

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS IN GYPSY, ROMA AND TRAVELLER RESEARCH

Lessons from a Time of Crisis

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Introduction: Emerging Trends in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Research

Martin Fotta and Paloma Gay y Blasco

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities across Europe. The global crisis fed on the fragility of GRT lives, exacerbating entrenched patterns of disenfranchisement while creating opportunities for new forms of marginalization to emerge. Throughout successive waves and lulls, as government directives and public attitudes changed, the vulnerability of GRT communities undoubtedly increased. GRT people were variously subjected to racial scapegoating, not just on social media but by the established media too. Measures designed to control the spread of the virus particularly harmed vulnerable families and communities heavily dependent on outdoor, manual and sometimes peripatetic ways of earning a living. Lockdowns and limits on movement provided the framework where discrimination in access to education, health and social support burgeoned. Especially during the early period in the spring of 2020, some governments at local, regional and national levels imposed supplementary controls and restraints on GRT people living in ghettos, informal settlements and sites. There, they became even more vulnerable to the virus due to overcrowding and lack of adequate sanitation. Isolation and economic precarity had negative impacts on mental health, while school closures in combination with the inadequate access to technology (broadband, laptops) put the education of many GRT children on hold.

Documenting, analysing and critiquing the marginalization of GRT communities, past and present, have long been central to the field of GRT-related research. This is true even for many scholars not commonly

involved in applied research. In March 2020, these tasks gained added urgency as reports appeared of the racist scapegoating of GRT communities and of the hardships facing GRT families unable to support themselves under lockdown. Restrictions on movement throughout much of 2020 and 2021 meant that researchers could not resort to the familiar, established ways of conducting ethnographic research – long-term participant observation, detailed life history work, *in situ* surveys, in-depth interviewing, first-hand investigation and documentation. Often, even archival work became impossible. With so many people across so many countries unable to leave their homes for such a long period of time, or having to avoid face-to-face interactions, even scholars living in and researching their own communities met unprecedented challenges. For researchers, whether of GRT background or not, working with groups located elsewhere, the obstacles seemed insurmountable.

Yet this also turned out to be a significant moment in the development of GRT-related scholarship – one that added impetus to a much-needed methodological overhaul, core elements of which were already in the making before the start of 2020. As researchers questioned the viability of their projects and pondered the usefulness of their work in the context of the crisis, they also retooled their methodologies, sometimes fruitfully expanding in new directions. They were not just responding to practical pressures. Rather, they were engaging wider debates relating to the ethics, politics and practicalities of knowledge production, both in connection to GRT issues and more widely. Alongside the generalized move to online work and remote social interaction there were other, sometimes contradictory, stimuli and processes at play – among others, the movement to decolonize social science research and teaching; the increasing precarization of academic labour; the growing focus on ‘impact’ in research evaluation; and the expansion of open-access publishing. In March 2020, all these came together in the crucible of the health crisis. Although the resulting overhaul is still in its early stages, three and half years after the start of the pandemic it is clear that GRT-related research has already undergone, and is undergoing, significant transformations. The aim of this volume is to scrutinize these and assess their relevance for the future of scholarship on GRT issues.

A companion to emerging GRT research

The aim of this volume is to unpack the changes within the field of GRT-related research that were accelerated or brought on by the pandemic through a distinctive focus on methods. We explore the concrete methodological implications of this transformative moment for the future of GRT-related scholarship, and we draw on the collective expertise of our contributors to provide guidance for researchers. The volume centres on ethnographic research so that, while most of the contributors are anthropologists, it will

be also useful to sociologists, social work practitioners and others using ethnographic methods. Of course, the breadth of scholarly work on GRT issues is vast, and it is impossible to document every significant development. For this reason, we have focused on those elements and processes that we consider particularly important and that we have found especially salient in our own work. These are:

