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Marginalisation and mixed feelings: supporting students of Gypsy, Roma and traveller heritage imagining higher education in the UK

Emily Danvers [iD] and Tamsin Hinton-Smith

Department of Education, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

ABSTRACT

Gypsy, Roma and Travellers (GRT) are a highly marginalised UK higher education minority with patchy targeted policy interventions. Drawing on qualitative interview data with education professionals working with GRT and with GRT young people, families and activists, the article compares attitudes, expectations, and desires around higher education. Firstly, the way in which university outreach can essentialise GRT people and the need to nuance these regulatory and normative practices is discussed. Tensions for GRT people imagining higher education and navigating complex identity transitions of ethnic invisibility are next explored alongside worries around 'coming out'. Finally, the article identifies the 'cruel optimism' in desiring education as a form of social mobility, particularly when institutions are not inclusive of GRT. From this, an urgent need is identified for contextually-sensitive GRT outreach for the academy's promises to be meaningfully inclusive.

Gypsy, Roma and Travellers (GRT) imagining higher education (HE) in the UK

Roma[1] are Europe's largest ethnic minority who experience persistent social exclusion and who are minoritised by and within education systems. The scant comparative data estimates that 1% of Roma in Europe complete HE (United Nations Development Programme, World Bank and European Commission 2011), although numbers vary between country. This necessitates trans-national policy to address ongoing inequalities. The Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015) and the 2011 EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies were crucial policy frameworks in this respect, seeking and enacting a comprehensive approach to inclusive education for Roma. In 2021, following the reformed EU Roma Strategic Framework (Public Publications Office of the European Union 2021) the Union adopted a recommendation on Roma inclusion for all member states (Council of Europe 2021). The UK's response to the Decade was limited (HM Government 2012) and post-Brexit there is no UK policy commitment to Roma educational inclusion. Moreover, there is a noticeable lack of scholarship and empirical data detailing the issues and requirements faced by GRT communities studying in the UK (Morley 2020). Consequently, this paper focuses on the highly specific policy and practice

CONTACT Emily Danvers ✉ e.danvers@sussex.ac.uk 🏛 Department of Education, University of Sussex, Essex House, Brighton BN1 9QR, UK

context of the UK, using the terminology of GRT to do so, while engaging with research on the more established field of scholarship and practice around European Roma in HE. However, while the particularities of national contexts can imply specific challenges and intervention imperatives to support GRT education participation, the shared international context of persistent discrimination and exclusion informs the wider transferable relevance of our insights.

GRT is a data shorthand, drawing together richly diverse communities. Like BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic), it prioritises analytical convenience over nuanced representations of a richly diverse group of people. Because of this definitional trouble, this article unpacks generalised or homogenous attitudes towards GRT and their relationship to HE and to its unevenly distributed promises of social mobility (Boliver 2017; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). There is a need to re-think dominant narratives of GRT represented via poverty pornography and precarity (Morley 2020) and consider how GRT relationships to HE might be imagined beyond schoolbooks vs wedding dresses (Hamilton 2016). It is necessary instead to represent the complex lives of GRT young people imagining a future in which HE might play a part. In doing so, this article suggests how education professionals constructing GRT as a target of intervention might best support meaningful and nuanced GRT inclusion within HE.

Just 6.3% of Gypsy/Roma and 3.8% of Irish Travellers access higher education by the age of 19 compared to around 40% of all young people (Brassington 2022). This equates to approximately 200 GRT students studying in UK HE at any one time (OFS 2020). The reasons for this under-representation are a complex constellation of historical, political, and social exclusions, racism and misrecognition that result in poor progress through formal education. In England, for example, GRT pupils have higher overall and persistent school absence rates than any other ethnic group and the lowest average attainment score aged 14–15 (Department of Education 2018a, 2018b). Matache et al. (2020, 59) warn of the "damaging but pervasive race craft that holds Romani culture responsible" for their exclusions from education and how legacies of discrimination and enquiry have generated persistent disadvantage for these communities. They argue that public education systems have been designed for *gadje* (non-GRT) - systematically and structurally othering GRT. Indeed, racism and bullying towards GRT is often normalised in school (Bhopal and Myers 2016) and teachers and school leaders frequently lack knowledge of GRT culture, including practices of home education (D'Arcy 2014). While this is a persistent and troubling reality, GRT people represent a spectrum of identities, histories, experiences and attitudes, particularly towards education. For example, Ryder and Greenfields (2012) report evidence of growing educational success for UK GRT people, including increasing numbers of graduates and postgraduates who are from these communities. Research indicates that enablers for GRT people to access UK HE includes good quality pre-school and schooling; an inclusive educational environment; moral support from families and teachers; transparent and accessible information about HE opportunities and financial support and scholarships (Bhabha, Matache, and Chernoff 2018; Danvers 2015).

