

Performing whiteness: Central and Eastern European young people's experiences of xenophobia and racialisation in the UK post-Brexit

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ABSTRACT

The state-induced anti-immigration environment and the normalisation of xenophobia in political and media discourses have led to the increased othering of European migrants in the UK through new forms of social stratification, especially since the Brexit Referendum of 2016. For young people who migrated to the UK as children from Central and Eastern Europe, Brexit has represented a major rupture in the process of their identity formation, adding new insecurities in the context of increasingly uncertain rights. Based on a survey with 1,120 young people aged 12–18 who identified as Central or Eastern European migrants, followed by focus groups and case studies, we report on young migrants' everyday experiences of xenophobia and racialisation. We explore the coping and resistance strategies young people used to integrate themselves in these racialized hierarchies. Drawing on insights from emergent theories of racialisation and whiteness, we add new evidence on the direct consequences of these experiences of marginalisation on young people's sense of belonging and their own attitudes towards other ethnic groups.

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Introduction

Debates about the impact of the 2016 EU Referendum on increasing rates of xenophobia and racism have been on-going among the political elites, media and the general public, in addition to Brexit-focussed scholarship (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017; Patel and Connelly 2019; Soboleswska and Ford 2020). While the EU Referendum seemed to have acted as a 'trigger event' (Devine 2018), the underlying mechanisms which led to an upsurge in xenophobic and racist incidents appeared to be oiled by decades of media-fuelled hostility towards migrants and the state endorsed anti-immigration rhetoric. Virdee and McGeever (2018) provided an insightful analysis of how the structural decline and

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experiences of downward mobility during the neoliberal era have led to a marked polarisation in UK politics, which has benefited mainly far-right populism. In this context, ‘the racialized politics of English nationalism’ (15) exploited by the pro-Brexit political elites gained most ground in areas of relatively low immigration, leading to the blowback of Brexit and its racialising consequences.

Reactionary populism is on the rise globally, with a sense of nostalgia over sovereign nation states, especially in states where racial homogeneity is still the norm (Bang and Marsh 2018). Brexit can be interpreted as a psychosocial condition described by Gilroy (2004) as ‘postcolonial melancholia’, where Britain’s attachment to the Empire is ‘coming back to haunt the postcolonial present to an imaginary set of privileges’ (Finlay et al. 2019, 18) seen as inherent to whiteness. In *Rule Britannia*, Dorling and Tomlinson (2019) also argue that the vote to leave the EU was ‘the last gasp of the old empire working its way out of the British psyche’ (cover). A misplaced nostalgia, combined with profound anxiety over Britain’s place in the globalised world, has led to a deeply unrealistic vision of Britain’s future. While xenophobic and racist discourses have a long history in Britain (Olusonga 2017), they shift at times to target new groups, more recently refugees and asylum seekers. Scholarship on racialisation has traditionally examined these processes in terms of the black/white racial binary (Gonzalez-Sobrino and Goss 2019). While centring the analysis of anti-black discrimination remains salient, researchers have increasingly attended to examining the experiences of exclusion of white racialised groups, including Irish migrants (Hickman and Ryan 2020) and other Europeans (Elgenius and Garner 2021; Garner 2019; Loftsdóttir 2017; Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012). Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983) have suggested that racism as a form of exclusion can extend to ‘any group that has been socially constructed as having a different “origin”, whether cultural, biological and historical’ (67) or has been located in ‘ethnic terms’, through labels such as ‘foreign’, ‘migrant’ or ‘minority’.

Whiteness has also received increasing attention across a number of contexts (Lundström, 2014), especially in relation to how it is perceived and how it affects the experiences of those who migrate. In the context of Brexit, whiteness has been drawn upon in both political and media discourses, explicitly or implicitly, often linked to dominant expressions of nationalism and patriotism (Botterill, McCollum, and Tyrrell 2019; Lulle, Moroşanu, and King 2018). Migrants from countries in Europe have occupied a distinct space in discourses around migration flows to Britain, historically thought of as able to access certain privileges (Erel 2011; Varriale 2021). Although researchers have problematised whiteness as an advantage for all groups of migrants (Hickman and Ryan 2020; Fox et al., 2012; Guma and Jones 2018; Rzepnikowska 2019), the British political class paid little attention to distinctions between migration flows or the benefits of migration before the EU Referendum. The pro-Brexit campaign reframed most migrants as ‘other’ and advocated ‘taking back control’ of Britain’s borders, implicating that free movement was a key negative part of EU membership (Outhwaite 2019). The categorisation of some migrants as being more acceptable than others because of their origins, temporality and/or whiteness was upended.

Young people who migrated to the UK as children from Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are a particularly interesting group to study in the othering of white European migrants. With pro-Brexit discourses developing and gathering momentum prior to the EU Referendum, CEE young people were going about their everyday lives

in their communities. Most had developed attachments to people and places and, for many, the UK was the only country they had known or could remember (Sime, Moskal, and Tyrrell 2020). With Brexit, their rights and status became different from their British peers – their otherness more apparent in the spaces they occupied. This paper explores how Brexit has further compounded young people's everyday experiences of xenophobia and racialisation, given that for many of our participants, these experiences were not new. Building on other reports of the increasing racialisation of new European migration (Rzepnikowska 2019; Botterill and Burrell 2019; Benedi Lahuerta and Iusmen 2021), we add further evidence to accounts of migrants' everyday experiences of marginalisation by centring the voices of young people aged 18 and under. As existing evidence comes mainly from accounts of adults, we provide much-needed quantitative and qualitative evidence of young people's experiences of exclusion.

