The Role of Education in the Assimilation of Romani Women in the United States

Melanie Covert

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ABSTRACT

The Romani are a largely unknown people group in the United States though their plight world-wide is highly visible. The story of Romani in the United States remains largely untold. This study explored the daily lives of 15 Romani women within the United States. The study investigated questions of historical prejudice, gender roles, educational achievement and barriers to assimilation with in the Romani community. Results of the study highlighted that many Romani women encounter significant barriers inside and outside of their communities that impact their ability to pursue higher education and to fully assimilate into mainstream society due to current and historical prejudice encountered outside of their communities and bias found within their communities.

INDEX WORDS: Race, Gender, Inequality, Assimilation
THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE ASSIMILATION OF ROMANI WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE ASSIMILATION OF ROMANI WOMEN IN THE
UNITED STATES

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family and friends who supported me in significant ways throughout my work on this project. It is also dedicated to the amazing women who allowed me to be a part of their stories and utilize their stories to be a voice for other women unable or unwilling to speak about their experiences.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1 INTRODUCTION

In a recent proposal to city hall, Rome’s social policy councilor advised other city officials that Romani (referred to often as Gypsies) residing within their city should be hired to sort the city’s garbage, citing their “skills in rummaging through waste” (RT News, 2015). The social policy advisor viewed this occupation as an opportunity for Roma to come outside of their camps and earn a living given that “A lot of these people rummage through rubbish and find materials, they have become skillful.” While many of her political counterparts viewed her proposition as an absurdity, her attitude towards this marginalized people, known as the Romani, is found worldwide. In France alone, Euroactiv reported over 13,000 Roma were evicted from their homes in 2014, leaving many without homes and even more with an interruption in their attempts to assimilate (2015). Euroactiv also reported that the Czech Republic was cited by the European Commission as violating European Union anti-discrimination laws after multiple infractions were found including the practice of requiring Romani children sit in the back of school rooms and finding that children placed in schools for the mentally disabled were disproportionately Romani, making up over 30% of the school’s population. The plight of Romani world-wide is often dire. Faced with intense discrimination individually and politically, academics and activists alike have sought to better understand and support the Romani cause.

Though Romani’s worldwide are a recognized and marginalized minority, they are given little recognition within the United States. Despite the seeming lack of overt oppression experienced by Romanies in other countries (Hancock, 2002), American Romanies may still struggle with many of the challenges to assimilation faced by Romani’s worldwide. Internationally, Romani women have begun to gain a voice in their own communities as well as
in academia discussing women’s issues, among which is the problem of educational access (Bitu & Vincze, 2012; Brooks, 2012; Gelbert, 2012; Schultz, 2012).

While it appears strides are being made for these women, few Romani women in the United States have a visible place in this discourse. Researchers have not yet asked enough questions of American-Romani women to determine if they are able to obtain education or if many of the cultural barriers that Romani women encounter world-wide are relevant to their lives in America. The questions I propose to ask in this study in order to better understand the life of the American Romani woman include: Does education for American-Romani women necessarily equal assimilation? Are the attitudes of older Romani’s who have encountered discrimination in education being passed on to the younger generations? How do the Romani talk to their daughters about education?

Answering these questions will assist in giving American Romani Women a voice in a worldwide discourse. Answering these questions will also help to shed light on the experiences of this often-marginalized group and provide countering information against stereotypes that have long been held about the Romani. Uncovering the experiences of American-Romani women may help to increase discourse among American scholars regarding the discrimination of Romani’s worldwide. This study will contribute to literature on gender and education by illuminating the unique experiences of Romani-Women who are often more educated than their male counterparts though they are being prepared to fulfill traditional gender roles in the home. Through the lens of Milton Gordon’s theory of Assimilation (1964), Berry’s Fourfold model of acculturation (1997) and Margaret Gibson’s proposed “Accommodation without Assimilation (1988),” I will critically examine the narratives I have collected from Romani women throughout
the United States in order to answer the questions I have posed and bring new perspectives to existing literature.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to adequately understand the plight of the Romani, it is important to understand the theoretical foundations of their experience.

1.1 Assimilation Theory

In 1964, Milton Gordon proposed his classic assimilation theory in which he outlined the process by which immigrants or marginalized groups become part of the host society. Gordon’s theory proposed that immigrants follow a single trajectory in their journey of assimilation. Gordon proposed that this journey begins with structural assimilation in which members of the minority are able to enter into close relationships with individuals from the host society followed by large scale entering of institutions (i.e. marriage) which would eventually lead to the ending of prejudice and discrimination towards this group (Gordon).

Some scholars felt that Gordon’s work was flawed, citing that this ease of assimilation occurred mainly for groups which already closely resembled the host group and that assimilation also requires the acceptance of the host group in addition to the willingness of the minority group to assimilate (Brown & Bean, 2005). Early immigration groups such as the Irish, Italian and Germans were able to successfully assimilate within 3 to 4 generations, this has been attributed by some to be a privilege of their “Whiteness”. More recent immigrant groups in the United States who are less likely to resemble the host population are finding assimilation a much more complex and lengthy process. (Alba, 1997)

Total assimilation was once seen by some scholars to be the ultimate goal of immigrant groups in the United States (Gordon, 1964). Today however, American Society shows
a different mindset among its immigrant groups. These groups have elected to explore different routes for relating to the host society (Alba, 1997). Berry’s Fourfold model of acculturation rejects Gordon’s single trajectory model and instead, identifies four options for relating to the host culture (1997).

Berry proposed that some groups may follow Gordon’s route of classic “Assimilation” in which individuals give preference to the norms of the dominant culture over their culture of origin. Others may choose “Separation” whereby they immigrate into a cultural enclave and largely reject the influence of the dominant culture. Other groups may choose “Integration” which involves integrating parts of the host culture into their already existing culture, creating a dual-identity. Finally, individuals may find themselves in the category of “Marginalization” in which they are being marginalized by the host culture and unable to assimilate (Berry).

In her work, “Accommodation without Assimilation,” Margaret Gibson (1988) proposed that some minority groups may be able to accommodate the dominant culture without entirely assimilating. This would enable the minority group to maintain strong roots within their community while benefitting from the resources held by the dominant culture. Individuals who were able to do this were observed to be more successful overall and were able to gain greater access to upward mobility. Those individuals who were unable to achieve some congruence between their own culture and the dominant culture, particularly between home and school life, fared far worse than those who were able to reach a congruent state between the two. However, minority groups often became resistant to schooling or occupations that were believed to lead to complete assimilation.
For one recent immigrant group, the choice of assimilation or non-assimilation upon arrival in the United States was strongly influenced by a history of world-wide marginalization and the simultaneous desire to remain separate from the outside world. This group, known as the Romani (also called Gypsies), immigrated to America at the turn of the 20th century. Known throughout Europe as an unwanted ethnic minority, they arrived with little desire to assimilate and were met, initially, with little opportunity to do so (Hancock, 2002). They continue to be a largely unknown and unacknowledged minority within the United States. Scholars, such as Herbert Gans might describe their ethnicity as symbolic, due to the ability of many American Romani to easily slip in and out of the dominant culture unnoticed however, this is not true for all due to both complex cultural issues and simplistic ones such as the dark, middle eastern features that many Romani possess which lead many to categorize them as non-Whites. Like those groups discussed by Gibson (1988) the Romani have become masters at accommodation without assimilation in order to access resources from their environment and are resistant to influences, including education, that would push Romani children towards complete, structural assimilation. Many if not most, choose a life of “separation”, as outlined by Berry’s (1997) model of acculturation.

1.2 Who are the Romani?

I recall as a young child hearing stories about my ancestors’ early life in the United States as Romani-traveler in the late 1800’s. The family’s caravan would set up on the outskirts of town, as they were not allowed inside city limits, where they would tell fortunes in the evening for the townspeople until they were run off by local authorities. It was not until later in life that these ancestors would receive a birth certificate and experience enough acceptance to settle into a permanent place. My own grandmother would acquire a highschool education and work as a
bookkeeper but would retain her preference to remain separate from the Gadje (the White majority), a preference passed down from her family that she would maintain throughout her life.

Stories like those of my ancestors are largely untold in America today. Despite gaining attention for their marginalized position worldwide, American-Romani are a little studied group. Scholars such as Hancock (2002) and Sutherland (1975) provide some insight into the American Romani, however, the quantity of available scholarship overall is limited. As a result, little is known about this often unrecognized minority. Though unacknowledged, the plight of this minority is important to understand as one witnesses the marginalization of this people worldwide.

In Hancock’s book, “We are the Romani,” (2002) a detailed history of this people is provided. Originally thought to be of Egyptian origin, Hancock provides strong evidence to support an origination from India from which Romani’s migrated around the 13th century. Overtime, due to various reasons, this people dispersed throughout Europe and have encountered a plight similar to that of the Jewish people, facing persecution from each host they encountered. Beginning around the 1300’s countries began to acknowledge the presence of Romani’s with anti-Romani/anti-Gypsy laws and, at times, sought to control this nomadic people with enslavement. Many Romani’s became enslaved throughout Europe. In some places, this enslavement continued until the late 1800’s. In 16th century England Romani’s were required to be branded and enslaved for at least two years (Hancock, 2002). The Romani were often seen as uneducated, dark-skinned mystics with a proclivity for crime, all the more rejected for their desire not to assimilate with whatever host country they encountered. In those places where enslavement was avoided, the Romani were controlled with oppressive legislation and public persecution (Hancock, 2002).
Clark (2004) points out that today what is known about the Romani can be summed into 5 common, erroneous beliefs. This summation is based on hundreds of years of historical inaccuracies and interpretation of Romani behavior by outsiders. These beliefs about Romani include: 1. Blackness, 2. False sense of Romani “Nobility” (i.e. king of the gypsies), 3. Involvement with the occult, 4. Proclivity towards crime (historically this included the theft of Gadje offspring) and 5. Overt Sexuality of men and women. Historically, the Gadje would use their erroneous observations of the Romani to justify social and interpersonal discrimination which interfered with the Romanies preferred way of life and led to hundreds of years of Anti-Romani/Anti-Gypsy discrimination. This discrimination still exists today as evidenced by stories previously cited where Romani face discrimination and unequal treatment in schools and are pushed to the margins of society (Euroactiv, 2015: RT News, 2015).

Hancock (2004) identifies that ancestors of the American-Romani were either transported to America from countries who wished to dispose of them or came willingly to escape a persecuted life. While America may have held some promise for a new life for Romani, world-wide their plight did not improve. Anti-Romani/Anti-Gypsy campaigns continued and Romanies became the target for racism, ostracism and bullying. During World War II, in addition to his “Final Solution” to the problem of the Jews, Hitler developed also a “Final Solution” to the problem of Romanies. By 1937 Romanies, along with Jews and Africans, no longer had civil rights in Nazi Germany. The Romani were considered a societal disease to be disposed of in order to ensure the purity of the German race. Nazi records underestimate Romani deaths to be around 2 million individuals killed throughout World War II (Hancock, 2002).
While scholarship and advocacy in European countries have brought about some improvement for Romani people, Romanies continue to face harsh prejudice and discrimination publically and privately (Hancock, 2002; Saul & Tebbutt, 2004).

While little is known about the American Romani, what is known has been largely defined by “Gadje” scholars who are often believed to be influenced by societal prejudices and commonly held stereotypes, scholars who are often only able to relate the story of the Romani as untrusted outsiders (Sutherland, 1975; Belton, 2005). Acton refers to the American Romani as living with a “duality of existence,” much like that of Dubois’ “Double consciousness” in which to exist within society one must play dual roles, and in order to avoid previously encountered discrimination (2004: Dubois, 1903). Many American Romani are unwilling to disclose their identity leaving some outsiders to question the very existence of this group (H Hancock, 2002; Belton, 2005).

The Romani are people who very much exist, largely without a voice. They often choose to separate themselves from mainstream society and leave their stories, most often, untold. Because Gadje have been a historical source of discrimination and are often viewed as immoral and likely to influence away from traditional cultural values (Derrington, 2005; Sutherland, 1975), interaction with the Gadje more than is necessary for work and some education is discouraged. Disclosure of Romani identity to outsiders is unnecessary and unlikely. (Derrington & Kendall, 2005; Belton, 2005; Sutherland, 1975).

Like Romani worldwide, cultural values and traditional gender roles in American Romani play a significant part in Romani interaction with Gadje (Sutherland, 1975: Silverman, 2012; Walsh, Este, Craig & Giurgi, 2011). This is very apparent in the approach Romani take to the pursuit of education. For this study, I propose to focus specifically on the role that
assimilation or non-assimilation into the world of the Gadje plays in the education of Romani Women. Romani women present a unique study for several reasons. Despite adhering to traditional gender roles in the home Romani women are not stratified by often traditional beliefs that men are more suited to be successful educationally; Romani women tend to fare better than males in school (Derrington & Kendall, 2004). Women in Romani communities often serve as negotiators with the outside world and are therefore encouraged to achieve at least a rudimentary education however, due to the nature of work expected of all Romani and the fear of influence from outside the Romani community, they rarely seek higher education (Silverman, 2012). In the UK, males tend to drop out of school more readily than females, often due to their inability to culturally integrate or anticipation of work with family, while many females are successful at “passing” as one of the dominant majority, assimilating and achieving success academically (Derrington & Kendall).

For the purposes of this study, “Assimilation” will be defined utilizing Gordan’s definition of structural assimilation including close, personal relationships with non-Romani and large scale entering of non-Romani institutions including marriage, churches, universities and occupations not typically held by Romani. In addition, this definition will include identifying more closely with “Whiteness” than “Romani.”

To understand the many and varied factors that influence the American Romani desire to educate, the relationship between Romani and Gadje education must first be explored.

1.3 Educational barriers

Among individuals in the U.S., studies show a gap between most minority groups and the White majority in test scores, grades and overall educational achievement (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Stroops, 2004). Additionally, even for those who achieve educationally, the payoff, when
comparing with what Whites are able to gain, is not commiserate with their efforts (Mickelson, 1989.) The achievement gap is a long recognized issue between White Americans and many ethnic minorities. As Kao and Thompson describe, there are two basic theoretical barriers to education among minorities. The first barrier is that ethnic minorities are stratified socially which inhibits their achievement by inhibiting their ability to access resources, social status and quality education. The second is that their cultural orientations can discourage individuals from achieving academically (Kao & Thompson).

Women in the United States, overall, surpass men in educational achievement (Stoops, 2004). Despite a consistent demonstration of ability and motivation, women continue to be stratified in the opportunities they will encounter in the workforce and continue to face gender inequality in educational settings (Mickelson, 1989). Despite these setbacks, women continue to achieve but often limit their aspirations to those careers consistent with a sex segregated structure (Jacobs, 1989; Mickelson). Women, at times, may sense their lack of social power in society and may decide that marriage, rather than career, is the best option to secure their future. These women may use education as a means of securing a mate rather than a means to advancing their future careers and subsequently, find themselves fulfilling traditional gender roles in their home (Mickelson). The gender inequality that is encountered in both school and career fields is a persistent prescience that limits the opportunities of Women and forces them to adhere to a structured trajectory of advancement that is unequal to that of men (Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel, 2008; Jacobs).

It is unclear if the experiences of women and minorities discussed is representative of the American-Romani woman. Being women, it is likely that they are stratified by their sex however, it is unknown if collectively their experiences resemble those of the White majority in
America, resemble those of minority groups who are stratified based on their social position or, if stratification comes largely from within their cultural associations. With little being known about the life of the American-Romani woman, the life of the Romani women world-wide must be explored. Because so few studies have focused on American-Romanies, in order to gain a perspective on the traditional relationship between Romani and Gadje education, this section reviews literature regarding Romani education in European countries. It is estimated that small numbers of Romani children are educated in primary school and even fewer children, 20%, achieve a secondary education (Derrington, 2005). Several reasons for this disparity have been proposed coming from within as well as without the Romani community (Bhopal, 2004; Bhopal, 2011; Derrington, 2005; Derrington, 2007; Grover, 2007; Hancock, 2002; Levinson, 2007).

Romani often view the Gadje with suspicion and characterize them as dirty and morally corrupt (Sutherland, 1975; Bhopal, 2004; 2011). It is not desirable that Romani spend more time than is necessary being influenced by the morals and customs of the Gadje. Those who are influenced by the Gadje are in danger of becoming corrupted and of being drawn away from their community (Hancock, 2004). Traditional gender roles and cultural expectations play a part in the lack of secondary education among Romani children (Bhopa). Children may be expected to leave school to contribute financially or help at home. Romani-Traveler children’s lifestyles often contribute to inconsistent school attendance (Derrington, 2005). Parents who possess little education are often unable to support their children’s involvement in school and may contribute to the ongoing distrust of Gadje in school and lack of educational achievement in their children. In addition, Romani culture often emphasizes vocational and home training over traditional schooling. Home training is believed to more prepare the Romani child for life within their
community subsequently, many do not see a benefit of going to school beyond learning the basic skills of arithmetic, reading and writing. (Bhopal).

Distrust of the Gadje presents a large cultural barrier to Romani education and, as many scholars point out, this distrust is not unfounded (Bhopal, 2004; 2011; Derrington, 2005; Grover, 2007; Hancock, 2002; Levinson & Sparkes, 2005). Romanies often encounter discrimination from administrators, teachers and students who hold deep prejudices and do not understand the Romani way of life (Bhopal, 2011). Historically, Romani have been excluded from Gadje schools or have been sent in large numbers to schools for mentally ill (Hancock, 2002; Grover, 2007). They are often targeted by teachers and children with bullying, name calling and severe reprimands for defensive behaviors when they choose to retaliate to this treatment. As Derrington, (2005) points out, Romani’s are often left with the choice to “fight, flight or play white.”

Some Romani children respond to the prejudiced treatment of others by fighting, verbally and physically, with teachers and students. This treatment may also lead them to disengage with the school system, a major contributor to the discontinuation of education (Derrington, 2005). Other students may seek to “pass” as part of the White, house-dwelling majority, thereby completely by-passing the prejudice treatment of the other students and educators.

This combination of external and internal factors make for a tumultuous and often disparaging relationship between the educational system and the Romani. Historically, those Romani who seek to advance their education may be viewed by their community as becoming too much like the Gadje, or too assimilated. Many are believed to be more likely to leave the community and assimilate in order to advance their education (Fonesca, 1995). In recent years,
however, these views and disparities have come to international notice and some measures have been taken to address them (Agglar, 2012).

In 2005, 12 European countries established the “Decade of Romani inclusion,” in which special efforts were made to decrease educational disparities among Romani. The United States participated in this effort as an observer contributing financial and political support. (Agglar, 2012). Through these measures, organizations have been established which seek to address cultural differences between European school systems and Romani communities (Bhopa, 2004). These organizations are bridging the cultural divide and gaining the trust of previously distrustful community leaders and parents (Bhopa). In addition, many Romani parents are beginning to acknowledge that traditional means of gaining income are beginning to be irrelevant in the modern world (Levinson, 2007; Sutherland, 1976). These parents acknowledge their children will need to acquire an education as a means of securing employment and possibly gaining respect. While these individuals may desire occupational assimilation, they continue to desire that their children hold to traditional ways and keep themselves within their own communities (Silverman, 2012; Sutherland, 1976).

For Romani women, these changes mean the potential for many opportunities. Romani women tend to stay in school longer than men because of greater restrictions on freedoms and cultural expectations (Derrington, 2005). A recent emergence of a Romani feminist movement has begun to explore the possibilities of Romani advancement in career and education. Some Romani women argue that they are able to hold to their traditions while obtaining advanced education (Bitu & Vincinze, 2012; Brooks, 2012; Gelbert, 2012; Schultz, 2012). Other women have encountered feminists who argue that to fully embrace advantages, their traditional identity (Schultz) must be left behind.
Currently, literature on Romani life, education or Romani feminism produces very little relative to Romanies in America. A recent study, one of very few available on American education of Romani women, by Silverman (2012) studied Romani Muslim women in New York. Silverman found that education has become a powerful tool against male domination in this community. Silverman also found that female education is outpacing male education and that education is challenging gender roles in this community. She discussed how parents wished for their children to become occupationally integrated however, they desire that they otherwise remain separate from the Gadje. Silvermen did not discuss the reception of Romanies by the Gadje education system. Due to lack of available literature, it is unknown if the same barriers to education that exist in Europe are relevant to the experiences of American Romani. As stated in the introduction, the lack of available literature has led me to ask several questions in order to better understand the lives of American Romani women in comparison with the lives of those who continue to be marginalized worldwide.

