Roma: Travelling Can Be Disruptive to Creating a Sustainable Business?

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Introduction

Throughout history Roma (including Gypsies and Irish Travellers) populations have been regarded as having no legitimate 'place' in mainstream society (Clark and Taylor 2014), a view that remains widely held by today's 'settled' population in many countries (Foley 2012a, b; Cooney and Foley 2017). The settled community generally perceives that the presence of Roma in a community usually signals the arrival of anti-social behaviour (Foley and Cooney 2017), even though such behaviour is not exclusive to any one section of society. Clark and Taylor (2014) argued that to be nomadic does not mean that a person regularly behaves in an anti-social manner. Similarly, to be nomadic does not mean that a person cannot behave in an entrepreneurial fashion, but such activity is frequently based on survival practices and necessity entrepreneurship (Block et al. 2015; Tipu 2016). Often the Roma community operate within a system of short eclectic 'jobs' or economic activities which falls outside of the academia's conceived definition of entrepreneurship, although researchers such as Foley and Cooney (2017) would argue differently. Throughout history the adaptability and flexibility of the Roma community has been the distinctive feature of their

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nomadic economic practices (Greenfields et al. 2012). The ability to engage in a succession of temporary or short-term employment or economic activity is in fact a different model of entrepreneurial activity by its existence and repeat nature. Perhaps entrepreneurship scholars need to reassess their understanding of the definition of entrepreneurial activity given that mainstream society is quickly turning towards contract and short-term employment (especially following the impact of the Coronavirus global crisis). It is arguable that a global realignment of the nature of employment is happening currently, but this is a practice that the Roma community has been applying for generations due to the historical impact of racial persecution and often forced nomadic lifestyles. Their economic survival has been based on short-term entrepreneurial activity within a larger plan of income generation. This chapter examines entrepreneurial activity within the Roma community, plus the challenges involved in creating a sustainable business while living a nomadic existence.

Historical Background

Roma are generally accepted to have arrived in Europe in the fifteenth century as nomads.[1] Over the centuries, Roma have experienced countless expulsions, the forcible removal of children, abduction and abuse of their women, servitude in mines and even extermination, just a few of their lived and historical fates. The resultant intergenerational transmission of trauma is supported by empirical research. Such studies have offered a growing insight into the societal and individual anguish suffered and some have concluded that children of trauma survivors are adversely affected by their parents' ordeals (Schwerdtfeger et al. 2013). European Roma have a history of 700 years of intergenerational trauma and such intergenerational transmission of trauma has also been noted within Europe's other outstanding entrepreneurial minority that have also suffered persecution, the Jewish population (Kahane-Nissenbaum 2011). Hoselitz (1963) contended that entrepreneurs are deviant from the mainstream population because of their marginal status and it could be argued that Roma have fitted this profile as they acted within a hostile social milieu, combined with an exclusion from political power. To compensate, they have concentrated on business activity even though they are outside the dominant value system. For the

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[1]This chapter talks about Roma, but this term includes Gypsies which is frequently the expression used by mainstream society. The chapter also recognises Irish Travellers as a distinct separate minority ethnic population that shares similar cultural traditions and suffers from many of the same prejudices.

Roma community, the problematic relationship between the settled[2] population and their 'nomadic' culture has been marked by both spatial and the social exclusion (Salemink 2016). Business was considered a sheltered industry for the minority as they were subjected to fewer sanctions due to their so-called deviant behaviour when compared to mainstream sedentary business operators (Hoselitz 1963). Due to their ambiguous position within society from a cultural or social standpoint, marginal groups such as the Roma in medieval-to-postmodern Europe have developed genuine innovations in social behaviour (Martinelli 2003). However, little is written of the Roma people who have survived the intergenerational transmission of traumatisation.