- the critical investigation of the shifting roles, capabilities, constraints and accountabilities of researchers (whether these are of non-GRT or GRT background);
- the development of collaborative approaches to project design, implementation and dissemination that engage on-the-ground GRT interlocutors and that create synergies between local and academic aims, needs and outlooks;
- the flexible deployment of research methods alongside the willingness to experiment, adapt and innovate;
- the ongoing reconfiguring of ‘the field’ (and, relatedly, ‘home’) from a bounded site or community to a shifting set of relations and processes, and of ‘fieldwork’ from consisting solely of sustained periods of ‘being there’ to knowledge-making combining different temporalities;
- the foregrounding of traditionally downplayed dimensions of the research process, including doubt, ignorance and failure; the exploration of aspects of human life that more readily escape analysis and description; and the recognition that academic knowledge is always in the making, and therefore is always provisional, partial and unstable;
- the transformation of academic writing to incorporate the work and perspectives of non-academic GRT interlocutors, particularly those without a formal education, and to enable dialogic texts where researcher approaches and conclusions are the subject of analysis and critique by research participants;
- the determination to work with publishers, reviewers and academic employers to shift established ideas of what outputs of academic value might look like, and to experiment with multimodal ways of communicating research.

The focus on these themes gives the volume its particular ethos, both reflexive and strongly practical. It is important to emphasize that none of these transformations is unilinear or unproblematic: none solves the challenges that face either social scholarship in general or GRT-related research in particular. Indeed, each of these trends seeds its own contradictions and challenges, and these are methodological and ethical. Our aim in the chapters that follow is precisely to attempt to bring both their limits and potentialities to light. The chapters do not offer an exhaustive overview of potential research topics nor

an itemized list of research methods to be applied in one's project. Nor do we intend to dictate the direction that GRT-related research should take. Rather, inspired by [Ballestero and Winthereik \(2021, 7\)](#), we think of this book as something between a handbook and a guidebook – a resource to think with, and to question, and in that sense a companion. We hope that the experiences and insights of our contributors, and their recommendations for further reading, will suggest helpful avenues for reflection and action to researchers facing concrete challenges.

But we also think of the volume through the idiom of companionship because it emerged from 'a form of copresence that entails proximity during highs and lows' ([Ballestero and Winthereik, 2021, 7](#)), from a sense of camaraderie and fellowship that arose as the contributors shared with each other their difficulties and insights while navigating their research projects under the new pandemic conditions. The book is a result of a series of conversations that we held throughout 2020, 2021 and 2022 – at online workshops, while working on this and other publications and informally. The pandemic, and in particular the turn to online interaction that it has engendered, enabled a proliferation of online events, facilitated the creation and strengthening of networks and made both more accessible to scholars with fewer resources or less opportunity to travel. The series of online workshops that seeded this volume, and the volume itself, were in fact stimulated by the crisis.

Throughout the pandemic we witnessed many home-bound ethnographers 'virtually [that is, remotely] accompanying' the communities with which they work through advocacy, awareness raising, and fundraising among other initiatives ([Horton, 2021](#)). The authors gathered here reflect on their own experiences to question what it might mean to accompany their research participants as the latter face struggles brought on or exacerbated by the global crisis. Their accounts bring to the surface tensions between research relationships on the one hand, and kinship, friendship and cooperation on the other. They discuss the limits, pitfalls, drawbacks and benefits of various kinds of action and collaboration, asking what forms social scientific research for transformation might take in the wake of COVID-19.

Some contributors write about their own GRT families and communities, reflecting on the emotional and practical challenges involved in working with and for their own people in the midst of the tremendous suffering engendered by the crisis. Others write about bonds of friendship and affection established with their research participants over the years, and how these were reconfigured or formed the basis of new collaborations during the pandemic. All contributors probe the complex nature of these connections, examining the ties of mutual support and also the boundaries, power differentials, inequalities and hierarchies that separate researchers and their interlocutors. Rather than positing engaged scholarship as an

unproblematic solution to the oppression and marginalization of GRTs, the chapters confront its limits and reach. What emerge are reflections on companionship that foreground key differences and inequalities, including the uneven impact that pandemic control measures have had on the lives of authors and interlocutors. The chapters thus address, in practical rather than theoretical ways, recent debates about the ethics, politics and morals of scholarship in general and of GRT-related research in particular.

Some authors in this volume had pre-pandemic professional expertise, academic or otherwise, working alongside GRT groups, and others are experts by experience writing about their own lives and those of their GRT families and communities. Additionally, the majority of the academic contributors find themselves early in their careers and hold no tenured position. We wanted to hear from younger researchers with recent or ongoing strong engagement with their fields, who were facing methodological dilemmas brought on by the pandemic without the cushion of an established academic career. We wanted to understand better whether normative, often gendered expectations regarding fieldwork (such as the reliance on long-term participant observation) take for granted a degree of professional and economic stability. Lastly, we wanted to ensure that the skills and backgrounds of our contributors matched the needs of the different groups with a stake in the development of GRT research methods: this includes not only academics but others (such as activists or non-governmental organization workers) using social science tools in their work.