We show how, since Brexit especially, whiteness has lost currency as a visible mark of privilege for these young people, as they are perceived as members of a homogenous category of outsiders who pose an economic and cultural threat. Their age, nationality and migration status leave them in increasingly marginal positions, just as they go through a key lifecourse transition from childhood to adulthood. We also examine the cultural markers of difference that lead to young migrants becoming targets and how these were emphasised depending on various contexts. In doing this, we explore the ways in which difference is articulated through discourses of racialisation, cultural superiority and xenophobia, brought into play in the active construction of CEE young people's identity as 'the other'. While whiteness is less pertinent to their othering than social class and their status as 'migrants', the contexts in which these experiences take place are characterised by hegemonic whiteness and white privilege, which operate differently across white social groups. We examine thus the processes of socially constructing a white identity that operates differently across groups, following also from Kincheloe's observation that 'the Irish, Italians, and Jews have all been viewed as non-white in particular places at specific moments in history' (1999, 167). In the final section, we also show the ways in which some CEE-born young people reacted to their loss of rights and social position by aiming to re-claim whiteness through the expression of prejudiced views or attitudes.

The othering of European migrants

Young European nationals were a group significantly underrepresented in debates on Brexit and excluded from the vote due to their age and/or nationality. While many had lived most of their lives in Britain, they did not have British nationality, given the right to settle under the EU's freedom of movement rules and the prohibitive cost of citizenship fees (currently £1,330). Thus they could not vote in the EU Referendum, although Brexit has impacted their rights and future mobility in an unprecedented way. For young migrants, the normalisation of anti-immigration discourses during the Referendum acted as a marker of their othering, coinciding with a critical time in their lifecourse, when questions of identity and belonging preoccupy young people (Moskal and Sime 2022). Increasing rates of prejudice-based bullying and hate crimes after the 2016 EU Referendum were reported in schools in England (Lepkowska 2017), while most teachers did not feel confident to discuss Brexit or racism with pupils or

intervene in incidents. The majority (84%) also believed that young people should learn about hate crime and hate speech in class. Tereschenko, Bradbury, and Archer (2019), in their study of Eastern European migrant children in schools, argue that Eastern Europeans are positioned 'at the margins of whiteness' and their association with manual labour jobs further excludes them from idealised whiteness, often built on middle class values. In schools, children benefit from whiteness if they speak English without an accent and parents quickly identify with white dominant values by embracing the local education system, although many may criticise it. Rzepnikowska (2019) also reported on Polish migrants' explanations for xenophobia they experienced, where participants associated these experiences with their aggressors' low education levels and working-class origins, thus aligning themselves with the dominant, hierarchical, classed views of British whiteness.

Brexit has changed citizenship rights for EU nationals in the UK, and their lives and plans for the future have been altered as a result (McGhee, Moreh, and Vlachantoni 2017; Ryan 2018; Trąbka and Pustulka 2020; Sime, Moskal, and Tyrrell 2020). Some research has shown the strategic orientation towards naturalising or leaving the country (McGhee, Moreh, and Vlachantoni 2017; Szredanovic 2020; Trąbka and Pustulka 2020). Our analysis adds to these accounts by sharing the perspectives of young people who have been absent in research, despite Brexit having a significant impact on their rights and plans for a future in Britain. We have shown elsewhere how Brexit has impacted young Eastern Europeans' sense of belonging and future aspirations (Tyrrell et al. 2019; Sime, Moskal, and Tyrrell 2020). In this paper, we highlight how young people navigate everyday forms of othering in an increasingly hostile environment, where schools, neighbourhoods and public transport become quotidian spaces of encounters with xenophobia, racism and threat. We examine the ways in which young people manage, defuse or resist these encounters through coping and resistance strategies. Whiteness allows individuals to 'blend in' with the majority groups and pass as 'non-migrants' unless identified by other markers, like accent or their 'foreign-sounding' names, but blending in is not always an easy option and has an emotional cost, as we show later. We also explore their views and attitudes towards other majority and minority ethnic groups, including expressions of prejudice.

Methods and data

The paper draws on a study with over 1,200 Central and Eastern European-born (CEE) young people who have moved to the UK as children since 2004 (the so-called '1.5 generation'), carried out with ethical approval from the first author's departmental Ethics Committee. We have discussed elsewhere the methodological and ethical challenges of involving migrant young people in research (Sime 2017). Participants in this study were young people aged 12–18 who had lived in the UK for at least three years. The study began with a group of six Young Advisors, who supported the team in designing the methodology and identifying the themes to explore. An online survey was advertised four months after the 2016 EU Referendum, through schools and social media and run between October 2016 and April 2017. It covered a range of issues, including participants' migration trajectory, everyday life experiences, family and peer relationships, sense of identity and belonging and future plans. The survey generated 1,120 responses,

where 97% of the respondents identified as white. There were more female respondents (60%) than male (38%) and over half of the participants were Polish (56%), which was expected given Poles were the main nationality group of migrants from CEE at the time, followed by Romanian (10%), Lithuanian (9%) and other nationalities (see Table 1). Most respondents lived in England (71%), while the rest lived in Scotland (19%) or did not give a location (10%) and over a third had lived in the UK for 10+ years.

