

# Racism and xenophobia experienced by Polish migrants in the UK before and after Brexit vote

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years the public discourses on Polish migration in the UK have rapidly turned hostile, especially in the context of economic crisis in 2008, and subsequently after the EU referendum in 2016. While initially Poles have been perceived as a ‘desirable’ migrant group and labelled as ‘invisible’ due to their whiteness, this perception shifted to the representation of these migrants as taking jobs from British workers, putting a strain on public services and welfare. While racist and xenophobic violence has been particularly noted following the Brexit vote, Polish migrants experienced various forms of racist abuse before that. This paper draws on narrative interviews with Polish migrant women illustrating their experiences of racism and xenophobia in Greater Manchester before and after the Brexit vote, and how they make sense of anti-Polish discourses and attitudes. This paper illustrates the importance of the interplay between the media and political discourses, class, race and the local context in shaping relations between Polish migrants and the local population.

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## Introduction

After months of anti-immigrant rhetoric in the run up to EU referendum in the UK in June 2016, the number of racially aggravated offences recorded by the police in the same month was 41 per cent higher than in July 2015 (Home Office 2016). Laminated cards were left outside primary schools and posted through letterboxes of Polish people in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, with the words ‘Leave the EU/No more Polish vermin’ in English and Polish (*Cambridge News*, June 25, 2016). Arkadiusz Józwick, a 40-year-old Polish factory worker in Harlow, died after being punched to the ground for speaking Polish in the street. Bartosz Milewski, a 21-year-old student was stabbed in the neck with a broken bottle because his perpetrators heard him speaking Polish with his friend in Donnington, near Telford (*Independent*, September 20, 2016). The wave of post-Brexit vote hostility revealed the extent of racism and xenophobia which affected not only Polish nationals but also other migrants and settled ethnic minorities, including British citizens (Burnett 2017; Komaromi and Singh 2016). Nevertheless, while a lot of attention has been paid to the rise of racist and xenophobic incidents after the EU referendum, this is not a

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new phenomenon in the UK. The racism that intensified following the referendum builds upon racism that existed before. It has been legitimised not only by the referendum itself, but by the forms of racism embedded as national policy in the decades leading up to it, including the debates over immigrant numbers and media discourse about ‘scroungers’ (Burnett 2017, 89).

While recent media and public attention has shifted to racist and xenophobic discourses in the UK, particularly affecting Polish migrants following the EU referendum, little consideration had been paid to Poles as victims of racist abuse before the Brexit vote, although some studies underline the issues of discrimination, racialisation and prejudice experienced by Polish and other East European migrants in the post 2004 accession period (Dawney 2008; Kempny 2011; Rzepnikowska 2016a; Rzepnikowska 2017a). Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy (2012) argue that shared whiteness between East European migrants and majority has not exempted the former from racialisation. The existing research also makes reference to prejudiced attitudes of Polish migrants towards other ethnic minorities (Nowicka 2017; Nowicka and Krzyżowski 2016; Rzepnikowska 2016b; Rzepnikowska 2017a). While the literature broadens the understanding of prejudice and discrimination experienced by Polish and other East European migrants, this article explores how Polish migrants talked about their experiences of racism and xenophobia before and after Brexit vote, and how important the media and political discourses, as well as class and location were in shaping their perceptions. By doing so, it draws on the interviews with Polish migrant women in Manchester in 2012/2013 and 2017/2018. After briefly describing the context of Polish migration, and discussing the interplay between race, whiteness, politics and the media, this paper examines the ways in which Polish migrant women and their relatives experienced racism and xenophobia and how they try to make sense of it.

## Polish presence in the UK

The accession of the eight new member states (A8 – Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary) to the European Union on 1 May 2004 has resulted in significant migration within Europe in recent years. The UK, as well as Ireland and Sweden, granted A8 nationals free access to the labour market immediately after the EU enlargement due to severe labour market shortages, mainly in low-wage and low-skill occupations in construction, hospitality, transport sectors and public services (Anderson et al. 2006; Eade, Drinkwater, and Garapich 2006). Freedom of movement attracted many Polish people, especially the young, affected by high rates of unemployment, low wages and lack of opportunities in Poland (White 2010). These newly arrived migrants constituted the largest group from the A8 countries entering Britain. Between 2003 and 2010, the Polish-born population of the UK increased from 75,000 to 532,000 (ONS 2011a). It was estimated that in 2015 the most common non-British nationality was Polish, with 916,000 residents (16.5 per cent of the total non-British national population resident in the UK) (ONS 2015), although this data does not record the length of stay and there is a limited knowledge of how many have left the UK. According to 2011 census data, Polish migrants have the highest birth rate amongst other migrant groups (ONS 2011b),

and Polish language has become the most commonly spoken non-native language in England and Wales (ONS 2011c).

