

CARRITOS CHOCONES AND DODGEM CARS:
A PRELIMINARY COMPARISON BETWEEN VENEZUELAN AND
AUSTRALIAN FAIRGROUNDS

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International comparative studies are a crucial element of the ongoing theorisation of nomadic and Traveller education. This preliminary comparison between Venezuelan and Australian fairground people focusses on similarities and differences in their patterns of residence, occupational groups, organisational frameworks and relations with the broader community. The paper argues provisionally that itinerancy rather than business type appears to influence the marginalisation with which nomadic and Traveller education must engage, and suggests possible directions for future, more extensive research.

Introduction

Earlier in this journal the junior author of this paper presented a comparison between the education of Australian show and circus people (Danaher, 1999). That comparison concluded with the suggestion that such a discussion “might help to provide the foundation of future international comparative studies” (p. 29).

This paper is conceived as contributing to such “future international comparative studies”. The “*carritos chocones* and dodgem cars” of the paper’s title refer to the electrically powered miniature cars, generally with room for one driver and one passenger, that children and adults delight in crashing into one another at Venezuelan and Australian fairgrounds. They are a useful textual device for introducing this comparison: they are operated in the same way in each country but they have different names and they relate differently to the broader framework of the fairground.

As will become clear in the paper, we must emphasise at the outset that this comparison is preliminary, with more data needing to be collected in Venezuela and ongoing theorisation being required to take place. On the other hand, we believe that a provisional comparison is better than none at this stage of nomadic and Traveller education research. The educational significance of what follows lies in differences in both organisation and attitude and goes to the heart of the nature and understanding of itinerancy on which nomadic and Traveller education is predicated.

The paper is divided into five sections:

- the research projects
- patterns of residence
- occupational groups
- organisational frameworks
- relations with the broader community.

We conclude by arguing provisionally that itinerancy rather than business type appears to influence the marginalisation with which nomadic and Traveller education must engage, and by suggesting possible directions for future, more extensive research.

The research projects

The research project on which the Australian section of this international comparison is based has already been described at length (Danaher, 1999, pp. 24-25). A small group of researchers from Central Queensland University interviewed 131 fairground parents and children, home tutors and teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education between 1992 and 1996 in five different cities in Queensland. Team members adopted a collaborative approach to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Sultana, 1991), and implemented many of the elements of cooperative learning theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1998) in conducting and publishing the research. They also deployed a number of conceptual resources in theorising Australian Traveller education, the junior author's particular contribution to which relating mainly to aspects of marginalisation theory (de Certeau, 1984, 1986) and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984).

By contrast, the Venezuelan data reported in this paper derive from research at a much earlier stage. In 1999, the junior author, working with the aid of an interpreter, interviewed two fairground operators in the Venezuelan capital city Caracas, and both authors conversed informally with a small number of fairground people in the Venezuelan regional city Valencia. The questions were introductory and exploratory, and were designed to elicit similarities to and differences from Australian fairgrounds. The resulting data were limited by uncertainties of language in the case of the interpreted interviews, and by the fact that the researchers lacked the opportunity to establish the rapport and trust that developed over time with the Australian annual data gathering. Despite these limitations, which we fully acknowledge, we contend that some tentative conclusions can be drawn at this early stage of the international comparative research project, including some possible directions for further stages of that project.

Patterns of residence

With the qualifications noted above firmly in mind, we begin our comparison between Venezuelan and Australian fairgrounds with their respective patterns of residence. The marked disparity in these patterns derives from the fact that, while Australian fairgrounds follow the annual agricultural show circuits (Danaher, 1998, 1999), the Venezuelan fairgrounds that we visited are permanently located on their current sites, where they vary in size and degree of sophistication between a corner shop and a hypermarket. A few decades ago they were itinerant, but with the passage of time they shifted to permanent location. (Clearly it will be important to establish whether some Venezuelan fairgrounds in the rural areas are still itinerant, and if so how their patterns of itinerancy replicate or deviate from their Australian counterparts.) This difference means that, while Australian fairground people identify their caravans as 'home' (although many of them also own houses), the Venezuelans with whom we spoke live in urban or suburban dwellings in Caracas and Valencia.

This difference in patterns of residence, whereby Australian fairground people are itinerant and their Venezuelan counterparts live and work in fixed locations, is fundamental to the argument – preliminary though it is – advanced in this paper. We assert below that this difference is the principal factor in explaining why the Australians see themselves as far more marginalised from and by the broader community than the Venezuelans. Here we wish to focus on the forms of educational provision available to the two groups. For the Australians, the Brisbane School of Distance Education has until recently provided a specialised program for the fairground children, whereby teachers travel to selected sites along the show circuits to teach the children face to face and at other times facilitate their completion of distance education materials (Danaher, 1998, 1999). The Venezuelans whom

we interviewed indicated that their children attended local schools in Caracas and Valencia, where they enjoyed the same levels of educational access as other children.

