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Racialisation, the EU Referendum result and sentiments of belonging in the UK: a consideration of Roma populations

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a qualitative study with migrant Roma communities in South Yorkshire, UK. The study was undertaken shortly after the 2016 European Union membership referendum in the UK. It finds that while hostility towards the studied Roma population did increase immediately after the resulting Leave vote, their experiences of racialisation can be situated more clearly in how the result engendered a shift in the expressions and understandings of their own place and position, with their particular histories as EU migrants of Roma heritage. In doing so, it adds to the evidence of how racialisation is manifest for such groups within this period. While acknowledging the specificity of these experiences, the article also argues that Roma share some features with the experiences of other EU migrants, also situated in the Leave period of social, cultural and geopolitical uncertainty.

KEYWORDS

Belonging; EU Referendum; identity; racism; Roma

Introduction

Arguably, the UK's 2016 Referendum on EU membership (henceforth: Referendum) was a key turning point for all migrants, many of whom reported changes in both their experiences of discrimination and awareness of citizenship status (Gonzales and Sigona 2017). Immigration was undeniably a central theme in the Referendum campaign. The anti-(im)migrant message was core to claims about sovereignty and the securitisation of the UK's borders. For example, the argument that the EU immigration system was unfair and detrimental to the working opportunities of British(born) citizens was a common theme, and much of the focus was directed at EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) living and working in the UK. With its racialised and xenophobic undertones, it not only supercharged the link between 'race' and migration in popular and political narratives but research has shown that these themes featured strongly in motivations behind the Leave vote (Patel and Connelly 2019).

While a number of studies have identified racialising processes affecting migrant Roma in the UK (Humphris 2018) and reviewed the situation of Roma around the Referendum (Nagy 2018; Richardson and Codona 2018), to date, only Clark (2020) has specifically focused on the racialising dimension of the Referendum on Roma migrants in the UK. This article further redresses this omission. In retrospectively examining qualitative data collected in 2016, from a series of focus groups conducted shortly after the Referendum vote, we report on the experiences of Roma communities in South Yorkshire – a region where almost two-thirds (61.56%) voted to leave the EU, higher than the national average of 53.4%. It is argued that the period around the Referendum,

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particularly that immediately after the result, provides an opportunity to observe with great clarity how the past racialised experiences of Roma continue to shape their sense of belonging in UK society. This article discusses the impact of the Referendum, and how past experiences of discrimination shape Roma plans for the future. In doing so, we draw attention to both the similarities and differences of their racialised experiences with other EU migrants. In doing so, this article makes an important contribution to the literature.

Roma, the UK and the Referendum

Despite efforts to address Roma discrimination via international policy frameworks, such as the 'Decade of Roma Inclusion' (Rorke, Matache, and Friedman 2015), Europe's Roma continue to experience anti-Roma hate, racism and xenophobia (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020). Kóczé and Rövid (2017, 684) note that Roma are subjected to a form of 'double discourse' in neoliberal Europe, where on the one hand, there is the promotion of integration, rights and equal opportunities of Roma, and yet on the other hand, there is a failure to address the structural violence and social insecurity they face.

It is argued Roma have been overtly 'racialised' and presented as the pre-eminent European minority, perhaps unintentionally reinforcing their 'otherness'. Studies of Roma have revived the explicit centrality of race as inherent in the very systems and processes of European national and transnational governance of the community (e.g. Yildiz and De Genova 2018). Endemic racial discrimination and exclusion in CEE led some to conclude that Roma had little choice but to migrate when the opportunity arose – a situation which Yildiz and De Genova (2018) have described as 'unfree migration', and Van Baar (2015) as 'forced mobility'.

The accession of 10 CEE states to the EU in the 2000s led to large-scale migration to western member states. This population movement included Roma communities, who arrived in the UK over the past 15 years in relatively large numbers.[1] A considerable number of studies have outlined Roma settlement patterns in the UK. These have included local authority profiles such as those produced by Manchester, Sheffield and Rotherham, as well as academic analyses. Initial residency sprung from a combination of earlier asylum locations, but populations grew rapidly through the movement-related kin networks, often from discrete areas in the country of origin. For example, many respondents interviewed by Christian et al. (2019) in Loughborough came from Bihor and Sâlaj Counties, in North-West Romania, and in Manchester many Romanians, came from the Tandarei and Fetesti in Ialomita province (Davies and Murphy 2010).

Roma positions and experiences in the UK should be of considerable interest to scholars of critical race studies, not least because of the parallel debates occurring in both Roma and migration studies over the same period. Some such as Weymss and Cassidy (2017), Humphris (2018) and Grill (2018) have explored how racialisation specifically impacts on Roma migrants in the UK. Grill (2018) argues that research, policy and activism that addresse the everyday racial discrimination facing Roma, while powerful and necessary, neglect the processes whose structure and operation (or 'governmentality') intrinsically penalises and 'racialises' them, that which also drives state-enabled anti-Roma hostility (Lane and Smith 2019).

