

# Supporting Liverpool's Roma community: an illumination via Bourdieu's theory of capital

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## Abstract

*We discuss our Fair Work research with the Roma of Liverpool, and showcase how Roma communities have developed coping strategies in increasingly precarious labour conditions. We utilise Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capitals, in particular social capital, to show how Roma cope with the uncertainties of precarious employment. We share our work of the Liverpool Roma Employability Network (LREN) and, in so doing, we posit that social networks, borne of social capital, not merely contribute to enhancing opportunity for Roma employability but more so, align deeply with Roma's habitus.*

## Keywords

Roma; employability; widening participation; Bourdieu; social capital

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## Liverpool's Roma community

There is substantial evidence of marginalisation of Roma in the UK (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2019): poverty is a central, recurring aspect of Roma exclusion, exacerbated by lack of fluency in English, poor education, restricted access to public services and wider opportunities. Further, there is limited integration in local communities. In this paper, we reflect on our 'fair work agenda' on employability and education for the Roma of Liverpool: Liverpool Roma Employability Project (LREN) arose out of a piece of research conducted by ourselves into precarious employment among Roma in Liverpool.

### Who are the Roma?

The umbrella term Roma is an endonym adopted by the first World Romani Congress in London in 1971.

Linguistic and genetic analysis suggests that the Roma are originally a Hindavi people from northern India (Hancock, 2014) and are currently the largest ethnic minority group in Europe. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and following the accession of several Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries to the EU in 2004 and 2007, the number of Roma migrating to the UK has grown.

To ensure that the research had wide impact on Roma employability and prospects in Liverpool, we initiated a series of breakfast meetings to bring together services within the city that worked with Roma to increase their employability. Organisations represented include those engaged in

supporting Roma through providing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, community allotments, childcare and entrepreneurship support. Encouraged by this success and impact of LREN, we recognise that low employability prospects begin much earlier than adulthood through, for instance, low engagement with formal education.



In 2018 we started the REAP (Roma Education Aspiration Project) in Liverpool after securing funding from the Department for Communities and Local Government. REAP's aim is to raise aspiration among young Roma, linking better education prospects with better employment prospects, creating a link or transition from REAP to LREN. We are now working with 100 Roma in Liverpool, creating opportunities to participate in higher education and are excited by the prospect of two Roma joining LJMU in September 2019.

### Context of our work

It is worthwhile reflecting on the discrimination and persecution of Roma in recent times. Various studies have noted countless examples of extreme discrimination of Roma in employment,

education and housing (Klimovský, et al., 2016; Matras, 2014). Whilst it is well documented that several thousand Roma were killed during the Holocaust, other human rights abuses are less well recorded and many continue across Europe today (Matras, 2014). Many Roma children in former CEE countries are routinely sent to schools for children with special needs and since the fall of the Berlin Wall, virtual walls have been erected in Europe that separate Roma from their non-Roma neighbours (Bobakova et al., 2015).

A study of Roma employment in Europe showed that over two-thirds had been refused work just because they were Roma (European Roma Rights Centre, 2007) and that only 10 per cent were in stable work that had lasted more than two years. This antigypsyism in employment has led to a concentration of Roma in low paid and low skilled work, typically in agriculture, warehousing, manufacturing, processing and construction. Following EU enlargement in 2004, widespread unemployment and discrimination in their home countries have motivated many Roma to migrate. This new pool of mobile and flexible labour, however, has been welcomed in the UK, in particular by the employers who struggle to fill low skilled jobs. Some highlight that the growth of a flexible, mobile labour force has resulted in poor labour practices (Lambert and Herod, 2016; Mason, 2018) and contributed to an expanding precarious workforce. Precarious work is defined as 'employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker' (Kalleberg, 2019: 2)

### **Bourdieu and the theory of capital**

We found synergy with Pierre Bourdieu's work who first coined the term 'precariat' and recognised the inherent dangers of a flexible workforce. Thus, using Bourdieu,

we located Roma in a 'field' or social space, comprising agents or members, each with their own habitus that enable them to manoeuvre within the social space. Bourdieu (1984: 170) defines the habitus as an internalised and cognitive 'structuring structure that organises practices and the perception of practices', and embodies not merely the capacity or social know-how to interact but also the ability to recognize the value or worth of such interaction. In turn, Bourdieu's concept of capitals (social, economic, cultural and symbolic) embrace what gives people's lives meaning, such that they want more of it. For individuals social capital is about their social relations, economic capital is material worth, cultural capital is know-how including how they look, act and dress, while symbolic capital is the amount of worth one has in the eyes of others.

Economic capital is an individual's wealth and can be directly converted into money; indeed, the Roma are well known for depending on family before institutions, and have less access to inherited wealth (Matras, 2014). Likewise, Roma, tend not to benefit as much from cultural capital, as it is highly individual and transferred through family, connections, experience and education. Roma often prioritise the economic activities of the family over education (Cozma et al., 2000) and, contrary to a common misconception of 'scrounging', they in fact produce and reproduce the major components of their capitals from within (Grill, 2012).

But it is Roma's deployment of social capital that particularly captures our attention. Social capital is highly valorised (Hage, 2013) by the Roma and is based on relationships within a group, such as friends or family (Grusendorf, 2016), and is thus well ingrained within the Roma habitus. This echoes Coleman's (1988) concept of

social capital as 'resources embedded in one's social network; resources that can be accessed or mobilised through ties in the networks'. Our research of Liverpool's Roma concurs with others in showing how Roma draw on their social capital and use informal social support before formal services such as healthcare (Bobakova et al., 2015) and rely on word-of-mouth recruitment methods over formal methods (Tarnovschi, 2012). Social capital for the Roma is everyday life: face-to-face, long term, contextual, repetitive, practical and predictable. This 'social capital on the move' distinguishes the Roma from other more settled static migrant groups. Sharing presence with family in an open manner constitutes and legitimises the daily network of social relations or capital that is reinforced continuously through practice. This constant movement substantiates and indexes the closeness of social capital relations and of being Roma (Grill, 2012).

For our research participants social capital impacts every part of their daily lives from accessing work, sharing transport, local knowledge, food, clothes, childcare, in an invisible but highly effective social network. This is demonstrated by Fernandez and Castilla (2017) who shows how social networks emanate from social capital, to the extent with Roma that the presence and worth of social capital ensures its esteem in the habitus, such that it triumphs over Bourdieu's other more typically valued capitals such as economic and cultural capital.

Illuminating the Roma experience via the lens of Bourdieu's theory of social capital enables us to better refine and develop the support they will require when making the transition to higher education and into employment. The practices we have cultivated to make the LREN a success is built upon bringing people together,

collaborating and sharing experiences in a safe and supportive space. These actions – or philosophy - align intuitively with Roma's habitus, but they are practices that can be transferred to support many socially disadvantaged groups within higher education. Such thinking is critical if we are to make good on our access and participation plans and ambition to improve social mobility.

- *Helen Collins and Patricia Harrison are senior lecturers at the Liverpool Business School, LJMU. The LREN was commended for its work with the Roma community at the 2017 National Roma Network's conference.*

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