Gypsy-Traveller Young People and the Spaces of Social Welfare: A Critical Ethnography

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Abstract

Drawing on more than three years of ethnographic research conducted within one British voluntary sector organisation, this article critically examines the nature of social welfare activities aimed at young people from Gypsy-Traveller communities. In doing so, the article engages and advances wider debates about the nature of the voluntary sector; the contestation of age boundaries and differences; and the institutional geographies of childhood and youth. Previous critical research has often expressed scepticism about the role of social welfare activities as potential tools for the assimilation, sedentarisation, and/or social control of semi-nomadic minorities, with young people often serving as primary targets of these kinds of efforts. To date, however, these discussions have often lacked a strong empirical grounding and have focused primarily on state education to the neglect of other kinds of activities, such as those provided through the voluntary sector. Drawing on evidence from fieldwork within one case study organisation that provided a range of activities and services for young Gypsy-Travellers, the article explores some of the continuities and discontinuities between discourse and practice within the case study organisation, and traces some of the sometimes uncertain and contradictory ways in which the organisation alternately challenged and reproduced dominant norms and practices. In the concluding section, I argue that binary distinctions between assimilationist/anti-assimilationist or sedentarist/anti-sedentarist do not necessarily capture the complexities of these

social welfare contexts, where power relations are often highly entangled and agendas not always straightforwardly enacted.

Introduction

Geographers have produced a small but significant critical literature concerning the social control, regulation, and stigmatisation of Gypsy-Traveller[2] populations (Sibley, 1981, 1986, 1998; Halfacree, 1996; Vanderbeck, 2003; Holloway, 2005; Powell, 2008). This research has called attention to the need to examine not only the most direct instances of harsh policing and oppression, such as the criminalisation of semi-nomadic practices, but also the more subtle ways in which social welfare efforts have been deployed, particularly in relation to Gypsy-Traveller children and young people (Sibley, 1986; Vanderbeck, 2005a; Powell, 2007). In this article, I draw on more than three years of ethnographic research conducted within one British voluntary sector organisation, the Gypsy-Traveller Centre[3] (GTC), to advance critical debates about the nature of social welfare activities aimed at young people from Gypsy-Traveller communities and other peripheral minority groups (Sibley, 1986). Previous discussions (whether originating in academia, government, the voluntary sector, or other sources) have characterised these kinds of activities in diverse ways, ranging from an emphasis on their 'empowering' or 'caring' potential to a pronounced scepticism about their assimilationist and ethnocentric underpinnings. To date, however, these discussions have often had a limited empirical grounding, and therefore have provided an inadequate picture of the complexities of discourse, practice, and power operating in these contexts. In addition, the existing literature has overwhelmingly focused on efforts by the state to promote/enforce participation in schooling (Vanderbeck, 2005a) to the neglect other kinds of institutional/organisational activities that also have important implications for the life courses and geographies of young Gypsy-Travellers. Besides contributing to these specific debates, the article extends wider discussions within human geography and elsewhere about the nature of the

[2] For the purposes of this paper, the term 'Gypsy-Traveller' is used to encompass members of traditionally semi-nomadic groups in Britain including Romanis, Irish Travellers and Scottish Travellers (see Clark and Greenfields, 2006). My usage here is not intended to imply that the groups are culturally identical, yet the groups are affected in similar ways by social policy, are often targeted by the same agencies and organisations, and do share a number of broad similarities. I am not including New (or New Age) Travellers groups, who are of far more recent genesis (this is not to dismiss the importance of issues concerning these groups). Issues of terminology can be controversial and there is no universal agreement on the best approach. Some Romanis, for example, embrace the term 'Gypsy', while others consider 'Gypsy' to be pejorative and prefer the term 'Traveller'. Irish Travellers, despite having a history that extends back centuries, are often dismissed as 'false' Travellers compared to 'real' Romanis, but this discourse has been thoroughly critiqued and refuted (see Vanderbeck, 2003; Clark and Greenfields, 2006). 'Traveller' has been used as an umbrella term in some sources to include Romanis, Irish Travellers, and Scottish Travellers, and in other cases to include these groups and New Travellers, hence the need to clarify terminology.

[3] GTC is a pseudonym, as are all names from the fieldwork. I have also intentionally not named the urban context in which GTC was located.

voluntary sector, the cultural contestation of age boundaries and differences, and the institutional geographies of childhood and youth.

I begin with a discussion of how young Gypsy-Travellers have often become the objects of attention and intervention from state and non-state actors with a range of motivations. I then examine broader critical literatures on institutional activities for young people (I use the term 'young people' throughout in its broadest sense), and discuss my methodological approach to studying GTC. Drawing on evidence from fieldwork, I examine the ways in which GTC's activities for young people are a kind of collaborative manufacture (Goffman, 1959, 253) between staff, young people, parents, funders, the state, and other individual and institutional actors. I explore continuities and discontinuities between organisational discourse and practice, and trace some of the sometimes contradictory and ambivalent ways in which the organisation alternately challenged and reproduced dominant norms and practices. In the concluding section, I reflect on the wider significance of the case study, suggesting the need for analyses that attend to the specificities of interactions in micro-contexts while situating these within broader landscapes of inequality.

The Social Construction and Social Control of Young Gypsy-Travellers

> On any day the numbers on site could have been supplemented by philanthropists, journalists, philologists, lorists, sanitary officers, missionaries, police and local government officials. Whether by sympathisers or critics the Gypsies were hounded from all sides, suffering interrogation about their lore and language, subjected to the evangelistic endeavours of the missionaries or persecuted by the various agencies of the state. (Mayall, 1988, 18)

David Mayall's description of nineteenth century Gypsy-Traveller encampments is suggestive of the often-fraught position of Gypsy-Travellers in British society. For centuries, Gypsy-Travellers in Britain and elsewhere in Europe have been subject to intervention, regulation, and proselytisation from *gaujos* (non Gypsy-Travellers)[4] with an interest in controlling and/or changing them, as well as questioning and study from those with a curiosity about people they see as exotic and different. To use Mayall's expression, both "sympathisers" and "critics" of Gypsy-Travellers have often made Gypsy-Traveller children central to their efforts, which have ranged from the provision of educational or training opportunities to the coerced or forced separation of children from their homes (Mayall, 1988; Okely, 1997; Jordan, 2001). To the present day, Gypsy-Traveller childhood

[4] This Romani term is spelt and pronounced in different ways by different users. In British sources, ways the term is rendered include *gaujo, gauje, gadjo, gorgio*, *gorgi*, and *gorgia*. Irish Travellers sometimes use the terms 'country people' or 'buffers' to indicate out-group members.

continues to be a major site of struggle between Gypsy-Traveller communities and sedentary society, as well as between members of Gypsy-Traveller communities themselves (Vanderbeck, 2005a; Levinson and Sparkes, 2006).

Stigmatising representations of Gypsy-Travellers, such as those found in a range of popular media (Vanderbeck, 2003), have frequently emphasised aspects of Gypsy-Traveller childhood and parenting, with semi-nomadic lifestyles portrayed as incompatible with the requirements of an 'appropriate' modern childhood (see Okely, 1983 and 1997a; Mayall, 1988 and 1995). Even in situations where Gypsy-Traveller families have moved into sedentary housing, however, hostility has often persisted, reflecting processes of racialisation that have marked Gypsy-Travellers as intrinsically deviant, dirty, prone to theft, and dishonest (Vanderbeck, 2003; Holloway, 2005). Gypsy-Traveller young people have often been seen as fruitful targets for intervention, given a belief that they will be more pliable than adults. As Okley (1997b, 72) argues, young Gypsy-Travellers are seen as "potentially available for change and rescue from what is seen by non-Gypsies as a negative and lost future if left to formation alone by Gypsies." Alternately understood as victims of their own upbringings and potential threats to the wider social order, young Gypsy-Travellers have become subject to efforts to both *include them in* and *exclude them from* 'mainstream' activities.