Critical race studies in the UK challenge the notion of the nation's progress to a society that claims to have advanced beyond ethnically determined discrimination. These studies argue that processes of ethnic discrimination and racialisation remain, but are delivered in newer ways, disguised behind ostensibly rational discourses around topics such as migration (and its impact on labour, wages and employment opportunities), national values, cohesion, inclusion and integration. They may often appear objective and based on rational concern, but in reality are framed to negatively portray specific racial groups (Genova and Nicholas 2017). In other words, they continue to ethnically define and racialise them whilst simultaneously claiming a 'post-race' society. This was underlined by research drawing on the lived experiences of Roma living in areas across the UK in a study prior to the Referendum (Brown et al. 2016).

Unlike their experiences in the period of economic downturn following the 2007/08 financial crash and leading up to the Referendum, many EU migrants reported some positive experiences of being welcomed, especially in terms of labour provision (Lima, Wright, and Philomena 2009). However, subsequent research has usefully illuminated the varied experiences of different EU migrants around the Referendum period, highlighting how it has been a source of anxiety and anguish especially for those who have made parts of the UK their long-term home (Rzepnikowska 2019; McCollum 2020). However, for EU migrants of Roma heritage, the Referendum period represented both a continuation and a magnification of the same forms of 'status crisis' that were unpleasantly novel for other EU groups. Studies of Roma showed a group already extremely vulnerable to hostile immigration policy and citizenship challenges (Greenfields and Dagilyte 2018; Grill 2018; Humphris 2018). Mullen (2018) examines how Romanian Roma in the 'ghettoised' Govanhill area of Glasgow, Scotland, have their citizenship challenged as a result of continuously being racialised and subjected to xenophobia through media discourse and political campaigns, as well as acts of harassment by the Home Office via the mechanism of 'voluntary return' to effectively deport Roma from their Glasgow homes.

Other research has outlined the likely (and actual) magnification effects of the Referendum on the racialising processes migrant Roma were already subject to (see James and Smith 2017). Nagy (2018) briefly examined the situation of Roma post Referendum but attributed their precarity to neoliberal economic governance (of which Brexit was a symptom). More recently, Richardson and Codona (2018) provide a useful consideration of the impact of the Referendum and Roma on broader issues of social justice. Humphris (2019) argues that following the Referendum, 'The shifting criteria of "deservingness" are likely to become even more complicated – and challenging to navigate – post-Brexit for UK-based Roma given that it is considered to create new uncertainty over residency rights, as well as increased financial vulnerability. Roma were more likely to fall foul of the European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS) administrative requirements due to a 'lack of passport/ID card and residence evidence, as well their poor IT skills and lack of access to technology' (Fernández-Reino and Sumption 2020, 4; Brown et al. 2018). Guma and Dafydd Jones (2019) study of EU migrants' reactions to the Referendum included a cohort of Czech and Slovak Roma, and found that many of them had been living in the area for a relatively long time and felt themselves and their families to be settled. While the wider sample contained a nuanced variety of responses, the Roma interviewees in Guma and Jones were overwhelmingly negative, which was in part 'based on their existing experiences of local state authorities … The further prospect of being deported to another EU state with entrenched anti-Roma attitudes was also troubling them' (2019, 6). Clark, who examined everyday Roma life in the city of Glasgow in Scotland, found that Roma families were still in a 'fragile and heightened state of uncertainty' several years after the Referendum, which he argued was a process that was deeply racialised (2020, 8).

While there has been (i) ethnographic research on racialisation of Roma in the UK, (ii) studies on other CEE migrants' responses to the Referendum and (iii) work that has looked at the likely impact of the Referendum result on Roma, with the exception of Clark (2020) there has been limited consideration of Roma communities' own understanding and responses to the Referendum. Building on the work cited by scholars in ethnicity, migration and Roma studies, this article considers the responses of Roma to the Referendum. Specifically, there is a focus on how a racialisation lens allows us to see the strength of Roma as a social group in situations of marginalisation and discrimination. This article considers what specific form responses may take for migrants in the UK who self-identified as belonging to a Roma community – as well as having other varied status and background. In having directly engaged with Roma to centralise their voices on the subject of identity, discrimination and citizenship in the period before, during and after the Referendum, this article argues that although racialisation processes continue to occur, which may indeed share some common ground with other EU citizens, the positioning of Roma as a specific type of 'others' (or, 'outsiders') has meant that Roma will tend to be particularly disadvantaged in a post-Brexit future (Brown et al. 2018).

