Young Europeans in Brexit Britain: Unsettling identities

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Abstract

Since the 2016 European Union referendum, young European migrants living in Britain have faced growing exposure to social exclusion and insecurities over their future. The Brexit process has not only changed their rights but has also increased their experiences of xenophobia and discrimination. In this context, we consider it timely to focus on young EU nationals' processes of identification and (re)constructions of their identities while they negotiate the multiple challenges posed by geopolitical transformations. The social constructionist research with young migrants shows that they increasingly experience their identities as fluid, with relationships that move between proximity and distance. Our findings from focus groups with 108 young people aged 12-18 born in Central and Eastern European countries and case studies of 20 family support this perspective. The analysis documents young people's agency and efforts to negotiate identity as a process of becoming in the context of change and uncertainty. To understand how young people from a migrant background navigate individual and collective identities, the article offers an explanatory framework that highlights their need for familiarity, continuity, and control over their lives, necessary to maintain a sense of home and belonging.

Introduction

The research on youth identities has highlighted the socially constructed, relational and fluid nature of identities. In this article, we explore how the identities of young European migrants who have settled in Britain have been impacted by geopolitical events linked to Britain's decision to leave the European Union and the global political, social and economic challenges. European migrants living in the UK have been at the centre of the debates on Britain's relationship with Europe since the EU Referendum in 2016, where the Leave campaigners promised to 'take back control' over Britain's borders. In this context, young Europeans have been feeling increasingly insecure both about their future and about how other people might perceive them (Zontini and Però 2019; Tyrrell et al., 2019). They have found themselves othered in schools, places of work and leisure and their ethicized identities have become central to debates about their right to belong and settle in the UK. As youth is a critical time in the formation of identities, it also functions as a crucial barometer of wider social changes and a receptacle for moral and social anxieties. For young people in particular, the processes of 'disembedding' of older, more established identities and the re-invention and creation of new identities associated with globalisation and modernity generate new uncertainties and anxieties over who one is and their place in the world (Rattansi and Phoenix 2005: 98). Youth as a stage of the life-course is positioned thus at the centre of transformations in the understanding of identities in postmodern societies as young people often create new forms of identity expression.

For young people engaged in international migration, increased hostility towards migrants in receiving countries represents an episode of crisis, which raises important questions concerning not only national identification and belonging, but also their sense of self and their hopes and aspirations for future. Research shows young people have a range of orientations towards both host and homeland cultures and places (Colombo and Rebugnini, 2012; Jørgensen, 2016; Wessendorf, 2010 White et al., 2011). The feelings and homemaking practices they may adopt following family migration are often attempts to mediate between the disruptive experiences of mobility and the simultaneous need for certain levels of predictability, continuity, and coherence (Moskal 2015: 151). Kilkey and Ryan (2021) have

recently argued that potentially disruptive structural transformations such as the EU enlargement, the economic recession, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic are interlinked 'because of the cumulative and spillover effects of the changes each event sets in train' (2021:247) and become 'unsettling events' that influence significantly individuals' evolving migration projects over time. Through the conceptualisation of 'unsettling events', the authors make clear that migrants' responses to any structural transformation must be understood against the backdrop of their life-course experiences; as migrants settle in places, moving becomes more complex and less attractive (2021: 248). We draw here on the notion of 'unsettling events' to explain how young migrants living in the UK construct a sense of identity and home in the context of change and uncertainty.

This article reports on findings from a study conducted with migrant young people aged 12–18 year-olds born in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and their experiences of long-term settlement in the UK (3+ years). Data were collected between June 2017 – April 2018, in the year following the Brexit Referendum, to address the pressing question of identity and belonging among youth of CEE background in the context of this significant geopolitical event. Based on the analysis, this article explores the following questions:

- How do the CEE-born young people (re)negotiate their cultural and social interactions locally and transnationally and what is the effect of these negotiations on their sense of identity?

- How do CEE young people navigate among the many identities which are potentially salient to them in any social situation? What is their agency in the process of identification?

Engaging with Boccagni's (2017) work on 'homing', this article attempts to theorise young migrants' lives more broadly. While setting up the theoretical framework of identity and homemaking within the transnational spaces, we explore young people's subjective accounts of relational spaces. The spatial dimension in the form of young

people's social connections to place and locality and their impact on youth ethnicized identities have not been often interrogated sufficiently by previous research. Discussing research on the social and intimate relationships of mobile youth, Harris, Baldassar and Robertson (2020) pointed out the disconnect between migration studies and youth studies and 'the tendency for migration studies to focus primarily on kinship networks, neglecting friendship, while youth studies emphasise the changing nature of young people's social and peer networks' (p.4). The authors argue that studies of migrant settlement have privileged a focus on a singular 'host' place, assuming that successful local social connections develop as 'anchors' of migrant belonging to facilitate social inclusion, while ignoring the relevance of transnational links and multiple belonging individuals can develop over time.