This exclusion/inclusion dynamic has been most discussed in relation to practices of schooling. On the one hand, Gypsy-Traveller parents who in the past sought to send their children to school were often explicitly blocked from doing so by teachers or *gaujo* parents hoping to prevent their children from interacting with young Gypsy-Travellers. Although explicit exclusion of this kind is far rarer in present-day Britain, a number of significant barriers still exist to school participation, including the rigidity of a school system designed primarily with the needs and aspirations of sedentary children in mind, as well as the continued presence of racial harassment in schools. On the other hand, however, many Gypsy-Traveller families have treated formal, state education suspiciously, resisting legal efforts to compel school attendance (Vanderbeck, 2005a), something which has become a concern for the state, which represents state education as a vehicle for 'social inclusion' (Ofsted, 1999). To the present day, rates of Gypsy-Traveller school enrolment and attendance in Britain remain comparatively low, particularly at secondary level (Save the Children, 2001), although rates have recently been increasing. Traditional Gypsy-Traveller practices of education have been centred on the home and the knowledge/skills thought necessary to reproduce Gypsy-Traveller societies and economies. As Smith (1997, 243), a self-identified Romani, observes, "Traditional Romani education is community education. Children participate in the communities' day-to-day activities […] learn(ing) by watching, listening and observing the economic, social, linguistic, political and moral codes of their society." Although resistance to state-enforced attendance continues from many families, it is important to emphasise that there is no singular

Gypsy-Traveller perspective on schooling or any other issue, with these issues heavily contested both between and within communities and families (see also Levinson and Sparkes, 2006).

A number of commentators have critiqued educational and other social welfare efforts directed at young Gypsy-Travellers for their assimilationist or incorporationist underpinnings (Sibley, 1981, 1986). Okely (1983, 161) is scathing on this issue in her discussions of how practitioners can fail to recognise the nature of unequal social relations in the society into which they hope to integrate young people:

> Too often social workers, teachers and students have approached Gypsy children in a thoroughly ethnocentric way, and attempted to impose their own values. Even those who pay lip service to the notion of a Gypsy 'culture' presume that the ideal education for Gypsy children should be a preparation for wage-labour.

These concerns have by no means died since the publication of Okely's monograph. McVeigh (1997, 9) argues that many welfarist efforts are informed by a pervasive *sedentarism,* "that system of ideas and practices which serves to normalise and reproduce sedentary modes of existence and pathologise and repress nomadic modes of existence". In his critique, he draws parallels between "sympathetic welfarism" and policies of genocide, suggesting that both are ultimately intended to eliminate nomadic lifestyles, differing only in their methods.

> The efforts of well-meaning politicians, social workers and educationalists and health workers who adopt a sedentarist and assimilationist paradigm *vis-à-vis* Travellers and other nomads is [sic] equally genocidal in effect [….] The nomad is increasingly caught in this genocidal dialectic between sympathetic incorporation and unsympathetic repression [….] Indeed, perversely, it has sometimes been the case that sympathetic welfarism has proved *more* successful in the obliteration of nomadic people. (McVeigh, 1997, 23)

Clark (1997) makes a similar critique of educational and social welfare policy at the level of the European Union, suggesting that welfare policies often constitute a strategy of cultural assimilation:

> Social welfare has come to be the method by which policies of assimilation are introduced and followed through [....] Having said this, it is also clear that some (a few) NGOs and statutory organisations are making progress by paying heed to Gypsy cultural norms and realities [….] Recent talk of 'social integration', 'social inclusion', 'intercultural education' is, for many critics, just a polite

> (and deliberately vague) way of talking about assimilation through the 'back door'. (Clark, 1997, 30 and 32)

Discussions such as these contribute to what I have elsewhere called a *narrative of assimilation* (Vanderbeck, 2005a) that emphasises how forms of social welfare provision can be intended to ultimately facilitate the demise of Gypsy-Traveller lifestyles and cultures. In contrast, however, other commentators have framed social welfare activities aimed at young Gypsy-Travellers (particularly activities promoting/enforcing regular school attendance) in terms of a *narrative of empowerment*. This approach is evident in the writings of many educationists, who tend to highlight how state education is necessary for child development and potentially provides access to new opportunities for young Gypsy-Travellers, given apparent declines in Gypsy-Traveller economies and the growing need for literacy and information technology skills (e.g. Waterson, 1997; Kiddle, 1999).

Although state education is the largest arena of Gypsy-Traveller "youth working",[5] there are also an important range of other activities targeting them, many of which have been organised by voluntary and charitable organisations. Quantitative data on these forms of provision is difficult to provide, given that there is no central data source and often little co-ordination between disparate activities. A 2001 guide produced by the Traveller Law Research Unit listed twenty-two voluntary organisations (often called Traveller Support Groups or some variation on the name) that are engaged in providing different kinds of support and/or outreach to Gypsy-Traveller communities in England, as well as several in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Given instabilities in funding sources, however, the number and types of these activities regularly fluctuate. For example, in the mid 1990s several projects with explicit child/youth components were hard hit or forced to close when Save the Children Fund withdrew direct support from a number of projects of this kind. More recently, the National Lottery Charities Board (now the Big Lottery Fund), Comic Relief, and other charities have contributed significant sums to a range of voluntary projects for Gypsy-Travellers. Between 1995 and 2001, the National Lottery Charities Board contributed in excess of £2.3 million to twenty-eight projects aimed specifically at Gypsy-Travellers across the United Kingdom. Eighteen of these identified work with young people as a main target.[6] As described in their press releases, these projects have included the building of community facilities and play areas, funding for youth and community workers, child and adult literacy projects, a project on young Traveller women and community participation, pre-vocational training, participation in the visual arts, "education and social activities" for young

[5] 'Youth working' is a useful shorthand employed by Tucker (1997, 89) and others to denote "the occupational activities involved in the fields of health, welfare, and education" directed at young people, broadly defined.

[6] All calculations are my own, based on data made publicly available from the Community Fund. Recent grants include £133,376 for a project in Dorset (2005), £148,450 for a group in Belfast (2007), and £306,515 for projects in Hull (2007). Full details of these projects can be obtained from www.biglotteryfund.org.uk.

Travellers, and "education and advice aimed at reducing poverty", among others. In May 2001, Comic Relief listed Traveller-related work as a potential area for support under its "fighting for justice" theme. The Irish Youth Foundation, the Brent Irish Advisory Service, and a variety of other foundations and charities have also provided money for projects impacting young Gypsy-Travellers. Several programmes (including GTC, as I will discuss) have secured funding for skills development and employment-oriented projects via the former Single Regeneration Budget, the New Deal for Communities, and the European Social Fund (a number of further examples of projects can be found in Kent County Council, 1999).

This is *not* meant to suggest that these forms of non-school 'youth working' are exceptionally well-funded or overly systematic—the national picture continues to be one of geographically highly uneven provision and practice in terms of the voluntary sector, as well as statutory social work and local authority (LA) youth services (Cemlyn, 1998, 2000). Nevertheless, the lack of in-depth critical examination of these activities is striking, with only one published study based on relatively short term engagements (Cemlyn, 1997) addressing voluntary sector work with young Travellers at all (nothing substantial has yet emerged on youth work within LA youth services). Below I examine wider critical literatures on institutional contexts of childhood and youth that can inform how these under-examined issues might be approached.

Power and the Institutional Geographies of Childhood/Youth

Geographers have shown an increasing interest in institutional and organisational contexts, a trend discussed by Philo and Parr (2000) as 'institutional geographies'. These accounts, rather than being rooted in the traditions of location analysis, emphasise the implications of institutional activities for human geographies (Del Casino *et al*., 2000). A particular concern has been the nature of power relationships within these contexts. In terms of childhood and youth, geographers have given particular attention to how 'the manipulated spaces' of schools are implicated in shaping young people's identities and controlling their bodies (e.g. Plosjaska, 1994). Less attention has been given to non-school forms of 'youth working', with important exceptions including Ruddick's (1996) groundbreaking account of service provision for homeless young people in Hollywood, California, and Dunkley's (2006) analysis of U.S. wilderness therapy programmes designed to heal 'problem' youth by sending them into nature. Although so-called 'children's geographies' has often critiqued the institutionalisation of the lives of young people (Vanderbeck, 2008), institutional and organisational contexts beyond schools have received comparatively little critical attention within the subfield, and there have been few engagements with wider critical literatures on human services provision.

Before further examining how power has been theorised within institutionalised contexts of "youth working", I first want to briefly explore broader

discussions of the nature of power relations. Recent conceptualisations in geography and elsewhere have emphasised how power is emergent and expressed through action rather than a latent or fixed property possessed by individuals or collectivities (Sharp et al., 2000). As Foucault (1980, 98) argued:

> (P)ower is not to be taken to be a phenomenon of one individual's consolidated and homogeneous domination over others, or that of one group or class over others [….] Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth [….] And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.

Massey (2000, 280) similarly argues against conceptualising power simply in terms of "the structure of big binaries" to the neglect of how it is "fraught, unstable, and contingent, as well as multiple".[7] She suggests *power geometries* as an heuristic for thinking through the complex, overlapping, and interlocking systems of power relations that operate in places, a perspective applied to the geographies of institutions by Tooke (2000). This view of power can complicate conventional notions of resistance. While conceptualisations of resistance vary (Pile and Keith, 1997), work in this area highlights that even marginalised groups maintain some degree of agency to act in ways unexpected or undesired by dominant groups, a point developed in relation to Gypsy-Traveller populations by Karner (2004). Cohen (1989, 152) suggests thinking in terms of a 'dialectic of control':

> Although superordinate agents have access to more potent resources, they can never thoroughly control subordinates' activities simply by virtue of the resources they employ. Rather, in all instances in which outcomes are achieved *through* the doings of others […] subordinate agents […] maintain at least some minimal capability to 'act otherwise'.