However, there remain data silences that prohibit a depth of analysis around the extent and nature of GRT under-representation in UK HE. Students self-report ethnicity via the national HE application service UCAS, leaving potential for under-reporting. This is particularly relevant amongst ongoing racism and hostility towards GRT people such

that positive self-identification, even confidentially, may be shaped by fear of negativity (Clark, Mountford-Zimdars, and Francis 2015). This fits with insights discussed elsewhere (Hinton-Smith and Padilla-Carmona 2021) that GRT students may feel pulled by prejudice towards maintaining ethnic invisibility (Abajo and Carrasco 2004; Brüggemann 2014; Padilla-Carmona, González-Monteagudo, and Soria-Vílchez 2017) rather than risking coming out (Pantea 2015).

In addition, the quantitative data are too small to analyse further explanatory detail such as the type of institution GRT students attend – specifically relevant for UK HE which is heavily stratified via an economy of prestige. There is also scant analysis of how GRT intersects with other identity characteristics – particularly social class, gender and first-generation HE status – in understanding the complexity of GRT learners' educational lives. Existing research highlights the analytical and political limits of understanding GRT relationships to education only through the lens of ethnicity. For example, Garaz (2014) reported that Roma students in Central and Eastern Europe, in receipt of targeted scholarships, tended to come from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds than the average Roma. Elsewhere we have identified how Roma women in Central and Eastern Europe experience HE as doubly marginalised in terms of their gender and ethnicity (Hinton-Smith, Danvers, and Jovanovic 2018). Understanding GRT and HE requires an intersectional analysis that foregrounds ethnicity but does not reduce learners to it. Finally, not enough is known of the qualitative social, affective and material consequences for GRT people who do access UK HE, including their experiences into, through and beyond HE. Accessing HE is not synonymous with being welcomed. Indeed, Ahmed (2012) states that to be at home within an institution, is a limited privilege denied to ethnically and racially marginalised groups. This precludes simplistic understandings of GRT social mobility via HE trajectories. This relation is anticipated to be always already fragile as it is for groups deemed other by HE. For example, Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) explore how capital acquisition and mobilisation by HE students to enhance their social positioning is shaped by social class such that accessing HE can act to compound rather than alleviate persistent intergenerational inequalities.

There is also a notable lack of policy direction and impetus for widening access to, and supporting the retention and success of, GRT learners in UK HE. All institutions produce access and participation plans indicating their ambitions and strategies for improving access and opportunity for underrepresented groups. The government guidance states that 'people from Gypsy and Traveller communities' are part of a wider set of student groups with 'particular equality gaps and support needs' that can be addressed in access and participation plans (Office for Students 2019). In 2019, less than 30% of plans mentioned GRT learners and less than 5% include targeted interventions (Atherton 2020). There is emerging key work based in institutions such as the University of Hertfordshire, University of Manchester, Kings College London, Bucks New University, and the University of Sussex. Of specific note is pioneering work from Bucks New that asks universities to take a public pledge towards GRT inclusion. However, this work is mostly driven by the academic, personal or political motivations of individuals and departments, rather than by a national agenda.

In UK HE, widening participation often sit within the organisational hierarchy of student recruitment, blurring the lines between these two agendas (Johnson et al. 2019). Focusing on GRT as outreach target may be less strategic in terms of producing a tangible

return on investment, compared to numerically larger groups such as those who are first-generation in their families to go to university. There are other outreach populations, such as those who have spent time in care, who are similarly small like GRT, but attract more visibility due to occupying a deserving narrative and for their being recognisable inclusion strategies such as scholarships and year-round accommodation for those who are independent from their families (Gazeley and Hinton-Smith 2018). It is rare in public discourse to hear GRT being afforded the same recognition of being entitled to the "gift" of HE or there being the same evidence-base for outreach. Finally, it is debatable whether understanding GRT in HE in terms of a shared culture is always most appropriate in terms of meeting their outreach needs. GRT are fundamentally distinctive communit*ies* clustered under a label rather than a definitive or united community. While it is recognised that what GRT share is a sense of being othered in education, we also understand that what it might feel to be welcomed in HE will not be experienced universally. McGarry (2014) state how interventions to address Roma educational marginalisation fail to address the multiple and interconnected issues facing this group. A move towards including multiple measures of disadvantage by UCAS (2021) seeks to recognise the intersectional nature of how bodies move through education differently. It could be that an, often inextricable, combination of identities and experiences come to matter, and that identity targeting becomes seen, over time, to be reductive and unhelpful.

