

# An “Other” perspective: Emancipation in alterity?

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## **Introduction**

The local newspaper usually publishes a photo of the Traveller women who have attended our back to education and training programme.<sup>1</sup> On each occasion there are a number of women who do not wish to be included in the photo, for very plausible reasons. For example, in a previous year one of the participants progressed on to a Community Employment scheme. She specifically requested that her new colleagues would not be informed that she was a member of the Traveller community. When I asked her why, she said that she was afraid that she would be treated differently in a negative way.

It is not surprising that individual Travellers fear negative treatment. This article will look at the bases of those fears, and explore where the negativity comes from. I will outline the stereotyping that is perpetuated in the media in general, and how education has a central role in challenging these myths and stereotypes. My positioning to discuss this issue is located in my own experience as ‘The Other’ (de Beauvoir, 1949). In the article, I will explore the concept of otherness or alterity and discuss the potentiality of the concept in challenging stereotypical norms and the ways in which this positioning provides me with a singular vantage point. I will look at examples of educational approaches, from our own programme underpinned by adult education principles derived from Freire (1972) and Noddings, (1984) and the UL initiative, on the integrated framework. I will consider the possibilities of otherness, and finally, on my own experience of alterity, which has enabled me to reflect on why I do what I do and how the notion of embracing otherness has been a personal motivation.

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1 The ‘Beoirs’ back to education and training programme was run by Bray Travellers Community Development Group and sponsored by FAS, County Wicklow VEC and the Bray Area Partnership and Pobal.

## Otherness

The old adage “no news is good news” is particularly true of the portrayal of Travellers in the media in general. As Hayes (2006) points out they are portrayed as ‘Other’, different from the norm, leading to their subaltern status in Irish society. In her ground-breaking work *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir outlines how a patriarchal and male dominated society defines women as ‘Other’ i.e. other than the male perceived as the norm.

The quality of otherness is relevant to the status of Travellers. For example, when a member of the Traveller community becomes seriously ill, their extended community rallies round. This has been known to cause alarm among health professionals when a large number of Travellers flood a waiting room in a hospital. That a group of individuals who are trying to be supportive can be perceived as a threat can be explained in the context of “othering”.

In his book *Irish Travellers: Representations and Realities* (2006, p.113), Michael Hayes examines the social construction of the Irish Traveller as “Other”:

*A visitor to Ireland today who chanced to pick up a newspaper would see little in the non-Traveller’s depiction of Travellers that would differ from the common and historical portrayals of the Traveller community as “Other”. At its simplest and worst, present-day perceptions of Travellers continue to build on a collection of primarily negative constructs – e.g. disorder, nomadism, laziness, dishonesty, backwardness, dependency, etc.*

It is not uncommon for those who have been identified as “Other” e.g. women, Travellers, people with disabilities, gay people and all marginalised people to suffer from internalised oppression. As Mason (1990, p.27) puts it:

*“Internalized oppression is not the cause of our mistreatment, it is the result of our mistreatment. It would not exist without the real external oppression that forms the social climate in which we exist.*

*Once oppression has been internalized, little force is needed to keep us submissive. We harbour inside ourselves the pain and the memories, the fears and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives”*

Internalised oppression is based on real fear. As I said in the introduction, some of our participants hide their identities outside of the programme environment

because of the fear that negative perceptions in the world of work will turn into those very weapons of re-injury and negative self-image. Part of the work of education is to nurture confidence and pride among Travellers, and to facilitate them to challenge negative media constructions. The next section will discuss the role of the media in creating those negative constructions.