Methodology

Pulay (2018) notes that earlier waves of academic research have often misrepresented Roma, essentialising their experiences by situating them as one group with the same ethnic and cultural identity, and thus reducing their own diverse voices and distinct experiences into a singular narrative of racialised subjectivity. This has served to feed anti-gypsyism sentiment about Roma – the scholarly equivalent of 'Orientalism' (Lee 2000, 147) that has permitted 'scientifically racist' ideas to limit accurate knowledge generation about Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities (Acton 2015; Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2018). In scholarship, such 'analytical misrepresentation' has served to effectively disempower Roma communities again by ignoring their difference to Gypsy and Traveller communities, their internal diversities and the specificity of related concerns. In this article then, while seeking to represent the distinctiveness, specificity and agency of Roma in South Yorkshire, we follow the approach of Lulle et al. (2019, 9) who suggest the best way of 'conceptualising and illustrating relational space and power-geometries' is through prioritising participants' own voices. That includes avoiding their homogenisation and de-constructing stigmatising images associated with them, both in lay society and within the scholarship known as Romani Studies. Our approach seeks to avoid the misrepresentation Pulay (2018) and Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2018) caution against. Rather, this article supports analysis of how migrant Roma experience socio-political context-specific sources of oppression, and how this then impacts on how they see their own futures in terms of their prospects and possibilities. In doing so, the participants illustrate how they make empowering decisions and are able in some ways to take control of their situations for the purpose of achieving positive outcomes for themselves and their families.

Sample

The study reported here focused on South Yorkshire. The data drawn on in this article was collected in four separate locations in South Yorkshire during July and August 2016 – shortly after the Referendum vote. It was collected as part of a wider project funded by the Big Lottery Fund into the Roma experiences of living and working in the local area, and a mapping of their community needs. Locations for that project were selected on the basis of intelligence previously gathered by local authorities on the growth of Roma communities in the region (Migration Yorkshire 2017). This was also a region where almost two-thirds (61.56%) voted to leave the EU, with just 38.44% voting to remain. The region's vote to leave was higher than the national average, which saw 53.4% in Britain voting to leave (and 46.6% voting to remain). One focus group took place in each of the following locations: Barnsley, Rotherham, Sheffield and Doncaster. Altogether, 29 adult participants of Roma heritage contributed across all four focus groups. In each group, respondents varied in age, gender and marital status, to ensure that a range of views and experiences could be collected. All had originally migrated to the UK from other EU Member States including Latvia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Romania. Time in the UK ranged from one to 17 years. Eighteen were female, and 11 were male.

The study design used thematic analysis, which is an analytical framework that allows for closer examination of qualitative data – specifically drawing out commonalities and differences in experiences, and to then comment on relationships between different parts of the data (Gale et al. 2013, 2). In this study then, thematic analysis enabled space for a variety of voices from migrant Roma communities. This analytical framework also informed the decision to have discussions guided by a semi-structured topic guide, that was used in all four sessions. As part of the recruitment process, three Roma champions who themselves lived and worked in South Yorkshire were identified and enabled engagement with Roma. The champions were heavily involved in the design of the focus group questions and were responsible for recruitment and delivery of the focus groups (Migration Yorkshire 2017). The four sessions were facilitated by these champions (themselves of Roma heritage, and who had all migrated to the UK from CEE). Recruited for their experience of research

fieldwork with the Roma communities, the facilitators were also qualified interpreters, which enhanced the likelihood that they could gather data in a more accurate and ethically professional way. It also allowed for focus groups to be conducted in the preferred language of the participants – including Romanes, Slovak, Czech and Romanian. These were key strengths of the data collection and research engagement process, as they helped to ensure that more accurate data was recorded and the champions also acted as 'guardians' serving the interests and safeguarding of the Roma group.

With the consent of participants, each focus group was recorded, the audio translated into English by the facilitator to maintain the integrity of what was said, and this version professionally transcribed into Word format. At subsequent meetings, the research team conducted an initial analysis and agreed a thematic structure covering various aspects of Roma lives in the UK, e.g. education, employment, politics, etc. Within the politics theme, the sub-theme of 'Responses to the EU Referendum' was included. Data from this sub-theme, which was again retrospectively examined in 2021, provide data on which this article is based.

Findings

The following findings are presented thematically but linearly, and explore peoples' experiences of the Referendum result followed by broader community 'reactions' and perceptions, concluding with thoughts about their futures.

