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When participants don't wish to participate in Participatory Action Research, and when others participate on their behalf: The representation of communities by *real* and *faux* participants.

Martin Levinson

Professor M.P.Levinson, Institute of Education, Bath Spa University, UK

Address: Newton Park, Bath, BA2 9BN

Tel.: +44 (0)1225 8758755

E-mail: [M.Levinson@bathspa.ac.uk](mailto:M.Levinson@bathspa.ac.uk)

PhD – University of Exeter

MA – University of Southampton

PGCE – University of Brighton

BA Hons – University of Leeds

Dr Martin Levinson is Professor of Education at Bath Spa University. His work is in educational anthropology, and particularly, social and cultural contexts of learning. His research is with marginalized groups, with a focus on the interface between culture, identity and education. He has worked with Gypsy/Romani communities for over two decades. He has also been involved in research/writing involving other groups, including Indigenous Australian and Sami communities, migrants, youngsters excluded from school, and most recently, disabled people.

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**Abstract**

This article focuses on methodological and epistemological issues arising from a research project with two Gypsy communities (2010-2012) in the South West of England. Although the two communities seem to share cultural roots and values, and live within a few miles of each other, they have contrasting experiences within the education system and very different relationships with the surrounding mainstream communities.

The article explores difficulties emerging as a consequence of the contrasting positions of the participant communities, the differing research aspirations and practices across the research team, and also the tensions between ethnographic work and participatory action research. It queries the problematic nature of participation, and introduces the concept of the *faux-participant*.

**Keywords**

Roma; Gypsies; ethnography; participatory action research

## **Introduction**

*Why should we continue to provide private zoos for anthropologists?* demanded Vine Deloria Jr. in one of the most stark and abrasive challenges ever made to the research community (Deloria, 1973). Deloria's critique reverberated far beyond those who had been carrying out research on Indian reservations in America (see e.g. Biolsi & Zimmerman, 1997); it invited all anthropological researchers to consider their practices, leading to more applied and inclusive approaches. Deloria's scathing comments contributed to the demise of colonialist sensibilities, leading to radically different social relationships between researchers and researched (Geertz, 1988). The critique helped stimulate a shift in the way of working with communities, for example away from Lewin's conception of action research to the ideas of Arendt and Freire around notions of praxis. However, it would be both naïve and complacent to assume that there followed a rejection of established models and a complete change of the ethnographic landscape. The fact is that many communities have continued with little voice or presence in projects about them, remaining, instead, 'imprisoned in the anthropologists' words' (King, 1997, p.115).

This persistence of ingrained patterns is not necessarily a wilful act on the part of researchers. The best intentions of ethnographers can be undermined by engagement with communities that, for various reasons, may not share the aspirations of researchers. Co-operation may be rejected - or apparently, accepted then withdrawn at some point along the path. Or perhaps, some community members might be collaborating while others remain apart. After all, communities are not monolithic, homogeneous entities, and invariably, researchers end up representing the views of certain members while the voices of others are lost.

This discussion explores some of the difficulties of carrying out sustained and consistent participatory research when one of the participant communities was cautious about

engagement in the project. It considers, too, further unevenness and fragmentation ensuing from differing conceptions of research (and desired outcomes) across the research team that were never fully resolved. Rather than addressing the tensions between ethnographic work and participatory action research, the researchers left blurred boundaries between them.

It is not only about differences within communities, but differences of approach among researchers engaged in the same project. Such discontinuity arose from tensions between ethnographic approaches that had been employed by the PI in past work and participatory action research principles envisaged by the Co-Is. The intention here is not to attempt a comprehensive and systematic comparison between ethnographic approaches and those encountered in Participatory Action Research, though clearly, there is a certain convergence between the approaches and values found in Critical Ethnography and those to be found in Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and other participatory / collaborative approaches. The purpose here is simply to reflect upon wider issues emerging from differing conceptions of research across the research team and inequalities in terms of participant voice.

### **Negotiating a path between parallel but discrete research traditions**

As already noted, the gap between ethnographic approaches and PAR has narrowed over time with the movement in ethnography away from *reading over the shoulders of natives to reading alongside them* (Lassiter, 2005, p.3). Proximity between the respective positions shrinks still further with the growth of subjectivity that inevitably ensues from this shift, and on the surface, at least, it seems only a small step from here to the PAR commitment to co-develop projects *with* people rather than *for* people (McIntyre, 2008). However, while this changing ethnographic practice may lead to a closer position to that encountered in PAR, it still falls some way short of an explicit agenda of change, empowerment and social justice as

envisioned, for instance, by Freire (1970). And whether or not PAR is viewed as a method or as a mere orientation towards research (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), it will inevitably instigate approaches that go beyond those encountered in most ethnographic work.

