Suicide amongst Members of the Travelling Community

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Abstract

This article investigates the attributing social factors to increased rates of suicide amongst members of the Travelling Community in Ireland. Travellers have been identified as a high risk group in Ireland (Walker 2008); however this is a surprisingly under-researched area. This article provides qualitative primary research investigating the difficulties and struggles endured by Travellers. Aspects such as their cultural heritage and their distinctive way of life shall also be delved into. This research uses resources such as literature, policies and strategies in addition to conducting qualitative primary research, with individuals who work closely with the Traveller community. The information gathered in this study is subsequently discussed thematically. It has been found that problematic issues such as discrimination, disadvantage, inequality of opportunity, racism against the Traveller community, social exclusion and a lack of self esteem have attributed to the prevalence of suicide amongst Travellers.

Keywords: The Travelling Community; social exclusion; inequality; nomadism; mental health; suicide

Introduction

Members of the Travelling Community, an indigenous minority in Ireland, have traditionally lived on the margins of Irish society. Their quality of life is being threatened by the challenges they face as a community. The objective of this research project is to investigate the attributing factors of the increased levels of suicide amongst members of the Travelling community in recent years. Problematic issues such as discrimination, disadvantage, inequality of opportunity, racism against the community, social exclusion and a lack of self esteem within the Traveller community shall be reviewed. This research aims to provide an informed, in depth source of information in to Irish Traveller's unique culture and way of life.

This research project firstly reviews the concept of suicide. Subsequently the political and social inequalities encountered by members of the Travelling community shall be reviewed. It is my intention to portray the views and experiences of the members of the Travelling Community. Though I was not in a position to interview Travellers themselves due to ethical considerations, I have prioritised their views from secondary research resources through reviewing literature and policy, focusing on the challenges and problems they face through conducting interviews with individuals who work closely with the Travelling community. Through the observations and findings of the research undertaken, recommendations to ameliorate the problematic issues involved can subsequently be proposed.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspective - Conceptualising Suicide

According to Durkheim (1952), social factors specifically – integration and regulation – are key factors which attribute to an individual's depression. Durkheim categorized suicide into four distinct areas, each area having different attributing factors: 'egoistic' suicide – resulting from a lack of integration; 'altruistic' suicide - resulting from excessive integration; 'anomic' suicide – resulting from a lack of regulation; and finally, 'fatalistic' suicide resulting from excessive regulation and excessive integration. This research hypothesises that 'anomic' suicide, resulting from a lack of regulation, is the category in this conceptualisation which would relate most to Travellers.

Anomic suicide, "*is most likely to occur when traditional beliefs, morals and practices break down as a consequence of rapid social change*" (Walker, 2008, 9). Certainly it is evident that Irish society has undergone significant change in the social, economic and political spheres over the course of the past one hundred years. Societal values and norms have changed with the emergence of industrialism and multiculturalism. In Walker's (2008) study of *Suicide Amongst the Irish Travelling Community 2000-2006* it is explained how this social and cultural shift can impact adversely on individuals in society. When an individual is in an unequal position in society in terms of educational achievements and employment opportunities, this can be the source of great personal distress*"* (Walker, 2008, 9).

Contemporary Profile of Travellers in Ireland

Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority group in Ireland, although their ethnicity status continues to be a matter of debate. There is a denial by the Irish government to formally recognise the Travelling community as an 'ethnic group'. McVeigh (2008) describes this as 'ethnicity in denial', this denial has negative repercussions as it ignores that Travellers should be respected for their unique cultural identity and allows for discrimination and racism to continue. Travellers share a unique cultural identity, tradition and customs within their community, which differs greatly to that of the general public. Their nomadic tradition and unique oral tradition, differentiates Travellers from the general, 'settled' populace. Travellers mostly intermarry within their community to ensure continuity of their tradition (Crowley, 1999, p.244).

