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Short Article

‘A great pity to think of her going on the roads’: Trauma understanding and Scottish Gypsy/Traveller childhood in out-of-home care

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Abstract

Scottish Gypsy/Traveller children have a longstanding history of state intervention, yet little is known about their experiences of out-of-home care (OHC) and how these experiences are represented in the records that follow them through life. This article examines the child welfare records of Martha Stewart, a Scottish Traveller and co-author, who was removed from her parents and placed in OHC in the 1950s. Using critical documentary analysis, we explore how family relationships, cultural identity, belonging and continuity were represented in the institutional record. The analysis shows how professional judgements and racialised classifications acquired authority, while the accounts of family and community were marginalised. As an adult, these records have become enduring artefacts of Martha’s life story, influencing how she understands her family, identity, belonging and the decisions made about her care. Returning to these records as an adult has also been re-traumatising, reopening experiences of grief, separation and loss. To help prevent or minimise similar harms for children and care-experienced adults in the future, we introduce a relational soil model for trauma-informed case recording. The model encourages practitioners to consider how records can either disrupt or sustain the relationships, cultural connections and sense of belonging that help children make sense of who they are, where they come from and the lives they have lived.

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Introduction

Scottish Gypsy/Travellers, known to themselves as Nawken (Fell, 2026), have longstanding histories, identities and cultural connections to Scotland (Shubin & Swanson, 2010). They are recognised as a distinct ethnic group and protected from racial discrimination under the UK's Equality Act 2010 (Riddell, 2022), although legal recognition has not removed enduring inequalities (Watson et al., 2025).

These inequalities have historical roots. Legislation and child welfare policy have contributed to racialised constructions of Scottish Gypsy/Traveller families, particularly where travelling practices were understood as requiring regulation or intervention (Allen, 2016; Clapton, 2009). The Reformatory and Industrial Schools Act (Scotland) 1854, Trespass (Scotland) Act 1865 and Children Act 1908 formed part of a wider regulatory context in which travelling lifestyles could be interpreted through ideas of neglect, disorder and parental inadequacy (Shum, 2003). Within this context, Scottish Gypsy/Traveller children were removed from their families and communities as part of broader processes of regulation, assimilation and social control (Scottish Human Rights Commission [SHRC], 2026).

Despite this history, we know remarkably little about the experiences of Scottish Gypsy/Traveller children in out-of-home care (OHC), or how these experiences have been recorded and carried forward into adulthood. Contemporary Scottish administrative data make the scale of OHC involvement difficult to establish. With notable exceptions, including McPhee (2021) and the autobiographical accounts of Whyte (2009) and Reid (2008), empirical research on Scottish Gypsy/Traveller children with care experience remains scarce.

This gap matters for policy relating to out-of-home care and for Scotland's commitment to trauma-informed practice. The national trauma framework (NHS Education for Scotland, 2017) asks what happened to a person and how services can respond safely while avoiding re-traumatisation. For Scottish Gypsy/Traveller children, whose lives have been shaped by a long history of state intervention, however, this question may be insufficient. As Allen (2015) argues, child welfare services must also consider how placing a child in care may contribute to trauma, how relationships, identity and belonging may be disrupted, and how these experiences may be carried forward into adulthood.



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Child welfare records represent important artefacts of a child's history and life story (Hoyle et al., 2019). The Promise, Scotland's commitment that children in care grow up 'loved, safe and respected' (Independent Care Review, 2020, p.18), calls for records children can recognise as their own. Yet little is known about how the lives of Scottish Gypsy/Traveller children placed in OHC have been represented in these records. This gap in knowledge limits our understanding of how institutional records may contribute to, or mitigate, the longer-term traumatic effects of OHC.

This article addresses this gap through the life story of Martha Stewart, a Scottish Traveller and co-author, who was removed from her parents and placed in OHC in the 1950s. Drawing on critical documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009), we examine her child welfare records alongside her retrospective account of reading them as an adult. Using Massey's (2005) understanding of place as constituted through social relationships and histories, we explore how family relationships, cultural identity, belonging and continuity were represented within the institutional record. We also draw on McElwee's (2021) work on soil, care and cultural identity. From this analysis, we introduce the Relational Soil Model to extend trauma-informed practice.

Methods

The child welfare records analysed in this article belong to Martha and document how child welfare services represented her childhood and family. The records comprise a bundle of legal and social work records dating from 1958 to approximately 1968, alongside a retrospective account Martha wrote after reading them.

By combining critical documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009) with Massey's (2005) relational concept of place, we moved beyond treating records as passive artefacts. Instead, we analysed how they constructed and represented six aspects of Martha's life: family, community, cultural identity, belonging, continuity and the institutional environment.