Theoretically locating GRT HE decision making

This work draws insight from across several theoretical strands – united by their ability to contribute to understanding the complexity of educational decision-making and participation from a social justice perspective.

The first dimension of this framing stems from Berlant's insights on cruel optimism. For Berlant (2011) people cling to fantasies of the potential to achieve a good life, encompassing spheres from intimate relationships through to income and employment – despite contradictory evidence of increasing precarity. Chadderton (2020) identifies this manifestation of cruel optimism in education narratives of a fantasy of meritocracy. The cruel optimism here is that, while being presented as an accessible means to a good life, education systems actively contribute to producing insecurity as a governing technique of neoliberalism. Reay (2018, 147) sees social mobility as being 'just as cruel and destructive as it is enhancing and transformative'– with the cruel optimism being that it is experienced as deeply personal, rather than reflective of the unequal societies from which these mobility narratives emerge. For us, Berlant's insights are particularly relevant for understanding social mobility in relation to GRT educational progression, in the face of contradictory evidence that HE's opportunities are not equally available, nor are returns on educational investment equally distributed (Boliver 2017).

Central to understanding intersections of GRT engagement with education systems and professionals are theories of capabilities, capitals, deficit and contribution. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theorisation of the unequal distribution of material and symbolic capitals valued within formal education enables understanding of the complex operationalisation of educational inequalities. However, it has also been extensively critiqued for underplaying individual agency and for locating those who experience disadvantage

within the education system in terms of individual deficit O'Shea (2015). Also relevant to theorising educational progression and social mobility is Appadurai's (2004) recognition of how the capacity to navigate HE's opportunities may be better understood as brittle rather than lacking for some.

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) approach speaks back to and transforms Bourdieusian notions of education capitals with their connotations of deficit and positioning of racially minoritised students within this. Instead, the importance is emphasised of those capitals that students bring to education from minoritised communities, including aspirational, familial, navigational and resistant capitals. While these capitals may be less explicitly valued within education systems, they are nevertheless vital resources in the search for tools to effectively understand and challenge racism in education. This resonates with Anza'sldúa (1990) insights around how the inclusion of people of colour in academic spaces and amidst knowledge-production transforms the theorising space and process of this forbidden territory through the inclusion of excluded or othered approaches. While some GRT people may identify as White, theories of racism against people of colour are highly relevant given the "unacceptable" whiteness GRT are seen to represent (Kavanagh 2021).

Ball, Reay, and David (2002) have explored the importance of ethnic identity to university decision-making, in the wider context of linked, intersectional identities. For many, going to university is seen as eschewing a normal biography, positioning the ethnically minoritised student as different to family and peers, and risking leaving them "out of place" (Ball, Reay, and David 2002, 352). This risk is further explored by Anthias (2013) in terms of the split allegiances that members of marginalised groups may experience between the mainstream and their communities. The transition involved in this status passage to a new identity (Brine and Waller 2004) is seen as being mediated by students' embodied characteristics, and that this can be particularly acute for individuals whose identity deviates furthest from normative assumptions of the ideal HE student. As GRT students attempt to penetrate the exclusions of education they are often symbolically pushed back by dominant others' imposed assumptions around what GRT people and communities are like, and their externally perceived limitations. Here the relevance is recognised of Gordon's (2011) theorisation of haunting as a malevolent spectre emerging uninvited to punctuate the educational journey with social, historical and political constructions, memories and imaginings.

Researching the 'marginalised minority'

As academics engaged with questions around inequalities for marginalised groups in HE internationally, we have explored the experiences of Roma students in contexts including Spain, Sweden, and Central and Eastern European countries (Danvers 2015; Hinton-Smith et al. 2016; Hinton-Smith, Danvers, and Jovanovic 2018; Hinton-Smith and Padilla-Carmona 2021). Since 2019, our research has focused closer to home – on the experiences the local GRT community in the region surrounding our university. This research has taken place as a secondary activity alongside social justice-informed practical outreach interventions that we have designed and led. Recognising the need to mindful of the power imbalances in processes and practices of knowledge production,

this work is guided by the principle of doing so collaboratively and responsively, recognising the imperative to "engage with, hear and respond to voices of educationally marginalised groups" (Hinton-Smith, Danvers, and Jovanovic 2018, 826).

