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Stereotyping Irish Travellers: Popular cultural identity and ethnocentrism in recent Media

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RESUMEN:

El propósito de este trabajo es analizar el problema de los estereotipos, y en especial el caso de la Comunidad de Travellers en la sociedad irlandesa actual. Además, se pretende definir cómo funciona, examinar sus causas y sus posibles consecuencias, incluyendo los prejuicios, la discriminación y el racismo. Así mismo, también se tratan los problemas de identidad, etnocentrismo y el reconocimiento de estatus de etnia de este grupo minoritario. La difícil situación de los Travellers se examina brevemente, analizando sobre todo los cambios que han existido en la política que se les aplica, y cómo se les ha representado en los medios de comunicación. Se incluye un análisis detallado de estudios e informes recientes que ilustran las nuevas formas de estereotipos y sus consecuencias.

Se analizan algunos ejemplos de intentos de acercar las dos comunidades y se llega a la conclusión de que para poder obtener un grado satisfactorio de intercomunicación cultural es necesario evitar simplificar la realidad de una cultura.

Palabras clave: etnocentrismo, viajeros, estereotipos culturales, medios de comunicación, Irlanda.

ABSTRACT:

This essay intends to look at the issue of Stereotyping, particularly involving the Travelling Community in modern Irish Society. The essay looks to define the practice, examine its causes and its potential consequences, including prejudice, discrimination and racism. We also look at issues of identity, ethnocentrism and recognition of ethnic minority status, which are prevalent in modern Irish society towards the Travelling community. The plight of Irish Travellers is briefly examined, focusing on the various changes in policy over the past 50 years, their representation in the various media and their fight to be recognised as culturally distinct from the dominant culture. There is extended analysis of recent studies and reports, illustrating more modern or 'sophisticated' forms of stereotyping and its ramifications, such as Tokenism and Aversive Racism.

We look at some examples of successes in bridging the gap between the Travelling Community and the general Irish population and draw the conclusion that in order to attain the level of Intercultural Communication desired, it is necessary to avoid over-simplification of one's environment and to continue to attempt to eradicate the development of stereotypes in our culture, particularly the Travelling Community.

Keywords: ethnocentrism, Travellers, cultural stereotypes, Media, Ireland.

Stereotypes are "social structures which serve as mental pictures of the groups in question" (Lipmann, 1922) or the traits that we view as characteristic of social groups, and particularly those that differentiate groups from each other. In short, they are that come to mind quickly when we think about "groups" (Nelson, 2009). But to understand the nature of stereotypes better, we must look at the nature of identity and ethnocentricity. An intrinsically important issue concerning the development of intercultural communication competence relates to the question of how people start to identify themselves as being part of a particular group. Furthermore, why does it seem almost inevitable that once established within that group, members of one culture start to develop negative attitudes toward other cultural groups? Our cultural identity is something that we unconsciously develop from childhood, when the immediate family is our initial point of reference regarding belonging to a group. As the child gets older and more experienced the development of outside interests, as well as those cultivated at home or in school, creates new groups with which

to identify, sometimes superseding those previously esteemed. A corollary of being part of the socialisation process is that we also learn about groups to which we do not belong, and indeed groups which we are taught to avoid. As Lustig and Koester (2003: 140) tell us, this tendency to identify as a member of some groups, called 'ingroups', and to distinguish these ingroups from 'outgroups' is very prevalent in human thinking. Furthermore, apparently inherent in our collective mindset is the tendency to establish cultural biases, as cultural similarity allows people to reduce uncertainty and to know what to expect when interacting with others. Experiencing shared interpretations, or cultural patterns, provides guidelines about how people should behave and indicate what to expect in interactions with others.