In the post-2004 period, Manchester has witnessed the arrival of Polish migrants, amongst other A8 nationals, who have contributed to a greater diversity of the city. The official statistics on the numbers and distribution of Polish migrants in Manchester are very limited. According to the Census 2011 data, East European migrants are incorporated in an imprecise category of ‘White Other’, which also includes other Europeans, Jewish, Irish, Americans and Australians. According to Manchester City Council (2015, 29) data, Polish migrants constituted 1.2 per cent of Manchester population and 0.8 per cent of Greater Manchester population (based on self-descriptions). Polish is the second most common language spoken in Manchester other than English.

### Race, racism and xenophobia

One of the arguments used to support the idea that anti-immigrant feeling has nothing to do with racism is that Polish and other East European migrants are ‘white’ (Anderson 2013). However, the focus of racist discourse has shifted to culture and ethnicity seen as fixed categories giving rise to the new forms of racism. As Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983, 67) suggest:

racist discourse posits an essential biological determination to culture but its referent may be any group that has been ‘socially’ constructed as having a different ‘origin’, whether cultural, biological or historical. It can be ‘Jewish’, ‘black’, ‘foreign’, ‘migrant’, ‘minority’. In other words any group that has been located in ethnic terms can be subject to ‘racism’ as a form of exclusion.

Furthermore, Gilroy (1987, 43) argues that the new forms of racism have ‘the capacity to link discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, Englishness, Britishness, militarism and gender difference into a complex situation which gives “race” its contemporary meaning’. The term xenophobia comes from the Greek words *xénos* – ‘the stranger’ and ‘the guest’, and *phóbos* – ‘fear’. Hence, xenophobia can be defined as ‘fear of the stranger’ and it is understood as hostility against ‘foreigners’. This paper argues that even though racism and xenophobia are often discussed as distinct phenomena, they often overlap and both are particularly important in exploring Polish migrants’ narratives. Sivanandan (2001, 2) used the term xeno-racism in reference to white migrants coming to Western European countries and defined it as:

racism that is not just directed at those with darker skins, from the former colonial countries, but at the newer categories of the displaced and dispossessed whites, who are beating at western Europe’s doors ... It is racism in substance but xeno in form. It is a racism that is meted out to impoverished strangers even if they are white. It is xeno-racism.

Subsequently, Sivanandan discussed directly migrant workers from Eastern Europe as victims of xeno-racism: ‘the treatment meted out to East European immigrants [stems] from a compelling economics of discrimination, effectively racism under a different colour, xeno-racism’ (2009, viii). Following from Sivanandan, Cole (2009) argues that the term xeno-racism should be used in reference to white East European migrant workers and their families many of whom experience a high level of exploitation, bad working and housing condition and racist attacks. There is a risk with using solely the

term xenophobia when discussing Polish migrants' experiences, as it may imply their presumed whiteness and deny the processes of racialisation. As Gilroy 2006 suggests, European migrants in the UK become racialised and imagined through the category of race because they are migrants. Anderson (2013) builds on this argument by emphasising that 'migrant' is not a value-free description of a person crossing international borders. Race is not an essential characteristic of migrants, 'but rather the socially constructed contingent outcome of processes and practices of exclusion. Racialisation does not require putative phenotypical or biological difference' (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012, 681). In fact, the racialised schema is changing and adapting: 'the nominal absence of somatic difference does not get in the way of xenophobic racism; it turns out racialised difference can be invented in situ' (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012).

