In this presentation I explain the following:

- Who are Gypsy/Travellers?
- What is intersectionality?
- The different ways Intersectionality is interpreted
- How and Why Intersectionality can be applied to the experiences of Gypsy/Traveller Girls
- Challenges in doing this kind of research

Before I begin I would like to highlight a few points that help to foreground the mindset of my thesis because it forms a useful backdrop upon which the tapestry of my research, findings and analysis is woven.

1. From the outset, my thesis rejects the idea that we live in a post-racial and post-feminist world. Racism and sexism, along with other forms of inequality are still very much part of many people’s lived experiences.
2. The thesis asserts that there are many forms of racism and many forms of sexism. In my writing I often refer to racisms for example.
3. As a researcher I believe that there are multiple realities and multiple constructs of knowledge, even if one reality may be viewed as ‘privileged’ within our society.
4. It is important to recognise that cultures, communities and identities are not fixed constructs, but are in fact rhizomatic and volatile (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Grosz, 1994). Equally, this multiplicity casts a shadow over existing theories, texts and research that hold focus on singularities, or dualisms (Grosz, 1994).

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1 These notes are a work in progress and based on an aspect of my thesis, which I am currently working on.
5. My thesis is largely an exploration of individuals’ perceptions, experiences and understandings of a particular phenomenon.

6. But within that, I argue that when studying the lives of marginalised communities, what is needed is a fundamental critique of hegemonic neoliberal ways of thinking and doing. We ought to recognise and respect that there are alternative knowledge and value systems, and that if at possible these ought to be reflected through alternative research practices and methodologies.

7. I try not to use the word ‘they’ or their’ in my research when referring to Gypsy/travellers as this further creates a them and us binary.

And so within this I highlight several key facts about Gypsy/Travellers.

Researchers have yet to fully explore the educational experiences of Gypsy/Traveller girls in Scotland and to ask why many girls do not formally attend school after age 12. Conversations with teachers, charity workers, liaison officers and other stakeholders who work in the field offer a range of explanations and reasons.

Existing research on Gypsy/Travellers in the UK and in Scotland tends to focus on the experiences of the community as a whole. Specific research on education does exist, and either explores the experiences of Gypsy/Traveller families in accessing education for their children or the interrupted learning experienced by Gypsy/Traveller pupils seen as being ‘on the margins’ or ‘outside the mainstream’, ‘different’, ‘deviant’ or ‘excluded’.

There is currently no research that gives voice to the gendered educational experiences of Gypsy/Traveller girls in Scotland, as seen from their perspective. The voices and experiences of the girls are missing, silent and unheard in these dominant explanations and it is important that this imbalance is redressed, in order that we may respect and understand more clearly, the girls’ views on the issues that affect their education. In this presentation, I explain the theoretical background to my research design. My research aims to ‘constructively disrupt’ current modes of thinking and practices within this subject area. I argue for a critical approach within an intersectional framework.
Who are Gypsy/Travellers?

- Gypsies and Travellers have lived in the British Isles since the 15th century (Okely, 1983)
- Theories linking their origins to Egypt and India abound, but are debated and disputed to this day.
- Travelling communities in Scotland have a separate history to European Roma
- Today’s Travellers in Scotland are a product of years of inter-marriage between pre-Celtic or Celtic and Romanies.
- Some sources contend that they may have existed from the 12th century, possibly making them Britain’s oldest community of nomadic peoples.
- Scottish Travellers refer to themselves as ‘Nachins’ in their native language, Cant.
- But the Scottish Government’s term ‘Gypsy/Traveller’ is most recent official terminology used as the preferred term.
- It was created to reflect the variety of communities that live, travel and have intermarried in Scotland over the centuries. Gypsy/Travellers are not a homogenous group sharing a single socio-economic stratum. Each community has their own understanding of their history and identity.
- It is important to note that the term is not accepted by all Gypsy/Travellers and is controversial.
- The European Union’s own terminology has also changed over the years, and since 2010, refers to all its nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples as ‘Roma’, its latest generic term. The Council of Europe (2012) considers Scottish Gypsy/Travellers to be ‘Roma’, to the disapproval of many Travellers I have met.
- Gypsy/Travellers were officially recognised as having a separate ethnic status in Scotland in 2008 and granted protection under the Race Relations Act (1976) (The Scottish Government, 2014).