There are multiple obvious benefits to restricting one's interaction to the confines of one's own cultural group. It eliminates the threat of outside influences, reducing the unpredictable elements that outside cultures bring. Also, quite simply, we respond instinctively to stimuli, thereby saving

time by categorising the various stimulants into handy preconceived patterns. By involving ourselves in intercultural communication we endanger the sense of superiority and security we can depend on in our own cultural group. This social categorising is part of the way we all process information about others. As well as organising stimuli into distinct conceptual categories, people also presume that everyone else shares their worldview in terms of perception, reasoning and interaction. The common practice of using personal experience to empathise with or understand the actions or emotions of others is the basis of "ethnocentrism", which is an important feature in the development of stereotypes. Another feature of social categorising is the act of simplifying the processing and organisation of information from the environment by identifying certain characteristics as belonging to certain categories of persons and events (Lustig and Koester, 2003). This results in an over-simplification one's environment, so that prior experiences are used as the basis for determining both the categories and the attributes of the events. This process is called stereotyping. This organisation and simplification can create some genuine obstacles to intercultural competence, because they may lead to prejudice, discrimination and racism (Lustig and Koester, 2003), all of which contribute adversely to the breaking down of barriers to intercultural communication. All cultures instruct their members on preconceived ways to respond to the world, which they consider to be proper and appropriate. Hence, people tend to consider their own history and experience as being universal. When this belief develops (or regresses as such) into a feeling that one's own culture is superior to a culture from without, it becomes ethnocentrism. William G. Sumner's (1940) definition of Ethnocentrism is "the view of things in which one's own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (Lustig and Koester 2003: 149).

Whilst Mac Gréil (1996), in his study of intergroup relations in Ireland defines ethnocentrism, as "prejudices against a person because (s)he is perceived to belong to a particular nationality or culture" (11). Interestingly, his definition relates to the target group, rather than the dominant culture. His research, conducted in Ireland, found that there are "signs of an overall rise in ethnocentrism" (11). It is worth noting however that when Mac Gréil compared his later research conducted in the 1990's, the results indicated "greater enlightenment in the Irish people" (11) regarding issues related to discrimination. This assessment will be discussed later in this article.

Another term, which is of interest to us from the perspective of Irish Travellers, is ethnicity. It is a socially defined concept based on cultural characteristics (Banton, 1998: 11). Anthony Giddens' definition of ethnicity provides a clear explanation of the term: "ethnicities refer to the cultural practices and outlooks of a given community of people that set them apart from others" (1997: 210). He describes ethnic groups as culturally distinct and possessing different characteristics such as "language, history or ancestry (real or imagined), religion and style of dress or adornment" (Giddens 1997: 210).

It is also important to note that the word "race" and ethnicity are often viewed as interchangeable. As Mac Gréil points out in *Pluralism and Diversity*

in *Ireland* (2011), a chief difficulty in assessing Irish Travellers position in society has been the constant inaccurate use of terms like Race and Racial by some commentators when referring to the treatment of this minority by the dominant society. Ethnicity is a product of learned behaviour within a particular environment, while race refers to "biological and genetically inherited physical or physiological traits" (2011: 296). This confusion often leads to ethnicity being seen as the identification of ethnic traits. Lentin distinguishes between the term "ethnic minority" describing it as a "fluid and floating" concept - and "race", which is understood as a rigid and unchanging categorisation of people (2002: 232). This can have both positive and negative results. A productive effect could be the development of a strong and positive image about a particular ethnic group, which may be helpful in breaking down the barriers to intercultural communication. However, it may also lead to the development of negative stereotypes.

Another commonly used term in contemporary Irish society with little regard to its actual meaning is "ethnic minority". Simply put, an ethnic minority is one that is culturally distinct from the majority of the population with a sense of itself as a community also (Giddens, 1997). The travelling community in Ireland is a clear example of an ethnic minority group with a sense of itself as a community. It is culturally distinct from the Settled community. This, however, is not a view shared by the Irish Government, which refuses to recognise the Travelling Community as an ethnically distinct group. This is evident in the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform's interpretation of the Equal Status Act 2000, which offers protection to those discriminated against based on their "ethnic origin" or "membership of the travelling community". By specifically naming the Travelling Community, it conveys that the Government does not consider the Travelling Community to be a distinct ethnic minority group.