As previously stated, I hope to determine through this study if American Romani women encountered the same cultural barriers as those encountered by European Romani, perhaps in more covert forms? I will explore if current values in Romani communities allow for the advancement of female education or does the advancement of female education necessarily mean the leaving behind of one’s community into the world of the Gadje? Do attitudes of elder Romani women who may have encountered discrimination, at a time when Romani were more recognizable in the US, influence the educational attitudes of younger female Romani today? How do American-Romani communities speak to girls and women about education, its values and their role as potential providers for their families? Finally, I hope to determine if American-
Romani females who fully assimilate more likely than those who remain in their communities to achieve advanced education?

3 METHODOLOGY

I utilized a snowball sampling technique to collect my data from May 2014 to August 2014. I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with American-Romani women. Respondents represented multiple geographical locations throughout the United States. Seven respondents reported living in the Deep South, two reported residing in the North West including Alaska, two in the Midwest and four in the North East. It should be noted that of the 15 respondents, 7 reported previously or currently living the traditional “traveling” lifestyle of many Romani. As a result, respondent’s length of time in their current location and ties to local culture are widely varied. Respondents ages ranged from early 20’s to 80 years of age. The average age of participants was in the mid 40’s. Of the women interviewed, three reported having no college degree and one is currently attending college. Eleven have college degrees. Of those possessing a college degree, six reported receiving their degree as a non-traditional college student. Five participants held advanced degrees.

The first five interviews were located by word of mouth, respondents provided recommendations for future interviews and passed on the interviewer’s contact information. The interviewer was contacted by individuals who were interested in the study. I also reached out to individuals who were connected with online Romani groups and discussion boards. The majority of these did not respond however one did respond and while not willing to participate was able to provide other contacts who had an interest to participate. Potential respondents were told through email that I was studying the lives of American Romani women and would be interested in hearing about their lives and educational experiences. Recruiting individuals for the study had
two very culture-specific barriers. Several individuals who expressed an interest in participating found it impossible to find adequate time to participate due to their families’ occupation. Many potential respondents belong to traditional traveling families who find themselves on the road during the summer months for the purpose of finding work. Others, particularly those from older generations declined to participate. Their reasons were couched in cultural norms surrounding a hiding of Romani identity to outsiders. Others did not wish to discuss what, for them, had been a difficult way of life that they have since abandoned.

Four interviews from the Deep South were conducted in person in respondent’s homes at a time and date of their choosing. One interview was conducted over skype and ten interviews were conducted over the phone. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. Before the interview, some demographic information and informed consent was collected. All but one interview was audio taped due to the wishes of the participant. That interview was transcribed as the interview took place. All audio tapes were transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes. Pseudonyms were given to all respondents to conceal their identity, and some details have been omitted or replaced in quotes to ensure the anonymity of interview participants.

Closed and open ended questions were asked to participants. Questions were aimed at learning about respondents connection with their community growing up, lessons transmitted to them regarding their role in the community and familial expectations around education. Respondents discussed their current daily lives and connections with other Romani. Respondents were also asked about the progress of American Romani in American Society racially and financially.
3.1 Summary of findings

In Chapter II, prejudice and discrimination were revealed as a significant part of the Romani experience in America. Historically, Romani have been victimized by overt actions of racism including violent acts, being run out of towns and being taken from their homes and placed in forced assimilation programs. Few to no social barriers exist that will protect Romani from acts motivated by prejudice or originating from long held stereotypes. Romani have encountered significant prejudice within educational settings, most notably in higher education. The prejudice encountered has further contributed to the resistance Romani have in engaging with outsiders, especially within an educational setting.

In Chapter III, I explore how Romani speak to their daughters about education and identified if the attitudes of older Romani influence the pursuit of education in younger generations. The narratives of respondents revealed that education has been seen for many generations as obsolete for Romani living traditional lifestyles because it does not contribute to their ability to make a living. Romani women especially, could expect to live within traditional gender roles that would not require a formalized education. Romani often viewed education as an institution of the Gadje and looked on it with suspicion due to its ability to negatively influence Romani children and leave them open to experience prejudice and discrimination. This was most notably true among older Romani who themselves had not completed a rudimentary education and had witnessed or been victimized by the prejudice of the Gadje. Younger generations of Romani see a shift in attitudes toward education occurring and, particularly those who have abandoned traditional means of work, encourage their daughters to pursue education to gain independence.

In Chapter IV, I identify that many Romani who have achieved education at the college level had assimilated away from their communities. This was found to be the result of strongly
held resistance to the world of the Gadje and the enduring belief that separation was necessary. Those respondents who have assimilated did not feel that Romani cultural practices adequately prepared them for life’s challenges and saw assimilation as the only solution to gaining the life they hoped for themselves and their children. Though they felt able to assimilate, most respondents continue to hide their identity for fear of encountering prejudice. Other respondents believed that an integrated life, or one of accommodation without assimilation, between the two worlds was possible though they acknowledged that something must be given up. Education was typically the catalyst towards assimilation. Respondents believed that if cultural norms surrounding education would change this would not be the case. Cultural norms continue to be resistant to change in many cases because stereotypes and prejudice regarding Romani persist, placing them at risk to encounter discrimination in whatever setting they may find themselves in.

In the conclusion of my study I discuss if true assimilation is possible given that, according to Milton Gordon (1967), this will only occur when discrimination ceases. I discuss how educated Romani women are more likely to assimilate than those who are uneducated but, as cultural norms change, this can also change among those willing to fight against the rising tide of stereotypes about Romani in the U.S. I discuss respondent’s current understanding of the lives of Romani in the U.S. several respondents identified that things had gotten worse for Romani as a result of an increase of Romani visibility in popular shows that depict Romani in a stereotypical and negative fashion. Others believe the lives of Romani remain the same because they still encounter the same prejudice encountered by their ancestors. The majority of other respondents saw the lives of Romani as improved due to improved educational opportunities and the ability to achieve social mobility. I conclude by discussing areas for future research and social activism based on the findings of my study.
4 DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination in the lives of Romani world-wide is a well-documented occurrence (Hancock, 2002). From verbal and physical attacks to social stratification and ostracism, Romani have historically encountered discrimination wherever they have sought to establish themselves (Hancock). In 2013, Time magazine reported on the rise of Anti-Roma sentiments as economic times worsened, many Roma experiencing restricted access to necessities like water in Hungary while in other parts of the world Roma have been unable to find jobs and homes in the face of discriminative legislation and cultural bias (Harris, 2013). Also in 2013, National Public Radio reported on a Roma family in Ireland whose blonde-hair, blue-eyed children were removed from their home. Authorities believed the children may have been abducted (an age old stereotype held about Romani) because the children did not resemble their parents (Peralta, 2013). The children were returned to their parents after a DNA test confirmed their identity but their story remains as a powerful reminder of the strength of prejudice held against Romani worldwide. As previously identified, little research exists that chronicles the lives of American Roman in depth and explores the occurrence or non-occurrence of this same discrimination in the United States.

Because of their largely invisible status in the United States. The plight of discrimination faced by the American Romani goes unnoticed. Of the 15 interviews I completed, 12 reported experiences of covert discrimination. Many have accepted this as a way of life for Romani. A lifetime of discrimination has led many Romani to retreat further into a life of separation in which they seek to remain invisible in hopes that through invisibility they may avoid discriminative practices. Others, heralding the creation of reality shows like “Gypsy Sisters” and “My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding” as an end to the invisible life of the Romani, have chosen to fight back through activism, education and openness. While intellectually strides have been made to
address the experience of the Romani within the U.S., their stories remain largely untold and justice is often exchanged for the separate and quiet existence that many desire.

The discrimination and prejudice faced by Romani in this section has been divided in several ways. First, I explore historical discriminations which were described by many of the older individuals that I interviewed. These individuals shed light on the lives of Romani 50-60 years ago in the United States. I then explore current instances of discrimination encountered by respondents. I then explore the development of mistrust as a result of discrimination and the resultant “hiding” of the Romani identify. Finally, I explore discrimination experienced by respondent’s in education, first at the elementary and secondary levels and finally in higher education. The exploration of these topics will help to answer the first question posed by the researcher: Have American Romani women encountered the same cultural barriers as those encountered by European Romani, perhaps in more covert forms?

4.1 Historical discrimination

Fifty to Sixty years ago, the lives of many Romani in the United States reflected a very traditional traveling lifestyle making visible targets for discrimination and prejudice while other Romani found that their culture, or even their appearance opened them up to negative treatment.

4.1.1 Forced Assimilation

For the first seven years of her life, Fey, currently in her 60’s, grew up in a traditional Senti-Roma community in the North East United States in the 1950’s. She recalls a loving and nurturing community surrounded by strong, empowered women and a loving, extended family. At the age of 7, Fey, her brother and cousins, along with the other children in the community were taken from their homes and entered into a forced assimilation program. The children were first placed in orphanages and fostered out to White families. Fey recalls her grandmother
seeking to be reunited with her and her brother time and time again, seeking to understand why this was done to the community. Fey’s grandmother was charged with kidnapping following her last attempt at being reunited and died shortly after. Fey emotionally recounted this, stating:

"My brother and I had a very hard time because the community sort of broke up after the kids were taken away. No matter what they did, they couldn’t get us back and my grandmother had died after that kidnapping charge and this was a woman who saved her kids from the Holocaust and then to come to this country and have her grandkids taken from her. I will never forgive this country for that…"

Fey’s grandmother had come to America hoping for freedom from the oppression and prejudice she had encountered during World War II. Instead, she found a society, similar to many in Europe that was unwilling to accept the preference for separation from Gadje life within their community. The city officials’ answer to this group of individuals who would not assimilate by choice was forcible assimilation but, as Gordon (1964) identified, true assimilation can fully exist unless there is an end to discrimination. For Fey and her relatives, this discrimination would only end by hiding who they truly were.

Fey was placed with many different families throughout the program, she was punished for speaking the language of her people and discouraged from recalling the customs of her community. Fey found herself forced to exist within the world of the Gadje, stripped of her true identity. Fey described the last step in attempting to erase the identity of her past, “My name was changed, I was a White girl.” By forcing Fey and her fellow Romani to outwardly conform to Gadje norms, even to the smallest detail, such as her name, an important message was conveyed. A life of separation from the world of the Gadje was unacceptable. One must choose to assimilate or be marginalized, there would be no middle ground. While this was the message conveyed to Fey and her family members, other respondents found that their attempts at
assimilation were met with complete resistance, they were unwanted and found themselves pushed to the margins.

4.1.2 Impact of the civil rights movement

Gracie’s family were among those who found themselves pushed to the margins, whether they hoped to assimilate or not, unless they were willing and able to hide their identity. She was raised in a mill town in the Southeast in the 1950’s. Her father was full Romani while her mother was partial Romani a fact that was concealed by her mother until later in life. Gracie found discrimination with her own family as her mother raised her to believe that something was amiss with her Romani relatives on her father’s side. While Gracie recalls “passing” as a typical White girl due to the light color of her skin, she recalls:

Some of us could pass, some of us couldn’t. I can pass for the most part and one of my brothers couldn’t….I remember kids throwing rocks at us saying your mother must have been with the Indian mail man.

Fey grew up with many questions regarding her background and race, “Sometimes my father would whisper in my ear, you know we’re not White and if he would try to talk about it, my mother would shush him.” Though Gracie’s mother tried to silence the realities her father was seeking to convey, Gracie could not remain ignorant to the disparity in treatment that her family, especially those siblings who were not able to pass, experienced. As Gracie got older, the truth of her father’s words remained with her.

At the age of 14, Gracie joined the Civil Rights movement along with her brother as a response to the language and behavior they observed in the White Citizens Counsel.

…My brother met a member of SNCC and they invited us to a meeting and things kind of went from there and it started to made sense to me about my background by talking to these Black kids about race and what it is and what it isn’t and it was a way to talk about things because my family wouldn’t talk about it at all so I spent a lot of time in the civil rights movement…a lot of it was trying to figure out this whole thing of being mixed race and how people talked about it and how people felt about it.
Where Gracie had found herself unable to be fully part of the White world she was seeking to pass in, she found a place among the members of SNCC who could understand her experiences and help her make sense of why she found herself constantly unable to be fully a part of that world, why full assimilation seemed unreachable, why her family had been pushed to the margins.

Gracie’s involvement in the civil rights movement opened a door for her father to recount a painful experience to her years later when she was on a visit home from college. Gracie recalled, growing up, though her parents worked at the local mill, they never lived in the mill housing though it was cheaper and closer to her parents’ work. She stated she never understood her parents’ choices until that day:

I went somewhere with my father, I don’t know where and we pulled into our yard and instead of getting out he just set there for a minute and he looked at me and said, “You know, I am glad you did what you did, I think Dr. King was right.” He told me this story, he told me when he and my mother were a very young married couple….they lived in a mill village…. I never understood why we didn’t live in them, my father was adamant he wouldn’t live in a mill village, he wanted to live on the outskirts of town……

Gracie had observed a desire for separation though she misunderstood its intent. This life of separation often made her feel like the girl from the “wrong side of the tracks.” She carried with her many questions regarding the separate life she experienced with her family. Many of Gracie’s questions were answered on this day:

I was always curious about it so on this day when I was in college he told me that when they lived [in a mill town] his family came to visit. They lived in a town nearby and when they left, the man who was the supervisor of housing for the mill came to him…. He came to see my father and he said to him “I don’t ever want you to have those niggers here again.” My father said, well, they are not Black, they are Indian and the guy said “I don’t care who they are, they are dark and you can’t ever have them here again.” So my parents moved out and from that time on my parents refused to live in a mill village.
Gracie believed that her father told her this story as an example of his experiences as a Romani. He wanted her to understand why he had made the choices he had made for his family. Gracie realized that it was this type of discrimination that had led both her father and mother to try to pass as a different group that was more socially accepted in the town from that time on. The act of “passing,” for Romani in America, is not an unusual act as will be discussed later in the chapter. As a result of discrimination, Gracie grew up on the outskirts of her town in housing which was more expensive and not comparable in quality or size to that of the mill housing, away from where her friends resided. Gracie grew up knowing that, in some way, she was different but was encouraged to hide that difference in order to find acceptance in her town, an experience shared by many Romani of her time. Assimilation was not aspired to because assimilation was never truly a possibility, for families like Gracie’s “passing” was a much as could be hoped for. This would influence many families, families such as Peaches’, to look on the world of the Gadje with a leery eye.

4.1.3 Fascination or discrimination

Peaches was the oldest respondent in the study, at the time of the interview she was in her early 80’s. She described her life growing up in the 1940’s in the Deep South as typical of Romanichal, a particular group within the Romani. Her mother was a fortune teller. Her mother and father would “put up” in a town, setting up their mobile home (for some Romani at that time it may have meant a tent or cheap housing) and a sign that advertised their occupation. Her father advertised the business by carrying cards around to the townspeople, careful to avoid areas that were known to report activity by Romani to the police regardless of whether they were disturbing the public or not. In her recollection, her classmates and neighbors were accepting of her family, in fact she described their approach to her life as “fascination.”
Mama told them when she registered us in school. They knew we [told fortunes] and they knew we were gypsy…. The wanted to know everything there was to know about it and I wasn’t about to tell them. It was none of their business.

Peaches described the fascination of her classmates and the many lasting friendships that her parents possessed with non-Romani in the town, which was unusual for Romani families, as proof that they faced no discrimination. Despite her belief in her classmate’s and parent’s friend’s fascination with her culture and her adamant denial that any discrimination existed, Peaches still identified that not all was revealed to those who were outside of her family.

Though Peaches did not move as often as other Romanichal, she and her family did relocate every few years for work or as a way to avoid harassment from local law enforcement. Though fascination existed, which in itself may be problematic because romanticized views of Romani life bring their own kind of discrimination, Peaches very clearly identified that discrimination also persisted, “I think most Romanichal knew they were discriminated against but it was just the way it was…. ” Peaches had experienced positive interaction with Gadje friends and classmates, believing them to look on her culture in a positive light and yet, she also knew that discrimination and mistreatment from the Gadje was simply a part of her existence.

The actions of her father, careful to avoid making trouble when entering a new town, exemplified existence outside the world of the Gadje. It would be difficult for any family to assimilate within a culture they were consistently being run out of. Separation rather than isolation was the rule for Peaches’ family but assimilation, without question, would be an impossibility.

4.1.4 “Run out of town” the reality of Romani life

Peaches’ experiences growing up were unlike many Romani who were unable to establish any connection with the towns they temporarily settled in and were more frequently
“run out of town” for a myriad of reasons. Gertie, in her early 50’s, recalled her mother’s experiences, “It affected my mother very much…. If someone in the town complained about you, you got run off by the police so it was very hard on mom, she wanted to live a normal life. It was very embarrassing for her.” Many traditional Romani have historically made their living in occupations that allow them to travel and settle in many places. Unfortunately, as Peaches and Gertie’s mother experienced, this often drew them to the attention of the local authorities who would target Romani as trouble makers or cheats. Ruby, another respondent in her 40’s, also identified that her parents were often run out of town growing up which led to a life of secrecy about her own identity.

Vaidy, a women in her 40’s from the North East also recounted that her parents experienced being run out of town, she recalled it this way:

I know that my mother’s family was run out of town several times and I know that my mother and my aunt and my uncle and a lot of my cousins were not allowed to go to school because of being Romani, they were kicked out of school.

For many Romani, the experience of this type of discrimination led to a culture of secrecy about their identity, akin to Ruby’s experiences, which we will be discussed at length later in this chapter. These events lay a historical foundation for a lived experience of discrimination for many Romani, but what about the present day? Have discriminative practices towards Romani persisted despite changing times and what, for some, may look like assimilation?

4.1.5 “We lived it” Prejudice as a normal part of the Romani experience

Fener, in her mid-40’s, identified how her older relatives spoke about the discrimination they encountered:

We were, you know, they used to say “dirty gypsies” you know, “stealers” and my grandparents and my mom and dad say they thought that gypsies were going to steal children.
The encounters Fener described were in line with literature (Clark, 2004) that erroneously identifies these stereotypes as commonalities of the Romani. At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed a current news article in which a Romani family in Europe was accused of stealing children (Peralta, 2013). The prejudice encountered by Fener’s family persists worldwide today and that is why these types of stories have become a part of the shared knowledge of the Romani. Though it is part of the shared knowledge, it is not something that is always spoken in words.

When asked if her family ever sat her down to discuss their experiences of discrimination, Fener responded by giving a keen insight into the understood nature of discrimination as part of the Romani experience:

We lived it. That was my life so we just knew, I don’t know how, I just knew. That’s the way it was you didn’t have to sit down and be told…… I lived in the middle of it. I could hear the older ones talking when I was younger. It’s not like we were being hid from it, we just knew. We just knew how it was.

That was the life of many from the older generation, no words were spoken, no lessons passed on, it was their experience, their daily life, they knew they were treated differently. Fener was not the only respondent to identify this type of discriminatory treatment. I found Marilla described the treatment she encountered to be even more explicit example.

4.1.6 “The minute they found out” the impact of discrimination on identity

Marilla, a women from the North East in her early 60’s, experienced this differential treatment first hand. She moved often with her family growing up. Initially, they would find acceptance in their new home, until her familial origins were discovered:

Once people did find out, when I was growing up they didn’t want any part of us…It confused me as a child I could not intellectually process why I was being shunned I didn’t realize it was because we were Gypsy.

Like many women who identify facing prejudice and discrimination, Marilla knew she was treated differently but couldn’t quite put her finger on the how or why until she was older
and could intellectually process the complexities of social prejudice. Although she identified that many younger generations have it easy, especially those who can “pass” as White, Marilla continued to encounter the same discrimination she encountered as a child even into her adult life. When asked if anyone ever found out about her background and treated her differently because of it, Marilla quickly responded that this was indeed the case, “Yes, the moment they did [found out] everything changed. An employer found out and took every opportunity to speak poorly to me. They put me down in a hole you know.”

Like Fener, Marilla found herself living a marginalized existence. Even when Romani have attempted, historically, to assimilate into the world around them, they were often met prejudice and suspicion brought about by age old stereotypes. This has only served to push the two worlds further away and has led many Romani, historically, to view complete separation as their only option. Though lifestyles of Romani changed as the years progressed, these deeply held views on separation remained. Once a historical basis for discrimination was established, I was eager to learn how the respondents viewed the state of discrimination for Romani today. To do so, I explored what the lives of Romani look like today.

