

Accountability to Research Participants: Unresolved Dilemmas and Unravelling Ethics

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Abstract

Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of Romani Gypsy groups in England (1996-2000), along with data from follow-up work involving original and additional participants (2005-ongoing), this paper explores several ethical issues that arose. It traces developing relationships across a thirteen year period, identifying the problems of attempting to construct a 'research community' consisting of individuals with diverse lifestyles, and at times, conflicting agendas. It problematises issues concerning the negotiation and maintenance of access, and considers, also, the prioritization of certain voices at the expense of others, and the difficulties of 'openness' when the researcher is unsure where a project is heading.

Rather than engaging with a full literature review of the themes discussed, this paper seeks to highlight the situated negotiation of ethics within a specific research context. The focus is on shifting events in which official codes of practice do not seem to provide an adequate means of navigation.

The paper argues that it is not sufficient for the researcher to pay lip-service to superficial guidelines, calling, instead, for deeper reflection that might lead to greater honesty with both oneself and the community/communities involved in research. It implies a need to react quickly to events in the field, informing participants about any perceived flaws and ambiguities in the original research design that may have emerged during data collection and led to changes of direction. Finally, it recommends that participants are fully involved in processes, including those that are interpretive, and that they, too, share any benefit of considering the research study, retrospectively, as an historical artefact.

Keywords – Gypsy-Travellers; Marginalised groups; Reluctant participants; Access; Researcher-participant relationships; Ethics.

Introduction

By its nature, ethnographic research is liable to include processes that cannot be planned and are situational (Luders, 1995). Researchers are likely to ‘find their own ways in the life world under study’ (Flick, 2009:235). Despite the fact that for at least three decades there have been calls for growing transparency regarding the background of studies, along with a tendency to confess to practices that might be seen to place subsequent research outcomes in doubt (Lareau, 1989; Whyte, 1981), it remains daunting for researchers to admit to such practices. In effect, it continues to be likely that studies will be reported without such information.

Whether or not the researcher is candid about such concealment, there remain significant ethical dilemmas. It would be risky for any researcher to embark on a relationship with new participants by emphasizing the messy nature of data collection and the unpredictability of outcomes. Many, potentially fruitful, collaborations might never get off the ground. Moreover, if methods cannot be fully predicted at the outset, and if procedural amendments are liable due to uncertainties, it becomes impossible for the researcher to be explicit with regard to the likely nature of changing directions. And while it is possible to inform participants at the outset as to the prospect of changing emphases, or even overall direction, the feasibility of consultation with all concerned remains unlikely in anything other than a restricted project. There is a strong case to be made for a position that involves the sharing of such information from the time at which the researcher becomes aware of deviation from the original course, but in reality, this will often be difficult to manage.

This paper does not set out to provide answers to these dilemmas; it simply provides examples, portraying the manner in which resentments can arise within a research community, and considers some of the options for the researcher. It also seeks to acknowledge the way in which there cannot be a single relationship with a research community; any project is actually based on a complex mosaic of interactions in which approaches towards ethical guidelines become fluid and variable. Yet at the start of a project forms are signed off signifying adherence to institutional and professional codes as if they are going to be followed with rigorous consistency.

Embarking on my initial research with Romani Gypsy participants in the UK, my temptation was to proceed as if I were dealing with a single monolithic community. There were several reasons for this other than just plain ignorance. While the differences between diverse communities of Gypsy/Travellers groups had been outlined by an earlier generation working in the field (see, for instance, Acton, 1974; Adams, 1975; Fraser, 1995; Kenrick & Bakewell, 1990; Rehfisch, 1975), it was problematic to obtain clear distinctions from insider accounts. Attempting to identify differences among groups seemed only to create confusion. In reports and legislation there was a tendency to treat all Travelling communities as a single group, with (sometimes implicit) references to a collective ethnicity and passing mention of shared cultural customs, traditions and economic practices. In the allocation of pitches on sites, there remains a tendency to act as if there is a single community. Besides, Gypsy participants are known to be evasive about their origins. It seemed prudent and strategically sensible to carry on with research, working within a process allowing for self-ascription (Liegeois, 1986). Thirteen years later I am still involved in research projects with the same communities. I have become much better at treating those with whom I am working on an individual basis. Nevertheless, there remain unresolved issues about the representation of different (often competing) voices. In dealing with the web of relationships between these participant voices and that of the researcher, it is relatively easy to subscribe to an ideological position that supports such concepts as *heteroglossia* and *polyphony* (Bakhtin, 1984), but somewhat more difficult, in practice, to incorporate them in the representation of groups. This remains a theoretical, ethical and methodological challenge.