Debates about power feature prominently in the vast critical literatures on schooling, youth work, social work, and other forms of "youth working". Discussing the influence of certain (sometimes limited) readings of Foucault on the critical social work literature, Davies (1991, 6) argues that one of the main images of social workers to have emerged is that of "puppets of a macro-system employed, not for well-intentioned 'helping' purposes, but as critical [i.e. crucial] agents of

[7] Binary representations of oppressor/oppressed can, however, be politically useful in some situations. Seeing power as "entangled" does not mean that it is unimportant to study relations of domination, oppression, and exploitation (Massey, 2000).

state power" (see also Chambon et al., 1999). A particular concern has been with the normalising practices evident in a number of welfare-orientated activities (Davies, 1991; Chambon, 1999), as young people and others are persuaded and coerced into normative modes of thinking and conduct that advance the interests of the state, capital, and/or other powerful interests. This has involved, for example, efforts to foster particular notions of citizenship among young people, prepare them for the workforce, and reduce "delinquency" (Davies, 1986; France and Wiles, 1997).

As Davies (1991) emphasises, however, visions of practitioners as simply "puppets of a macro-system" can be reductive in that they neglect the complex negotiations that take place in social welfare contexts. As a number of commentators emphasise in relation to human services provision in general (e.g. Wharton, 1989; Payne, 1991; Sibeon, 1991) and work with young people in particular (e.g. Ruddick, 1996; Banks, 1997; France and Wiles, 1997; Tucker, 1997), the agency of practitioners matters. Practitioners do not seamlessly transform "received ideas" (Rojek et al., 1988) from higher authorities into practice; rather, they are involved in processes of translating discourse and policy into social welfare practices, and as such exercise a degree of agency (Sibeon, 1991). As Parton (1999, 105) argues of power relations in welfare contexts:

> [T]he exercise of power takes place through an ever shifting set of alliances of political and nonpolitical authorities. Professionals and other "experts" are crucial to its operation, but they also have their own interests and priorities, which means that day-to-day policies and practices are not unified, integrated, or easily predictable.

Indeed, the "received ideas" passed on by the state (which itself is not a monolithic entity) and other sources can have contradictory implications for practice. Banks (1997, 221), for example, sees decisions about intervention into young people's lives as often replete with contradictions between principles relating to the self-determination of individuals, the welfare of individual service users, the public good, and the mandates of social justice or equal opportunity (see also Cheetham, 1989; Epstein, 1999). While there is little dispute that practitioner agency to some degree matters, the extent to which it matters is a subject of debate (Davies, 1991) and requires empirical examination, given the diverse nature of social welfare activities and the contexts in which they occur. These debates in many respects mirror discussions in the critical education literature, which emphasizes that although schools are major sites for the reproduction of classed, gendered, racialised and other inequalities (Morris-Roberts, 2003), they are also sites of cultural production where "economic and political ideologies […] are mediated, worked on, and subjectively produced" (Giroux, 1985, 36). Thus, these are "socially constructed sites of contestation" (Giroux, 1985, 23) requiring ethnographic inquiry.

Although much of the critical literature on social welfare and the 'helping' professions focuses on state-sponsored contexts, increasing recent attention has also been given specifically to activities from the voluntary sector (Milligan, 2007). In terms of children and youth, voluntary organisations provide a diverse range of educational, training, recreational, and other forms of support. Two inter-related phenomena within the sector have received particular attention. First, many areas of the voluntary sector (which is of course highly diverse) have become increasingly professionalised, such that paid professionals as opposed to volunteers are the central actors within voluntary organisations. Second, there is concern that many voluntary organisations have begun to constitute a kind of "shadow state" (Wolch, 1990) as they have begun to fill gaps in public welfare services provision and have compromised much of their independence from the state (although, as Berman (1984) notes, sources who fund voluntary and charitable activity often have agendas similar to those of the state). Many voluntary organisations in the US and UK receive at least partial funding from government, leading to concerns that "the increased dependence of voluntary organisations on state contracts and grants, together with a growth in state regulation and administrative oversight, can act to reinforce state control over welfare provision and increase state penetration into the activities of everyday life" (Milligan, 2007, 6). In this view, many voluntary organisations have become or risk becoming part of regimes of governance involving both state and civil society actors that potentially reproduce or inadequately challenge inequalities. Again, however, there is a need that "empirical realities be faced in ethnographic detail" (Harker, 1990, 68) in specific contexts to understand both the extent and significance of these developments.

In the remainder of the article, I bring these insights to bear on a case study of GTC. I use the case of GTC not as 'representative' of other contexts (especially given that there is no singular model of this kind of work to which the case could be generalised), but as a way of problematizing, enriching, and challenging existing interpretations of social welfare efforts for young Gypsy-Travellers, calling attention to the need to take micro-contexts seriously while also situating them in wider systems of power relations. In the next section, I further discuss the logic for the case study and my approach to researching GTC in greater detail.

Methodological Approach and Research Context

Until comparatively recently, the history of scholarship on issues pertaining to Gypsy-Travellers consisted largely of often exoticised or voyeuristic interrogations of their cultures, including their languages, folklores, historical origins and pollution taboos, with less interest shown in interrogating the power relationships involved in efforts to regulate and control Gypsy-Travellers. Although Acton (1974, 2) argued in his account of Gypsy politics that "a sociology of minorities must also be a sociology of majorities", and Okely (1983, 26) emphasised "the need for participant observation among the Gorgio (*gaujo*)

authorities", in-depth research of this kind has rarely been carried out. As I have argued elsewhere, too much research has "chosen to interrogate aspects of Traveller cultures … rather than turning a critical eye to those in positions of relative power" (Vanderbeck, 2005a, 77). Only rarely have researchers looked in an ethnographically nuanced way inside *gaujo* institutions and organisations (see Grönfors, 1981, on policing in Finland and Kenny, 1997, on secondary schooling in Ireland).

Thus, this research was not explicitly framed as a project of 'raising the voices' of a marginalised group (which is not to dismiss the importance of research in this vein). Rather, my broader aim was to critically examine the discourses that suggest, support, and sustain 'youth working' practices with Gypsy-Traveller young people, and to explore the nature of power relations within these contexts. This effort involved empirical research in a range of both state- and voluntary-sector contexts. The empirical material presented here is based on long-term ethnographic research within one voluntary organisation, although the analysis is also informed by interviews and visits with practitioners in three other voluntary organisations; interviews with twenty-two professionals working for state funded Traveller Education Services (TESs); attendance at a diverse set of public events where issues concerning Gypsy-Traveller young people were discussed; and a substantial review of relevant secondary documents and media accounts.

The case-study organisation, GTC, started in the 1970s as a small-scale, voluntary project that initially focused on adult literacy. The centre, which at the time was located near a large concentration of both Romani and Irish Traveller encampments in a declining urban industrial area, soon observed its activities to include young people, who volunteers realised were not accessing the school system for a variety of reasons. Over time, the organisation secured funding both from the council and charitable sources, and its activities have become increasingly professionalised, with only a small amount of the overall labour of the centre provided by volunteers (as is increasingly the case across the voluntary sector). Like many voluntary organisations, GTC had experienced cycles of expansion and contraction in the range of services it offered as new sources of funding have become available and others expired or were withdrawn. At the time of research, GTC's activities included providing benefits advice, family support work, a playgroup for children under five, a youth work programme (YWP) with activities for ages 12-25 (with most participants aged 14-18), and a skills-development project for under 25s (SDP). None of the paid staff (between five and seven people at any given time during the research) at the centre identified themselves as Gypsy-Travellers.

GTC's users included both Irish Travellers and Romanis, and were roughly equally divided between Gypsy-Travellers living on one of the city's local authority (LA) caravan (trailer) sites and those living in 'settled' housing (usually

council flats). On occasion, highly mobile families stopping temporarily in the city accessed some of GTC services, although the services for young people were primarily used by families who spent the majority of the year in the city, whether on sites or in housing. The centre maintained a relatively informal atmosphere, with users free to use GTC as a drop-in centre during regular opening hours; staff and users often chatted informally in the common area over cups of tea while, for example, users waited to speak with the welfare rights adviser or to pick up their children from the playgroup. Maintaining this atmosphere of informality was considered crucial by most of GTC's staff as, in their view, it helped differentiate the organisation from other institutions (schools, benefits offices, social work agencies) that many of its users severely distrusted.