The analysis we present in this article documents young people's agency and efforts to navigate individual and collective identities which are being re-defined by Brexit and other 'unsettling events', in order to satisfy their need for continuity and control over their lives, necessary to maintain a sense of belonging. It promotes a relational approach to study migrant youth that combines a transnational lens with regard for diverse local sets of relations across places 'here' and 'there'. We aim thus to address the gap between transnational migration studies and youth studies and offer that 'deeper engagement' between the two fields advocated by Harris, Baldassar and Robertson (2020). Such an approach understands young people's transnational social spaces as increasingly fluid and multi-sited, with relationships that move between proximity and distance (Harris et al., 2020: 9).

Young people and Brexit research

The emerging literature on the effects of the current neo-assimilationist and nationalist political climate in Britain has started to show how Brexit profoundly affects various groups of EU migrants (Botterill et al., 2019; Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2019; Guma and Jones, 2019; Lulle et al., 2019; Rzepnikowska, 2019). For many EU migrants, Brexit has resulted in a loss of security and sense of control over their lives, which impacts their wellbeing as well as their current home-making practices (Zontini and Però 2019; Sime, Moskal, Tyrrell, 2020). The future of EU migrants in Britain remains highly uncertain, making them dwell

between Brexit-related uncertainties and undetermined plans (McGhee, Moreh, and Vlachantoni 2017). Guma and Jones (2019), in their study of EU-nationals in Wales, argue that Brexit creates a continuous process of othering by unsettling EU migrants' pre-negotiated attachments and connections. The feelings of compromised ability to apply agency to place can emerge as a series of disruptive effects (Riikonen, 2020). Personal and professional connections and disruptions shape the future mobility plans among high skilled EU migrants. Lulle *et al*./span> (2019: 7) observed a strengthened sense of national origin after Brexit among young people from Latvia, Poland and Slovakia living in Britain, which was interpreted by some as a response to turning European citizens into immigrants.

Increasing research has been devoted to the marginalisation of and discrimination against migrant children and youth in their receiving societies. Brexit has triggered concerns linked to young migrants' uncertainties over long-term future. These were related to access to education and the labour market for EU nationals post-Brexit, the precarity of their legal status and their concerns over an increase in racism and xenophobia (Sime at al, 2020). There is however a scarcity of literature that explores young people's response to unsettling events such as Brexit or the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on their identity formation, as well as broader concerns related to migrant young people's sense of self and impact on their social relationships in local and transnational spaces.

Theoretical considerations: social connectivity, identity and home

While engaging with issues of youth identity processes in response to disruptive change, our aim is to explore young people's subjective accounts of what Massey's called 'relational spaces' between a stable residence and 'belonging in mobility' (2005: 8). Transnational migration studies have been criticised for their preoccupation with connectivity (Carling, 2014, Nowicka 2020; Waldinger, 2015). Researchers still need to understand the variance in these connections - why some linkages persist, weaken, or fade away and what different patterns can be observed (Waldinger 2015). Having ties to people elsewhere does not necessarily lead to more solidarity or advance concern and action towards those who 'stayed behind' and vice-versa. Carling (2014) urges us to distinguish between existing connections

(for example, having a relative abroad), transactions (ongoing exchanges with relatives abroad) and scripts (norms governing these transactions) and argue that without these transactions, connections would not survive. Social connectivity across borders thus provides a context in which the effects of migration can be studied (Fouron and Schiller 2001). Grzymala-Kazlowska (2018: 255) observes that over time, some social connections (anchors) linking migrants to their countries of origin may be lost or broken, such as family relationships and friendships. In this study, we will explore the maintenance of transnational anchors in the case of young people and the importance of these ties for their sense of cultural and national identity.

In relation to young people, the resources, and opportunities available to them to maintain active the connections they have with relatives in other countries are often controlled by adults. In the process of people migrating and establishing connections across borders, the culturally specific and taken-for-granted local norms and values move, circulate, and interact with other culturally specific local norms and values. During migration, a new space of multiple belongings, and competing norms, values, attitudes, and practices coming together (Nowicka 2020: 10). In this study, we are interested in how young people negotiate these multiple spaces and how they navigate a sense of belonging across them. We explore the ways in which young people manage discontinuity at a local and transnational level and how they practice home, especially when their right to belong is uprooted by political events, while enacting a plurality of identities in flexible ways.