The data used in this paper is drawn from related outreach and research projects led by the same core team and focused on GRT young people and their families attending the same school located in Sussex who were involved in two projects between 2019–2020. The first project "*Supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Educational Transitions*" focused on engaging GRT secondary school pupils and their parents in imagining futures beyond school and learning about further and HE progression pathways (Danvers et al. 2019). The GRT "cohort" were identified by the schoolteachers by their school ethnicity categorisation. Specific "ethnic self-identification" of participating individuals was not routinely discussed, but where this was raised, young people and their parents referred to themselves as Travellers or Gypsies. This research was in three stages. The first involved consultancy workshops in school with 6 young people in Key Stage 3 (aged between 12–14) where we discussed their future selves, their involvement (or not) in HE as a potential part of this and how being GRT might shape this educational trajectory. Through guided small group discussion, participants were invited to reflect on questions around their education ambitions, anxieties and what additional support they would like through producing individual journey maps. An event was also held to explore similar themes from the perspectives of families. The second stage was targeted outreach for the same group of young people, which included a trip to a college for 9 GRT students (the additional students were from the same Key Stage 3 cohort but were unable to attend the previous workshop). They were accompanied by a graduate youth coordinator from a GRT community organisation and 2 parents. The final stage involved the provision of resources on GRT culture and history for the school and holding a celebration and learning day where 14 community members and education professionals came together and part of the discussion was recorded as data. This was followed up with semi-structured interviews with 5 educational professionals and 3 community activists. 3 of these 8 were from the GRT community. These interviews explored what best practice for supporting GRT young people to access HE might look like.

When the pandemic forced school learning online in 2020, it felt important to return to see how this had impacted a community with an already stretched relationship with school. This concern is evidenced in an open letter from the Traveller Movement (2020) to the UK Government which reiterates sector wide concerns around GRT pupils being further marginalised in their education through the pandemic, due to digital exclusion and low-grade predictions. Our second project "*Learning under Lockdown*" continued this previous outreach commitment (Derbyshire et al. 2020). GRT pupils and their families in the same school and age cohort (although not necessarily the same individuals) were invited to take part. A near-peer GRT graduate engaged these pupils in a creative arts project to produce something which exemplified their experiences and feelings around learning under lockdown. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 3 GRT young people (2 female, 1 male, all in Key Stage 3) and 3 parents (all female, 2 GRT and 1 non-GRT) which discussed these creative submissions and what this could tell us about their lives, their relationship to education and the possibility of HE within their futures.

Ethical approval was received from the University of Sussex to carry out both research stages. Participants for both research stages were identified through our network of contacts in our partner secondary school, university Widening Participation team, and partnership with national advocacy organisation Families, Friends and Travellers (FFT). All participants were each interviewed once, in English as the spoken language of all participants. Interviews were up to 60 minutes duration, with interviews with young people being shorter than those with professional adults. Interviews for both stages were carried out by phone, minimising any participant discomfort at academic researchers visiting the Traveller site or asking participants to meet in the formality of a school or university venue. This subsequently facilitated uniformity of interview mode across the two research stages when the later research took place during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The inclusion of multiple stakeholder voices and a diversity of research activities is indicative of the smallness of this community, the early stage of exploration into this area and the somewhat piecemeal, opportunistic nature of the data available informed by our primary focus on interventions directly benefitting participants, above data gathering. This "small-steps" approach was deliberately enacted in response to the well-documented challenges (and less understood opportunities) of researching GRT as a hard-to-reach and stigmatised population (Condon et al. 2019). As such, the data *is* small-scale and opportunistic, yet vitally important in developing on-the-ground understanding of these under-researched experiences and identifying directions and patterns for more large-scale, systematic research. Indeed, the contribution of such in-depth, small-scale qualitative data lies "not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something" (Flyvbjerg 2006, 224).

Our feminist epistemological standpoint informs our recognition that no social research is value-neutral but is rather always contextualised by the embodied and ontological locatedness of the researchers who undertake it. Our research is immersed in and produced through these entanglements (Braidotti 2012 para.4). Moreover our identification as feminist researchers and related understandings around reflexivity and positionality in research are central to our methodological approach, in which we recognise the inextricable relevance of our own particular standpoint to both research process and findings. In line with this we present this discussion in the first person in recognition that we as researchers are central to the insights that we identify.

Our analysis in this article includes all data collected through both research stages. While these emerged from distinctive episodes of engagement and drew on different stakeholder perspectives, they are coherent in researching the same particular learning context of one secondary school with a large and well-established GRT community, and in understanding challenges and successes in keeping GRT young people engaged in education, and the role of families and wider communities in this. Hence for this paper, the interview data has been merged (14 in total, including 3 young people, 3 parents and 8 professionals) from both projects with the discussion from the celebration and learning day and analysed what threads ran through this. Practically, this was enacted through some collective initial coding and pattern noticing using NVivo. The authors then came together to discuss this and unpack its closeness to our own understanding, before revisiting the data again. Our process of coding was enacted not as an act of reducing complexity to a set of static representations of thematic categories and hierarchies. Instead, analysis was encountered as a slowing down, close reading, noticing and

reflecting – inspired by Maclure (2013, 181) notion of coding as wonder and as being attuned to "an open-ended and ongoing practice of making sense". Indeed, while the numbers reached by this project were too small for us to engage in detailed and meaningful analysis of things such as the role of gender or the specific ethnicity category of GRT in shaping HE as a site of/for social mobility, it is recognised that our participants occupied a complex constellation of identity and experience and the foregrounding of GRT in this paper represents only part of their stories. Despite the small sample size, the potential for important learning from this to be distributed widely is considered significant, particularly in indicating some important themes that are worthy of discussion and further research.