A fuller description of the first phases of my research with Gypsy communities is provided elsewhere (see, e.g. Levinson, 2007a), while I have also explored themes that highlight the opacity of the research process (Levinson, 2004). In my own research, what began as a process of seeking answers to specific questions evolved into more open and wide-ranging inquiry, including the collection of life stories (Levinson, 2007b). From a relatively early stage, interviews became increasingly unstructured and informal, occurring in a number of contexts, inside or outside trailers, in houses, fields, cars, or pubs. This was a long way from my starting point: I had begun with the intention of exploring issues relating to school education, discovering that there was a need for holistic understandings, particularly concerning the nature of learning at

home. As will become evident, in some cases I forgot that I had gone beyond issues for which I had received consent, at least initially.

Okely's (1983, pp. 40-44) account of the background to her own study of a Gypsy group raises important issues about research with marginalised, secretive communities. Disarmingly candid about the deceptions she employed to gain trust, her description indicates calculation and ingratiation. From the outset, Okely concealed her research role, content to allow her participants to continue with certain misconceptions - e.g. that she was in trouble with the police. In effect, the establishment of trust was achieved through the evasion of truthfulness.

The gains of such deception for Okely went far beyond the negotiation of access, and her work invites another question: would it have been possible to have acquired such rich information about the community she was studying had she been open about her intentions from the outset? Covert research has sometimes been justified on the grounds that the benefits of greater understanding outweigh the potential harm to research subjects (Herrara, 1999; Lee, 1993:145). Such a position needs to be treated with caution, and entails the risk of opening the door to ideas such as those proposed by Helm (1985). In particular, Helm argued for a distinction between the concepts of *clandestine* and *secret* research, suggesting that covert research in the latter context was acceptable. The transparency of this semantic ploy has been quite correctly criticized (Berreman, 1996), but there remains a need to analyze the underlying motives. Above all, Helm's proposal reflects a thirst for research outcomes. It is easy to criticize the proposal for being not merely disingenuous but lacking morality. At the same time, there is a need to admit that the very nature of much ethnographic work - its openness and uncertainty - is such that a cunning researcher can easily circumvent ethical fences that are nominally in place. I would like to consider some ways in which this has been the case in my own work.

The unpredictable nature of access

Only some years after embarking on my initial research project was I able to understand with some clarity the reasons for the difficulties experienced in the first phases. To begin with, one is

following in the footsteps of others. In the words of one participant: “We are never quick to place our trust in others, but after Okely (see above) we are still more wary.” In retrospect, it seems fairly obvious, but for the new researcher (inexperienced and zealous as (s)he is likely to be) the project in hand seems somewhat bounded by its own nature and objectives. At that stage, it is difficult to comprehend the ways in which relationships are constructed around an abstruse framework of previous interactions with others.

My initial contact with Romani Gypsy families had been shaped by conventional perceptions of *sponsors* and *gatekeepers*. When dealing with a group that is not easily accessed, it is only natural to seek the help of those with an existing connection. It was, perhaps, inevitable that my initial relationships with Gypsy children and their families were going to be constructed within the framework of relationships with those working with the Traveller Education Service and with teachers. The problem for the ethnographer is that any ensuing relationships are to some degree pre-defined by those relationships with others. Only when I began to appear on sites and negotiate my own relationships could I break free from those constraints.

As many early visits were unannounced, it was never possible to predict responses, and these often shaped ensuing relationships. Each research environment produced its own dynamics. As an outsider, I found that my attempts to make contact were affected by the circumstances of previous Gypsy/Gadje encounters. (1) Though accepting my reason for visiting at face-value, some of those approached told me that they were not willing to co-operate as they had often felt exploited in the past by researchers. The general consensus was that little, if anything, tangible resulted from their perspective through co-operation. A few people expressed suspicions that I was not actually a researcher. It became apparent that my relationships were not shaped merely by those that had occurred with other researchers, but with journalists, police officers and the entire Gadje universe.