Ideas about the relational spaces, transnationalism, social connectivity, and multiple belongings have informed our research from the outset. These theoretical starting points link to interlocking concepts of identity and home. By bringing home, space and place together in a migration context, we build on the notion of 'homing' proposed by Boccagni (2017) who explains that home becomes a process rather than a state of things; and ultimately, more existentially, a matter of 'homing', longing and aspiration. Boccagni and Kusenbach (2020) call for a sociological understanding of home as 'a special place or a set of meanings, memories, aspirations and needs associated with it' (p.596), to argue that such an understanding must be inherently relational. The concept of home can be used to capture the complex social relationships that exist between individuals or

groups and certain built environments, social settings and material cultures to which people attach unique meanings and functions. Our sense of home depends on the meaningful relationships we have developed with other people, family members who share the same space, neighbours, and other locals. Home thus means a significant relational engagement, reflecting need and desire to attach a sense of security, familiarity, and control to one's life circumstances (Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020: 297). Continuity through a shared home is relational and links to socio-spatial dimension of identity.

In the case of people who migrate, memories of places left behind continue to play a key role in how individuals think of their place in the world and where they belong. The concepts of identity and memory have been little employed in the study of the processes of mobility, place-making and belonging of children and youth. Memories of people and places from the past can be used imaginatively to consider a broader range of influences in youth that otherwise may be overlooked (Moss 2010: 533). The disciplinary division in studying identities and the prevalence of conventional approaches to identities has frequently resulted either in the individualisation or de-contextualisation of young people's identities, tending to omit their subjectivities and past experiences, failing to grasp their multiplicity and fluidity (Rattansi and Phoenix, 2005: 98). Glick Schiller et al. (1992) have shown that migrants often have an ambiguous national and local identity, with consequences for their ethnic identity and carry with them emotional attachments and identifications across places. Yet, studies of migrant young people have often focus on their integration in the host society, denying their transnational experiences and subjectivities (White *et al.* 2011, Vathia and King 2021).

We aim thus to unpack youth subjectivities and the individual identity process through the concept of continuity of memory adopted first by psychologists inspired by the influential philosophical work of Locke (1997/1689; see also Nimbalkar, 2011). Memory, embodiment and continuity are considered essential components of how individual identity is experienced (Little *et al.*, 2002: 171). More recent psychological research on identity and memory reveals the existence of self-defining event networks characterised by similar identity motives. Demblon and D'Argembeau insist that one's personal identity 'is nourished by memories of significant past experiences and by the imagination of meaningful events that

one anticipates to happen in the future' (2017: 656). They suggest that personal identity also depends on the formation of coherent networks of related events that provide an overarching meaning to specific life experiences. Similarly, Ritivoi (2002) discussed the influence of memory on migrants' identity and the resistance of some to allow a new culture to influence their self, while others may be more open to a co-existence of identities, old and new. The continuity of memory contributes to what we consider ourselves to be here and now, and these events form the basis for the continuity of our lived lives into the future (Little *et al*., 2002: 171). Extreme experiences threaten the element of continuity because they may bring cognitive changes that challenge central values. In this respect, family migration is a major 'unsettling event' (Kilkey and Ryan, 2021) to young people's sense of continuity and identity formation. The geopolitical transformation of Brexit that makes migrants question their sense of home and belonging brings again a potential identity crisis to for young people living in the UK.

Gosh and Wang (2003: 280) suggested a relevant conceptual framework that highlighted interactive psychological, sociocultural, and economic processes that influence the formation of individual transnational identities. Upon reaching their destination country, migrants often face an unfamiliar context. This 'reality' consists of migrants' material circumstances, their access to social networks and a sense of others' perceptions and expectations. In these new circumstances, migrants modulate their behaviours and develop a sense of who they 'can be' and how they can be 'both here and there'. This experience is lived through and performed by the body, which is itself culturally and historically influenced (Brown *et al.,* 2011). Jamison (2020: 221) insists that embodied, emotionally charged, symbolically communicative family relationships and friendships are relevant to wider social change. The relational processes that constitute parenting, family, friendship and caring relationships are shaping selves, producing a liveable social world. In this study, we explore young people's connections to other people and places 'here and there' as part of their identity re(construction) processes and document how these experiences are simultaneously embodied, emotionally charged and relational.