Overall findings

The data discussed collectively illuminate shared themes that contribute important understanding to us as researchers of this under investigated area of experience. These findings centres around three core areas, summarised here and theorised in more detail in the subsequent Discussion section, in which insights from the data are brought together with relevant theoretical perspectives.

Firstly, data revealed concerns around the **Measuring of Marginalisation**, with targeting emerging as both essentialising and essential. Among our interview conversations with outreach and education professionals, community organisers, parents and young people – there were differing perspectives on constructing GRT people as targets of university outreach. There was a shared sense that targeting was important to generate attention (and associated support and funding). But there was also recognition that GRT outreach work could be tricky territory in terms of being institutionally niche and reducing young people's intersectional identities under a homogenised ethnicity marker. This created a tension in which GRT people are "done" by essentialised "inclusivity" categories but also that categories are essential in constituting the work to be "done".

Secondly, mixed feelings about **Imagined Futures** were apparent in the data. When we designed the outreach projects described above, this was done as a collective of academics, GRT representatives, teachers and outreach professionals. Reflexively, it is recognised that as academics with access to funding and research expertise, we exercised considerable, and often unexamined power. While we didn't claim to "know best", there were contrasting discourses among educational practitioners about the imagined futures of GRT learners. One colleague suggested that what would be most appropriate for GRT learners would be a trip to a local college that offered more practical subjects such as animal care and floristry. Another indicated that a traditional cooking activity would offer informal cultural awareness raising. This raised concerns around producing an "expected" mobility pathway for GRT learners and that the cultural activity might essentialise learners. The issue was how to support GRT learners to any possible imaginable future, while also recognising the specific cultures, histories and experiences shaping such possibilities.

Lastly, the data identified the often **Cruel Promises** that higher education can represent for marginalised groups. Our interviews identified awareness of the contradictions inherent in encouraging GRT young people into HE in that the promises of a happy HE

may not resonate with the lived experience of being at university as a member of a marginalised group, nor the potential for HE to pay off in terms its promises of social mobility via, for example, privileged access to the graduate labour market.

Measuring marginalisation: targeting as both essentialising and essential

Outreach professionals who worked with the language of targets, benchmarks and results recognised and struggled with the "awkwardness" of GRT. As one described:

> Why does an institution need to get involved? Why do they have to consider it? There's no benchmark, there's no stick. They don't engage.

Outreach Practitioner 1, Discussion at Celebration and Learning Day

They later reflected in our interview about how marketised HE produces GRT as outside this rationale because they are too small a group to "count". Harrison and Waller (2017) reveal the economised vocabularies shaping the narratives of outreach practitioners, concluding that the need to measure the measurable works against social justice agendas. This has specific consequences for GRT learners who, because of the intensification of target-driven outreach, are constructed as problematic because they are small in number, diverse and under-explored by the sector (Allen, Greenfields, and Smith 2018). Consequently, the drivers for GRT inclusion are often individualised (e.g. this should be done here) or politicised (e.g. it is wrong this isn't happening), rather than the everyday business of target-driven outreach. This context also works against understanding the intersectional identities of GRT learners and considerations of nuance or different within and between communities who need to be knowable enough to produce workable solutions for their inclusion. As explored in the quote above, there is no stick or requirement compelling institutions to engage in this work and, while specifically naming GRT on access agreements reduces complex identities of young people to these blunt categories it appears to be the only recognisable means to generate meaningful action.

This process of knowing as categorisation becomes additionally compounded because GRT people are negatively racialised as difficult subjects:

> If you were to work with young carers or looked after children they have a deficit-positive model where there's deficit . . . around their circumstances, but it is a very positive empathy in terms of supporting those guys. I think with the GRT community, I think it's a deficit-deficit model

Outreach Practitioner 2, Interview

The deficit model, shaped and infused by discourses of "unacceptable" whiteness (Kavanagh 2021) produces GRT as problematic. This, as Ahmed (2012) theorises means that such diversity work becomes seen as difficult labour and is not taken up, which leaves inequities further obfuscated and reproduced. This deficit notion was also regularly reinforced in interviews with parents:

> If anything, they try keeping the Gypsy children separated from each other. I don't know why. I think it's because they think when they're together they're going to be a nuisance.