Some of the key roots of PAR emerge from the work of Freire and Fals Borda, and in particular, Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientisation*, whereby the oppressed become agents of social and political transformation. This imagined the shifting of research in a way that would re-locate the oppressed and marginalised from the periphery to the centre of social inquiry. It might be noted that PAR has been proposed as being particularly appropriate for work with exploited or oppressed groups (Khanlou & Peter, 2005). There is a risk that PAR can remain as more of a vague principle than as something concrete. With regard to one project in Scotland, Titterton & Smart (2008) identified three ways in which action transpired in practice: (a) through the transfer of knowledge and skills to the community involved; (b) through the enhancing of self-worth and self-esteem among participants; and (c) by giving participants a voice in improving services.

As noted by Jordan (2009), it remains difficult to map the origins and development of PAR, partly, as a consequence of a tendency to use the term interchangeably with Action Research. Further difficulties arise as a result of its hybrid nature, and Jordan depicts PAR as an amalgam of approaches and epistemologies drawn from participatory research, action research, feminist praxis, critical ethnography, aboriginal research methodologies, transformative education, critical and eco-pedagogies and popular and community education. Jordan also notes that versions of PAR (and more generically, participatory research) have not necessarily been linked to radical politics and the emancipation of oppressed or marginalised groups. Meanwhile, Jordan perceives the development of critical ethnography as paralleling PAR, utilising similar methodologies and sharing an ethical commitment to social justice.

However, there are also clear tensions between the Critical Ethnography (CE) and PAR – one deriving from the fact that CE emerges from the academic centres, a more hierarchical and individualised milieu that imposes a distance between researcher and participants, reifies theory over practice, and fits a little uneasily with the democratic and communitarian ethos of PAR.

Still deeper potential conflicts arise between the (classically) neutral, naturalistic element of ethnographic research, and the goal-oriented nature of participatory action-research. However, in the context of the project outlined below, the PI and Co Is sought reassurance in the fact that the process and intended outcomes, working with community members and facilitating reflection that would empower individuals from those communities (see e.g. Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1988), meant that the preference of some team members for PAR was by no means irreconcilable with ethnographic research. In particular, such a purpose was consistent with the traditions of critical ethnography in seeking to highlight and address social inequalities (see, e.g. Carspecken, 2001). From a wider philosophical perspective, the research design appeared to fit in with Habermas' views on communicative action, reducing barriers to participatory research - as distinct, for example, from Foucault's view of communication as embodying pre-existing relationships.

Further complexity developed when one of the Co Is began referring to the project in terms of being CBPR (Community Based Participatory Research). Israel et al (1998) characterised CBPR as research that is based on a set of values that includes the promotion of equal partnerships and co-learning and an explicit commitment to ensuring that research leads to, and is informed by, action. As noted by Banks & Armstrong et al (2013), this description of CBPR could fit equally well with much research that is characterised as PAR. Using different terms, such as community-based participatory research and participatory action research, such research might be viewed as an *approach* rather than a *method* (Minkler &

Wallerstein, 2003). However, there seems to be a slight difference of emphasis: PAR does not necessarily need to incorporate the beliefs and aspirations of a ‘community’, while there is an inference, as communicated by its very title, that CBPR will do just that. Without contradicting itself, PAR might simply embody an attempt to achieve the outcomes of the participants involved in any particular study.

The project described below derived from previous PAR / CBPR work undertaken by the Co Is with Gypsy/Roma/Traveller communities. However, it grew, too, from the wider ethnographic work of the PI, stretching back over two decades. Inevitably, there were some tensions between the ethnographic principles and practices of the PI, and the action-research principles of the wider research team. In the PI’s experience, collaboration had always been between himself and family / community members. The central purpose of the PI’s previous research had been to explore the home-school interface, considering the ways in which culture and identity affected participation within the education system, and the ways in which cultural worlds and the sense of individual and group identities were altered through education. The process had always entailed regular visits to community members to discuss understandings, without any firm intention to change the landscape other than to support the participants through the co-construction of shared understandings. The Co-Is, on the other hand, came from practice-based backgrounds, and achieving change perceived to be of value to community members was perceived as integral.