At times it was difficult not to view access as an empowerment issue. By their very nature, some sites are particularly intimidating to outsiders. Visits to them can easily become construed as trial by ordeal, a factor bound to alter *professional* behaviour. I began my research feeling that experiences belong to the participant; that the choice is that of the participant whether or not to

share them; and that the researcher in no circumstance should attempt to influence, coerce or bribe the researched into sharing any information he or she wishes to retain. My intention was genuinely never to transgress or violate any of the above principles. The following account of a visit to one site encapsulates some of the realities and highlights the contest for control:

FIELDNOTES, December, 1997

Finally, got to this guy, pottering about in front of a battered, old caravan, with a mangy-looking dog for company - a cross between a pit-bull and something else not quite so cuddly. Both of them were eyeing me warily as I approached. Soon the dog started barking and straining at the frayed rope which held it. The swarthy, thick-set guy (presumably Smithy), in his mid-fifties, perhaps, half-turned to his dog: "Stop that racket, you cunt." Quickly, I gave him the usual patter, what I'm researching and why, all the while taking anxious glances over my shoulder to check how the rope was holding up. No comment. Smithy (2) heard me out:

ME: So, would you mind answering a few questions?

No response

ME: Well, is there anything you'd like to say?

SMITHY: Yes - fuck off.

Now generally I respect subjects' wishes – what's more this Smithy didn't look as if he had a great deal to say. More pertinently, I didn't much like the expression on his face -nor that on his dog's either, for that matter. But on this occasion, I felt bloody-minded. It had been a frustrating day: a long drive, nothing to show. Moreover, I realized that I had been set up by the other men, who had sent me there merely to get rid of me, whilst also, perhaps, getting their own back on Smithy for some past altercation. I persisted.

ME: What I'm hoping is that this research will be of some use in . . .

SMITHY: I'm not fucking interested in what you say your work's about. I told you to fuck off.

ME: Look, I tell you what. I won't even ask you any questions. Just talk to me for five minutes - about whatever you like, then I'll fuck off.

It seemed to me that his expression softened. And if I wasn't imagining it, so did his dog's. By using his language, not mine, I seemed to have become a person, not someone from an official world. Perhaps, too, I had passed some test of maleness.

SMITHY: Buy me a drink, and I'll talk to you.

In the event, Smithy gave me more than an hour of his time and provided some valuable insights. It emphasised the need for persistence, and also highlighted a significant aspect of data collection: some of the most interesting material came from those who initially were reluctant to speak to me. In such cases, access was often 'bought' with a pint. In Smithy's case, granting me access to him, gained him access to a local pub, noted for its 'No Travellers' sign in the doorway, and while we were there, he would look up at times to glower challengingly at the barman.

There is a tendency to use the term 'access' as if it were some immutable, fixed state, the implication being that, once negotiated, access ceases to be an issue. Experience soon taught me that this was far from the case: what seemed acceptable one day was evidently not the next. Factors here ranged from external events - death in the family, illness, eviction, other forms of harassment from authorities - to the mood of respondents on a given day. Sometimes, when it was discovered that I had spoken to a certain new participant, an already established relationship broke down. I had failed to respect some boundary established on either personal or communal lines. Sometimes, I suspected people had been told not to speak to me. I discovered that this had occurred on at least two occasions when children had informed parents about certain conversations that had taken place - 'At times I had the impression that participants were playing

a game: constructing defences, sharing intimacies, withdrawing again' (Levinson, 2004).

A clear factor in all of this was power relationships. A participant might be gregarious during one encounter, suspicious the next. "Do you think we've just got bugger-all else to do but sit around and chat to you?" one previously mild participant challenged me one day. The same person was as friendly as could be on my next visit, but on a subsequent occasion accused me of taking too much for granted. "In what way?" I asked. "Coming here like this . . . everything all nice and chummy," came the reply. Once again, I got the impression of external pressure, and it is perhaps significant to record that visits to trailers were invariably public, observed by neighbours. 'Such instances reflect the partially concealed politics of such encounters, and perhaps, too, it is worth recalling that in a society whose relationships are usually casual, the pre-arranged, formal interview is in itself unnatural and causes unease' (Levinson, 2004).

Contextual factors, too, could shape the nature of the relationship. I first met one participant, Tizzie, outside the school-gates, when her two children introduced me at the end of the day. She talked enthusiastically about her children's progress at the school. I met her some weeks later, by chance, in a local supermarket, on which occasion she was exceedingly chatty, appearing to relish the opportunity to share (unsolicited) gossip, of a salacious nature, about other adults who lived on her site. It is unclear as to the extent to which this was due to the fact that this encounter took place in a neutral environment, but the subsequent occasion on which we met, when I was visiting her site, Tizzie pointedly ignored me.

Further deconstruction of the concept of *access* is necessary, for quite apart from its unpredictability, there is another feature that is all too easily overlooked: degrees of access. This might entail, for example, access to items initiated by participants rather than researcher, or access to opinions but not to experience. The variable nature of access is likely to be concealed in final reports that are concerned to convince the reader as to validity, and such aspects as specificity, relativity and fluctuation of access are likely to be glossed over.

