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How to cite:

Vieten, Ulrike M. and Gawlewicz, Anna (2016). Visible Difference, Stigmatising Language(s) and the Discursive Construction of Prejudices Against Others in Leeds and Warsaw. In: Vieten, Ulrike M. and Valentine, Gill eds. Cartographies of Differences: Interdisciplinary Perspectives. New Visions of the Cosmopolitan, 5. Bern: Peter Lang, pp. 202–221.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.3726/978-3-0353-0804-4>

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Visible Difference, Stigmatising Language(s) and the Discursive Construction of Prejudices Against Others in Leeds and Warsaw

ABSTRACT: There is a growing interest in – and urgency around – the understanding of cultural difference in and across European societies. Language matters crucially to how difference is perceived and conceptualised. Against this backdrop, the consequences of encountering difference through language still require research. In response to this need, this chapter looks into the use of prejudiced terms addressing difference with respect to axes of gendered ethnicity/religion (Muslim men) and gendered class (male underclass) in two European cities. In doing so, it traces the vernacular embedding of perceptions of specifically coded difference in Poland and the UK. As such, it explores how the same categories of difference are discursively produced in two national contexts and enquires in what ways perceptions differ, overlap or refer to an increasingly global discursive framework.

Introduction

Kürti (1997) argues that the projection of Eastern Europe as a peripheral region is ‘akin to the orientalising project known from colonialism, whose totalising and hegemonic perspective was so important for exploitation of the colonies by the colonizers, and which was supported by a nationalist elite lending credence to its expansionism’ (1997, 31). Thinking of Poland, it is important to stress that the periods of partition (Davies 1981) indicate various historical stages of being incorporated *culturally* into hegemonic empires (e.g. Habsburg, Prussia, Tsarist). In effect, there are historical phases

of being exposed to the dominance of hegemonic languages (German, Russian). Importantly, although Poland experienced periods of dependence, which also holds true for the dependence on the USSR until 1989, it also remained at certain times a colonial power in relation to some regional and ethnic entities (e.g. the collectively labelled 'Eastern borderlands'), which fuelled the production of Polish as the legitimate language of the Polish peoples (Bakuła 2007; Gosk 2010).

In the contemporary world, English has become the *lingua franca*, widely used as a vernacular and professional second or third language. In this context, there is little research on how distinctively positioned European (Continental) cultures and languages such as Polish relate to English as a hegemonic language, and what the consequences of encountering difference through language are in this respect. This matters crucially when comparing individual experiences with difference in two linguistic contexts where local perceptions of distinctive minorities might be conveyed in specific stigmatising slang terms. Dylewski and Jagodzinski (2012) traced the lexical borrowings from African American slang in Polish youth slang, arguing for a broader connectivity linked to the cultural globalisation of different emanations of the English language. Engaging with the transnational effects of Europeanisation (Cowles et al. 2001; Graziano and Vink 2006) and the need for the deepening of an inter-cultural understanding across Europe (Vidmar-Horvat 2012), this chapter will turn to the phenomenon of abusive *slang words* as a form of 'sub-cultural' codes in two differently positioned European languages, and to the question of how privately connoted informal language expresses and transmits prejudices against visible minorities in Poland and Britain. As argued here, Polish and English colloquial spoken language offers a window to explore how perceptions of (ascribed) difference are spelled out in private communication alongside a publically sanctioned or politically correct 'acknowledging' language of difference.

The chapter introduces the findings of a larger comparative research project, LIVEDIFFERENCE,¹ which explored how individuals experience

1 The research was funded by the ERC between 2010 and 2014; the PI and Grant Holder was Prof. Gill Valentine, University of Sheffield.

and speak about difference in Warsaw, Poland and Leeds, England. It is based on interviews with two sets of respondents, residents in Warsaw and in Leeds, exploring each participant's experiences as well as attitudes towards difference.