GRT Parent 1, Interview

This parent was reflecting on how positive she felt about being part of a GRT specific outreach programme. For her, this was new and unlike what she experienced prior where there was a reluctance to positively engage GRT learners collectively. Yet, there were concerns about how such targeting could produce the GRT young person as reified and as the subject to be fixed.

> Parent: He said mum I go to my special class today...
>
> Young Person: Yes it's just Travellers. We do trips...
>
> Parent: It is still a positive I'm not denying that, that it's positive. But I did say...are you going to be doing the same stuff for other children, include other children? It's only purely to not segregate the group.

Parent 2 and Young Person 2, Interview

This discussion revealed the young person and their parent's tensions about, on the one hand, the positives of being recognised and valued as an identity group with specific requirements but, on the other hand, concerns about excessive visibility or marked difference. These debates are explored by Burke (2012) who identifies how HE outreach is embedded in regulatory practices, which aim to know and fix the outreach target to conform to hegemonic expectations of what it means to be a university student. Yet when such notions of outreach as knowing/fixing rub up against negatively racialised discourses, GRT learners are essentialised through the lens of ethnicity. Yosso's (2005) work has the potential here to recast these notions of capital deficit associated with GRT and to consider instead what might be offered in terms of cultural strengths and resources. This is explored by Boros, Bogdán, and Durst (2021) who identify the value of Roma cultural capital as a site of normative resistance.

Mixed feelings about imagined futures

Tension around how GRT learners might be positioned in these comparatively different ways by others in terms of their educational trajectories emerged in our interviews. For example, one participant reflected about their experiences of being GRT and having traditional assumptions expected for them, while also having to design recognisable GRT outreach themselves that often draws on these same assumptions:

> There are just low expectations of students . . . like oh, it's all right, you'll be a tarmacker or a hairdresser or something . . . I think I'm quite lucky that I am a Traveller so I can see it in quite a balanced way. I know some Travellers like to put all the blame on institutions, institutions like to put the blame on families . . . And I'm like, well actually I think we all just need to communicate a bit more and work together.

Outreach Practitioner 1, Interview

And yet, the GRT learners and their families we worked with had diverse plans – from working with animals, manual occupations, and boxing to becoming a doctor. Gordon's (2011) work on haunting resonates here to understand how cultural identity emerges as a spectre, an often-uninvited presence that punctuates the educational journey with

social, historical and political constructions of normative trajectories. GRT people as potential HE students are reconstructed through and haunted by these historicised constructs such that their imagined futures, and the concurrent possibilities for social mobility, are positioned as highly specific and narrower than a traditional HE student might imagine.

A GRT community activist and another parent further exemplified these changing and often conflicting assumptions about GRT people's imagined futures:

> I want him to get an education. I never went to school . . . My mum and dad kept me home. But I said that was back then. I said a lot of things have changed now. I said a lot of travelling children are getting good jobs, even the girls they're going to college and doing stuff. It's something in life that you need. And he does understand that. And he's said he wants to do well.

Parent 3

> I think parents are recognising that to carry on . . . these days you need to have qualifications . . . But the problem that . . . there's not really that many role models and, where there are role models, they tend to be a bit exceptional . . . What we've found is some of the younger people who have broken away . . . When I say broken away, I'm meaning that they're dipping their toes into things that the culture might historically not have done that much.

GRT Community Activist 1, Interview

HE is positioned as a desirable choice most immediately in terms of its impacts on employability, but there is little direct discussion in terms of other aspects of social mobility such as expanded networks, inter-ethnic relations, socioeconomic conditions etc. Yet these are hinted at – such as in terms of changing gender relations suggested by "*even the girls*". The notion of tentatively treading an unfamiliar path from previous generations to access a changing employability market resonates with other research on marginalised students in HE, particularly first-generation students (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Thomas and Quinn 2006). Going to university positions the minoritised student as different and risking leaving them "out of place" (Ball, Reay, and David 2002, 352). Anthias (2013) describes a specific consequence of these new educational trajectories as resulting in split allegiances for members of marginalised groups between their communities and the field of HE. This split has affective consequences in producing mixed feelings for those, such as Roma women in HE, feeling in-between their own expectations and those of others (Hinton-Smith, Danvers, and Jovanovic 2018). As Reay (2018, 157) neatly puts it in her analysis of social mobility "you become more equal in relation to privileged others but at a cost of those you love and care for becoming less equal in relation to you".