Ethical fault-lines : Openness, risk and flexibility

It is tempting to use that which has been stated above as evidence to defend research that shifts direction. The nature of access shapes the nature of the information gathered. It is possible to portray the researcher - as much as participants - as being a *victim* of the vagaries of the research process. This would be to understate a certain degree of agency in the choice to allow a project to develop. In my case, I found the research process at least as challenging and exciting as it was frustrating. I allowed the initial terms to drift; regularly, I was acquiring information that went beyond the initial remit.

At what point, one wonders, might a project be considered to have become covert? To what extent is a researcher misleading participants when (s)he her/himself does not know where it is heading? Initially, my attempts to justify my study revolved around the position that research was beneficial: only with such knowledge and understanding could one hope for changes to an educational system increasingly shaped by didacticism and intolerance of non-conformity, in which the outcome of much research seemed to be the confirmation and support of pre-established positions. I allowed this initial conviction to justify enquiry that was somewhat tangential.

At the same time, I would like to offer a counter-position, in the proposition that a too rigorous adoption of a certain code of ethics is liable to lead to sterility and to obstruct the processes of dynamic research. In effect, the unpredictability of a project, the cause of ethical concerns, is also a strength. An extreme example might be found in the study of gang culture as recounted by Venkatesh (2008), where an initially conventional study of gangs in Chicago was transformed by the elevation of a key participant who took on the role of dialogical partner. Had the research remained in its original conception, it is highly unlikely that such insights as those obtained by Venkatesh on gang culture would have been possible.

As suggested already, my own research began as a restricted study. The focus, at the outset of data collection in the 1990s, the initial study, investigated reasons for the difficulties encountered by Gypsy children in schools. As it became evident that understandings based on such research

could only be partial, the research gradually moved towards the home environment. Meanwhile, it also became clear that to understand the experiences of children, it was necessary to explore the perspectives of older members of the communities. From my perspective, this seemed to significantly enrich the data that were being gathered. This view was not necessarily shared by participants:

ETHAN (30s): I thought your research was about our kids' education.

ME: It is.

ETHAN: So why are you asking me now about how I feel about moving from my trailer to a house?

ME: Well, as I've been talking to people, I've come to realise that there are all sorts of things involved that affect attitudes, and I think it's important to find out what parents are feeling if I'm going to understand where their children are coming from.

ETHAN: So, what you said the first time was just bollocks, and what you're doing now is trying to find out about lots of new things.

ME: OK – if you want to put it like that, but it's not as if I ever set out to deceive you.

ETHAN: 'course, if I'd known that from the start, I might never have agreed to talk to you.

ME: Fair enough – 'course you can still tell me to get lost.

ETHAN: I can – and I might – but all this time you've been talking to Jack and Crystal (Ethan's children), and I don't know what sort of things *they've* been telling you.

While I had been aware from the outset that my research group might be viewed as marginal, invisible, and above all, vulnerable by almost any definition (see e.g. Quest & Marco, 2003; Wiebel, 1990), it becomes all too easy to forget to differentiate between relative degrees of those conditions. Ethan, it turned out, had cause for particular sensitivity.

Ethical fault-lines : Engagement v. distance

Towards the end of 1817 the poet, John Keats, made allusions in letters to two elements of huge importance to the researcher. The first letter, in November, referred to the matter of empathy: "If a sparrow come before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel." From my own experience, I would suggest that the ethnographer is rather more likely to be in the role of sparrow than poet, but to go along with Keats' proposition, one wonders as to the extent that it is possible to 'take part' in the existence of another. The very fact that there is always the possibility of stepping out of that alternative existence changes its texture. Fairly early in my research I found it quite gratifying that some children with whom I was working asked whether I was Gypsy or Gadje. What was this based on: the fact that I had used a few Romani words; the fact that my manner had evolved from a traditional researcher role towards something more informal and collaborative; the (largely subconscious) amendments to dress code and speech; or simply the fact that I was spending some time with them in home settings without asking questions? It would be gross exaggeration to think that any of this amounted to 'taking part in the existence' of another.

In Keats' view, his fellow poet, Coleridge, deserved to be criticised for not being 'content with half knowledge'; on the contrary, the poet needed to subsume one's own character and experiences, to efface one's own identity by immersing it sympathetically and spontaneously within the subject described. This strikes me as being subtly different to - and moving beyond - the anthropological concept of 'going native'.

