival has been skill-sharing, with exchanging of goods and bartering helping to transform groups of individuals with common goals into communities.

There appears to be obvious parallels between traditional Gypsies and more modern Travellers, not solely in lifestyle choices but also in their shared experiences of exclusion, discrimination and prejudice. The derogatory names with which travellers of all origins are branded, particularly in the media, serves only to exacerbate the problem. Becker (1973) developed a labelling theory, first published in 1963, that suggests the boundaries society imposes on groups is partially responsible for encouraging deviancy. By stigmatising he argued, the labels assigned are eventually accepted and lived up to, in a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. In effect, the characteristics that make Travellers ‘hard to reach’ also appear to make them hard to tolerate. This seems particularly true in case of New Age Travellers and Hetherington (2000, pp.112-113) proposes, the notion of an alternative ethnicity, one seen by many as ‘made up’, is too alien a concept for rural England, or in fact anywhere in the UK. The struggles of ethnic conflict within the confines inner cities can be easily overlooked, but in the expanses of the rural landscape however, any disruption to pastoral tranquillity can be cause for consternation.

Many New Age Travellers are sympathetic to green issues and according to Christopher (2003, pp.59-67), despite Travellers being actively involved in preservation, they were also viewed by many locals with the same level of disdain as the developers they were there to protest against. The reason for this, he suggests, is that in the 1980s many affluent

professionals had moved to more rural locations to escape city life and although they often campaigned against rural development themselves, there was very much a NIMBY (not in my back yard) mentality. Travellers were viewed as destructive to the countryside despite studies at time showing the real threat to wildlife and green spaces was from the industrialisation of farming that had shifted from agriculture to 'agribusiness'.

The determination with which the government has sort to eradicate the negative elements of Traveller lifestyle through legislation, even to the detriment of traditional Gypsy culture, such as in the repeal of Part II of the Caravan Sites Act (1968) provides an insight into the contemptuousness with which some Travellers are held. The direct use of composite labelling as described in Part V of the Act referred to a number of groups, with no obvious connection, as a "collective nuisance". That in itself was regarded as a somewhat unusual measure in terms of legislation (Christopher, 2003, p.137). By contrast there appears to be distinct lack of policies designed to support new Travellers, and despite being 'hard to reach' there appears little appetite for that to change in the near future.

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