4.2 Current Discrimination

Most respondent’s identified that with the passing of years, many Romani have forsaken the “traditional” Romani lifestyle of traveling, though some still hold to it and have transitioned to a more outwardly assimilated lifestyle. Despite this outward assimilation, many still prefer separation between themselves and Gadje. Margret Gibson (1988) may have identified their lives as accommodation without assimilation, doing what was necessary to get by.

Though these changes in lifestyle have occurred, prejudice and discriminative practices towards Romani remain very much prevalent. In its simplest form this looks like stereotypes that
many Romani encounter almost on a daily basis. These include stereotypes about Romani being cheats, thieves, stealing children and placing curses on people. These arose in almost every interview conducted. In a more severe form, this may include physical violence or being targeted by the police. The first respondent representing the lives of Romani today reported a mixture of each of these forms of discrimination in her narrative.

4.2.1  “He couldn’t deny it” Facing the reality of discrimination

Rachel, represents a new generation of college educated Romani women. Rachel is a women in her 20’s who resides in the Northwest United States. Staying connected with her Romani roots and community is an important part of her life. Her story was wrought with experience after experience of discrimination and outright racism. Rachel resides in an area of the United States where outsiders are familiar enough with Romani practices and physical features to easily recognize them within their community. Prejudices against Romani are tightly held as Rachel experienced many times growing up. Rachel identified how the knowledge of this prejudice began to dawn on her as she got older.

When we were young, my dad would try to hide things from me because he didn’t want me to be upset……. you know all sorts of assaults that happened to family members including my dad….At first he would try to say you know oh this and that but finally he couldn’t deny it anymore you know, I was old enough to understand what was happening, it’s pretty bad here actually.

Rachel’s father had hoped to protect her from the reality of prejudice in her life as young Romani, but over time, the frequency and intensity of these occurrences made ignorance impossible. Rachel grew into an understanding of just how bad discrimination for her people was in the United States.
As she grew older, Rachel had her own experiences in which she encountered prejudiced attitudes and discrimination. During an internship with a mayoral campaign, Rachel was confronted with strongly held prejudiced attitudes that nearly led to violence.

We were going door to door to try and talk to people. I went in to this Jewish neighborhood and you know a lot of them come from Europe so they have more exposure to us. I was harassed and almost assaulted and they were calling me you know slurs in Yiddish but I knew what they meant and it was very scary. And I quit. I was like I can’t do this.

For Rachel, overt prejudice is a reality. She has encountered prejudice similar to the prejudice she encountered on the campaign from a variety of sources. Because she resides in an area of the country where Romani are identifiable, the opportunities for facing overt prejudice are many. She has found this to be true in many jobs she has held.

Rachel currently works as a nanny and has encountered stereotypical attitudes not just from the parents who employ her but from their children as well. She finds they constantly comment on her behavior questioning if that is something “you people “ do and commenting on her physical appearance: “The [one child] she is always saying “you would be so pretty if you would fix your nose.” Her employers and their children felt a freedom to say whatever they thought and felt about her appearance and life as a Romani. This was a very common experience among respondents, the experience that among friends and strangers, no taboo exists that would prevent individuals from openly engaging in stereotypical speech, asking Romani to engage in stereotypical behaviors (i.e. reading palms, cursing others) or making racist jokes about Romani life (i.e. carnival life, stealing children).

These stereotypes prevent individuals from viewing Romani as the marginalized group they are and fail to pay respect to the difficult experiences many have lived. Rachel agreed that the stereotypes held by mainstream society affects what is expected of Romani which can
eventually lead to discriminative practices. Rachel acknowledges that some things have marginally improved for Romani in the United States such as the removal of laws banning Romani from owning land or property but even some of these measures are very recent. In 1998, New Jersey removed the last law from their books that allowed them to regulate “Gypsy” property ownership, residence and travel. For some Romani, the absence of these laws on official record has not prevented law enforcement or others from continuing to engage in discriminative practices.

In Rachel’s experience, racism and discrimination are a reality for Romani in the United States. She acknowledges that while not everyone knows about Romani in the U.S., a lot do. She says, “You have to be careful.” When asked if the “gypsy” stereotype negatively affected societal expectations for Romani, she agreed they did. Again, the dream of Milton Gordon’s assimilation (1964), in the current state of society, is an unreachable one because prejudice remains. For many respondents in the study, assimilation has only been possible by giving up something and for most, this has meant giving up, or hiding their ethnic identity. For those unwilling to make that choice, a life of separation, according to Berry’s model of acculturation, is preferred.

4.2.2 “It’s just really bad” Invisible discrimination

The preference for separation was evident in the Louisa’s family. After listening to her story, there can be little wonder why. Louisa, in her 40’s, is one of the few women interviewed who still hold to many of the traditional ways of life. Her husband works a “traditional” job for Romani men and they are often on the road for work. Perhaps because of this, Louisa has some of the most vivid accounts of discrimination and prejudice in the present day.
I’ll argue over a dollar because of how we are treated. We [she and her grandmother] went into a store, Ross and they went over the intercom, security on all aisles, security on all aisles like, yeah there’s that.

Whenever you call to make a reservation [at an rv camp] and then you come and they see who you are “Oh that spot is full you have to leave, you can’t stay there.”

Like other respondents, Louisa encountered small instances of being singled out within the world of the Gadje. In her life, being treated unfairly due to stereotypes held about her community has become an almost daily occurrence.

Louisa recalled events that happened to her grandparents and recognizes these events continue to occur in her community, “Granny’s father got arrested and they beat him. He died from internal injuries ten days after they let him out of jail.” Louisa identified that harassment by the police is not a thing of the past:

When you are pulled up in a campground, don’t be surprised if you are surrounded, the police will block off all the entrances. They will block every entrance to the place in the middle of the night and run checks on everybody’s license in the plates…

In many of the towns where Louisa and her family travel for work, their community is known and sometimes watched by local authorizes. Age old stereotypes influence the reception they receive from town to town. As Louisa identified, they are often met with immediate distrust from law enforcement officials who take every opportunity to make it impossible for them to make a living.

The first time he [her husband] was arrested because we were ignorant…. we had no idea …they made up a charge…. When they took him to the jail and they were booking him the police said “What are these guys here for what did they do? They haven’t done anything” and they said “Oh, they’re just these Gypsy fly by nights you know the ones that’s always coming in town…They keep their trucks and auction them off, They see them driving down the road and pull them over and give them so many tickets they can’t drive, it’s just really bad.

This treatment from local authorities makes her fearful for what the future holds for her family and her son:
I don’t want him working outdoors because nowadays it’s not if you go to jail it’s when you go to jail and it’s not for what you are doing but it’s for who you are…. I can’t send my son to go to work to make a living to go to jail. I don’t have the money to get him out.

Louisa is fearful that her son will encounter the same discriminatory treatment her husband and other male relatives have encountered if she allows him to follow a traditional career path. Because of the potential for danger and negative encounters with the law, she has encouraged her son to go to college and find an alternate way.

For the sake of survival, Louisa’s family views separation as their only option in world that is constantly seeking to drive them out. Louisa’s family faces marginalization on a constant basis. She discussed being called a “fly by night” though she and her family lived in houses within the town. For Louisa, it seemed that even when she and her family attempted to be a part of the Gadje’s world in any small way, they were only met with resistance, continuing to solidify the inter-generational mistrust that exists towards the Gadje. This mistrust was a comment theme that emerged throughout all interviews which situated itself as a theme that must be deeply explored.

4.3 Mistrust

Given both current and historical experiences of prejudice and discrimination, it is not surprising that Romani Americans, like other Romani worldwide have developed a culture of mistrust towards the outside world. Throughout each interview that was conducted, mistrust was evident.

When asked if they remember anyone in their family speaking about race and racial issues, interviewees responded with a range of recollections that showed a common theme of mistrust. Some were instilled with a belief that “Gorja’s” or “Gadje” were dirty and that they should remain separate. Others were told not to trust Gadje, that there were many differences between
the Romani and the Gadje and though they might associate, there remained an understood line between the two. Even in some of the more liberally minded families, the line remained:

It was up to us who we married. We dated, a lot of Romanichal weren’t allowed to date, we dated Gorjas and brought them home, we didn’t hid it, they knew we were dating it was ok with them but at the same time they both knew when we got married we were going to marry a Romanichal. - Gracie, 80’s

Even in Gracie’s family where dating of the Gadje was allowed, a firm line remained, one that Gracie understood and respected. Certain lines would not be crossed, and though these boundaries were often unspoken, Gracie understood the social retribution that would occur by crossing them.

From an early age, Fener’s family also instilled this sense of being separate as a form of protection, “We were always kind of told to keep to ourselves because I think the way outsiders viewed our family so long and treated us…..it was instilled in us to be leery of them.”

Despite this lesson, Fener took a unique perceptive on the idea of “mistrust.”

Mistrust is not the right word sweetheart, is no the word, it’s cautious, you’re cautious of people. It was, we were told this, my father’s generation were treated so badly because of who they were. That’s why our parents didn’t want that happening to us you know they saw how bad it could be but I never really mistrust people it’s just really leery of them.

Despite a more positive outlook on non-Romani instilled by her parents, Rachel, in her mid-20’s, found the rest of her family to be much less trusting of the outside world. Rachel recalled a lesson that her Aunt passed on her to her:

They [her family] are very aware of the discrepancy in how we are treated in this country you know my Aunt…. She always says you know don’t trust anyone who isn’t Romani who isn’t us. Don’t put too much trust in Gadje…. Don’t trust anyone from the outside because you know they will hurt you.

While Rachel’s parents sought to counter this by encouraging her to treat everyone equally the rest of her family encouraged her to remain separate and mistrustful of non-Romani by not forming friendships with them and not eating in their home.
Most of the interviews conducted echoed a sentiment of remaining separate from non-Romani and maintaining an air of mistrust. The refusal to eat food from those outside the community is just one form, a very important form that this mistrust took. Even those interviewees who reported having friendships outside of their community often identified that crossing the boundary of entering a non-Romani home or eating their food was not allowed. In most families, at least growing up, friendships with non-Romani outside of school was not encouraged and very often discouraged through words and actions. Gertie recalled her great aunt hanging up on friends who were not Romani when they would call her home.

As the thread of mistrust was noted interview after interview, something else began to emerge. Undoubtedly the mistrust of non-Romani persisted for, as has already been discussed, good reason. As a result of this, many Romani took to hiding their identity in various ways. As a means of survival in a world surrounded by prejudice Romani would lie about their ethnicity. A culture of secrecy was cultivated. This culture persists today and was encountered as time after time potential interviewees declined to participate citing that the things we would be discussing in the interview, the life of the American Romani, were not things that should be openly talked about and certainly never put on paper. Hiding from the Romani was a traditional way of life and main, in one way or another, carry this with them even today.

4.4 Hiding

The deceptions perpetrated by those interviewed who sought to hide their identity were not always similar, some said they were Irish, others Native American. The underlying motivation however, was always the same. No one could know who you are. Never tell what you are. Hide who you are. These were messages passed from generation to generation motivated by mistrust, birthed from lifetimes of discrimination.
4.4.1 Identifying as Native American

Gertie, in her early 50’s recalls many messages about hiding who she was. Gertie grew up in a small southern town where, she recalled, most of the other children had blonde hair and were fair skinned. Gertie, with her Black hair, nearly black eyes and olive skin was noticeably different. In school people would often ask her, “What are you?” and most often she allowed them to believe that she was Native American. Her mother, she recalled, shunned the idea of telling others about who she was. The rest of her family encouraged her to identify herself in a way much more socially acceptable than the truth:

They told me to say we were English Irish travelers. Well my aunt did and then my mom never told me that I was anything, she just told me not to say I was gypsy. When I was small I don’t think I understood the cultural significance of being a gypsy.

Gertie’s appearance and the dark secret of her identity influenced her ability to successfully interact with the world around her. She felt, even from a young age that she was different though she didn’t understand the weight of this difference nor what this would mean for her socially. She knew only that to hide her identity was part of her life as a Romani.

4.4.2 “It's not something I've ever been proud of”

Ruby’s family was especially protective of their identity. Ruby, though in her early 40’s, carries the weight of her secret with her even to this day. Upon beginning the interview, she identified that had it not been for the interviewer she would have refused to even participate in the interview because of how closely she keeps the knowledge of her identity. Ruby recalled:

….it was kind of difficult because I was always told growing up not to tell that we were Romanichal gypsies so I always felt I was carrying around this burden, that I had this secret but yet my grandmother told me it was something to be proud of but I felt like how can you be proud of something yet it has to be a secret.
Ruby felt confused about the messages she received from her family. She was encouraged to feel pride in her heritage and she was given an explicit message that it was important not to tell others about who she was.

Ruby’s dilemma was similar to many of the other women who participated in the study. Many identified being instilled with a pride in their heritage while simultaneously being encouraged to hide it. Few women who were interviewed were able to live with an outright pride in their identity or felt the freedom to share it with their friends. For Ruby, the weight of the secret she carried around made even school difficult to bear as she was surrounded by people outside of her community from whom she must hide her identity on a daily basis. Ruby recalled sharing that secret with a few close friends whom she found to be accepting but she lived in fear that somehow her parents would discover she had revealed their secret. She feared what the recourse for committing such a cultural taboo would be.

4.4.3 Identifying as Italian

Fener’s experience with identity confusion was very similar to that of Ruby’s. Growing up in the Deep South, she was also instilled with the message that she was to hide her identity from those who were outside her family.

…[ we were told to] not let outsiders know who we were. If they did they would think you know we were bad people… I always kept close to my family because I was afraid, I was afraid of people who were not my family… I hid, I hid who I was. Nobody knew who I was.

Fener carried with her a fear of outsiders, passed down from her family which prompted her to hide who she was. Like Gertie, Fener had very dark features which prompted many questions from the classmates in her southern town. She identified that at a young age she began to lead people to believe that she was Italian, which was much more socially acceptable. She was told never to tell anyone that she was Romani because of the racism that would inevitably be
encountered. When asked if she believed she would have experienced racism had her classmates or teaches found out about her identity, she confidentially affirmed she would have. Even into adulthood, Fener maintained to coworkers and other outsiders that she was Italian, preferring to keep the secret she was charged with keeping in her childhood. Though Fener knew that for most Romani, hiding was a reality, there were others who were able to give a proud voice to their ancestry.

4.4.4 Identifying as Irish

Phoebe, also in her 40’s, was among the few that were interviewed that lived with a much more vocal and outward sense of pride in her identity. She viewed her identity as something that added richness to her life. She agreed that it was not something that was publicized but something that was taken for granted as an element that made she and the rest of her family unique. Even in a family that spoke proudly of their heritage, the dark shadow of discrimination was present which sometimes lead to, if not an outright lie about identity, a lie of omission to prevent unwelcome attention.

….there was always an element of, you don’t tell them this because of their negative reactions there would be bias and discrimination and it would affect tier ability to make a living so it was something that wasn’t always brought up, not that it was something they were ashamed of but it was something they had to do in order to make a living.

Phoebe acknowledged, though she was very proud of her identity a s a Romani, it was often the outside world, rather than her family that pushed her to be mindful of self-disclosure. As discussed in Berry’s model (1997) the host culture must be receptive of those outside of its culture in order for them to become assimilated. When individuals from within the host culture become hostile to those outsides, even those who desire to assimilate in some degree, assimilation is prevented and those individuals become marginalized.
Phoebe understands the realities of what many Romani face from the dominant culture today. Though she has pride in her culture, she is not ignorant to what self-disclosure often costs Romani in business and their ability to support their families. When asked what she would say if someone were to ask her to identify herself racially, Phoebe indicated that she often responded by telling people she is English Irish or French Swedish. Which, she emphasizes, she is.

4.4.5 Hiding Romani identity

Unlike Phoebe, Allie’s acceptance of her identity and decision to identify herself openly was a process. Upon entering college, she felt she had to live on the “down low,” never letting others know her true identity fearing the repercussions. She recalls:

...people couldn’t place me and I let them think I was from wherever I was from. You know they would come out with all kinds of things and I was just like uh huh..... I thought I had to keep very quiet and you know don’t speak my language don’t wear any kind of traditional dress not mark myself up at all. I just had to kind of be a sheep, follow behind everyone and just keep my head down. I never raised my hand in class, nothing and it would all be good.

Allie was raised in a community that, out of necessity, had to hide their identity. When she entered college, she took these social norms with her, viewing her deception as a means of remaining safe. Since that time, Allie has come to know many strong, Romani women who proudly identify their heritage and this has encouraged her to also proudly identify herself as a Romani. Other interviewees, particularly those who were younger, had similar trajectories of discovering a pride in their identity and a departure from hiding.

4.4.6 Identifying as Hungarian

Gayle, in her 30’s, was one of those interviewed who found themselves on a similar trajectory to that of Allie. She grew up in the North West in a border town, on a reservation which, she described, was not a mecca for diversity and acceptance. She recalled that her mom did not want her to identify herself as Romani. Her mom helped her to understand how the
knowledge of her identity might lead her to negative interactions with individuals at school or in her community. For some time, she believed it might be better to let others believe she was Hungarian, Native Alaskan or French Canadian, whatever would be more acceptable.

Gayle didn’t recall many specific moments where her parents discussed not sharing about her identity but she did recall a sense that people didn’t need to know this about her. She recalled feeling some regret about the times that she outright denied her identity as a Romani. In her few experiences of sharing her identity in high school she found that people were less than accepting and found herself being lectured by her mom who reiterated the negative outcomes that were possible when she shared about who she was.

In college, Gayle continued to allow others to make their own assumptions about her identity. She recalled that many individuals thought she was Arabic because she spoke the language and she passed as Lebanese for some time. She admitted she still didn’t want to tell others who she was. Like Allie however, there came a turning point where she was willing to identify herself even knowing what the cost might be:

..I took this class which was a complete life changer… it was called women of color in the United States and we had to read all these critical feminist scholars… so that was the first time in my entire educated life that I read anything and I could see myself in it…. I started to think maybe I should identify myself you know, what could happen?

Gayle came to a realization that to be Romani was something to be proud of. Though discrimination could, and would, occur following her revelation, it had become more important to identify with who she truly was.

4.5 Today

For many of the interviewees, like Gayle and Allie, the point at which they finally decided to identify who they are is a pivotal point in their lives. The mistrust that led to years of hiding had to be overcome with the knowledge that what was once feared could still very much be a
reality. While others who were interviewed identified passing as German, White, and Native American some would simply lie about knowing what a Romani was or avoid the question of race at all costs. For some, the façade continues as a form of protection or simply because the strength of the cultural norms instilled within them remains.

For others, there was no need to hide. Anne recalls that by the time she was 15 her dad had passed away, there was no longer a voice encouraging them to hide so she and her brother would tell anyone who they were because they were already noticeably different. Few people in the U.S. can confidently identify Roma but, as previously discussed, the rise of reality television featuring Roma has increased the negative ideas many hold. Fey despairs that these shows have reversed progress that has been made among Roma to proudly identify their heritage. As was evidenced in the lives of many who were interviewed, the hiding of identity carries on today as a protective factor for many in the Romani community. Encountering discrimination continues to be a part of the Romani experience as evidenced by the stories in this study. One of the most salient settings of discrimination for Romani identified through interviews was education.

4.6 Discrimination in Education

Undoubtedly, both historically and currently, Romani have experienced discrimination in the United States. What has yet to be explored is if this same discrimination can be found in the educational experiences of Romani women. In order to better understand the barriers that may exist for Romani women to become better educated, it is imperative to have an understanding of what the educational experience of the Romani look like in the United States.
4.6.1 Bullying as part of the Romani experience

For some, like Vaidy, in her 40’s, school, though enjoyable academically, was a place she regularly encountered prejudice. She recalled that kids would bully her when they found out she was Romani. The children would make fun of her and tell her to sit in the back of the class.

I had friends and then suddenly I didn’t have friends anymore, that was probably why…… As I got older… I think at that point as the kids got older they realized there was something to make fun of… there were a couple of kids in particular who were really mean and rude…. They would say that gypsies need to sit in the back…

In Rachel’s life (20’s) as in Vaidy’s, bullying became more prevalent as she got older. She experienced being called a “dirty gypo.” Once she got into middle school and high school, a private school, the bullying significantly increased. Rachel recalls that people would start rumors about her, try to get her expelled, spread lies about her father because they knew she was Romani. People would say that she was probably at school on a scholarship or that she likely stole something, all motivated by their knowledge of her identity as a Romani. Even the headmistress at her school had no problem speaking in a derogatory manner about her father in front of her.