Nomadism

Travellers are nomadic in their tradition, however this is a diminishing tradition according to the study *Suicide Amongst the Irish Traveller Community 2006* which found that "*over a seven year period a total average of 68% of all Travellers live in houses*" (Walker, 2008, p.78). The Traveller Visibility Group (TVG) discusses the hardship endured by Travellers as a result of nomadism. "*Lack of appropriate accommodation in the Council and Corporation areas has led to severe hardship for Traveller families...Discrimination against the 'roadside' group is evident in the pressure from local resident groups, industry and the courts forcing Travellers to constantly move, often between city and county borders*" (1993, p.4). Pressure to

'constantly move on' can lead to feeling of lack of social acceptance. "*The status these Travellers face in the community is of a despised minority*" (ibid).

As Travellers begin to travel less, there is a certain loss of identity coupled with a lack of social participation and social exclusion; Travellers are beginning to feel depression. "*Traditional levels of mobility appear to have decreased due to a reduction in stopping places and the physical isolation of sites and separation from their community if placed in housing has led to Travellers becoming more house bound. This has resulted in a higher incidence of depression, anxiety, bad dreams and higher suicide rates*" (Goward et al 2006, p317). As a result of changes in their traditional ways of living, it may be that such rapid change may be an emergent factor with regard to Traveller mental health.

Travellers Mental Health Status

In Walker's (2008) study of *Suicide Amongst the Irish Traveller Community 2006 – 2006*, states that the rate of suicide among Irish Travellers, from 2000 to 2006, stood at 3.70:10,000. This was over three times that of the total population, peaking in 2005 when it was over five times the national rate. Unemployment, lack of education, housing and water sanitation were identified as social detriments to health. These health detriments are reiterated by The World Health Organisation - 'Commission on Social Determinants of Health' which states, *"The conditions in which people live and work can help create or destroy their health – lack of income, inappropriate housing, unsafe workplaces, and lack of access to health systems are some of the social determinants of health leading to inequalities within and between countries"* (World Health Organisation, 2006). Travellers who traditionally have lived on the margins of society would be exposed to many of these social detriments to health. From the decrease in practice of Nomadism to an acquisition of new social norms adopted from the settled community, Travellers are beginning to question their cultural identity and heritage.

Methodology

The research is comprised of qualitative research using semi structured interviews. From an ethical perspective, it would be inappropriate to interview Travellers directly as the nature of the issue of suicide is very sensitive and distressing to those directly

impacted. I chose to interview people working in different areas of Traveller provision. I interviewed three individuals, the interviews were one on one, and the interviews were in-depth and lengthy. The first candidate worked in a support centre for Travellers (Candidate 1), the second candidate I interviewed was working in the provision for accommodation to Travellers for cork council (Candidate 2); and the third candidate I interviewed was a bereavement councillor (Candidate 3). Semi-structured interviews were utilized, each interview exceeded two hours.

Finding & Analysis

Over the course of the interviews themes and issues which most frequently arose are thematically discussed. These included cultural change, social exclusion, a lack of opportunity, educational disadvantage and also health issue such as substance abuse.

Cultural Change

Ireland has undergone huge changes in the cultural, social and political spheres in recent years. This cultural change was a central theme discussed in relation to Traveller suicide and depression. Travellers are undergoing a transition; many of their traditions have been lost. They are experiencing loss of their identity. "*The Traveller life is very much dead, they are very often forced to settle, their cultural identity has been lost*" (Candidate 2)*.* This loss of social identity and values could be related to Durkheim's 'anomic suicide' which is discussed in the theoretical perspective. Candidates 1 and 2 both mentioned this huge social change as being a distressing issue for Travellers. "*Travellers are expected to conform to settled way of life a settled society way of life, but in a Traveller context, so they are pulled in all directions*" (Candidate 2).

