

Picturing others

Annabel Tremlett illustrates how everyday images can challenge stereotypes of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller people



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Discrimination against Roma, Gypsy or Traveller people is often said to be the last ‘respectable’ form of racism,¹ with the use of offensive terms and blatant prejudicial comments prevalent and uncontested in many public spheres. Stereotypes of these communities have a strong visual element: from the glitzy world of elaborate Traveller weddings, to the impoverished beggars from Romania on London streets, or the unauthorised encampments of Travellers’ caravans surrounded by spewing rubbish. Such images are heavily selected, edited, sensationalised, and often unrepresentative of the majority of people from these communities, yet are the ones circulated again and again in our media. So how can such entrenched stereotypes be challenged? What would a ‘non-stereotypical’ image of Roma people look like?

These are the questions asked by a current British Academy Small Research Grant project, led by myself, Dr Annabel Tremlett at the University of Portsmouth, in partnership with John Oates from the Open University. The basis for the project was a question I grappled with when co-editing a special issue of *Identities* journal in 2017, entitled ‘Romaphobia and the media’. Working with Roma and non-Roma authors, the special issue aimed at exposing and deconstructing some of the entrenched racism against Roma across the media in Europe – which can at times be very stark and direct, and at other times nuanced and insidious. Myself and my co-editors, Vera Messing and Angéla Kóczé (both from Hungary,

Angéla is also from a Roma background), started to call our special issue the ‘especially depressing issue’, as the persistence of racism against Roma in the media from so many different outputs and countries was relentless. We realised that there seemed to be nothing else on offer to the public about Roma people apart from these negative images, and in turn, this is what we were offering in our journal. We therefore decided to include three articles in our special issue written by professional Roma from varying backgrounds, on how they negotiate and challenge prominent racism. These articles showed that Roma people are not just the passive victims of racism, but confront and change the way Roma people are perceived.

However, whilst this special issue showed the agency of Roma people in resisting racism, there was still the question of how the public image of Roma people could be challenged – what could be a visual alternative to ingrained negative stereotypes? I knew, from my own research on the everyday lives of Roma people in Hungary, that they have a lot of joy and warmth in their lives, even in difficult times. I’ve been visiting the same town in Hungary for nearly two decades now (including over four years of living there). This has put me in a very privileged position of seeing those who were children at the start of my research (around 7 or 8 years of age) growing up – they are now in their mid-20s. Over the years I’ve asked them to take pictures of their everyday lives, and then interviewed them on that basis (a research method called ‘photo

¹ Sir Trevor Philips, then Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, 2004.

elicitation'). I also ask them to reflect on previous photograph projects, so I get a real sense of how they see their lives changing, how they want to represent themselves to me as a researcher, and what they think of the choices they've made in their lives or how life events have impacted on them.

What I love about the photographs they produce is the way they are just of everyday lives – families larking about having fun, people working on their homes, cooking, mending bikes, looking after pets, talking to their grans, posing for 'selfies' – pictures any of us might take. This doesn't take away the struggles people can face with poor housing, dilapidated streets, very precarious wages and racism in their everyday lives – all these adversities came out in the interviews. But these images show us that people have the urge and vitality to live their lives in the best way they can, even if that's in really tough circumstances.

These photos have become powerful in ways I certainly didn't imagine at the start. They are products of self-representations – the children/young people are given disposable cameras, and they choose what they take photographs of. This means that they are the image-makers, which is unusual for Roma people who are so often misrepresented by others. Well-meaning documentary makers and photographers tend to romanticise or exoticise or produce 'poverty voyeuristic' shots that are very depressing; media outlets tend to criminalise or demonise Roma people. It's quite rare to see 'ordinary', everyday lives as seen by the people themselves.

The British Academy Small Research Grant has allowed me to take a long look at these images, alongside those produced by my project partner, John Oates, a developmental psychologist from the Open University. John carries out activist fieldwork (for example, he was a consultant on setting up a version of the UK 'Sure Start' programme in Hungary). He also documents the everyday lives of Roma people, leading to exhibitions and films such as *Vortex*, which give invaluable insights into the complex challenges that Roma people face and how they survive. Through the project, we hired a research associate, Sanna Nissinen, who has expertise in the ethics of humanitarian photography used in charity and non-governmental reports. The three of us set about analysing hundreds of our fieldwork photographs of the everyday lives

of Roma people, using a theoretically informed framework that draws on the work of visual analysts Per Ledin and David Machin. This approach deconstructs the image content – e.g. people, places, activities, colour, materials, and perspectives employed – and analyses the symbolic effect of each, and then thinks through the effect of the image as a whole. We also included in our analysis awareness of power, inequality and racism, drawing on the work of cultural theorists Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall to build our understanding of how racialised, fixed and stereotypical views of Roma minorities are reproduced and continue to be circulated.

We found that images from our fieldwork still, at times, contain so-called stereotypical traits – such as run-down buildings, children with dirty faces and no guardians, passive adults – that denote the negative, backward stereotypes of the Roma. However, we started to understand that some images had definite differences from the usual stereotypes. We found four main elements that differed from prominent stereotypes, and these are illustrated on pages 46–53.