In discussions of racialisation of Polish migrants coming from a predominantly white society, it is crucial to consider the category of whiteness. Dyer (1997) recognised the distinction between the whiteness of the English, Anglo-Saxons or North Europeans from that of Southern or Eastern Europeans due to the specificity of the former in the past two centuries. Also, while Irish migrants initially were racialised by being considered as 'not-quite-white' in the U.S.A. and UK in the nineteenth century, they used whiteness to improve their situation in the labour market (Ignatiev 1995). Furthermore, after the Second World War, displaced persons in the UK benefited from immigration policies with racialised preferences for white workers (Fox 2013; McDowell 2009). Even though whiteness can be defined as a category with shifting borders and internal hierarchies, they can be crossed and climbed by certain groups (Dyer 1997, 20). Nevertheless, as Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy (2012, 681) argue, 'past generations of Irish, Jewish, and indeed earlier East European migrants would suggest that putatively shared whiteness does not exempt them from the effects of racism'. For instance, despite 'becoming white', the Irish in the UK faced high levels of discrimination until 1970s and 1980s. Ryan's (2007) research about Irish nurses in Britain, who mostly migrated in the 1950s and 1970s, reveals the ambiguous position of these migrants as white and European insiders, but, at the same time, as cultural outsiders. As a result of recent large-scale migration of Poles to other European countries, many have become conscious of being white as a result of contact with non-whites, and at times, not-quite-white through contact with the white hosts (Parutis 2011; van Riemsdijk 2010), although Ryan's (2010) study on Polish migrants in London shows that whiteness was rarely explicitly stated, possibly due to an assumption that whiteness is normal and therefore taken for granted. Anderson (2013, 45) argues that post-2004 migrants from Eastern Europe present a 'degenerate' whiteness, 'a contingent and degraded form of whiteness', similar to that of the Jews and the Irish before them, often as a result of the negative media coverage. The Polish presence in the UK has become increasingly visible and audible. As they constitute a larger and potentially more problematised group, they have become more prominent in a racialised visual schema. Byrne (2006, 21) argues that perceptual practices centred around the visual are particularly important to the construction of race and reinforcement of racialised discourse: 'for race, racial discourses serve to construct the visible difference on which they themselves are based. It is through race categories that visual differences become apprehended'. Polish food shops have become highly noticeable markers of Polish presence in the public spaces (Rabikowska and Burrell 2009). Polish names, different letters and pronunciation constitute visible and audible markers of

difference (see also Nowicka (2012)). Dawney's (2008) study on racialisation of East European migrants in Herefordshire revealed some references to the clothes worn by these migrants considered as unfashionable, and therefore markers of difference. While some respondents in Ryan's (2010) study on Polish migrants in London claimed that Poles can blend in British society presumably due to their whiteness, others thought that Poles can be recognised by facial features.

The theme of Polish migration in the UK has been widely covered in the media and political discourse, affecting not only the way Polish migrants are viewed by the British public but also influencing everyday encounters between Poles and Brits. Migrants from Eastern Europe were initially seen as unproblematic as they posed 'few questions of cultural and racial difference from their host societies' (Favell and Nebe 2009, 206). It is argued that, by favouring migrants from the EU, the UK has been implicitly favouring white migrants (Favell 2008, 704). Nevertheless, as a result of British anxieties over uncontrolled European immigration, the political and media rhetoric has changed. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) controversial poster used during the 2014 campaign read: '26 million people in Europe are looking for work, and whose jobs are they after?'. In April 2015 during the BBC One leader interview on April 22, 2015, Nigel Farage, the former leader of UKIP, said he would prefer immigrants from India and Australia to East Europeans, even though he previously claimed his party would not want to discriminate against new arrivals by nationality. UKIP's popularity, based on anti-immigration and anti-European policies, is a possible reason for pushing immigration to the top of the political agenda. Speaking on the BBC One 'Andrew Marr Show' on January 5, 2014, the former Prime Minister David Cameron singled out Polish migrants in the discourse about welfare benefits abuse.

EU migration into the UK was a key issue in the EU referendum debates in 2016. The Leave campaign used the anti-immigration discourse claiming that the main cause of all the UK's issues, including housing shortages or the strained National Health Service (NHS), is 'uncontrolled mass immigration' caused by the right to freedom of movement within EU member states. The Leave campaign argued that exiting the EU would allow Britain to 'take back control of its borders' – the slogan previously used by UKIP. Amber Rudd in her speech at the Conservative Party conference in October 2017 said that foreign workers should not be 'taking jobs that British people could do' (*The Guardian* 12 January 2017), echoing Gordon Brown's 'British jobs for British workers' remark in 2007. Even though it seems like the responses of some politicians to EU migration have not been racially motivated but rather economically, they produce racialised effects (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012). Burnett (2017, 4) points out that an examination of over one hundred cases of racist violence after the EU referendum 'shows a link between the language and behaviour of perpetrators and the rhetoric and policy pronouncement of politicians'. Fekete (as quoted in Komaromi and Singh 2016, 1) stressed the link between racism and politics in the light of Brexit:

one of the things that has become clear is that the hostile environment that has been an official aim of policy for the last few years is 'coming home'. If a 'hostile environment' is embedded politically, it can't be a surprise that it takes root culturally.

Furthermore, Haque (2017) argues that the Brexit toxic campaign has normalised hatred towards immigrants, turning communities against each other.