First reactions

When participants were asked to describe their own reaction on hearing the result of the Referendum vote, sentiments expressing disappointment, surprise and shock appeared across all focus groups. This was linked to a sense of confusion and uncertainty over what this meant for their continued residence in the UK and an increased sense of precarity and fear for the future:

> We have no security. We don't know what to expect now. (Rotherham FG)

> The people are very unsure about what to respond because they don't know a lot about Brexit. I don't know what will happen. I only know that they want us out from their country. (Sheffield FG)

Humphris (2018) describes the pervasive uncertainty of status and insecurity affecting the lives of Romanian Roma migrants in the UK, as an ambiguity that increased at critical junctures such as the ending of transitional controls for A2 Member states. However, the reactions included above closely echo the initial responses of Polish migrants interviewed by Rzepnikowska (2019) and the Latvian, Polish and Slovak participants in Lulle et al. (2019, 1). The latter concluded the result triggered the emergence of 'speculations, fears and uncertainties' among their subjects. In describing their first reaction, several participants referenced their sense of deep attachment to the UK:

> We felt awful, because UK is like a second home for us … since then we have to be ready for everything. (Rotherham FG)

This was by not the only time the word 'home' was used to describe the UK. A sense of belonging in the UK was one reason people felt so shocked, not only at the result but also at the reaction of others in the neighbourhood following the vote to Leave the EU. Significantly, many people linked their first reaction with the Leave vote to their local family connections:

> My reaction was, that we were shocked … we have families here in UK from the EU. We have settled in here, lots has changed and our children who growing up in here and can't even speak their own language. (Doncaster FG)

Two people in Barnsley explained that family members had been buried here, the second adding that their grandchildren had been born and brought up in the place and had gone through the local education system:

> For example, my mother has been buried here, she's died here, so if we have to leave, I don't know, I can't imagine that. (Barnsley FG)

Across all four focus groups, the outcome of the Referendum had brought to the fore the idea that a major change could occur sooner or later. Fears that change might be out of their hands and that involuntary return would be the consequence of the Leave vote also appeared regularly, another manifestation of uncertainty. For most this was a possibility (i.e. '*if* we need to leave'), though others were more fatalistic about the future:

> What can we do if they want us (to go) back in our home country? What can we do about it? There's nothing we can do. We will have to go back. (Sheffield FG)

> Sad . . . that we are all going home. (Rotherham FG)

The frequent use of the terms 'we' and 'people' suggested something of a shared perspective but may also reflect the fact that participants had discussed the outcome with family members:

> I calmed down because all of my family is here, and we talked among ourselves. (Barnsley FG)

For some, uncertainty meant they wished to wait and see what was going to happen, but others had made plans and preparations to leave the country if necessary. When the facilitator (themselves a Roma migrant) recalled how there was panic on the day of the Referendum result, a participant responded:

> Yeah, they were all packing expecting to be deported. (Rotherham FG)

It was not unusual for there to be different reactions within the same family:

> Facilitator: Have you heard about people leaving the country after the Brexit?

> Respondent: Yes, personally my father telling me to, so he's the one. He wants to move and he's telling me to come with him as well, but I'm not going. (Barnsley FG)

Several talked about Roma families who had already left the UK because of the Referendum result, including members of their own families:

> Yes, I have friends that have left straightaway after Brexit result. They've left back to Slovakia. They've returned there because they were scared that they will be evicted. (Sheffield FG)

> I had friends, family, when they heard about the Brexit, they packed all of their clothes that they could and send them back to Latvia and they also left themselves, I myself didn't have the thought that I needed to leave and go back to Latvia and I don't have the thought as well. (Barnsley FG)

This last person went on to remark that some of those who had left in the immediate aftermath had since returned to the UK.

Making informed choices

The choice among Roma residents to stay in the UK, return to their country-of-origin or move to a third country, were inevitably influenced by a complex mix of experiences that individuals and families had already had while living in the UK in terms of adjustment, relationships within and without the community, the reasons for leaving their countries of origin in the first place, and hopes for the future. As most of the preceding testimony indicates, the implications went beyond the individual's status to include wider family and, in several instances, the presence of three generations of the same family in the UK was mentioned.

Among the cohort of Romanian Roma interviewed by Humphris (2018) the prevalence of low, or no literacy (itself arguably the product of racial exclusion in schools, see Searle 2017), placed substantial limits on the ability to acquire more knowledge and awareness, with verbal information from trusted sources such as close friends and the family being relied upon. This was also clearly evident in all four

groups in the present study. Levels of knowledge and awareness about the implications of the Referendum vote were generally low as the multiple usage of 'don't know' attests. One respondent who had lived in the UK for 7 years reflected that this view was common among Roma he mixed with:

> Many people still don't know what's going to happen … what we can expect. We will need to leave or stay. So same as me, many people from our community still don't know what will happen and many people just prepare themselves to leave because it will not be possible to be here anymore or whatever. (Barnsley FG)

However, the same respondent added:

> Actually, personally, my view on this is that it's not going to be like that. We will have some rights to stay here because I am as a resident already seven years now, my kids are in school now, I'm working, so I think it's not going to happen like that. (Barnsley FG)

Thus, while there was plenty of evidence that fear, anxiety and even panic affected many Roma in South Yorkshire in the aftermath of the Referendum, this was not universal – even when views were shared within close kinship networks. While uncertainty about the cause of the Leave result and what would happen next may have been common, particular individuals supplied articulate responses. Another respondent, who had come with his family 4 years previously, now worked in local government, and as a freelance interpreter in which role he interacted with many services. Confirming that because of his job he had some awareness about his rights in the UK, he indicated 'as an interpreter I meet a lot of (Roma) people and people are afraid' but added:

> I am also quite certain that there will be some kind of measures, or some kind of conditions about who will be able to stay freely or something. (Barnsley FG)

What was interesting about both these individuals were their position as both member of the community and a support worker in a local service. Much scholarship has focused on the perspectives of community members on the one hand, or front-line workers on the other, but very little on those who straddle such boundaries. As this quotation indicates, even one individual could veer between pessimism and optimism. This reveals a belief that residence had brought rights and entitlements linked to length of stay, employment and family inclusion, which bears conspicuous resemblance to the statement made by a non-Roma Slovak migrant interviewed by Lulle et al. (2019, 8) who remarked: 'personally, I think that the UK is not going to expel us. After all we work here and we meet all our obligations, pay our taxes etc'.

Others were familiar with the subsequent political processes. Respondents in two groups explained that they knew Article 50 (Treaty on European Union, 2009) had to be triggered before the actual departure could start, with various suggestions given as to the actual date of leaving, as one respondent stated,

> I heard that it will be happening in December 2018. (Doncaster FG)

While uncertainty was derived in part from lack of knowledge about what would happen next and the options available to them, it was also linked to a much greater degree of fear about the prospect of return to CEE. Life here was contrasted with the memory of discrimination and racism in their country of origin and the likelihood of poor prospects should they go back:

> Our kids go to school here and now we should go back to Slovakia where there is nothing for us? (Rotherham FG)

> All of my family is here, and we talked among ourselves that we will not go back to Latvia because we don't have anything to return to. (Barnsley FG)

These narratives were invariably situated in discussions of the long-standing anti-Gypsyism in education, work and society at large in countries of origin, echoing the Slovak Roma interviewed by Brown et al. (2016) and Grill (2018). In this regard, it is worth highlighting one of the Polish migrants interviewed in Rzepnikowska (2019), who after the Referendum, stated that she and her husband were

> considering going back … (but) she would not feel safe in Poland because of her darker skin complexion … While she may become racialised in Poland due to her darker skin complexion, she blends in well in her ethnically mixed neighbourhood in Manchester.

This form of 'shadeism' among 'white' migrants, reminds us, as in the words of Lulle et al. (2019, 6), that there are complex levels of racialisation and that freedom of movement 'is not equally accessible to all'. Nonetheless, it may be argued that certain members of the community are in privileged positions, and their testimony is a useful corrective to the tendency to homogenize the experiences of Roma migrants.

Subsequent hostility in the UK

Across our sample, there was some evidence that hostility had been present before the Referendum. Specifically, respondents were asked to describe what changes, if any, they had observed in peoples' attitudes in their local neighbourhood following the Referendum vote. Some discussed stark changes in attitudes among the local community and those providing services. This is highlighted in the response from one respondent who discussed her views on why she thought the Leave had campaign had succeeded:

> *To* stop the immigration. 10 years ago, nobody point at us with their fingers, they want to know us, find out about our culture, they want to be our friends but close to the Referendum things has changed. (Doncaster FG)

In her view, the attitude to Roma had been much more welcoming back in the mid-2000s, worsening 'close to the Referendum'. Others were less sure, and speculated whether it was the arrival of Roma specifically that had prompted such antipathy to EU membership. Uncertainty permeated their understanding of the rationale for the Leave result:

> I don't know why England has decided to do that, to come out of EU. Is it because of Roma? Is it because of us? Is it because they are watching us from a different side and light? (Sheffield FG)

Negative experiences encompassed both everyday neighbourhood social interactions and overt harassment. They often involved children, again demonstrating the role of family, with examples including having items thrown at the windows of their homes, being verbally abused and confronted in public spaces and a combination of overt abuse and a 'sense' of being othered as this respondent describes:

> Since the result from Brexit happened, my children have told me that in the park they've experienced some bad behaviour from different children, shouting and telling them that they will have to leave back to their home country. On the road and in the shops, I can see that they are watching us differently because they know we are Slovakian Roma. I am not crazy or stupid enough not to realise when somebody is watching me with his eyes, telling me through his eyes that I will have to leave. (Sheffield FG)