From the sixteenth century onward, being Roma frequently resulted in death sentences or in slavery. In many countries, persecution stemmed from the highest authorities, including both the State and the Church. During World War II, hundreds of thousands were sent to concentration camps and while no exact figures are known, it has been estimated that approximately 250,000 Roma lives were extinguished during the Holocaust. But the intergenerational persecution in modern Europe continues, especially in Central and Eastern Europe where Roma constitute between 8 and 10 per cent of the population in some countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania). During the Communist era, Roma were usually given unskilled labouring jobs in heavy-industry factories and mining. Following the change to democracy in Central and Eastern European countries, the Roma became the new scapegoat for post-Communist society's ills as their plight has dramatically worsened since 1989. The result of this endless persecution has resulted in endemic problems of low life expectancy, high illiteracy, dire poverty, poor housing and exceptionally high rates of unemployment (Brearley 2001). This constant oppression of the Roma has been further exasperated by the rise of far-right activists and political parties in some European countries which has unleashed new state nationalism which has led to Roma being commonly stigmatised by the media and few governments have been willing to create laws to protect their rights (Brearley 2001). Given such levels of discrimination, Chanal et al. (2011) wondered how the creation of a sustainable business that creates value through innovation be possible within such a context.

The participation of Roma in enterprise is a contested terrain as it intersects with research into the broader understanding of ethnic, racial and political identities. Some researchers have suggested that Roma should

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[2]'Settled' refers to a population that is sedentary, living in houses on a permanent basis. Roma often refer to non-Roma as the settled population, although an increasing number of Roma are becoming settled and living in permanent homes due to government policies restricting nomadism.

be considered within the 'Indigeneity' space, since Indigenous peoples are defined as having ancestral ties to specific land, a distinctive culture or language, a shared history of oppression, and while unlikely to be in economic or political power, they are often engaged in collective movements towards self-determination (Corntassel 2003; Durie 2005). Given that Roma communities are displaced ethnic minorities that loosely fit this definition (except for not having ancestral ties to specific lands), it is arguable that Indigeneity studies should be inclusive of these communities also. Indigenous peoples have unique ways of viewing the world which influence their ways of constructing activities and organisations (Amoamo et al. 2018) which influences their decisions regarding enterprise development and this also applies to Roma entrepreneurs.

This chapter examines and challenges the concept that a nomadic lifestyle can be disruptive to creating a sustainable business. Maybe a starting point is to unpack the western academic concept of a sustainable business, for the Roma standpoint is different to the academic position. Roma populations within a wider context of urbanisation, settlement and social change will be studied to ascertain their opinion in five diverse locations. For example, in Ireland and the UK, government policies have sought to cease cultural practices that allow a nomadic way of life. The restriction of halting sites, metal barricades to disrupt caravan access to roadside rest stops and stricter laws on livestock, rubbish dumping and environmental laws negating some scrap metal processing have all impacted on former lifestyle practices. Roma cultural practices and status in the modern-day has changed from the exotic romantic travelling gypsy (Schneewis and Foss 2017) to that of the 'folk devils' (Kabachnik and Ryder 2013). Therefore, there exists a need to get behind normative assumptions over the innate nature of their presumed sociality and instead show how such attitudes emerged as a result of the confluence of particular socio-economic trends and cultural understandings from the mid-nineteenth century which by the end of the twentieth century had become firmly entrenched.

Methodology

This paper critiques five qualitative case studies over a period of 7 years of families who belong to the Roma community. Technological change and the impact of digitalisation have been revisited and included. Snowball sampling via direct and indirect recommendations was the only viable form of data gathering from what many people would consider a secret society. This