Demonised ‘Other’

The disputed history and origins of Gypsy/Travellers frame how they are powerfully conceived in the minds of settled communities here in Scotland, consciously or
disconsiously, for hundreds of years. Gypsy/Travellers have traditionally been viewed as ‘rogues, vagabonds and vagrants’ (Mayall, 1995: 40). Gypsy/Travellers in Scotland have experienced various forms of persecution - deportation to the colonies, ethnic cleansing, and removal of children from their parents to be sent to Australia and Canada, and forced assimilation. Genocidal laws against Gypsies and Travellers were commonly enacted in many countries across Christian Europe. Staying hidden, invisible, kept Gypsies and Travellers safe, but their visible absence further corrupted their image and marginalised them.

The symbolic public perception reflects a demonized ‘other’, whereby Gypsy/Travellers are wild and cunning, dirty thieves. They are accused of not being gainfully employed, their children not going to school, and that their girls only want to marry and have children. Many amongst the majority think Gypsy/Travellers are all poor and that they all live in caravans.

So how can the marginalisation and demonisation of Gypsy/travellers, and Gypsy/Traveller girls in particular, be explored and analysed effectively? I propose that this can be done through an intersectional framework.

**What is intersectionality?**

Intersectionality challenges mainstream feminism by displacing essentialised notions of women and the universalisation of white middle class women’s experiences. It centres the experiences of women of colour, and Black women in particular, in feminist theory and emancipatory practice. At times viewed today as ‘the brainchild of feminism and gender studies’, intersectionality is also a political challenge to white supremacy in feminist politics and feminist social science (Bilge, 2014; Mirza, 2009).

It is important to recognise that the concept is not a new one. It first took root as a response to the experiences of Black women in the United States, their pernicious subjugation and subsequent struggles for freedom and recognition.

In 1851, an African American abolitionist, women’s rights campaigner and suffragette, Sojourner Truth, disrupts the viscid idea that only white women are ‘women’ in her famous speech *Ain’t I a Woman?* (Truth,1851). She asserts that a Black woman, when viewed as a slave or as property, is devalued, dehumanised and
oppressed by racism, but also sexism. Truth argues that there are different ways of being a woman, but both male and female white supremacy erases different manifestations of what it is to be a woman.

Racism and sexism marginalize and exclude Black women, but so do white feminist struggles. Truth’s speech reflects the view that ‘women’ are the same in some ways, yet different. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), an African American critical legal studies theorist, brings this argument to the fore. Crenshaw formally introduces the term ‘intersectionality’ to address the fact that the experiences and ongoing struggles of African American women were not being critically considered in feminist and anti-racist discourse. She contends that both race and gender be interrogated to observe how these two categories interact to shape the lives of women who are not white.

Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices (Crenshaw, 1991: 1242)

Audre Lorde (2007) reminds us, ‘there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not lead single-issue lives’ (p.138).

Intersectional approaches to social locations have stressed the interdependence between different kinds of divisions as well as the tensions and contradictions within and across these social categories. As part of my thesis, I argue that traditional unidimensional approaches to investigating experiences of oppression and subordination, particularly within marginalised communities, are inadequate. Critically exploring the complexity of such issues through a single lens – race, gender or class, for example, is likely to produce simplistic and skewed findings.

**Differences in Interpretation**

Intersectionality is increasingly viewed as a research paradigm in its own right but like all rich and worthy concepts, it is contested, defined and interpreted in different ways. The basic difference is that some theorists want to see it being used only to
interrogate Black feminist struggles, and therefore some researchers have been
accused of misappropriating it and forgetting its origins in African American feminist
history, and others see it as being applicable to a multiple of struggles.

It is perhaps significant to note that Crenshaw in 1989 referred to her understanding
of intersectionality, when she first introduced the term, as ‘one way’ of approaching it
and only ‘provisional’, envisaging its ‘indefinability’ as a theoretical fixture and the
challenges of containing its use within a single discipline within academia or for a
single purpose. I highlight now several key components of Intersectionality.

✓ Patricia Hill Collins refers to intersectionality as a ‘matrix of domination’
reflecting various spheres of power - structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and
interpersonal, at the level of the everyday.

✓ Naples asserts that these spheres of domination are not necessarily static and
rigid systems of oppression.

✓ Prins (2006: 6) argues that individuals have agency; their identities,
experiences and worldview also play a role. The four spheres of domination
interact with individual and group agency to construct systems of power and
oppression.

✓ Naples (2009) refers to this approach as interactional or relational.