This is echoed in an interview with a parent who wants their child to continue studying, like they did, but also indicates the social and affective challenges of doing so:

> **Parent 1:** I'm just about to get my degree. It's almost unheard of and it's almost seen as you think yourself something better than where you're actually from, but it's not, it's just I needed that independence. . . . And I've got friends, I've got cousins, that as soon as they hit secondary school the girls were pulled out of school, they didn't learn anymore. . .I said to them why are you putting up with it? Oh well you know it's just his way isn't it, it's just the way. Well, actually no. . .You've got a choice. But because they've been raised and not knowing there's any alternative they think it. And anybody outside that thinking is oh

they're snobby. And that's why I wanted [my child] to be part of this. You want to engage in it didn't you?

Young Person 1: Yes.

This referencing of HE as an unfamiliar "snobby" path is linked to both socio-cultural escape and independence alongside the tension that to study is a point of uncomfortable distinction indicates the mixed feelings about the place of HE in GRT people's imagined futures. It is not presented as a neutral or straightforward opportunity but a trajectory towards social mobility that is potentially brittle (Appadurai 2004), infused with and haunted (Gordon 2011) by socio-cultural-historical tensions and connections. Alongside the need for further data and analysis of GRT post-HE journeys to understand their mobility pathways, there is a need for those in outreach to work *with*, but not necessarily work *only* towards narrow cultural expectations and assumptions about possible futures in order that young people are supported towards broad imaginaries that may (or may not) include HE.

The cruel promises of higher education

> You can have the best will in the world and you can say, look, come to uni, it's for you, and then you get there and you actually still feel lonely and unwanted. Because the people that are so pro whatever underrepresented group it is, so if it's the Travellers, people are like . . . So I can go out and be like, oh you should come to university, I feel great here, I feel welcomed. But then if you come here and you don't have that experience then what have WP done? Have they not spoilt your life?

Outreach Practitioner 1, Interview

As Reay (2018) explores, the specific cruelty of social mobility is that failure to progress is personally ascribed to the individual. Indeed, one outreach professional further identified that the mis-selling of the happy promise of HE is also contingent on its inability to redress wider social inequalities and prejudice against GRT:

> If I can look at it from an education perspective and then get some success with that, then great. But I don't know whether you can write this in the report, it's very hard to go . . . You got into HE, great, because that's not what their problem is. Their problem is social acceptance, per se.

Outreach Practitioner 2, Interview

Insights from our data challenge the supposed inclusivity of HE for GRT young people. Here theoretical insights are relevant including those around valued capitals (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) and the positioning of marginalised students as deficit in relevant qualities O'Shea (2015).

One way in which the shortcomings of HE in offering an inclusive space for GRT young people emerged was through observations around invisibility. This resonated with existing perspectives from commentators including Abajo and Carrasco (2004), Clark, Mountford-Zimdars, and Francis (2015)), Brüggemann (2014), Pantea (2015), and Padilla-Carmona, González-Monteagudo, and Soria-Vílchez (2017) around the pull

towards maintaining ethnic invisibility in HE as a means to avoiding prejudice resulting from misunderstanding:

> I think there's a few more Travellers at university than perhaps anyone knows, because there's no reporting. And you get so used to hiding ethnicity over the years that a lot of people I don't think will ascribe … I just think that maybe it's quite difficult to deal with a lot of different stigma from both inside and outside of communities and a lack of understanding which might make people not. And I think that you need to have quite a lot of strength of character to do it.

Outreach Practitioner 1, Interview

This signifies the relevance for of Anza'sldúa (1990) insights around how such academic spaces are constructed as forbidden territory for people of colour, who risk being silenced. This further resonates with Gordon's (2011) theorisation of haunting as a malevolent spectre and our application of this to understanding how GRT young people seeking to challenge stereotypes as they progress through their education journeys can be pulled back by others' stereotypes in constructions of "us and them" (Anthias 2013).

Our interviews also indicated the need for young people to hear from other GRT to give believable messages about what HE is like:

> The more we can identify students from the GRT community that are at university and can come back and speak to our students or other students across the area with real positive messages, that will resonate more, I think. That's more applicable to these students than me standing up and saying you could go to university.