In consulting with our Young Advisors, we found that young people did not recognise the word 'xenophobia' but used racism as an umbrella term to describe discriminatory

Table 1. Profile of survey respondents (Sample = 1,120).

		Number	Percentage
Gender (N = 1,118)	Male	419	37.4
	Female	673	60.2
	Transgender	3	0.3
	Other/Prefer not to say	23	2.1
Age groups (N = 1,112)	12–15	359	32.3
	16–18	753	67.7
Country of birth (N = 1,116)	Poland	625	56
	Romania	116	10.4
	Lithuania	101	9.1
	Hungary	59	5.2
	Latvia	56	5
	Bulgaria	46	4.1
	Other	39	3.5
	Slovakia	29	2.6
	Russia	19	1.7
	Estonia	10	0.9
	Czech Republic	9	0.8
	Ukraine	4	0.4
Ethnicity (N = 1,098)	Slovenia	3	0.3
	White	1,062	96.7
	Mixed/multiple	20	1.8
	Gypsy/Traveller/Roma	9	0.8
	Asian	3	0.3
	Black	2	0.2
Religion (N = 1,095)	Latino/Hispanic	2	0.2
	Christian	645	58.9
	Atheist	403	36.8
	Other/Don't know	47	4.3
Location in the UK (N = 911)	England	720	79
	Scotland	191	21
Year moved to the UK (N = 974)	2011–2014	347	35.6
	2005–2010	504	51.7
	1998–2004	90	9.3
	Don't know	33	3.4
Feelings on Brexit* (N = 948)	Uncertain	535	56.4
	Worried	513	54.1
	Scared	257	27.1
	Hopeful	177	18.6
	Angry	175	18.4
	Excited	66	7
	Happy	53	5.6
	Very often	56	6.3
Experienced racism 'because of your accent, colour of your skin or the way you look' (N = 882)	Often	71	8
	Sometimes	278	31.5
	Rarely	274	31
	Never	203	23.2

*Respondents could choose more than one answer.

behaviours and practices. We thus decided to use the term ‘racism’ in the study rather than ‘xenophobia’ because of the cultural currency and widespread understanding the term ‘racism’ holds. This led us to phrase one survey question as follows: ‘Have you ever experienced racism because of your nationality or things like your accent, colour of your skin or how you look?’. Data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics. However, these findings cannot be generalised in the absence of reliable data on the CEE groups residing in the UK. While it is not always possible to label experiences as either racial or xenophobic, and we accept this generates some potential conceptual ambiguities, we have aimed to distinguish in the data sections between instances of racialisation when issues of race and ethnicity were either clearly involved or implicit, and instances of xenophobia where experiences were linked to young people being from a migrant background.

Given we recorded 565 qualitative responses on experiences of xenophobia and racialisation in the survey, indicating these were common occurrences, we decided to explore these issues in more depth qualitatively. Twenty focus groups were carried out between May–November 2017, involving 122 young people from CEE migrant backgrounds. Participation required full informed consent from parents/carers, and young people were made aware of their right to withdraw participation at any time and the limits to confidentiality, if they disclosed any harm. The groups were organised in schools and community centres and 55 female and 57 male young people aged 12–18 took part across urban (11), semi-urban (3) and rural (6) areas. All focus groups took place in English, with parents’ consent and interpreters present if required, and were analysed thematically.

The remainder of the paper discusses the findings in relation to three themes which emerged from the analysis: (1) young people’s experiences of othering since the EU Referendum; (2) their coping and resistance strategies to incidents of xenophobia and racialisation; and (3) young people’s beliefs and attitudes towards other ethnic groups.

CEE young people’s experiences of othering since the EU Referendum

Many young people said that Brexit made them insecure in relation to their position in Britain and expressed strong emotional reactions to the EU Referendum outcome. The most common feelings they identified in relation to how Brexit made them feel were ‘uncertain’ (56%), ‘worried’ (54%) and ‘scared’ (27%) (see [Table 1](#)). They said that the EU Referendum had led to an increase in racism and xenophobia, especially manifest through anti-immigration rhetoric and class reductionist narratives of ‘undesirable migrants’, seen as a threat to resources, such as jobs and housing. The majority (77%) said that they had experienced racism and xenophobia because of their nationality, accent or the way they looked. Almost half (49%) said they had seen ‘more racism’ since the EU Referendum, while 23% said they had seen ‘about the same amount of racism’ before and after the Referendum. Young people identified ‘safe’ and ‘risky’ places, although incidents could happen unexpectedly and in the presence of people they knew, as well as strangers. As Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy (2012) aptly warn, ‘racialization does not require putative phenotypical or biological difference’ (681) and racialized differences can be created and invented *in situ*. Likewise, others have conceptualised racialisation as a dynamic process stemming from social dominance and power, through

which ‘ideas and practices of “race” are injected into a social relationship, as properties of people, spaces, relationships, inter alia’ (Garner 2019, 512; see also Gonzalez-Sobrino and Goss 2019).