Between 1998 and 2001, I conducted regular participant observation as a volunteer in GTC in a variety of capacities, participating in activities on more than 150 days with the centre's users and/or staff.[8] I also conducted a follow-up visit to the centre in 2002, approximately one year after formal fieldwork ceased. The kinds of activities I was involved in were varied, but included volunteering particularly in activities directly aimed at children/young people, ranging from age two to about twenty-one. Additionally, I regularly attended relevant organisational meetings and other events, including three annual general meetings, staff meetings, planning sessions, and interagency meetings between GTC and statutory agencies involved in health, education, and site provision. This long period of involvement afforded substantial access to conversations with both staff and users of GTC; it also allowed observation of continuities and contradictions between discourse and practice that would be hidden from a researcher with a shorter, more superficial involvement with the setting. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with six of the centre's professional staff (all of the staff employed at that given moment). These interviews took place about halfway through the fieldwork, thus permitting further in-depth exploration of both individual perspectives and the meanings of particular practices I had observed over an extended time. Although my presence inevitably had "effects" on specific events that transpired in the context (as is always the case with participant observation research), my presence almost certainly did not transform the overall ethos or working practices of GTC in any significant way. The tendencies and issues I discuss below both predated my presence and persisted (as confirmed in my follow up visit) after I left the setting, and are supported by triangulation of evidence from interviews, documents, and other sources.

All of the staff were explicitly aware of my research interests, and in fact encouraged the project. Not wanting to adopt a covert approach, I also made young

[8] To provide greater protection of the confidentiality of individuals, given the relatively small number of organisations nationally working with young Gypsy-Travellers, it was decided to allow at least five years to pass after the completion of the participant observation before publishing findings from it.

people and parents aware that I had research interests in forms of 'youth working' with young Gypsy-Travellers. There were, however, a large number of people who used the centre's services, and it would have been impossible (and substantially disruptive of GTC's services) to inform everyone with whom I had fleeting contact. Young people and parents with whom I had regular contact were aware of my interests, with the subject often arising naturally on my first introduction to them. When directly representing the 'voice' of a young person or parent in the following sections (either as a direct quotation or paraphrase), it is one with whom I interacted frequently. However, despite knowing a great deal about the lives of a number of young people and their families outside GTC, the amount of personal detail I recorded in my field notes in this regard was intentionally limited. This was due to my concerns about protecting privacy and not reproducing invasive traditions of research that emphasise the (sometimes voyeuristic) examination of personal circumstances and group cultures rather the interrogation of the *gaujo* field of power regularly encountered by Gypsy-Travellers. As Sibley (1998) argues, one must also question the extent to which it is beneficial to marginalised groups to publish overly detailed information about their lives and resistant practices that can then be accessed by more powerful groups. Although I had innumerable informal discussions on a range of issues with young people, parents, and other users, I did not endeavour to conduct recorded interviews with GTC's users, given that I was inevitably to some degree positioned by users as 'staff'. As such, I felt that it would ineffective and ethically dubious to ask direct interview-style questions of users about GTC, a process that would have aroused fears for some that candid opinions would filter back to staff and perhaps compromise their access to services. In fact, the quality of the participant observation data collected over the research period was likely far richer as a result of *not* formally interviewing users, as opinions and perspectives were explored naturalistically in spontaneous and socially meaningful interactions (see also Vanderbeck, 2005b).

Discourse, Practice and Power at GTC

GTC's Ethos: An Alternative?

> GTC was established as a response to the appalling conditions that Gypsies and Travellers in (this city) were living in [….] GTC has developed organically in response to the expressed needs of Gypsies and Travellers with their participation at every level. (GTC brochure)

> GTC's staff have built up a relationship based on trust with the community, visiting them in their homes and offering a well-used drop-in centre. This two way communication structure has resulted in this project proposal (for the SDP). It is a result of a number of young people asking the youth workers to help them find suitable skills training. (Excerpt from successful grant proposal, GTC)

In this section, I explore GTC's overall ethos, or the guiding values and beliefs that characterise the work of an organisation (cf. Cloke et al., 2005). Specifically, I examine some of the tensions and disjunctures between GTC's stated goal of being a user-led alternative and other professional discourses, norms, and agendas that shaped the centre's working practices. As discussed previously, critiques of social welfare activities aimed at young Gypsy-Travellers have often problematised both their sedentarist underpinnings and potentially coercive nature. Although staff had different backgrounds, practitioners at GTC were familiar with the contours of many of the debates that took place regarding Gypsy-Traveller/*gaujo* relations, with some having in fact read texts such as Okely's (1983) well-known ethnography and other critical literature. The jacket cover of Hawes and Perez's (1995) *The Gypsy and the State: The Ethnic Cleansing of British Society* featured prominently in a display on the wall of the main shared staff office, alongside various clippings from local and national media illustrating the oppression of Gypsy-Travellers in Britain, as if to signal staff awareness of the circumstances encountered by their users.

Although terms such as "assimilation" or "sedentarisation" were only occasionally used directly, the discourse of the centre both explicitly and implicitly critiqued government and other policies to suppress semi-nomadism and normalise Gypsy-Travellers to *gaujo* lifestyles. Practitioners at GTC continuously emphasised that they wanted the centre's services to be user-led to the greatest extent possible, with its activities directed by the expressed needs and wants of its users (cf. Baron et al., 1999,12). Aspects of consultation were considered central parts of the work. For example, when youthworker Tina joined GTC, she visited each of the local authority Gypsy-Traveller sites with a loosely structured set of questions for young people and parents, including their preferences for single sex or mixed group work, their thoughts on appropriate and inappropriate activities, and whether or not they wanted to mix with young people from other sites. Discussions of the origins of the SDP almost always emphasised the ways in which funding for the programme was sought as a result of productive interchanges between the staff and young people. One of the most frequent criticisms GTC staff made of other local authority agencies was that "they don't listen" or engage in any real consultation with Gypsy-Travellers. GTC envisioned itself within its own discourse as an alternative to this way of working, a discourse recited both in interactions amongst staff and in representations of the organisation to outsiders.

Based on their interactions with young people and parents, staff recognised that many GTC users found mainstream provision (particularly educational provision) to be unsuitable for a range of reasons. Consistent with the traditional role of voluntary organisations as pioneers of new forms of practice (Baron et al., 1999), GTC attempted to develop innovative, adapted forms of provision and training for children and youth that they would find more suitable or appealing. The playgroup, for example, was an alternative for parents who could not or would

not access 'mainstream' playgroups; it offered a flexible, free service where children were with other Gypsy-Traveller children, with staff who were better trusted than 'mainstream' providers (see below). The YWP offered access to recreational opportunities for young people who felt uneasy about or excluded from using what local provision existed (such as youth clubs nearer to home); and the SDP attempted to provide access to skills training (such as construction skills sought by young men that could be used in self-employment, 'taster' courses on hairdressing skills for young women, or training to pass driver's license tests) that were more flexible and responsive than that available from mainstream providers.

At the same time, however, GTC's ethos as a kind of 'alternative' had a complex relationship with the 'mainstream' (a term used repeatedly in organisational discourse). While the organisation provided certain kinds of alternative provision for young Gypsy-Travellers, staff also explicitly hoped that their activities would increase the confidence and comfort of their users in accessing 'mainstream' services. As several staff explained, they hoped that their work would one day be obsolete because Gypsy-Travellers would begin using 'mainstream' services. Youthworker Lynn explained the activities of GTC this way: "It's about doing it one way until they [Gypsy-Travellers] are willing to do it another way" (fieldnotes). Lynn's description in many respects resonates with the critiques I have characterised as narratives of assimilation in that it suggests that GTC's activities were intended in the long term to normalise Gypsy-Travellers into *gaujo* institutions: getting Gypsy-Travellers "to do it another way". Certainly this was also often the picture painted in grant proposals and other documents, where arguing that GTC's services provided a much-needed bridge to the 'mainstream' was necessary to meet the terms of funders (a point I return to below). However, the positioning of individual staff and the centre itself on a number of issues was often ambivalent, inconsistent, and fraught, defying easy categorisation as either "assimilatory" or "empowering". Lynn, for example, while hoping GTC's users would more frequently access 'the mainstream', also held the view that families should not be legally forced to send their children to school, sometimes actively advising families on how they could avoid or resist such measures. In one instance, fourteen-year-old Ben approached Lynn and me to confide that he and his mother were concerned that they were "going to get done" (prosecuted) by the local education authority (LEA) because he was not attending school. Lynn explained that his mother could send a letter to the LEA informing them that she was educating him "otherwise than at school" (i.e. home-educating him), and they would be legally protected (cf. Vanderbeck, 2005a). Thus, in complex ways, staff and the centre could alternately (or sometimes even simultaneously) attempt to bring their young users and parents closer to the 'mainstream' while also helping them to avoid it.

