

Third Sector Research Centre Discussion Paper G: Summary

'Co-producing Knowledge with below the radar communities: Factionalism, Commodification or Partnership? A Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Case Study'

Andrew Ryder; January 2015

For a number of years I worked as a campaigner in the Gypsy, Roma Traveller (GRT) third sector. This activism was a by-product of my academic research for a PhD, somehow I felt uncomfortable with a research strategy that might have meant me standing aloof on the side lines, observing a marginalised community from afar and not lifting a finger to help. At the time a then New Labour Government was at last thinking about how to address the national sites shortage which was causing untold hardship for Gypsy and Traveller families, at the same time the tabloid press and 'dog whistle' politics were demonising this community. I drifted into activism and abandoned my academic studies and helped establish and service a Coalition of Gypsy and Traveller groups which was needed to lobby and communicate community aspirations to the Government during a 'window of opportunity' sparked by a policy review on this issue. Four years ago I returned to academia but sought to fuse my backgrounds in activism and academia by promoting participatory action research (PAR) with GRT communities.

In the TSRC discussion paper '**Co-producing Knowledge with below the radar communities: Factionalism, Commodification or Partnership? A Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Case Study**' I seek to deliberate upon experiences and insights drawn from Participatory Action Research (PAR) but also explore the wider academic, policy and cultural context that shapes the environment in which researchers work in and have to navigate. Despite a growing number of institutions advocating participation and empowerment these terms are being hijacked and tokenised by those in power. It is also important to note that some in the academic establishment are wedded to scientism and deride PAR as lacking objectivity and being tainted with activism, such researchers wish to retain a stranglehold on knowledge production which is firmly centred within universities. In addition, the growing commodification of research is leading to an academic environment where researchers' productivity is tightly measured and controlled. For already overworked academic researchers PAR makes major demands given the time such a research approach requires in terms of relationship building and capacity building.

Despite these impediments to the development of inclusive research, a strong case can be made for the efficiency of such research approaches which can formulate policy which is informed and guided by those it impacts upon. Moreover, it is through community based participatory forms of research that citizens, including those at the margins, will reflect, understand and mobilise to bring forth transformative change.

Finally the paper expresses concern about the symbolic violence which competing academics inflict upon each other, disagreement and debate is a valued feature of knowledge production, but there is a concern that within Romani Studies this process is becoming too factionalised. Of all academic subject areas Romani Studies is one which should embrace and reflect diversity of opinion but also a diversity of structures and inclusivity of means engaged in knowledge production.

The aim of TSRC Discussion Papers is to promote debate on research and practice. The views expressed are those of the author rather than TSRC itself. To debate further please contact Andrew Ryder: andrew.ryder@uni-corvinus.hu