Similarly, there has been some ambivalence in the portrayal of Polish migrants, particularly in the tabloid media. Initially, some media focused on the positive work ethics of Polish migrants by emphasising hard-working-ness, value for money and diligence. They were constructed as a 'desirable' migrant group and seen as 'invisible' due to their whiteness. With the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008, there was a rhetorical shift. Polish migrants increasingly started to be perceived as an economic threat responsible for society's malaise: job shortages, unemployment and the strain on social services. In the run up to the EU referendum in 2016, the reporting of immigration more than tripled over the course of the EU Referendum campaign, and the coverage of the effects of immigration was overwhelmingly negative, particularly in the *Express*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* (Moore and Ramsay 2017). Migrants were blamed for many of Britain's economic and social problems. Amongst those singled out for particularly negative coverage were Poles. For instance, The *Daily Mail* article on May 6, 2016, titled 'A rapist protected by the police and the mining town that turned into little Poland' makes a clear reference to the visual and audible difference of Polish presence with several images of Polish stores, bakeries and beauty salons. It uses a phrase 'Polish invasion' and comments on lack of integration of Poles within the community with attention to Polish language seen 'as a barrier to stay separate'. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)(2016, 18) criticised British tabloid newspapers, for 'offensive, discriminatory and provocative terminology'.

Both tabloid media and some political discourses have played an important part in constructing the narrative about the apparent impact of EU migrants on the 'left behind' British white working class (Haque 2017). Recent Runnymede report (Khan and Shaheen 2017) discusses how working class communities are exploited by dishonest politicians telling them that the newcomers are to be blamed for their problems, encouraging the white working class to resent migrants. However, this is nothing new. The interests of the white working class have often been pitched by the media and politicians against those of ethnic minorities and migrants (Skeggs 2009). The widespread negative political and media discourse about Polish migration further contributes to tensions by 'constructing such new minorities as the main agents of the decline of established white British working class communities' (Garner 2009, 48), while the wider socio-economic inequalities in British society are overlooked. Thus, anti-immigrant sentiment in the light of Brexit is often associated with the British white working class, even though there was a large middle class 'Leave' vote (Dorling 2016). These issues have been previously explored by Garner et al. (2009) and Hudson et al. (2007) revealing that deprivation and disadvantage played a vital role in neighbourhood relations and that racial tensions were often driven by struggles for employment, housing and welfare benefits. They also highlight the influence of the media in fuelling negative attitudes. The discourses about the British white working class and immigration often homogenise this group and contribute to the assumption that white working class people are inherently racist. Haylett (2001, 356) points out that even though multiculturalism is predominantly lived in working-class areas, white working class is often portrayed as racist. This paper not only explores Polish migrants' under-research experiences concerning racism, xenophobia and fear, and how they interpret these experiences with reference to the media and political discourses, but also to class discourses mentioned above.

## Research context

The fieldwork for this research was carried out in Manchester in 2012/2013 and subsequently in 2017/2018. Polish residents are dispersed across Manchester and the area of Greater Manchester, although the City Centre ward and Cheetham are described as popular with the Polish community (Manchester City Council 2015). Many of my research participants arrived in less advantaged areas with cheaper rent and poor housing. However, as a result of improved socio-economic situation, some moved to more affluent residential neighbourhoods.

Manchester is a city with a migration-friendly narrative characterised by a wide support from the local governments (Smith 2010). It is important to highlight a strong remain vote in Manchester (60.4 per cent), while the majority of Greater Manchester boroughs voted to leave. The leave vote was associated with a longstanding frustration over immigration in more deprived parts of Greater Manchester (*BBC News*, June 24, 2016).

The ethnography was initiated by participant observation with the local groups and organisations involving Polish migrants. This method allowed establishing trust with and provided access to research participants. While the study of gender and migration has been marginalised in the larger field of migration studies, this research stressed the importance of women's narratives about daily encounters in multicultural cities. Narrative interviews were conducted with 21 Polish women in Greater Manchester. The sample aimed to capture the heterogeneity of Polish women in terms of age, socio-economic status, marital status, migration history and length of stay. It included Polish migrant women who entered Britain just before or after Poland joined the EU. The interviewees were mainly contacted through the groups with which I conducted the participant observation and subsequently snowball sampling was applied. The third method employed in this research was a focus group made up of five Polish migrant women. The participants were asked to bring photographs reflecting everyday situations in multicultural Manchester, which were used to stimulate group discussions.

I maintained contact with most of the interviewees (15 out of 21) and contacted them in 2017 about their experiences after the EU referendum. While six agreed to a conversation, others were unobtainable. Initially, my research was not designed as longitudinal. As Ryan, Rodriguez, and Trevena (2016) point out, it would have been difficult to plan a longitudinal study considering temporariness and uncertainty of Polish migrants' trajectories.

The interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013 were transcribed, summarised and coded manually to identify the main themes and subsequently analysed as narratives (Riessman 2002). The data from the narrative interviews were cross-checked with the data from the focus groups and the participant observation. The paper also draws on preliminary analysis of the data gathered through interviews in 2017/2018. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

## Experiences of racism and xenophobia

This part of the article focuses on the interviewees' experiences of racism and xenophobia before and after the EU referendum. It also illustrates how the fear of racist violence and harassment is influenced by race, class and location.