Data and methods

Following from our previous research (Moskal 2015, Moskal and Sime 2016) which focussed on migrant childhoods, in the current study we look at migrant adolescents' experiences, orientations and agency. The research for this article engaged with young people aged 12–18 years old across England and Scotland, using a range of methods. In the first stage, an online survey involved 1,120 young people and interviews with local service providers; in the second stage, the study generated data through 20 focus groups and 20 family case studies in urban and rural areas across the UK. All participating young people were born to CEE parents and had lived in the UK for three years or more. In total, 108 young people, including 50 females and 58 male participants, all aged 12–18, were involved in focus groups between June and November 2017. In the group interviews, we asked participants about their everyday lives, the places they lived in, the activities they could or could not do, their relationships locally and transnationally and how Brexit was likely to impact their lives. The case studies included 13 female and 7 male participants, aged 14–18, and some of their family members. At first, a researcher visited the family to discuss participation and meet family members; at this meeting, young people were also given a scrapbook to use to create a book about themselves, with a focus on their snse of identity and who they are. At the second family visit, the young people discuss the materials produced by them independently including any visuals and the scrapbook and a family interview was carried out with volunteering family members, including the young person.

While formal ethical approval for this study was obtained formally from the ethics committee at the authors' institutions, the research team was always mindful of key ethical issues, such as inclusiveness, informed consent, avoidance of harm, confidentiality and ensuring that the findings are used in ways that are consistent with young people's interests. Researching young people in their homes required sensitivity. Young people were asked to choose if they would prefer to be interviewed separately or in another location than the family home. Participants received a clear, detailed account of the research and its rationale and asked if they wish to participate before each session. To allow all young people to fully express themselves, we used a range of participatory techniques, which included

scrapbooks made by the participants in the case studies over several weeks and a toolkit for creative engagement called Ketso (www.ketso.com). Ketso was used to work with focus groups in schools and community centres as well as in family settings. In Ketso driven focus groups, participants work in groups by writing or drawing on 'leaves', which were then displayed in various ways along branches. The themes we used to structure the focus groups included: relationships, places, belonging, citizenship, and identity. Most focus groups and case-study meetings took place in English (some case studies were carried out in other languages with an interpreter, if necessary) and were recorded and transcribed in full, to allow an in-depth thematic analysis.

To develop the analytical framework, several transcripts were first coded independently by the research team, who then agreed jointly on a framework for analysis to be applied to the remaining data. After the thematic analysis of the focus groups and family case studies was completed, we identified three key dimensions of participants' sense of identity connected to their migrant positionality: an ethnicized and transnational identity, related to being a young migrant; a relational identity as part of transnational and local family and peer networks; and an exclusionary, marginal identity. As the project focussed on exploring experiences of being a migrant, we are aware that questions asked as part of our interviews made young people prioritise an ethnic/migrant lens in their reflections on their identities, with less attention paid to axes such as gender, sexuality, class, religion etc. While we acknowledge that multiple identity categories are important to young people's identity projects as fluid and changing and identities are intersectional, we focus on the identity dimensions they discussed in relation to their migrant journey as a key event in their lives. These identity dimensions are presented below in connection with the research questions and conceptual framework that links relational spaces of home and continuity to the processes of enactment or performance of multiple identities young people engage in on an everyday basis once they have migrated. Finally, looking at their identities as fluid and changing, we explore European young people's agency in the process of multiple identification and how young people understand the mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion in the context of Brexit as factors influencing the reconfiguring of their identities.

Empirical evidence

Ethnicized and transnational identities: Being a young migrant

Moving to the UK and acquiring thus a migrant identity has been for many of the young people in our sample associated with experiences of displacement and feelings of being a stranger in a new land. In time, these identities became transnational, as young people learned to navigate multiple cultures and adapt to their new status as 'migrants'. For those who could not achieve a sense of continuity between these spaces, a sense of alienation or non-belonging often developed. In time, local friendships and familiarity with places in the UK meant that some were reluctant to return to their countries of origin or felt confused about feelings of home when they visited. Many felt that they no longer had as much in common with their friends in their countries of origin and did not have the same emotional engagement or strength of memories as their parents.