## **Designing the Project**

This research took place in the South West of England over a three-year project (2009-2012). The project involved youngsters (aged 11 to 17) living on two Gypsy/Traveller sites. A central purpose of the research was to inform the debate on the 14-19 education strategy for improving outcomes from the perspective of vulnerable groups. In particular, it addressed

many of the needs highlighted in education reports and guidelines for that period (e.g. DCSF, 2008; DCSF 2009; Wilkin et al, 2010) in the context of educational inclusion of Gypsy Roma Travellers (GRTs).

As already noted, from the outset there were discrepancies between the ways in which the project was envisaged by the PI and by the Co Is. The PI envisaged the project as being essentially research-based, generating new understandings through collaborative work with participants about the ways in which education was perceived both across the communities involved and across generations. As such, the project was a continuation of work in which the PI had been involved across two decades, whereby understandings and meanings had been co-constructed by the researcher and participants regarding the interface between school and home ideologies, and contrasting value systems, and considering ways in which the tensions between them might be addressed.

For the two Co-Is, the project was conceived in a somewhat different light. One of the Co-Investigators was Equality and Diversity Lead with Cornwall Local Authority, Children's Services. The other Co-I was CPR (Camborne, Pool and Redruth) Learning Partnership Leader for Cornwall Council. Both Co-Is had a strong commitment to ensuring the inclusion of youngsters from Gypsy / Roma / Traveller families beyond primary stage schooling. For both, there was far more concern on their part to achieve change that would establish better practice in schools with regard to the youngsters involved, and to more intensive engagement with the education system on the part of their families, as well as better outcomes as measured by examination results/qualifications.

While the PI and Co Is shared a commitment to working with families, there were differences in the ways in which such collaboration was anticipated. Moreover, while the Co Is had clearly defined ambitions for the project, the PI had no outcomes in mind, other than helping youngsters and their families to reflect on school experiences and to be in a better

position to make choices. More intensive engagement with schools / colleges was not necessarily viewed as a positive outcome by the PI, while the improvement of examination results was not seen as a central research aim. On the other hand, and inevitably, these factors were perceived as being significant by the Co Is, whose employers were liable to measure success through such outcomes. Above all, the central interest for the PI was about understanding the reasons for the differences between the two communities, whereas for the Co Is, the focus was more about finding pathways by which the community on Site B could become more like the community on Site A.

In the end, the project was set up rather loosely as participatory action research, designed to provide information and support for schools, other agencies, policy-makers, etc., while also helping the youngsters involved and their families to reflect on educational experiences, opportunities and outcomes. One objective that soon evolved was to contrast culturally- situated discourses with official discourses of 14-19 progression routes. A further objective was to explore insider perspectives across generations, taking account of the wider effects of involvement in an education system among older individuals from a marginal group that has traditionally sought to evade such participation. Understandings were sought as to how the voices and perspectives of young participants might inform the ways of constructing bridges between the milieus of school/work and families/communities, as distinct from reliance on policy-directives. A central intention was that the direct involvement of youngsters in the research process should enable participants to reflect on educational processes in which they were engaged, and facilitate the evolution of in-group peer-support structures.

Where notions here fell short of full participatory action research was in the lack of community voice in the initial design phase, considered integral to the process elsewhere (consider, e.g., Israel et al, 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). However, at all other stages,

the intention was for community members to participate on equal terms. There was also the flexibility to make some amendments to the project design if it became clear that participants felt the need for some alternative research directions.

The research team agreed about the need for caution about predicting precise outcomes. While there was consensus that community empowerment was desirable, there was no shared vision of what such *empowerment* might look like. Specifically, there was no uniform agreement across the team as to the exact nature of *inclusivity* and *social transformation* that might be deemed as being desirable across the two communities that were involved. As such, the team envisaged the approach as less of a pre-specified and formal research method than as an *orientation* to research (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006), allowing space for community interactions to establish potentially unanticipated pathways. Part of the plan was to develop and trial a methodological approach and practice that would be appropriate for Gypsy/Roma/Traveller families, engaging them and their communities in understanding educational practice in schools and enabling them to improve participation and identify ways of achieving wider social inclusion.

The intended framework was to avoid formal interviews, seeking space for reflection and exploration over time of school experiences and career aspirations. It was envisaged that there might be some focus on specific incidents, as vignettes (see, for instance, Blodgett et al, 2011). The plan was that participants should reflect on their own experiences, while exploring educational experiences and job/career outcomes among peers and older family members. The phases of research would move from workshops, during which young people would explore their own feelings about the purposes and outcomes of education, followed by opportunities to develop their own research skills. In the next phase the young people involved would investigate the views and experiences of others from their family and

friendship groups. Finally, a forum would be set up in which people from different generations could be brought together to discuss the issues.