study group is reflective of the Roma community as they represent a broad cross-section of small businesses due to their commonality across countries. The research methodology of qualitative inquiry was adopted as the chapter emanates from the interpretive in order to seek deeper engagement with the research. Primary research consisted of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the five family groups at different times over the seven-year research period. The names of the participants were omitted from the analysis to ensure privacy and instead codes (such as A1 or C2) were applied to participants. Geographic locations have been altered so that any specific individual cannot be identified due to the private nature of the community. The research methodology used a multiple case study approach which can be scientifically applied within independent studies (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2002) and linked the data with a systematic review of the literature (Tranfield et al. 2003; Pittaway et al. 2004). A thematic approach was applied to the empirical evidence to provide focus and unity (Thorpe et al. 2006). Sustainable business management and the rights of Roma businesses in their struggle for financial independence can occasionally have an illicit dark side, so this chapter provides an insight into the pressures placed on Roma business people, plus their 'hidden' economic activities and specific entrepreneurial attitudes (Salemink 2014). In some studies of the Roma community, the economic activities that are hidden can be marginal and illegal (Somerville et al. 2015). This is no different in this study and it is accepted by the author that this is the norm and no ethical condemnation is applied. Conventional research techniques do not apply when researching Roma (Bosworth 2012) for they are difficult to reach and wary of outsiders into their lives (Khonraad and Veldhuijesen 2009). They are generally extremely private and secretive (Salemink 2016). Only a skilled, experienced ethnographer who is a non-conventionalist researcher using 'insider' snowballing techniques based on cultural introductions can succeed in such a setting. Belonging to an Indigenous community and wearing a Roma-made earing proved beneficial to gaining access to the families!

Case Study

Interviews were conducted within five diverse groups that included a family in Paris (France), one in Dublin (Ireland), one in the East Midlands (England), one in Granada (Spain) and one in Newcastle (Australia). Some detail of each of the families is provided next.

1. *Paris (France)*

This family lived in a camp on the old disused Petite Ceinture railway line, a relatively short walk to the major tourist areas which provided income-generating opportunities for this group of Roma. Their camp has been used (on and off) since the early nineteenth century. The family stated that their original camp was destroyed in the 1850s by Napoleon III. Research supported this when Baron Haussmann constructed a circular railway around the city's fortifications (Jordan 2004). In 1850, the camp area was a thick forest and the current camp stood in the regrowth of that forest on the edge of a disused railway line. The camp contained horses, many different types of vehicles, older cheap-styled aluminium and timber caravans, together with haphazard shelters constructed of scrap wood, plastic sheeting and open fire-places for warmth and cooking. There was no running water, sanitation or rubbish removal, so there was much rubbish openly evident. The slum-like camp since the author's visit has since been destroyed, with more than 350 people evicted by police during the winter of 2016 (BBC 2016).

2. *Dublin (Ireland)*

This Roma group lived in a rough camp on the airport side of a major tributary road in makeshift housing, in squats in old (possibly condemned) terraced-housing and in several caravans parked around the estate. The settlement is north of Dublin, near the airport, on what appears to be a disused lane and adjoining former industrial land. This family is best known for their horse-drawn carts and continuous encounters with the local authorities regarding rubbish removal, street begging and alleged shoplifting. The lack of satisfactory sanitation, basic removal of rubbish or the removal of horse by-products was obvious. Water appeared to be brought into the camp area in containers.

3. *East Midlands (England)*

An introduction from the Dublin family enabled the author to interview an East Midland Elder and several family members on their attendance at a funeral in Dublin. Roma have lived in and around Bristol for hundreds of years, on former commons and open areas such as at Emerson's Green, Bradley Stoke, Patchway and Lawrence Weston. Other sites include Speedwell, Redfield, Newtown and Brislington. Small groups of New Travellers have frequented Bristol in the last three decades. The permanent site in

Ashton Vale where the interviewees originated has 12 pitches where a mixture of English Roma, and Welsh and Irish Travellers live. To the author's knowledge, Bristol City Council owns the site and it is managed by Elim Housing, an interesting public housing organisation. It was stated to the author that some of the residents move away to find work in spring and summer, returning for the autumn and winter months. They also travel on the carnival circuit or visit family; others travel for cultural reasons.