Martha's responses to the records formed an important part of the analysis. Her handwriting runs through the margins of each record, responding directly to descriptions of her family. When asked in sensemaking sessions why she had written these responses, she explained: 'I didn't want to forget how I felt when I read it for the first time. It was the emotion'. The records and Martha's account were

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therefore treated as situated and incomplete forms of knowledge developed, in part, through the analysis presented herein.

Positionality

The first author is a Nawken social anthropologist and restorative practitioner; he brought a restorative perspective to the sensemaking process. The second author, a British social work academic, contributed professional and research experience of social work, child welfare and structural inequality. Martha, the third author, had interpretive authority over how her life was represented in this article. Where our readings of the records differed, hers took precedence.

Ethics

Martha is a co-author, not a research participant, but because her records and words also form the data, we report how her consent was sought. Consent was ongoing throughout the sensemaking and writing process. Martha decided which of her records were shared, how her words were presented and who was included. Martha chose to be named as an affirmation of her authorship and agency.

Findings

The analysis identifies three interconnected processes of 'institutionalised evidence', 'professional classification and judgement', and the 'racialised classification and symbolic power'.

Institutionalised evidence

In 1958, Martha was taken from a camp in the North-East of Scotland, where her family had been living nomadically with relatives. She was removed and placed into care at the request of a local Inspector for the prevention of cruelty to children, after he claimed her parents were 'not exercising proper care and guardianship'. The petition gives her address as 'Tinkers Camp', 'Tinker' was a common, now offensive, term for Scottish Gypsy/Travellers. Therefore, before any thorough assessment had taken place, the record had already named the ethnic identity of her family. Martha has written at the top of this document: 'THE NIGHT WE WERE TAKEN'.

The stated reason was that her parents were 'meantime in prison' for breach of the peace. An offence of being drunk in charge of the children was also recorded, but 'for some reason, this charge was not proceeded

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with.' Martha's margin note reads: 'My parents were not in prison they were put in jail while we were grabbed'. She believes 'They were looking for any excuse to take the children'. The file cannot settle this, but it does show the grounds for removal shifting over time. At committal in January 1959, the recorded reasons were housing that was 'hardly suitable' and parents who 'have not normally settled down'. Martha responds to both points in her margin notes, explaining 'they are Travellers'.

The record contains few uncontested facts and no recorded interviews with the parents, children or extended family. What can therefore be established as an institutional 'fact' is limited to what was observed, recorded and considered relevant by those involved in the child welfare and legal processes. Martha's retrospective account brings a different form of knowledge. She always knew she was fostered, but as she grew older, her questions grew too:

> As I got a little older, I started to give more thought to this mystery couple who apparently had something to do with me. My curiosity grew about this couple, who were my 'parents' too, but I could not understand why the rest of my friends in school did not have another set of parents themselves.

The records show that days after the children were removed, an Area Officer met Martha's grandmother at the encampment. She had washed the children's clothes and agreed to keep the family's 'clothing, tent and bedclothes'. She appears in the file as a keeper of belongings, but never as a possible carer. Beside this, Martha has written: 'She didn't know she would never see us again'. Her granny, Martha says, 'was never told' and 'would've been petrified of authority'. Her social worker later told her that today they would have asked a responsible adult to look after her, 'that would've been my granny'.

Professional classification and judgement

Professional judgements about the family's circumstances are evident throughout the records. Police and social work described the children as 'in a dreadful state of filth' and 'extremely frightened when taken to the Police Station'. After talking with the police officer, the children's officer judged that 'it seemed quite a bad case'. These were not simply descriptions of circumstances but judgements about cleanliness, care and what constituted an acceptable living environment.

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Following their release from custody, the parents attempted to appeal the decision to place their children in OHC and to maintain or regain involvement with them. In August of 1959 the Children's Officer recorded that Martha's mother 'has been in touch with me by telephone on several occasions'. She further wrote of 'frequent requests' to have the children returned, the officer judging that 'it seems a great pity to think of her going on the roads with her parents' and that 'in many ways I would feel sorry to see them going back to the surroundings from which they came'. Identity and mobility were therefore incorporated into judgements about parental suitability, suggesting that being identified as 'Tinkers' and living 'on the roads' were treated as relevant to assessments of parenting. When Martha's family left the town, officers wrote:

> It would look as if they are probably on the road for the summer. We will no doubt hear from them again in the winter…the only difficulty seems to be that the parents might try and get them home.

A later review, written after Martha's father's death in 1968, rewrote this history. The record describes her father as 'a vagrant of drunken degenerate type'. It states: 'Mother not in touch since children committed to care and whereabouts not known'. Martha has written on the record, 'compare this to page 1'. It seems her mother's calls and requests had been erased. The later review also expanded the account of the 1958 incident, adding an upset pram and a child 'nearly smothered', calling it 'one of many such incidents'. None of this appears in the contemporaneous note. Of this review, Martha says: 'It's the lies,' she explains, 'they would never have dreamt I could've ever read this.'