### **Compromises and Repositioning**

All members of the research team were experienced in working with Gypsy/Roma/Traveller communities, and well-aware of the fragility of such relationships, as well as the general unpredictability of existence on Traveller sites. There was acceptance among the research team that the design was tentative and would need to be reactive and flexible. In actuality, huge compromises were made.

The project was beset by difficulties from the outset. Work with such communities relies on the formation of strong, trusting relationships, and the sudden death at the outset of the project of Ginny Harrison-White, the Equality and Diversity lead at Cornwall Local Authority, left a gaping hole. It is very much to the credit of her over-worked (and soon to be broken-up team) that the research continued. Soon afterwards, the second Co-I took up a post in Abu Dhabi. Once again, members of her team continued to support the project, even though they, too, were soon to become dispersed due to reorganisation and budget cuts.

It has long been accepted that research involving participants from marginal groups entails difficulties and likely fluctuation in the composition of groups (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). As already stated, the participants lived on two separate sites, and there were significant differences in the nature and circumstances of the two communities involved in the research. Though the sites are within ten miles of one another, those living on them had selected contrasting relationships with the surrounding mainstream population. Many of the adults from Site A were employed in local shops and other settings. Most of the youngsters were staying on in secondary education to gain qualifications. The adults from Site B remained apart from the non-Gypsy population, and their children were dropping out of

secondary education at an earlier stage. There was a particular volatility to life on their site, and soon after the start of the project, a key family was evicted from Site B. Meanwhile, during the course of the project all the children from Site B were either expelled from school or left. Only one remained on roll at school, and he did not attend. Three were sent to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), but generally, did not attend there either.

Families from Site B remained suspicious throughout the project. Soon after the beginning of the project the youngsters from Site B informed the team that they were willing to contribute but not to participate as researchers, so the investigation with peers, siblings and extended families was conducted by one of the research team members. Although as part of the Traveller Education team, the researcher knew the families concerned, this was far from the approach that had been planned. The youngsters ended up giving data about their own views without generating understandings beyond that with regard to the feelings of peers and family members. There was no real opportunity for sustained or intensive exploration of their feelings as they evolved over time. This element of research was more sporadic in its nature, exacerbated by the fact that families on Site B followed more itinerant lifestyles. As a consequence, data gathering with that community became formal and traditional, never adhering to the interactive, democratic and ecological model proposed.

The intention had been to utilise over a two-year period a central core of between five and seven youngsters (aged 10-16) from each site, reviewing their progress through their own eyes, exploring evolving feelings about school experiences and future careers. This group would work outwards as co-researchers, investigating the experiences and aspirations of peers. In the case of Site A, those numbers were maintained, with half a dozen individuals acting as a constant core group. They met with the PI on six occasions, participating each time in half-day workshops. At the workshops the youngsters engaged in activities that (a.) enabled them to explore their own feelings about and experiences of school and future work,

and (b.) developed research skills that would facilitate the exploration of issues with their peers and family members, regarding views towards education and shifting aspirations. Part of each workshop was allocated to tasks intended to build skills as researchers. Apart from experimenting with interview techniques, consideration was given to the organising, representing and understanding data. In the intervening period, the youngsters involved also worked closely on tasks with a member of the research team (a Teaching Assistant responsible for Gypsy Roma Traveller Liaison). Youngsters participated through interviews and focus group meetings, and through the collaborative gathering and production of evidence (with the support of a liaison teacher), in the form, for instance, of power-point displays, that captured their evolving views of education and their hopes for the future.

It was not always a smooth or comfortable process with the Site A participants, and on one occasion, when a member of the research team had presented the youngsters with an ultimatum on account of their undisciplined behaviour – and in particular, their refusal to take turns in making contributions, Victor (aged 15 and one of the most unruly youngsters) had to explain: “What you need to realise is that we all come from big families, where everyone has plenty to say, so to get yourself heard, we all talk at once. That’s just the way we are.”

Re-adjustments of adult-child power relationships were required, but one way or another, the youngsters worked together and individually, and the extent of their input was encapsulated through very active participation at a final conference during which the underlying issues were discussed with older community members from across southern England, along with other stakeholders. Adults present (from both community and outsider backgrounds) expressed surprise at the way in which the young participants asserted control at various points during the conference. Unfortunately, only the youngsters from Site A were involved, as those from Site B had already made it clear that their participation would not continue beyond the interview phase.