In March 2004 the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, an expert body that seeks to provide advice, develop initiatives to address racism and to support a more inclusive, intercultural policy approach in Ireland, submitted a plea to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Human Rights, claiming that Travellers should be 'recognised as an ethnic group in Ireland' and seeking support for that position from policy developments and conceptual approaches within Ireland and at an international level. Their claim was that the Government had procrastinated on the question of recognising Travellers as an ethnic group. This was reflected in the Equality legislation (1998, 2000) where they were recognised as a separate ground for protection against discrimination as opposed to being included under the 'race ground'. However, they felt this position had clearly changed and that the government's position had now hardened to one of explicitly not recognising Travellers as an ethnic group.

It also illustrated that The First National Report by Ireland to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), stated in plain terms: "In regard to the scope of the report it should be noted that Irish Travellers do not constitute a distinct group from the population as a whole in terms of race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin" (O'Connell 1998: 2). They conveyed that this position was at odds with most

respected legal and academic opinion, which clearly would support the position that Irish Travellers are an ethnic group. It was also, they argued, inconsistent with Government action in other areas of policy where Travellers are either recognised de facto as an ethnic group, with almost identical language used to describe an ethnic group. It also highlighted concerns among Traveller groups that the move was in some ways "symbolic of a perceived hardening of a policy position towards Travellers in recent years and there has and will be policy changes arising from this position" (2). This unwillingness of the establishment to recognise Travellers as a distinct ethnic group was another factor which made intercultural communication more difficult.

In May 2011, in the RTÉ documentary "Blood of the Travellers", the first DNA analysis of the Travelling community proved that it is a distinct ethnic minority who separated from the settled community between 1,000 and 2,000 years ago. According to genetics expert Jim Wilson from the University of Edinburgh, though it is clear Travellers diverged from the settled community, it is not clear why. The revelation, according to *The Irish Examiner* "will put further pressure on the Government to recognise Travellers as a distinct group of people" (Hough n.pag.).

NATIONAL POLICIES FOR TRAVELLERS

Travellers are widely acknowledged as one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Irish society. Travellers fare poorly on every indicator used to measure disadvantage: unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, health status, infant mortality, life expectancy, illiteracy, education and training levels, access to decision making and political representation, gender equality, access to credit, accommodation and living conditions. (O'Connell 1998: 1)

The Economic and Social Research Institute concluded that "... the circumstances of the Irish Travelling people are intolerable. No humane and decent society, once made aware of such circumstances, could permit them to persist" (ESRI, July 1986, Paper no. 131). The ESRI also stated that Irish Travellers are "... a uniquely disadvantaged group: impoverished, under-educated, often despised and ostracised, they live on the margins of Irish society" (n.pag.). But although it is generally agreed that Travellers are treated differently to the settled community on a wealth of societal matters, there has been hesitancy in recognising the deeper issues in terms of discrimination and racism. Three phases of policy making regarding Travellers has seen a consistent denial of such matters. The initial phase of governmental involvement with the Travelling Community is the *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy*. The Commission set out:

to enquire into the problem arising from the presence in the country of itinerants in considerable numbers; to examine the economic, educational, health and social problems inherent in their way of life. . . . In order to provide a better way of life for Travellers the Commission undertook "to promote their absorption into the general community... (1963: n.pag.)

Their basic stance was to view travellers as group who deliberately ostracised themselves from the dominant culture, and whose general existence and way of life needed to be drastically altered to conform to social norms. There was no explicit acknowledgement or examination of discrimination towards Travellers. In fact, critics of the Report saw the assimilation policies it pursued as being discriminatory and racist.

The next stage is contained in the *Report of the Travelling People Review Body* (1983). This report had the benefit of twenty years experience since the earlier report and shows a significant shift in thinking by policy makers and others involved with Travellers. The Review Body was asked to examine "the needs of Travellers who wish to continue a nomadic way of life" (n.pag.) and how "barriers of mistrust between the settled and Travelling communities can be broken down and mutual respect for each others' way of life increased" (n.pag.). The term 'itinerant', which was associated with vagrancy and deviancy, was replaced with 'traveller', which was recognition of a distinct identity.