At the end of December, 1817, Keats developed his thinking in the area, writing about a concept he described as *negative capability*. This described the quality of selfless receptivity essential to a true poet: "That is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats, 1817). At an early stage of in my own research, I recall having several arguments with my supervisors on the subject of research. What I really wanted was to give an accurate portrait of the experiences and cultural world of my participants, with no 'irritable reaching after fact and reason'. I was already dubious about the ability of an outsider to construct meanings that were free of his/her own experiences and world view. To take a small example, when children described the joys of lamping (hunting rabbits and other small creatures) I found it difficult to share their excitement. There were also certain cultural beliefs and practices that seemed rather alien to non-Gypsies; when I asked participants

to try to explain their significance, it was frequently frustrating for all concerned. Superstitions or belief systems about death are not easily rationalised. It can take far more than a research project to unravel the real meanings; in any event, meanings may differ from one individual (or group) to the next. The fact is that over thirteen years after I began research with Gypsy communities, my understandings are still shifting and deepening.

One reason for this, of course, is that the universe for the communities I have worked with has changed in that period, but perhaps still greater a factor are the changes within myself. It seems almost inevitable that the longer one is in the field with any community, the more difficult it is to sustain the position of *professional stranger* (Agar, 1980). How much simpler it might have been to have stuck with a single research project before moving on to work with other groups! My work began on the premise that greater understanding between communities can only be beneficial; sometimes I have had cause to doubt whether the outcomes reflect this. Has there been greater tolerance? Have schools changed their practices towards the group?

On the other hand, feeling that one belongs to a separate world, one that remains hidden from a wider (mainstream) universe, can imbue those within with a certain strength, as is implied by the following conversation with two girls, Seline and Roseanne (aged 10 and 9):

SEL: We sometimes speak our own language . . . when we don't like something about people

ROS: We call them names. We've got our own words, but I'm not telling you, 'cos it's our code. 'Shorkers' are shoes, 'rackne' means girls, 'gille' means boy, 'shil' is hair. But you know, I could be makin' up all them words.

ME: Why would you want to do that?

ROS: 'cos it's things- for our people, not yours.

ME: What do you think would happen if people who weren't Gypsies got to know it?

SEL: You'd know what we were saying.

ROS: You might use it against us.

ME: In what way?

ROS: Maybe to find out all about us.

SEL: He's trying to do that now.

ROS: I know. That's why I might be making some words up.

At the time the girls said this, I was reminded of the conviction held by the rose in *The Little Prince* that her thorns would offer her protection from the tigers that roamed around her small planet. Nevertheless, it is the perception that is of importance here, and the acquisition of a secret code by the Gadje, potentially, diminishes the Gypsy sense of security. A population under study deserves something tangible in return. My occasional suggestion to participants that the reporting of research might lead to some local change in educational practice, or even, ultimately, some wider policy shift seemed a rather meagre offering: it was all in the realm of future possibility, and seemed scant reward for involvement that entailed an element of social risk, bearing in mind that within some communities any collaboration with non-Gypsies is viewed with suspicion. In the circumstances, it was rather humbling that for some participants, a degree of friendship, and at times, a drink together seemed to suffice as payment.

The ensuing relationships between researcher and researched results in a greater dilemma for the researcher: there being a need to dialectically fuse the two functions of commitment and distance, coming to a place whereby the research subject, the other, becomes not an object but a dialogical partner (Koepping, 1987:28). This is far easier said than done. My field-notes reflect the difficulties I was having in maintaining a distance.

FIELDNOTES, MAY 1997, SITE G, CORNWALL

The next interview took place in what might at best be described as a shack, some might say hovel, a building that looked as if it had once been DIY pre-fab, as if it were about to fall apart at any moment, with a range in one corner for heating, and presumably, cooking, bits of rug covering the floor, a window that was jammed a home-made door, and washing and toilet facilities across a yard. The grandparents were sitting close to the

range when I arrived. Alongside them were their grandson and granddaughter, the latter of whom had been sick. It resembled one of Dorothea Lange's photographs of the Depression, or a scene from 'The Grapes of Wrath', with a kind of permanent impermanence. The scene filled me with a sense of guilt - the role of objective researcher, detached from context, is not easy when one is confronted such poverty of surroundings and by the threadbare clothing of participants. Instead of concentrating on my interview schedule, I could not help but wonder as to what might have been lost by Gypsies through adaptation to an essentially sedentary existence on sites. What did I know of this world? What right did I have to come barging in with my questions? Gradually, I was struck by the simple dignity of these people. The old man's pride in ownership - ("This house, every little screw, belongs to me. I love me own property.") - increased my sense of humility. I began to notice other things: the pictures of children on the walls; the neatly sewn-up clothes, etc.