Despite the history of tension and mistrust between the two communities, the original intention had been to bring them together at certain points, so as to add dynamism and complexity and in order to ensure a degree of consistency and unity to the project. This proved unfeasible. An extremely violent incident between members of the two communities, increased tensions between them and made it unfeasible to conduct any combined research.

As a result there was an inevitable imbalance in the representation of views across the two communities. Muhammad et al (2015) discuss issues of positionality and power distribution in community based participatory research, but the experience here highlights the need to scrutinise not only the discrepancies between researchers and participants but those between participants themselves.

### **Constructing minority groups: The Right to Heterogeneity**

*“Who has the authority to speak for a group’s identity or authenticity?” (Clifford, 1988, p.8)*

The experience of research across the two communities involved in this project highlights once again the need to consider the right of members of minority and marginal groups to in-group difference. Across Europe in recent years there has been increasing acknowledgement of the diversity of Gypsy communities – (see e.g. Clark, 2015; Marushiaikova & Popov, 2016; Monasta et al, 2012; Olivera, 2015; Smith & Greenfields, 2015; Tremlett, 2013). Yet at a policy level such diversity is overlooked, and in the UK, education reports and official documents continue to refer to ‘GRT pupils’, ‘GRT parents’ and GRT families. DfE (2014) is typical in making no allusion to differences across communities that do not merely include long-standing groups that distinguish themselves as English or Welsh Gypsies, Scottish or Irish Travellers, but also various, more recently arrived, Roma communities from across Central and Eastern Europe.

Academics have also played a part in this process. Across minority groups, it is all too easy to overlook issues arising from diversity encountered within communities assumed to be homogeneous – and this is especially likely to be the case when a social justice agenda is built into a project. As part of his theories of liberal culturalism, Kymlicka (1995; 2001) proposed a model of social justice to operate across different minority groups. The model has been much criticised (see e.g. Barry, 2001; De Schutter, 2005; Schuster, 2006). One criticism concerns the need to begin any consideration of community rights with a focus on cultural realities, as distinct from an external set of principles (Parekh, 2000), and this should entail, too, an acknowledgement of cultural fluidity (Hall, 1992).

While the heterogeneous nature of minority groups has been emphasised over several decades (e.g. Philips, 1976; Robertson, 1995; Rosaldo, 1988), there remain powerful factors accounting for the persistence of attempts to treat minority groups as homogeneous. In his generally commendable undertaking to seek a wider theory about educational disengagement (Ogbu, 2003; Ogbu & Simons, 1998), John Ogbu, for instance, presented a rather bounded, monolithic view of Black culture that overlooked differences resulting e.g. from class background (Foley, 2004). The motives for simplification can be understood. It is difficult to reconcile efforts to promote equal citizenship for minorities, founded upon universalistic liberal notions, with the acceptance of difference within groups that may undermine such an endeavour (Taylor, 1992). The demand for equality is liable to result in the glossing over of diversity within groups, as this would be to introduce different (and quite possibly, contradictory) needs and interests amongst the group members. Amongst those seeking to influence policy, this is understandable, and can be seen as serving *the greater good*. For those seeking to improve understandings, however, it is important not to depict cultures as stable and bounded entities. At any given time, there will be competing understandings from both within and outside the groups concerned. Cultures are constantly in a state of flux (Hall,

1996); hybrid forms will be emerging (Bhabha, 1994); the boundaries between groups will not cease to shift (Barth, 1969).

While such variety and fluidity may be generally accepted, in principle, for the purpose of policy-makers and practitioners, much simpler conceptions tend to become reified. Indeed, the homogenisation of minority group members through official classification can tend to serve a politico-economic function for the majority culture that is unrelated to the aspirations of the minority group members themselves (Guerra & Jaggers, 1998). Attempts to classify members of Roma Gypsy and other Travelling communities reflect such a process, and suggest an incapacity or unwillingness to acknowledge the diversity within this group. In fact, over several decades, policies towards Gypsies and Travellers have lacked coherence or consistency, fluctuating between objectives demonstrating a desire to care for and support Gypsy-Traveller families and an intent to monitor and regulate all aspects of their lives, including cultural identity (Clark, 2008).