This ambiguous and ambivalent positioning extended into questions of representation and funding. As Okely (1997, 77) suggests, practitioners can walk a

"tightrope of ambiguities" as they feel compelled to position themselves as "saviours" to get funding. This often meant representing GTC's users using the fashionable and problematic buzzwords of the moment, such as "disaffected", "at-risk", and "socially excluded" (cf. Vanderbeck, 2003).

> *[Speaking at an Annual General Meeting], Bonnie and Melanie […] explained that the organisation had just received a grant of several thousand pounds "for work with young men considered at-risk of criminally offending." There was a series of groans from around the room, reflecting the collective reaction to the notion that Traveller boys would automatically be considered in this category. Bonnie interjected (a bit apologetically), "Once we get the money, we can basically do what we want with it*."[9] (Fieldnotes)

Staff had conflicted feelings about re-inscribing problematic discourses of deviancy and deprivation in this way, but rationalised that acquiring funding created the potential that money could be spent in user-led ways that ultimately furthered the agendas of GTC's users.

However, although the discourse of user-ledness circulated through almost all aspects of GTC's activities, the normative order (Herbert, 1997) of the centre was also shaped by the personal and professional values of staff, as well as external pressures from funders and other bodies. For example, the terms of funding for the YWP (which came from a mix of monies traceable to the local council and several grants from charitable foundations) stipulated that activities should have educational components, broadly understood to include not just formal learning but also 'social education' (see also Cemlyn, 1997). Thus, although young people primarily wanted recreation from the YWP, staff attempted to incorporate aspects of education into activities, as part of both their commitment to particular professional models of youth working as well as the terms of their own funding. This approach meant that young people were often more or less steered towards particular decisions, with choices relatively circumscribed or predetermined.

> Youthworker Sam, youthwork student Clint, and I discussed plans for a YWP session (mostly with youth from Site B but also two boys from housing) for next week. We collectively made a list of potential activities, including indoor football, swimming, bowling, arts and crafts, and a photography project. Sam noted that he wanted the young people to spend at least some time over the next month working on GTC's new computer equipment, so that they could get

[9] In some cases, portions of a grant could go into the 'unrestricted' budget to be spent at GTC's discretion, although, as I discuss at greater length below, it certainly was not the case that GTC necessarily could spend grant monies as flexibly as Bonnie suggests here.

> used to using it and improve their skills. I asked how we would finally decide what we were actually going to do next week. Sam said that he and Clint would go over to Site B tomorrow "to find out what (the youth) wanted to do." He then explained, "We can make some choices and present them and say, 'Are any of these things that you would like to do?' If we just go and ask them, they'll say 'the cinema' or something ridiculous […] This way we're sort of giving them choices [pauses, then speaks more softly] I really don't like doing it that way" [i.e. presenting young people with a predetermined set of choices]. After some discussion, indoor football was decided as the most promising activity for next week. Sam pointed out, "So the week after [after having played football] we can say 'We played football last week, why don't we go back to (GTC's office) this week?' Then we can work on the computer or something. [Smiles] It's like bribery really." (Fieldnotes)

As Sam noted, he "[didn't] like doing it that way" necessarily, suggesting the dissonances that existed between the desire to be a user-led alternative and the desire to enact other professional agendas and values. This tension, for example, was acutely evident in relation to the subjects of sex and drugs education, two areas that are standard 'mainstream' youthwork topics but for which there was little (if any) expressed mandate from either parents or young people. The possibility of incorporating some aspect of sex education into the YWP was discussed on multiple occasions. Inevitably, some staff would express that parental objections were likely to be strong and that it would damage other aspects of GTC's work if young people were banned from coming by their parents as a result. Questioning the virginity of an unmarried woman was a serious form of insult amongst young people at GTC (see also Okely, 1983), and it was feared that raising the subject of contraception or sexually transmitted infections could be interpreted as implicitly questioning someone's virginity, with embarrassing (or worse) implications. Other staff would invariably counter with an anti-essentialist discourse, arguing that the organisation should not assume that all Gypsy-Traveller parents would react the same (cf. Acton et al., 1997). The consistent outcome, however, was that sex education was never introduced during youth work despite a feeling by staff that it would be valuable as part of their personal/social education (at the time of fieldwork, there was no immediate evidence of problems with sexually transmitted infections amongst young people, and discourses of 'teen pregnancy' had little currency given that many young women married in their teenage years).[10] Even 'consulting' parents about offering sex education in a systematic way was considered risky, given that parents often wanted assurances, when giving initial

[10] Interestingly, in interviews with staff at another voluntary organisation that offered some services similar to GTC's, staff indicated that they did introduce sex education in some of their youth sessions but explicitly did not inform parents about this, asking young people "to keep what was discussed in the session in the session".

permission for young people to participate, that the group would not be exposing young people to inappropriate material. Aspects of drugs education (considered a somewhat less sensitive topic, although one that many young people and parents had genuine reluctance or discomfort discussing) were occasionally addressed in very casual ways, such as through a computer game or informal conversations when the topic arose naturalistically. Staff to some degree enacted their own agendas, but they were also continuously aware that parents and young people could withdraw their participation in GTC's activities at any time. As young people themselves often reminded staff by both word and deed, their participation at GTC was highly contingent:

> *[At the ice-skating rink with a group of young people from Site A] Holly (age 15) and Ali (age 16) sat down at a table with youthworker Tina and me. The two of us were drinking coffee and planning some future activities for the YWP. Tina asked Holly and Ali for their input, saying "I don't want to make you guys do something you don't want to do." Holly chuckled a bit and replied, "Don't worry, Tina, you know we're not going to do anything we don't want." Both Holly and Ali laughed.* (Fieldnotes)

GTC as a Fragile Accomplishment

Unlike LEAs (which could prosecute parents for children's non-attendance at school) or statutory social services (which could forcibly intervene in families), GTC had no statutory power. Keeping the organisation—and staff jobs—alive meant not losing the trust of users and providing services that people consented to use, given that users could (and often did) 'act otherwise' to staff intentions. In this section, I further examine the contingent nature of young people's participation in GTC's activities, with a particular emphasis on the negotiation of trust between staff and users. The notion of 'trust' was one of the most frequently discussed issues amongst staff at the centre, and establishing and maintaining user trust was considered key to all segments of GTC's work. Many of GTC's users had had previous negative experiences with representatives of a variety of *gaujo* institutions—police force, schools, housing and welfare offices—and had uneasy relationships with these institutions (one member of staff had a brother who worked as a police officer in another city, but deliberately never disclosed this to users for fear it would make the organisation look as if it had police ties). Users had to feel confident that they would not receive a hostile reaction at GTC and that sensitive information would be kept confidential from *gaujo* authorities, other user families, or in some cases, a user's own family.

Staff were acutely aware of the anxieties many parents harboured of their children being taken into care by "the social workers". Although GTC was not a statutory agency, staff felt anything that even suggested the possibility to parents that children could be taken away at GTC's instigation would have serious

repercussions for the centre's ability to work with young people. A highly anomalous example demonstrates the rule. In one instance, GTC staff had concerns regarding the welfare of two children—an infant and a two-year-old—of a woman living on her own on a local, sparsely populated caravan site. The woman was in the midst of a serious personal crisis, and several staff expressed fears that the infant might not be getting fed properly and that neither child was receiving adequate supervision. Unusually, one member of staff had begun to spend significant amounts of out-of-hours time on-site trying to directly support the mother. After several days of this, the mother for unknown reasons told several other Gypsy-Traveller families that GTC was seeking to have her children taken away by social services (no GTC staff members had made any contact with outside agencies). The staff member was strongly advised by the others that she needed to back away from the situation before the rumours of GTC's collusion to remove the children spread too far and severely compromised the centre's work[11] (see also Okely, 1997, and Jordan, 2001, on the historical practice of young Gypsy-Travellers being taken into care, and ongoing parental fears of this).