### **The role of the media in social construction**

The media “re-present” images and stories back to society and play an active part in constructing meaning in the world in which we live. Creedon (1989, p.18) suggests that not only do the media contribute to the construction of reality but also to a dominant consensus view of what reality is:

*Mass communications theorists who take a cultural approach to communication also argue that reality is nothing more than-and nothing less than-a “collective hunch”. They suggest that when countless personal and interpersonal interpretations are communicated via mass channels meaning tends to become homogenised and consensus values prevail.*

Touchman argues that even a non-fictional genre such as news is not just an objective reporting of the facts but is a construction of reality. News is ‘...a depletable consumer product that must be made fresh daily’ (1978, p. 149). Thus, the constant renewal of the ‘re-presentation’ reinforces the homogenised consensus around stereotypes, almost without question. Further, Habermas defines the public sphere as a realm of social life in which public opinion is formed. Of the role of the media Habermas says: ‘today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere’ (1984, p.49). He is highly critical of what he calls the ‘refudalization’ of the public sphere, whereby public opinion is manipulated by the mass media. This is particularly relevant to the portrayal of Travellers, where the norm creates the otherness where Travellers are concerned. For example, *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* portrays some Travellers in a voyeuristic, mocking manner, on Channel 4. This is buttressed further by new media, e.g. ‘tackyweddings.com’ that is devoted to sneering at the kinds of wedding dresses that Travellers wear at their marriage ceremonies. And there are more explicitly racist sites. These are the fundamental issues that education, and in particular, adult education, needs to address, which I will discuss in the next section.

### **Challenging the myths through education**

Until recent times Travellers themselves have had very little say in how they have been portrayed. Hayes (2006) has tracked their depiction in the early Irish state

as a regressive group, out of kilter with the emerging modern nation. Further, they have been considered as a counter-cultural group: ‘a society within a society’ (O’Aodha, 2007, p.9). Thus, with this negative stereotyping, it is not surprising to find people wanting to hide who they really are as oppression becomes internalised. An aspect of hiding, or disguising the self, is interesting in the context of Cant, Gammon (or Shelta as it is referred to in academic circles) the Traveller language. It is obvious that many of the words are an inverted form of Irish. St John O’Donnabhain (2007, pp. 97-8) explores the aspect of Cant as a secret language and a means of protection against the dominant society:

*...the repeated testimony of Travellers such as Pecker Dunne, that Shelta functions to help keep Travellers’ lives private and for secrecy, can leave us in very little doubt that disguising is (and has been for some time) a very important part of Shelta use in the course of daily life.*

However, he then goes on to examine how Cant can function as a binding agent, creating a sense of belonging to a specific group amongst those who speak it.

This resonates with my experience in adult education. For example, near the beginning of our previous programme, I was approached by a couple of younger participants who were bemoaning their loss of knowledge of Cant. I recall the exact words of one young woman “We don’t know our own language”. Furthermore, they requested if there was any way that we could teach it to them. With the approval of the whole group, in consultation with Dr. Michael O’ hAodha of the University of Limerick (I will discuss this connection later in the article) and with the unstinting help of an enthusiastic tutor we devised a course outline in Cant. Following negotiations with the C.E.F. of County Wicklow VEC and FETAC it was agreed that an exploration of the language could be included in the *Living in a Diverse Society* module. That is, the private and binding language was re-introduced through the basic principle of adult and community education, starting with participants’ own starting point (Freire, 1972), enabling learners to identify their needs, and meeting those needs through a learning programme. This is the fundamental tenet in challenging the norms that create otherness. This underpinned another innovative programme around creating narrative.

In December 2008, Bray Travellers Community Development Group published ‘Beoirs’ Stories, a collection of narratives written and recorded by the women on the training programme. ‘Beoirs’ is the Cant word for women, and the booklet was

a collection of factual and fictional stories documenting some of the heritage and traditions unique to Traveller women culture. Heneghan discusses the relevance of publications relating to Traveller culture, to Travellers who are in education:

*To the Traveller community, these books, particularly the two biographies, are recognised as 'one of our own' and it is to be hoped that all such publications will feature in schools in the years to come to enhance a greater understanding of Traveller culture and history (2007, p.66).*

With the assistance of talented and caring tutors, the Beoirs programme attempted to address some of the needs of Traveller women, outlined above, by running a module in *Personal Development* and providing an opportunity for participants to explore their own culture through, for example, the *Living in a Diverse Society* module. Again, the role of education is central to building the capacity of the participants to deepen their own knowledge through their own story or narrative (Freire, 1972) in addition to providing resources for their wider community.

However, the ability to stay focused on the positive requires confidence. In my experience, once again because of internalised oppression Travellers sometimes suffer from their own negative thinking. *Cognitive distortion* and strategies to overcome it as outlined by Ellis (1962) have some relevance in this regard.