## Before the EU referendum

The research participants imagined Britain before their arrival as a safe country with well-mannered upper-class people (Rzepnikowska 2016a). They were surprised with socio-economic deprivation in some areas of Greater Manchester which they often described as ‘dirty and dangerous’, with a particular visibility of the British white working class. While most interviewees experienced various forms of conviviality in their neighbourhoods (Rzepnikowska 2014), some were affected by racism and xenophobia. Paulina (27) moved to a shared flat in a high-rise block of flats in Salford with her husband and his friends from Poland. Salford, a borough of Greater Manchester, is – like many urban areas in the UK – a place of contrasts with regenerated areas next to some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Britain. Although the crime rate in Salford has decreased in recent years, hostility towards recent migrants has often been undetected by the authorities. Paulina expressed her fear of white young males she described as *kap-turowcy* [hoodies]. Paulina witnessed drug dealing, breaking windows and burglaries which were an everyday occurrence. She avoided leaving home on her own and she only used to leave the flat accompanied by her flatmates. Even though Paulina had positive relations with some local residents, she and her husband became a target of harassment which she described as racist:

It was a very dangerous area ... there were a lot of council flats, high-rise blocks and there were many people hostile towards us, Polish people. When they saw we had a car with Polish registration plates, they started harassing us, kicking the car or breaking the windows. This is how they manifested racism toward us.

Celina (41) was also harassed in her new neighbourhood in Droylsden, a town in Greater Manchester, where she lived alone in a flat above a shop: ‘The problems started when the locals realised that a single and strange looking female, surely not English, lives there and nobody visits her’. Several interviewees expressed their awareness of their foreign appearance which may possibly make migrant women feel more prone to harassment (see also Rzepnikowska 2017b). Based on her study on street harassment in Cairo, Egypt, Ilahi (2009) stresses that looking more explicitly foreign was linked with a higher likelihood of harassment and racialisation.

Celina lived in fear, and when her flat was broken into and most of her belongings went missing, she was forced to look for alternative accommodation. After some time, she moved to a council flat in south-eastern part of Manchester city centre. Several months after the interview, Celina told me that she experienced physical and emotional harassment on a daily basis by some white British neighbours and she believed that it was because she was perceived as ‘different’.

While Paulina and Celina described their neighbourhoods as dangerous and experienced harassment on a daily basis, Aldona, a 34-year-old university graduate, considered her neighbourhood in Blackley in north Manchester as peaceful. She was shocked and scared by an incident which involved a verbal attack by a white British man:

A: I was hanging washed clothes on my balcony ... and I noticed that, when my husband parked the car after returning from a shop with my son, someone threw a shoe from the second floor and then I hear ‘Polish cunt’ ... and I saw a man at the balcony shouting at me aggressively ... I was really scared. We were supposed to leave in 15 minutes and I was afraid that something unpleasant would happen.



- I: How did they know you were Polish?  
 A: When someone has a Polish satellite dish ... and maybe they heard us speaking in a different language because we park our car under their balcony.

Aldona also told me about an area near where she lives, Harpurhey, described as the most deprived area in Manchester (Bullen 2015):

I would have to be honest now [smiling ironically]. When I pass Harpurhey, what stands out ... the English poor class [laugh], if I can call it this way. Most people living there are on benefits ... But because it is a cheap area many immigrants move there. But I rarely go there ... I don't like that area. I am involved there somehow you know, because there is this cultural centre and so on. I don't like going there because when I went there recently ... I went to the shopping centre. If you went there for 5 minutes you would know what I mean. These women were so fat, tattooed, poor people, it stands out in the first instance, and they are white, right? There are migrants living there, but you can't really see them that much ... I don't like going there by car because of what happened. It was when the ... event took place. The local white kids started throwing stones. I am just scared in a way. I'm afraid they will damage my car or ... I'm telling you, this neighbourhood seems dangerous to me. There are people there with particular [anti-immigrant] views, let's say.

Aldona, as well as several other interviewees, discussed poor white British people with reference to their visual and embodied features in juxtaposition with their anti-immigrant attitudes and their geographical location in deprived areas often described as dangerous. This resembles popular images of the white working class in Britain, particularly transparent in TV series like *Benefits Street* (Channel 4, 2014) and *Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole* (Channel 5, 2014–2015), or as my focus group participant mentioned, *People Like Us* (BBC Three 2013) which followed the lives of white working class people in Harpurhey. In the popular imagination, a very diverse category of working class 'rapidly devolves into a deficient "social type": as a council estate dwelling, single-parenting, low-achieving, rottweiler-owning cultural minority, whose poverty, it is hinted, might be the result of their own poor choices' (Bottero 2009, 7). In Aldona's narrative there is a tension between a genuine fear of anti-immigrant attitudes, racism and xenophobia, and racialised othering of the poor white working class.