Staff members readily acknowledged that, despite the length of time they had worked at GTC, they were *gaujos* in the eyes of users (see also Okely, 1983, on cultural boundary maintenance issues). For example, Lynn (who worked with both the YWP and SDP) explained that when she first joined GTC years ago, she was often referred to as "that *gaujo* woman from the centre", something she interpreted as "a way of showing […] the trust only goes so far. You're still an outsider" (interview). Nevertheless, staff also suggested that many users made some differentiation between *gaujos* who worked in other institutional contexts and staff at GTC. In welfare rights adviser Simon's view, "I'm certainly not seen as a Traveller, but I'm not seen as one of *them* either, the people in statutory services, the people who they come into conflict with" (interview). The picture, however, was much more complex than this statement would suggest, as there were ways in which attempts to differentiate GTC from other *gaujo* institutions were of mixed success. On the one hand, a number of users expressed a definite preference for dealing with the staff and volunteers at GTC rather than those at other agencies. Highly sensitive information was willingly shared between users and members of staff, often in the context of casual conversation when it was not strictly necessary for GTC's work. Young people occasionally used the expression *gaujo* in ways that did momentarily differentiate between GTC staff/volunteers and others:

> *Today was GTC's annual open day, where visitors from other agencies, the local area, and around the country were invited to visit*

[11] As I suggested, these kinds of situations were rare, but did raise potential questions about how members of staff would have responded in a clear instance when there would be a duty to report a child protection issue. One playgroup worker articulated informally that she'd 'rather lose her job than not report a child protection issue', but she was uncertain that all her colleagues would agree unless the case were absolutely unambiguous.

> *the centre. As usual, there were games for the young people, a circus performer, and arts and crafts activities [….] Marie (age 14) and I were chatting about the day's activities, and she pointed to a group of visitors (from other local agencies) and said to me, "It would be better if the gaujos weren't here." I asked her why and she simply said that it would be more fun.* (Fieldnotes)

On the other hand, however, staff members were sometimes casually referred to by young people and parents in conversations amongst themselves as "the social workers":

> *(Playgroup worker) Melanie and I arrived in the GTC van to pick up several children from Site A for playgroup. Shelly (age 14), who regularly participated in the YWP, saw us arrive. As I stepped out of the van and said 'hi', she called to her mother, "The social workers are here."* (Fieldnotes)

This was a label that members of GTC staff *never* used in relation to themselves or their work, but which had continued currency in communities that had a long history of various kinds of *gaujo* interventions—a history in which GTC was clearly locatable. The boundaries of trust at GTC were fluid and constantly subject to negotiation.

Although many parents living on local sites were enthusiastic about letting young people participate in at least some aspects of GTC's provision—as were young people themselves—others were more hesitant. Gaining parental trust involved consulting with parents (usually in unstructured ways) about activities for young people, emphasising that their children would be well-supervised and returned to their sites or houses at the specified time. Parents often articulated significant concerns about their children's safety and, even for older children, anxieties about sending them on outings. In cases where parents were reluctant, staff did sometimes try to establish a level of trust with parents to try to secure their children's participation. In these instances, negotiation with parents was generally subtle and non-coercive, given both GTC's ethos of voluntary participation and its complete inability to directly compel anything. Although in a broader sense staff were clearly more socially powerful than most of their potential users, staff often *felt* relatively powerless in these negotiations. Consider this extended extract from my conversations with youthworker Tina, the only staff member at GTC who had prior connections with local Traveller families before working at GTC. Below, she recounts her attempts to increase participation amongst Irish Traveller young people at one site where, although a few children participated in the playgroup, no one regularly participated in the YWP or SDP. In particular, she focuses on her efforts to gain the consent of one couple to allow their fifteen-year-old daughter Angela to come to GTC to learn how to use the computer:

I [Robert] *was originally scheduled to go out with Tina today to Site C to visit some young people's families, but it ended up not quite happening like that. Tina came up to me as I arrived in the morning and said, "You're going to think I'm a total shit, but…" She explained that she had talked with* [playgroup worker] *Vivian earlier and they had decided that it was best that Tina go without me to Site C today. They were concerned about the impressions the presence of a man (even one who had been there before) might give to Angela's parents today, who were hesitant to allow her to come. Tina explained that Angela had approached her privately the last time she was on Site C (a few days ago) and coaxed Tina to go talk to her mother and ask if she could come along to GTC. Angela apparently told Tina she was really interested in doing some work on the computers. Tina went over to talk to Angela's mum, who said 'no'.*

Tina […] *made another visit to the site two days later to talk to the parents about the youth work that she was setting up. She talked to Angela's father, who tentatively said yes, asking "She won't be with any young lads, will she?" Tina apparently explained that Angela wouldn't be if he didn't want her to be. She also said that she told him, "Look, I'm always going to be straight with you. I'll always tell you what's going to happen" and tried to assure him that nothing bad would happen to Angela when she was with us. Tina left them to think about it since Angela's mother was still resistant to the idea, but Tina said she would come back today—two days later—to chat with them more about it.*

Tina described (her reaction) when Angela approached her the other day. "It just hit me right here [Tina points to her heart]. *You could see it in* [Angela'] *eyes. And it wasn't just that she wanted to go off-site, but she wanted to do computers—a girl who's never been to school and can't even read or write! She's really built it up in her head that she's going to come. I try to tell her, 'Calm down. I'll see what I can do.'" Tina also explained, "I'm not going to try to coax them. They're the kind of people who probably will have made up their minds when I get there, and they'll tell me yes or no."* […] *Later that afternoon* […] *Tina came up to me smiling and said, "Robert, I got Angela!" Vivian joined us at this point, and Tina said that she had arrived and spoke a bit to Angela's mother. Tina emphasised to Angela's mother that she was someone who would be straightforward with her* [….] *Angela's mother apparently invited Tina into the caravan and Tina assured her that Angela wouldn't be with boys if she didn't want her to be, and that she was just going to work* […] *on the computer.* (Fieldnotes)

The complex family dynamics in this instance are evident. Angela genuinely wanted to attend; her father was ambivalent; her mother was resistant. The sense of achievement experienced by Tina upon gaining parental consent is also plainly evident; her exclamation "I got Angela!" suggests a feeling of victory, a common trope in social work and child-saving discourses. Nonetheless, Tina is clear that she had no intention of "coax(ing)" the parents, even if she really did feel it important for Angela to come.[12] Tina's approach was typical of that applied to most negotiations with parents. Issues could be discussed, occasionally even debated in a reasonably light-hearted way, but parents were not pushed hard or pressured. Interactions could have a dialogical quality to them (Kenny, 1997), in which there was a genuine exchange between staff and users.

> *Don came in with his son Jack* [a participant in the YWP] *to see Simon. While waiting in the coffee room with Tina, Bonnie, and me, we all talked about future activities for the YWP, and how we were planning an ice skating trip. Don had previously expressed his objection to the ice skating trip because he thought it was a bit dangerous* […] *and said, "If they fall and somebody skates over his fingers, they can get cut right off." He said that there was no way that he was going to let Jack go. Tina protested in her usual laughing way that Jack would be really good at it, smiling at Jack. Tina and Bonnie playfully asked Don how he could let Jack go boxing and go-cart riding without a helmet but not ice skating* [these were not YWP activities but things Jack did in his own time]. *Bonnie* [asked]*, "I'm not having a go* [i.e. attacking you]*, but I don't see how you can let him go riding without a helmet* [and] *go boxing, but not go ice skating? I don't understand." They all talked back and forth about this, with Don protesting that he no longer let Jack ride the go cart, and that he always wore protective gear when boxing. After a few minutes of this back and forth, Don agreed* [that ice skating probably wasn't more dangerous than other things Jack did*] and said, "he can go"* (Fieldnotes)

Schooling Discourses and Ambivalences

One area of dialogue between staff and users concerned the issue of school, given the relatively low levels of school attendance amongst young Gypsy-Travellers in the city. As indicated previously, increasing educational participation is a stated goal of both state and non-state actors who fund GTC's work, yet practice at GTC was much more complex than this would suggest. At the time of

[12] On the flip side, even when consent was given, it could later easily be withdrawn. Angela did come to the centre several times, and even attended a mixed gender YWP activity (accompanied by an older sibling), but after that did not come again. Shortly thereafter, the family moved to a different area.

research, none of GTC's young users had stayed in school past age fifteen, with most having stopped significantly younger and a few not having attended at all (the official school-leaving age in England is sixteen, and none of the young people left with qualifications). Consistent with the organisation's general ethos, practitioners at GTC did not press parents and young people about issues of school (non)attendance, although in some cases positive encouragement or reassurance was provided in instances when a parent (such as a mother attending playgroup with a child) asked staff for advice about it. School could be suggested as an option, but was rarely directly pressed in a sustained way:

> *At a staff lunch* [attended by Bonnie, Lynn, Sam, Simon, and myself] […] *we discussed a mother with two children at Site B who was having some difficulties. She had never been to school herself* […] *but had taught herself how to read, but couldn't write. Bonnie said, "(S)he's teaching the kids at home—I made up some alphabet cards for her." Simon said, "Has anyone talked to her about sending the kids to school?* […] *(S)omeone could approach her and say, 'If you wanted to do this, is there anything that we could do to help?' I'm not saying that education is necessarily the right answer … [voice trails off]."* (Fieldnotes)

Here Simon suggests that GTC could make users aware of their educational options without lobbying for particular outcomes or assuming that school was "necessarily the right answer". Bonnie explained her view that children should not be forced into schools this way: "If [parents] don't want to put their kids in schools, they don't want to […] A lot of kids you talk to, they get such an education, you know, a better education than my kids will ever get, and it's an education in life and how to live and how to survive. What's wrong with that? […] If they don't want to do it, let's not force them into doing it" (interview).

