

Institution: Arts University Bournemouth		
Unit of Assessment: UOA 32 Art and Design: History, Theory and Practice		
Title of case study: Using photography to challenge public perceptions of contemporary British Travellers		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013 – 2014		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Professor Paul Wenham-Clarke	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Photography	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2007 to date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y/N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The photographic research project <i>Urban Gypsies</i> by Wenham-Clarke is focused on a small group of Irish Travellers living beneath the Westway, a major route into highway in London. It has provided a unique insight into the lives of this community and thereby challenged commonly held public perceptions of contemporary British Travellers. The photographs and accompanying texts, cascaded widely across print and social media, have provided an alternative to the stereotypical views of the Travelling community perpetuated by the popular media. The research highlighted continued public prejudice against the community and the challenges they face, fighting for the survival of their cultural identity, under pressure to conform to societal norms, with their freedom to travel greatly curtailed. The impact of the photographic images has been to inform the public about the inequalities of modern life, to challenge public perception and to encourage a greater acceptance of cultural diversity.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The research began in 2011. The underpinning activity was based on a project to visually document the different communities living and working beneath the Westway, a substantial elevated highway that links the M40 to central London, located in an inner-city area in one of the most deprived parts of the UK but conversely situated in one of the most affluent boroughs, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. These communities included a riding stable, sports facilities and businesses and also a small group of Irish Travellers.</p> <p>In the 1960s and 70s many groups of Travellers moved closer to cities as their traditional ways of earning a living diminished and they needed to find new sources of income. The Irish Traveller community of the UK were once all fundamentally nomadic people but this lifestyle was discouraged by national and local government who encouraged Travellers to adopt a more settled life on official sites. The Westway Travellers reflect this process of forced consolidation as they arrived in the late 1960s and the designated site became official in 1976.</p> <p>Whilst the Travelling community is a subject of fascination to wider society, their representation is invariably misleading, exoticised or mocked. It is invariably negative. In contrast, Wenham-Clarke sought to provide a unique insight into the lives of this small Irish Travelling community that rarely gives access to those on the outside of it. Using photographic images to capture key life events accompanied by contextual narratives explanatory text, he sought to use visual images to show the community as they themselves chose to be depicted.</p>		

Wary of aggravation, Wenham-Clarke adopted a 'roundabout' approach, initially photographing all the groups living under the Westway except the Travellers. Finally, some eight months into the project, Wenham-Clarke was invited by a long-term resident into the site to photograph the Travellers 'on their terms', covering family events and celebrations. Access was only granted on condition that Wenham-Clarke continued to seek and obtain permission as he went. The project involved taking a series of photographs of twenty traveller families while alongside conducting over twenty interviews that examined what it was like to be a Traveller. Drawing on narrative and oral history and employing qualitative research methods the interviews were designed to explore their experiences over a 40-year period. The works were not intended as surveys and the locations and individuals photographed were selected with qualitative impact in mind. The research was essentially sociological, identifying individual behaviours, patterns of experience, and/or issues and responding to them in ways that were intended to generate public debate.

Wenham-Clarke worked tirelessly and patiently to win the confidence of individuals within the community gaining unprecedented access into their homes. The project took over two years to realise. Invited to attend key life events such as weddings, christenings, first communions and birthday parties, these formal occasions are documented visually through a series of photographs that provide unique insights into a community that rarely gives access to those outside.

Wenham-Clarke's research found that the Travellers' world was changing as their nomadic existence was no longer tolerated by many local councils leading to them having to adopt a settled life. Attending local schools, meant increased contact with their surrounding community, finding life-partners who were not Travellers, which in turn was leading to a gradual demise of their culture. In contrast to commonly held misconceptions, the Travellers did pay tax and they did pay rent for living on the site. The research also showed that the new generation had lost 'their will to roam' with many believing that the end of their way of life was only one or two generations away, as they gradually became assimilated into the wider population.

The research also gave a unique insight into their culture, finding that the Travellers get married quite young and had large families with traditional marriages in which the wife stayed at home with the husband going out to work; divorce was frowned upon. Travellers do not smile for the camera feeling no need to falsify their appearance for the photographer. Their children had an old-fashioned kind of childhood, playing outside for hours every day. It found that that the Gypsies thought that non-Travellers were obsessed about owning everything, spent their lives longing for retirement and did not live their lives for today.