Of the 882 participants who discussed their experiences of racism and xenophobia in the survey, 14% percent ($N = 127$) said these happened ‘often’ or ‘very often’, 32% ($N = 278$) said they ‘sometimes’ experienced racism, while 31% ($N = 274$) said these experiences were ‘rare’. Just under a quarter (23%, $N = 203$) said they had never experienced racism. When asked to detail these experiences, 565 participants described personal experiences of prejudice-based discrimination. These incidents happened in schools, but also in public places, such as parks, shops, public transport or streets, in young people’s places of work and online, through social media. While there was no variation in levels of racism and xenophobia reported in Scotland or England, young people in cities were more likely to report incidents than those in rural areas. Schools were cited as the most common sites of prejudice-based attacks.

The diversity and superdiversity of schools as places of tension and inter-ethnic conflict has been reported before (Cole 2017; Tereschenko, Bradbury, and Archer 2019). Young people felt that schools should be ‘safe places’ where they have opportunities to learn, develop friendships and socialise without concerns for their well-being. Picca and Feagin (2007, 43) have argued that individuals may try to mask their racist attitudes by deliberately associating themselves with a minority friend or saying that they ‘do not see race’. This tension between being treated as a friend and equal while also being target of abuse often confused participants, as xenophobic incidents could happen randomly and involve close peers:

I was running laps around the field when two girls my age started having a go at me for unknown reasons. They started calling me a foreigner and telling me to get out of the country.¹

At school, people say about me becoming a car washer and ask what my dad does as a job and make fun of it. I also get called a Polish freak.

One of the things that happened at school was people telling me I should be working in the dining hall or cleaning their houses because I’m Polish. Obviously that’s a stereotype and I’m pretty sure they were just having a laugh, as that’s the type of humour we have.

The usual racism, just friendly banter between friends.

The narratives of xenophobia disguised as banter or jokes were common, and jokes were used to exclude individuals from groups or perform otherness as a reminder of difference and non-belonging. Prejudice-based humour is often utilised as a means of appearing innocent, while still relying on racist discourses (Pérez 2017), in attempts to normalise racism and promote its acceptability. Racialisation through categories of class and social hierarchies was also evident, with racist slurs often reproducing wider racial discourses around undesirable migrants, e.g. anti-Gypsy, anti-Muslim and anti-refugee sentiments. Race-based stereotypes were extended to white individuals whose countries of birth were associated with significant numbers of Roma groups or by expanding on the anti-immigrant discourses to imply that all migrants were ‘undesirable’:

I’m often called a Gypsy or strange because I’m foreign - I’m not even Roma.

Called a Gypsy because I'm Bulgarian, go back to your country.

A boy in class asked me if I came here on a boat and did I have to build it.

Incidents of xenophobia were also gendered. Female respondents were called 'prostitutes' or 'house cleaners' in a derogatory manner and they were also more likely to be abused by strangers in public spaces, for example, when speaking in other languages than English.

[on the] street, being called a thief, disgrace to the UK and a prostitute.

The xenophobia experienced by young women often involved the sexualisation of their bodies, which seemed to derive from stereotypes about human trafficking from Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries. It has been argued before that the intra-European hierarchies and the racialisation of Eastern Europeans as 'inferior' exacerbate the sexualisation of Eastern European women (Krivonos and Diatlova 2020). Our findings illustrate these incidents were unpredictable, with attacks happening in public places when perpetrators noticed a non-British accent, but also in young women's homes, as some experienced sexualised xenophobia from their partners in romantic relationships:

[It happened in] schools, streets, bars ... incidents of being called a prostitute based on my background, being told to go back to my country ...

Racist jokes² at school – also an ex was racist to my face when at my house, calling me names all the time, Polish b***h.

By contrast, young men's experiences of cultural violence drew on different types of anti-immigration discourses, where they were called 'terrorist', 'Nazi' or 'Polish builders', combined with derogatory remarks questioning their legal right of residence in the UK:

Got called a Nazi because of my Polish origin.

In school – I was told that I'm with Putin and I would missile the school.

Being made fun of for accent at school; jokes about WWII/Hitler/Holocaust.

People would tell me, go back to Auschwitz, or ask if my parents are bus drivers and say 'Poles are taking our jobs, go back home'.

While some young people recounted occasional, one-off incidents, others said these were more regular occurrences, including bullying and violent physical attacks taking place at school or in public places:

At school, they pulled a knife.

I was bullied from the age of 6 to the age of 12. I had rocks thrown at me, vile rumour spread about me, my possessions stolen – I was mocked and verbally abused simply because I'm Polish.

At my last school, someone made xenophobic comments about my nationality and tried to burn my hair. Last year, in my current school, a group followed me around chanting UKIP and that I should 'f**k off back to my country'.

Far from being safe places at all times, schools were places where risks were consciously and continuously being negotiated – including the risk of being othered and,

in extreme cases, the risk of physical violence. The role of peers and teachers emerged as profoundly important in young people's everyday experiences of violence and marginalisation in schools; teachers could be defenders, perpetrators or by-standers:

The teachers who hear the racist/sexist/whatever comments made by students, but choose to ignore them! Or even better, they laugh along!!! Trust me, as unrealistic as it sounds, it happens more often than you think.