Initially, I had been mindful of the contention that it was not enough not to be a threat to research participants; one needed to act in such a way as to be seen not to be a threat (Sluka, 2007). I was drawn into a desire to help those with whom I was working, sometimes with little knowledge as to the potential outcomes:

FIELDNOTES, March, 1998, SITE D, Devon

Grace (a grandmother, in her sixties) brought up the issue of her course. This is the fourth time I have visited Grace and Frank, who have always been very affable. When Frank was out chatting to someone during my last visit (just over a month ago), Grace had confided that she had enrolled on a literacy course at a local college. In fact, two other women I have met previously have also admitted to making such a decision, but Grace stands out in that she is, by some way, the oldest, and also the most tentative about the plan. She asked me what I thought, and I said that it sounded like a brilliant idea: no-one is ever too old to learn, I observed. When I asked how she thought it would make her life better, she replied that she would like to "go down Tesco's with me 'ead 'eld 'igh, pickin'

up this tin and that and knowing what it says on all them blummin' labels". The only problem was Frank: it would seem that he is vehemently opposed to the idea.

Now she said that she had not informed Frank yet. "Maybe I'll wait till he's had a few," she joked. I rather wish that she had waited till Frank had 'had a few', because she chose my visit on this occasion to announce her news. I think she brought up the issue in front of me, hoping for some support. Frank's response was blunt: "What's the bloody use of books?" He turned to me: "It's not for us, all that; it's for you people." I am pretty sure he holds me responsible for his wife's decision, even though her plan to enrol was something that Grace had mentioned on my very first visit here as her 'big secret'. I tried to suggest that it was not something that was going to change their lives. Somewhat misguidedly, I also tried to make a joke of it. Frank had complained on one visit that he can't trust Grace at the shops because she's always buying "strange stuff, you know, exotic-like, what don't agree with me". "Maybe she'll bring home food you like when she can read the labels," I now said. He asked me if I was "taking the piss", and went on to say that he was not too old to put my "punch my fuckin' lights out", and if his wife "goes on like this, she knows what to expect 'n all."

Although things became a little less fraught, subsequently, I am left with an uneasy feeling that it is partly due to my intervention that Grace translated a vague plan into concrete action. My initial visit was to talk about the education of her children and grandchildren, and at one point, I had observed that her two granddaughters were doing particularly well at school. She had expressed pride, along with apprehension regarding the possible consequences of the girls staying on much longer at school. I feel that my subsequent enthusiasm for the outcomes of education may have been a factor in Grace's decision.

Research Community or Communities : competing agendas

Giroux (1992) observed that ‘history is constituted in dialogue and some of the voices that make up that dialogue have been eliminated’. It is necessary to understand the mechanisms by which certain voices become privileged while others are relatively disempowered. One also wonders how and to what extent this pattern might be avoided. With regard to this, it is necessary to appreciate that the researcher has only a certain amount of control: for the process does not only concern power relationships between researcher and researched but those that occur between competing members of the research community.

This leads on to an important issue: what is the ethical position when the interests of certain members of the group under study conflict with those of others? With regard to my own work, such tensions have emerged on the basis of gender (Levinson & Sparkes, 2006), age-group, patterns of work and lifestyle (Levinson & Sparkes, 2004).

One dilemma that has recurred almost too often to mention regards engagement with school:

FIELDNOTES, NOVEMBER, 2007, SITE R (Private site), Somerset

Visit to Tommy and Kathleen today again emphasised the continuing difficulties with decisions about school. There was the opportunity to speak to all of the children. Bobby (age 14) told me that he is desperate to stop going to school, and it is only because of his mother that he is still there. He is impatient to be out working with his father, Tommy and his uncles, and feels that he is just wasting time at school and becoming depressed. Kathleen’s response is that there is barely enough work for Tommy, let alone, Bobby, and only through additional qualifications will her son be able to ‘make something of himself’. She is also worried that if Bobby stops going to school, Adam (age 10) will say that he does not want to go either, and Jade (age 11) will have no-one to look after her, and will get bullied again.

In a separate conversation Jade tells me that she is desperate to continue at school, but only if her big brother is there to look after her. Adam just says that school is ‘boring’.

“Everything feels like it’s falling apart,” Kathleen commented: “All this effort to get them there.” She asked me to have a word with Tommy.