The narrative statements and interviews that accompany the photographs highlighted continuing persecution and discrimination against the Travelling community. They shone a spotlight on the tremendous pressures that continue to be applied to these marginalised groups from local communities and the wider society that views them as a persistent problem, described by a Parliamentary Enquiry (2019) as the *Last acceptable form of racism*. For example, the Travellers held their parties in local pubs, but only certain places would accept them. Many venues said 'no' as soon as they realised that it was Travellers that were trying to book, 'they were fully booked'. Many of the men did not want to be photographed for fear of losing work if they were identified as Travellers by outsiders. Although locals thought that the Travellers got the site for free, they in fact rented the site from the council, paying a decent amount of money to do so. But with so many families living closely together and with more children growing up, this had gradually led to overcrowding.

A selection of the work was chosen for 2013 *Westway* exhibition at St Martin's in the Fields with some images selected for prestigious photographic prizes including the Sony World Photography Awards and Taylor-Wessing Photographic prize and exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery and Somerset House. In 2019, 45 images were published in the form of a book including images and accompanying statements from the Travellers. The research received wide media coverage across Britain, Europe, the US and Australia connecting with audiences of hundreds of thousands, far beyond photographic and academic communities.

The research details how the Travellers' world is changing with their nomadic existence no longer tolerated by authorities and, as they will have lost their freedom to roam, the gradual demise of their culture.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Solo exhibition: *The Westway*, St Martins-in-the-Fields Gallery, Trafalgar Square, 7 January - 3 March 2013. [Returned to REF 2014].
2. *The Urban Gypsies*, shortlisted for Sony World Photography Awards (people category), exhibited at Somerset House, The Strand, London, 26 April - 12 May 2013. [Available on request].
3. Exhibition: *The Urban Gypsies of the Westway*, shown as part of The Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month, Victoria & Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, London. SW7 2RL. June 2013. [Available on request].
4. Image of Gypsy Christening selected for Royal Photographic Society (RPS) International Print Exhibition, exhibited at Shire Hall Gallery, Stafford, 20 July 2013, then toured. [Available on request].
5. Image of Gypsy Christening selected for Taylor-Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize 2013, exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery, Trafalgar Square, London WC2N 5DN 12 Nov 2013 – Feb 2014. [Available on request]
6. Wenham-Clarke, P. (2019). *Urban Gypsies*. London: Hoxton Mini Press (*Tales from the city*). [Returned to REF 2021].

4. Details of the impact

The Government estimates that there are between 100,000 and 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers living in Great Britain. Ethnicity is one of the protected characteristics identified in the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998. Gypsies and Travellers should therefore be protected from discrimination together with all ethnic groups who have a particular culture, language or set of values. However, Gypsies and Travellers are among the most socially excluded and politically disempowered groups in British society. The Parliamentary Enquiry which tackled inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities noted it has been acknowledged for many years that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people have the poorest outcomes and experience the 'last respectable form of racism' (2019).

In contrast to some TV shows which have exploited negative perceptions of the travelling community for entertainment purposes, Wenham-Clarke's photographs have challenged stereotypical views of the travelling community perpetuated by the popular media:

The photographs testify to Wenham-Clarke's ability to build long-term relationships of trust with a group of people particularly wary of photographers, journalists, filmmakers and other outsiders equated with misrepresentation or mockery. The project makes an important contribution to the documentation of a historically marginalised group in London whose representation more often than not plays into negative stereotypes. (S5).

They have informed the public, by allowing them to see inside the traveller community as they wanted to be portrayed, without commercial incentives:

It has been a good experience being able to say what we feel knowing it won't be edited out which is what normally happens when we deal with the media. We talked about all the difficulties and racist attitudes we have faced and still face. (S3).