Such experiences are strikingly similar to many of those detailed in Rzepnikowska (2019). Apart from one example, being targeted specifically as a Roma is not mentioned and even here is preceded by the nationality of the speaker. The recurring prominence of family, particularly children, in many of the accounts is notable. In a remarkable exchange about pre-Referendum experiences, participants originally from Latvia highlighted how friendship and prejudice could exist within one close relationship:

> Respondent 1: All this time while I'm here since 2009, about seven years now, and he's still time after time attending my course as a friend. He's a good person, he's British and a few years ago, we were just spoken [sic] about some nationalities and something. I don't know why we started to talk about Gypsies, about Roma. He said, 'Oh, they are very bad people.'
>
> Respondent 2: I had same experience!
>
> Facilitator: So, in that point, did you say anything?

> Respondent 1: No, I didn't. I didn't. I should. At the moment I should say, 'I am [Roma]' and I do [will] tell him one day. I've not told him yet but I will say, 'Look, you've known me for eight years now, can you see any difference?' (Barnsley FG)

Future uncertainties

Across all the groups there were participants who were more confident about the future and focused on staying in South Yorkshire. There was mention of a sense of belonging and being settled here, which focused on aspects of family life. These feelings were established well before the Referendum vote. This was cemented by factors such as work, schooling, language, even the burial of family members. Belonging here was also contrasted with the feeling of not belonging (or not being wanted) in the countries of origin:

> We would be happy to stay in this country and remain here and continue our lives here since we've settled down and we've got a couple of years living in this country with our children. (Sheffield FG)

> It might be different; I don't know but I think that I see my future here, I see my kids here studying in school and getting a good job. It's my personal opinion. (Barnsley FG)

One respondent was keen to explicitly highlight the more positive context of a multiracial UK:

> [In the UK] they're used to so many different races achieving and everything. So, you have a chance. My children have a chance. (Rotherham FG)

Within a single focus group, there were different judgements. Three out of four respondents in Doncaster were still hopeful but for one long-term resident, the Referendum had changed everything. One who had remained in the UK when family members had left explained that eventually the latter had come back

> because they still had job here [sic] and they needed to receive final wages and when they saw that there is no civil war going on, they saw everything was fine, nobody has been beaten up, they returned, and they stay here now. (Barnsley FG)

The sense of feeling 'at home' in South Yorkshire was often explicitly stated,

> This is our home. They should at least say who is staying or who is leaving. (Rotherham FG)

> I would like to continue to work here and my children to go to school here and live in this country, but if it's not possible . . . If we have to go out from EU and go back to Slovakia, we will have to comply with this if this is what England wants. (Sheffield FG)

Many participants discussed a mix of reasons to stay and to go. While it was clear a waiting game was occurring, the general feeling was that they would leave if required to but most preferred to stay. For a number, this meant taking up the options afforded by the immigration system:

> My intention is yes, to apply for permanent residency and then for a British passport, but they are going to make it hard.. . . At the moment things are exactly as they were before [in terms of rights to stay]. (Sheffield FG)

Discussion

In their exploration of EU citizens' experiences of hostility in the lead up to the vote, Guma and Dafydd Jones (2019) lamented the fact that 'little consideration has been given to the implication of the Referendum's impact for EU migrants themselves' (2019, 1). With notable exceptions, where such consideration has occurred, the voices of Roma in the UK has largely been absent. The focus groups reported here gave participants the opportunity to reflect what the Leave vote might mean for their

lives in South Yorkshire. This was in itself important in enabling space for a variety of voices from migrant Roma communities. The facilitation of each focus group session by members of the Roma community was also intended to try and minimise the gap between researcher and researched.

The immediacy of the result meant at the time of the research, participants were still processing the implications. But the result itself was only one point in the longer process of the Referendum campaign, during which some participants had perceived a negative change in the attitudes and behaviours of people in the neighbourhood and raised questions about the sustainability of this situation. The evidence chimes with recent studies of other EU migrants. Lulle et al. (2019) conclude that the Referendum campaign has leached power away from EU migrants, a process evident in the perspectives of increased uncertainty and negativity among migrants themselves – 'migrant subjectivities'. In this respect, the Referendum may be interpreted as a 'peak crisis' for many EU migrants.