Renia (57) also experienced harassment in her neighbourhood in Ashton. The perpetrators were white British male teenagers. While she had good relations with her immediate white British neighbours of similar age, the generational segregation in her area negatively influenced relations with younger local residents. She told me how the majority of people living nearby were retired, while young and mostly white British families lived on the other side of the neighbourhood.

When we moved in six years ago, the local kids didn't like us. I didn't understand them. They started laughing at us. We had unpleasant situations. When we were leaving the house they would throw stones at us. The parents didn't do anything about it. One day, one kid, a 10-12 year old boy, from social housing, from large families, I suppose problematic, he jumped on top of the car, turned around, I was in the window, and he pulled his trousers down and flashed me with his naked buttock.

Renia asked her neighbour for help despite her poor English, who called the security and the attacks stopped for some time until the new attacks by other local teenagers started the following autumn manifested by 'knocking down the rubbish bins, kicking our doors and

showing their naked bums'. This incident was not reported to the police. This shows how much racism and xenophobia go under-reported. It might be argued that the rise in the reported hostility post referendum might partly show more active reporting by victims as they become more aware of the issues and how to do it.

Renia, as well as several other interviewees, assumed that the parents were responsible for transmitting prejudice to their children. Racism and xenophobia were also attributed to poor and uneducated white British people with large families living in council estates. However, the actual attitudes of the local residents are unknown. Renia's account reflects a tendency in the UK of ascribing racism to poor white British people (Sveinsson 2009), while elite-driven racism is often unacknowledged.

While the narratives discussed above show examples of racism and xenophobia experienced in the neighbourhoods, Nikola (31) experienced the most extreme form of racist violence in a local bar in Manchester:

I was attacked in a public place most likely because I was speaking Polish or my foreign accent. I asked him to leave me alone. He was English. He said 'I don't understand what you are saying' in a very negative way ... and he attacked me. It was terrible. I was in a hospital. I couldn't walk. It was a serious and brutal attack.

Even though Nikola did not say that her perpetrator was white, she described him as English implying his whiteness. Just as in Ryan's (2010) study, Englishness was often synonymous with whiteness in the perceptions of my research participants.

Even though several research participants perceived themselves as white, the car with the Polish registration plates, the Polish satellite dish, Polish language, foreign accent and 'foreign look' become the markers of difference.

It sounds sad but if you don't speak, then everything is alright, because people are not entirely sure if you are Polish, or maybe English, because I am white. But it is obvious that as soon as I start speaking, you can tell that I have an accent and people straight away know and always ask this question: 'Where are you from?' (Lucyna, 34)

When people see me it is ok, but when I say something with a foreign accent I am often met with a negative reaction, not always but it happens. I am white so people can't see that I am not English, right? But when I open my mouth and I say something with a foreign accent, because my accent never will be a British accent, I get this negative reaction. (Judyta, 33)

The privilege of whiteness disappears once they start speaking. While whiteness allows a certain level of invisibility, foreign accent marks Polish migrants as the Other. This confirms the argument that whiteness is always emplaced and temporary (Frankenberg 1993), and that visibility and invisibility are very dynamic and changing (Goldberg 1993).

The presence of Polish migrants highlights pre-existing tensions and inequalities that reinforce them. In the light of socio-economic deprivation of the inner city areas where many migrants move to, some established residents perceive these new arrivals as a source of competition for jobs, welfare services and housing (Sveinsson 2009). While the widespread negative media discourses on migration further contribute to tensions, the wider structural inequalities in British society, denying the working class (white or otherwise) access to opportunities, resources and power (Khan and Shaheen 2017) are overlooked. Wimmer (1997, 31), however, has argued that xenophobic and racist perceptions of social reality should not be understood merely in terms of 'a fight for scarce jobs or

housing'. He has emphasised the importance of 'the territorial dimension of the national community' which is

viewed as solidarity among the familiar ones who live in a borough or village that becomes a mini-model of the nation. The physical presence and visibility of foreigners in these social spaces, and especially their integration in local schools and communal institutions, nurture perceptions of invasion, inundation and existential rivalry.

As discussed earlier, this physical presence and visibility of Polish migrants in various social spaces across neighbourhoods, towns and cities across the UK, and their presumed strain on public services, particularly became the issue in the run up to the EU referendum.

### *After the EU referendum*

Several informants interviewed in the period after the EU referendum told me how shocked they were about Brexit vote and how anxious and uncertain they started to feel. They were aware about anti-migrant sentiment in the run up to the referendum.