4. *Wallsend, Newcastle (Australia)*

An introduction from a former colleague at the University of Newcastle allowed the author to observe celebrations on April the 8th in Australia which is International Romani Day. In 2017, Roma from as far away as Tasmania and Western Australia travelled to a small rural property on the central coast of New South Wales (NSW) and to the Wallsend property mentioned, a suburb in Newcastle, NSW to reinforce their culture and educate their children. One group, refugees from Holland who immigrated to Australia during the Whitlam years of the 1970s are Kalderash Romani. As background information during the decades of convict transportation between England and Australia from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, some 60 convicts were Romani Gypsies. Among them was James Squire, who arrived on the First Fleet in 1788 and went on to become the colony's first brewer. He also formed a deep friendship with Indigenous leader Bennelong, (distantly related to the author) whom he eventually buried on his property at Kissing Point on the bank of Parramatta River. Squire's grandson, James Farnell, became premier of NSW. This background offers some insight into the connections that Roma have in Australia. For decades, a well-known Roma camp existed in Little Bay, Sydney, ending around the 1950s. The population active in the circus and country carnival circuits amalgamated with other smaller groups and moved (due to society pressures) to rural areas on the outer Sydney urban fringe and to Newcastle. Romanichal Gypsies of England and Wales have family in Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia who also regularly visit the Wallsend and other NSW camps, particularly in the colder winter months coming north for the warmth. Some 14,000 Roma live in Western Australia alone and a few of these who are also Romanichal Gypsies make the journey to Wallsend. The Wallsend and Central Coast properties are on private lands and are kept low-key to ensure they do not catch the attention of the local council or adjoining properties, and this is why they are maintained in semi-rural areas hidden behind bush corridors (Sayer 2017a, b).

5. *Granada (Spain)*

The family in Granada were Gitanos entrepreneurs who told a hard story of a young people in the community struggling with drug addiction, high school dropout rates and poor health statistics (e.g. cardiovascular disease, low childbirth weights and poor survival statistics, coupled with growing diabetes and poor diet complications). However, they also praised the benefits of tourism, the ability of their people to earn a living in dance and music, or work in the construction industry and other related industries. They proudly explained that many of their family were talented stonemasons working on the reconstruction and protection of many Roman and other heritage sites throughout the area. The family lived in a lavish villa and admitted that local Granada people did not think of them as Roma because of how they lived. The mainstream population did not see the cultural aspects of their lives, rather they saw them as business people and were socially accepted to a degree. Access was gained from introduction through a community contact in Dublin.

Analysis of Data

The interviews looked specifically at Roma life both as a nomadic and as semi-permanent to permanent 'settled' living. All five family groups had lived in peri-urban encampments. It was common practice in Europe that in winter they would look for cheap lodging in cities, often alongside working-class populations, making and selling goods to survive. Traditionally, they would then move in regular circuits across the countryside during the spring and summer, picking up seasonal work, hawking and attending carnivals. The annual round of farm work that was so important for their economic foundation would commence in late spring with hop training and throughout the summer and autumn Roma families moved from farm-to-farm as each crop needed harvesting.

> Cherries, strawberries, blackcurrants during high summer, as well as peas, beans and other vegetables were needed to be quickly gathered in as they ripened. The hops were ready in September, followed by apples and pears in the autumn and potato picking in early winter. (Clark and Taylor 2014: 6; BBC 2005)

Family members in Ireland, England and France reminisced about these times because the children were well fed, drinking fresh milk, access to fresh eggs and cheese, together with a steady supply of fresh farm produce including

protein such as chicken, lamb or beef. A common story from the families revealed that technological advancements in the mechanisation of rural industries since the 1960s has severely reduced the demand for the Roma agrarian skill-sets, forcing them to take-up illicit activities, hawking, organised begging, scrap metal procurement and other unskilled income-earning activities.

