

Theories of racism - irish travellers



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It is the intention of this paper to give a detailed account of the theories which help explain the attitudes of the settled community and the state towards travellers in Irish society today. Furthermore, it will explore relevant research to help explain theories on racism which will provide a greater understanding of why the attitudes of the general Irish settled community to travellers in Ireland is one of racism and prejudice.

To understand these attitudes, we must first ask ourselves with what is race and racism. Giddens and Sutton (2016) describe race is one of the most complex perceptions in our society. They go on to add that we as individuals, have a belief that humans can be separated into groups based on our biological or physical traits, this is known as race (Giddens and Sutton, 2016 p. 675).

Racism, on the other hand is prejudice based behaviour placed on an individual's social distinctions (MacAnGhaill 2002) whilst a racist is someone who has a belief of superiority over another based on the group or race that they belong to (McVeigh 2016).

McElwee, Jackson and Charles (2003) suggest that a survey commissioned by Amnesty International (2000) discusses attitudes towards travellers and minority groups and which found that over forty two percent of the Irish population held negative attitudes towards Travellers.

Travellers have their roots submerged in nomadic rituals as far back as the twelfth century and are sometimes referred to as tinkers, itinerants, knackers, or gypsies (infogalactic. com 2016) and research has shown that they are one of the most significant and deprived minority groups in our

society (O'Connell, 1997). On investigation through public forums, the general agreement on travellers is that they are dirty, smelly, untidy, disrespectful, deviant, just out for what they can get and in general up to no good (politics. ie 2015). Traditionally, referred to as Tinkers, which originates from the Gaelic term for Tin Craft, owning this label as they worked with tin and copper, travelling the country repairing buckets, pots and such ware (paveepoint. ie).

In 1963, the Irish Government commissioned a report on the travelling community. The Commission concluded that for the purpose of their deliberations, the best description of an " itinerant" was a person who had " no fixed place of abode and habitually wandered from place to place, but excluding travelling show-people and travelling entertainers" (Commission on Itinerancy, 1963 p12-13, as cited by Traveller Ethnicity - An Equality Authority Report, 2006).

When it comes to quantifying disadvantage and marginalisation in society, the travelling community rate below par on some of the elements that we take for granted, such as health, education, decision making and political representation. They are subjected to a life of poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, infant mortality, reduced life expectancy, lack of political representation, extreme gender equality and financial poverty (Mac Laughlin 1996).

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) concluded that the circumstances of the Irish Travelling people are inexcusable. No civilised society, could allow this type of prejudice to exist and that furthermore, they

are a disadvantaged group in all elements of life whilst living on the edge of society (The Economic and Social Research Institute 1986).

The European Parliament Committee of Enquiry on Racism and Xenophobia published a report on racism where it stresses the urgent need for procedures to combat racism and to make it an integral part of an overall assimilation and anti-racism strategy in Ireland to include education, public awareness programs and a wide range of measures to ensure migrant, ethnic and minority communities, including the Travelling Community are more integrated in modern Irish society (Schweppe and Walshe 2008)

Figures for the Irish Census (2011) report that the Traveller population in Ireland today is estimated to be approximately 29, 573 and hence, this equates to approximately just over half of one percent of the total Irish population, furthermore, this figure represents a thirty two percent per cent increase on figures for 2006 (Census 2011 Religion, Ethnicity & Irish Travellers 2012).

Societal Modernisation has transformed the life of travellers, with tin being displaced with disposable and plastic material, the need for tin craft has died out, travellers needed to adapt their craft and took on the role of selling car parts, old scrap metal, machinery and trading in horses (Honohan and Rougier 2016).

There has been a long-time conflict between the settled and travelling community in Ireland. Research by Mac Gréil (2010) suggests that the attitudes of settled people to travellers indicate that over sixty percent would not welcome a traveller as a member of the family, seventy percent are

supportive of travellers to live their own way of life decently, over sixty percent reject travellers based on their way of life and shockingly over eighteen percent would deny the right to Irish citizenship to them.

There are various theories and approaches which can help explain the attitudes individuals of the settled community have towards travellers. The psychological approach to racism as Giddens (1984 as cited by Graham et al.,) highlights where the psychological and social psychological theories help explain these attitudes of racism, race, ethnicity and prejudice. The underlying principle for this theory is that an individual's psychological condition or personality traits can cause a behaviour of prejudice as they project their anger and frustration outwards to someone else, even though their problem exists within them self. Balibar (1991 as cited in Lentin 2007) refers to this as the " Scapegoat Theory", and based on the psychological and social psychological theories, the travelling community are being used as scapegoats for other societal problems that exist.