Young people also described incidents where teachers were xenophobic and discriminatory in their practices – by not allowing young people to sit exams in certain subjects, commenting on their accent or ignoring their presence in class – or by expressing anti-immigration views:

An examiner gave me a low grade on a well-made project due to my accent, which he said he noticed during a presentation (in high school).

The head of the English department told me I wasn't capable of doing English National 5 and told me to do ESOL instead. I told him I was able to do it, but no, he kept telling me I wasn't good enough and how bad I was at English. I proved him wrong.

The acceptance and perceived lack of action from teachers during the incidents they witnessed made young people reluctant to report incidents. They said they did not report because 'teachers knew' and did not act to counter the prevalent culture of prejudice, or they would not take reports seriously. Similarly, young people said that Asian or Black young people would be more likely to be believed by authorities if reporting discrimination or bullying, showing internalised ethnic hierarchies of who is a credible victim. One of the focus group participants described how her brother reported an incident when he was called a 'dirty Bulgarian' by a peer and nothing was done by the school. She was convinced the school's response would have been different if her brother were not white. Other participants mentioned teachers overhearing xenophobic comments in class or corridors and ignoring these. In a focus group, young people also discussed why reporting may be seen as 'causing trouble' or make the bullying worse, as there would be no consequences for perpetrators:

Dominik: We don't tell the teachers.

Eva: No we just keep it for ourselves, because we know it's going to happen again.

Researcher: Why do you not tell the teachers?

Eva: Because there's no point telling the teachers, 'cause it happens again and again and again.

Dominik: They call their parents and then it will get worse. (Focus group)

In a Runnymede report, Joseph-Salisbury (2020) stated that 'racism is deeply embedded in schooling' in Britain and that 'much clearer anti-racism policies are needed to institutionally embed a culture of anti-racism in schools' (3). The incidents described above show young people's vulnerable position, also in spaces many would expect to be safe or regulated. For some, these experiences were not new as they had experienced racism and xenophobia since their arrival in the UK; however, Brexit had created a changed environment of increasing othering of new migrants. Young people

were frequently feeling vulnerable to being perceived as undesirable and othered. They reported the racism and xenophobia they experienced had intensified with Brexit and these changes had been long-lasting rather than short lived after the EU Referendum.

From invisible to visible: marginalised whiteness, coping and resistance strategies

Rather than a static characteristic, it has been argued that whiteness constitutes a category that people can move in and out of during the process of racialisation (Loftsdóttir 2017; Hickman and Ryan 2020). The majority of young people in our study identified as white (97%) and some commented on how whiteness allowed them to 'blend in' in public places. However, they were frequently socially constructed as 'other' and as not belonging, being regularly reminded that they were 'not from here'. Some of the most commonly mentioned markers of difference were young people's names, accents and ways of speaking, which may not always be sensitive to localisms and colloquialisms non-migrant young people would be easily familiar with. At other times, young people were verbally abused for using their family language in public, their cultural identity made clear through audible markers of difference:

Sometimes nice people become rude as soon as I start to talk to them and they hear that I have a foreign accent.

When I was walking around with my little sister, an old lady screamed at us because we were speaking in Polish and called us 'pigs' and told us 'go back to your own country'.

Our findings uncover the more subtle ways young people seek to and perform whiteness as a coping strategy against exclusion and marginalisation (Erel 2011; Moore 2013). Getting a 'local' accent was a challenge for some young people, although many said they had managed to overcome this as a tactic to 'blend in'. Young people said they could easily switch between accents, for example, when in class or when in public places, with their friends. In these cases, they would 'pass unothered' (Elgenius and Garner 2021, 229), at least until their nationality would be revealed by people knowing them:

I was at the park with two of my friends, then two kids came up (maybe 17-18 years old). They seemed nice for a while, but then one of my friends mentioned that I'm Polish. So one of the new other kids started having a go at me, asking me to show him my visa, wanted to know if I'm here legally, said all I do is steal jobs and that he's gonna deport me. It was a horrible experience and disturbing to see how he went from friendly to hostile just because I'm an immigrant.

These experiences illuminate how whiteness as grounds of inclusion loses currency over cultural difference, which operates as a primary criterion for exclusion (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012; Moore 2013). This was also the case with young people's neighbours, as many families, especially in cities, did not interact with neighbours for fear of them having prejudiced views; they preferred to remain less noticed or 'invisible'. In the survey, over one in three of young people (38%) believed that their neighbours were prejudiced against Eastern Europeans and some discussed abusive incidents and attacks on their families, which they saw as motivated by xenophobia:

Someone drew a Swastika on my house and wrote 'go back to your country and stop stealing our jobs'.

On our property, next door neighbour broke our fence and threw small stones at our windows. We've also had our fence set on fire.

Vandalism of our property - and beatings.

When asked if they reported incidents to the police or other authorities, young people said they were more likely to report if these involved physical attacks and damage to property, unlike everyday incidents between peers or one-off verbal attacks, which they considered low-level offences the police might be less likely to intervene in. However, the general consensus was that reporting incidents of xeno-racially motivated violence was not advantageous, as young people unlikely to be taken seriously or could be perceived as trouble makers. Young people said they would rather 'ignore' their peers' comments or 'move on', if incidents did not involve physical violence or deflect these by making a joke themselves in response to the attacks:

I've been called an immigrant, which I find quite funny.