It should be noted that - while setting themselves apart from other communities - community members, themselves, construct ideas underpinning a myth of homogeneity, and this tends to relate to cultural authenticity. Eli Frankham, the Gypsy activist, perceived *authenticity* in both blood lines and, also, arcane and specific knowledge:

*We're dying. 60% of our children are marrying Gadjes... In the old days you would never put Ayres with Frankhams or Loverages with Boswells. Now we've forgotten how to make pegs or flowers. I met some Roma people the other day. Said they were tree surgeons. I said, which are deciduous trees then, and which are non-deciduous? They didn't have a bloody clue what the difference was! That's a real education, that is.*

*(In paper presented at the International Conference on Romani Studies, July 1996, University of Greenwich.)*

Similarly, other community members have asserted evidence of group membership through reference to e.g. knowledge of horses, fortune-telling, and bare-knuckle fighting. For group members such internally-produced conceptions can serve as reassuring identity-markers, but they are also restrictive, precluding behaviours and life choices that are perceived as being *un-Gypsy*.

It was interesting that participants from both Site A and Site B communities in this research cited opposing behaviours to affirm *authenticity*. Among those from Site A an argument could be defined along the following lines:

*Gypsy aspirations for our children need to change. We no longer have access to the traditional roles that were undertaken by previous generations. We cannot pursue the old nomadic lifestyles or make a living through the skills we acquired from parents and grandparents. It is important to acquire new skills, for which schooling is necessary. Gypsies have always been oppressed and have always shown the capacity to adapt, learning new skills. We are representative of that tradition, and represent the feelings of the wider Gypsy community.*

Among those on Site B, a rather different argument could be perceived:

*Gypsy lifestyles have become impossible to pursue. We still teach our children the same skills and knowledge that we ourselves learned, and our parents gained from their own parents. We resist schooling, which will teach our children alternative values and erode what remains of our cultural identities. We are the true Gypsies and represent the feelings of the wider Gypsy community.*

These conflicting positions, each in some ways logical, were contested, fiercely, at the conference that ended the project. Indeed, participants from other Gypsy/Roma/Traveller communities argued in favour of each, and differences between Site A participants - both within and across the generations - began to appear. This was disconcerting for many of the non-Gypsy stakeholders and those working for groups supporting inclusion. As already suggested, among activists it is often politic to continue to present a homogeneous view of communities; it is easier to argue for rights if they seem to represent the views across communities. For stakeholders and agencies supporting Gypsy/Roma/Traveller communities it is tempting to view better integration as being empowering. Thus the retention of Site A youngsters in secondary schools was perceived as a story of success; the drifting away from education on the part of Site B youngsters, was seen as a tale of failure. A key objective was to identify ways in which Site B participants could be made more like those from Site A, better integrated in the wider community, and more 'successful'.

### **The Right of Non-Participation**

There is relatively little information as to reasons why participants might opt for participation or non-participation in research. At a collective level, motivation identified by researchers might include representation, political empowerment and informing change (Clark, 2010). In the case of this particular project, the approach to participants centred on the proposition that their voices could only be heard directly through participation.

It is important to recall that 'participation' can be interpreted in several ways. Arnstein (1969) proposed three levels, from manipulation and tokenism at Level 1, through information, consultation and placatory input at Level 2, through to Level 3, entailing degrees of partnership and citizen control. Hart (1997) proposed a ladder of participation with eight rungs, with significantly more discourse around rights and empowerment. Shier (2001)

offered an alternative with five levels of participation, ranging from children being listened to, at the lowest level, to children sharing power and responsibility for decision-making. Treseder (1997) suggested a circular model, with the embedded assumption that, in actuality, young people's involvement will never actually result in full control. Several aspects of such models might pose difficulties. One concerns the precise nature of boundaries between such levels. Another concerns the internal power dynamics; the experiences of any given project might differ dramatically among the different children involved.

In the experience of both the PI and Co Is, there was a shared sense that decisions regarding involvement, especially when concerning younger group members, tend to be reached on a family or community level rather than through individual preference. With this project, it was quickly evident that the communities were going to select different paths. The families from Site A seemed to be convinced by the argument that, for real change to occur, it was imperative that individuals from the community were involved. In any event, the involvement of families from Site B would have been disrupted by certain events, such as evictions from the site. However, even in more stable circumstances, the families from Site B seemed to perceive no likelihood of better futures through collaboration in a project about education. They did not appear to anticipate any future gain through full participation in the project, and in any event, their subsequent responses in interviews suggested that they remained suspicious of anything beyond minimal participation in the education system. They simply did not share the prevalent view among policy-makers and those involved in Gypsy education that the exploration of more enriching ways to engage with schools would offer better options for their children.