Teacher 1, Interview

This role modelling work was identified as important not only to HE but to wider GRT people's social, economic and political inclusion:

> HE opens up all of those further job opportunities where GRT are underrepresented. For example, you need a degree to be a teacher, and I think it would be fantastic to have GRT teachers in schools or to work in the prison service or work for the police. And there are travellers that work in these areas, but obviously, they are an underrepresented group … And by allowing GRT to access HE, you're allowing this community to become part of the wider society

Teacher 2, Interview

While offering clear benefits, such agendas to widen access to HE to increase social mobility are not unproblematic. Encouraging those from marginalised ethnicities to move into non-decolonised HE is ethically tricky as this can perpetuate social inequality by reinforcing notions of being othered. Additionally challenging is the placing of a burden of responsibility on GRT students to be "more than" just students, but to take responsibility as role models and agents for social change for their communities. Abajo and Carrasco (2004) and Bereményi and Carrasco (2015) note, for example, the higher-than-average expectations for Roma students to make it from family, from teachers, and even from Roma peers. This iterates existing insights around who is and is not entitled to pursue HE for their own benefit implied by the compulsion to give back in return for one's HE (Nyírő and Durst 2018). This chimes powerfully with Ahmed's critique of the racist underpinnings of

diversity agendas that position inclusion as a gift to be bestowed and repaid; which Ahmed argues to positioning marginalised groups as "those who are not at home" (Ahmed 2012, 43). As Burke (2012) has identified, education is not a gift, but a right.

Conclusion

Our data reveal some of the tensions, concerns, and possibilities for GRT people's inclusion into or towards HE. The marketised context of outreach relies on broad and essentialised categorisations which produce the imaginary of the GRT student as a homogeneous and knowable target that workable interventions can be delivered towards. There is an urgent need for nuanced, intersectional work to destabilise and disrupt such quick-fix discourses towards more careful, nuanced and ethical outreach practice. Importantly, and echoing our learning journeys in our own work around GRT outreach, a need is identified for continued unlearning. This is about an orientation away from this is how it should be *done* towards how it might be continually *developed*.

Moreover, the dominant notion of GRT culture as oppositional to normative educational trajectories emerged alongside discourses of GRT having expansive aspirations that included HE. GRT culture was often assumed to "haunt" future educational possibility and produce mixed feelings about the opportunities offered, including concerns around coming out and ethnic invisibility and the implications of HE for connections with existing communities and identities. This is a both a consequence of homogenised, racialised understandings of GRT communities and their historicised exclusions from education. But it is also about how neoliberal discourses of aspiration present HE decision making as a rational choice of disembodied consumers (Clark, Mountford-Zimdars, and Francis 2015). In contrast, for GRT communities, educational trajectories and possibilities for social mobility are often cruelly entangled within and haunted by identity, culture and history – concerns that move beyond the unravelling of individual desires to the experiences of persistent structural barriers. It is suggested that more inclusive outreach for GRT people seeks to understand and value the complex constellations of journeys towards and into HE, moving away from individualised notions of aspiration. It is perceived that this can best be achieved by working, as we have done, in collective groups of academics, teachers, outreach professionals and community representatives to benefit from shared expertise and take collective responsibility. While this article stated at the outset the need for national policy direction for GRT in HE, there is concurrent value in sharing of resources and knowledge to enhance sector understanding in collaboration and comparison rather than competition. Within such collectives, the voices and perspectives of GRT communities should be amplified in order that this is working *with* and not *on* marginalised communities (Greenfields 2013).

Finally, our data highlights how outreach work needs to be accompanied with ongoing commitment to decolonial practices in HE. For example, Brooks, Clark, and Rostas (2021) analysis of the development of the discipline of Critical Romani Studies shows an urgent need to interrogate how knowledge is produced about Roma to best represent and meet the needs of a "misunderstood and marginalised population" (11). Moreover, Boros, Bogdán, and Durst (2021) review talent support programmes for Roma in Hungary and conclude that a key benefit is producing "Roma cultural capital" a set of intellectual, social and political resources to make meaning from ethnic identities, forge networks and sites of

belong and create sites of resistance to dominant pejorative understandings, including within education. This work involves moving beyond including GRT as a specialist curricula topic but exploring how knowledge about GRT is produced and by whom, who teaches this and how and critical attention to institutional practices that obfuscate, discriminate and essentialise GRT people. Yosso's (2005) work on community cultural wealth offers a potentially productive model for HE inclusion policies to do this by recasting the strengths rather than deficits of GRT communities by acknowledging and recognising the knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by this socially marginalised group. Without this, outreach is merely a superficial gesture, with a fragile connection to the unevenly distributed promises of social mobility. HE must therefore in-reach to value GRT voices, histories and experiences within practices, cultures and curricula in order that outreach does not act as a cruel promise but a site of renewal and possibility.

Note

1. The umbrella-term 'Roma' encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.). EU policy documents and discussions commonly employ this terminology and Gypsy is seen as highly pejorative in these contexts. However, in the UK GRT is the chosen policy acronym and mirrors census ethnicity data categories of Gypsy/Traveller, Roma and Irish Traveller. GTRSB has emerged to account for broader representation of Scottish and English Travellers, Show People, Boaters and New Travellers but these wider categories are not yet mirrored in national data collection.

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ORCID

Emily Danvers http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0170-5331

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