Racist jokes, but not really to discriminate against me, or too serious.

In workplaces, some young people employed another coping strategy by trying to disguise or at least not share their nationality with work colleagues for fears of discrimination, although others would eventually know their nationality by seeing their 'foreign-sounding' names or finding out they were from a migrant background. This again made some vulnerable to discrimination and verbal attacks, which they did not report, for fear of losing employment:

During my first week in my first job, I made a mistake at the till, so I called the supervisor, he went mental at me about people like me stealing jobs and not even being able to do them right and that nobody wants me here and I should go back to where I came from.

When an individual's nationality was not known to perpetrators, but they could place young people as not being 'from here', 'Polish' or 'Gypsy' become slur words associated with 'migrant', 'illegal' and 'undesirable'. Similarly, the language of criminality was perceived as commonly associated with foreign-born individuals, especially Roma, Romanians and Poles:

On the bus- on a few occasions younger students said to me to 'fuck off back to Poland' (although I'm not even Polish).

Waiting for the bus, saying how Polish people are ok, but they wouldn't tell a Pole where they live, because you never know, they might steal from you.

I'm Romanian, so people often call me 'dirty Gypsy, just go back to your country'.

Scholars have referred to a spectrum of whiteness and 'shades of whiteness' (Moore 2013) in describing how class and migration status can render white groups subject to stigmatisation and marginalisation. The perceived, subjective vulnerabilities which derive from one's sense of being, seen as undesirable or not belonging, were mainly discussed in terms of emotional upset and distress. Participants mentioned that people

appeared to give them ‘disgusted’ or ‘disapproving’ looks when they were, for example, speaking their family languages in public, in shops, parks, libraries or public transport, which impacted on their aspirations to settle in the UK in future:

Personally, I don’t feel discriminated [against] in the UK, but I feel people from my country are background citizens – we exist, but are not seen.

I want to move to America when I’m older as I don’t believe I fit in the way of British people live their lives and how they function. I sometimes feel unwanted and I have to pretend I’m someone else for people to like me. I feel like I need a fresh start.

These attempts to plan for a future elsewhere if things got worse, or pretend they were ‘someone else’, illustrate the challenges to young people’s sense of identity and security, but also their perceived agency to take action and change their situation by altering their environment or seeking security elsewhere. Other strategies of coping included attempts to rationalise attackers’ behaviours by discussing their perceived lack of education, the peer pressure of gangs or laddish culture, or the likely unfavourable life circumstances of their attackers, who may feel anger towards others indiscriminately:

The uneducated people who discriminate against others on the account of ethnicity, religion and sex can save their hate for themselves.

I wish some people would be better educated on our countries and our countries’ history with the UK, so there would be less hatred and misunderstandings.

Under these circumstances, young people tended to take incidents in their stride and did not report the violence, although they were aware these behaviours were not acceptable. In several instances, young people avoided further conflict by removing themselves from the situation:

Two English girls started making fun of my family talking in Polish; we left the park.

The perception that Brexit has created an ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide and made Eastern Europeans more vulnerable made many participants more conscious of their displays of cultural identity in public spaces. They became more self-aware when speaking European languages in public, or when wearing items of clothing that ‘gave away’ their nationality, because of style or logos written in other languages, or eating certain foods in the school hall. Some young people talked about their attempts or their peers’ attempts to hide their nationality or state another, more desirable nationality. As they were often of darker skin, Roma young people would tell people they were Spanish or French, clearly suggesting a perceived ethnic hierarchy of desirable migrants or acceptability, based on their skin colour. These strategies exemplify racialisation as a theoretical tool to understand how experiences of everyday discrimination of new ethnic groups are informed by the social cultural dominance of the black/white binary (Gonzalez-Sobrino and Goss 2018). Young people themselves realised their attempts to ‘blend in’ or told by their peers that they were engaging in cultural mimetism:

I was told on many occasions that I ‘Englishised’ myself.

I think some Eastern European people hide their nationalities and pretend that they are English or fake an accent. I live in Liverpool and some Eastern Europeans fake a scouse accent because they are ashamed of their actual accent.

They also talked about the role of their ‘foreign-sounding’ names and how, for some, it had been easier to change their name or adopt a pseudonym or nickname. These strategies of modifying or disguising their cultural identity, in addition to the impact of their everyday experiences of prejudice-based bullying and discrimination, had a direct impact on young people’s emotions, sense of identity and belonging:

I am worried about the outcome of the Referendum as since then I’ve not felt welcome here, the place I call home. It’s heart-breaking to see how much hatred the election has brought out from people. Truly saddening.

Most respondents, however, were determined to ride the wave of political turmoil and the rise of far-right extremism, which they felt had made society more divided and had given rise to increasing prejudice and discrimination. Similar to studies with adult Eastern Europeans (Lumsden, Goode, and Black 2019), young people described how they occasionally employed resistance strategies, stood up to perpetrators and aimed to confront attackers, report incidents and also get more involved in political activism and campaigning for migrants’ rights:

At school, a student was racist to my friend and I stood up for her.

I started to be more involved, looking at how you join a party and which parties care about migrants. I also go to protests.