The loss of one's social status, social power or standing in the community can cause an individual to expel these types of attitudes and behaviour creating anti-traveller discourse as highlighted by Helleiner (1998) who argued that travellers were blamed for current societal problems.

Furthermore, he went on to suggest that this blame could have been used as a deflection technique to divert attention from the social problems in the economy. Anxiety and fear can also produce the same response. The process of affiliation can be a factor which causes group hostility. Prejudice toward the minority group is carried out which creates an in-group cohesion with the dominant group. Desire to belong and to and being loyalty to a group,

individuals will side with the dominant group regardless of beliefs. Group cohesion is created by the hostility to another group (Wade 2015).

The Irish settled community are seeing it as us and them. There is a division created in society based on race, Bryce (1902 as cited by Graham et al., 2016) refers to this as the Race Relations Theory. He argues that races are individual entities that divide society into groups or races where a recognised pattern occurs when the races start to compete. Park (1914) suggests that this competition between the races is a four-stage cycle combining Conflict, Competition, Accommodation and Assimilation where there are varying results, the process starting with the weaker race absorbed into the stronger race and the weaker race eventually blends out, Park argues that race relations is a natural series and it repeats itself until conclusion with full assimilation (Lyman 1968). Weber on the other hand, argued that race was an important part of our social identity. He went on to add that the societal groups or racial group we are in, compete in markets for their share of social resources such as education and employment. Rex, (1970 as cited by Graham et al., 2016) likened this market competition and connected it to marginalisation and discrimination. We can see how this market is working in our society in relation to education, jobs and housing. The socially dominant group of the settled population are winning favour in the markets, while the travelling community is losing out to become an underclass society (Graham et al., 2016)

Black Feminism (Davis 1981, Hooks 1982, Giddings 1984 as cited by Graham et al., 2016) theories argue that feminist theorising based on race and gender, has contained itself in the white middle class perspective. They

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argued that women from any other race were excluded from the feminist theory. This is very prevalent in Traveller females, who are primarily marginalised and discriminated. At the recent Fempower conference, Senator Katherine Zappone called for increased gender balance and inclusion in the feminist discourse. She went on to add that life expectancy for traveller women is seventy, and that is eleven years lower than women in the wider settled population. Traveller women are not included in the feminist debate as they fall into the disadvantaged category (Edwards 2016).

The Irish government has endeavoured to integrate the travelling community into society over the years, it can be suggested that the state has taken a racial state approach theory to the travelling community (Baker, 1978). An Irish Government Commission report (1960, investigated and recommend solutions for the race relations issue in Ireland. The commission aimed to bridge the gap between the settled and travelling community and suggested that integration was the best way to deal with the travelling population and the process to intergrade them into society by integration was agreed. Unfortunately, this process in itself, brings about race relations theory. The Report goes on to add that behaviour of itinerants and the fact that they segregated themselves from the settled community was a cause for the racial conflict. This was something that would start the inter relations arguments. Integration came with its own issues and in early stages of adjustment there were problems with the urbanisation of the travelling community. Taylor and Gmelch (1978) argue that the integration and urbanisation was done too quickly and this caused issues between the races.

Traditionally, travellers were known to have animals such as horses and donkeys, and traditionally moved around from place to place with them. Before the introduction of mechanical vehicles, these animals were used to transport their trailers. For a large period of time, the cost of motorised vehicles were out of reach of the travelling community, so having animals was their only mode of transport.

Travellers do not think about money, belongings and property in the same way as the settled community. They pick up their belongings and move on to a new place or town, often, leaving rubbish and anything they no longer need behind them, they do not have ownership of land and perceive that the country as an entity, is for them to take what they need. Keeping animals, costs very little or nothing and they allow their animals graze in fields and on roadsides, however, this causes conflict with the settled community who have issues with the damage to public spaces, road sides crops and such as they animals were allowed to graze where ever there was grass

(becomenomad. com)

Research into the mobility of travellers, discusses the idea of globalisation, and identifies a clear distinction between voluntarily globalised travellers and involuntarily globalized vagabonds. The mobility experienced by the elite is of their own doing whilst, the mobility of forced migrants, travellers is not by choice. The report goes on to add that being mobile by choice reflects and reinforces the divergence and division of our society that has accommodated globalisation (Bauman 2003 as cited by Kuhling 2007.)

Through the modernisation of society, Ireland experienced a shift from a traditional rural society towards an urban society. This shift resulted in some unwelcomed change for both the travelling and settled communities and the travellers were now becoming a greater problem for Irish society (Crowley n. d.)

Following on from urbanisation, and the lack of available land space, travellers started moving to roadsides and grass verges rather than fields. This brought new levels of travellers into the urban areas and the increases in shop lifting and pilfering, business owners have taken to barring members of the travelling community (Politics. ie 2009).