✓ Cho’s (2013: 795) views intersectionality as an ‘analytic sensibility’ –
sensitizing us to the multiplicity and complexity of inequality.

✓ Carbado et al (2013: 304) explain the different ways in which intersectionality
has been defined and put to use – across disciplines, national borders, to
engage women of colour, women in the Global South, even examining Black
men’s experiences and advocating the need of gender equity between Black
women and Black men.

✓ They conclude that ‘the theory is never done’ and that ‘there is potentially
always another set of concerns to which the theory can be directed. They
suggest that it does not make sense to try to ‘frame’ it, restrict it and
‘anthropomorphize’ it.

✓ Carbado et al (2013: 304) propose that an alternative approach to defining
intersectionality is not to ask what it is, but to asses what it does, and ‘what
else the framework might be mobilized to do’. 
Crucially, they argue that intersectionality allows us to see women in their particular context, without minimizing the effects of differences between different forms of subjugations or concealing one form in another. Rather, each form of oppression informs the other.

Although Mirza (2015:4) believes it is important to acknowledge the origins of intersectionality within the Black feminist movement, she also concedes that ‘It is only by attention to situated localised accounts of ‘marginalised lives’ that we can reveal the ways of ‘being and becoming’ …[it] valorises situated experience which is at the heart of black feminist epistemology’.

**Intersectionality and Gypsy/Traveller Girls**

Following the advice of Carbado et al, Crenshaw and Mirza’s, I argue that it is possible for intersectionality as a theoretical framework to celebrate the origins of the concept, as I have done today, in Black women’s emancipatory struggles and still ‘mobilize’ it beyond the struggles of Black women, towards other women of colour. In my case, I am seeking to apply an intersectional framework to a group of ethnicised and marginalised ‘white’ women - Gypsy/Traveller girls in Scotland.

The curious racialization of Gypsy/Traveller communities, subject to what Crenshaw (1991: 1261) calls ‘patterns of othering’, over centuries, in the media and in popular consciousness, as a minority white population in Scotland is also explored. The research therefore has to problematize what it means to be ‘white’, and to be a ‘white woman’ living within ‘simultaneously interlocking oppressions’ that collectively serve to marginalise and silence lives.

One of the strengths of intersectionality is that it recognises ‘within-group diversity […] and the limitations of groups within categories to self-identify in a personally relevant or empowering way’ (Hancock, 2007: 75). Just as there are tensions between dominant and subordinated groups, there are also tensions within these groups that need to be explored.

Gypsy/Traveller girls may be considered ‘white’ and Scottish, because their physical characteristics do not mark them as being visibly different; but within the population of Gypsy/Traveller girls there are multiple differences, the most potent being whether
a Gypsy/Traveller girl leads a completely nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, whether she lives in a trailer on a council run Traveller site, a privately owned site, in a house or flat, whether she lives with both parents or a single parent also has consequences for her.

Furthermore, it is not just women of colour who experience oppression by powerful systems that promote inequalities. Being ‘white’ can also be problem. There are hierarchies of whiteness, and some ‘white people’ are excluded and oppressed by the very system and dominant practices of whiteness that protect the interests of privileged white groups. Being part of or being excluded from being ‘white’ is a complex historical social construct, which I discuss at length in my thesis but which is beyond the scope of this presentation – but I summarise by highlighting the following points

- Whiteness is a social construct
- It is a system of knowledge, ideologies, and norms
- It is shaped and maintained by power
- However, white people are not a homogeneous group

Colin Clark (2006: 7-8) points out that there is an ‘ethnicity conundrum’ with regard to Gypsy/Travellers, because ‘the majority (settled) society tends to regard Scottish Gypsy/Travellers as white, whilst others (academics and policy makers) see them as a being a separate ethnic group. The conundrum is that the white majority perceives them as being part of ‘the dangerous classes’ (Morris, 1994:16), whilst Gypsy/Travellers are also ascribed the socio-legal status of separate ethnicity since 2008.

Gypsy/Travellers are entangled in a complex web of race, ethnicity and class made more complicated by their own processes of community and individual self-identification. They are white but also ethnicised. The lives of Gypsy/Traveller girls are further complicated by their gender roles.