While two weeks before the EU referendum I was convinced that the result would be to remain in the UK, a few days before the referendum I realised that it was highly likely that the result would be to leave the EU. This was based on the poll results announced on the radio BBC Radio 4 and largely on anti-Polish or anti-immigrant profile of the broadcasts I listened to ... When the results were announced I was a bit afraid and I started to feel uncertain ... I started to think what would change and how quick changes would happen. For the first few days I had to get used to this new and uncertain situation. I was wondering if the welcoming England would change for the worse – and I wasn't thinking about physical violence as such, even though I could hear about it on the radio, but I was thinking about new laws, residency restriction linked with leaving the EU (Oliwia, 32)

Oliwia and her husband started considering going back to Poland, although they also thought about the possibility of moving to another country since there is a growing hostility to ethno-national and religious minorities in Poland (ECRI 2015; Kornak, Tatar, and Pankowski 2016; Mikulska 2010), particularly in the context of the recent 'refugee crisis' and xenophobic language of mainstream politicians. Oliwia thought she would not feel safe in Poland because of her darker skin complexion.

Oliwia told me how surprised she was when her acquaintances apologised for the referendum results and reassured her that Britain was still her home and she was welcome to stay. Nevertheless, Oliwia told me that it was important for her to hear this in the context of increasing aggression towards Polish people after the referendum, as reflected in some media reports, as a result of which she became afraid. Despite this fear Oliwia said she felt safe because she spent most of her time in the university campus or in family spaces. She felt particularly safe in her ethnically mixed neighbourhood in Rusholme which she called a 'migrant neighbourhood'.

Oliwia assumed that she personally did not experience anti-Polish sentiment possibly because she thought she did not 'look Polish'. She pointed out that because of her darker skin complexion she has often been perceived as Spanish and sometimes children of Asian origin in her neighbourhood assumed she was a Muslim woman of Asian origin. While she may become racialised in Poland due to her darker skin complexion, she blends in well in her ethnically mixed neighbourhood in Manchester.

While Oliwia feels safe in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood, Nikola and Celina, whose narratives were discussed earlier, told me that they also feel safe in their new neighbourhoods, Didsbury and Chorlton, prosperous suburban areas of Manchester described by the interviewees as ‘posh’. This illustrates how different local contexts may influence experiences of migrants and their relations with the local population. While the neighbourhoods mostly populated by poor white Britons were perceived as dangerous and marked by fear of racism, the informants considered multi-ethnic and more affluent areas as safe from racism, reinforcing the idea that racism is a white working-class issue.

Renia, whose experiences were discussed earlier, lives in the same neighbourhood she lived in when she was interviewed in 2013. She experienced racist harassment before and after Brexit vote by the local youth. She also told me how her relations changed with her close neighbour, a white British woman, illustrating how the relations are in constant flux:

Everything changes. It constantly fluctuates. A neighbour who has been living here for several years, always used to talk to me, you know, she asked ‘how are you, how is it going, is everything OK?’, and everything was fine. Now, when I see her, she turns her head away and pretends she doesn’t see me. I think that there starts to be a tendency of negative sentiment towards migrants because of Brexit. I can’t tell you that this is hundred percent the case but I have this feeling based on people’s attitudes.

Renia also told me about an incident at her husband’s workplace, a meat factory in Greater Manchester, the day after the EU referendum. In the early morning of the shift some white British co-workers started shouting ‘No more Polish vermin’, and migrant workers were told not to show up at work and go back to Poland, regardless of whether they were Polish or not. The employers responded to this incident by organising a staff meeting and explaining that similar behaviour would not be tolerated. However, Renia’s husband told her that ‘although everything is ok, nothing is the same as it was before the referendum’. While racialised workplace encounters are largely under-researched, Ashe and Nazroo (2017) argue that racism remains a persistent feature of work life in Britain which disadvantages ethnic minority workers. My research in 2012/2013 revealed complex encounters in the workplace, including various forms of conviviality, friendships, but also prejudice and racism (Rzepnikowska 2017a). Renia’s account shows how racism and xenophobia have intensified in the context of Brexit and how relations with neighbours and co-workers have changed.

### **‘Why us?’ making sense of racism and xenophobia**

The research participants interviewed in 2012 and 2013 were often surprised that they experienced racism and xenophobia despite being white. Celina made an interesting reflection about how European citizens became the ‘new Other’ in comparison to other visible ethnic minorities:

There is some kind of a barrier because of the arrival of Polish people. I said that it would have been better if I was black, I mean, if I was from Africa, because people would stop treating me as an intruder from Europe, because that’s how they treat me sometimes, and they feel guilty about those from Africa because of the history, because they have to make it up to them. And now ‘them’ from Europe? What do they want here?