They felt that young people had to unite and resist attempts at social divisions and that it was down to their generation to ensure the future is better and less divisive – and many had hope things will get better:

Yes, we are discriminated and maybe we’ll continue to be, but we don’t have to back off that easily. In my opinion, we shall fight for our rights, as people who have been here long enough to call Britain home. I am not going anywhere, others should not go as well. As you say in your project title – we are here to stay.

By the time I’m in my forties, people won’t really see nationalities as a different thing. It’s the same thing really and no one will care.

In summary, there was some evidence of resistance in young people’s actions, to negate the impacts of victimisation they were exposed to, in addition to everyday coping strategies. For some, this took the form of avoiding and retreating from situations perceived as threatening or trying to ‘blend in’, so they were less likely to be targeted. For others, this took more active forms of resistance, such as challenging their attackers or taking action by reporting or protesting, or planning to secure citizenship in the future to also gain voting rights.

Beliefs and attitudes towards other ethnic groups among Eastern European young people

In this final empirical section, we report on young people’s own attitudes towards other ethnic groups and scrutinise the extent of their prejudiced beliefs. We show thus the pervasive nature of prejudice, which can make certain groups which experience prejudice adopt discriminatory attitudes or behaviours towards other groups, as a way of ‘fitting in’ within existing racialised hierarchies. Fox and Mogilnicka (2019) showed how

Eastern European migrants draw on forms of racism that are familiar to them from before migration, while also adopting new forms of racism as part of their integration repertoire, in order to negotiate their racialised difference and become more accepted. They call this ‘pathological integration’, whereby migrants learn to master a racist repertoire as a coping strategy and to situate themselves more favourably in the existing racialised hierarchies they aspire to be part of.

In our survey, young people felt that the majority groups in Britain were prejudiced against Eastern Europeans (as mentioned above, 38% believed that people in their area were prejudiced towards migrants like them). Also, about 1 in 3 (31%) worried about their safety in the local area, saying they felt ‘mostly’ (8%) or ‘sometimes’ unsafe (23%). Some described xenophobic attacks perpetrated by neighbours, which led to their reported safety concerns, while others said they just a ‘feeling’ that their neighbours did not like new migrants, which made them dislike the areas they lived in and wanting to move out.

I hate living here, I think the English people are very close-minded and many are prejudiced against immigrants. I constantly feel unwanted and unappreciated in this country.

While the qualitative findings suggest perpetrators were often from majority groups, in their communities or schools, young people reported that members of minority groups could become perpetrators. They mentioned ethnicity-based ‘gangs’ in schools, who would stick together and protect members of their own group, while perpetrating violence against other ethnic groups. These included examples of minority groups fighting against the majority group, but also inter-ethnic fights between minority groups. Inter-ethnic acts of violence among adults have previously been interpreted as performative acts that work to strengthen claims for inclusion on grounds of whiteness (Erel 2011). In some cases, young people linked the violence to the working classes, saying the perpetrators were likely to come from council estates and families of benefit claimants or drug users.

In book groups, at the library, other kids and their parents would ostracise me and gossip about how I don’t belong here (the people were Middle Eastern migrants themselves).

There were many students from lower class backgrounds that did have a lot to say about where I’m from – interestingly, this was when I lived in London and the bullies were ethnic minorities themselves.

According to some young people, migrants’ hierarchies which positioned some nationalities as ‘better’ or ‘more desirable migrants’ were evident in schools and neighbourhoods, where young people from certain countries in Southern and Central Europe were often perceived as being better treated than more recently arrived Eastern Europeans:

In my (international) school, I occasionally get mocked for being from Lithuania, comments mostly from Spanish, Italian, German pupils and pupils from bigger countries.

These experiences illustrate how racialisation positions Eastern Europeans as not ‘fully’ European (Loftsdóttir 2017). A small number of young people also expressed anti-immigration attitudes in the survey and focus groups. In a focus group, a young man explained how Syrian refugees would pose a threat and why the British government

were right to aim to reduce immigration as refugees pose the risk of terrorism. His friends, however, were prompt to disagree. Attitudes towards other minority groups were also explored in the survey through a question asking young people to indicate whether particular groups were suitable teachers. We chose this profession given the perceived respectability of teaching across cultures. The answers demonstrated a mixed picture of prejudice. While a majority considered Eastern Europeans (81%), Black or Asian (79%) or Muslim (72%) individuals as suitable primary school teachers, only 36% of those who answered felt that a Gypsy/Roma person would be suitable for a teaching career. This demonstrates how, much like the host society and in their struggle against classification, young migrants can also associate certain minority groups as more undesirable. It also unveils coping strategies, whereby migrants aim to be recognised as 'respectable' and aligned in values to the majority group and hegemonic whiteness (Krivonos, 2018; Moore 2013). Altogether, the significance of these findings arises not from their scale, but from their explanatory potential in destabilising traditional understandings of xenophobia as manifesting through a simplified binary between migrants and host society.

