Chapter 7

THE WELLBEING OF GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS

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AIMS OF CHAPTER

- Outline the social, economic and policy factors behind the increasing settlement of Britain's nomadic communities.
- Discuss how the concepts of cultural trauma and collective resilience can aid our understanding of how minority groups respond to external change.
- Examine the relationship between accommodation and the wellbeing of Gypsies and Travellers.
- Explore some of the difficulties faced by newly housed Gypsies and Travellers and consider the impact on subjective wellbeing.
- Consider the role of locally based social networks in boosting individual and collective wellbeing.

TASK

Look at the bi-annual caravan count published online

(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gypsy-and-traveller-caravan-count-

january-2013). Look at Table One. What is the balance between the number of caravans on authorised sites (social rented and private) and unauthorised sites (on land owned by Gypsies and on land not owned by Gypsies) in your region. How does this compare with the national picture and how has this pattern changed over the past five caravan counts?

INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on four qualitative studies conducted between 2006 and 2012 consisting of three focus groups and in-depth interviews with 68 Gypsy and Traveller households living in various locations in London and Southern England, the aim of which was to examine their experiences living in conventional housing. The criminalisation of unauthorised camping, difficulties gaining planning permission for private sites and a decline in public site vacancies following the 1994 Criminal Justice Act has led to an increasing drift into housing over the past 20 years, Around two-thirds of the UK's estimated 300,000 Gypsy/Traveller population is now resident in 'bricks and mortar' (Greenfields and Smith, 2010).¹ One strand of these studies was concerned with the relationship between accommodation, access to social networks and wellbeing. In this chapter the impact of wider legislative and social factors on the accommodation options and wellbeing of Gypsies and Travellers is considered and how, through recourse to community networks, external pressures to assimilate are resisted and traditional communal and family structures maintained.

Although they are one of the country's oldest minority groups the history of Gypsies in Britain is a history of prejudice and state sponsored persecution ranging from policies to exterminate or deport them in the Middle Ages to policies to eradicate nomadism via removal of children from itinerant families; forced settlement and assimilation in the modern period (Mayall 2004). In contemporary society Gypsies and Travellers remain the most excluded group across several domains: they are the unhealthiest group in society experiencing more illness and dying younger compared to other minority group members and the lowest socio-economic groups (Parry et al

¹ The figure cited is an estimate of the number of English Gypsies (Romanichals) and Irish Travellers resident in the UK. In addition it is estimated that between 200-300,000 Roma from East and Central Europe now live in the UK though many do not declare their ethnicity making estimating numbers problematic.

2004). Mental health is particularly poor with a significantly higher percentage experiencing anxiety or depression (32 per cent) than the general population (21 per cent) (Goward, et al 2006). Gypsy and Traveller pupils have the poorest educational outcomes gaining the fewest GCSE's at grade A*-C; the lowest attendance levels (particularly at secondary school); the highest levels of permanent exclusions and the highest proportion diagnosed with Special Education Needs (SENs) (Cemlyn et al 2009).

Despite stereotypes associating Gypsies and Travellers with criminality, the Association of Police Chief Officers (ACPO) has stated that they have no more problems with crime among the travelling population than with the general population. However, evidence indicates that they receive unequal treatment by all agencies of the criminal justice system. They are more likely to receive custodial sentences and less likely to be handed community sentences or to be bailed than the general population (Power 2003).

The marginalised social position of Gypsies and Travellers is a reflection of the extent of societal prejudice that they face. A survey by Stonewall (2003) revealed that more people feel prejudiced towards Gypsies and Travellers (35 per cent) than any other group followed by refugees and asylum seekers (34 per cent). These perceptions are fuelled by the media where they are routinely vilified and depicted in ways that would be unacceptable were they directed at any other group (Richardson and O'Neill 2012). While Gypsies and Travellers experience high levels of racism they are more resigned to racial hostility rarely reporting such incidents to the authorities (Netto 2008). State officials are not immune from negative stereotyping and reluctance to report racist incidents is grounded in mistrust of the police in particular, and officialdom in general, and a preference to deal with such problems

themselves, which paradoxically entrenches stereotypes of violent criminality. These negative attitudes manifest themselves in a universal desire for spatial separation among the sedentary population: while the 'settled' community demands that nomads cease travelling, there are few issues that galvanise a community as effectively as when opposing Travellers settling in their vicinity either onto sites or into housing in their neighbourhoods (Ni Shuinear 1997).