> *I consider this place my home. I know if we're going to my granny's during summer, we're going to Poland, my dad says, 'oh, I'm finally going home', but for me going to my granny's is going on a trip away somewhere and then at the end of the trip I say, 'Oh, I'm finally going home', when I come here, because I definitely think of this place as my home, I've got all my friends here, my school, my cat, so this is definitely the most important place for me.* (Nadia, Polish born, 16, Family Case Study)

Being a young migrant affected participants' sense of identity in a significant way. Young people reflected on their sense of identity since they moved to the UK and more recently, in light of Brexit. While for some, their family migration made them feel they matured a bit earlier, others highlighted that places left behind were also changing. For example, Marek (15, Polish-born) reported the feeling of strangeness from the place of origin:

> *It feels like I should be there, but I haven't been there for eight years and it's just not the same. The place has changed so much because now there's pretty much buildings everywhere. Everything has been cut down and it's just not the same thing.*

Familiarity was thus an important factor to their sense of belonging in Britain. Familiar things, people, places and routines were key to their feelings of being 'at home', particularly

for those young people who had spent more of their lives in the UK than in their birth country: "*I feel more at home when I'm in England. That's probably because I've spent most of my life here*." (Gregor, 15, Slovak-born, focus group, England).

For many young migrants, going to local places such as swimming pools, the park, or the local football pitch created a sense of being at home, because they reflected places or routines that they were used to in their country of birth: "*Every time, when I'm at the swimming pool, it reminds me of when I was in Poland; I was going there every winter*" (Nora, 15, Polish-born, focus group, England). A sense of continuity for our respondents was often preserved though sensorial and bodily routines: "*It's probably like my bed's there and that's where I wake up every morning, most mornings. I know where everything is and it's like home*" (Dennis, 17, Lithuanian-born, focus group, England). While the constitutive relationship between memory and place is the most obvious in the realm of material culture, Hoelscher and Alderman (2004) argue that it is also performative: 'Memory circulates both in a material form and through the bodily repetition of performance. Through bodily repetition and the intensification of everyday acts that otherwise remain submerged in the mundane order of things, performances become like rituals' (2004: 348). In the accounts of our young people, the enactment of the self and the bodily experiences of being present in one country, but equally connected with another through birth and memory of childhood routines, were also shaped by their consciousness of being from a migrant background. Their migrant identity became more prominent in everyday encounters, especially since the Brexit referendum, and while some did not feel British, they started to develop a more local or regional identity, saying they felt English or Scottish (see also Sime 2020). As Krista (Latvian-born, 16) admitted:

> *I am proud to be Latvian; I find the language, culture, and history so beautiful and unique. I am proud to be Scottish, as this country has given so much to me and there have been so many individual people who have just been so lovely and amazing. However, I don't feel I'm British.*
>
> *In Latvia, I am not Latvian, because I have not lived long enough in the country to absorb the culture. And in Scotland, I do not belong, because I am not Scottish by*

> *heritage. That puts me in a sort of a limbo because I do not belong anywhere, and I just felt I am out.*

Living between a 'stable' locality and 'belonging in mobility' (Massey 2005) was evident in participants' reflections on multiple (non)belongings, like in Krista's statement above. Young people like Krista did not feel they had a unique point of reference or set of resources through which to negotiate identification with national forms of citizenship, much less to combine them in a cohesive narrative (Moskal 2016), especially when their sense of belonging had been altered by recent political events. These made them acknowledge a stronger sense of belonging to their culture of birth or develop a sense of local or regional identity, while not feeling British.

Krista's statement pointed to the fluid forms of attachment and belonging young people develop. Many mentioned how Brexit had also made them question their sense of belonging in the places in which they lived and the extent to which they would be accepted when claiming a local or national identity in the regions where they lived. These processes point to the 'dynamic, complex, multidimensional and spatially differentiated processes of attachments' (Ryan, 2018: 235) that are part of young people's lives. By finding ways to preserve continuity between their memories of past places, present experiences and their constructions of possible futures, many of the CEE-born young people recognised their hybrid identities as fluid and developing over time.

Relational identity: Language, family and friendships in transnational interactions

Language came to constitute a main point of identification for young people and not merely because it provides a major culture reference, but it also avails a sense of continuity, bodily routines often spatially differentiated by use of different languages at home and in public spaces. Our participants saw language as integral to their sense of cultural and relational identity. Personhood - who and what a person is at a specific time and place- is lived through and performed by one's body; that includes the languages they use, their fluency and markers such as accents. This applies to young people's home language, to being bilingual, and to speaking other languages in addition to their home language. Most young people were speaking one or two European languages at home or a mixture of European

languages and English, while public places such as schools were mainly monolingual and often rejected home languages. Switching languages was common practice:

> *[We speak] mostly Hungarian, to be honest, but sometimes we switch to English, just for some fun. It's so weird because if I were to talk to someone in English, I wouldn't be as open.*
>
> (Istvan, 15, Hungarian-born, family case).