The idyllic lifestyle portrayed by media does not match the Travellers way of life. This can be stressful as Travellers are fully aware now more than any other generation of Travellers before them; that it is almost impossible for them to conform to mainstream society's expectations of them. As candidate two explains, "*the Travellers of this generation have higher expectations than their parents did, this is fuelled by the media. By not fulfilling these expectations, a lack of self worth ensues*" (Candidate 2). This lack of fulfilment leads to great personal distress, the needs and aspirations of members of Irish society is driven by the media more than ever before.

A huge part of Ireland's social change is the increased levels of acceptance and openness of diversity within settled society. Candidate one explains the lack of acceptance of diversity within the community. "*There is less understanding of differences in many areas for instance; sexuality, race and mental health. It is difficult to accept difference and there is great difficulty in finding support within the community*"(Candidate 2). If Travellers cannot receive support within their own community*,* it is important that the mental health services are accessible and approachable.

Traveller's Relationship with the Health Care Services

Whilst interviewing the candidates that worked closely with Travellers, It soon became apparent that their relationship with the health care services was quite poor. Candidate 1 explains; *"Traveller's relationship with all service provision is difficult and suffers from the lack of understanding by the provider of the cultivation of Travellers"* (Candidate 1). Candidate 1 proceeds to explain that reform within the health care services is necessary in order to achieve a more effective and 'Traveller-friendly' approach*. "There is a need to adhere to the Travellers situation. To co-ordinate services in a more holistic way; as in to deal with the Travellers by referencing the different agencies toward involuntary Traveller education and development. Traveller development would involve Travellers in the solution and not just part of the problems in general and mental health"* (Candidate 1).

The poor relationship between Travellers and the Health Care Sector was also discussed as a prime issue of concern regarding increased levels of Traveller suicide by candidate two. Candidate two explained that Travellers were availing of health care services however it was expressed that the services were felt to not specifically be targeted towards Travellers. "*Travellers are availing of Health Care services quite a lot especially in comparison to before. However these services are kind of 'thrown' at Travellers, they are not really targeting the root of the problem*" (Candidate 2). Candidate two proceeded to explain that younger male Travellers would be a prime concern, as they find it very difficult to approach the mental health services. "*As a service provider, on a personal note I have seen many suicides within the community especially from members of the Travelling community whom are younger than 35, the*

younger males, they would be less likely to approach services than members of the settled community, they would be more likely to fall through the net"(Candidate 2).

The need to improve the relationship should be tackled from both sides. Reform is needed to improve accessibility of the service however mental health promotion and awareness must be spread throughout the Travelling community. *"Members of the Travelling community tend to be slightly more wary about sharing their emotions but it's important that they learn to overcome this anxiety, awareness needs to spread of the importance of intervention"*(Candidate 3). Travellers find it difficult to establish trust outside of their community. For members within the Travelling community, "*accessing services can often be viewed as a weakness"* (Candidate 1). *Traveller men are quite 'macho' I think they would feel seeking any medical help but especially for mental health as a sign of weakness.* (Candidate 2). The concept of mental health promotion and the importance of establishing positive mental health would be a key factor in the amelioration of the issue.

Social Exclusion

Social exclusion was seen as a major contributor to depression amongst Travellers by the candidates interviewed. "*Depression, loneliness and isolation would be the main mental health issues"* (Candidate 1). The lack of integration within society is a social detriment to mental health. Candidate 1 explains that members of the Travelling community are very much aware and affected by their exclusion from society. *"Young travellers, males especially would be affected and very much fuelled by their sense of being an outsider in an increasingly affluent community"* (Candidate 1).

Candidate 2 further explains the distress felt by the members of the Travelling community "*They are often made to feel like the cast off of society, knowing in their hearts that they have no bright future. So it makes it hard to be around in this life. They feel unwanted, they often get turned away from public houses and cinemas and they are made to feel like it's their fault"* (Candidate 2). It was expressed that this powerful segregation was constantly being reinforced within society. The 2002 Anti-trespass Act was a very public disapproval of Traveller's nomadic heritage, *"pressure of eviction and rejection can be very hurtful, inter-feuding can become more serious*

as families are forced to stay put in a halting site they may want to move from" (Candidate 2)