Although pressing issues such as prejudice and hostility, misunderstanding, resistance, indifference and harassment towards Travellers were acknowledged, there was a general reluctance to name discrimination as an issue, to the extent that seemingly simple human rights were lauded as examples of plurality: "The Review Body is pleased to record that there is no evidence of discrimination against Travellers in the granting of social welfare assistance and in gaining enrolment in local primary and second level schools" (1983: n.pag.).

The possibility of introducing laws to prevent and outlaw discrimination against Travellers was looked at, but found the report considered that: "such legislation would be fraught with difficulties, especially in the absence of a precise legal definition of 'traveller'. Accordingly, the enactment of anti-discrimination laws is not sought" (1983: n.pag.). However, the use of the term 'Travellers' in legislation, despite the apparent need to define so, took place in three pieces of legislation in Ireland: The 1988 Housing Act, The 1991 Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act, and The 1993 Unfair Dismissals (Amendment) Act. The third phase of policy development, however, can be associated with the publication of the Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community in 1995. This document devotes a full section to the issue of discrimination, which is a reflection of the fact that the key Traveller support groups had made this a priority issue for the previous ten years. It had also become a major media issue.

The Irish Media also illustrates the segregation comments and gathered by the NCCRI (National Consultative Community on Racism and Interculturalism) that have contributed to expounding popular stereotypes and creating a negative image of the Travelling community in Ireland. Traveller life is without the ennobling intellect of man or the steady instinct of animals. Mary EllenSynon, a former columnist in the *Sunday Independent* expressed

that Garda believe that Travellers are responsible for over 90% of attacks on the rural elderly and adds that the

Traveller culture "is a life of appetite ungoverned by intellect [...] It is a life worse than the life of beasts, for beasts at least are guided by wholesome instinct. Traveller life is without the ennobling intellect of man or the steady instinct of animals. This tinker "culture" is without achievement, discipline, reason or intellectual ambition. It is a morass. And one of the surprising things about it is that not every individual bred in this swamp turns out bad. Some individuals among the tinkers find the will not to become evil. (O'Connell 1998: n.pag.)

With these remarks she is clearly dehumanising the members of the Traveller community and questioning their culture and intelligence. The NCCRI also includes another article by journalist Brendan O'Connor, who wrote the following headline in *The Sunday Independent*: "Patience Runs Thin When Uncivilised Travellers Spill Blood" (O'Connor 1997a). This was referring to an article about feuding, in which he concluded: "It just doesn't happen in a civilised society" (n.pag.). He also tries to justify himself for using the term 'knacker': "Where I come from the word 'knacker' doesn't mean someone of any specific socio-economic or ethnic background. It means someone who behaves in a way that society abhors. And that's what the people who desecrated a Tuamgraveyard last June were, knackers and scumbags" (n.pag.). The columnist tries to give the word 'knacker' a dimension and connotation that it does not have in society to prevent him from being regarded as a racist. He insists on using the same term once again in *The Sunday Independent*. The headline reads: "Good relations knackered" (O'Connor 1996). In the article he states that "the conflict is not between settled and Traveller. It's between decent people and 'knackers'." (n.pag.). Perhaps the most startling of his assertions is that the entire Traveller culture should be obliterated and replaced with an assimilation into what he considers 'normal' settled life, regardless of their or desires or rights: "Brendan O'Connor applauds Councillor Ann Devitt for suggesting that Traveller culture is not sacrosanct, and that the time has come for them to change their way of life". (O'Connor 1997b).

The NCCRI found other prominent remarks made by local politicians in national newspapers and the radio: "They are dirty and unclean. Travelling people have no respect for themselves and their children." (County Councillor quoted in *Irish Times*, 13th March, 1991); "These people have been a constant headache for towns and cities throughout the country." (County Councillor quoted in *Cork Examiner*, 13th June, 1990); "Killarney is literally infested by these people." (County Councillor quoted in *Cork Examiner*, 18th July, 1989); "They are a constant problem, moving from one open area to another and creating problems." (County Councillor quoted in *Cork Examiner*, 13th June, 1990); or "Deasy suggests birth control to limit traveller numbers." (Headline in *Irish Times*, 14th June, 1996).