The Equal Status Act (2000) in the Republic of Ireland means that it is unlawful to discriminate against a person on the grounds of membership of the Traveller community in the provision of goods and services, education, sports, access to public facilities and accommodation, (Irishstatutebook. ie 2000). It is highly interesting however to note that under the Equal Status Act, seventy five percent of all cases taken against publicans and vintners, were by members of the travelling community and noting that there were 1307 cases taken this particular year, this equates to 748 cases taken by the travelling community and the majority of these claims were taken against licensed premises who sell alcohol. (Coulter, 2003)

The Vintners Federation Ireland (VFI) have fought for changes to current legislation when it comes to travellers. The general assigned behaviour to travellers is that they will become drunk, start fights and cause problems in the establishment. Drunken and disorderly travellers have a reputation that

precedes them and hotels, bars and entertainment venues not wanting the hassle of this, refuse them entry. Traveller weddings are barred from a lot of hotels around the country and issues of hotels being ransacked and bar fights have all tainted the public view to travellers (O'Connell 1997). The VFI has fought for changes to the act and demanding that the removal of adjudication of cases from the Equality Tribunal where travellers have alleged abuse or discrimination (Commission on Liquor Licensing 2002), however, organisations representing Travellers and campaigning against discrimination on race grounds have suggested that the number of cases taken supports the view that discrimination against Travellers, especially in relation to entertainment venues, is widespread

We have seen a large shift in individual opinions relating to the travelling community. Bernard Joyce, Director of the Irish Travelling Movement has acknowledged that the push to accept travellers as an ethnic minority has indicated an acceptance of their dual identity in them both Irish and Traveller and the fact they have a belonging to both communities. (Holland 2017).

The UN International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) (1969) state that any distinction, elimination, restriction or inclination, based on race, colour, descent, national or ethnicity, which changes or brings about change to the, basic rights and constitutional freedom in the political, economic, sociocultural, or any other area of public life denotes racial discrimination" (ohchr. org), furthermore, the Irish Government, reported to UNCERD (2004), stating that Irish Travellers, " do not" form a group that differs from the general population as a whole in terms of race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin, they go <https://assignbuster.com/theories-of-racism-irish-travellers/>

on to suggest that, “ Travellers do not appear to fall within the definition of racial discrimination” (Government of Ireland 2004 as cited by McVeigh, 2007 p90).

In the 1980’s, the government produced the Report of the Travelling People Review Body where it announced that “ in the light of experience and current knowledge the concept of absorption is unacceptable, implying as it does the swallowing up of the minority traveller group by the dominant settled community, and the subsequent loss of traveller identity”. The report went on to identify ways to integrate the traveller and settled community (Social Inclusion Services, 1983 p11).

The media is not without blame for tainting individual’s attitudes to the travelling community. It can hold itself partially responsible for the socially constructed view the settled community have of travellers. The media demonise the Travelling community, adding fuel to the fire and encouragement of the feelings of discourse and further identifying them as social deviants (Kabachnik 2009).

Research by the Irish Travelling Movement in Britain has reported in a recent briefing that the negative media coverage of the UK’s Irish Travelling Community has now been acknowledged by the United Nations Human Rights Committee (Briefing: Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers in the media, 2012).

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission feedback report has found that most Irish people would be reluctant to buy a house next-door to a Traveller (McInerney and Larkin 2015).

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In the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, Irish Travellers are a recognised ethnic group. In the Republic of Ireland, they are represented as a social group. At a recent hearing of the UN Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights, the minister for justice and equality, Alan Shatter, announced that the government was deliberating the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority group.

Research by Hutchinson (2005) argues that the Human Genome Project identifies that humans share over ninety nine percent of their genetic material which leaves less than one percent for probable biological racial differences. Based on the findings of his research, it can be argued that race is a social construct and an idea held in society thinking when it comes to the travelling community.

Based on the evidence presented in this paper, it is evident that there are attitudes of hostility towards the travelling community from members of the settled community.

The settled community, have reasons for their hostility towards travellers as we have identified herein and this in turn, creates attitudes of prejudice towards travellers (MacGréil 2011), furthermore, it is worth noting that over fifty years following the initial publication of the seminal report of the Commission on Itinerancy, Irish Travellers today, are still one of the most marginalised and discriminated against groups in society (Honohan and Rougier 2016).

The sociological theories on racism such as the Psychological and Sociological Psychological Approach theory, the Race Relations theory, Black
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Feminism theory, Neo-Marxism and Racial State theory all identify how the opinions of settled community can be understood based on the theories.

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