For others, the recollections of school discrimination were regarded as trivial events but several made it clear that had they broke the silence that was instilled in them about their identity, there would have undoubtedly been a change in the way they were treated by students and teachers alike. Louisa recalled a time when her nephew was in elementary school and another child was instructed by an adult not to sit next to him because was Romani. Unfortunately, these experiences were not isolated to elementary and high schools but were found to be quite prominent within the University setting.
4.6.2 Discrimination in higher education

Surprising to me during the interviews was the finding that the majority of the stories of discrimination in education came from higher education. These stories were reported by those women who possess a college education and they shed an unfortunate light on the presence of prejudice within higher education in the United States, specifically towards Romani. Despite being in spaces that are considered to be among the most enlightened in our society, for those who shared their experiences in higher education, they were often met with ignorance, indifference and marginalization. These experiences occurred both as students and faculty. A story recounted by Fey described how she was followed and had beer cans thrown at her by individuals who had attended one of her first lectures on the Romani. While not all prejudice met was as outright as Fey’s experience they were just a poignant.

4.6.3 Encountering ignorance in higher education

For some Romani, the ignorance of Romani culture or experience is not as frustrating as the refusal to be informed. Rachel, the interviewee who most recently finished her undergraduate degree, encountered many professors who lacked appropriate knowledge about Romani but refused to accept information that Rachel offered as legitimate. When Rachel would try to offer insight into what might be considered offensive in her community, professors would often respond in a very derogatory way:

I would try to tell them um that’s really offensive maybe you should try not to say that, then I had them be like, “Oh you’re not like really an ethnic group” and I’m like ok have fun being an ignorant jerk the rest of your life.

Rachel’s attempts at bringing enlightenment to her professors and classmates were met with resistance. As previously stated, no social taboos exist that prevent outsiders from engaging
in stereotypical speech or discriminatory actions. Rachel described encountering this frequently during her time in college.

Allie encountered some of the very same attitudes encountered by Rachel, in her undergraduate program. She recalled making a positive comment about Romani in undergrad and the reaction that followed was akin to “all hell breaking loose.” She identified that most students and faculty had negative ideas about Romani that were half romanticized and half pejorative. Despite these negative interactions, she felt that most undergraduate students were at least curious about her background. In graduate school she found herself being singled out:

In graduate school, people thought I shouldn’t be there, most of them had strange tales about gypsy women…..In my master’s program I was the only one who wasn’t offered teaching, I wasn’t able to publish and my program tutor told me I wasn’t that kind of person or up to the task even though I had a 4.0. I can say for certain it was because I was Romani but, I was the only Romani in the class so it seemed weird to me.

As Allie stated, she could not confidently pinpoint her experiences as being the result of her Romani heritage, and yet her experience was not unique among respondents. Like other time in her life, Allie sensed that something was amiss, that there was something different about the way she was treated and compared with others.

4.6.4 Being told Gypsies are not a minority

Being barred from funding or opportunities in college was a theme that came up with other interviewees. Gayle’s story was similar to that of Allie’s with a much more positive ending. Gayle, in her 30’s, related an incident that happened when applying for funding in her master’s program. Gayle applied for a minority scholarship and when she was meeting with the scholarship facilitator she was told that gypsy people were not a minority. Gayle recalled:

that just lit a fire under my ass I was so angry that she said that I even called my mom…at this point I had made connections with Romani people and scholars.. I had gotten in touch with [a major Romani scholar] and he wrote a letter of support…. I set up a meeting with the lady and the dean and the lady was singing a different tune…. I
brought books and articles and I was like I am going to educate these people… and they allowed me to apply for the scholarship.

Several of the individuals I interviewed recalled experiences of being unacknowledged as a minority group in government settings and otherwise. In educational settings especially they feel they are left without a voice to represent them and often find themselves fighting against those in power for recognition of their experiences in a marginalized community.

For Gayle, the experience ended positively as she later received funding through the program. She identified the moment of receiving the funding as a defining one in her life. That was the moment of being acknowledged for who she was, though it had not come without a fight. For many Romani students, the achievement of something as big as funding or as small as professors modifying their language to more culturally appropriate terms comes at a price that may include loss of opportunity, pressure from faculty or scorn of fellow students. Though discrimination was found among the narratives of students, it was not limited to them as discrimination was also found among faculty.

4.6.5 Being told Gypsies can’t read or write

Although Vaidy is employed by one of the nation’s elite schools, she has encountered the same attitudes and barriers that were encountered by other interviewees at schools across the United States. Vaidy recalled participating in a job talk in which a faculty member, already aware of her background, asked questions in such a leading manner she was forced to self-identify in a very public way, an occurrence, as previously discussed, that is very protected by Romani. Vaidy recalls receiving criticism about being both a Romani and a feminist, with critics stating that being Romani is too patriarchal, essentially saying a choice between her identity as a Romani and as a feminist had to be made.
Previously, it was discussed that individuals rarely possess social barriers that would prevent them from explicitly stating racist or stereotypical statements directly to Romani. Vaidy experienced this first hand at a conference where she presented a paper:

These two [professors]…… were both like “oo the gypsies, do you remember all these rhymes that were very racist” and then went into all these nursery rhymes about the gypsies stealing you and they were very happy with themselves. I don’t think the realized it and I was really easy going about it but then one of my students…. Were like really that was so racist and you didn’t call the out on the fact that they were being so terrible.

Though silent on this occasion, having previously been exposed to the familiarity and comfort with which individuals express racist epitaphs it could be likely that in some respects Vaidy has become desensitized to it, it took outsiders to acknowledge the discrimination she was encountering.

At other times, Vaidy has called individuals out, even her own students for perpetrating racist stereotypes in the classroom. Vaidy recalls incidences when she has tried to educate her students about Romani scholars to be met with statements like “Ha! Gypsies can’t read or write, what are you talking about?” She has faced criticism from administration or faculty who’ve commented about how she’s “still doing the gypsy thing” in relation to her research, discouraging her from continuing down a path that they viewed as novel for a time but unproductive overall.

All of these experiences added together provide the picture again that few social barriers exist to protect Romani from outright interaction with prejudice. When met with prejudice and stereotypes, the individuals who present them are unapologetic in their presentation. Among those interviewed, discrimination and prejudice in the college setting was much more identifiable then early on in their education however, when considered along with the idea that many of those
interviewed did not choose to identify themselves as Romani until their college years, this finding stands to reason.

4.7 Conclusion

The first question posed in the study was whether or not Romani currently faced discrimination in America. Given the range of information regarding current and historical discrimination and its effects on Romani lives in America, I believe the answer to this question is certainly, “Yes.” The foundation of this information is vital to understanding better what barriers exist in the education of Romani women in the United States and the interaction of education and assimilation in Romani communities.

When one considers what this type of discrimination has led to worldwide, it becomes all the more evident why these occurrences must be acknowledged and changed. Romani have long chosen to remain separate from the world of the Gadje, a practice that continues world-wide. Though this may be the result of a people who simply prefer to keep to their own ways, their decision to remain separate has been solidified due to the historical and current prejudice that many Romani encounter. Gadje are viewed with mistrust, and as will be seen in the next chapter, the public school system is viewed as an institution of the Gadje, which subsequently, has led many Romani to be mistrustful or disinterested in the pursuit of education.

Margret Gibson (1988) identified a life for immigrants in which mainstream practices could be accommodated into traditional ways of life rather than succumbing to assimilation. While this life of integration seems ideal for a people such as the Romani who so highly value their heritage, the ability to live such a life has been stifled by the marginalizing behaviors of the Gadje. As Berry (1997) identifies in his model of acculturation, in order for a group to become assimilated, the group must desire to enter into the culture of the mainstream
society and that society must invite them in. For Romani, the mainstream culture has often been an unwelcoming presence, pushing generations of Romani to hold tightly to their lives of separation least they find themselves more marginalized than they have already, historically, been.

Engaging with the educational system in the U.S. places the Romani directly in the center of the Gadje’s world, exposed to their values and forced to interact with them on a daily basis. Is it this exposure to a culture they hope to remain largely separate from that presents barriers to the education of Romani women or, do other factors influence whether or not a Romani woman will pursue education? In order to determine this, in the next chapter I will seek to answer the following questions: How do American-Romani communities speak to girls and women about education and its value? As well as asking, Do attitudes of elder Romani women who may have encountered discrimination, at a time when Romani were more recognizable in the US, influence the educational attitudes of younger female Romani today?

5 HOW DO THE ROMANI TALK ABOUT EDUCATION?

In 2014, the European Union released a report on discrimination of Roma children in education. The report cited that education provided to Romani was not only inferior but, had exposed Roma children to being disproportionately diagnosed as mentally ill, being educated in Roma only schools, White flight from schools largely attended by Roma and lack of appropriate books and educational buildings. This report exemplified the educational experiences of Romani worldwide and sheds light on the mistrusts parents have historically held towards educator (Euroactiv, 2015). As previously discussed, Roma have held a mistrust towards educators and educational settings due to discriminatory practices and historical inequalities (Silverman, 2012). Given that inequalities exist, it was important, to explore the question of how American-Romani
communities speak to girls and women about education, its values and their role as potential providers for their families and if attitudes of elder Romani women who may have encountered discrimination, at a time when Romani were more recognizable in the U.S., influence the educational attitudes of younger female Romani today. The outcome of this line of inquiry was varied ranging from total mistrust to a rigid insistence that education would be achieved. Some respondents encountered a mixed message that was discouraging of education and yet valuing of it in others.

For some respondents, education was neither encouraged nor supported. Just as the parents in Derrington’s study (2005) encouraged their children to remain separate and placed little value on education, so too did these respondent’s mothers and fathers encourage separation. Many saw little benefit in pursuing education when it would not contribute to the Romani way of life. Following Berry’s model of acculturation, many parents encouraged their children to embrace separation, preferring their daughters to remain attached to the ideals of their own culture. Despite this encouragement, for many of the respondents, education lead to an integration of what they knew at home with the new experiences and ideas they were exposed to at school, often leading to a duality of identity. For many, it was the first time they had been exposed to people outside of the Romani in any significant way.

5.1 Lack of Support

Many respondents identified that they were without adequate support from their families and sometimes even their educational institutions, which discouraged many from pursuing education.
5.1.1 “Nobody ever sat down with me” Lack of support

Gertie, who is currently attending college at the age of 54, was discouraged from interacting with non-Romani while simultaneously receiving messages that education was something to be valued. Though her father was outspoken against her receiving an education, her mother encouraged her to pursue education verbally while failing to show her any actual support in the way of obtaining a highschool or college degree.

Well my mom was always different, she wanted me to go to college and have an education but she never showed me how to do that. Growing up she said she wanted me to go to college and then when I got to the age where I could do that she never showed me how or gave me the means to do that.

Growing up, Gertie’s mom was not involved in her education. Though her mom encouraged a college education she gave nothing in the way of actual support. Gertie’s dad made his expectations clear from an early age. He was against education, he had other ideas in mind for his daughter’s future. His expectations fell in line with traditional gender roles of the Romani and touched on a theme of morality that could be found in many of the respondents’ recollections.

He just wanted me to marry another gypsy, he was totally against gypsy women being outside of our roles. He thought it was immoral…He wanted me to find someone to marry that would have taken care of me.

Gertie’s plans for herself fell in line with her dad’s expectations. She floundered without support from her parents or even help from school. Looking back, Gertie wishes she had been encouraged to pursue something different. “Nobody ever sat down with me, including anyone at school and said, hey you know what do you want to be when you grow up? What do you want to be one day?” Gertie felt that she lacked appropriate support to achieve or even set goals both at home and at school.
Gertie had different expectations for her own daughter. She expressed that her desire for her own daughter was to go to college and be whatever she wanted to be and this was the message she instilled in her. To achieve this Gertie felt she had to offer her daughter a better opportunity to achieve this dream by exposing her to people who were not Romani, people who would discuss education as a desirable and beneficial thing, people who possessed education and careers. Her decision to separate from the Romani was one that was often looked down upon by her family members but one that was not an unusual occurrence among the other women interviewed.

5.1.2 “That boy is the only one” Gender differences

Like Gertie, Marilla, currently in her early 60’s, was given the expectation early on that she would fill the role traditionally assigned to Romani women. When asked about the expectations she heard growing up regarding her future, Marilla identified clearly the plans her family had for her:

Yeah basically I would get married and have children and serve a man. When I was a freshman in high school I expressed an interest in going to college and my mother said “There will be no college for you, that boy is the only one who will go to college because he will have a family to support.

Influenced by her family’s attitudes toward education, she quit school at the age of 16 and worked in a factory for a year. Her time working in the factory showed Marilla that she wanted more and so she returned to complete high school. Her graduation from high school did little to excite the pride of her family. “It was not a big deal. I felt it was anticlimactic because nobody came.”

Marilla wasn’t surprised by this reception of her education. She identified that her mom’s long held attitudes toward education influenced how she spoke to her daughter.
My mother hated school so she didn’t care whether we liked it or not. My dad only went to the fourth grade and my mother made it to her junior year in high school before she quit. They were not supportive, we were not encouraged. It was such a bad experience for my mom that she was like, “If you don’t like it that’s ok I understand.” At that point she was unaware of the value of education.

Marilla felt that her family failed to give the tools necessary to be a successful adult in education and life. She expressed a sentiment similar to Gertie about the lack of support she encountered, “No one ever empowered me as a girl growing up.”

Like other Romani families discussed in this study, the primary goal of Marilla’s family was survival. The educational attainment of Marilla’s parents was not unusual among many older generation Romani. Without education, they searched for alternative means of survival. This meant obtaining all they could from their environment without assimilating into the world around them.

My families view of being gypsies [was] you just have to take what you can and run with it. [My dad] would say just tell them you have a degree, don’t tell them you don’t have a degree and didn’t go to college. I would say…. you can’t just get out there and say you got it. He’d cheat and I don’t think he ever experienced embarrassment.

As Margaret Gibson’s research identified, this was accommodation without assimilation at work. Marilla’s family was able to accommodate what they had learned about the Gadje in order to meet their need for survival while simultaneously remaining separate from society and social institutions.

Despite the many obstacles that Marilla encountered, she was eventually able to obtain a college degree. Because of her negative experiences and the negative expectations of her family, Marilla passed on different expectations to her own daughter.

Well I kept her from that type of lifestyle immediately. She was not aware of who we were or where we came from. I would not permit her to live in that lifestyle. She grew up with the expectations that she would go to school, including going to college.
Like Gertie, Marilla felt that the only way to ensure that her daughter received appropriate messages about education and her role as a women was to separate her from the Romani way of life. Her daughter received a college degree and Marilla believes she made the right decision in keeping her daughter from the way of life she was exposed to growing up, a life often lacking support, similar to the of another respondent, Fener.

5.2 Impact of Lack of Familial Support

Like Gertie and Marilla, Fener, 45 and a retired registered nurse, also experienced an indifferent attitude towards her education. As previously discussed, many Romani parents encouraged education only so much as it prevented them from being involved with law enforcement and school officials (Derrington, 2005). Fener recalled possessing a love for school that was neither encouraged nor celebrated by her parents.

I loved going to school [my] parents didn’t really make a big deal out of it. We went because we had to. I think they knew if we didn’t go, the police would come. It was a law you had to go. We went because of that, it’s not like they had big dreams of me going on you know for college or whatever. I loved going to school.

Fener recalled that her parents were not involved in her schooling, they never asked questions or checked her grades. For Fener’s family, two worlds existed, the world of the Gorjas at school, a world they were forced to be a part of, and the world at home. The two were separate Like other respondent’s families, Fener’s family preferred separation over any other acculturation strategy.

Fener identified that her parents’ indifferent attitude towards her education left the idea of college up to her:

It was never like “you’re going to college when you grow up, this is what you wanted to do” When they were raised a young girl grows up and gets married you know and has children, that’s how they were, that’s how their parents were and my great grandparents. I never really talked to momma and daddy about going to college. The subject was never broached in fact, when I graduated from high school it was a really big
deal, me graduating from high school. I don’t even think it was something they thought about because you know their family before them never did it.

A history without educational achievement and a lifestyle that allowed for the earning of a living without formal education left individuals like Fener’s parents and grandparents placing little value on educational achievement for their children.

Like many of the women interviewed, Fener choose to get married at a young age and have children. The marriage did not last and she found herself home with her parents and without the means to support herself and her children. She decided then that she would become a nurse. While her mother’s attitude was less than supportive, her father expressed pride in her education. For her own daughters, similar to Gertie and Marilla, Fener hoped to pass on a different set of expectations.

Fener wanted her daughters to value education and go to college because, as she had experienced in her own life, relationships did not always work out. She didn’t want them to be unable to support themselves. She wanted them to have options, something she did not see herself having growing up. Unlike Gertie and Marilla, Fener did not see separating herself from her culture as a necessity to passing along these ideals. Rather than choosing an acculturation strategy of separation, she saw, and experienced, integration as a viable option for remaining true to who she and her daughters were while pursuing a path which differed from her families’ expectations. This conflict between familial expectations and educational achievement experienced by Marilla, Gertie and Fener was no more intense than in the interview conducted with Louisa, a stay at home mom in her mid-40’s.

5.2.1 “We would be told to clean” Another view on gender

One of the most poignant example of the conflict between traditional values, lifestyle and educational achievement was found in Louisa’s interview. As previously identified, Louisa
continues to live one of the most traditionally Romani lifestyles of all the respondents. At the age of 40, Louisa has yet to complete her high school education.

Louisa’s family was strongly against integrating with non-Romani. Like so many others interviewed, Louisa’s family ran their own business and were constantly traveling to find new work. This lifestyle alone prevented many Romani from assimilating in any significant way and often interfered with the education of their children. In current times, many Romani that continue in the traveling lifestyle choose to homeschool their children however, when Louisa was growing up, homeschool was not an available option.

Louisa’s family instilled no ideas about the value of education or the opportunities that education could unlock:

As a child we was never told, I had no idea that you could have a career and make something with your life something fun, something that you enjoy, like we were not told be what you want to be. It was rare that we even went to school, I would go to six schools a year.

Louisa’s experience echoed these respondents close to her in age who found themselves lacking support or encouragement for their future goals. School was not a priority and was given little emphasis. Though little encouragement was given, Louisa recalled that some family members saw education useful in one way, if following the traditional path of marriage at a young age did not work out.

We was encouraged to get a diploma so when if we got married and our husband left us, we could get a job and like in the old days you could learn to type or be a waitress, just something where you could get a job…We was encouraged to make good grades but that was basically it, pass and you done good. We wasn’t encouraged you can do better, be all you can be, succeed, none of that. Basically we would be told to clean and do the dishes.

Again, the expectation of traditional gender roles and ways of life were observed to be a barrier to educational achievement and yet fully acknowledged the traditional ways of life did not always work as some women were encouraged to assimilate to the extent of brining in money
for their families. Louisa was both emotional and passionate when she spoke about her lack of education:

I am still really upset I don’t have an education because now I know how dumb and illiterate I am and it’s awful, it’s so awful. I don’t even testify in church and I don’t like to speak because I know that I am illiterate and I hate talking to school teachers and going to meetings anything like that. I hate it so bad. It’s really bad to be illiterate. Just bad.

Louisa recognized that her lack of education has held her back professionally and socially. Keenly aware of what she believes are her shortcomings in knowledge and social skills, Louisa regrets that she was not encouraged to pursue her education further.

Louisa’s dreams for herself are many. At various times she has attempted to start a business or obtain a job. Without a basic education it has been an unreachable dream. Other times, working for herself selling various goods, she has been quite successful at making money. Louisa views this success as a sign that had someone encouraged her to obtain an education and pursue a career, she could have been a very successful business woman.

Because Louisa lives with so many regrets regarding her own education, she hopes her daughter will have a different future. She would love for her to have an education and sees the value of encouraging her daughter to pursue it. Though she values education, she is also leery of the dangers and negative influences of the public school environment. As a result, she is currently homeschooling her daughter, a choice she did not make with her son, so that she can keep a closer eye on her.