Ability to speak their home language gave many participants a sense of personal comfort. Josef and Dagnija described how they felt more comfortable talking and sharing experiences with people who came from the same country and spoke the same language as them.

> Josef: *You can relate, that's good. You can relate to them a lot, and talk to them about the experiences, I guess. And when you feel intimidated by others, you can just talk to them.*
>
> I1: *So, you think it's easier to share your experiences with the people from the same country?*
>
> Josef: *Yeah.*
>
> Dagnija: *And somehow, I don't know, for me I kind of trust them more.*
>
> (Josef, 16, Polish-born; Dagnija, 14, Latvian-born)

Many young people expressed pride in their ability to speak multiple languages and said they wanted to continue to learn new languages in the future. The identification with multiple linguistic cultures was associated with feelings of enrichment, empowerment and self-esteem. However, others d/span>id lacked fluency in their first language, which made them feel rather disconnected from peers from the same country. For this group, there seemed to be a link between not speaking their families' home language fluently anymore and feelings of alienation and non-belonging in their birth country:

> Wiktoria (15, Polish-born): *It's because I'm so used to being in England, and I speak English with my sisters when I'm in Poland. I kind of feel like—I just feel different from everybody else.*

> Vladislav (13, Lithuanian-born): *It is a little bit awkward when you go to the shop and you speak English. If you're speaking English to your parents, some people will stare at you as if you're a crazy person.*

In these instances, language becomes the cultural marker of difference across transnational spaces. It is not easy to untangle the intercultural nature of identity and how cultural differences facilitate or obstruct communication (Martin and Nakayama, 2005). Once we accept the diversity and ongoing transformation within all cultures, we can 'see culture as something that we do through systems of representation, rather than something we have. As all cultures change and transform, meet, and merge with others, clash and crystallise into distinct and sometimes hostile factions and contain competing representations, interests, and voices' (Howarth, 2011:155). For our participants, the fluidity of identity often resulted in them hiding their feelings or acting differently to be accepted or fit in. Young people talked about having a flexible identity across places, which allowed them to 'blend in' across groups, depending on what they felt were desirable attributes or interests, situations and groups they were in.

The 'transnationalisation' of identity was also mediated by modern technologies, which have produced different opportunities for retaining connections unavailable to previous generations of migrants settling into new places, co-mingling traditional and new forms of identity construction (Rajan-Rankin, 2018). Technology plays a key role in maintaining relationships and facilitating 'co-presence' (Baldassar et al., 2016), but also proved challenging for our participants. Creating the feeling of relatedness and co-presence is often difficult for children and young people who are usually closer to their physical experiences than adults. Communicating at distance is made more difficult by lack of bodily co-presence and limited space for gesture, facial expression, and movement. Most participants described staying in touch with friends and younger family members on social media and communicating with grandparents and older relatives by Skype, FaceTime or phone. While almost all the young people said that staying in touch was important and communicated often with their grandparents, some saw this as mostly the responsibility of their parents and found

everyday communication frustrating. For example, Veronika (16, Polish-born, focus group England) reported:

> *Our grandparents' phone like every day, just to keep in touch with us, just to see how we're doing and things like that.*

Families' relationships and friendships are not only embodied, emotionally charged, but also symbolically communicative (Jamieson, 2020: 221). Communication with grandparents, including voice and gestures brings back memory and feelings generated by the past intimacy and co-presence; these memories keep shaping caring relationships are reproducing bodies and spaces. Memory helps in these communicative moments of implicit intimacy to sustain the feeling of relatedness and influence who young people are and how they feel about themselves. Being part of family and friendship groups and negotiating their place in these relationships was a crucial part of young people identity formation. The role of family in their lives thus spanned several countries, resulting in a range of (sometimes mixed) transnational feelings (see also Jørgensen, 2016: 28). Sense of home was also linked to identity for most of our participants, and many said that they felt they had multiple homes: '*We do go back a lot* [to Poland] *and it does also feel like home back there as well, I guess, because it's your other family that you haven't seen in a while*,' said Agnieszka (14, Polish-born, family case). The material circumstances highlighted in Gosh and Wang's (2003) framework for development of transnational identities often determine the level of contact between the countries of origin and residence. Due to families' material circumstances, the most common desire of being mobile across multiple localities does not always translate regular transnational exchanges.

For these who reported visiting family in the country of birth, these visits were seen as bodily routines performed to maintain a sense of connection to one's roots and family integrity. Grandparents were most mentioned when discussing the scope of the visits, but young people also visited aunts, uncles, cousins, and old friends. Several young people described how visits to their birth country had become more important as their grandparents had gotten older and less able to travel.