This narrative about European migrants becoming the new Other deprived of white privilege reminded me about a sense of unfairness implied by some Poles about being victims

of racism and xenophobia despite being white and European. This reflects their lack of awareness of racism experienced by non-white people. During my participant observation I heard comments or questions ‘why can’t they focus more on blacks and Asians?’. Based on her research on Polish migrants in London, Birmingham and selected cities in the Midlands, Nowicka (2017, 9) also discussed how one of her participants assumed the ‘wrong’ position of non-whites in British society, and as the problem ‘to which white Brits are blind or which they do not dare to name’.

The issue of the media coverage was particularly important to the interviewees. Those interviewed in 2012 and 2013 believed that the media were responsible for hostility towards Poles:

It seems to me that all of these strained relations between the British and the Poles and other immigrants result from the media manipulation of the image of the Poles coming over here, who knows in what quantities, and taking the jobs of poor Englishmen. (Lucyna, 34)

You open a newspaper and you see another article about Poland or Polish immigrants and you think, this newspaper reaches millions of people and there are some that are intelligent enough and they have knowledge to contradict it, but others have no idea and they will believe in what is written in the *Daily Mail*. So for me this is really irritating and sometimes I feel you have to fight for some things here, so that someone doesn’t look at me in a bad way because of some kind of stupid stereotype. (Patrycja, 28)

The media have an impact on the surrounding and people ... they found a scapegoat, of course blaming the Poles for all what has been happening because there are so many of us. This is of course untrue ... We are always observed, in the spotlight. If anything bad happens, they would be able to say something negative about us. (Nikola, 31)

The views of the interviewees after the referendum also show their awareness of the dynamics of the British politics and media. Renia linked xenophobic attitudes of British people with both the politics and the populist media:

I think politicians for their own or party interests, for these unfortunate ‘bars of popularity’, are able to do everything. For example, to tell British people that the only remedy for Britain’s return to the nineteenth century super-power is the expulsion of immigrants. And then it will be a land flowing with milk and honey ... honest and professional journalism is a dying species. Now the media is governed by the audience. The Brexit example clearly shows that the populists are better off than those who can reliably present the results of the decisions which were made.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the interviewees often discussed racism, xenophobia and fear with reference to class and spatial characteristics. They mainly attributed racism and xenophobia to the poor white working class Brits. The perpetrators were usually described as anti-social white men or adolescents from large families living on a council estate, often labelled as dangerous. This echoes the popular discourses about violent white youth and racist white working class in general (Gillborn 2010; Haylett 2001; Phizacklea and Miles 1979; Skeggs 2009).

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to illustrate Polish migrant women’s experiences of racism and xenophobia before and after the EU referendum. While it highlighted the need to understand

how less visible minorities can become racialised and experience racism and xenophobia despite their assumed whiteness, it also illustrated how the interviewees discussed their experiences with reference to class, location, as well as the media and political discourses. The main argument was that racism and xenophobia were well-established before the Brexit vote. Racism witnessed today has a long history and as a dynamic phenomenon it takes different forms at different times. The article highlighted the importance of the national context of the UK with attention to the media and political discourses on Polish migration, as well as the local context. While the existing literature mainly focuses on racism experienced by non-white ethnic minorities, this paper makes an important contribution to the understanding of overlapping racism and xenophobia discussed and experienced by migrant women coming from a predominantly white society. The visible and audible markers of difference, such as Polish registration plates, Polish satellite dish or Polish language make their Otherness visible and audible. It also shows how the homogenous notion of Polish whiteness is contested and how not 'looking Polish' may actually be considered as a way to be less stigmatised.

The paper also illustrated how the interviewees discussed racism in relation to race, class and space. Racist violence and fear of it were mostly discussed in the context of specific places occupied by specific people, mainly deprived neighbourhood mostly populated by poor white Brits. While they saw themselves at risk of racist harassment in the neighbourhoods marked by deprivation and white working class presence; they felt safe from racism in more ethnically diverse and more affluent areas. This raises the issue of becoming visible and invisible in different spaces and highlights unstable racialised positioning of Polish migrants.

The one to be feared of is constructed as white, young, anti-social, British male with a low social status living on a council estate, mirroring the ambiguous construction of white working class in some British media as deviant – although they are also portrayed as victims (Gillborn 2010; Skeggs 2009).

Further research should focus on how experiences of Polish and other European migrants and their relations with the local population continue to change in the context of Brexit, especially since many are acquiring or have already acquired British citizenship. Furthermore, it should also explore the experiences and attitudes of not only migrants but also those from the local population, including white and non-white established population.

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