The relevance of race cannot be denied, but the toxic mix of ethnicity, race, gender and class that have served to undermine Gypsy/Traveller communities over centuries is highlighted in my study.
Various surveys and reports show that racism and racist bullying is a major problem experienced by Gypsy/Traveller pupils. However, it would be too simplistic to assume that racism is all that the girls encounter and that racism is the main cause for non-attendance and low attainment, especially at secondary level. It is important to discover if there are other systems of oppression and subordination that interact together to affect the lives and experiences of these girls.

Matsuda (1991, as cited in Crenshaw, 1991: 1245) calls this analytical inquiry ‘asking the other question’ - where gender biases exist the researcher asks ‘Where is the race bias in this?’ and where there is a race bias, one asks ‘Where is the gender bias or patriarchy in this?’ The researcher is always looking for other forms of discrimination that accompany the one obvious bias. It is important to acknowledge that in some ways the experiences of Gypsy/Traveller girls may be similar to more privileged white girls and women, and in other ways, they may experience discrimination like Gypsy/Traveller boys and other men of colour do. The point is that no one group’s experiences of privilege and oppression are entirely separate, exclusive and confined within that group (Crenshaw, 1991), but it is nevertheless important not to fuse one group’s experiences with another, and seeing them as one and the same. Homogenising experiences of subordination betrays the plight within individual and group shared narratives.

**Challenges**

There are several challenges associated with intersectionality both as a research paradigm and tool for analysis (Davis, 2008: 1).

Firstly, Gopaldas and De Roy suggest that an intersectional approach to analysis is more complex, time-consuming, and the findings challenging to summarise. They also suggest that ‘larger datasets may be needed to account for all intersections’ (Gopaldas and DeRoy, 2015: 356).

Secondly, Naples (2009) warns that it is ‘not enough to assert that one’s study is intersectional […] a researcher must specify and reflect on which aspects of intersectionality are brought into the frame and which ones are left out or treated less centrally in the analysis’. Whilst I hope that my research will be transformative by
making a significant contribution to the debate on the experiences of
gypsy/travellers, I cannot claim that the research participants, the gypsy/traveller
girls, have this aim in mind. This study is not a piece of participatory action research.
I was not aware and have not been made aware of community activism, or a concerted
force of opposition, run solely by gypsy/traveller women in Scotland. This research
aims to be transformative, but only in a limited sense, in that it is ‘not [as yet] part of
a social movement’.

Thirdly, there could potentially be a long list of social divisions, but it is equally vital
not to be reductive or to generalize too loosely. There is a fine balance to be struck.
Floya anthias highlights ‘the impossibility of attending analytically to the plurality of
categories [and] individual differences. Deciding what to leave in and what to leave
out requires careful consideration.

Another important point she raises is that the idea of intersectionality ‘suggests that
what takes place is similar to what happens at an intersection (where things collide or
crash together) […] but it] might not be a product of the intersection at all but may
[only] be manifested in that space’. The researcher needs to be careful not to be
misled. Not all points of intersection produce problems of subordination and
oppression.

And finally, anthias also advances a valid question about the challenges in dealing
with the inequality of women within their own communities and within their own
families, i.e. outside what is usually thought of as the public domain’.

And this is a crucial point:

Entering into the private world of family and close-knit community relations raises
issues about just how much, public bodies and policy makers can do to predict and
prevent combinations of intersecting inequalities.

Summary

✓ An intersectional paradigm allows for a critical appreciation of the
connections between and within the gypsy/traveller girls’ lived educational
experiences, current policy and practice.
My research relies on an interactional approach to intersectionality. It acknowledges and includes human agency. It aims to be transformational, but in a limited sense.

Gender, class, age are considered important categories of inequality.

Race and ethnicity, and the processes of racialization that Gypsy/Traveller communities have been subjected to, are not denied but are critically explored in problematising the social, cultural and historical construction of ‘whiteness’.

Mirza (2015: 3) points to the ‘normative absence and the pathological presence of [certain groups] of racialised women collectively assigned as ‘other’, like Gypsy/Traveller girls for example, and advances the idea that intersectionality’s function is to continue to critically disrupt and problematise.

An intersectional epistemology segues neatly with my choice of qualitative methodology in which the heterogeneous voices of marginalised Gypsy/Traveller girls are amplified and valued.

Audre Lorde (2007) reminds us, ‘there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not lead single-issue lives’ (p.138). In analysing findings I am always ‘asking the other question’ - where gender biases exist I ask ‘Where is the race bias in this?’ and where there is a race bias, I ask ‘Where is the gender bias or patriarchy in this?’