The participants suggested that their status following the Referendum vote had changed and as a result some of them, expressed serious concerns over their long-term future in the UK. This uncertainty appears to be amplified as a result the significance their family, particularly children, has for the reasons why they had migrated in the first place, i.e. due to inter-generational discrimination. Despite feeling settled in the UK, the Leave result and uncertainties around what exactly Brexit meant for them, led to confusion and served as a reminder that they could rarely escape the label of 'undesirable other': the 'outsider' in need of removal. This showed the contrast between their own sense of belonging, and how others (non-Roma) viewed it. This also disrupted claims to a multiracial UK, highlighting that rather citizenship in the UK for some groups remains temporary and provisional. In turn, this contributed to participants' uncertainties about the(ir) future, especially in terms of belonging, citizenship and staying in the UK – this was so, even though measures of belonging had been engaged with, i.e. children being born, going through the education system and some family members being buried there. Uncertainty, doubt and considerable anxiety about the possibility of eviction and forced return, were common themes in participants' narratives about the immediate aftermath of the vote. Faced with a significant moment of hostility and in anticipation of more troubled times ahead, some had made the decision to move back to countries of origin. Humphris (2018) argued that for Romanian Roma migrants in the UK, the 'creation of a context of pervasive uncertainty is representative of processes of racialization, or at the least, provide the techniques to obscure these processes'. The shared histories of such disruption, even in recent times within the EU, make such responses understandable. However, separate studies detect similar uncertainty and fears among other EU migrants (e.g. Guma and Dafydd Jones 2019).

Participants spoke of an upsurge in racial hostility, but the examples suggested this was part of the wider racialisation of all EU citizens. The issue of racism directed at 'white' migrants from countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, communities often considered outside of 'traditional' race-inflected migration narratives, has been examined by a range of authors, who have described its specific growth and form in the UK. As Rzepnikowska's (2019) Polish migrants discovered 'The privilege of whiteness disappears once they start speaking'.

In one sense, the targeting of EU migrants (including Roma), represents a continuum with the targeting of those minority ethnic communities with a much longer standing migrant heritage. Nonetheless, there were important differences. Unlike many 'white' migrants in the UK, for Roma racialization was nothing new; it had simply shifted from anti-Gypsyism to anti-migrant framing. And while racialisation *as migrants* may have occurred to all EU nationals in the UK, the phenomenon was interpreted qualitatively differently. While individuals understood they were subject to an increased racial hostility (as migrants), this was framed within past contexts. As one stated,

> I know we are used to racism from our country, we grew up in it, but I don't want my daughter to go through it here. (Rotherham FG)

This quotation is illustrative of the effort to resist such processes. Similar sentiments were expressed by Polish, Czech, Slovak, Romanian and Hungarian Roma interviewed for Brown et al. (2016). This study supports Grill's (2018) position that Roma experiences deserve a distinct category of 'migrating

racialisations', where their understanding of their own position here is calibrated by the overt, historic racialisations experienced in their countries of origin, such that the UK is seen as a place where they have a future, in contrast to the former.

Whereas studies of other (non-Roma) migrants have indicated that 'there was a clear sense that the higher the skills, qualifications and status, the greater the sense of attachment and imagined belonging' (Lulle et al. 2019, 9) this was not the case for Roma in this study. Most of those interviewed did not possess such advantages but did stress an attachment to their local area and the UK overall. Among adults schooled outside the UK, very low levels of literacy, (even in the languages spoken in countries of origin), placed substantial limits on the ability to acquire more knowledge and awareness about the implications of the Referendum. Where more details were sought, information usually came verbally via trusted, often family sources:

> I will choose, so this is where I find out information - so we speak as well among family members, we (ex)change information that we know, and I have also a social worker who comes quite often, so we exchange information with her as well. (Barnsley FG)

These narratives indicate not only were they choosing to remain, but they were also pro-actively seeking information to make a more informed decision.

The evidence presented here demonstrates Roma in South Yorkshire are articulating spaces of resistance to the unknown future. The process of reflection enabled participants to list their own investments in their particular areas, exemplified by children's progress at schools, their own work, even the burials of loved ones, and how achievements in these environments contrasted with the immobility experienced in their country of origin. This sense of belonging was also important for many respondents' decisions on their future.

The foundation of this resistance was the family, the importance of which was of central significance for the Roma migrants in our reported study. Except for Humphris (2019), the importance of family for Roma in the UK has not been explicitly investigated. This concurs with the argument of Marinov (2019) that migration has strengthened one of the key aspects of Roma culture (Romanipen) – the family network. The evidence showed that for Roma this identity was rooted in local places represented by both the past (e.g. burial) and future (e.g. children's education). Their identity as Roma is therefore being reworked – paradoxically, while their formal status as EU migrants is increasingly precarious, their status as Roma is bolstered. The evidence supports the claim by Botterill et al. that an 'expanded concept of belonging in post-Brexit Europe' may be needed 'that includes both formal, legal, and political inclusion, as well as the informal, emotional, and affective bonds and encounters in everyday life' (2019, 3).