Having outlined the broad social contours within which Gypsies and Travellers live their lives the following sections will highlight the 'accommodation careers' and experiences of community members in conventional housing. This will involve examining the ways in which cultural identities are sustained in the face of a determined assault on their traditional lifestyles and how those identities provides a crucial source of community support that mitigates some of the difficulties faced when dealing with an alien, and frequently hostile, society.

SETTLEMENT, CULTURAL TRAUMA AND WELLBEING

Cemlyn et al (2009 p. 5) notes that 'in many ways accommodation is key to understanding the inequalities and barriers to services experienced by Gypsies and Travellers.' Throughout the 20th century the impetus behind successive legislation relating to accommodating Gypsies and Travellers has been to settle them either onto approved caravan sites or into conventional housing (Belton 2005). Government reports throughout the period have frequently stated that the ultimate aim of providing permanent caravan sites was a temporary measure with the longer term objective that site dwellers would eventually enter housing. While these aims have been presented in paternalistic terms Laungani (2002), cautions against the tendency of policy makers to offer universalistic solutions for culturally specific behaviours and preferences. The apparent benevolence of such policies often results in a punitive approach towards groups who resist being moulded into dominant notions of what is rational and in the group's 'best interests', while the damage that such policies inflict on community members is ignored in a utilitarian pursuit of the 'greater good.'

The growing number of Gypsies and Travellers forcibly settled into housing in the post-war era is relevant to social scientific interest in 'cultural trauma' - the concept has been used by anthropologists and sociologists to account for similarities among a range of indigenous and nomadic communities globally - low educational attainment, high suicide levels, depression, substance abuse and family breakdown - found among peoples who have experienced rapid social change, the destruction of traditional lifestyles and who are widely exposed to discrimination from the economically and socially dominant culture (Tatz 2004). Cultural trauma refers to events that 'leave(s) indelible marks upon their group consciousness' (Alexander 2004 p. 1) and contains four elements: firstly it has a particular temporal quality and is rapid and sudden; secondly change is felt deeply and touches the core of the collective order. Third it is seen as having particular causes that originate from outside the affected group and finally it is perceived by the group as unexpected, shocking and detrimental (Sztompka 2004). Evidence indicates that for many Gypsies and Travellers the move into housing can be traumatic and have a negative impact on psychological wellbeing (Smith and Greenfields 2013; Parry et al 2004). This has been recognised in law where the concept of a 'cultural aversion' to housing emerged in a planning case (Clarke v Secretary of State 2002) and has been incorporated into guidance regarding assessment of accommodation requirements.

Legal judgements following the *Clarke* case state that local authorities should attempt to facilitate a homeless Gypsies' traditional lifestyle by providing a pitch on a caravan site but if none are available the local authority can offer conventional housing in meeting its duties (Willers 2010).

For many Gypsies and Travellers the difficulties encountered following initial settlement in housing can be extremely detrimental to psychological wellbeing, which encompasses practical, spatial and social dimensions. For those accustomed to a communal and kin based existence not only are many separated from community ties (which also exposes them to an increased risk of racism) but they have to attend to a new set of practical and daily concerns that frequently threaten to 'undermine or overwhelm one, or several essential ingredients of culture or the culture as a whole' (Smelser 2004 pp. 38-40). The following sections will outline some of the practical and social elements of this transition and consider their impact on the research sample of housed Gypsies and Travellers.

Housing Transitions in 'Bricks and Mortar'

The ethnocentric assumption that equates house-dwelling with improved living standards and enhanced wellbeing is not borne out by research findings revealing the difficulties faced by many formerly nomadic families in housing (Thomas and Campbell 1992). Budgeting for example is a major source of difficulty for those accustomed to daily expenditure patterns. It is frequently the poorer sections of the

Gypsy/Traveller community who lack the resources to purchase their own land or private housing (bungalows are the preferred type) that end up in social housing. Two-thirds of respondents estimated that their living standards had worsened since moving into housing due to higher living costs, often leading families into a spiral of debt (Gidley and Rooke 2008). One woman recalled that

> 'I couldn't believe the bills...when I got the bills in I didn't know what to do – we'd only had gas bottles afore that and changed them when they run low. I just ignored the bills until it all got too bad.'