It is indicative of the depth of the problem Irish settled society has with Travellers when you consider that these arcane sentiments are being proffered by democratically elected politicians,

chosen to represent the views of their electorate. It seems self-evident that these kinds of assertions, when voiced in the public realm, can lead to a deepening of negative stereotypes and a hardening of a public's attitude towards Travellers. As discussed previously, the stereotypes propagated in the media have also contributed to ensuing discrimination and racism and are definitely a barrier to the ongoing dialogue between the Settled and the Travelling communities.

MacGréil in his *Prejudice in Ireland Revisited* (1996), states that "Irish Travellers are still seen and treated as a 'lower caste' in society" (11). According to his research findings there has been a substantial deterioration in attitudes towards Travellers since 1972-3, leading him to conclude that "Irish people's prejudice against Travellers is one of caste-like apartheid." (11). In his more recent look at prejudice and related issues in modern Ireland *Pluralism and Diversity in Ireland* (2011), Mac Gréil draws some interesting conclusions from his exhaustive research on Travellers conditions. He points out that as Travellers were a 0.5% of the National Population in 2006, it should be well within the capacity of the Irish people to integrate this native ethnic minority and give them their proper stake in the society. The model of integration strongly proposed in his book is that of integrated pluralism, which means support for the genuine and valuable cultural traits of the Travelling Community. Of these, 63.8% are unemployed, in contrast to the 7.1% of the National Population. The new demands on education for gainful employment and the discrimination against Travellers getting normal work would be a fairly widespread expression of anti-Traveller prejudice. He appeals for 'positive discrimination in favour of Travellers' and "employment to compensate for their having to overcome the effects of negative discrimination" (2001: 295-330).

On a positive note, there is a willingness to employ a Traveller, and the substantial increase in support for Travellers to serve on a jury. What is most important about the fact that nearly three-quarters of the people agreed was the manifestation of trust in the Traveller to be competent to carry out a most responsible civic duty. But these items refer to contractual rather than personal relationships between the Settled and Travelling Communities. These purported views are typical of Tokenism or Aversive Racism, as pointed out by Lustig and Koester: "individuals do not perceive themselves as prejudiced, because they make small concessions to, while holding basically negative attitudes toward, members of the other group" (2003: 139). This is conveyed in the fact that most people do not want to settle near, or socialise with, Travellers. Some of the public criticisms of Traveller householders is exaggerated, and has become stereotypical and, thereby, unfair.

Mac Greil argues that once favourable contact has been established, changes in negative attitudes are likely to happen. With favourable contact within the community, negative stereotypes will be demythologised and the true attractiveness of Travelling People will become more manifest to neighbours and visitors alike. Travellers themselves will begin to realise that they have a stake in society and will respond constructively to the positive norms of the Irish community, which will transmit to future generations. In other words, for

Mac Gréil, this is the only way they could be assimilated as an integral part of the neighbourhood.

All in all, the work of Pavee Point, a Travellers Rights NGO (O'Connell 1998), has gone some way to informing people of the plight of the Travelling community in Ireland, as well as opening dialogue and encouraging a rethink in the mindset of the settled community. Lustig and Koester claim that "an intercultural transformation occurs when people are able to move beyond the limits of their own cultural experiences to incorporate the perspectives of other cultures into their own interpersonal interactions" (2003: 173). This transformation must take place sooner rather than later in Irish society, to preserve an ethnic group prominently outcasted by society. Our ability to adapt, to change the pre-conceived stereotypes we have forged, and to attain and maintain positive, healthy relationships with members of different cultures, will not only establish us as being an inter-culturally competent society, but it will also contribute to keeping alive one of the largest and oldest indigenous ethnic groups in the island.

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