I don’t want her to go to school because I am really scared to death of shootings and robbers. Like the street we live on, the highschool…..I have two cousins that go to that school and a girl shot herself in the bathroom. Plus it’s on the news here in town where teachers are molesting the kids, it’s just scary time for school. [Gypsies] would say that it’s not that we don’t want the education, it’s the environment. Like drugs and girls dating and all the things like being in the environment that we don’t like them in.
Louisa’s view of public school and her reluctance to expose her daughter to that environment is another example of how many Romani resist assimilation, resisting Milton Gordon’s most basic level of assimilation, failing to engage with social institutions. Verbally or non-verbally this resistance communicates an important message to Romani daughters about their place in both the world of the Romani and the world of the Gorja.

Though the lives of Gertie, Marilla, Fener and Louisa are distinct examples of family traditionally unsupportive of their daughter’s education, other respondents identified that their families were encouraging though they failed to provide little in the way of actual support. This was true for Gracie, Josephine and Anne. All three were encouraged to achieve an education though their parents were not often present to provide emotional support or to actively help with school related tasks.

5.3 Negotiating Racial Complexities in Educational Settings

Gracie, who is now in her 60’s, possessed a love of school from an early age. School provided an important coping mechanism and escape from a tumultuous home life.

Learning was encouraged in her home early on. Gracie recalled:

I loved school, school for me retreat from my crazy home life. The one thing my father did for me…he taught me to read very early so when I went to school I could already read very well. My father loved to read so he took me to the library almost every Saturday of my life even into my college years it was just something we did together. I couldn’t depend on him being sober the rest of the week but usually he was sober on Saturday and we went to the library. School for me was the retreat from the crazy home life…it was the only place I felt really safe.

From early in her life, Gracie found school to be a retreat. Though formal education was not necessarily encouraged or emphasized it served an important institution in her life, which showed her how valuable it could be to her future.
The historical setting of Gracie’s school days was wrought with prejudice against non-Whites. The schools at that time were still very much segregated. Gracie’s mother, determined that her children would receive a good education despite being what Gracie identified as, “the kid from the wrong side of the tracks.” Gracie’s mother fought hard and was able to enroll her children in a school that would provide the education she desired for them.

Despite instilling an early love for learning and fighting against social prejudice to enroll their children in adequate schools, Gracie’s parents were surprisingly uninvolved in her day to day education:

They were totally uninvolved in school. That was a good thing my mother fought to get us into that school but I don’t ever remember my parents coming to a PTA meeting. I did a lot of public speaking…my parents never came. They never came to a concert, never came to a play. I understand that my mother went to 5th grade and my father went to 8th and I think they felt it wasn’t their place. It wasn’t a place they felt comfortable. My father very much wanted us to get an education…[but] they never talked to us about going to college.

Gracie’s parents, like many Romani parents of their day, possessed few years of formal education. This had a significant impact on their desire and ability to be actively involved in her education. Gracie observed that her parent’s lenient attitude was born of their own struggles with education.

Though her parents never discouraged pursuing a college education, they never talked about college or the means of getting there. Though they were encouraging and supportive of education, they maintained traditional expectations for their daughter:

They thought I would get married which is what I did….I didn’t go to college until I got divorced when I was in my 20’s, so yeah they clearly expected me to get married. I think they thought I might work, my mother worked in the mills, but school, never.
Gracie went on to receive a bachelors and master’s degree. Though she understood the traditional expectations of her family, she had also been given enough insight and encouragement to understand the value that education possessed.

Like Gracie, both Josephine and Anne’s parents left the decision of school up to them. Anne, in her 40’s, initially followed a traditional path, leaving school in 11th grade and getting married however, she later went on to become a nurse. For Josephine, currently in her 30’s, though her parents were supportive, they put no expectations on what she could do. Whatever her decision regarding school was going to be, she was supported.

Both Anne and Josephine passed this open attitude on to their own children, allowing them to decide what they wanted to pursue. Their ultimate goal is for their children to be happy and they do not allow familial expectations to interfere with giving their children the freedom to choose the future they hope to have. No specific expectations are communicated but support is freely offered and pride is expressed with their children’s accomplishments, whatever they may be. Josephine homeschools her three children due to the frequent travel required of the family’s business. Both Anne and Josephine identify that though they value their Romani roots and are connected with them, they also exist within the world of Gorja. They both identify that they have found a balance between the worlds and view themselves as being largely assimilated.

The majority of the remaining respondents of the study identified that their parents were influential in propelling them towards education. In most of these instances however, many of their respondents saw their parent’s actions and attitudes as a departure from traditional views and practice. Many saw themselves as able to achieve more than their Romani relatives because their parents consciously choose to instill in their daughters the value of educational achievement.
5.4 Support for Education

Phoebe, in her 40’s, was among those respondents who saw their situation as an “exception” to the norm. Surrounded by strong, working women, Phoebe observed a value for education and business savvy from an early age. Her mother and aunt were cloth merchants in the 1950’s and 1960’s selling imported cloth and furs to high end clientele including movie stars and professors. Her mother had attended a boarding school growing up. Her positive experiences in boarding school and her positive encounters with other educated women translated to a positive outlook on education that she would pass on to her daughter.

Phoebe related how her father instilled a love for reading at an early age.

My father always raised me to read, he’s the one that instilled a love of books in me. The first thing we would do when we would go to a new town was to get a library card and get some books. Watching him do that influenced my love of reading as well. There was a high value on learning but maybe not so much on higher education but if I wanted, they were not against it.

Many respondents identified that, similar to Phoebe’s father, a high value was placed on the acquisition of knowledge rather than on formalized education. Even the families most strongly against pursuing formal education encouraged their children to acquire knowledge, which, according to Berry’s model, would be more likely to place them in a state of integration rather than assimilation. Phoebe herself would go on to pursue formal education, receiving a bachelor’s degree in fine arts after taking some time to travel and marry. Phoebe identified that it was both her own motivation to learn as well as the encouragement of her parents to gain knowledge that pushed her to continue her education.

Though the expectations and messages passed on from her parents motivated Phoebe to continue learning, she identified that her experiences were unlike those of her extended family, who held traditional expectations for their daughters:
...extended family, they were sort of set on their children not going because they thought it would take them away from who they are, what their expectations should be. Their expectations were they marry and you know, things are pretty much set. It should be the same as it always had been and if you go to school you are associating more with those who are not your kind and they try to pull you away from your family. It was looked at as an unwanted threat to the continuation of you know, our culture. It was a way to keep it untouched and intact.

It was no surprise that Phoebe identified her experiences as “unusual.” In her immediate family she observed a value for education and a way of life that involved at least a structural level of assimilation. In her extended family, there was no place for assimilation, the standards of separation between those who were Romani and those who were not were strictly adhered to. As the literature supports (Silverman, 2012), education was viewed as a mechanism to separate younger generations from family and the traditional ways and was therefore devalued and, at times, completely discouraged.

Phoebe passed on the same value for education that she was instilled with to her children. She hopes that her daughter will complete her college education and choose a career that will enable her to be independent. While she is grateful that her own family held an appreciation for college, she acknowledges that this is not always the case within Romani families, even her own extended family. She acknowledged that the attitudes passed from parent to children have a significant impact on the path towards or away from education that the children will choose to take.

I think the family and parents have a big influence on the attitudes the children have and I think there are some that are more educated than others. There are some that appreciate and don’t appreciate knowledge and education because they want to keep things as they know, the same old same threatened by change. Some people don’t want change. There is some element of that and you know family can perpetuate that.

Margret Gibson (1988) discussed how some immigrant families believed it could be possible to accommodate non-traditional knowledge, like receiving an education, without full
assimilation. For the individuals Phoebe described, this was not an option. To preserve the traditional ways, separation, again, should be strictly adhered to. Despite this, Phoebe was given a different set of ideas and expectations that have now propelled both herself and her children forward in education.

5.4.1 “I was going to go to college” Changing expectations among Romani families

Like Phoebe, Rachel, in her 20’s, possesses a college degree. She identified that the expectation that she would go to college was one that was expressed very early in her life. Again, the idea of this being a novel attitude compared with the attitude of her extended family was present in her responses.

My dad…made it very clear to me from a young age that I was going to go to college and that I was not going to get married right away like all of my cousins. The rest of my family are very traditional, they kind of expected that I would get married and have kids right way, like right after I graduate high school all my cousins had [gotten married]. The expectation from the rest of family, they were kind of surprised that I went to college.

Rachel’s father was the first person in their family to attend college despite the fact that his parents and siblings hardly possessed a high school education. Because of this, he was insistent that his daughter would go to college and was involved in Rachel’s schooling to ensure that she did well. Rachel identified that her mother was also very involved in her education. It was important to both her mother and father that Rachel would achieve more than a high school diploma.

Rachel identified that if she has daughters of her own, she hopes that they will be independent women who are able to make their own choices outside of the families’ expectations. She stated that she would like them to attend college but that she will not force them to go. In her own life, she has seen how familial expectations can
have a significant impact on educational choices. Despite the support she received from her parents, her extended family had an impact on the trajectory her education took.

There were expectations that I wouldn’t go to college and then when I went to college there were expectations I wouldn’t go to graduate school and I am so they are kind of a little baffled as to why I would want to do that because, when I get married, [they assume] I’ll be staying home taking care of house and kids and husband. For a really long time, I wanted to be a doctor but I was discouraged from it by my family because it was too ambitious for a women.

Despite the messages she received from her extended family regarding the appropriate roles for a women, Rachel was positively influenced to pursue an education and, through the example of her father, she was shown that she could obtain an education and continue to preserve her culture.

5.4.2 “I was expected to do well” Historical expectations

Both Vaidy, in her 40’s and Peaches, in her 80’s, were also strongly encouraged to pursue education. While the messages they received were similar, the path that their educations took significantly differed. Vaidy was able to pursue an education and eventually receive a Phd while Peaches, due to her parent’s illness, left school to work and help support her family. Despite the different paths they followed, they both passed on a value of education to their children and an expectation that they would receive a college degree.

Vaidy recalled that though little was ever explicitly stated regarding the expectations she carried as a Romani women there were a few messages she received regarding education. “I don’t think they (expectations) were ever couched in Romani terms expect to say that our people were very hard working and we kept the family together as Romani women but we also worked really hard. I was always expected to get straight A’s. I was expected to do well in school.”

Vaidy was identified as gifted learner from an early age. She received encouragement in her education not only from her parents but her teachers as well. Vaidy’s mother encouraged her to
pursue a college education at one of the elite universities on the East Coast, and that is exactly what she did. Vaidy was the first and only person in her family to receive a college degree.

Like Vaidy, Peaches was expected to attend and do well in school. She knew from observing her extended family that the value her parents placed on education was a departure from the ideals of her other family members.

We went to school and it was like you had to go to school, you had no choice. A lot of Romanichal did not go to school, they couldn’t read or write because their parents didn’t go to school and their parents didn’t believe in sending their kids to school to associate with the Gorja. My family was very broad minded. It was a cardinal rule, you didn’t miss school unless you were really ill, ill enough to go to a doctor. That was one thing that they insisted upon is that we got an education. All three of us graduated from high school and [my sister] was the lucky one, she got to go to college.

Unlike Vaidy, Peaches’ mother was not able to assist her in a dream of attending college. At a young age, both her mother and father became ill. As soon as she graduated high school, which in itself was an accomplishment for a Romani women living a traditional, traveling lifestyle, she began working to help support her family. Had these circumstances not occurred, the path to college would have been open to her. She recalled that her parents were open to whatever she wanted to do. Though neither of her parents had a high school education, they valued knowledge and emphasized achievement in education. Despite this, the cultural norms of caring for one’s own family strongly influenced the trajectory her life would take.

That’s the only thing I regret in my life, that I didn’t go to college but I couldn’t because mama and papa were sick and I was supporting them and by the time it got to the point where they were well, I could have gone to college but it was not that important to me then. I could see that I was needed more at home than for my personal thing to go to college.

Though their lives took different paths, both Vaidy and Peaches continue to hold on to the value for education that was instilled in them from a young age. Peaches passed this value on
to her own daughter who eventually completed her college education. Vaidy has no doubt that her children will go on to achieve a college education given that she has created a culture for them that has already set the expectation of college as an eventuality rather than a choice to be made.

5.4.3 “They will get made fun of” Reaction to education

Unlike most of the women interviewed, Gayle, in her 30’s, had two parents that were college educated. Her parents instilled an appreciation and value for education as well as a love for participating in sports, which would eventually enable her to pay for college. Gayle recalled that both her parents grew up very poor and worked hard to pay their way through college. Her dad was able to go to college on a football scholarship. Because of this, both her mother and father steered her towards sports from an early age as a means of paying for college. Gayle went on to receive a Master’s degree and considers herself fortunate to have had parents who went beyond the traditional expectations for their daughter.

Though not raised around traditional Romani, Gayle spent some time living within a Romani community where she observed a resistance to formal education:

It is completely shunned across the board. There is this idea that if you are going outside looking for something you are looking for a source which is outside a Romani source you know. You are going outside the community so automatically you are opening yourself up to it. I don’t want to sound angry but that’s an idea in traditional communities of ritual purity that prevents easy interaction, like it is spiritually dirty.

Gayle identified that the messages that are often communicated about education involve the idea that interaction with people and ideas outside of the culture bring with it an impurity further solidifying the idea that to remain separate is ideal. Gayle identified other barriers to education for many traditional Romani women. “I think the other thing is there is no precedence for education so people are not sure what might happen if people go out and get an education.”
Gayle hopes to pass on the value of education to other Romani by helping them to achieve a minimum standard of education without having to engage with individuals outside of their communities. On way she has attempted to do this was by starting an online GED prep program that provided a Romani tutor. Unfortunately, Gayle found that many individuals who began the program lacked support at home. “They will get made fun of and they will be like oh you want to be like a Gadje. People will say look at her, she doesn’t want to be like us.” Again, more evidence was found that supported the idea that the way the Romani talk to their daughters about education is often directly influenced by the level of assimilation they are comfortable with their daughters engaging in.

5.4.4 “Traditional men do not find that attractive” Gender views

Ruby, in her 40’s, was another respondent who received the message that education was to be valued. Neither of her parents had received a college education due to life circumstances and both grew up very poor. Like so many other respondents, Ruby considered her parents different from the norm found among her Romani relatives. “My parents were a little bit different in that they did value education and they did want me to go to college and grow up and be successful academically and financially.” Ruby had observed that other family members expressed alternate expectations to their daughters, “They do not value girls getting an education and men, traditional men, do not find that attractive.”

Ruby’s parents were involved in her schooling and expected her to get good grades. Her parents encouraged her to go to college to study journalism though she had expectations for being a teacher herself. Her parents were not supportive of this decision so Ruby choose not to go to college for many years. She attended a technical school and received a certification and then got married at a young age. She recently returned to college to receive a
degree in teaching, an accomplishment that her parents have expressed much pride in. Ruby acknowledges that her parents gave her every opportunity to achieve educationally, opportunities she failed to take advantage of at the time. In her own daughter, Ruby has already instilled the expectation that she will attend college and believes she will be able to provide the financial as well as emotional support she will need to achieve this dream.

For Ruby, the consideration of assimilation and its effect on her future was not a factor in influencing her decision to pursue an education. Though extended family members held traditional expectations, her parents were able to effectively communicate a value for education and instill in their daughter the belief that achieving an education was an attainable goal. In the previous chapter, Ruby’s experiences of hiding her identity in school were discussed. While many traditional families fear that education may draw their daughters away from the traditional way and therefore prefer them to remain separate, the message that Ruby encountered was in order to be successful, one had to separate one’s life as a Romani from ones existence in the world of the Gorja. This duality of identity negatively impacted Ruby’s school experiences and caused her to develop a dislike for school. Ruby’s experiences highlight what several respondents encountered. For Romani, it is often the message about the individuals involved in education rather than education itself that prevent women from obtaining a degree.

5.5 Conclusion

The questions posed at the beginning of this chapter included: How do American-Romani communities speak to girls and women about education, its values and their role as potential providers for their families? I also asked, Do attitudes of elder Romani women who may have encountered discrimination, at a time when Romani were more recognizable in the US, influence the educational attitudes of younger female Romani today? There can be little doubt that from
these accounts, at least historically, that many Romani families have passed on expectations for the female relatives that did not include pursuing an education. What is also evident however is a shift in the roles expected of Romani females and their prospects in current times. There can also be no doubt that the attitudes of older Romani relatives significantly impact the attitudes of Romani women, even when their behavior deviates from traditional Romani roles. Though discrimination was rarely explicitly referenced when discussing messages against education received from older relatives, on ongoing mistrust of the Gadje was evident.

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that there were identified cultural norms among Romani women. For those Romani whose parents valued and encouraged education, there was a spoken caveat to their narrative that their parents were, “A little different,” they considered them to be deviants from what was considered to be culturally normal and expected. Other themes emerged throughout the narratives regarding education. Several barriers to education consistently emerged including expectations regarding traditional gender roles, the consideration for what is attractive, the lack of education possessed by parents and other family members. Concerns about morality and the desire to remain separate from non-Romani was a major theme that emerged in some form in almost every narrative. It was clear that many respondents initially attended school because the law required it and that many left school also out of necessity, to help support their families. Regardless of formal education, the attainment of knowledge was universally valued, though some families preferred this attainment occur outside the influence of the Gadje. Despite family misgivings about formal education, when education was attained most, though not all, found that their achievement was met with pride.

Given the messages regarding education and its impact on assimilation and the observation that a shift may be occurring regarding attitudes towards education and assimilation
in current generations of Romani women, a final set of questions must be asked that will tackle this line of inquiry head on. Do current cultural norms allow for achievement of education? Are American Romani women who fully assimilate more likely to be educated?

6 DOES EDUCATION EQUAL ASSIMILATION?

As many studies about Romani outside the United States chronicled, the Romani lifestyle is not always conducive to the pursuit of education (Derrick, 2005; Silverman, 2012). This is often the case for two reason. The first reason that many Romani fail to pursue education is that the traveling lifestyle prevents children from being in one place for significant amount of time which interrupts schooling and influences many Romani to prematurely discontinue their education. The second is that many Romani maintain bias towards formalized education due to historical and current discrimination and the belief that education will influence their children to assimilate in to the world of the Gadje and away from their family and values (Silverman).

Much of what was found and discussed in the two previous chapters supports these ideas as barriers to education but, do not account for the many cultural changes that were identified nor did it account for the number of respondents who possessed a college education leading me to ask the question, Do current cultural norms allow for the achievement of education? Secondly, much debate worldwide has taken place regarding whether a Romani woman must assimilate in order to become educated (Bitu & Vincinze, 2012; Brooks, 2012; Gelbert, 2012; Schultz, 2012). Are American Romani women who fully assimilate more likely to be educated? Is it possible, as Margaret Gibson discussed (1988), to accommodate information learned outside the Romani culture without assimilation or does education, for Romani women require assimilation as defined by Milton Gordon, where Romani women engage with social structures such as college
as well as entering into social institutions such as marriage and friendships outside of their Romani family?

Overall, the answers to these questions were found to be quite complex. Because respondents represent a myriad of backgrounds and age cohorts, each respondent answered the questions in a variety of ways. The majority of respondents view the education of younger Romani as something that is becoming much more frequent. Others believe that those who hold to traditional values continue to be barred from educational achievement.

What was clear from the interviews is that many believe that though often, a women does assimilate in order to achieve education, she doesn’t have to. They also believe that as a shift is occurring in which Romani have begun to place a high value on education, fewer women will be faced with the choice of choosing assimilation and separation from their families and traditional values in order to become educated.

Most respondents believe that the traditional ways of life that made engagement in the educational system difficult are becoming impossible to maintain, encouraging them to engage with more mainstream occupations and lifestyles. Though practically, the cultural norms of many Romani may be changing, the value given, and attitudes towards, education may remain consistent. It is largely the current values and attitude towards education I was interested in exploring with respondents knowing that this would answer all the questions I proposed to investigate simultaneously.

To better understand the current cultural norms among Romani families, I felt it was important to involve the norms encountered by older generations of Romani women. Without literature that would provide a historical basis for this line of inquiry among Romani in the United States, I felt it was important to create a historical anchor from which I could determine if
a true cultural shift had taken place and, as I followed the life trajectory of each generation of Romani, I could determine just how much assimilation played a role in the lives of the respondents who had achieved education and those who had not.