It is crucial to note that the interviews with residents in Warsaw were conducted in Polish by Polish nationals while residents in Leeds were interviewed in English by both British and non-British nationals. Hence, our research involved a complex cross-cultural methodology with the complicated positionalities of the researchers written into the research process (Rose 1997; Kim 2012). The quotations we include in this chapter were either transcribed verbatim (in case of the Leeds sample) or carefully translated into English to maintain conceptual equivalence i.e. comparability of meanings between the original utterance and the translated piece (Birbili 2000; Temple 1997). We further utilised narrative analysis (Earthy and Cronin 2008) to explore how and why people use certain linguistic expressions to talk about their experiences and attitudes towards difference.²

First, we discuss how language, e.g. subcultural speech, tends to transmit attitudes towards difference, including prejudice. Further, we consider both national contexts, the British and the Polish, and argue that the language that refers to the axes of difference has been distinctively produced in these settings as a consequence of unique histories and legal developments.

Here, we particularly draw upon the concept of *postdependence* (Gosk 2010) in order to explain how certain understandings of difference are uniquely embedded in the Polish context. Then, we turn to the empirical material and illustrate how research participants in Warsaw and Leeds labelled specific minorities, and in what ways prejudices conveyed in stigmatising slang also hinted at a 'private' view of difference alongside a legally and morally sanctioned public demand for 'political correctness'. We particularly focus on visible difference distinguishing gendered belonging to class (e.g. a sub-proletarian working-class male), race (non-white) and religion (Islam).

- 2 When quoting our respondents we use italics to emphasise forms of discursive othering through slang. An ellipsis in brackets indicates that a section of text has been removed to facilitate readability of quotations. All names in the chapter are pseudonyms.

Prejudice, translating culture and social representations of Others

In an increasingly globalising world (Morley and Robins 1995, Castles and Miller 1998), social-cultural geographies are changing rapidly. The opportunities for people from different countries and languages to meet and try to make sense of each other are manifold. Curiosity and cosmopolitan openness, as a positive outlook (Breckenbridge et al. 2002; Nava 2007), as well as more sceptical feminist views of its ambivalences (Kofman 2005), including shifting racialised group boundaries (Vieten 2012), encompass altered ways of communication and encountering difference in Europe and beyond. Hence, we link our own research interest to a growing public and academic awareness of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007) and diverse local spatial sites.

In a recent study on prejudices and racism against Roma, Goodman and Rowe (2014, 43) claim that 'a taboo is in place only against racism' but [other] prejudices are regarded more acceptable'. Still, there is a significant scale of prejudices, and as we argue here, the 'national language of difference' is crucial to detect the construction of prejudices cross-culturally. According to Collins and Clement (2012) language plays a central role in the production and transmission of prejudice. They furthermore claim that the role language plays in producing and transmitting prejudice, understood as 'antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization' (citing Allport 1954; 2012, 337), is rather underestimated. Their study demonstrates that 'explicit expressions of prejudice are relatively rare given current social norms condemning them, which might explain the lack of research in the field' (2012, 380). This 'lack' might be partly due to the rise of national 'hate speech' laws and the penalising of prejudiced language in the public sphere. However, the situation in Britain and Poland has developed over decades, and quite distinctively. Despite a basic liberal ideal of 'free speech', abusive and racist speech in the British public sphere has become largely unacceptable, first with the 'Race Relations Act

1965;³ and, more recently, with the ‘Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008’ (Bleich 2011).

In Poland after 1989, ‘hate speech’ legislation regarding ethnicity, nationality, religion and gender was incorporated into the 1997 Penal Code. In 1999 additional legislation was passed ‘banning Nazi and Communist Symbols’ (Bazyler 2006, 9). Furthermore, Poland has blasphemy laws protecting the religious from insults directed towards symbols of faith or religion (Bazyler 2006). Bojarski (2011) argues that there is a very low level of legal awareness in Polish society and people’s passive attitude to seeking legal help prevents many individuals from attempting to claim their rights, and enforcing the existing laws. In sum, there are significant differences between Britain and Poland with respect to the way penal law works, and the ways in which people on the ground relate to the different legal frameworks. (See also the chapter by Piekut and Valentine in this collection, for further details.)