It is illuminating to consider the response of one member of the research team as this fact became apparent. The team member expressed surprise that one community might choose not to be involved, commenting: *After all, the research is for their own good.*

However, well-intentioned the sentiment may have been, such external constructions regarding perceived benefits of the project brought to mind terms such as neo-colonialism, cultural imperialism, chauvinism, ethnocentrism, etc.; the team member justified the position by adding that the research was ‘at the very least, in the interests of the young people involved. With regard to research youngsters as participants, it has been argued elsewhere that a child protectionist over a rights model cannot be justified (Murray, 2005). Arguments based around the supposed ‘well-being’ of the community become still more vexed when group insiders take a different view. Actually, even internal constructions regarding ‘benefits’ are contentious given the unequal distribution of power and voice within any given community.

In the context of this project, and viewing it from a researcher perspective, what cannot be denied was that from the perspective of most members of the wider research team the choice of one community to disengage from the process was deeply frustrating. While accepting the prerogative of participants to withdraw, an effort was made by some team members to achieve the objectives without their central input. In the words of one team member: *Maybe we need to participate on their behalf, representing what they might say if they were able or willing.* When asked about the ethics of this, the response was that if we did not act in this way, the views of the community living on Site B would never be communicated. *How could their preferences be represented through a wall of silence?*

### **The many faces of the faux-participant**

When researchers have firm ideas about achieving change that - in their view - will be of significant benefit to the communities involved, there is inevitable frustration when those communities do not wish to be involved. In such circumstances, it is all too easy to settle for

some form of *faux-participation*, whereby certain community members and/or stakeholders are permitted to represent the views of the group.

In this instance, some of the difficulties were inherent in the project design. The very choice of two such contrasting communities was always likely to invite certain narratives. And within the context of a PAR study, inevitably, the community at Site A was a model of success for advocates of inclusion.

Given the differences between the two communities involved in this research, it became evident that while PAR was appropriate for one community, it was never likely to succeed with the other, where the researchers' 'idealistic' aspirations were not shared. Ethnographic work seems to have been more appropriate with this community. PAR seems to require that the minorities involved must be ready to participate and are committed to the goals of the research.

The *faux-participant* can take several different forms. (S)he can be manifested through the intervention of a researcher. In such cases, the researcher may expand on a limited amount of authentic participant information, to extrapolate and speculate on apparently grounded information. The researcher may be acting on a social or political agenda, selecting the input of a small number of participants who are providing a partial picture. The researcher may be operating in the genuine belief that this information captures the views of the community - or that its transmission would be for the good of the community. Alternatively, the researcher may just be reporting events through the filter of her/his own experience.

In this project, the researcher on Site B had worked for many years in Traveller Education, demonstrating dedication, intelligence and sensitivity in her work with Gypsy/Roma/Traveller families. Reading through her field-notes, they make for rather dismal reading: building a tale of helplessness and lack of hope, particularly when taken in

conjunction with the quotes of participants. But, beneath the surface, there is an alternative narrative - one that was never likely to have been selected by the Co-Is and their teams in view of their working context and role. This is a tale of defiance, and successful resistance to inclusion/integration, in the context of genuine apprehension about the erosion of cultural identity.

The faux-participant can also appear through magnification of the words of specific participants from within a community, who are simply more eloquent or out-spoken. It is all too easy to seize on the words of a garrulous and articulate participant, especially, in cases in which it can be difficult to persuade other participants from that community to engage.

Rowena (aged 15) from Site A was one such participant in the project under discussion here. She was very forward about expressing ideas and opinions, and her views were very plausible. Only after a group discussion quite late in the project did two other girls confide that Rowena's views did not coincide with their own. Subsequently, when quizzed on the matter, others from the group agreed that that Rowena's opinions were at odds with their viewpoints.

A participant can be, simultaneously, both *real* and *faux*. (S)he can operate as someone who provides truthful information about her/his personal experiences, but exaggerates about certain aspects in an effort to operate, too, as a community spokesperson. Alternatively, the faux-participant can begin a project as a genuine participant. 13 year-old Billy (also from Site A) began the research as one of the more outspoken group members, but gradually, became more withdrawn, and could not be coaxed into sharing his views. His friend Reg offered to answer for Billy ("I know more about him than he knows about himself," claimed Reg). Billy said he was quite happy for Reg to speak on his behalf, but at the end of the project, when asked if his experiences and opinions had been exactly as Reg had presented them, he just shrugged. The above echoes the PI's experiences across other

research projects with Gypsy/Roma/Traveller communities, when family members have responded on behalf of others. On which note, a not uncommon experience in the work of the PI with Gypsy/Roma/Traveller participants has been the manifestation of group memory, according to which individuals have reported events as if they had happened to themselves, when actually, they were incidents in which other family members had been involved.