About the chapters

The chapters that follow deploy reflexivity as the vehicle through which to appraise specific methodological challenges and innovations: all chapters foreground the researchers' positionality and assess critically the nature of their research involvement. Each starts with a bullet-point list of key themes and ends with a list of recommendations that should help readers as they are designing their own research projects or working through conundrums.

Chapters are preceded by 'visual abstracts' by Tamsin Cavaliero, a social scientist working with Irish Travellers and graphic facilitator. As she explains in [Chapter 2](#), 'Responding to Research Challenges during COVID-19 with Graphic Facilitation', graphic facilitation guides readers through complex information using a mixture of diagrams, symbols and pictures. While it is usually deployed in real time (for example, during meetings or seminars), we hope to harness its capacities to assist understanding and debate. The inclusion of these illustrations is not accidental: academic writing styles often function as barriers to understanding and dialogue, not just for academics themselves but for wider audiences, including students and those whose lives are under scrutiny. By mobilizing visual cues and notes, illustrations

should enable readers to see patterns more clearly and also encourage them to reflect on what academic knowledge is and can be, and how it is achieved and communicated (or not). We have found multimodal ways of communicating research very helpful when sharing findings with project participants during the pandemic, and when asking for their critical analysis and feedback. Illustrations by Cavaliero are offered in the same spirit, with a hope that teachers and researchers will consider using them and other multimodal tools in their classes and projects.

In order to assess the methodological transformations accelerated by the pandemic, in our own [Chapter 3](#) on ‘Innovation, Collaboration and Engagement’, we place them against the context of ongoing debates about the ethics and politics of GRT-related research, asking whether they help foster reflexivity, inclusiveness and accountability as well as scholarly rigour and innovation. The growing reliance on narrative and textual data, the increased tendency to do research through and about social media and the rising dependence on the help of research assistants have the potential both to challenge and reinforce the inequalities on which GRT research is built. The pandemic has made more salient the multifaceted roles that researchers play in relation to the communities they study, and the ethical complexities of these roles have also become more clearly visible. Here collaborative methodologies, where researchers work together with local non-academic interlocutors, emerge as one potential avenue for a more egalitarian, accessible and open way of doing research with GRT communities. Yet their usefulness and appropriateness in any particular context must be assessed rather than taken for granted: we argue that a strongly reflexive and critical approach to methodological choice, and the productive recognition of doubt, failure and dead ends, must be central to responsible ethnographic research.

The pandemic fuelled the intensification and diversification of modes of cooperation between researchers and non-academic interlocutors, yet these are rarely unproblematic. Understanding the contrasting motivations for cooperation of the various parties, and confronting their distinct histories, expectations and goals, is essential for such collaborations to succeed. In [Chapter 4](#), ‘Bridging Academia and Romani Activism in the Age of COVID-19’, Demetrio Gómez Ávila, a Romani activist, and Antonio Montañés Jiménez, a non-Romani anthropologist, discuss how they joined forces in 2020 to document the growth of online hate speech against Gitanos in Spain. Their conversational approach keeps their two voices distinct and so makes clear to the reader the distances between their outlooks while demonstrating the fruitfulness of dialogue. Discussing openly the perils of academic misrepresentation and conflicts over control of knowledge production, they demonstrate one way in which advocacy and scholarship can come together to facilitate the ‘renewal’ of Romani studies ([Beck and Ivasiuc, 2018, 12](#)).

Yet what advocacy and action might accomplish, or by whom, is far from predictable or straightforward. The question of why, when and how scholars should engage in advocacy is central to debates around the place of academia in struggles over social justice (Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Harrison, 1997). Marco Solimene, who has carried out research among Bosnian Xomá in Rome for over two decades, discusses the possibility that the silence of the non-GRT researcher might constitute a form of deferral to Xomá knowledge. In Chapter 5, ‘The Anthropologist’s Engagement’, he questions taken-for-granted, hegemonic understandings of politics of voice and visibility. His ‘refusal’ (for example, Simpson, 2007; Shange, 2019) to speak up on behalf of his Xomá interlocutors honours Xomá control over their representation and its terms and builds outward from their politics, experiences and understandings of their social position.