This suggests that a continuum of educational provision, *albeit* a somewhat crude one, can be constructed to range from fairground children attending local schools, to teachers visiting some sites along show circuits, to a separate school being established to travel permanently with the children (as the Australians have recently been successful in requesting), to itinerant children relying exclusively on distance education because, as in the case of Australian circus people (Danaher, 1999), they do not follow predetermined circuits. Even though the first option – fairground children attending local schools – is not based on itinerancy, its relevance to nomadic and Traveller education lies in constituting a standard against which the other options can be measured. We mean by this, not that itinerant people need to conform to the ‘norm’ of fixed residence or else accept the consequence of inferior educational provision, but on the contrary that such provision needs to be sufficiently diversified and specialised to allow *all* patterns of residence to be accorded equitable standards of quality of educational provision.

Occupational groups

Occupational groups provide another marker of comparison between Venezuelan and Australian fairgrounds. In Australia, there are four such groups: members of the Showmen’s Guild of Australasia, who own the rides and stalls; ‘workers’, who help to operate those rides and stalls and who assemble and disassemble the equipment in each town; ‘itinerants’, who operate smaller stalls such as those selling novelty items; and ‘horsey people’, who are in charge of show jumping and dressage (Danaher, 1998, 1999). Although these groups are mutually dependent for their livelihood and there is considerable interaction and even

marriage among them, Guild members undoubtedly have the greatest levels of cultural and financial capital on the show circuits.

Given the different nature of their work, the Venezuelans, who operate only the rides and stalls, have only two occupational groups: owners and workers. This situation is similar to Britain, where fairground “society has an intriguing two-tier system” (Pullin, 1986, p. 64), according to whether the show people are owners or lessees of the rides and stalls. It also parallels to some extent the distinction among Australian circuses between ‘old families’ and ‘new blood’ (Danaher, 1999), except that the emphasis on performance rather than entertainment with circuses means that there is likely to be a higher degree of mutual dependence there than on the fairground. It seems to us that there is considerable difference—and distance – between owners and workers in Venezuela. One owner stated that, while owners were respected because of their contribution to the community (a point that we elaborate below), workers were often itinerant and therefore considered to be “like Gypsies” – that is, subject to suspicion and prejudice on account of their itinerancy. On the other hand, the same interviewee distinguished between permanent and freelance workers at his fairground: the former constitute the core of his workforce, and the latter are employed at weekends and during holidays as the need arises. In view of his emphasis on the importance of training reliable and trustworthy workers, he was likely to hold his permanent employees in higher esteem than the freelance workers.

This comparison between Venezuelan and Australian fairground occupational groups reinforces the importance of recognising the heterogeneity of itinerant people, particularly in relation to deciding whether and in which ways they are marginalised (Danaher, in press). Within itinerant groups there is clearly a broad diversity of cultural and financial capital, with resultant differences in access to educational provision and capacity to lobby for improvements to that provision. At the same time, the disparities between the non-itinerant

owners and the itinerant workers on at least some Venezuelan fairgrounds strengthen our tentative hypothesis about the marginalising effects of itinerancy on those fairgrounds. It is crucial that both those disparities and those effects are allowed to take ‘centre stage’ in theorising and implementing nomadic and Traveller education.

Organisational frameworks

With regard to organisational frameworks, the Venezuelan and Australian fairgrounds are similar in that they are private enterprises and family businesses. The Australians trace their family connections with fairgrounds over several generations, with the result that there is simultaneously ‘friendly rivalry’ within families and a ‘closing of ranks’ against outsiders. This ‘friendly rivalry’ extends to whether particular individuals travel on the more or the less lucrative show circuits and where they are positioned at specific sites along those circuits. Similarly, the Venezuelans with whom we spoke emphasised the fairground as a strong family business that they would be pleased to have their children enter.

The principal difference in organisational frameworks that we discerned was the absence of a Venezuelan equivalent of the Showmen’s Guild of Australasia mentioned earlier. The Guild has played an indispensable role in the internal regulation of business matters on the show circuits, as well as in representing fairground people to show societies and political decision makers (Broome with Jackomos, 1998; Morgan, 1995). The Guild was also highly instrumental in lobbying for the specialised education program for fairground children implemented by the Brisbane School of Distance Education (Danaher, 1998, 1999), as well as more recently for a separate school. Our Venezuelan respondents indicated that, while they meet their peers from time to time, they are independent and separate business people with no need for an overarching organisation such as the Guild.