Exclusionary, marginal identities

Young people routinely navigate between the many identities which are potentially salient to them in any social situation. In our study, many young people had peer groups that included mainly young people of British origin, while others included both migrant and non-migrant members. When young people had friends from their birth countries, it was common to befriend people who helped when they first arrived in the UK or neighbours. Young people also sustained long-lasting friendships with friends from their country of birth, and these friendships were maintained online between visits to their countries of birth. However, even in these relationships, young people had an awareness of how the difference between their lives and their transnational friends' lives affected their friendships. Istvan (15, Hungarian-born, family case) said:

> *I can kind of feel it getting a bit more stranger and stranger every year; they're moving up as well in the school. They're still in the same place, but they're moving up; everything is different there compared to here, so… It's kind of good to talk about it, but also you can see the differences.*

Access to social networks plays an important role in shaping migrant transnational exchanges and one's cultural and ethnic identity. In extreme cases, migrants can live a life comparable to 'exile' (Said 2000, 181), chequered with rupture and separation anxiety. The host society often thrusts upon individuals highly homogenised collective identities, particularly of 'class' and 'ethnicity', which may only remotely relate to migrants' self-perceived identities. (Gosh and Wang, 2003: 280). For young people, different friendships are a significant influence on their identity formation and intersect with socio-cultural values and their own and their friends' social position. Young people re-shape their identities as they interact more with others, non-migrant and migrant youth. While recognising family and friendship groups as sites of belonging, processes of 'othering' occurring in these interactions are also influencing young people's performative identities.

While young migrants can be part of diverse social groups, they can at the same time feel excluded due to their migrant identities. As illustrated in other studies, migrant youth

'experienced a sense of belonging based on social acceptance across different contexts, including transnational' (Lulle *et al.,* 2019: 8). Many young people in our study talked about the bitterness of feeling rejected by their friends and neighbours, especially since the Brexit Referendum, while at the same time feeling that they belonged in the UK. Yet, their belonging was unsettled by the ongoing political events which mark them out as unwelcome citizens, despite their proven loyalty to the places in which they lived (see also Sime, Moskal and Tyrrell, 2020). For example, Nadia (18, Polish-born, family case) talked about feeling estranged in her town and reflected on the discrimination issues she had experienced since the Brexit Referendum:

> *Just waiting at a bus station or something. I remember I was in like a coffee shop or something once just on the phone to my mum and there were people who were sat next to me who expressed, whilst I was on the phone, that they don't like me speaking Polish in their sort of proximity. And that I should just be speaking English because I'm in England. So, there are a lot more instances where people assume— (…) That's what's Brexit's – Brexit has sort of given them the confidence to do so, I think.*

Migrants' newly found fear of speaking their home language in public, the anger and resignation to the rising intolerance towards them especially after the EU Referendum has been reported before (Lulle *et al*., 2018; Rzepnikowska, 2019), confirming EU migrants' sense of rejection. A similar sense of rejection, however, was felt by some young people when they visited their country of birth, for instance, Hanna (16, Polish-born, focus group, Scotland) reported:

> *That happened to me in Poland. Someone asked where I live and I said 'Oh, I live in Scotland' and someone was like "Oh, well then, why don't you go back to your own country?" and I was like 'I was born here [in Poland]'.*

Hanna's account shows how young people's visits to the country of birth often challenge their identity and their belonging is called into question. Research with other groups has raised similar questions about how individual and collective identities are navigated, for example in relation to young migrants of a Muslim background in London (Ryan, 2014),

who sought out a sense of identity in contexts of uncertainty, but also in contexts of hostility while paying return visits to the homeland.

Growing up as a migrant leads to a greater openness towards difference (Moroșanu *et al*., 2018). Young people's embeddedness in difference can lead to significant socio-cultural detachments from their family/ home country values. For example, Nadia (18, Polish-born) described her country of origin as a place where she could not be herself:

> *I am a lot more reserved with my family in Poland; for example, I do not express my opinions as freely on certain topics such as race, LGBT or immigration because our views often vary so much that it would lead to arguments. The culture and community we live in now is a lot more inclusive and varied and understanding and so very different to theirs, and that is one of the reasons I do not like going to visit. I can't be myself.*