Particularly for families with limited literacy the amount of paperwork and bureaucracy involved in moving into and retaining a property can be overwhelming sometimes resulting in tenancies being forfeited. While assistance with budgeting and the transition into housing was, in theory, available through 'Supporting People' schemes, these mechanisms were rarely accessed due to previous negative experiences when dealing with officialdom and the anticipation of prejudice and conflict. One respondent argued that

> 'They (officials) don't like Gypsies and they treat you like dirt. We're rejected by some services because they don't want anything to do with us – we need equal rights to be recognized as an ethnic minority and for other people to have more understanding like they do for the others.'

Difficulties coping with the practical aspects of life in 'bricks and mortar' are compounded by the unfamiliar physical layout of housing. A sense of spatial disorientation was evident among many respondents related both to the unfamiliar design of housing and to the different usage of internal and external living space, which is less distinct for nomadic people than 'settled' communities. Many replicate traditional living arrangements, sleeping communally in one room and making little use of the upstairs. One respondent noted that his family sleep in the living room and 'drag the mattresses down at night - upstairs is for the dogs and kids toys' while another commented that her family were 'only using one room and a kitchen – there's too much space in a big house and no real space outside so it's topsy turvy'. Indeed the use of outside space for socializing, which was the norm for site residents, could create tensions with their 'settled' neighbours as such gatherings were often perceived by the latter as threatening and intimidating (discussed below).

Many considered housing as being detrimental to psychological wellbeing while the contrast between the 'natural' nomadic life and 'synthetic' nature of house-dwelling with its injurious impacts on health was commented on by several participants.

'Travellers get ill when they go into houses because the air and light are different its artificial not fresh air and daylight so a lot of breathing and lung problems start then...Travellers are in housing and living in artificial atmospheres with chemicals and breathing it when they sleep' A common complaint related to the confined nature of housing and to the physical differences compared to caravans and chalets. These factors exacerbated stress and were accompanied in many cases by claustrophobia and panic attacks especially among those relatively new to housing.

'It's just staring at the four walls does my head in. It's terrible really terrible. I know in a trailer it's smaller but you've got windows all around you and you can see out in all directions who's coming and what's going on so it just feels bigger.'

The adverse impacts of housing on the health and wellbeing of Gypsies and Travellers has been well documented. Parry et al (2004) noted that the health of housed Gypsies was poorer than those on sites with levels of anxiety significantly higher among those in housing (2004 p. 34). One male observed that

> 'Mental illness is big in the housed Gypsies. I've seen it. It's massive and I see it all through the country. They put them in substandard housing because they think that's what they are substandard people.'

Social Isolation, Discrimination and Wellbeing

Practical difficulties of the type described above and conflict with neighbours had an extremely corrosive impact on the wellbeing of the research sample. The communal and kin based nature of Gypsy culture has been observed in a variety of historical and geographical contexts with long-term 'clusters' of different yet related families travelling or living in close proximity to each other the norm (Okely 1983). Conventional housing – designed for the nuclear families often leaving individual households spatially and socially isolated. When respondents referred to feeling lonely in housing this was generally contrasted to the communal experiences of living on the road and/or on sites, 'we miss the site, don't like houses, too lonely, feel too closed in.' Social isolation is intensified through hostility from their neighbours and accounts of racism ranging from name calling; repeated and spurious complaints to the authorities through to physical attacks were common. One woman described how

'The estate's full of unruly kids with no respect, the neighbours are as bad as they used to be. We get hassled all the time with the bad names and we've been broken into many times. Gorjers (non Gypsies) are the worst really badly raised.'

Another woman recalled how 'they [neighbours] put all the windows out 'cos they found out it was Travellers moving in'. Pat Niner (2003) revealed that of the local authorities who responded to her survey 'problems with neighbours' was one of the main reasons that housed Gypsies and Travellers ended their tenancies second only to 'inability to settle.' For those who felt 'everything is foreign to us we've grown up in trailers' or who reported feeling 'shut in stuck here in this shit house on this shit estate' the absence of social support networks could prove overwhelming as one woman, discussing the impact of enforced social isolation on her mental health recalled

"...you'd go literally three months and you might just say good morning to someone outside because they lived their own lives never spoke to each other. I didn't want people in my house but you didn't visit people and it got to the stage when I had the children and post natal depression kicked in."