With some apprehension, I brought this up with Tommy. I know from experience that the topic depresses him. He suggested that we had a stroll outside the trailer. Pointing to the hills in the distance, he asked me what I thought. I told him how peaceful it looked, especially on a late afternoon such as this. “It’s pretty enough,” he said, “but for me, it’s like a prison.”

Tommy told me that he worried that the children were becoming more ‘gadjeified’ with each passing day. “Soon they won’t be able to remember all the things I learned them when they were nippers.” He said that Kathleen was quite right in saying that there was not enough work for Bobby, but a big part of the reason was because they had settled here and were doing hardly any travelling. “How can you expect to find work when you’re stuck in one place?” He added that, deep down, for the sake of the kids, he knew that his wife was right. “I love Kathleen more than anything, but this thing is breaking us up”, he said. “Our people were never meant to stick in one place like this.”

We said no more. We just watched the setting sun and returned indoors. Tommy thanked me as I left. “For what?” I asked, feeling forlorn at being so helpless in the face of their unhappiness. He shrugged. “For listening, I guess.”

If the interests of individual family members diverge, how much more is that the case across communities? Those living in different circumstances - e.g. on large official sites, on small private sites, in houses - are likely to have diverse concerns and interests. As a researcher who has established longer-term relationships, one is often put into the position of being asked to represent the viewpoint of a particular family member or of a certain group. Quite simply, there is no correct line for all concerned. The problems seem more acute when working with a community that has been, traditionally, at a disadvantage with its dealings with a mainstream community. Of course, in most research it is possible to take the line that you are there as a

researcher. With longer-term, ethnographic work, it is less easy to resist being drawn in as an intermediary. Most awkward of all, perhaps, are the situations when you discover that you are being used by certain community members or groups to cause trouble for others. There have been several occasions when I have been given information, mischievously, with that very purpose.

Ethical fault-lines : The Prioritisation of certain voices over others

In the reporting of any in-depth project, it can become almost impossible to create order and coherence out of a heterogeneous web of meanings. The greater the number of those involved, the more difficult the process. As stated above, my research with Gypsy communities evolved from mainly school-centred fieldwork to work in home contexts. Appearing on sites, gaining access 'from cold', was time-consuming. When opportunities came for *snowballing* strategies (Renzetti & Lee, 1993), I accepted them with alacrity, without any consideration of the implications. This was most problematic at the earliest stages, when I was still acting in the belief that Gypsies could be treated as a homogeneous group. This was not simply recognising the diversity to be found between, for instance, English Romani communities, and those from Scottish and Irish Traveller backgrounds; I simply had no sense of the extent of the differences, rivalries, alliances and antagonisms within those groups.

It was natural that participants would pass me on to friends, but in giving priority to certain voices, I was disempowering others. The matter was addressed somewhat belatedly in my first research project, when I tried to access as many new voices as possible; indeed, I had to be practically dragged away from the field by supervisors.

Traditionally, Gypsy communities operate on rather hierarchical lines. Many conversations over the past thirteen years have been in group contexts, in which certain group members have been reluctant to express views that conflict with those of dominant individuals. While opportunities were sought to explore the attitudes of the relatively disempowered members of communities, it was not always possible to achieve this. Moreover, there were occasions when such individuals

sought to distance themselves from opinions articulated previously upon the discovery that more authoritative group members had expressed conflicting views.

Meanwhile, a further layer of prioritisation was occurring, one that was more subtle and pervasive over a long period. In Rabinow's (1997) view, ideally placed informants are situated at the margins of their societies, from where they are in a position to survey both sides of social fences. This has been very much the case in my own research; those who have provided the greatest insights have often had the capacity to reflect in great depth about the nature of their existence as a consequence of having remained within the mainstream education system and then taken *Gadje* jobs. It is quite possible that their evidence has been skewed by double marginalization: not fully accepted in a *Gadje* world and liable to have been rejected by their own people. In some cases, those involved have kept their Romani identities secret. There is not the space here to include even a small proportion of evidence reflecting this, but a couple of quotes from the participants below convey something of the emotional space inhabited by those involved:

My older brother has commented that I betrayed everything my family stood for. I feel that I've been in the wrong places and done the wrong things. I'm imprisoned in a different world. And at the same time, I've never left the world I should have belonged to. You can't choose not to be, however much relationships, and social, emotional and psychological landscapes drift. (Saki, 30s)

I have always felt that my life resembled a train that went off the rails. Never able to go back from where you came and yet never quite managing to move away. Maybe you can't have both cultural belief and educated opinion without emotional conflict. (Ruth, 20s)

Such profound comments came from those who had crossed borders and were able to survey both sides. Overall, they were atypical, but their testimony seemed so important that it could not be left on the peripheries. As in other spheres, the victims of this tendency were the less articulate.