None of the above scenarios necessarily negate the value of the data gained. As an example of this, a participant at the final conference (who belonged to a separate Gypsy community, one that had not been involved in the research) began to speak about the findings *as they might appear* to someone from Site B. It would have been most unlikely to have heard the insights that followed from a member of the community; they required both empathy and detachment. It is important to recall, too, that there are pressures on participants from marginalised communities about what to reveal and what to cover up. Researchers need to exercise caution about taking any new information at face value, and still more importantly, it is critical to build in sufficient time for the development of long-term relationships between researcher and participants, both in terms of building trust and knowledge about what to believe. The above is not seeking to build a case for faux-participation as an adequate alternative to real participation. Apart from anything else, community members have a right to represent their own worlds. However, it may be enriching to find opportunities to bring insiders together with well-informed others who operate on the periphery of the group so as to probe understandings of community life in greater depth.

## **Conclusion**

Given the differences between the two communities involved in this research, it became evident that while PAR may have been appropriate for one community (at Site A), it was

never likely to succeed with the other (at site B), where the researchers' ideals were not shared by community members. Ethnographic work would have been more appropriate with this community; with PAR, the minorities involved must be ready not only to participate but to share the same commitment to envisaged consequences.

PAR projects such as the one described in this article may well be set up with the most laudable intentions of improving outcomes for minority groups, but it is difficult to be clear about the best outcomes. In the context of this study, it is important to accept the risks for Gypsy/Roma/Traveller individuals and families engaging in education. It is not possible (in the absence of studies that follow individuals over several decades) to predict the outcomes of full participation in the education system for Gypsy/Roma/Traveller individuals, families and communities. It may turn out that what is in the interest of the individual, economically, is not in the best social interest. Or what benefits the individual may, in the longer term, damage the community, through the undermining of intergenerational relationships and cohesion. In some ways, Site B members are more protected in their communities than Site A members through the act of non-participation - if holding their community together is the prime objective. Indeed, it might be noted that through increased and prolonged participation in school, the youngsters from site A had developed a number of career aspirations without realising that, in order to achieve them, they would need to leave home to study and move away from families. Upon realising this, almost all concerned said that if their families could not accompany them, they would be extremely reluctant to take up any opportunities (Levinson, 2014).

The challenge will be for such communities to retain their togetherness while accessing a wider range of work options, but that is not easily attained and tough compromises will be necessary. Given the risks, it is all the more important that community members are full partners in any research undertaking. The project described here facilitated

the involvement of community members at all but one stage - research design, and in retrospect, this seems a most regrettable omission.

However democratic and laudable Freire's concept of praxis may be - reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it - in practice, this is liable to remain an ideal conceived from the outside. In cases where the 'oppressed' do not seek transformations, or cannot be convinced of the need for change, researchers are left with a choice: whether to continue to act in the perceived interests of participants or to turn away and allow inequities to persist. For academic and non-academic researchers, activists, stakeholders and other agencies involved with a community, there is likely to be self-interest in the continuation of the project, whereby it becomes all too easy to justify acting for the good of reluctant participants. Alternatively, they may seek out certain members of a community who share similar aspirations to those of the research team, and then act as if those participants are representative of their wider communities.

Meanwhile, it should also be noted that the construction of common goals within research teams does not make them homogeneous either. Surprisingly little has been written about divisions between individual researchers in joint projects - other than a consideration of wider, generic issues affecting e.g. unequal relationships between academic and non-academic partners in such collaborations (see e.g. Durose et al, 2011; Pohl et al, 2010). The increasing popularity of community participatory research cannot escape problematic ethics ensuing from a range of factors such as unequal power relationships between partners, blurred boundaries between researchers and researched, academic and activist, and conflicts between community and individual rights (Banks & Armstrong et al, 2013). The mercuriality of the research process is particularly acute in work with marginalised groups, and some ethical fault-lines cannot be predicted, and researchers' responses to dilemmas that arise

move from the principle of *causing no harm* to one closer to *causing the least possible harm in the circumstances* (Levinson, 2004; 2010).

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