As most women were primarily home based they were more likely to refer to social isolation and express concern over loss of family contact after entering housing, one woman observed that *'we're all in housing now and it's not our way. It's scattered our people'*. Parry's (2004) study found higher levels of anxiety and depression among Gypsy women than men though evidence suggests that the transition from sites into housing has had a negative impact on male working patterns and social status with increasing levels of family breakdown and substance abuse following the move into housing being reported by advice workers and community members (Cemlyn et al 2009; Smith and Greenfields 2012). The adverse impacts of housing on individual and collective wellbeing formed the dominant theme in the participant's narratives. However, focusing on the culturally traumatic elements of settlement reveals little about the collective practices and strategies through which settlement and

assimilation is resisted and an approximation to traditional communities recreated within housing. These issues are addressed below.

CULTURAL RESILLIENCE AND WELLBEING

While the concept of cultural trauma is useful in framing the dysfunctional aspects of social change and its impact on individual and community wellbeing it only provides a partial view of how individuals and groups respond to fundamental changes in their social environments. The ability to offset external changes through the use of various coping mechanisms will affect how people experience adversity: the fact that Gypsies have survived centuries of persecution and discrimination with their sense of group solidarity and collective identity intact is testament to their resilience. Sutherland (1975) notes that Gypsies represent a prime example of a group that resists enormous pressures to assimilate, managing to live within the wider society while rejecting its values and institutions. Hollander and Einwhoner (2004 p. 548) highlight the cyclical nature of relations of dominance and resistance whereby 'domination leads to resistance, which leads to further domination and so on' which encapsulates the history of relations between nomads and the state. While social, economic and policy driven factors have combined to restrict the accommodation and lifestyle options of Gypsies and Travellers, these barriers are not insurmountable through various innovative responses. The following sections will explore how, within a restricted set of options, many community members are able to minimise the impact of changes perceived as antithetical to traditional values.

Identity and Wellbeing

Social, psychological and developmental studies indicate that a strong ethnic identity generally contributes positively to psychological wellbeing (Madrigal 2008). Despite the low social status of Gypsies and Travellers, few accept the views attributed to them by outsiders and their negative profile is continually contested and resisted. McVeigh (1997) notes that in spite of the pervasiveness of anti-Gypsy stereotypes many Gypsies and Travellers remain convinced of their own superiority *vis-a-vis* settled society. One way of negating derogatory labelling is through the inversion of stereotypes associating Gypsies with dirt, crime and disorder. These are reversed and levelled at their 'gorger' neighbours whose standards of cleanliness and hygiene practices were viewed as inferior to their own. One woman argued that

'Gorjers think we're filthy 'dirty Gypsies' they call us but any Gypsy woman living in a house or a trailer would be ladged (shamed) to keep a dirty place our houses are that clean...but the gorjers round here are that dirty I wouldn't let my dogs use their houses for their toilet'

A further arena where their own practices were regarded as superior to their neighbours was in relation to child-rearing with different perceptions of anti-social behaviour forming a major source of conflict. One or two related Gypsy families living in the same neighbourhood could result in large numbers of youths gathering outside. This was frequently perceived by the police, social landlords and neighbours as a potential source of disorder. One woman retorted that *'that's just our way. It doesn't mean anything and how can we say to [son] that he can't see his cousins*

and friends when they come off the site to call?' Powell (2008 p. 97) refers to a 'process of collective identification [which] contributes to a 'we image' among Gypsies and a process of disidentification from the settled population'. This coheres around attitudes and practices regarding hygiene and childrearing practices, which place limits on intergroup relations and contribute to the respective groups' ignorance of each other. Intolerance and prejudice fosters a willingness to complain to the authorities about Gypsy and Traveller youth, which fuels conflicts between neighbours and adds to the association of Gypsies and Travellers with criminality as one woman commented, 'I hate it here. I haven't got my family here and the police are always at my door.' Several participants were critical of their neighbours parenting skills and their refusal to accept responsibility for their children

'They [non Gypsies] cannot take criticism of their families and if you do complain it'll end up in a fight whereas Travellers they will...sort their kids out when they play up 'cos we all know each other so 'I'll tell our father' normally does it.'

Regardless of the length of time spent in housing 'histories of mobility' and family ancestry are major components of individual and collective identity. Comments such as 'we're not born to the houses we're raised to live in trailers' were commonplace while the incompatibility of conventional housing with traditional lifestyles and practices formed another aspect of difference and collective identity.

> 'Everything is bad [in housing]. Too many bills, don't like the stairs, we can't have a fire in the garden or cook outside or sit outside talking round the fire 'cos the

neighbours would call the police. We can't even have family funerals like we would in a trailer.'