According to the families, on the outskirts of Dublin, London and Paris, there were well-known stopping places used by nomadic Roma for generations. Far from being 'a separate people', their economic survival depended on close interaction with the wider population (Clark 2002; Okely 1983). Furthermore, their lifestyles, if nomadic, were not too distant from those of the poorer working classes, since both communities had common experiences of over-crowded, often damp accommodation, with no running water and inadequate heating, and were governed by the capriciousness of landlords. For both populations, their levels of literacy were low and their experiences of education were frequently alienating. Additionally, work was often temporary and seasonal, with household livelihoods a precarious 'economy of makeshifts'. Consequently, while the rhetoric of 'Roma deviance' (or anti-social behaviour in today's parlance) existed, and was being perpetuated and reinforced by Victorian-styled elites, such perceptions was competing with an everyday lived experience which suggested otherwise.

Changes to laws criminalising a nomadic lifestyle and the loss of income when on the road has forced all five families into a more 'settled' existence. Four of the families advised that nomadism offered greater entrepreneurial opportunities and a wider variety of entrepreneurial pursuits. The ancestors of a family in Granada found themselves living semi-permanently in limestone caves after the fall of the Moorish empire in the sixteenth century. Semi-permanent cave abodes offered them a place of relative peace away from persecution and access to a growing market for labour and enterprise opportunities. The other four groups in general found living in a permanent settlement quickly reduced their economic opportunities as their geographic areas of legitimate business pursuits shrank as anti-social sentiment from the mainstream population increased the longer that they lived in a 'settled' area. According to the families, due to high unemployment and limited employment avenues, many Roma were forced into illegal activity to earn an income to support their families. Respondent A1 (who referred to himself as a self-employed scrap metal appropriator and odd jobs handyman) did not like his wife and daughters begging and/or shoplifting as it often put them in danger of abuse and/or police conviction. The police habitually marginalised them and took the mainstream persons' allegations without allowing the Roma

person the opportunity to defend themselves. They were convicted without fair process and given that "*you were guilty in the eyes of the others anyway; stealing is how I feed my kids when there is no work*" (A1). Richardson (2006) found that the Roma communities were framed negatively as tax avoiding criminals, which regularly became a self-fulfilling prophecy. B1 (an unemployed father of 4) saw the Australian Police as racist and rarely in a dispute did they listen to his story.

> Living in a permanent place, we don't have the opportunity of picking up some odd jobs. When you travel or move around, you cover more country, more people, more opportunities to earn some food or borrow some money. When you are stuck in one place, the opportunities dry up. (B1)

A1, D1 and C1 also concluded that living permanently exacerbated the unemployment situation and severely curtailed any enterprise opportunities. D1 was the patriarch to a large family of 10 children, his wife, her parents and his dead brother's wife and children. He found living in a sedentary camp like that of an eagle trapped within a canary cage.

> Before I used to work on farms, a bit here and there, we would move about. There were chances for work. I had contacts in service stations, repairing tractors, collecting and selling bottles and metals. (D1)

When asked can they establish and carry out a sustainable business when in a nomadic existence, all responded by highlighting that one would assume that living in a permanent position, a person could establish business contacts, networks and build a business, but that such outcomes do not happen.

> We live in substandard housing, temporary squats in most cases. We do not have access to markets, too much competition from established businesses, no government assistance as it all goes to refugees. We have no access to capital, to bank finance or business associations, whereas when we are travelling or nomadic, we could seek out markets, use old contacts and networks. We operate on small margins, but can make profit; you cannot do that when living 'settled'. When settled you must travel vast distances to do a deal or scavenge, so when travelling the expense is a daily cost because the whole family moves. When moving around, we follow age old patterns, following work and opportunities, moving is a natural part of our lives. You can't have an established business like what we learn about or see in the towns, rather when we are moving, we have small operations, we are doing deals in all sorts of manner. When we are settled, we have little opportunity to create business opportunity – to do deals. (A1)

The experiences of the Granada Sacro-Monte Roma community were quite different. The caves offered protective shelter and a place to house their livestock. From as early as the late sixteenth century, the women began dancing the Zamba, a distinctive type of flamenco which is now a major local attraction for visitors. From the 1960s the caves attracted a type of new resident as artists, writers and people seeking an alternative existence began to inhabit the caves also. The residences now boast modern kitchens, bathrooms and power, and are commercially rented out to a growing list of newcomers. Most of the Roma population now live in council housing downtown or in the suburbs. As advised by M2, many have their own large residences across the town, illustrating the disparity in wealth with sections living on or below the poverty line. Furthermore, a sizeable proportion of the population have investments in real estate, construction, building supplies, quarry products such as sand cement and gravel, metal fabrication and boat building.