They offer nuanced and sincere depictions in the face of pervasive negative stereotypes. (S9) Wenham-Clarke avoids the photographic clichés that often plague documentary photographers. He uses his commercial skills to create technically flawless, but intimate portraits that present the Gypsies as modern people, not as society's problem. (S1). He [Wenham-Clarke] started to photograph 'stuff' that they [the Gypsies] wanted capturing, becoming a conduit to capturing life of modern-day Travellers through the imagery they wanted to convey. In effect helping to give the Traveller community a voice. Having worked with Gypsy and Traveller families for more than two-decades, I am very aware that this level of trust is rare. (S2).

The Travellers have had many challenges over their time on The Westway site, but the greatest has been to maintain their cultural identity. The book clearly records the community's struggles and helps the reader look beyond the stereotypes and see the world from a Traveller's point of view. (S4).

Extensive press, media and social media coverage of the prize-winning photographs enabled the images to be seen by broad audiences internationally. *The images resonate beyond the photographic or art world. (S1).* The accompanying text, including oral histories gathered as part of the project, reached hundreds of thousands of people through wide dissemination in print publications such as Marie Claire, the i-newspaper and Polka magazine (S6). This has challenged public perception providing un-prejudiced insight into the lives of the Travellers:

In combination, they encourage viewers to challenge their prejudices and perceptions of Travellers and to look beyond the common stereotypes (S5). The images show how colourful, sometimes skimpy and often glitzy outfits that us 'gorgers' (a name the travelling community give to non-Travellers) have seen plastered over the television and in the press over the years; this time taken on their terms, delivering a first-hand look into their lives free from prejudice and stigma, and confirming just how strong a community these 'urban gypsies' really have. (S8). This kind of personal insight is needed to raise the understanding of contemporary Traveller and Gypsies, to highlight the levels of inequality they face on a far too regular basis. (S2).

On-line publications with international circulation enabled the images to be seen across the globe, with features in CNN Style (USA) (S7), Post (Italy), Kwerfeldein (Germany), and news.com.au (Australia) in addition to UK based publications such as Time Out and the Face, addressing misconceptions:

It's a common mistake among outsiders to think that Travellers are only Travellers if they are on the go. London is their home. What the pictures show is that Traveller life is fundamentally about community. Freedom isn't just the freedom to escape. It's also the freedom to be together. (S7).

The 2016 Housing and Planning Act removed with protections for those with a 'cultural tradition of nomadism or of living in a caravan'. The images have informed the public about inequality within modern life:

Yet, poignant shots of the static caravan site, and the backdrop of inner-city London, reflect on the housing crisis the Travellers face and the risks this poses to their identity. A reduction in traditional stopping places and authorised sites, as well as the increasing value of urban land, mean many families based in large cities are forced to assimilate and move to bricks-and-mortar housing. This overt pressure allows Paul to draw attention to power and inequality in cultural and social life. (S9).

Life is difficult for our community as we are being forced to live in a different way to our traditions and the book has helped to make non-travellers realise what we are going through. (S3).

With this unique lifestyle under threat, the images document a closed society whose very existence is threatened:

The resulting photographs are an intimate portrait of a close-knit community, whose cultural identity and way of life seem precarious in a rapidly gentrifying city. (S10).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Statements

- S1) Professor Emerita, Parsons School of Design [Portrayal of Travellers as they themselves wanted to be seen].
- S2) Research and Development Consultant, Westway Trust [Building trust with the community].
- S3) Member of the Travelling Community [Portrayal without commercial incentives; informing public of inequalities in modern life].
- S4) Head Teacher, Inner City Primary School [Portrayal of Travellers as they want to be seen; challenged stereotypical portrayal].
- S5) Curator of Photographs, Museum of London [Challenged public perception providing un-prejudiced insight into the lives of the Travellers]

Other references

- S6) Marie Claire July 2019 pp. 46-47 [Images seen by broad audience via print publication]
- S7) CNN Style 8 July 2019 <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article> [Images seen by a broad audience via online publication; addressing common misconceptions]
- S8) We Heart. <https://www.we-heart.com/2019/07/10/paul-wenham-clarke-urban-gypsies-hoxton-mini-press/> [Un-prejudiced insight into the lives of the Travellers]
- S9) Loupe Magazine 20 November 2019. [Informing the public of inequality in public life; countering pervasive negative depictions]
- S10) Time Out Online Article 6 June 2019 [Documentation of a closed society]