Solimene’s chapter reflects on the methodological affordances and limits of social media and digital technologies as research tools. While online and offline worlds are interconnected, and even in pre-pandemic times social media played an increasingly important role in Xomá sociability, during the pandemic Solimene could make sense of the online lives of his Xomá friends only because of his previous knowledge of Xomá social relations and cultural cues, gained through decades of first-hand participant observation. From piecemeal information, Solimene attempted to reconstruct a picture of a Xomá social life in the so-called ‘nomads camp’ during the lockdown which turned out, despite the material strife, in many respects more socially satisfying than that of most other inhabitants of Rome who were isolated within their apartments.

Like Solimene’s, Iliana Sarafian’s contribution examines the practical difficulties involved in making sense of research participants’ lives remotely, but she also emphasizes the difficulties that arise when we try to account for those aspects of human experience that most easily escape analysis – in her case, grief and love. Her Chapter 6, ‘Roma Ethnographies of Grief in the COVID-19 Pandemic’, is driven by a humanistic reflexivity that uses the researcher’s self and her emotions as vehicles for inquiry. The chapter takes as its departure point two coronavirus-related deaths, one in Iliana’s own Bulgarian Roma family, and another in that of Maria (a pseudonym), one of her Roma research participants. These events bring Iliana and Maria together despite the geographical distance that separates them and the time that has passed since Sarafian’s doctoral research in Maria’s neighbourhood. The ‘field’ irrupts into ‘home’ thanks to communication technologies, sparking a series of reflections about the structures that connect and disconnect Roma lives, and the lives of participants and anthropologists. Sarafian focuses on the centrality of the emotional and the affective in research: building on established traditions in the anthropology of emotions, she argues that her own experience with death and mourning gave her a better insight into

what her interlocutor was going through. She is careful, however, not to homogenize and claim identity with Maria. Rather, drawing on the best tradition of autoethnography, she troubles the dichotomies of insider and outsider, proximity or distance, nuancing relationships and experiences across various levels. The stringing of adjectives, qualifications and hesitations that characterizes Sarafian's writing thus becomes not merely an evocative authorial strategy but a means of describing and displaying the particularities of their relationship and positionalities.

Social science aesthetics and assessment processes are biased towards certainty, assertiveness and success. Even in ethnography we seldom read about failures or dead ends, although these moments also bring forth the contours of the social and the nature of ethnographic knowledge, as we suggest in [Chapter 3](#). This is the subject of Nathalie Manrique's [Chapter 7](#), 'Beyond the Screen', a testament to Manrique's commitment to her Gitano interlocutors and to slow learning. Manrique describes her attempt to find out what was happening in the community where she had done intermittent fieldwork since 1996 and to carry out remote research on perceptions of the pandemic during the lockdown of 2020. Manrique realizes that not all issues can be studied remotely and, while she learns some facts, their meaning or emotional valence keep escaping her. This is not least because her closest contacts, on whom she depended for many insights when doing research *in situ*, are deaf and illiterate, and other informants are hard to mobilize informally as co-researchers in a remote project. As she cannot learn in real time and what little she learns is mediated by others (informants, media, archives), the chapter becomes a meditation on ethnographic serendipity, on immersion and its limits and on how anthropology constructs its knowledge.

By making it impossible (or at least much more difficult) to carry out face-to-face research, the pandemic made patently clear something that all ethnographers know, but that is still most often downplayed: non-academic interlocutors (participants, collaborators, field assistants) play key roles in the creation of ethnographic knowledge. In [Chapter 8](#), 'Luxa's Prism', Stefano Piemontese, a non-Roma professional ethnographer, and Luxa Leoco, a Roma research assistant, review their collaborative relationship and the methodological choices they made when researching together the lives of disadvantaged youths in Madrid during 2020. For experimental collaborations like theirs to effectively challenge the inequalities that shape scholarly knowledge production, it is essential to foreground the analytical power and limits of experiential, oral and memory-based forms of inquiry and representation. Practical adjustments have to be made to working practices so as to enable the analytical contributions of GRT interlocutors who are neither activists nor formally educated. Piemontese and Leoco's chapter sensitively and earnestly foregrounds how becoming vulnerable to each other, sharing of feelings of uncertainty and failure became central to