Ryan (2018) has argued that research on EU migrants in the UK has tended to overlook the ongoing stories of settlement, and the manifold factors (including spatial, temporal, structural and relational issues) that shape a long-term attachment to this country. This might be termed a narrative of moving from migrants to residents. Her research focused on Polish migrants who were resident for over 10 years but notes that 'different groups of migrants have varied rights and entitlements and may encounter diverse barriers in settling into a new society, as will become even more apparent as the UK prepares to leave the EU and mobility rights are brought into sharp focus' (2018, 248). In this regard, we have added detail to Ryan's picture. As this article demonstrates, the process of settlement in the UK is accelerating for Roma, and more intensively, in part because of the role of family, but also because the ties of attachment to countries of origin were rendered fragile by persistent racial discrimination.

Even as state agencies and non-Roma have intensified the racialisation of migrants since the Referendum and further restrictions come into force – such as those outlined in the EU Settlement Scheme, the testimony of Roma populations demonstrates their self-identification as local citizens. To be sure, this is fragile, but it is determined. As one participant stated,

> If everything calms down and everyone starts getting used to the new rules [after Brexit] and whatever, I'm hoping people will get permanent residence. (Rotherham FG)

Overall, therefore, while the Referendum had shaken their attachment to the UK and threatens a return to an being specifically racialised as Roma in countries of origin, our participants demonstrated a resolute resistance to leaving – and specifically how this potential future is resisted through narratives of belonging. The time frame between data collection to retrospective analysis gave the opportunity for a good consideration of how Brexit impacted immediately on members of Roma communities in South Yorkshire – especially in terms of responding to and resisting Brexit uncertainties. At time of writing, as the UK has moved beyond Brexit, future research would do well to revisit participants to consider changes in belonging sentiments and future mappings. The work of Mullen (2018) on the growing xenophobia and stigmatising of Roma populations following Brexit would be relevant here.

Conclusions

Studies on the impact of the Referendum campaign on EU migrants are limited and have been focused for the most part, on 'white' migrants. These have demonstrated that the Referendum represented an intensification of existing trends, expanding the scope of racialising narratives which were already occurring to all migrants. Roma can expect to be impacted by the racialising inherent in the new processes for gaining long-term settlement, which are already proving problematic to navigate (Roma Support Group 2020). But unlike other CEE migrants, this is unlikely to cause them to depart the UK. This article has shown that for Roma, unlike many other CEE migrants, the period around the Referendum did **not** lead to a weakening of ties to the UK. To be sure, some participants expressed shock and fear, had felt temporary alienation and had experienced a rise in racially motivated aggression, but in the end, there was not a heightened sense of being 'Eastern European' as detected in those interviewed by Lulle et al. (2019, 9). If anything, the Referendum strengthened their resolution to remain in the country and the local area of South Yorkshire. This sense of belonging and inclusion has been highlighted in the testimony of Roma elsewhere (see Brown et al. 2018). Nonetheless, the focus on South Yorkshire means that comparative studies of Roma communities elsewhere in the UK would be useful.

The fundamentally *social* dynamics of how that is happening in each place is symbolic of the determination, built through generations of resistance, to build a better life. For Roma in South Yorkshire, the Referendum may be seen to represent another movement of racialisation in a much longer narrative (this time as part of a wider body of CEE migrants). But, even if it displays new characteristics (as ably documented in Grill's 'migrating racialisations' or Humphris 'everyday racism and residency rights') it is precisely because this experience can be articulated within a historical context of discrimination and migration that it is able to provide a reason to resist such pressures. The testimony of participants reveals some for mechanisms of building local identities, showing that above all, family is both the reason for staying and the bedrock resource to enable it. Overall, this article has added to the picture for Roma in the UK at a critical time for their settlement. It reiterates the importance of examining what Guma and Jones describe as 'the multiple and complex ways in which people develop a sense of connectedness to places and localities in which they live and the significant role that relationships and emotions also play in this process'. (2019, 8). On this, the article's strength is that it adds a dimension to the understanding of Roma migrants' experiences and active responses in a period of political turmoil in the UK demonstrating how that experience is racialised in distinct and comparatively different ways to others. Methodologically, the centralising and non-exploitation of Roma voices is a key strength that we would encourage future research to support. That said, it is recommended that future research in this area considers the appropriateness of engaging with wider Roma population groups or consider intersections, such as gender or length or stay, as way of comparing experiences and testing generalisability.

Note

1. Whilst we acknowledge the implications, politics, and challenges of counting populations, particularly Roma, it is noted that previous estimates indicated a Roma 'community' in the region of 200,000 (Philip, Scullion, and Martin 2013) – a figure that is thought to be an underestimation given their lack of participation in the UK Census.

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