In order to determine a respondent’s level of assimilation, based again on both Gordon and Barry’s models (1964; 1967), I identified if respondents had friends outside of their Romani families, if they had married non-Romani, if they would be ok with their children marrying non-Romani, if they belonged to a church or other social organization that was largely attended by non-Romani, if they ate at the home of non-Romani and if they had non-Romani to their home to eat. Finally, I explored how the respondents identified themselves racially. As previously identified, I will identify the outcome of this line of inquiry along with the answers to the questions already posed by first exploring the experiences and cultural norms encountered by the older generations of respondents interviewed in order to provide a historical anchor from which the lives of younger Romani can be considered.

6.1 Exceptionalism

Peaches, in her 80’s, grew up in a time when the majority of her family members had what is considered to be a very traditional way of life for Romani families. Peaches’ parents worked as fortune tellers, influencing them to move often. She described how her parents would set up their business each time they moved to a new town.

They [told fortunes], that was their thing. Papa did all the advertising in the papers, he put the ads up and had it published in the papers. He would go out what they called carding, they had [fortune telling] cards with the name and address and whatever and he would go out into the neighborhoods…White people didn’t like you to throw cards out in their yards. That’s how we made our living…
This type of lifestyle was common among many Romani of their time. Though Peaches and her family moved somewhat frequently throughout her childhood, it was not as often as many of her Romani family members:

We did not move very much growing up, we were in a places for like 4,5,6 years at a time before we got tired of it and moved somewhere else. Mama went to school, she didn’t get to highschool, they travelled, like back when they were growing up they traveled like every year so they moved around….I can only remember maybe ten times when we moved in my lifetime.

Often, the traveling lifestyle of the Romani prevented assimilation as much as their desire to remain separate from the Gadje. Peaches viewed her parents’ ideas surrounding interaction with the Gadje as different from other Romani: “Mama and Papa were different…we had Gorja friends and that would come and spend the night. We had Gorja friends and we had Romanichal friends.”

In those times, it was rare even for Gadje women to work outside the home but necessity forced Peaches and her sister to break with cultural norms for women and begin working. Peaches observed how this brought about a major cultural shift among her family members, specifically the younger ones:

I think my sister and I… were the first ones that started working among all of our cousins. Their mothers told fortunes and their fathers did the advertising….the girls stayed home, they didn’t work. [My sister] and I were the first ones that started and this was the best thing that could have happened to us because mama and papa both got to where they couldn’t take care of us you know so we worked and took care of them….That was the Romanichal way, the younger ones taking care of the older ones…That’s the way it was….

Cultural norms defined many of the decisions that Peaches made however, necessity required her to make choices outside of what was culturally normal. Despite this departure, Peaches behaviors were acceptable given the role that she filled within her family as the oldest
sibling, when her parents were unable to work. Her family members responded positively to holding a mainstream occupation and soon began to follow suit:

Ever since then, everyone saw you know, they’ve got money and they’re not working but like 8 hours and day and we work day and night [telling fortunes] and that’s when the Romanichal started their children working…A lot of Romanichal didn’t work because they traveled a lot, they just wasn’t in one place enough to work. Then, in modern times they bought houses and sold land and they was able to work, they were in one place you know.

This shift among her family members changed the cultural expectations regarding women and working. Romani women were no strangers to work, as Peaches describes, supporting the family often involved both the mother and the father however, working among the Gadje in jobs that required education and training was altogether new for many Romanichal. Though cultural views on working experienced a shift, views toward education, as discussed in previous chapters, remained very much the same. In addition, the traveling culture of these families again, often prevented them from engaging with the educational system.

Peaches’ youngest sister would go on to college while she and another sister continued to work. Though, in both friendships and working, Peaches entered into the world of the Gadje, in many ways, she remained unassimilated. Though she would have certainly met the criteria for Gordon’s first level of assimilation, assimilation stopped there. Entering into social institutions of the Gadje, such as marriage, at the time, was certainly out of the question, even for parents as liberally minded as Peaches.’ She was expected to marry a Romani.

Papa and Mama let us date, I dated Gorjas. At one time I was engaged to one. It was different in every Romanichal family, some were staunch against it and some were ok. Some didn’t want anything to do with the Gorja. We dated, a lot of Romanichal weren’t allowed to date. We dated Gorjas and brought them home, we didn’t hide it, they knew we were dating and it was ok with them but at the same time they knew when we got married we were going to marry a Romanichal.
Again, though Peaches would fit the criteria for structural assimilation, according to Berry’s Model of Acculturation, she would more likely be defined in terms of “integration” in which she would integrate some aspects of Gadje life, work and friends, within the confines of her Roma world. Peaches went on to marry a Romanichal and, though she had some Gadje friends, as she aged they became less and less, preferring to stay in contact largely with her Romani relatives.

Peaches’ description of her life and the life of many found in her day painted a picture of a lifestyle that prevented settling in one place and was a barrier to both education and working a steady job. For Peaches’ generation, which is arguably the oldest current living generation of Romani, it would seem that Romani lifestyle and cultural norms did not allow for large scale perusal of education among Romani women.

Marilla, 20 years Peaches’ junior, from the North East, observed many of the same cultural norms that Peaches encountered among her own immediate family. Like Peaches, Marilla was able to make friends outside of the Romani, most likely because, outside of her immediate family, Marilla was not connected with her extended Romani family. Despite being largely disconnected from other Romani, her traveling lifestyle, traditional for many Romani, still prevented her from maintaining non-Romani friendships. Marilla recalled:

…We travelled a lot and I was permitted to have male friends outside of the family but we didn’t stay in one place for very long…in second grade I went to 9 different schools… one place would have taught you multiplication and you go to the next place and you hadn’t learned it yet so you were always missing out.

Though Marilla, at times, saw herself outside the Roma culture, her parents held views known to be traditionally held by other Roma outside the United States (Silverman, 2012). Marilla identified the expectations for her life as a Romani women held by her parents:
I would get married and have children and serve a man….As much as my mother said you will not marry this girls off for money, lo and behold, wouldn’t you know that is exactly what [my father] tried to do, marry me off.

Marilla’s parent’s plans for her life did not work out as they hoped. Marilla resisted the traditional life she felt she was being forced into.

I saw so much ugliness in misogynistic feelings towards women in that family and I knew early on that I had to escape, that is how I felt, I had to escape it. Even my family, I had to escape.

As will be observed throughout many of the interviews, the cultural expectations of women marrying and caring for their home has been a major cultural barrier to the acquisition of education for many Romani women in the U.S. as education is often viewed as unnecessary to the future of Roma women. These barriers were certainly observed in Marilla’s life. Marilla identified that although she graduated from high school, it would 15 years before she went on to pursue a college education. “A lot of that was the fact that I eventually got married and had a child and I wanted to focus on her first or at least that is what I thought I was supposed to be doing.”

When it came to people outside of her family, though she was allowed to have non Romani friends, she was taught to fear the outside world, a practice not uncommon among many of the Romani families represented in the interviews I conducted. Fear was a mechanism utilized to maintain separation between Roma and the world of the Gadje and to maintain traditional roles and cultural norms within the family. Marilla’s father represented perhaps the most extreme picture of one who used fear to instill a desire for traditional Roma roles in his children. She described these experiences with deep emotion:

We were encouraged with fear. [My father] was tyrant, you didn’t think for yourself, he made all your decisions, you only spoke when you were spoken to. He really didn’t allow us to have our own life experiences and would criticize us when we didn’t have the skills to master something… I was just a women you know, meant to cook and
clean and spread their legs and do what they are told. He had a real hard time with any women that opposed him on that.

For Marilla, the oppressive, patriarchal nature of her upbringing and the knowledge that following traditional practices were not bringing her the life she had hoped to have, influenced her to begin looking at how others, in the mainstream, had come to have the life she hoped to have for herself. She recognized that to have the lifestyle she desired, she would have to assimilate.

I saw people who lived much better than I did, how they lived their lives, people I admired. They had nice homes, they were modest, loved their children. I saw that was what I wanted...I wanted that for myself and I knew you had to work for it. The more you are working the more you assimilate and realize what it takes in order to do that.

Marilla followed, what she considered to be, the path towards assimilation. Based on physical characteristics alone, Marilla identifies herself as “White” however, she acknowledged that if a “mixed race” category exists, when asked, she often elects to identify herself in that way. The majority of her friends are not Roma. Marilla observed that interaction with non-Romani, in even current times, continues to be unusual among individuals of her generation. Marilla’s observation further exemplifies the strong barriers that exist to assimilation among older generations of Romani.

I still see that [the older generations] are afraid to, not so much in the younger generation but in my own still, they are scared to know anyone outside their clan. …everything is very closed minded, even their thinking is clannish. They are very fear based people and a lot of that comes from being on the run for 1000’s of years and trying to feed your family in non-traditional ways.”

Marilla’s observation about why these attitudes against assimilation exist are supported by literature (Hancock, 2004) and by other interviews conducted in this study. Despite these barriers, Marilla believes that things are changing, that a shift has taken place among younger Romani in which they are not afraid of people outside of their own and that, unlike her own
experiences, young Romani women today no longer have to choose to be separate from their own community and assimilate to acquire education. When asked if she believed that Roma women had to separate from their community to pursue education, she took a very positivistic view of the current situation in the United States: “I think until recently, yes [women had to assimilate], I don’t that that is the case now.”

Marilla’s ideas about the current state of younger generation of Romani women fall in line with both Gibson’s accommodation without assimilation and Berry’s ideas of integration rather than assimilation. Though Marilla takes a positivistic view of today’s Romani, a definitive conclusion cannot be made from her case alone. Though other women interviewed also took a positivistic view, others possess opposing views that will be explored in later interviews. What can be concluded from Marilla’s study is that, in her experience, education equaled assimilation. Once that path to assimilation was followed, there would be no return.

6.2 Changing Perspectives in Support of Romani Education

Like Marilla, Fey is in her 60’s. She grew up in the Northwestern United States though she currently resides in the Northwest. Fey shares many values and experiences that Marilla discussed in her interview. Like Peaches’ mother, Fey’s mother and grandmother were fortune tellers. Fey described her mother and grandmother as strong women, responsible for generating income for the family. As a child, Fey assisted her father in advertising her mother’s trade and described the world of her childhood as a “wonderful environment.”

As previously discussed, Fey was taken from her community at a young age and forced to assimilate by leaving behind her customs, language and given Roma name. Though those individuals who had taken the Roma children from their community cited their need for education as a main motivating factor in relocating the children, Fey’s educational prospects
were dim by the time she came of age. Fey received her GED and then took an unusual path to eventually obtaining her graduate degree.

Ok well, I ended up with years of working on the street doing drugs, selling drugs, prostitution, being a real brat. Then I went to methadone clinic in [the city] and there was a sign up at the time saying free room and board for students who would come to this college in [another city]. I went there and it kind of changed my life.

Despite encountering many obstacles following high school Fey was able to pursue higher education when she was presented with an unusual opportunity. She would go on to complete her bachelor’s degrees and a Master’s degree.

Though Fey is proud of both her education and her Roma heritage she identified that receiving her education was, at one time, a sign of assimilation because a women receiving an education in her childhood community was atypical.

[It was] very atypical. That’s why they took us away supposedly is because we are not being schooled. We apprenticed sort of like the caboots in Israel, we decided who we wanted to apprentice with and we did. No school was certainly not big but I am old, that has changed.

Fey observed in her childhood community, the preference was to carry on the old customs of passing on a trade. This enabled Roma to live outside of dependence on the Gadje economic system, and away from potentially discriminatory and marginalizing encounters. This way of life lent itself to separation from the world of the Gadje. The Gadje found the chosen separation of Fey’s community an unacceptable arrangement. Local government forced the young generation into assimilation and marginalized the elder ones. Despite the attempts by Gadje to transform Fey into a “White Girl” she continued to attempt to adhere to as many of the customs of her people as she could remember as she got older. She described herself as “totally assimilated” despite trying to uphold these customs.
For Fey, what started as a life of separation transformed to forced assimilation but, though reconnection with her family and heritage in her 40’s, she began to live what Berry’s acculturation model described as an integrated lifestyle. Fey has friends who are both Roma and not Roma. She belongs to several social institutions within both worlds and identifies that there are multiple pieces to her identity.

Because of Fey’s life of integration, she believes it is possible today to be an educated Roma women who maintains strong ties to her community. Though in her younger days, education outside the community was not common, Fey sees a change occurring.

I will not say that Roma communities in this country will not support a women’s education. I think that is changing. I think that is old world. I think the more Roma women who get educated and there is a responsibility to raise women’s consciousness…to contribute back to their community so I think it’s a slow process but I do not think one has to leave their community to be an educated woman.

Though not directly stated, Fey’s answer seemed to imply that through integration, or Gibson’s idea of accommodation not assimilation, a strategy that Fey herself adopted, Roman women today can pursue education with the support of their community. She has observed a shift in attitude begin to take place, though the process may be slow. Fey was not the only respondent to identify this shift occurring. Gracie also holds similar views regarding a shift in women’s education.

### 6.3 Changing Beliefs Surrounding Women

Gracie was the last of the older generation to be interviewed. Like Marilla and Fey, she was in her 60’s. Gracie possessed a master’s degree and had previously worked in a University setting. Today. She promotes her culture through her writing. Though connected with her culture, Gracie spent many years assimilating into the world of the Gadje.
Gracie’s assimilated lifestyle seemed quite unusual given the upbringing she described during her interview. Her father, like so many Romani from the older generations, held strong ideas about “separation” and “cleanliness.” Though in minute ways, this related to cleaning and food, on a large scale, these concepts ensured that as Romani, they would remain separate from the Gadje who were viewed as an “unclean” people. In her interview, Gracie recalled the severity of her father’s views:

My father had certain ideas about cleanliness. Food had to be a certain way/ Food could not touch each other. Everything had to be separate. Laundry had to be separated, the house had to be cleared a certain way. We were not allowed to have dogs in the house, those kinds of thing.

In addition to barriers of assimilation, Gracie encountered gender roles that restricted her and confined her to the realm of home and housework. Though Gracie’s mom worked, it was largely out of necessity which, for many older Romani, was the only acceptable reason for a Romani women to work within a Gadje dominated environment.

Gracie left behind the traditional expectations of her family and not only obtained an advanced degree but surrounded herself with educated individuals, which included both Romani and non-Romani friends. For Gracie, the integrated lifestyle meant incorporating the Roma customs and connections into the assimilated lifestyle she had already established later in life. When asked if she thought other Roma women must assimilate away from their culture to become educated, Gracie had much to say.

Gracie discussed how she currently works as an online GED tutor. Through her volunteer work she strives to help Roma with a desire to be educated meet their goals at home. Many times, this has been problematic due to the familial barriers and cultural norms that have persisted throughout the years:
I have tutored Roma girls, whose family, whether or not they showed up to class was very problematic. Usually it was I had to watch the younger kids and I had to babysit for my sister. I couldn’t use the computer because my father wanted to talk to so and so wherever. The families didn’t make it a priority. Then I tutored a young man who had never been to school a day in his life, it isn’t only the girls but the girls will have a hard time of it because they thing the boys need enough education to do business in the world but I don’t think they think about the girls.

Despite the many barriers to education that some Roma lifestyles presented, Gracie persisted in believing changes have and will continue to be made to cultural norms and beliefs surrounding education.

I think there are ways to incorporate your culture into a more educated lifestyle, a more affluent lifestyle but not without struggle probably. Are there things we have let go of? Yeah. But can you be a proud woman and be educated? Watch us…. I think we probably need to change the definition of who Romani women are a little bit but we can do what without losing our culture, without losing the language…It will be a struggle.

Gracie observed that holding on fully to traditional gender roles may not be conducive to a change in lifestyle but she expressed strongly that a life of integration was possible. A Romani women could be elevated through education while remaining true to their culture and their people In unity with many of the women who participated in the study, Gracie believes that accommodation without full assimilation is possible. Will it require Roma to give up some ways of life? Almost certainly but, at least according to these women, it can be done.

6.4 Oldest Generation

The four women who represent the oldest generation of Romani women interviewed present a complex picture. There can be no doubt that they all looked with hope to the future of Roma women however, there can also be no doubt that the cultural norms of these generations presented many barriers to education for Roma women. Rigid adherence to traditional gender roles, a strong desire to remain outside Gadje influence, a desire to exist outside of the formal economic system of the Gadje all served to make education for many Romani women of that day
unnecessary or impossible to achieve. The positivistic view that things have changed and would continue to change held by these women was not unwarranted. The next group of women interviewed, those in their 40’s and 50’s, represented the next generation. There can be no doubt that within this generation, a shift had begun to occur within Romani families and among the many women represented in these communities.

6.5 The Parents of Today

The largest group of respondents was represented by women largely in their mid-40’s, some in their early 50’s, women whose children are beginning to come into their own as adolescents and young adults. The majority of the women from this group of respondents possessed a college education. There can be little doubt after hearing their stories, that between their generations and those of Peaches, Marilla, Gracie and Fey, a shift occurred among many Romani women. For some, this meant that the norms of their communities had shifted away from the traditional norms previously described in this study. For many others, this meant a move away from the identity of their childhood and a move towards assimilation.

6.6 Survival as a Way of Life for Romani

Among all the respondents of this group, Louisa was the only one who did not possess a college education and who continues to live a “traditional” Romani lifestyle. She is in her 40’s and lives in the Midwest though, she identified, she has lived in almost every state in the southern United States. Louisa is a stay at home mom who homeschools her youngest child. In the past, she has gone into business for herself and been successful. Her businesses have been independent work common to Romani families. She readily identifies as “Romani” when asked to identify herself racially.
Though Louisa has some non-Romani friends, she stays mostly connected with her Romani relatives, largely due to her traveling lifestyle which she describes as unstable in many respects.

We don’t have a lot of stability, we don’t have a calendar planned out for the year, like something pops up like I hate to take any responsibility at church….I never know when I have to leave even though I have home you just never know what is going to happen and then you are going to have to leave you like you got to be able to go at the drop of a hat. Anywhere at any time.

The life Louisa lives is reflective of the life she had growing up. Louisa moved often in her childhood due to her family’s traveling occupation. Growing up, though she was still able to connect with others outside of her own family largely due to attending church. Even still, there were cultural norms that were upheld within these friendships, norms she continues to adhere to today.

When I was 8 years old, we started going to church… I had some close friends from church… and I spent the night with them which was very rare, very rare. My kids have never spent the night over out of our race. They are very rarely with people not in our race.

For Louisa, separation from Gadje was a way of life with few exceptions. Even those relationships that were allowed outside her community were heavily regulated. Separation over assimilation was a way of life.

The traveling lifestyle made it difficult for her to maintain friends with individuals outside of her community. Louisa described her father’s work and how this impacted their lives.

My father would do construction working outside and you could only stay like when the weather permitted if it got cold and it snowed then the blacktopping would shut down and then you would have to move and go south and when you got south you can only stay then when it gets hot and you have to leave or if you are staying in a town and there are too many people, too many other Romanichal working there they work the town out and its too hard to make money then you have to go somewhere else to make money.
The uncertainty of this lifestyle created much instability in Louisa’s life and prevented her from engaging with mainstream society.

Unlike other women in the study, Louisa was prevented from working growing up. Work was another way for Louisa to be negatively influenced by the world of the Gadje.

I never was allowed to work, I always wanted to work at the mall, I was never allowed to work until this day I told them they never let me work they still get mad and holler “Well you had plenty of money, you had everything you wanted.” I think, that’s not the point, I wanted a job and I think to this day they still cannot understand it.

In addition to encountering barriers to work and a career, Louisa encountered many barriers to her education due to her traveling lifestyle. Louisa left school in 7th grade and never completed her education, a decision she regrets even today. Despite this, she continues the traveling lifestyle, which can often interrupt the schooling of her own daughter who is now being homeschooled.

Louisa is able to recognize through her own regrets about education that her lifestyle is not ideal for the pursuit of education, but explains that this lifestyle is a way of survival for many Romani:

The thing is it’s about trying to survive and trying not make money and it’s like so hard in school because even with my kids, my daughter is homeschooled now and my son just graduates and is going to start college, it was hard because White people looks down their noses, “Well how come they missed so many days of school” and I say “Lady I wish you could walk one mile in my shoes.”

Louisa identified that many individuals outside of her community look down on the lifestyle she and her family occupy. Many hold beliefs that these individuals are unstable, perhaps even unsuitable as parents due to the constant change in location that these children experience. Louisa south to provide a greater understanding of why this lifestyle was necessary to the survival of her family, something she believes an outsider would not be able to fully grasp.
Like if you are out on the road when you get somewhere it is winter time you barely have the money to get where you are going you’ve got to get up and go to work. We wake up every day out of work like we just have to knock on a door and make it happen. There is no steady pay check. Every day we wake up out of work, so we ca only stay somewhere as long as we are working so if we don’t have work then we have to go somewhere else and they want to know where you are going and how long it is going to take. It hard, it’s difficult that’s the main thing with school. It ain’t that we don’t want them to have an education, it’s just make it very difficult when we are just trying to make enough money to survive.