building a relationship of trust between the two and helped ease at least some power differentials. Moreover, written collaboratively (with the two authors alternating in providing their reflections), the chapter is also a contribution to an emergent genre of GRT ethnographic writing in which an academic and a non-academic interlocutor write ethnography together while analysing the drawbacks and advantages of the collaborative process itself (for example, [Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020](#); also [Montañés Jiménez and Gómez Ávila](#), Chapter 4 in this volume).

By emphasizing positionality, failure and uncertainty, and by scrutinizing the relationships and hierarchies that underpin the production of ethnographic knowledge, all chapters in this volume address questions that are central to current debates around the politics of GRT-related research: what claims to knowledge can and should different actors in the research process make? How do the particular histories and positions of researchers and interlocutors open or close to them specific avenues for inquiry and representation? In [Chapter 9](#), ‘Over and Back Again’, [David Friel](#) tackles these issues by reviewing his attempts to shift the focus of his Master’s research to document the impact of the pandemic on his Irish Traveller community. He presents his chapter as a contribution to the larger effort by Irish Travellers to reclaim the narrative from the margins and grassroots. Drawing on Indigenous methodologies and participatory research methods, he argues that it is essential to challenge traditional, non-Traveller scholarly representations of Travellers, and to acknowledge that non-Traveller academic concerns dominate research agendas. The chapter pivots around the place of emotions in so-called ‘insider research’ within one’s own vulnerabilized community and tackles questions of power, positionality and accountability. Friel convincingly demonstrates that, since the researcher’s emotional involvement is essential to qualitative research, self-care and care for others must centre research practice.

[Ana Chirițoiu](#)’s ‘Analysing Contradictions’ ([Chapter 10](#)) closes the volume. This is appropriate, as the chapter heeds the call to reflect on analysis as ‘constituent of ethnographic praxis’ through which novel insights are generated from ethnographic material and that arises from immersion in specific societal positions, relationships and contexts ([Ballesterero and Winthereik, 2021](#), 1). The lockdown in spring 2020 brought about a distance between Chirițoiu and research participants in a way that was not felt before. They were separated physically as they were contained to their respective homes in different countries. But Roma also faced racist backlash and socioeconomic disenfranchisement that highlighted structural inequalities and antigypsy racism permeating Romanian society and which separated the realities of the ethnographer and her interlocutors. These distances made apparent to Chirițoiu the contradictions that characterize Roma lives. While she had noted them in her previous research, the pandemic context

forces her to reflect on their place in Roma lives and on Roma notions of ‘trouble’ and ‘capability’. Following what Gregory Bateson called a ‘wild “hunch”’ that required Chirițoiu to work by means of ‘a combination of loose and strict thinking’ (Bateson, 1972, 75), she gained a novel insight into the mechanism through which societal contradictions that get imposed on Romanies become transposed onto familial and intimate levels where they get resolved along gendered lines, and often at high personal costs.

The arrival of the pandemic instigated urgent discussions on how social scientists should respond to the crisis. As well as having to decide how best to adapt research methods and projects to the novel context, there was a felt need to investigate the social impact of the pandemic, particularly on vulnerabilized populations. Bristol University Press made a key contribution to this scholarly endeavour through the Rapid Response series and, later, the COVID-19 Collection (for example, Kara and Khoo, 2020a, 2020b, 2022; Garthwaite et al, 2022). Our volume belongs to this wider debate: it attempts to move beyond the pandemic event and learn from it, as well as to use it as an opportunity to take stock of GRT-related scholarship.

When the pandemic started, we wished we had a book to recommend to our students and others working alongside and for GRT communities who were rethinking their own roles as researchers at a time of crisis. We realized that, despite the existence of many monographs based on research in or with GRT communities, there was no generalist, critical introduction to social science research methodology on GRT-related issues or with GRT communities. While filling this gap completely would be an overambitious aim for this little book, its purpose is to help to kickstart a much-needed conversation. We hope that *Ethnographic Methods in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Research* will become a useful companion for both seasoned and junior social science practitioners when thinking through their research engagements.

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