The possession of a caravan was an important symbol of cultural capital and maintaining the ability to just 'get up and go' even if rarely acted upon could significantly enhance wellbeing. Regulations prohibiting the stationing of caravans outside social housing or stipulating the duration that houses can be left vacant placed significant constraints on semi-nomadic practices. Over 65 per cent of those interviewed reported travelling at some point of the year even if only to attend one or two horse fairs or other culturally important events. A number of parents reported sending their children to spend time with relatives who lived on sites or still travelled to ensure, as one woman said 'they don't forget their roots'. In other cases a 'rediscovery' of core cultural values and return to traditional lifestyles may feature as a strategy of cultural resistance to assimilation, an Irish Traveller for example noting that 'my boys all raised in houses and now they're all on the road. They wanted to live like their grandfolks not like a country person [non Traveller]'. Maintaining a sense of collective identity is essential to individual wellbeing as a female resident on a private site commented

"...the condenseness of the travelling community keeps it alive without that we'd disintegrate which is what the government want. That'll never happen even if they put us all in houses they'll always be who they are.'

Housing, wellbeing and the recreation of community

Residential concentrations of housed Gypsies and Travellers were identified in all of the study areas, with some estates containing 40-50 per cent Gypsy/Traveller households. In some cases this was a result of local authority approaches to managing nomadic communities by moving them en masse into newly built council accommodation following mass evictions or site closures. Another mechanism behind residential enclaves was through an active and conscious approach to the housing allocation system. As priority is given to those with existing family connections in an area, respondents often applied to be housed on estates where a network of relatives were in close proximity. Access to informal sources of knowledge have also allowed for a significant degree of movement within housing. A trend of frequent movement between houses was identified as participants exchanged premises through complex networks of carefully planned transfers until they were able to settle closer to their family and wider support system. As one respondent observed

> 'As much as people try to separate Gypsies and Travellers in housing in this area they are wheeling and dealing to be in houses near their own families, so then you end up around this area with estates full of travellers, and unfortunately people around them don't understand why they want to be together. But it is that family network.'

Access to social support networks is a key determinant of psychological wellbeing (Turner 1981) and in all the study areas references to the positive aspects of having relatives and/or other Gypsies and Travellers living nearby were prominent: *'There*

are a lot of Travellers round here and that's a good thing because we're in and out of each other's houses'; Another participant remarked that 'Yeah there are loads of them (Travellers) round here and that's good 'cos we'd go mental otherwise, we have nothing to do with the gorgers.' Others mentioned the security that comes from being part of a localized and close-knit community, which both expresses and reinforces solidarity.

> 'I got family all over this estate there's so many of us the gorjers wouldn't dare give us any trouble that's the best thing about being here, my aunts and cousins are always in our place'.

Thus while housing can be experienced as extremely isolating and damaging to wellbeing, the mechanisms through which it is allocated and exchanged means it can be utilized in a highly versatile manner facilitating the continuation of community structures and networks in a new context.

CONCLUSION

Bancroft (2005) notes that beneath the heterogeneity of Gypsy Traveller and Roma groups worldwide the common factors uniting these disparate groups are exclusion and prejudice. While attention has focused either on the small minority with no legal stopping place who resort to camping in parks and playing fields or on well publicised evictions such as Dale Farm in Essex, the plight of those 'settled', often unwillingly, in conventional housing is generally overlooked. Similarly the logic of forcing people into an already severely overstretched supply of social housing, when they are prepared to provide their own accommodation is rarely questioned. The drive to settlement regardless of human cost raises the question of whether political rhetoric supporting diversity, minority lifestyles and equal rights is motivated primarily by political expedience and as a diversion from more deep-rooted economic and class based social divisions.

The settlement of Britain's formerly nomadic communities is also relevant to questions surrounding the role of social support networks in offsetting destructive external pressures and preventing the more damaging impacts of those pressures on individual and communal wellbeing. The concept of cultural resilience is important in comprehending the processes which either assist housed Gypsies and Travellers to adapt or alternatively to succumb to individual and cultural trauma. For participants the ability to form spatially bounded networks provided a vital source of support and solidarity while providing a means of both reaffirming collective identity and resisting dispersal and assimilation. These forms of cultural resistance represent 'low profile techniques' through which groups lacking in economic or political power are able to 'deny or mitigate claims made by appropriating classes' (Scott 1985 p. 302). Indeed the ability to resist policies antithetical to their way of life play an important symbolic role in raising self-esteem and avoiding the erosion of identity with significant impacts on the participant's sense of wellbeing.

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