Discussion

This paper has focused on several ethical issues that affect relationships between researcher and participants. Amongst other aspects, it has recounted scenes that highlight specific difficulties, relating to access and to the maintenance of relationships, in the context of research with marginal - and often defensive groups. It has explored issues of openness on the part of the researcher, implying that in actuality, and whatever the intentions, honesty and transparency can be almost impossible to achieve. Indeed, overall, it might be noted that there are no easy solutions to the dilemmas that arise. In the light of the nuances and complexities around any principles that might govern the researcher-researched relationship, it is important to consider how current structures address the issues portrayed here. A personal view is that audit systems constructed to cover ethical issues are unlikely to amount to any more than window dressing. The likelihood is that the intricacies arising from relationships in the field will be collapsed into some check-list that is, at best, superficial, and at times, possibly meaningless.

In establishing frameworks for any study, it is argued here that the researcher needs to acknowledge the diversity within groups: in making sense of the world, we simplify it. Implicitly, we may be aware that any group is likely to consist of numerous communities, yet there remains a tendency towards collective study. Scientists used to study the Portuguese Man o' War as if it were as a single life-form, before it was recognised as a *siphonophore*, not one organism but a colony of creatures. It may be helpful for researchers to remember the opposite when dealing with human communities: groups are actually made up of individuals, and the interests of the group do not necessarily converge with those of the individuals that constitute it.

A central purpose of this paper has been to consider the nature of relationships between researcher and researched, in a context of fluid (sometimes volatile) dynamics within groups. In the case of long-term work with a specific group, the culmination of fieldwork is not in the form of articles/ reports, etc.; these are merely part of an ongoing process. Representations will have an impact on those ongoing relationships, and to avoid some breakdown, it is critically important

to arrive at a place in which there is true collaboration. At the same time, there is a need for realism.

In his analysis of the writing of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin made a distinction between the traditional monologic novel, in which the voice of the writer-narrator retains authority, and the polyphonic novel, in which there is a different relationship between narrator and character, with the voice of latter never ultimately submerged by that of the former; the author is, along with the characters, just one consciousness. In the distribution of power, this seems an ideal scenario for a researcher, but the reality is rather different; in actual fact, the author-researcher can never be placed in this single role: through the sequencing of voices (s)he is a puppeteer, a conductor. Even if allowance is made for complete sharing of interpretations, only through some radical narrative experiment might a fixed hierarchy of meanings be avoided. All of which does not mean that the polyphonic model should not be utilised; on the contrary, one should continue the search for textual space where discursive complexity and dialogic interplay of voices can be accommodated (Clifford 1998).

Notes

1. *Gadje* - often pejorative term used by Gypsies for non-Gypsies
2. All the names used here are pseudonyms, except in cases where participants specifically requested otherwise.
3. It should be noted that Gypsies live in a number of different contexts, and it is therefore, potentially misleading to generalize. However, it remains true that certain types of knowledge, constituting an identifiable skills-base, have persisted across communities. These extend beyond the actual knowledge itself, and relate to the sense of a specific Gypsy identity.
4. (1) *USE OF TERMS* - Researchers differ as to preferences regarding the terms *Gypsy* and *Traveller*. In the UK, fieldworkers involved with the groups concerned have in recent years tended to opt for the latter. In view of the negative associations with the term *Gypsy*, there is a certain political correctness here. While each term has its own connotations, my own decision has been determined by the self-ascription of many

participants in my study, who tended to select the term Gypsy, often on the grounds that they wished to distinguish themselves from New Age or New Travellers – though some did express a preference for the terms Rom and Roma. My choice is also influenced by Liegeois' (1986:16) rejection of Traveller, nomad and other "non-ethnic" generic terms on the grounds that, by avoiding any ethnic content, these labels effectively deny the existence of a specifically Gypsy culture. I have used the Gypsy term for non-Gypsy. Gadjo (sing.); Gadje (pl.) - spelt in various ways elsewhere: Gorgio, Gauje, Gadze, etc., whenever this was used in speech. Participants themselves have often ignored traditional singular and plural endings, using the terms Gadje and Gadjes, instead. It should also be noted that the word Gadje has pejorative connotations, and when not reporting conversations, I have opted for the term non-Gypsy.

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