*The task of the helper who seeks to change the beliefs and appraisals of the person in need is to modify the thinking and belief system of the person. This is done by disputing the beliefs... (Murgatroyd, 1985, p.78)*

Noddings' (1984) ethics of caring underpin the approach that we take in our programme. She argues that moral decisions, in addition to logic and values should also include reciprocity and relationships with others. Reciprocity includes a willingness on behalf of tutors/teachers to learn about another culture and language. Training needs to be based on a model of education that views the participants as adults with knowledge, skills and life experience. Additionally, tutors need to acknowledge the expertise of the participants in the subject area of their own identity and culture and act as facilitators to build on and strengthen existing capacity. As educators, we take on a role similar to Murgatroyd's helper. We encourage the participants to develop a knowledge of and pride in their own culture and an understanding of their sense of alienation and consequently we can strive to counteract their feelings of negativity and shame.

### Making connections

Our own learning and development was also relevant in this context. In 2009 we learned that there was a specific seminar room and collection Library in U.L. devoted to Traveller culture. A number of our participants and a couple of tutors travelled to Limerick to see it and to meet Dr. Micheal O hAodha and John Heneghan, Co-ordinator of the Traveller access programme. John Heneghan was so struck by the potential for leadership within this group that he later contacted me. At a subsequent meeting, he outlined the framework model for Traveller inclusion that he has developed (ref: *Fig. 1*) and we discussed possible modes of dialogue and interaction as relating to our group.

**Figure 1: Limerick County Traveller Interagency Framework**

GOAL's	Accommodation	Health	Education	Employment	
Rapport Building					Processes
Empathy					
Collaboration					
<i>Interagencies</i>					
B'HRA	DES	DSF	FÁS		
Garda	HSE	LCC	Lim Yth		
UL	VEC	WLR			
Sustainability and Continuity					
Monitoring					
					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homework clubs</li> <li>• Credit-earning: Woodwork Metalwork</li> <li>• Tutoring</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Subcommittees</li> <li>• Development</li> <li>• Leadership training</li> </ul>

*Source: John Heneghan, University of Limerick, April 2010, adapted.*

As Heneghan (2007, p.68) puts it:

*...it has been the growth in the number of participants, partners and advisors from the Traveller community itself that really strengthens the project.*

In simple enough terms, this 'Limerick County Traveller InterAgency Framework' created by John Heneghan at the University of Limerick, is based on a number of principles. First is that dialogue, mutual dialogue, is absolutely essential – conversations and discussions over time with local Travellers, and all institutions involved in Traveller affairs, are a prerequisite to starting off real 'action' in the area of educational access; education, in turn, links to issues related to accommodation, health, and meaningful work/business/employment. Most central here is dialogue with Travellers themselves, creating some rapport which over time builds mutual trust, without which one is simply wasting one's time; without empathy and trust, substantive communicative action on the key pillars of the framework cannot emerge, nor will they be sustained over time. It addresses the cultural barrier of Travellers perceived as a 'society within a society' as referred to above.

In the meantime, some of those participants have moved on and with Traveller community development workers have been trained as Diversity Trainers in Traveller Culture. This action is supported by the County Wicklow Traveller Interagency and aims to provide training to Travellers enabling them to, in turn, provide awareness training about their own culture and traditions. It also aims to promote an understanding of Traveller culture among school goers and the wider community. The University of Limerick generously provided transport and tuition in leadership skills to those involved. Once again, a talented and enthusiastic tutor greatly assisted in the process of encouraging and supporting the Travellers involved in speaking about their own culture with pride.

### **Reflections**

I have become a fan of YouTube. I rarely watch the items with the most hits but I look up the music videos of favourite artists and sometimes I come across speakers with interesting ideas. One such idea is from a man called Simon Sinek (2010) who argues convincingly that inspiration is derived from why we do things rather than what we do. Reflecting on why I do what I do has caused me to examine my views at a deeper level and to consider the importance of why I felt inspired to work with Travellers.