This suggests that, as with educational provision for itinerant people, there is something of a continuum in organisational frameworks for those people. This appears to range from the Showmen's Guild of Australasia (or its equivalent in Great Britain), which exercises considerable lobbying power on behalf of and resolves disputes among its members, to the Circus Federation of Australasia, which is younger and has less lobbying power that is directed mainly at countering opponents of exotic animals in circuses (Danaher, 1999), to the situation in Venezuela where there is apparently no representative organisation. Both the Guild and the Federation evolved in response to the need for their members to speak with 'one voice' on a whole range of issues associated with their livelihood. One point that we clearly need to explore in Venezuela is whether the apparent absence of a representative organisation reflects the higher capital and status of fairground people in that country, with consequently less pressing need for specialised educational provision. If that is indeed the case, it underscores yet again the enduring links among itinerancy, marginalisation and agency that frame nomadic and Traveller education provision and research.

Relations with the broader community

The final element of our comparison is relations with the broader community. Repeating the point about heterogeneity that we noted earlier, we need to emphasise that such relations obviously vary considerably from one individual and group to another. A Venezuelan fairground proprietor, like a Guild member in Australia, is more likely than a worker in either country to have access to the cultural and financial resources that facilitate acceptance and approval by non-fairground people. This in turn gives them a wider variety of choices in the education of their children, including opportunities to send their children to boarding schools or non-government schools. An important question about education in that

context is whether it replicates those existing inequities or contributes to improved life chances for all fairground people, regardless of occupational group.

For us, the fundamental difference in the relations of the Venezuelan and Australian fairground people with the broader community derives from the fact that the Venezuelans are not itinerant. The Australians, including Guild members, speak often and at length about their perception that the wider society mistrusts and fears them on account of their itinerancy (Broome with Jackomos, 1998; Danaher, 1998; Morgan, 1995) – a situation that is partly encapsulated in the usually complex and sometimes tense relations between the Guild and the agricultural show societies with which they have to negotiate their itinerant circuits. They vary considerably in their response to this attitude; some state outright that they are fairground people and take their business elsewhere if they encounter prejudice, while others prefer not to reveal their occupations and simply say that they are ‘passing through town’. By contrast, the Venezuelans whom we interviewed claimed to feel fully integrated members of their local business communities, partly in recognition of their important contributions to the economies of those communities. One respondent discussed a commemorative plaque received by his relative for helping his local Rotary Club (a well-known service organisation) to instal a community resource. It is probably difficult for Australian fairground people to belong to that kind of service organisation because of the rules pertaining to attendance at meetings. (On the other hand, in the Netherlands the junior author was shown some trophies awarded to a young Dutch fairground proprietor by the town council where the fairground was located, apparently for having the best established stall. This fact, suggestive of fairground–town links that do not apply in Australia, is also worthy of further research.)

Our tentative inference from this comparison of relations with the broader community is that the marginalisation with which fairground people are undoubtedly faced in Australia – and also in other countries such as Great Britain (Pullin, 1986) – derives from their itinerancy

rather than from the nature of their occupations. Clearly this proposition needs a great deal of supplementary research to examine it in a variety of contexts in Venezuela. If it is the case, however, what is its significance? Firstly, we might be accused of stating the obvious – ‘everyone knows’ that itinerancy is marginalising. Our response would be that it is always helpful to have empirical evidence rather than unresearched suppositions. Secondly, it would suggest possible grounds for action in terms of promoting more positive understandings of the multiple experiences of itinerancy. In other words, this kind of confirmation could be useful to add to the ongoing efforts to change social attitudes through education. Thirdly, and in relation to education, such a confirmation could be significant in turning attention to the continuum of educational provision that we suggested early in this paper, and thereby underscoring the need for such provision to exhibit as much diversity and heterogeneity as the experiences of itinerancy itself.

Conclusion

We end this paper as we began it, by stressing the tentativeness of our discussion. Nevertheless, we believe that this preliminary comparison between Venezuelan and Australian fairground people in terms of their patterns of residence, occupational groups, organisational frameworks and relations with the broader community has been instructive, if only as a starting point for future research.

With regard to possible directions for that research, we indicated above that we need to confirm the extent to which the Venezuelans’ living and working in permanent locations applies to all or most fairground people, and in doing so to trace the demographics of those in the fairground industry who do travel regularly. We need also to investigate the apparent absence of a representative organisation for fairground people, and its implications for the

capital and status of those people in Venezuelan society. In addition, we need to broaden the design and implementation of our research project to provide a methodological means of placing interview statements by fairground proprietors in the broader context of the industry as a whole.

Most significantly, we need to explore ways of highlighting the disparities and heterogeneity of Venezuelan fairground life, including in relation to educational provision for fairground people in that country. We need to do that because it is important in its own right, as a valuable element of Venezuelan cultural history and life. Yet we need to do it also because of the contribution that it can make to understanding and theorising nomadic and Traveller education at an international level. It is in that spirit that we offer this comparison – for all its tentative provisionality – between the *carritos chocones* and the dodgem cars of the Venezuelan and Australian fairgrounds.

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