However there are many reasons for the lack of integration of members of the Travelling community into mainstream society. As a community Travellers tend to stick together as a group in marriage, socialising and so on. *"There is very much a 'group mentality' for individuals within the Travelling community. It is very hard to break away and become an individual. This 'group mentality' prevents Travellers from integration and socialising with settled folk in addition it is hard for them to truly become strong and independent away from the group"*(Candidate 1). *"There is a lack of sense of self within the family"* (Candidate 2). Candidate three explains that self development and fulfilment is paramount in achieving positive mental health. In addition the 'group mentality' of Travellers makes them less approachable and intimidating to members of the settled community which greatly hinders their integration and socialization. It was expressed by each of the candidates that Travellers have issue trusting members outside of their community; this would be a disincentive to approaching doctors and other specialists for intervention.

Education and Employment – No Way Forward

The usual progressive routes for individuals would be through education and employment. *"Social stressers such as accommodation problems, internal feuding, poverty of money, self, spirit are eroding Travellers sense of self. They often have no way of planning a future they are in a poverty trap"* (Candidate two). Awareness of the importance of contentment fulfilment sense of self and mental health promotion begins with education. Candidate two explains "*awareness and education are at the root of the solution*". If this was achieved understanding and acceptance could begin. "*There would be more of a social stigma towards suicide within the Travelling community as there is less understanding"* (Candidate One).

Travellers have very little opportunity to flourish in the education and employment sectors as they are so entrenched in disadvantage from the very beginning. *"If you have a child that born in the Travelling community from the moment of its birth, that child has far more disadvantages than a child from the settled community. They are going to be living in overcrowded accommodation, their education is not as static as*

the settled community, it can be broken up through nomadism and it may not be as important or prioritised by the parents" (Candidate 2)*.* These barriers to progression and be disheartening and as candidate three explains when an individual is cut off from society and making no 'contribution' they may begin to lose their sense of self-worth, feeling purposeless. This can prove very damaging to an individual's mental health. *"All of these continuous social stressors on a daily basis begin to wear down your sense of self, they are caught between two identities- it can be very frustrating they can see what cannot have"* (Candidate Two).

Traveller participation in education was focused upon in the 1995 'White Paper' which was published by the Department of Education. The policy had set targets to be achieved within a certain time span. "*These included a target of 100 percent completion rate at primary level to be reached within five years, a target of a hundred percent completion rate at Junior Cert. level, and a 50 percent completion rate at senior level to be reached in ten years*" (Considine and Dukelow, 2009, 435). It was understood that progress would be made if education became an inclusive and enjoyable learning experience for Traveller children. Emphasis was on tackling the core challenges of inequality of access, participation and outcome for Travellers within the system. "*A little knowledge is a dangerous thing and at the moment the young people who I work with/for, they are gaining knowledge and self awareness, they realise they can't fulfil they aspirations and expectations"* (Candidate Two). It is frustrating for Travellers seeing and realising that the way forward those educational achievement and attainment of employment is very much out of their grasp, it is a huge social injustice.

Health Issues – Substance Abuse

It was expressed by the candidates that just like members of the settled populace alcohol and drug abuse is becoming a serious concern. Many members of the travelling community are turning to drugs and alcohol for solace and this is adversely impacting on their mental health.

 In Traveller's Health a National Strategy 2002 – 2005 the dangers of Travellers using medications was explained, for instance following dosage instructions when illiteracy rates are so high (2002, 4). *"Across the board in both settled and Traveller society, anecdotal evidence that the drug use has hugely increased has a huge impact on*

mental health. Desperation, drug withdrawals, try to cope with not fitting in would be issues of concern" (Candidate Two). Candidates two's concerns were shared by candidate one who stated, *"some young traveller men are involved in the consumption and distribution of drugs, there traditional occupations of the past have diminished such as copper mining and wagon top building"* (Candidate one).