Martha's retrospective account illustrates how such judgements were experienced. She recalled asking to meet her parents and being told:

'No, we don't know where your parents are as they move about too much'. When I got older it was, 'Why are you bothered about your mother and father, they are just degenerates.'

Her response, 'So, what does that make me!', captures the difficulty of reconciling professional descriptions of her parents with her own developing sense of self. When her mother died, the social worker told her foster mother it was 'the best thing that could have happened'. In her retrospective account, Martha responds: 'For whom!!!'. When she later

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applied for her file, she was told that today she would have been allowed to meet her parents. By then, however, both had died in their thirties. She had not been informed of either death or supported to attend their funerals.

Importantly, Martha does not present her former social worker simply as uncaring. When she later introduced her son to the social worker, she reflected that the social worker's actions were motivated by concern for children, although 'misplaced at times', particularly in preventing her access to her parents. These classifications are significant because they were produced within institutions with the authority to define and classify family life. Once recorded in legal and child welfare documents, professional judgements could acquire symbolic power, shaping how the family was officially understood.

Racialised classification and symbolic power

The racialised character of the record is also suggested by how the children were positioned in relation to an 'ordinary' childhood. When Martha was two years old, she was taken to see Santa Claus 'so that they would have some of the experiences of ordinary children'. While this may have been intended positively, the reference to 'ordinary children' constructed a distinction between their childhood and that understood by professionals to be normal or desirable. This is further evidenced when she is described as one of the 'tinker children' who 'would now certainly not appear to be other than quite normal children belonging to a very normal home'. Martha's margin note responds with sarcasm: 'Thank goodness for that!' She reflects: lines like this 'imply I wasn't 'normal' before…I wasn't described as a tinker anymore after a few years in care'. But at school she vividly remembers other children singing 'tinky, tinky, tarry rag…', explaining 'It made me feel sick and I got frightened they'd find out'. Martha explains she grew up 'in two worlds':

> I always felt like a fraud inasmuch I was neither a settled person nor Traveller person. I was a bit of both, and that bothered me…I wanted to look like someone too, that's how you know you belong, right? I was not one thing or the other.

Meeting her birth parents or extended family was therefore important to her as a means of understanding her identity:

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> The only way I could sort that out was to meet my natural parents or some of my natural family to see if I was physically and mentally like them in some way. I was grateful for a very loving home but you, the authorities, told me I had another family and I would very much like to identify with them also if it was possible. I wanted to see if I looked like them, sounded like them and to see if they loved me too.

In this excerpt, Martha illustrates how the separation of children from their families can also become a separation from aspects of identity and belonging. Martha's later reflection that she is 'a natural wanderer and always will be' suggests the continuing significance of identity to her sense of self, despite being raised in OHC and separated from her family and community. As Martha explains, she wants social workers and police officers to understand how trauma 'can be created by the least statement'. She does not know what her mother looked like. For Martha, the consequences of removal were not only located in the loss of family and community, but also in the meanings recorded about her and carried forward through her life.

Discussion

This article adds to the limited evidence on Scottish Gypsy/Traveller experiences of OHC. Through Martha's child welfare records and life story, we show how her childhood, family and relationships were recorded and interpreted, and how these institutional accounts have continued to shape her understanding of family, identity and belonging. Her experience also illustrates how records created during childhood can become living artefacts of a person's life story, encountered again in adulthood and capable of reopening experiences of removal, loss and trauma.

The article indicates that child welfare records are not passive accounts of family life but influential constructions of it. In Martha's records, professional knowledge acquired authority to define family circumstances, parenting and childhood, while the relational and cultural conditions surrounding her life received less attention. What was recorded became what was known. Stereotypical assumptions acquired the appearance of fact, becoming embedded in the institutional account of Martha and her family and reproduced through subsequent decision-making. Each record therefore became a site through which racialised assumptions could

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acquire authority and persist over time. For Martha, encountering these accounts as an adult demonstrates how institutional records can continue to shape understandings of childhood, family and identity. This finding has implications for trauma-informed practice, requiring attention not only to accuracy, but to whose knowledge is privileged, what is made visible or invisible, and how records may affect children and families across the life course.

Informed by Massey's (2005) and McElwee (2021), we have used the findings presented above to develop the Relational Soil Model. Instead of treating records as passive archives, the soil metaphor focuses on the living relationships, cultural traditions, and institutional contexts embedded in documentation. A central premise of the model is the knowledge that child welfare records either sustain a child's story through accurate, respectful narrative or stifle it through judgemental and deficit-based framing. Encouraging critical reflection and evidential recording, the model guides practitioners across six core conditions to help ensure that decisions and records consistently promote positive growth by championing accuracy, inclusion, race equality, long-term stability and belonging (see Figure 1).