Exhibitions

As a part of our project we are holding exhibitions to display these images. We are asking our audiences (some of whom are also from Roma, Gypsy or Traveller backgrounds) for responses to them, both to test our analysis and to encourage new discussions around the 'non-stereotypical'.

The first was a photography exhibition at the Hungarian Cultural Centre in London in June 2018. The aim was to draw people out of their passive attitudes as viewers, and transform them into active participants in a shared world. We invit-

ed audience members to create collages to represent their views of the images on display.

The second exhibition was held at Portsmouth Guildhall at the end of 2018. As well as displaying images from our own research, we also gathered fantastic examples of anti-racism campaigns and projects from Roma, Gypsy and Traveller organisations and independent photographers. We also didn't forget that Portsmouth itself is a city that has many Traveller and Romani families at the heart of its community and histories: we were very pleased to have permission to show photos and stories from the family of one of Portsmouth's most famous boxers, Traveller Johnny Smith.

We are still analysing the feedback from the two exhibitions, but we have found the experience of interacting with audience members and asking for their opinions fascinating. Overall, the collages and other audience response sheets provide a means to show how complex and multi-layered responses to images of a marginalised minority can be.

Our British Academy-supported project runs until August 2019. One of the main findings so far is that, in order to break down stereotypes, we need engagement. We must think of people not just as others but as ourselves, and must look at how we relate to each other, our shared histories, identities and experiences. In some ways, perhaps, the lives of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller people seem very distinctive; in other ways, we might totally relate to them. The important thing is to recognise people as humans, who have dignity, humour, difficulties, self-respect, frustrations, struggles, in complex or banal lives. We can be different, yet we can also connect in so many ways.

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Other ways of picturing...



01 – Everyday activities

Showing people as active in their everyday lives, even in very poor circumstances, contrasts with public images that tend to show Roma people as passive and parasitic.

A Roma man has asked his two friends from work (who are non-Roma) to fix his gate after some vandalism in the street.



Two female friends sit in a courtyard, one is hugging her grandson. There are clothes hanging out to dry beside them. The photograph shows ordinary activities involved in taking care of family life, even when the backdrop looks dilapidated. In fact, when we looked at this photograph, the woman pictured with her grandson said (with laughter), 'Oh no, [the courtyard] looks like a mess – when you show these pictures tell them we are in the middle of renovating it, otherwise they'll think we're slovenly Gypsies!'

Photos: taken by the daughter of one of the women; from Annabel Tremlett's fieldwork.



02 – Connection with the viewer

Many news images of Roma tend to show them as a faceless group, or looking sad or delinquent. Eye contact, or a sense of ‘being with’ (meaning a kind of intimacy), creates a connection with the viewer and breaks down power relations.

A couple pose with their young son in a ‘selfie’. Note the warmth from the closeness of the couple and the way the little boy is leaning into his father. This is also a mixed ethnicity relationship (the woman is Roma, the man non-Roma). Such unions are rarely discussed in public spaces, unless as an aberration or problem. In my experience, mixed couples were a common occurrence, and show that integration and connections between communities are lived out in the intimate lives of families.



Photo: from Annabel Tremlett's fieldwork.



Here we see a grandmother with her grandson – a private moment which shows their closeness. We can almost feel the warmth in the contact between their bodies and the soft feel of the child's hair on his grandmother's face.

Photo: taken by John Oates from his fieldwork.

Photo: taken by John Oates from his fieldwork.



A mother and her two boys are enjoying an outdoor picnic provided by a local organisation. Exhibition audience members have said how they like the ordinariness of the scene and how the little boy is interacting with the camera man/viewer.



Photos: self-representation taken by the mother of the little girl and partner of the man; from Annabel Tremlett's fieldwork.

03 – Being playful or funny

Everyday images taken by Roma people themselves are far more likely to be playful and funny than any public images, which tend to show Roma people as sad, deviant or criminalised. This humour creates an obvious connection with the viewer and creates another way Roma people can be seen, rather than just as hapless victims.



A father and child have fun posing in sunglasses with a mobile phone. We can imagine the little girl is either copying her father, or has 'ordered' her father to pose in the same way as her! Images of Roma fathers with their children are rare in the public sphere, giving substance to the idea that Roma fathers are absent and uninterested in their children.

04 – Difficulties with dignity

To avoid falling into the trap of only showing 'happy' photographs of Roma people (which may detract from the often devastating circumstances they face), the phrase 'difficulties with dignity' emerged from our analysis as a means to show people in tough situations, but without them being shown as wretched. Which images came into this category was not always agreed on by our research team – the concept of 'dignity' itself in photography has been described as 'amorphous and its use uncertain' (Langmann & Pick).

A mother and child sit on a bed. Though the backdrop is bare and impoverished, the woman is engaged, confident, talking to someone off camera, while her baby is protected on her lap and looks well cared for and relaxed.



Photo: taken by John Oates from his fieldwork.



Photo: taken by John Oates from his fieldwork.

Two children look out of a window and a third is leaping on the bed to join them. There is a sense of despair with the children alone in this dilapidated room, but the light from the window and the children looking out does give some hope. There is a lot more to the story behind the image, but our audience members said that even without knowing the story, this image is very powerful in showing the conditions that some Roma children face.