Next, we turn to a discussion of what culture and difference means, and relate this to the everyday experience of cultural difference across a majority/minority divide.

Marciniak (2009) suggests the term ‘post-socialist hybrids’ to capture ‘the lingering past’ (2009, 175) of socialism paired with an ‘upgraded’ new European identity’ for Poles. This identity could be explored within the frame of an emerging postdependence⁴ paradigm recently claimed as a suitable way to characterise the position of Poland vis-à-vis various European countries and/or the hegemonic eighteenth-century empires (e.g. Habsburg empire), the USSR or the iconic ‘West’ (Gosk 2010). Polish history encompasses both moments of dependence on external powers as well as periods of imposing power. Importantly, however, the country has never been colonised in

3 A number of different penalising laws followed: the ‘Public Order Act 1986’, then the ‘Crime and Disorder Act 1998’, and the ‘Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006’.

4 The discussion of the concept of postdependence is beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, we only mention this emerging conceptual lens and refer readers to the broader literature (e.g. Gosk 2010).

the sense of extra-European racist colonialism targeting non-white people. Therefore, rather than 'the colonised', its intricate position could be better described as a 'colonizing colonized' (Gosk 2010) or in 'triple relation' as former colony, former coloniser and in relation to 'the Western hegemon's' (Mayblin et al. 2014). This complex positionality has had a profound influence on Polish national identity and values (Janion 2011) and is fundamental to how people understand and relate to diversity and difference.

Beyond this national-cultural specificity, the meaning of language as a tool for producing and transmitting prejudice has to be discussed further. According to Collins and Clement (2012, 383) 'language is not a neutral vessel [...]; it has an unyielding transformative effect: changing what it carries and distorting the perception of those who are exposed to it. This influences prejudice by activating culturally shared ideas and creating implicit expectations that subtly transform the perception of groups and group members'. Linked to this function is the observation that social representations are communicated through slang. Slang is frequently used in sub-cultural groups (e.g. youth culture, local communities) to produce group identities (Bucholtz 2000). Moscovici (1973) argues that social representations fulfil two core functions; they order social reality and facilitate communication between different individuals. Hence, they work as a cultural code, which is shaped by group interests and knowledge of a particular social phenomenon. Such a cultural code is used to cope with a new idea or perception, and could be employed when analysing the perception of an unfamiliar and visible ethnic and 'racial' group difference. As a way of processing social representations individuals anchor the representations in their networks of significance (e.g. the familiar social fabric) and resort to objectification to make the abstract more concrete. Metaphor might also be used to signify 'the Other'. This metaphorical element, for example, might be transmitted through the use of pejorative slang.

The use of explicitly prejudiced language that our research found in one-to-one interviews challenges the perception of a civic consensus around non-prejudiced attitudes towards difference. This is happening in distinctive ways in Poland and Britain, recognising the specifics of the cultural contexts. The ways in which culturally and historically situated social representations of difference impact on the perception and evaluation of minority group differences is most relevant to this insight.

The urban sound of difference: Warsaw and Leeds

Poland is a European postsocialist state, politically and socially ‘isolated’ between the end of the Second World War and the late 1980s due to the Communist regime (Borowik and Szarota 2004). The consequence of this was, relatively speaking, the ethno-national homogeneity of Polish society, furthermore described as predominantly Roman-Catholic (Eberts 1998). Against this backdrop, Warsaw, the capital city, remains the most ethnically diverse area in Poland with a 3.3 per cent ethnic minority population. The city has offered an attractive labour market to foreigners since the collapse of Communism, and its social fabric has become increasingly multicultural (and multi-linguistic) over the last two decades. There are significant minorities from Vietnam, Armenia, Turkey, China, Ukraine, Russia, as well as French, German, British and American transnational migrants (Piekut 2013). Despite this increasing diversity in Warsaw and a growing number of people who declare themselves as atheists or agnostics (GUS 2010), it remains a largely Roman-Catholic city. The city’s economy is based on services and boasts a greater proportion of non-manual workers than Poland as a whole; its profile includes, nevertheless, pockets of both wealth and deprivation – the latter being shaped by class dynamics as well as social and educational status (Piekut et al. 2012).