Bonnie invokes an anti-assimilationist discourse in her opposition to young people being forced into 'mainstream' schools, but her statements mask the ambivalences and uncertainties that individual staff (including herself) experienced in their practice. These statements also do not capture the ways in which GTC did actively attempt to promote particular images of schooling to its users. Especially in situations where staff had access to children and young people unaccompanied by parents, there were frequent, usually subtle,[13] efforts by staff to foster positive attitudes towards formal schooling and encourage attendance.

> *Joe's parents had come in to GTC to sort out a benefits issue. While waiting, Joe* [age 12] *wandered into the coffee room and sat down*

[13] I use the term "subtle" in relation to my own perception of these practices. I think it is probable that in many cases, such as with Joe, the agenda of the staff member was quite apparent.

> *with Vivian and me. I asked him how he had been lately and what he'd been up to. His response was relatively blasé at first, but soon he started to chat a bit* [….] *Vivian asked Joe if he'd been going out to work doing tarmacing with his Dad lately, and Joe replied, "No, just staying at home all the time." Vivian asked, "Have you considered going to school?" and winked discreetly in my direction as she said it. He answered, "Nah." Vivian asked him about the things that he liked to do: "Do you like drawing?", "Do you like painting?", "Do you like videos?" After a series of "nos", Joe replied "yes" to the question about videos, and Vivian said, "You get to watch videos sometimes in school." Joe replied, "Only boring ones" and explained his preference for action films*. (Fieldnotes)

> *Vivian, Bonnie, and I had been invited into Nan's caravan for a cup of tea* [Nan was the mother of two young children who sometimes participated in GTC's playgroup] […] *As we were leaving Nan's caravan, I saw Bonnie bend down and talk to Nan's daughter, Sandy, who was about to turn five. Bonnie said in a playful voice to Sandy, "So when are you going to start school?" I noticed that Nan was out of earshot. Staff had discussed as a group several times how Nan and her husband harboured real anxiety about letting the kids start school, and Bonnie knew well that it was far from certain that Sandy would start school*. (Fieldnotes)

The extent of staff ambivalence regarding schooling is reflected in the fact that Bonnie, who had argued previously that people should not be forced to go if they do not want to, clearly harbours hopes that Nan's daughter *will* in fact enter school. Eighteen months after this second segment of fieldnotes was recorded, Sandy had completed her first year of school but had stopped attending regularly after an incident where (just as her mother had long feared) she had been injured on the playground due in part to lax supervision. Bonnie commented, "It's a shame, because [Sandy] is bright as a little button", suggesting the tensions in her rhetoric about the (non)necessity of formal schooling. In several instances, Nan asked if Sandy could return to attending the under-5s playgroup instead with her younger sister, but this was prohibited by the funding terms and legal conditions of the playgroup's existence.

Contesting and Reproducing the Boundaries of Age

Nan's request was in fact a common one, as a number of GTC's users saw no legitimate rationale for the age boundaries that were enforced around particular activities for young people. If her three-year-old daughter was attending the playgroup, enjoying it and learning, why shouldn't her six-year-old be able to as well? The issue of age boundaries was perhaps the most hotly contested issue at GTC and was a significant source of staff/user disjunctions (Wharton, 1989).

Despite its anti-assimilationist/user-led discourse, GTC's work was also permeated by normative assumptions about the desirable forms that childhood and youth should take, and in many respects reproduced processes of age segregation and segmentation common in 'mainstream' organisations (Vanderbeck, 2007), with consequences for users and the centre's work overall.

Numerous previous accounts (e.g. Okely, 1983, 1997; Sibley, 1981; Kiddle, 1999) have emphasised how constructions of age within Gypsy-Traveller communities can differ in many respects from dominant 'mainstream' constructions in Britain. Children are often incorporated into familial practices of economic production and social reproduction at what *gaujo* social workers and educators consider a young age. Staff at GTC regularly noted how impressed they were with the maturity that many of their young users showed about their responsibilities, with a common trope being that their young users were more 'adult' than their 'mainstream' counterparts (a discourse also often invoked by many parents, who saw *gaujo* youth as immature and unprepared for the world compared to their own children). Staff, however, often had conflicted feelings about this, harbouring particular notions about the kinds of recreation, play, and social activity in which young people of certain ages should be engaged.

> [During a YWP trip to an amusement park] *Bonnie commented on how fifteen-year-old Ernie (who only rarely participated in the YWP these days) really seemed to be enjoying himself today. She explained that most days he is off working with his Dad and brothers, and has assumed quite a lot of responsibility within his family. Bonnie remarked "It's nice to see Ernie be a kid for a while". I had in fact chatted with Ernie earlier while the two of us were queuing for a ride. If anything, he had seemed really pleased to be going out regularly to find work with his older brothers, whom he clearly admired.* (Fieldnotes)

Critical accounts of the assimilation/incorporation of minority cultures have called attention to how separating children (whether temporarily or permanently) from the influence of the sphere of their families is an important tactic for gaining influence over children (e.g. Adams, 1995; Van Krieken, 1999). For example, through practices of institutional age segregation, children in schools are separated not only from the supervision of parents and other adults from their communities, but also from the influence of siblings. At GTC, both parents and young people frequently articulated a preference for activities that could include siblings of different ages, often crossing the boundaries prescribed by funders and/or legal restrictions for particular activities. Both young people and parents offered a number of explanations for wanting greater age mixing. Siblings of different ages were often each other's closest companions on site, and young people frequently expressed feeling guilty if a sibling was excluded from an activity by an arbitrary age

boundary. Both parents and young people also often felt that it was the responsibility of older siblings to watch over and protect younger siblings,[14] and in some instances it was argued that the presence of brothers could protect sisters from the attentions of other boys. Finally, young people frequently articulated that they felt more comfortable going into unfamiliar settings accompanied by siblings or cousins, even if these kin were too old or young for particular activities.

A number of GTC's staff identified the issue of age boundaries as among the most emotionally fraught aspects of their work. As Vivian and Melanie recounted separately (yet in identical terms) of their experiences turning away eager older siblings who wanted to join the playgroup, "It breaks my heart to have to say 'no'." Yet "no" was always the answer in these circumstances, in some cases leading to heated exchanges between user parents and staff (in more than three years, the only clearly implied threat of violence I recorded towards a staff member was in an exchange regarding playgroup age boundaries). For the playgroup, the boundaries of age were vigorously enforced given that its work fell within a legal and funding regime that strictly prohibited the participation of children of school age.

The YWP showed a limited degree of flexibility on age boundaries, but this was always with an awareness that it could put the programme at funding risk or attract the attention of the LEA (if, for example, a young person under sixteen participated in an activity during school hours). Where exceptions were made, it tended to be in instances where young people actively made a case that staff found emotionally difficult to deny, such as in the situation below, where Tina's desire to let a young woman socialise with friends trumps the usual rules:

> *Tina and I arrived on Site A for an evening activity. As the 'regulars' began to board the van, Lucy (age 16) approached Tina's window accompanied by a girl of about eight years old. Lucy explained that she was baby-sitting her younger cousin that evening, and would not be able to come along unless her cousin could come as well. Tina explained that she simply could not bring someone that young with the youth group—that we really could get in a lot of trouble* [….] *Several other girls (who had already boarded the bus) pleaded a bit—"Please, Tina, can't she come?"—and said that Lucy's family was pulling off the next day and wouldn't be back for a while. Eventually, Tina relented and said, "Just this once."* […] *Tina explained to me later, "I just couldn't say no. I probably would have*

[14] Kiddle (1999), among others, discusses this issue specifically in relation to conflicts that result in school settings, when older siblings in a school want to check on the well-being of younger siblings in other classrooms.