In summary, young people acted as creative makers of their own identities, although these creative possibilities were bounded. Transnational exchanges differed in intensity and regularity among young people, being contingent upon the interplay of several factors that may range from psychological to material and sociocultural. With changes in circumstances, migrant young people develop multiple lives and, consequently, multiple identities (Gosh and Wang 2003: 281). The merit of a transnational lens, as argued by Nowicka (2020: 11), lays in exposing 'the continuities, the fractious, unruly, recusant, intractable outcomes of (national) socialisations', while it doesn't just focus on ethnicity. Yet if reduced to connectivity, transnationalism ends up in danger of reinforcing an assimilationist thinking, as identities are not always subject to fusion and often tend to resist hybridisation (Werbner 2015). The evidence discussed in this article points to the intersections of the local/global spaces that must be at the centre of conceptualisation of youth identity, without forgetting that processes of identification always occur in micro-sites (Rattansi and Phoenix, 2005: 118). A focus on the multiplicity and relative hybridity of migrant youth identities allows us to recognise that the spaces of social inclusion and exclusion for migrant youth are overlapping and multi-layered.

Conclusion

This article contributes to current debates on migrant young people's agency in the self-identification processes and emphasises the need to pay more attention to young people's investment in experiencing a psychological continuity, spatially differentiated attachments and bodily routines that shape these processes. Our analysis goes beyond the dominant settled vs. transnational understanding of identity, to give a more nuanced picture of the fluid process of identity formation and belonging. The young people defined their identity as fragmented, dynamic, and changeable. They talked about how their sense of identity had changed since they had moved to the UK and again since the Brexit referendum, expressing a mixture of positive and negative feelings. Their feelings and perceptionsof transnational connectedness and sense of continuity were influenced by the cultural and social contexts in which they had grown up. Perceptions and expectations of friends and family may influence young people to refrain from and/or engage in select transnational exchanges. In this context, the sociocultural norms of the society of origin play an active role (Gosh and Wang 2003: 281) in processes of self-identification and becoming.

Young migrants rely on existing family relationships and friendships to re-orient themselves when crises and disruptions occur, for example in the context of Brexit. The article highlights young people's proactive choices and identity investments in sustaining significant connections with relatives and peers. Many young people had long-lasting friendships in their country of birth, maintained online and through regular visits to their country of birth. While some of our participants felt 'out of place' in both country of origin and residence, most seemed to feel the UK was their home in many ways, and some expressed a dual sense of home. This duality was mostly seen as a positive thing; however, some young people reported the challenges of living between these different homes and cultures, including conflicts with the parents and transnational family members, lack of understanding among non-ethnic peers and increasing discrimination after the Brexit referendum. This relational continuity extends to the future. The future, as we explain elsewhere (Sime at al. 2020), does not only refer to 'plans' or 'expectations' of what will happen. It involves an act of imagination, whereby one envisages what is possible in the

future, looking back at identity-defining events. Individuals form the basis for the continuity into the future of their lived life, while building plans and imagining (Cantó-Milà and Sweebach, 2015).

In relation to our data, we showed how the Brexit process can disrupt future imaginaries of young migrants in the UK, with consequences for their identity development, as it leaves them uncertain about the direction and location of their lives. Brexit has brought wider structural shifts which can reframe and reverse migrants' rights and attachments and influence their sense of identity and agency, as well as the sense of what they would like and can realistically chose for their future. Through the personal relationships young people form, they sustain the 'ontological security necessary for agency and reflexivity, a sense of individualisation and identification with others' (Jamieson (2020: 221). In relation to this, the use of the discursive category of homing has supported our analysis. Home, as explained by Boccagni and Kusenbach (2020), requires a differentiation of the social world, including: 'an *inside*, constructed as personal and intimate, and an *outside* that may hold opposite qualities' (p. 599). Thus, home can be mobilised in various public contexts to enhance the distinction between insider and outsider groups.

Paying attention to the value of young people's relational continuity and identifications across spaces has allowed us to observe how their micro-level resources are connected to macro-level forces. Power differentials and structural inequalities result in an unequal distribution of resources, access and rights for individuals or groups to make themselves at home under circumstances of space and time (Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020). The migrant youth engagement in transnational flows of people and ideas, as well as their response to the critical socio-political events such as Brexit, raises important questions concerning not only their sense of self and future orientation, but also their agency in the processes of social change for the future. As Kikley and Ryan (2021: 248) suggested lessons can be learned about migrant young people's potential responses to Brexit by looking back at preceding and following interlinked unsettling events. In this respect, the lack of a longitudinal frame emerges as a clear limitation of the present study. Further research is

needed to explore migrant youth identities and homemaking practices from a lifecourse perspective to better understand how migration projects change over time.

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