In order to maintain a life outside of the economic control of the Gadje, one that allows for the freedom and solitude that many Romani seek, the type of occupation that Louisa family is engaged in is a required. This may mean going through seasons of little income and harsh conditions while at other times it may bring much prosperity. When faced with these difficult times however, decisions must be made in the best interest of the family, and this may require a family or even a whole community to move multiple times within one school year, a decision viewed negatively by outsiders, particularly educators.

Louisa knows that many conditions of the Romani lifestyle are not ideal and have certainly left her with some regrets about her lifestyle. She believes however, that many cultural norms are beginning to change. “Things is changing, and people are working and stuff and like within the last year things is changing. People know there is opportunity before we had no idea that could be our life.” From Louisa’s perspective, the option to become educated is more open today then in previous years however, she also acknowledges that younger Romani continue to choose the traditional lifestyle. For these younger Romani, it’s a choice of preference rather than survival.

The boys [go] out and make money and the girls [stay] home and cooks and cleans and watches kids. And they are fine with that, its not like they are from the 50’s. That’s what they want to do. They don’t want to work. If they wanted to go to work they probably could but they don’t want to now.
Though she has lived a traditional lifestyle Louisa’s own son has begun college and she hopes the same for her daughter. Louisa’s narrative gives one the sense that separation or even accommodation without separation is possible but one cannot help but acknowledge the many barriers to education that exist within this way of life. As with every traditional story told, something has to be given up to obtain educational achievement.

Louisa was the only one of the eight women represented in this generational group who did not possess some college education or a degree. Despite the fact that this group was a largely educated population, of the seven with a college education, only two completed their degree at a traditional age. For most of the women in this group their lives began strongly connected with their Romani communities and they were raised with the expectation of fulfilling traditional gender roles. The cultural practices and lifestyles experienced by many of the women were encouraging of a life of separation over assimilation. For these women however, life circumstances required them to take a different path towards assimilation.

6.7 Unprepared for Life’s Challenges

Fener currently resides in the Deep South but moved often during her childhood. Currently in her mid-40’s, Fener previously worked as a registered nurse but retired due to illness. Fener acknowledged that in her day to day life she doesn’t think about being Romani at all. Unless she is close with someone she rarely identifies herself racially. She is currently married to someone who is not Romani. She attends a church that is largely attended by individuals of other ethnicities and has friendships with many individuals outside of her own ethnicity. By the standards set forth in the previously established literature (Gordon, 1967), Fener appears to have fully assimilated away from her Romani roots.
Fener’s life growing up would have predicted a different trajectory for her future. Fener’s family moved often in her childhood for work and to be near other Romani family. Though she would make friends at school from outside of her community, she was encouraged to play and interact with her siblings and cousins. Fener didn’t recall receiving any other direct messages regarding the life she should expect to have as a Romani…she expected to have the life she observed around her.

What I’ve seen in my family is that most of them got married, that’s what I thought I would end up doing but you know grow up and get married and have kids. I think it was just implied that’s what you were going to do when you grew up, get married and have kids.

Educational achievement was not among the expectations she had for herself, though she enjoyed school. Fener knew that the traveling lifestyle was not conducive to completing education for most Romani girls and often, even if they stayed in one place long enough to finish high school, they would leave before they graduated to work and help their families. This occurred normally around the age of 16 or 17.

Fener followed a traditional path of marrying and having children at a young age but soon found that this path had not prepared her for the challenges she would face:

I got married just to get out of the house, I felt like that was the only way out. I got married and had two girls. It didn’t work out, I moved back home and realized I needed to do something…so I decided well I’m going to go to school and become a nurse.

Fener did go on to become a nurse and later married again outside of the Romani community. Fener knew both of these decisions were unconventional for women in her community but, she recognized that the life she wanted for herself was not conducive to holding on to traditional lifestyle choices nor would they allow her to give her daughters the life she hoped for them to have.
Fener raised her daughters to be involved in school providing them with stability and encouragement. She encouraged them to pursue and education and career rather than relying on a man. She wanted them to be able to avoid the circumstances she found herself in after her divorce. Though she stays in touch with her family today her lifestyle does not reflect the culture of her childhood. Fener has assimilated and left much of her past behind.

6.8 The Challenge of Breaking Cultural Norms

Gertie’s life took a similar trajectory to Fener’s. In her early 50’s, Gertie also resides in the Deep South though she moved often growing up. Today, she is attending college in order to complete her bachelor’s degree. All of her friends consist of people outside of the Romani community. She belongs to a church that is not attended by any individuals from the Romani community. She has chosen for some time to have little to no contact with her Romani family. She stated that she thinks about being Romani more often since she has gotten older but, when asked, she identifies herself racially as White. Though currently unmarried, Gertie’s previous marriage was to a non-Romani, and she is glad to see her own daughter married to a non-Romani. Like Fener, Gertie has entirely assimilated into the world of the Gadje and yet, her childhood started on a much different trajectory.

From early on, Gertie was aware that there were expectations she was expected to fulfill as a Romani woman. Expectations she was not always able to fulfill:

My mother didn’t really teach me how to interact with other gypsies because we lived in a town away from them until I was 13. We lived in another town so I didn’t really know how to interact with either society. I was kept isolated from both. The gypsies have their own norms and mores and negative sanctions that I was not aware of and it made my life very difficult because she didn’t teach me those.

Like other Romani, Gertie moved often growing up which sometimes meant being further away from her relatives, however, eventually her mother decided that being near her
family was the best place for her. Gertie was able to see clearly the expectations for life within her community: “I don’t think they ever [thought] about going to school…[The women] have the children and clean the house.”

Gertie left high school before graduating. It wasn’t until Gertie made friends outside of the Romani community that she was influenced to pursue furthering her education:

I had a friend in bible study that showed me how to get my GED and showed me how to get into college so I actually went to college and my mother was very non supportive. She wasn’t willing to help.

Without the support of her family, however, Gertie quit school and, like Fener, she decided to marry to get away, a decision that did not work out for her in the end. In time, Gertie found herself divorced with children with few skills to assist her in making a living for herself and her children.

Gertie has had four children and, though she has worked many different jobs throughout her life, she is just now returning to finish her college education. Gertie came to the conclusion early her adulthood that it was important to separate from her community in order to have a better life for herself and her children. She views the cultural norms she was taught in her community as detrimental to her ability to function within mainstream society, “It took me while to understand how to communicate and be a part of a normal society as a whole.”

Following a path outside of her family’s expectations carried many negative sanctions that Gertie described as “being shunned and ridiculed, gossiped about which is the Gypsies’ worst fear, losing your reputation.” Gertie admits however that there were those who chose to assimilate away from the Romani community who still managed to maintain the respect and admiration of their family members. One family member in particular achieved a college education and never sought the acceptance of her community as Gertie had. Gertie saw her
family’s response to her as significantly different from the one she received when choose to live outside of the community’s expectations:

I think they were impressed with what she was able to accomplish. She was successful at what she did and also she got married when she was in college. I think if she was a single women out there I think there might have been some eyebrows raised. She had a husband and family along with her career so that kind of legitimized her decision. Plus they knew her mother had health issues so they probably figure that was the only route for her.

From Gertie’s perspective, this family member was able to break cultural norms because 1) necessity required it and 2) she adhered to cultural norms that held greater weight, such as marriage. For Gertie however, she believed however, like Fener and many of the other women interviewed, that the only way for her to achieve the life she wanted was to assimilate. This was largely due to the extent to which her Romani family emphasized separation to a point that was impossible to veer even slightly outside their expectations.

When asked about the lives of other Romani today, if they were choosing the path she had taken, she had this to say:

I think some of them have assimilated but even the ones that have assimilated into the mainstream society, it still hasn’t changed their mindset, they probably still struggle with identity issues. There’s a real dichotomy of feeling guilty because you have broken the cultural norms but then you know I think they haven’t quite pushed all the way through the door.

Gertie acknowledged that even those who choose to assimilate carry with them an enormous amount of emotional baggage. These individuals may experience guilt regarding the choice they have made to move away from their culture and their identity. In addition, though they may appear outwardly assimilated, many of the traditional mindsights that they have been engrained with make it difficult to adjust to the new world in which they are trying to exist. Unlike many of the respondents, Gertie didn’t view integration as an option in her past though,
today, she identifies that she has begun to see that it’s possible to “take the good with the bad,” preferring to integrate the positive elements into her assimilated life.

Though Gertie and Fener believed the life they hoped to live required that they leave behind the culture of their childhood, others, like Ruby were exposed to both an integrated and separate lifestyle early on and yet, she choose, like Gertie and Fener, a path of assimilation, maintaining the shared belief that this was the only strategy that would enable her to have the life she hoped to have for herself and her children.

6.9 Social Norms and Individual Prospects

Ruby, in her 40’s, resides in the south east where she was raised. Unlike other Romani, Ruby resided in one place growing up. She has recently completed her degree and works in education. She is currently married to someone who is not Romani. Though she maintains relationships with Romani family members, she identifies that the majority of her friends are not Romani. She identifies that she rarely thinks about being Romani and identifies herself as White ethnically. In the past she has only belonged to community organizations that were not affiliated with the Romani community. She identifies that she has assimilated, that she is in the “Goja” culture.

Growing up, Ruby’s immediate family was more broad minded than her extended Romani family. Her parents encouraged education and supported the idea of going to college. She was allowed to interact with non-Romani and go to their homes. Her extended family accepted these friendships but expected she would make a traditional choice for marriage:

My great aunts and my grandmother wanted me to attend dances and stuff and fly me out Texas to meet other people within [our community]. That made me really angry, we had a large disagreement about that. Like many of the respondents, there existed for Ruby a traditional expectation that she would marry within her community. Her parents often deviated from the expectations of her
family, encouraging her to obtain an education before marriage. Despite her parent’s expectations, she observed the expectations surrounding women in her extended family, the expectations her female cousins could have for their future and she felt, even this was problematic.

Education is not valued...I don’t think it is the smartest decision for women to not be educated beyond the 7th or 8th grade. The husbands are not going to live forever, for a woman not to be an independent thinker you know, not being charge or your own destiny….just doing everything your parents say…Gypsy girls are so, they’re so obedient and subservient, I wasn’t raised that way I guess, I was raised to be an independent thinker and to think for myself and I don’t know I think they put the limitations on themselves…Intelligence in females is not a desired trait…I also think that they are uneducated a lot of times and when you have two uneducated parents living in poverty, I feel like for a child there is a lot of factors there working against them, poverty, socioeconomic status.

Ruby felt that many of the women in her family were without the means to live independently, lacking education and social skills to propel themselves forward into success. She views the cultural norms within her family as restrictive to women, leaving many of them without the means to care for themselves should traditional trajectory of marriage fail them. For Ruby this is problematic, something that needs to be addressed if the lives of these women are going to change.

As discussed in a previous chapter, Ruby choose to marry rather than complete her college education. She would go on to work in many fields possessing a high school diploma and a few certifications. Similar to Gertie she found that many of the cultural norms she had inherited did not prepare her for working within the world of the Gadje.

At the insurance company I worked for…I would come in and the people thought I was rude because I would not come in and smile and greet them but I was not taught to do that. You speak to people when you enter a room? I had never heard that. I didn’t greet people and they started talking about me right away. You know only really what you are taught as a child.
Though her parents encouraged her to achieve goals not traditional for the women in her family, she found that many of the cultural norms she learned growing up did not adequately prepare her for adult life because many were based on a perspective of separation from mainstream society.

Like Gertie, Ruby came away from her Romani upbringing with many negative perceptions of the cultural norms she was taught. Ruby believes that a life of assimilation is the answer for achieving the goals she set for herself and her children. Ruby does not believe that the traditional Romani way prepares women for the realities of life ahead of them. Ruby chose a life of assimilation over the integrated, or accommodated, life of her parents because she continued to see the negative effects of many cultural practices within her own life, even today.

Given the examples of Gertie, Ruby and Fener, it may be easy to jump to a conclusion that, like older generation of Romani, education may inevitably lead to assimilation for Romani woman however, other respondents painted a much different picture. Though raised with traditional values and largely assimilated, they view the integration of the Romani life into their mainstream practices as a possibility and view their cultural heritage with pride.

6.10 A Culture the Encourages Acquiring Knowledge

Phoebe is one of the respondents who looked back on the traditional disparities of her upbringing with both pride and appreciation. Today, in her mid-40’s, she resides on the East coast and, like her generational counter parts, she lives a largely assimilated lifestyle. Phoebe holds a bachelor’s degree and has taken courses towards completing a master’s. She does not move often for work and has many non-Romani friendships. She belongs to community institutions that are not affiliated with the Romani. She was previously married to a non-Romani
individual and when asked to identify herself racially she is most likely to say English Irish or French Swedish. All of these point to Milton Gordon’s definition of assimilation.

Despite the choices she has made to live an assimilated lifestyle, she has great appreciation for her cultural roots. Growing up, Phoebe had many friendships with individuals outside of her culture. Her family moved often due to work, which Phoebe viewed in a positive light. She believed that the constant relocation she experienced benefited her personal enrichment and her thirst for knowledge and education:

My culture allowed me to learn about being in a lot of different places with a lot of different cultures and a lot of different people. I think just the lifestyle of the Romanichal is an education in and of itself— in that you are adaptable and being adaptable you have to know a little bit and take in different things about different places and different cultures and take in expectations. You just kind of have that ability to adapt that way. At least that’s what I thought, I always thought it was a privilege to experience that and I think I brought these experiences with me to the classroom. It was knowledge to build on top the knowledge I learned in the classroom.

Though Phoebe felt that the lifestyle she experienced contributed to her success in the classroom, she witnessed many cultural expectations that made the pursuit of education obsolete among family members who continued to remain separate from working within the confines of mainstream system.

Some would barely go [to school] at all outside of elementary school. It was probably more like the guys, like my brother who quit… He quit because everyone around him quit…The boys from a fairly young age, they will go right in and work with dad and it will become a family business….So the education isn’t needed…more girls will graduate than guys.

Like Phoebe’s brother, many men and women adhered to cultural norms of the community in order to work and establish their family within the approval and acceptance of their community.

Despite what she observed around her, Phoebe received encouragement from her parents regarding education. Phoebe’s father died when she was in her late teens. She began
college but soon decided that the stress of college and her family life were too much and decided to take a break, going on the road with her family for a year. Following this year, she married someone outside of her community and returned to college to complete her degree. Through her many life experiences, Phoebe has chosen a life for herself defined largely by assimilation and yet, she has left the decision of being a part of the traditional practices of her family up to her children. She supported the decision either to assimilate into the culture of her traditional Romani family or to continue on the path that she has chosen. From Phoebe’s perspective, the appreciation for knowledge found within this community can allow for a lifestyle described by Margaret Gibson (1988), accommodating what is needed to survive in a modern economic system without full assimilation. Others, such as Vaidy, shared Phoebe’s views on accommodation.

6.11 A Shifting Generation

Vaidy, like Phoebe, is in her 40’s and looks back with appreciation and admiration of her Romani heritage. Vaidy lives in the North East, she holds a PhD and works as a professor at a well-known University. Vaidy’s life consists of a large number of non-Romani, non-White friends but also maintains connection with her Romani family. Her husband is not Romani. Phoebe identifies herself racially as Romani and is involved in much Romani activism. Phoebe appears to be living an integrated lifestyle when her life is examined within the context of Berry’s (1997) acculturation model. Given her upbringing, it is not surprising that she has held tightly to her Romani roots.

Vaidy lived in one town growing up. She did not live a traveling lifestyle as many of the other respondents in the study had. She had many friends from outside of her community. As for the expectations her family communicated to her about her life as a Romani, they were
more centered around personal behavior and integrity then on rules for or against assimilation, though themes of separation remained:

    That was a very big expectation, that I should maintain these boundaries. That I should take care of my family and be close with my family and not leave my family. Speaking Romani and I don’t know I think that is pretty much it. Devotion, dedication to my parents, to my cousins and maintain cleanliness and maintain the language.

    Vaidy did not experience many of the barriers to education that other respondents had discussed. For herself, she was pushed to achieve educationally and given the support she needed in order to do so. Vaidy acknowledged that there are many barriers in place for Romani, even today, to access education but, a push against education was not something she identified with.

    Here I am in my [my 40’s] I would have thought I would see a whole generation of educated people who would come after me and I haven’t seen that. So that really tells you something about how many of us are in the US who have access to higher education. or even finishing secondary school?

    Though Vaidy has not witnessed this entire generation of educated individuals, there can be no doubt that as a shift for this generation was occurring, it left the door wide open for the generations of women who were to come after them to pursue their educational goals. The last generation of Romani women interviewed were represented by women in their 20’s and 30’s. They represent the latest generation of adult Romani women, separated by several generations from ancestors who daily feared being run out of town or worse by local Gadje. These women were the outcome of the current generation of Romani parents, and their experiences reflected the shift in cultural norms and opportunities for women that began with their parents.

6.12 An Open Generation

    Josephine is in her 30’s. She resides mostly in the Southeast though she travels often due to her husband’s work. Josephine identified that she was taught few lessons regarding the life she could expect to have as a Romani women but, she stated, “I could easily see that the majority of
women were home makers.” No different from the generations before her, Josephine observed traditional roles for the women in her life.

Josephine was also taught traditional lessons about cleanliness, lessons described by many of the women interviewed, “As far as lessons, I was taught at a very young age to be very clean and take pride in my things and home. Cleanliness is very important to Romani people.” Though her family may have been traditional in the ways of cleanliness and gender roles. Josephine’s family was very much open to allowing her to have friends outside of her community, friendships she maintains to the present day.

Though she attended public school growing up, she left school to attend homeschool in the 10th grade and received her GED. Josephine identified that her parents were open to whatever would make her happy. No barriers were placed on what she was able to accomplish. When asked how she would identify herself racially, she laughed and stated, “I am very proud to say I am both Romani and Non-Romani, It’s just who I am.”

Though in some respects Josephine lives a very traditional lifestyle, traveling and homeschooling her own children, she views herself as someone who has integrated her two worlds in a way that is comfortable, a way that works. By leaving the door open to choose what she wanted for herself rather than forcing separation, Josephine was able to choose a path of integration. Because the option to choose her path in life was left open, Josephine never felt that she had to leave behind her community identity in order to accomplish the goals she had for herself. Josephine lives in what she describes as “The best of both worlds.”

From Josephine’s interview, it was clear she felt that women would not be forced to choose between their heritage and education if they were met with openness and support from their families. While traditional traveling lifestyles may not be conducive to a traditional
educational experience it doesn’t have to be a barrier and though women may be raised surrounded by women in traditional roles, these women can pass on many lessons from their own experiences that can empower their daughters to pursue whatever life they choose for themselves. These are the lessons that Josephine conveyed in her interview, providing support for the idea that choices for Romani women go beyond assimilation or separation alone, for Josephine, a middle ground exists.

Gayle, in her 30’s, grew up in home that closely resembled Josephine’s in many ways, a home that was open and supportive. Gayle remembered that she had many friends outside of her own ethnicity growing up, something she attributes to living largely away from the Romani community and having one parent who did not share a Romani heritage. Gayle was not exposed to the “traditional” Romani community until she was older and became curious about her heritage. Gayle was encouraged to pursue many opportunities and interests, to do what she wanted. She described her mother’s approach in this way:

She kind of already had the opportunity to make choices on her own and so she really wanted that for me to and so she was very encouraging for all kinds of things and all different opportunities which I am so thankful, she essentially said as along as we were doing something safe you know she was encouraging us to do.

Unlike many of the Romani women interviewed, Gayle was not restricted by being a women within her community because she resided largely away from them. Gayle was not exposed to the traditional gender roles in her immediate family that most of the women interviewed described. She did not move around growing up, her parents held permanent jobs that did not require a traveling lifestyle. From all appearances, Gayle’s immediate family had assimilated even into marrying outside of the Romani ethnicity, the second stage of assimilation according to Milton Gordon’s stage of assimilation (1964). Gayle possesses a college degree and partially attributes this success to her parent’s encouragement and support.
Despite the benefits of living within a largely assimilated family, as Gayle got older, she became interested in the life of “traditional” Romani and choose to live within one such community for a brief time. While there, she was exposed to a life much different from the one in which she grew up. She began to see gender differences between the men and women and the barriers that existed for the women in these communities, recognizing that the traditional ways of life may not be conducive to the education of Romani women.