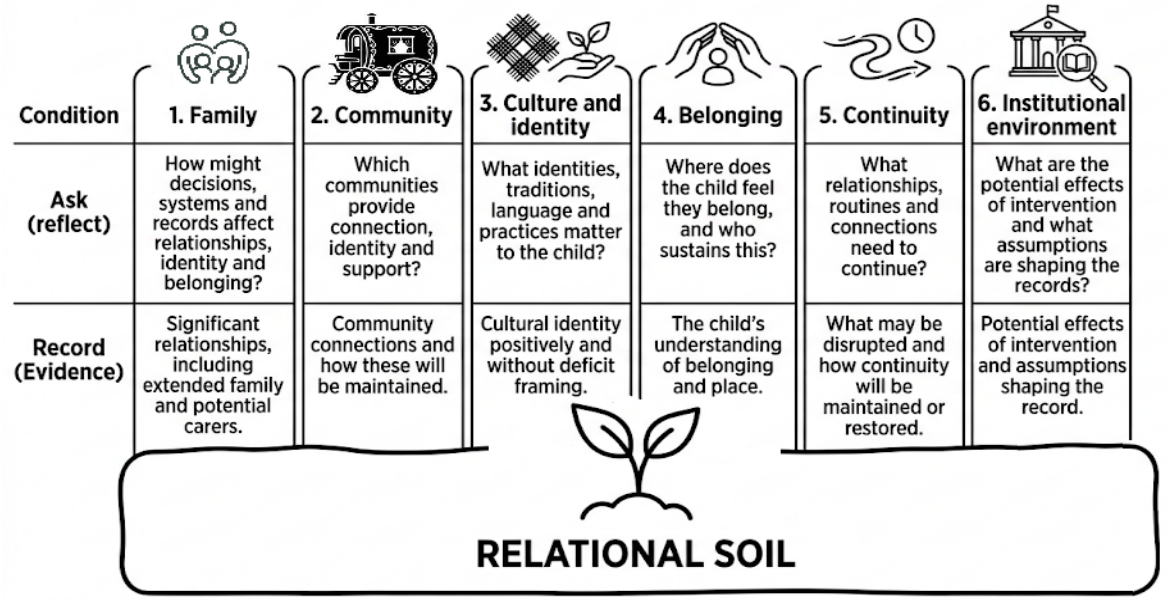

Figure 1: Relational Soil Model

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The Relational Soil Model extends Scotland's trauma-informed approach, which emphasises relationships, safety, trust, collaboration, empowerment and preventing re-traumatisation (NES, 2017), by bringing the institutional record into view. It also supports the Promise's commitments on records (Independent Care Review, 2020). Although The Promise recognises that care-experienced people will read their records later in life; critics have argued the care review gave too little attention to race, with The Promise Scotland acknowledging the need for a stronger anti-racist lens (Goodwin, 2025). Our Relational Soil Model brings that lens to recording. It asks practitioners to consider not only what happened to a child, but how their relationships, culture and history are represented, whose knowledge is given authority, and how these representations may be encountered later in life. Recording therefore becomes part of relationship-based and anti-racist practice rather than a neutral administrative task.

For Scottish Gypsy/Traveller children, the model requires practitioners to look beyond risk, deficit-based assessments, and immediate placement needs. Looking also to the relationships and cultural connections that provide continuity, stability, permanence and security before, during and after OHC. It also requires records to preserve, rather than overwrite, the child's connections to family, community, culture, ethnicity, identity and place. In this sense, the Relational Soil Model is not an additional assessment tool but a way of changing what practitioners attend to when they assess, record and plan care. Grounded in Martha's experience, its purpose is to ensure that children's histories and identities remain visible within the records that may follow them through childhood and into adulthood.

Limitations

This study is based on the historical records of one person and the retrospective account of one co-author, therefore cannot establish how representative her experiences were of Scottish Gypsy/Traveller children more broadly. The historical archive is also incomplete, with limited recorded perspectives from the children, parents and wider family. Martha's retrospective account provides an important counterpoint to the institutional record, but it necessarily reflects her later-life recollection and interpretation of childhood experiences. These limitations reinforce the need for further research combining historical and contemporary

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administrative data, with the testimony and lived experiences of Scottish Gypsy/Traveller care-experienced people and communities.

Conclusion

This article has shown how one Scottish Gypsy/Traveller's experience of OHC was shaped not only by separation from family, but also by the professional judgements and racialised classifications through which her childhood was recorded and remembered. The relational soil model brings family, community, cultural identity, belonging, continuity and the institutional environment more explicitly into trauma-informed practice.

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