Perceptions of Suicide

The issue on Traveller's perception of suicide had many conflicting view points from the three respective candidates interviewed. The third candidate felt that suicide was still very much a social taboo within the community. *"It is important for the Travellers who come in to contact with suicide, learn to accept it and on future anniversaries remember to acknowledge it, in their own special way. This could be with some formal ceremonial ritualistic behaviour or even by a small personal token such as looking through old pictures and remembering the person. It's important to cope with one's issue and learn to deal with them, remembering the importance of reminiscence"* (Candidate 3). Emphasis was placed on the importance of encouraging travellers to open up and talk about the 'stigmatized' topic in a therapeutic manner. *"It is also very important that travellers learn not to be afraid to have a conversation about death"* (Candidate 3). Candidate three summarized their point of view with what I felt was a very touching important statement. *"The grieving process is an important part of life, it's important to take the time to confront issue regarding the loss"* (Candidate 3).

Candidate two felt that suicide was not seen as different to any other death within the Travelling community. Candidate two explained that death within the Traveller community was very publically acknowledged and mourned regardless of the cause. *"From my own experience death in the Travelling community regardless of the cause, it is always devastating they are very emotional distraught, they are very akin to wailing and crying, death is a huge part of Traveller society"*(Candidate 2). Candidate two also spoke of the recent trend amongst travellers who are purchasing very expensive caskets to commemorate their loved ones. *"The families are distraught, they are marking the death with overly elaborate caskets often borrowing the money to purchase these, it's very much 'one-upmenship' within the community"* (Candidate 2). Despite this recent competitive trend candidate two insists that the

integrity of the commemoration is very much intact and that Travellers continue to visit the grave to reminisce and acknowledge the death, regardless of whether it was suicide it remains a public affair. *"The burial is an intense emotional experience, death is a huge part of Traveller life, and they are quite good for going to visit graves, holy wells. Death binds them together"* (Candidate 2). Death is described as a ritualistic, unifying experience and suicide is said to be openly acknowledged and mourned it is not the same stigmatised issue it is with the general public. *"Death is so tragic anyway that they don't seem to treat death by suicide any differently they have not seemed to classify it as 'worse than' in my opinion"* (Candidate 2).

Candidate one explained that suicide isn't so much a stigmatized topic or social taboo within the community. However candidate one explains, *"similar to the settled populace suicide is always very shocking, travellers tend to act in superstition by leaving the area"* The ritual of burning the deceased's belongings is a ritualistic act however this derived from the sanitising effect of fire on rampant contagious diseases such as tuberculosis historically.

The data gathered in the interviews was in-depth and contrasting which offered a more informed all round perspective of the issue of Traveller suicide. However due to word constraints only selective key information was shared. Candidates were given the freedom to speak of issue they felt were most concerning for traveller mental health. Recurrent themes throughout the interview such as the poor relationship with the health sector, social exclusion, and drug were emphasised on.

Conclusion

Members from the Travelling community who die by suicide are all unique. Different reasons lead to them falling into a depression and the issues which most distress them is unique to each individual. This research project provides a broad scope of problematic issues which may adversely impact on Traveller mental health.

It was my aim to highlight the inadequacies society needs to be overcome however reform is required both within social policy and within the Travelling community. It must become acceptable to prioritise one's mental health, seek help and place trust in professionals. The mental health system needs to become more Traveller- friendly,

approachable, accessible and non- intimidating. I felt the research undertaking illuminated contributing factors to the increased rates of suicide within the Traveller community. Issues attributing to the increases would include; social exclusion, a poor relationship with mental health services, lack of educational opportunity, discrimination and disadvantage.