The Granada example has illustrated a limited social acceptance of the Roma which is not the case in other areas of permanent residence such as Madrid. In the Spanish capital, the Roma population experiences high levels of poverty and social discrimination, albeit lower than that experienced in central Europe (Brañas-Garza et al. 2006). Quintana (2015) described the Granada interaction between the local population with Sacro-Monte Gitanos (Spanish Roma) as 'an Interethnic Event', demonstrating the role of subjective standards that continue to guide Gitano behaviour and reactions to changes in the urban landscape. Empirical evidence of student perceptions in Granada (especially those of Gitano and mixed Gitano-Payo ethnicity) demonstrated that despite efforts towards social inclusion, discriminatory beliefs and practices still linger and need to be actively reduced (Madrid-Fernández and Katz 2018). Despite the negative social attributes of racism, poor school performance, discrimination and poor health statistics, Granada Roma are no longer nomadic. The growth of tourism and construction in Granada has been expertly tapped into by sections of the Roma community (including M2, a research participant). Economic development for the Roma in this area demonstrates the move by a community towards self-sustaining economic growth and institutional modernisation (Goulet and Walshok 1971). The analysis of the five case studies would appear to confirm Goulet and Walshok's (1971) work that identified how marginal communities view the relationship between their own values and the perceptions that they have of the visible benefits ordinarily associated with development (better housing and nutrition, easier access to jobs and schooling for all). The sedentary Roma (such as participant M2) have indeed achieved this balance, resulting in an outcome whereby social acceptance is slightly improved over

the national/European average and a non-transient lifestyle actually allows the entrepreneur to succeed in business. It is also evident that there needs to be much deeper research undertaken on this issue as any linkages between balancing the cultural values of the Roma community with the perceived economic social benefits of the mainstream population are still tenuous.

Conclusion

The study of the five families across different countries has revealed very similar economic and social struggles. It was generally believed that it was extremely difficult for a Roma family to build a sustainable business while living in 'settled' housing. Furthermore, the research identified five common characteristics that stood out from the participants:

- The need for independence from pre-determined stereotypes and racism;
- The strong kinship and family ties along hereditary lines that hold the families together;
- The role of their culture (even when there is evidence of fading traditional skills such as arts, crafts and music);
- Their strong entrepreneurial trading culture as an attribute of their identity;
- Due to their self-imposed secrecy, they can only rely on their own community or extended family.

Salemink (2014, 2016) also found similar observations. Western or mainstream society has labelled the Roma communities as the 'other'. They are marginalised, depicted as deviant and even sub-human. Being marginalised by mainstream society, their entrepreneurial skills are subjugated when they live in a 'settled' existence, plus they suffer automatic prejudice (Allen 2016). If allowed to be nomadic, they can be useful members in wider society by contributing to the economy through a variety of employment positions (Salemink 2016). The conclusion from this research is that a nomadic lifestyle can be disruptive to creating a sustainable business, but it is the preferred scenario to maintain entrepreneurial practices among the Roma community. The exception was the Granada example where there is a degree of social acceptance and therefore the opportunity to build sustainable businesses. Any deviance as mentioned by Allen (2016) is in fact displayed by the wider non-Roma community in their preconceived racist attitude to those that are different. Financial independence gained from entrepreneurial activity allows

the Roma community to be independent to a degree, surviving mainstream societies prejudices!

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