The community I had for while was very traditionally conservative so there was a lot of things men could do that if women did it would be absolutely called into question but if men were doing it, it was totally accepted. It depends on the community and level of conservativeness… I would venture to guess if people were more open to educational opportunities you would see a major shift in men and women’s roles because a lot of times if women are dependent or if they are with their families of the men they marry. You don’t have a lot of power or agency…the only way women have that power in the community is if they are older….it can be very constricting I think.

Gayle saw the life of this traditional community as restrictive and identified that the traditional ideas discussed by participants, like Peaches, in her 80’s, are still in existence among some communities even today. Within these communities women are often restricted to the role of homemaker and mother, while for some this is a role they gladly fulfill, for others, this is the only option they are presented with when they come of age.

Gayle sees these traditional practices as largely problematic because this lifestyle prevents individuals from being able to pursue careers or education. Gayle identified the disparities that exist in career and education between those, like herself, who are largely assimilated and those who live within traditional Romani communities, those who prefer and isolated and separate lifestyle.

I work at a university but the point is I work for someone. I’m not having a fortune telling office or doing driveways or buying and selling cars or something like that which is more on your own type of thing…. 
Gayle referred to the jobs traditionally held by Romani, jobs that did not require a consistent schedule nor do they require working underneath anyone. Gayle viewed these types of occupation in a largely negative light:

It lends itself to instability. I mean you might go to an area and have a lot of money and then in winter its feast and famine. The instability is not contributing to an environment where you are going to send a kid to school. If you are on the road in the summer there are a lot of practical careers but there is a lot of getting back to what people in the community think it is also a form of control and people being scared to let go of what they know. It is the fear of the unkind. I think older people especially are weary of that because they see a lot of erosion of some of the traditional thing they value.

When asked if she thought women who live within Romani communities must leave their community and assimilate, Gayle answered passionately:

Well if the people or culture are going to force them to make that choice then yes but part if it is not having any support from your community that is some of the biggest issues. Some of the people haven’t even gotten past 5th grade I mean, forget about high school, high school is wow. I think there are ways people came access education but the barriers in their way are so great…sometimes they don’t have the support and they don’t have the resources.

For Gayle, Margret Gibson’s (1988) idea of accommodation without assimilation is a real possibility if communities could take hold of it. Gayle sees assimilation as unnecessary to education but only if communities will choose to support women in pursuit of it. Gayle identified that the lack of support was one of the greatest barriers to receiving an education in Romani Communities.

Though Gayle believes that traditional values and practices can largely be preserved, even when community members choose to pursue education, she, like others, also believes that there are some aspects that will and should be changed:

I think that there are aspects of traditional Romani culture that are not that good you know so I don’t think getting your daughter married at 15 or 16 is a good thing. Is it traditional? Yes. Is it good? No. I don’t think when you talk about tradition of what’s cultural you have to live up to this gold standard that its everything that makes community so great because I think there are a lot of thing that are not so great and I
think that is one of them. There are thing outside the culture that could be good. It is unfortunate that [we] are trying to tell somebody you have to make the choice between being a gypsy or being educated, that’s wrong. I don’t agree with that. I think if [we] want to preserve our culture and our language then educated is a way to that… it’s just we have a certain mindset about what education could or might do and it’s a lot of fear.

Gayle views the lives of Romani living traditional lifestyles, resisting education, as a culture in decline within the context of their social situation. As society and technology advance, these communities are being pushed further and further towards the margins of society, making traditional means of generating income almost obsolete. This creates even more barriers for education and work for women as well as men. Gayle believes that things must change in order for the state of the Romani to change. While she believes it is possible for these changes to take place, she acknowledges that these changes must take place from within the community itself:

I don’t want to sound like a pessimist but I want to be realistic and I don’t think the situation will get better till we do something about it and no one is going to come along and say yeah you know, I really should help Romani people. No one is going to do that unless we do it for ourselves.

She expressed tapping into an understood idea that Romani are invisible underserved minority in the United States. She believes passionately that because of the invisiability of the Romani and the marginalized treatment they have received worldwide, Romani must bring about change on their own if they hope to see a shift in the trajectory of future generations.

From Gayle’s perspective, a life outside full assimilation is possible for Romani communities without eliminating them from an educated life. The pursuit of educational achievement is not possible, in her eyes, with complete preservation of the traditional lifestyle. Like so many of the respondents within the study, Gayle believes an integrated lifestyle is possible, and potentially economically necessary, but only if change comes from within Romani communities themselves.
Of those from Gayle’s generation, Rachel was the youngest of the respondents, in her 20’s. Rachel was raised in the North East, close to her extended family in an area where Romani are widely recognizable. Like Gayle, growing up she had, and continues to have, friends who are from many different ethnic backgrounds. She identified that though her immediate family is ok with this, her extended family is “somewhat confused” by this choice. She believes that her extended family would probably much rather that she had only Romani friends. Though hesitant to say with 100% confidence, she identified that she probably would have greater connections with non-Romani friends if it weren’t for her family. Growing up, Rachel did not move often as many respondents have reported of themselves or other traditional Romani. Rachel is engaged to a non-Romani man, a decision her family had to learn to accept at first, they have since come to happily embrace.

Though Rachel possesses many ties outside of her Romani community, including her college education and work experience, she discussed that she thinks about being Romani often:

[I think about it] a lot, especially now. I think about it a lot and I try to be proud of it and I try to think, you know, what am I doing that is stereotypical and what is not stereotypical, am I being a good representation of my community? I think about that a lot.

Though much of Rachel’s lifestyle points towards assimilation, it was not difficult to see, as she told her story, that her family and heritage play a significant role in her life. Though her path has differed from other women in her family by going to college, their influence still directed the path she would take:

I wanted to join the military actually when I was in high school and I know that even my parents [didn’t like] that, it wasn’t something appropriate for woman to do. You would bring you know shame on our family if you did that. I just remember everyone was in an uproar about that so needless to say…
Even among a more liberally minded set of parents, rules of separation and appropriateness continue to be enforced. Rachel described how cultural norms have played out in the lives of other Romani relatives, “You know all of the other women in my family have not gone to college at all and they had kids very young and only one of them actually works outside the home.”

In spite of Rachel’s description of other women in her family, one might say that she and her parents are for more assimilated and non-traditional than her family but, for Rachel, this depends on who she is being compared with. She believes she may appear more assimilated when compared with some of her traditional family members while to others she may be seen as far more traditional. Either way, there is evidence in Rachel’s life that to some degree, assimilation has taken place. There has been a separation from the traditional ways of her family in order for her parents and herself to become educated and yet, she has not left the old ways or her identity behind. Like many other women in the study, Rachel’s life exemplifies that women can maintain strong ties to their identity and become educated and, though not all Romani ways of life are conducive to the education of women, one can still integrate these ways of life into behaviors viewed as “assimilation.”

6.13 Conclusion

The questions posed at the beginning of this chapter included: Do current cultural norms allow for the achievement of education? Are American Romani women who assimilate more likely to become educated? Given the many and varied perspectives represented in the study the answer to these questions proved to be complex with many considerations to take into account. Despite the variety of narratives, common themes did emerge.
Historically, cultural norms emphasized separation from the Gadje, this meant creating occupations that would allow them to exist outside their economic control. These occupations made Gadje education obsolete or difficult to achieve given their traveling lifestyle. As years progressed, and the traveling lifestyle became less common, attitudes towards Gadje influence remained the same, unsurprisingly given the continued prevalence of discrimination against Romani discussed in previous chapters. As a result, separation was widely emphasized and formal schooling, an institution of the Gadje, was not. Because many parents did not hold education beyond middle school, it was not emphasized for their children. Traditional gender roles made education an unnecessary achievement for many women.

Over time, occupations and traditional roles for women have begun to shift as more and more women have begun to acquire education out of necessity. Seeing the economic and personal stability that came through education, many women shifted their cultural values and began to pass them on to their own daughters. These daughters today believe that a much more open attitude toward education exists, and for women, an emphasis on education has emerged.

While suspicion and a wish to remain separate from the Gadje remains prevalent among many Romani, many now see that the accommodation of Gadje practices into Romani ways of life is possible. Though an entirely conclusive answer cannot be reached given the variation among Romani families and communities, one can hypothesize, based on the narratives of this study, that even among those living the most historically traditional lifestyle today, education is a possibility.

When seeking to answer the second question posed in this chapter, I reached a realization about the relationship between education and assimilation. Among respondents, women who assimilated were not more likely to be educated, women who became educated were
more likely to then assimilate. For a majority of respondents, education became the catalyst towards their assimilated lifestyle. For these respondents, separation was so firmly engrained in them from childhood, they saw life within their Romani community as an either/or choice. For other respondents, the openness to outsiders and support of educational achievement showed they need not entirely leave their Romani roots behind, electing instead for a mostly assimilated lifestyle, integrating the roots of their past into the life they have created.

Some of the women in the study would reply strongly in the affirmative when asked if assimilation was a necessary decision in the path towards education. Others would say that it isn’t necessary but that some parts of their identity must be left behind. All respondents would add the caveat that this does not have to be the case if a shift in cultural values occurs but that it is dependent on change within the Romani community and outside of it.

7 CONCLUSION

Worldwide, Romani are struggling to gain equality not only in their current lives but in the collective memory of groups who have been marginalized and victimized throughout history. To be excluded from the narrative of those who have been marginalized, for many, means to be overlooked in their modern day plight. Their plight has largely resulted from historical, structural oppression rather than the isolated choices of Romani today as many would choose to believe.

With so many Romani internationally raising their voices against the structural oppressions they continue to face, many countries have begun to take note of their plight. As previously discussed, the decade of Romani inclusion, ending in 2015, was declared as the decade in which European countries would end discrimination against the Romani people (Decade of Romani Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2012). The United States’ part in this
initiative was to serve in an observer status, doing little to acknowledge that these same individuals reside and experience a difficult plight within their own boarders.

World-wide April 8th is celebrated as International Roma day, meant to celebrate the culture of and bring awareness about the Roma people, a day that is unacknowledged in the United States (Szlaví, 2014). August 2nd is Roma genocide remembrance day, a day set to commemorate the events that occurred on August 2nd, 1944 at Auschwitz in which mass numbers of Roma were exterminated as part of Hitler’s final solution for the Roma people (European Youth Campaign for Society, 2010). While in the United States, Holocaust Remembrance Day is certainly a day that is widely acknowledged, Roma are often left without a voice in the remembrance, thus a day was created to acknowledge the loss of so many Roma lives.

Yearly, individuals gather at the United Nations in New York City to pay honor to those who were killed in the Holocaust and yet, yearly, Roma have struggled to have representation in the remembrance. Gracie, a respondent in her 60’s, described this yearly battle with those who would not wish to include the Roma:

We have such struggles at the UN for example and every year we have lobbied them to include us in their Holocaust remembrance and its every year, [Roma scholars and activists] have burned themselves out trying to change things here and they are immensely resistant and I feel strongly one reason they are immensely resistant is because they have a very European viewpoint of who the Roma are. You know, these poor terrible people who are often thieves and beggars.

Even in seeking to remember the atrocities committed against their own people, to be included in the narrative of atrocity and hope, they are often excluded because of the deep prejudice held against the Romani. Once again, the voice of this marginalized people is silenced.

Despite the attempts by those who wish to rid their countries and narratives of the Romani people there are those who acknowledge the plight they have faced. Gracie believes that
Roma must continue to speak out and raise awareness in places such as the United Nations. She recalled an event from a Remembrance Day she recently attended:

…I made a point of introducing myself as Romani and I had some interesting responses you know. That was the year that [a Romani scholar spoke] and she was a total magnet because all these people, they did not know and they didn’t have a clue because they didn’t understand. I watched one older man come up to her, he was very old, he came up and took her hand and he said, “I was at Auschwitz and I want you to know I remember the cries of the Romani camp.” There wasn’t a dry eye in the place but this is something we battle every year. This is the UN, they should know better, for them I have no pity. We have to pound them until they get the message.

Bringing visibility to the lives and history of Roma, according to Gracie, is the only way that a change can occur in their lives and in the mindsets of people and nations who are actively opposed to the Romani and their ways of life. Even the smallest act of acknowledging one’s identity of being Roma, such as what Gracie did at the Remembrance Day, can make a difference in raising the visibility of Roma. As discussed throughout this study, this smallest act of acknowledging identity, to Romani, is a difficult task, often steeped in fear.

Considering the acknowledgment of Romani identity in this light and the sometimes purposeful invisibility of Roma in the United States as a means of protection, I consider the collection of fifteen U.S. Roma narratives in once place an important step forward for raising Roma visibility. I encountered many challenges in being able to recruit respondents for this study, many unwilling to allow the life and identity they have been able to hide for so long to be so significantly exposed. With the exception of current reality television shows that only represent “Gypsies” in a stereotypical way, there exists practically nothing within the United States, scholarly or in popular media that has been able to access the personal narratives of Romani, men or women, so intimately. Certainly none exist that have collected so many historical narratives of discrimination and prejudice in traditional Romani lives in one place.
Beyond the premise of this study, exploring the role of assimilation in the education of Romani women, this study has given voice to the lived Romani experience in the United States. It provides insight into what being a Romani women means in all its multifaceted beauty. This study has been able to delve into the narratives of a people whose lives pass like shadows throughout history, people who leave little behind to give evidence of their existence. As many respondents stated, the days of silence must now be a thing of the past in order to combat the negative images that are being disseminated into society and to bring recognition of what Romani worldwide continue to face.

Though the life of the American Romani women, to some, may appear disconnected from what Romani face internationally, I did not find this to be the case. Most of the respondents’ lived experiences mirrored the lives of their Romani counterparts worldwide in some form. The narratives collected in this study exemplified the impact that structural oppression has on marginalized individuals regardless of the country in which they reside and also exemplify what Romani women have been able to accomplish by empowering themselves with education.

The experience of Romani Women is certainly reflective of the literature on women and minorities discussed in the introduction of this study. In order to better understand their experiences, I needed to delve beneath the surface of what individuals generally assume to be the lived experience of the Romani. In order to conduct an exploratory analysis of these lives, I had to strategically choose my site of incision. By choosing to uncover the impact that education had on assimilation in the lives of American Romani, I believed I would be able to address many issues at once, including education and assimilation but also issues of race, prejudice, economics and identity. Not only did my exploration of these narratives provide insight into these areas, it uncovered many more concepts that influence the experience of
Romani women in the United States and left me with greater questions to consider at the end of my analysis.

I found throughout my interviews that prejudice and discrimination were a significant part of the Romani experience in America as much as it is part of the Romani experience worldwide. I identified that historically, Romani have been victimized by overt actions of racism including violent acts, being run out of towns and being taken from their homes and placed in forced assimilation programs. Few to no social barriers exist that would protect the Romani. Similar to Romani worldwide, Romani in the United States have encountered significant prejudice within educational settings, most notably in higher education, a theme which often goes unexplored in literature regarding Romani internationally. I found that Romani continue to be resistant to assimilation due to prejudice encountered form the world of the Gadje.

I explored how Romani speak to their daughters about education and identified how the attitudes of the elders were continuing to influence the behaviors and attitudes of the younger generations. Romani views on education as a Gadje institution often persisted in the interviews and views that education was unnecessary to making a living continued to persist among those pursuing traditional Romani means of work. This was most notably true among older Romani who themselves had not completed a rudimentary education and had witnessed or been victimized by the prejudice of the Gadje. Younger generations of Romani see a shift in attitudes toward education occurring and, particularly those who have abandoned traditional means of work, encourage their daughters to pursue education to gain independence.

I found that many Romani women who had achieved education at the college level had assimilated away from their communities. This assimilation was often the result of attitudes about separation from the Gadje, women believed they were in an either/or situation. When
women assimilated they continued to hide their true Romani identity often due to the fear of
discrimination that had been instilled in them from childhood. Other respondents believed that an
integrated life, or one of accommodation without assimilation, between the two worlds was
possible though they acknowledged that something must be given up. Education was typically
the catalyst towards assimilation. Many respondents feel that if changes can come from within
the community, then women would not have to choose between their identity and education. For
now, many see assimilation as their only option however, I questioned if assimilation was truly
an option for any Romani.


Though on the surface it would appear that some Romani are able to assimilate due to
their seeming “Whiteness,” the lingering question that emerged from the interviews I conducted
was can Romani every fully assimilate? According to Milton Gordon (1964), the final stages of
assimilation occurs when prejudice against this group disseminates, for Romani who do not hide
their identity, this has not become a reality. Women who become educated overall do appear to
be more likely to assimilate when compared with those who are not able to achieve education.
Though this may be in reaction to constraining cultural norms, these norms have developed as a
reaction to historical prejudice that persists. Several examples of women who are living an
integrated form of acculturation were given throughout the study exemplifying that this is
possible if one is open to acknowledging their true identity on one end and letting go of some of
the traditional ways of their ancestors on the other.

In order for this life to be a possibility for Romani, the social climate of the
United States would also need to see a significant shift. Towards the end of each interview I
asked respondents about their current understanding of the lives of Romani in the U.S. Among
respondents, several answers continually emerged. Respondents identify that in America today, Romani continue to face discrimination. Romani are far more visible today due to stereotypical portrayals on reality shows which increases their vulnerability to prejudice and discrimination.

More and more Romani are finding their traditional ways of working and living harder to maintain, making it difficult to support their families or, at the very least, remain separate from the oppressive influence of the Gadje. Respondents agreed that the Romani struggle in America pales in comparison to that of the international struggle that is occurring but that their struggle also goes completely unacknowledged, making it difficult for others to see them as a marginalized minority.

I asked respondents to identify if life for Romani in the United States has gotten better or worse. A fourth of the respondents indicated that things, for many, have gotten worse. Gertie, whose story revealed she has largely assimilated, had this to say:

I think it has gotten worse for the ones that still have the traditional mindset. I don’t think they really know how to assimilate real well and it’s very difficult for them because they don’t know how to make a living.

Generations of Romani passing down messages to their children about remaining separate from the Gadje have ill prepared many for assimilating into their world and made many fearful to do so, fearing the possibility of what they may encounter. As previously stated, many believe that things have gotten worse due to the rise of stereotypes disseminated in U.S. media and little to no information to counter these stereotypes. Herein lies the necessity of the study I have conducted, a way to give agency to those individuals who wish to counter these stereotypes through the power of their own narratives.

Some respondents identified that most Romani fare the same today as in the days of their ancestors. Many respondents continue to face threats of violence, restricted access to
work and resources, discrimination and social stigma. Respondents identified that Romani remain misunderstood and largely uneducated due to social and structural barriers. Others identified that little is done to help the plight of the Romani in the United States which has contributed to the lack of change in their situation. Like Romani worldwide, they face a plight that is either unacknowledged or placed on the shoulders of the individuals rather than the historical rooted structural barriers that have led many to the place they find themselves in today.

About half of the respondents believed that things overall have improved. Some identified that many stereotypes have declined while education is on the rise. Others see that Romani have lives free from much of the racism that exists worldwide which provides them with greater opportunities to be socially mobile. Finally, these respondents believe that Romani have a greater understanding of what mainstream society requires of them and are more open to incorporating these things into their communities and lives.

The findings discussed throughout the entirety of this study pinpoint the fact that greater education needs to occur on two fronts, within Romani communities and within mainstream American society. Many of those interviewed are already doing much to contribute in both ways, by bringing programs such as GED prep courses online for Romani students and providing mentoring in their communities. Others are participating in activism that gives voice to a community that has been without adequate representation both in the U.S. and oversees. In addition, further research is needed to adequately represent Romani lives in order to counter the negative images being disseminated through not only reality television but music, books and movies as well. With limited number of Romani, and specifically Romani women, represented in academic settings in the United States, this may be difficult to accomplish.
Research that highlights the negative impact of popular stereotypical images and mechanisms for stratification against Romani in the United States would serve the community well. The powerful women interviewed in this study believe that change is possible, that Romani women may proudly hang on to their roots. Though already quoted earlier in this study, I believe these words, spoken by Gracie, are worth repeating and are representative of the women who choose integration over assimilation:

“Can you be a proud women and be educated? Watch us.”
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