> *said no, but she was pulling off tomorrow, and this was her last chance to do something with the other girls for a while."* (Fieldnotes)

In most instances, however, boundaries were enforced, often leading to acrimony, arguments, and sometimes tears. A number of SDP skills-training activities—for which the centre had external funding and invested a significant level of effort to organise—ultimately failed because older siblings declined to participate when school-age siblings or cousins were excluded. Despite their ambivalences about issues of schooling and age boundaries, staff at GTC uniformly saw it as a folly for a thirteen-year-old boy, who hadn't attended school in five years, to be barred from attending a bricklaying course with his sixteen-year-old cousin. However, the funding and legal structure in which GTC was embedded (and, crucially, had embedded itself) rendered this kind of participation an impossibility, limiting the extent to which GTC really could provide an 'alternative' to the mainstream.

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous discussions of social welfare activities for young Gypsy-Travellers have rarely taken an in-depth look at discourse, practice, and power relations in specific contexts. As such, debates about the nature of these "youth working' spaces have not adequately captured the complexity and nuances of the dynamics at play. In this final section, I reflect on how the case of GTC can advance critical discussions of these issues, and particularly our understanding of the relationship between microcontexts and systems of power

How well does GTC fit with previous characterisations of social welfare efforts for young Gypsy-Travellers? McVeigh (1997, 9), in his previously quoted critique of the sedentarist biases of social welfare programmes, argues that "well-meaning politicians, social workers and educationalists and health workers who adopt a sedentarist and assimilationist paradigm *vis-à-vis* Travellers" are involved in a form of cultural genocide. The specific objects of this form of critique, however, can prove difficult to identify. Can a clear distinction necessarily be drawn between those who adopt these paradigms and those who do not? Okely (1983, 161) similarly critiques *gaujo* interventionists who attempt "to impose their own values". Can we straightforwardly separate those who do this from those who do not? These are questions that are often not well-addressed in existing critical writings. The case of GTC suggests the analytical problems with positing distinct categories of those who adopt sedentarist and assimilationist paradigms and those who do not (see also Vanderbeck, 2005a). One would find little evidence in GTC of practices explicitly intended to impede semi-nomadism, move Gypsy-Travellers into sedentary housing, remove children from their homes, or forcibly impose *gaujo* values. Within their own discourse, practitioners at GTC actively opposed these very things. Yet individual values and assumptions about subjects such as schooling and the nature of an appropriate 'childhood' also clearly influenced the nature of GTC's work in ways that require subtle excavation. No one, for example,

attempted to directly coerce families into sending children to school; however, staff often had deeply conflicted feelings about young people's non-attendance and attempted to convey positive messages about schooling in situations when they had access to young people without their parents (this is not to suggest that there is anything intrinsically antithetical about schooling to Gypsy culture, but rather that practitioners inarguably sought to shift young people's subjectivities about how to organise their lives in this way). Staff objected to 'mainstream' institutional practices that were not sensitive to Gypsy-Traveller "norms and realities" (Clark, 1997, 30); however, the 'alternatives' offered by GTC were deeply circumscribed and in many respects still enforced a number of dominant 'mainstream' patterns, such as forms of age segregation to which users frequently (and usually unsuccessfully) objected.

The question of practitioner agency is thus a complex one. As I highlighted, theoretical discussions have called attention to the need to ethnographically examine how and in what ways practitioner agency matters within social welfare contexts as "socially constructed sites of contestation" (Giroux, 1985, 23). Within the micro-context of the organisation, the agency of practitioners clearly mattered for what was contested and how (and if) these contestations were resolved. The choices of tactics adopted by staff in gaining user trust, for example, were crucial for the success/failure of GTC's work. Staff worked creatively to pioneer forms of practice that took greater heed of their users' wants and aspirations, and some of these were actively embraced by young people and parents. Yet the fact that the organisation worked on a professionalised model reliant on funding from both charitable sources and government plainly meant that the conditions of action (Sibeon, 1999) were restricted. Tréanton, speaking in a roundtable discussion with Foucault and others, comments that a common problem for social workers is that "(t)hey are employees of sorts, wage earners of small and midsize firms within a society in which problems are now located at the level of large organizations" (Foucault Roundtable, 1999, 91). While he also notes the need to be cautious about "overgeneralizing", it does point to the limits of professionalised practitioner agency in enacting anti-sedentaritst agendas when work is partially funded by various arms of a profoundly sedentarist state—a state that imposes legal and other restrictions on working practices that individuals and organisations violate at their risk. Although GTC's staff members were not state social workers, as I have suggested above, the boundary between non-state and state is increasingly blurred in many areas of the voluntary sector.

The question of user agency is equally complex, and requires thinking through questions of power both within and beyond micro-contexts. In GTC's own discourse, young people and parents voluntarily chose to participate in its activities, which differentiated GTC from state schooling or statutory social services. Whatever the agendas of staff and those who funded them, users of GTC's services often utilised the organisation in an instrumental fashion and 'act(ed) otherwise'

(Cohen 1989, 151) than staff or funders wanted. A major purpose of the playgroup, for example, was to ease the transition of children into reception classes in mainstream school at age five (a feature of playgroups generally). This, however, did not necessarily make it so—many children did go on to reception classes, but not all, and not all who went stayed long. Some mothers used the playgroup primarily as a form of day-care to free up a few hours for shopping or some other purpose. A major purpose of the grant that supported the SDP was to incorporate young people into the 'mainstream' labour market, but young people could use the SDP's support to practice for their driving theory tests or gain skills that they could use in other contexts without taking on other aspects of the programme. Few actually used the SDP to gain formal labour market access. GTC's users were often savvy about how they utilised the services on offer through the centre, accepting certain aspects, rejecting others, and in some ways using services in ways that furthered their own agendas. Young Gypsy-Travellers and their families were clearly not passive recipients of *gaujo* agendas transmitted through GTC. As Okely (1997a), drawing on Lévi Strauss, suggests, "Gypsies have been brilliant *bricoleurs* […] taking things from surrounding systems and inverting their meaning for their own use [….] The Gypsies have both selected and rejected" (Okely, 1997a, 191). Similarly, educator Jordan (2001, 70) reminds us of Gypsy-Travellers' "strengths in making balanced choices between acceptance and rejection of what is freely available".

However, this notion of voluntarily accepting and rejecting—choosing what is 'freely available'—risks underemphasising the highly circumscribed boundaries in which choices are made, and potentially misrecognises the nature of what social welfare practitioners and contexts provide. The extent to which anyone's participation at GTC could be considered voluntary had to be considered in relation to the broader contexts in which Gypsy-Traveller's lived, which restricted all manner of other options relating to spatial mobility and related forms of economic activity (Sibley, 1981). Epstein (1999, 8-9) reflects on the dissonances that exist in social work practices regarding changing people versus changing structures:

> Social work is the Janus-faced one. To accomplish its purposes social work must dominate its clients, although in theory and in its manner of interpersonal relations with clients it puts forward a democratic egalitarian manner [....] It must enable its clients to be transformed, to adopt normative ways and thoughts *voluntarily* [….] In social work noninfluential influencing is its communicative art, its speciality. [….] (I)t is common to state the intentions of social work as helping people to accommodate to the status quo and as challenging the status quo by trying to bring about social change. This dissonance is intrinsic to the nature of social work, to its essence.

While GTC's users were in no easy sense 'dominated', the dissonance described by Epstein was certainly apparent in GTC's work. The logic for young people's participation in its activities is one largely created by wider conditions and structures of inequality; middle-class *gaujo* young people are rarely targets of or participants in these kinds of social welfare contexts. GTC sought to support young people and their families, but this often meant *attempting to facilitate changes in young people and families* as much or more than it meant *changing the conditions of action for families*. Young people, for example, often complained of feeling bored and marginalised on isolated official caravan sites that were distant from many sources of recreation. Despite doing a degree of campaigning, GTC had very little impact on the forces that ghettoised young people in this way; it could only offer occasional activities that temporarily alleviated boredom and helped young people adapt to life on sites. This arguably contributes to processes of containment as much as empowerment or care. A recent collection of essays on social policy towards Gypsy-Travellers poses the question of whether British policies constitute "care" or "control" (Clark, 2008). What is too often missed in many discussions is that these two apparently contrasting dynamics exist not just in parallel but in tandem. The repression of semi-nomadism through controls on spatial mobility (and the consequent damage to semi-nomadic economies and lifestyles) creates logics for state and voluntary sector "care" and intervention.

Social welfare and human services contexts have important implications not just for young Gypsy-Travellers but young people more generally, and especially young people who are constructed as 'socially excluded', 'marginalised', 'disadvantaged', and so on. To date, geographers' critical engagements with these kinds of contexts have not been particularly sustained or ethnographically rich (but see especially Ruddick, 1996). If geographers are to produce a robust critical literature on the forces that shape young people's life courses and geographies, there needs to be greater attention to the logics of particular forms of non-school "youth working", attending to the complexities of micro-contexts while situating these within broader systems of power relations that are not always immediately visible.

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