Young people's experiences of discrimination and cultural violence are thus only part of the full picture on how they negotiate inter-group relationships through everyday coping practices and their own attitudes to race, identity and rights. Emejulu (2016) suggests that whiteness 'can intrude, appropriate and colonise these spaces in order to reinforce an identity of victimhood' (para 5) and while reports of racial harassment should not be dismissed or questioned, the tension between 'whiteness as victimhood' and 'whiteness as innocence' must be acknowledged. Others have acknowledged that the racialisation of white migrants being given coverage indicates that white migrants remain privileged, as hostility towards them threatens the hegemonic racial hierarchy and the privilege of whiteness. Our findings illuminate whiteness as a structural position of privilege intertwined with the sense of Europeaness (Krivonos and Diatlova 2020) which Central and Eastern European young people in Britain are increasingly excluded from. The ramifications of Brexit have had a substantial impact on CEE-born young people who migrated to the UK as children and their everyday experiences of being othered are likely to inform their attitudes towards other ethnic groups. In this context, most participants said they were striving to adopt more inclusive identities and promote attitudes of inter-ethnic cohesion with their peers:

After all, we are all citizens of the world. I have friends and co-workers who are Indian, Syrian, Irish, Scottish, English, Filipino, Swedish, German and Lithuanian and we all get on with all our funny accents and we respect each other. I wish more people would be open minded and respectful.

Conclusion

This paper has examined young Eastern Europeans' experiences of xenophobia, racialisation and othering in the UK since the 2016 Referendum. We explored the impact these experiences have on young people's everyday interactions and feelings of belonging to their communities. The examination of the 1.5 generation and their encounters with racialisation in its diverse manifestations, from micro-aggressions to explicit verbal and physical attacks, discriminatory practices or serious prejudice-motivated crimes,

revealed their complex, multiple experiences of marginalisation. It is not a simple case of discrimination, but one of everyday experiences of xenophobia and racialisation, which had become more normalised since the Brexit Referendum. We have shown in the analysis how young people responded through strategies of acceptance, avoidance or blending in, or through more active forms of resistance.

These findings show that young Central and Eastern Europeans have become othered in spaces such as schools and public places and often feel unsafe and at risk of being victims. Their experiences show renewed ethno-nationalism in the wake of the Brexit Referendum and how ‘shades’ of whiteness are constructed at the intersections between one’s skin colour, nationality and markers of social class. While performative whiteness may have enabled CEE young people to ‘blend in’, the complexity of social hierarchies of race in Britain (Clarke 2021), the pervasiveness of anti-immigration discourses and the impact of Brexit on their settlement rights has ruptured their lives. The everyday aggressions they are experiencing, sometimes disguised as humour and banter, other times more overt, as verbal slurs, threats or physical attacks, have direct consequences for their sense of belonging. The incidences of discrimination young Eastern Europeans disclosed, which often went unreported, show the urgent need to target anti-discrimination and preventive interventions at school and community levels.

The study progresses existing knowledge by focussing on young people’s experiences in the context of current public debates on issues of national and European identity and questions whiteness as a norm or fixed trait which determines young people’s life chances post-migration. The data show how incidents are not always taken seriously by adults in positions of power and why young people think that reporting would not improve their situation. The accounts on the highly salient nature of the stigmatisation of young European migrants add to current understandings of stigmatisation through everyday aggressions, in addition to more explicit incidents of being excluded, ignored, dismissed or made a target. These incidents do not have to be repeated for young people to increasingly feel a sense of alienation and un-belonging. The impact of events they are victims of, or which they witness, is significant also on an emotional level – they feel excluded from the groups they want to belong to.

The other novel contribution has been to examine young people’s responses to these incidents. These are strategies of coping by ignoring incidents, blending in, finding ways of justifying their attackers’ behaviours, removing themselves from situations or trying to fight back. As argued by Elgenius and Garner (2021), “whiteness does not protect from racialization, but provides an opportunity to realign with the majority discourse, and thus constitutes a claim-making resource” (225). Imoagene (2019) mentions the strategies of social adaptability and conciliation, in relation to middle-class second-generation Nigerians’ responses to racism in workplaces. In the strategy of social adaptability, individuals learn to perform behaviours that are valued in their new environments; by using conciliatory strategies, individuals deflect, excuse and ignore racial incidents. We found that young people were both adaptable and conciliatory, but they also had a strong sense of justice and some held the belief that violence can be challenged through individual and collective resistance. However, instances of reporting aggressors were rare – and this finding raises important implications for policy and practice, especially in schools, where young people might not be familiar with mechanisms of reporting or may think they will be stigmatised further if they report incidents.

Finally, the article has examined young Central and Eastern Europeans' attitudes towards other minority groups and the majority population in Britain. The data showed prejudiced remarks expressed against other ethnicities, particularly Roma, or lower socio-economic groups. Further research needs to examine young Central and Eastern Europeans' views of other groups and their attitudes towards differences and how these views are changing over time and post-Brexit. Studies on conviviality show that individuals' attitudes towards others do not always change with inter-cultural contact and can lead to further segregation or the adoption of new forms of racism as a route to a 'pathological integration' (Fox and Mogilnicka 2019, 5). To this extent, the fact that young people's experiences of interactions with other ethnic minority groups through schooling do not always lead to anti-discriminatory attitudes gives scope to further interrogations of whiteness and how one's dual positioning as both majority and minority can impact on world view, behaviours and attitudes.

Notes

1. All quotes are from the survey responses, unless otherwise mentioned.
2. As mentioned in the Methodology section, participants often used the term 'racism' to refer to incidents or comments which were xenophobic in nature.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available through the UK Data Service for registered users at: <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-854232>.

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