In the now famous *Stanford Commencement Address* (2005) of the late Steve Jobs, he exhorts his audience to be passionate about what they do. I believe that when we hide even a part of ourselves, there is a resulting guardedness that restricts spontaneity and limits our ability to be truly passionate. Barthes discusses passion and hiding:

*To hide a passion totally (or even to hide, more simply, its excess) is inconceivable: not because the human subject is too weak, but because passion is in essence made to be seen: the hiding must be seen: I want you to know that I am hiding something from you, that is the active paradox I must resolve: at one and the same time it must be known and not known: I want you to know that I don't want to show my feelings: that is the message I address to the other. (1977, p. 42)*

Through personal experience, I have become passionate about the celebration of otherness but I am acutely aware of the negativity and even shame that many Travellers have to overcome in order to be able to celebrate their difference.

### **Two examples of the positivity of having 'Other' perspectives**

Since I was a child I have had an abiding interest in astronomy. I watched a programme, part of a series called *Beautiful Minds* on BBC Four, transmitted on 12 April 2010, which was about the Irish astrophysicist Jocelyn Bell Burnell. In December 1967 as a postgraduate student she discovered Pulsar stars, though it was some time before the news filtered out partly due to the fear of ridicule (in the form of little green men) on behalf her male academic supervisors. Ironically, and reflecting the misogyny of the times, it was they and not she who were awarded the Nobel Prize for the discovery in 1974.

In the programme, when questioned closely about why she specifically had made this discovery, Jocelyn Bell Burnell made a couple of points that I found intriguing. One was that as a student she did not have a reputation to lose and therefore was not constrained by that fear. What really struck me, however, was when she said that as a woman she felt that she had brought a different way of looking at things to the proceedings. Is it just possible that not 'being an absolute human type' (de Beauvoir, 1949) was an advantage?

The second example of alterity is the Ron Davis' story. The interviewer asked him why he had named his book *the Gift of Dyslexia* (2010). Born with a form of autism he explained how, in middle age he realised that the talents that allowed him to be creative and view things from different perspectives were what caused



his disorientation regarding the written word. He overcame his dyslexia by formulating mental pictures of words. He co-founded the Reading Research Council in 1982 and helped to develop methods that are now of assistance to people suffering from Dyslexia worldwide. Davis and Braun explain the phenomenon:

*The talents which create the vulnerability for confusing symbolic information are assets in other ways. For example, individuals who “see” the dimensional attributes in our world understand intuitively how things work...Tasks which require the ability to visualise something in a creative or different way are often simple for individuals with these talents (2010, p.xii).*

### **Conclusion**

Involvement with the Traveller community has been a huge learning experience for me. Furthermore, it has given me the opportunity to reflect on how my practice sits on a theoretical framework and reflects my beliefs. Having initially struggled with my own alterity as a lesbian, I have been fortunate to realise for a long time that being different can give one another perspective. For example, concepts such as *dominant discourse* were easy for me to grasp as I grew up in a world where the heterosexual voice was virtually all pervasive. Involvement with gay politics taught me that minorities need to raise their own voices and can offer equally valid perspectives. The ability to look at things another way can be an enormous resource and I believe that it is only when we embrace our difference that we can fully exploit the potential that lies within it. If I am to start with why, then this is why and I believe this passionately.

In the course of running some parenting skills classes, a tutor came to me to complain that a sister of one of the participants was interfering in the relationship between a mother and child. I tried to explain to her that extended family bonds are much stronger in Traveller society. While the tutor in question perceived this as a negative influence, it is possible to look at this from another angle. Many Traveller mothers derive a great deal of support from their sisters, mothers and female relations in general in terms of childminding, advice and exchange of information. This is not at the expense of children as the extended Traveller family appears to be very child-centred.

If we focus on the positive we can see that Travellers demonstrate a strong sense of community and extended family bonds when they rally around a sick relative. In this way they demonstrate their ‘ethics of caring’. If we can begin to

appreciate what Travellers have to offer us through their rich cultural diversity then perhaps we can begin to give them the support and encouragement necessary for them to share their unique perspectives. If we can encourage them to focus on the positive aspects of their culture, perhaps we can help them to counteract the negative ways in which they are perceived. As one of the participants on the Beoirs training programme put it, *Education should be based on respect.*

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