Relationship with Mental Health Services

Intimidating inaccessible approaches have proved unsuccessful and it is now the focus that Traveller's should receive education and training and become part of the solution. *"What emerges from the (Walker 2008) research is that there is a general distrust of the* psychiatric *services among Travellers, and uptake of these services is low, even in cases where Travellers demonstrated several factors associated with increased risk of suicide"*(Walker, 2008, 109). A level of trust must be established in order to improve the relationship between Travellers and the mental health services

Confusion over Identity – A State of Normlessness

The Travelling community is in the stage of transition, aforementioned nomadism is a rapidly diminishing tradition. Travelers are no longer sticking rigidly to their own traditions and customs. Travellers are beginning to adopt mainstream society's cultural tradition. *"Today, young Travellers have a lot in common with their settled peers, and to a certain extent, there has been a loss of cultural traditions as they take on the values of mainstream society".* However Travellers remain excluded from society, they are viewed as inferior. Traveller's are being caught between two cultures and are not being fully accepted into either. *"They are not fully accepted as part of settled society, and having lost many of their own cultural and social traditions they may no longer be fully accepted as Travellers"* (Walker, 2008, 111). This lack of social acceptance makes modern day Travellers more prone to depression and suicide. *This lack of integration could be related to 'anomie'* Using Durkheim's theoretical perspective on suicide, the increased rates of suicide amongst Travellers lack of integration and regulation is attributing strongly to Traveller suicide.

Recommendations

Future Research

Additional more intensive research must be undertaken on traveller mental health in the future. In terms of research a more targeted and Traveller friendly approach should be adopted. This would greatly enhance knowledge and awareness of the issue. Formal research such as that conducted by the central statistics office should record suicide rates by ethnicity, all other ethnic minorities and members of especially low socio-economic groups in Ireland including Travellers. This would create more accuracy and progress if achieved. More precise objectives and aims could be set and comparative studies could be undertaken on a national and international scale. A strong involvement of Travellers should be ensured in order to empower the community instilling a sense of self esteem and also to give research an unintimidating, traveller- friendly approach.

Improved Self- Esteem

A sense of pride must be instilled within the community; Travellers should be encouraged to be proud of their cultural heritage. This cultural pride and ethnic identity would cultivate a sense of resilience and self esteem; this would improve Traveller's coping skills. *"Whether housed, in sites or on the roadside, (Travellers will begin to) feel that there can be a better future for their children whether they choose to remain separate or to integrate"* (Walker, 2008, 114). Resilience, confidence and contentment of the Travelling community would make its members far less vulnerable to suicide and depression. This would create a 'collective dignity' amongst Travellers. The Cork Traveler Women's Network (CTWN) and other Traveller organizations have recognized these issues of lack of self-worth amongst the community; projects such as 'Barrel Top Wagon' exhibit the Cork Public Museum instill a sense of pride into the community. The CTWN utilises all of their resources and funding to develop their core work of promoting the important aspects of Traveller life such as *"Traveller health and wellbeing, culture, education and providing support to local traveller women's groups across the city"* (CTWN, Annual Report 2007, 12).

Empowerment

Project's such as; the Cork Traveller Women Network's Barrel Top Project which is exhibited in Cork, display publicly the positive aspects of the Traveller culture so that

their artwork and music can be viewed and admired in a public place. Travellers working on such projects become empowered and may even rediscover forgotten aspects of their heritage for instance copper, wagon construction and even reminisce the old folk tales. Training and education of Travellers in coping with the challenges facing their community would lead to empowerment. Fundamentally an approachable service for aid, that Travellers would place their trust in would be established.

Final Thought

Research gathered in this article represents the view is that cultivation of pride and empowerment is the way forward to improving the mental health of Travellers. The lost social traditions and norms should be restored however improvements in standards of living should be encouraged. In Durkheim's perspective of suicide the loss of social norms led to a sense of 'normlessness' and lack of regulation. The social 'anomie' and uncertainty that Travellers are currently experiencing is undoubtedly unsettling for members of the Traveller Community. Traditions such as, "*as strong family and community ties, and religious beliefs, and their high tolerance for troubled members*" (Walker, 2008, 115) remain within the Travelling community. These strong values could be utilized to develop a resilient, proud community and protect those who are vulnerable to suicide. An active targeted approach is needed to support the Travelling community and protect against further human loss through suicide.

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