By comparison, Britain is a country whose colonial history has produced complex patterns of ethnically, nationally and religiously diverse immigration in a post-colonial context throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In this context, Leeds – one of the largest cities in the UK – offers a particularly useful research site with a proportion of minority ethnic population close to the national average of 19 per cent (according to the 2011 Census). Stillwell and Phillips (2006) emphasise that a notable feature of Leeds is the size of its Pakistani and Pakistani-British community which, together with Indian, Bangladeshi and other South East Asian groups, constitutes over half of the city’s non-white population. Importantly, Leeds is located in direct proximity to Bradford, the third largest site of South Asian settlement in England. Leeds is furthermore quite diverse in terms of religion (e.g. substantial Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities) and is an important labour market, in particular in finance

and business. Although it represents a successful transition from an industrial city into a post-industrial urban location of considerable prosperity, nonetheless (like Warsaw) it contains areas of poverty, exclusion and deprivation (Stillwell and Phillips 2006). Partly affected by the ethnic conflicts that erupted between the racially segregated and classed populations in Northern English cities (including nearby Bradford) in 2001 (Amin 2001; Vieten 2011), Leeds has faced challenges regarding the communitarian capacity to live with difference (Stillwell and Phillips 2006).

In the following sections we explore the distinctive use of slang terms in both localities, in English and in Polish. We look more closely at the gendered dimension of prejudiced language cross-culturally, focusing particularly on the notion of masculinity it portrays. Goodnight et al. (2013) stress that facets of traditional masculinity as ‘status’, ‘toughness’ and ‘antifemininity’ have a prominent position in detecting the formation of interests, e.g. prejudices. In order to perform strong traditional ‘masculinity’, it is argued, a constant effort is required to live up to the expectation not to be ‘feminine’, ‘resulting in a fragility that is unique in the masculine gender role’ (Wellman and McCoy 2013, 2). Therefore, men struggle to re-establish dominant masculine gender roles. Intersecting with class, ethnicity/race and religion, ‘status’ and ‘toughness’ in the performance of the male gender become the cultural lens through which different masculinities are measured and categorised. In this sense, the racialising of the Other has also to be read against a dominant cultural model of a specific masculinity.

Warsaw: Constructing ‘Arabs’ and ‘typical dres’

The interviews with Warsaw residents draw attention to some interesting patterns regarding the discursive understanding of Muslims (and of Islam more broadly), as well as the classed and gendered ‘*dres*’/‘*dresiarze*’⁵ culture.

5 We use both forms – ‘*dres*’ (singular) and ‘*dresiarze*’ (plural) – in this chapter. While they relate to various ideas (‘*dres*’ means a sports tracksuit in Polish, yet may also

While looking more closely at the way Muslims were addressed by our respondents in Warsaw, we noticed that they were not unfavourably perceived in general, but only when equated with what research participants construed as ‘Arab people’. When asked, for instance, about their encounters with Muslim people, the vast majority of respondents would routinely swap the term ‘Muslim(s)’ with the expression ‘Arab(s)’.

This misconception appears to build on the influence that history and politics has had on the wider Polish society. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Polish Communist government developed close political relations with the countries of Maghreb, Mashriq and the Near East such as Syria and Iraq, as a consequence of broader global geopolitics. This resulted in an influx of students from these countries, some of whom decided to stay and settle down in Poland (Gasztold-Señ 2012).

Importantly, they embodied visual difference through their phenotypical features (e.g. darker skin, black hair). Needless to say, in the context of a nationally, ethnically, racially and religiously non-heterogeneous⁶ Polish society, singular Arab Muslim individuals were not only racialised, but also viewed as a homogeneous group.

Furthermore, narratives frequently included other forms of discursive othering. One such narrative, indicating that ‘race’ in terms of non-whiteness intersects with minority religion (Islam), is presented below. Here, both elements become signifiers of negatively prejudiced difference.

For example in Asia, Asian countries, they have their own ‘you do it your way, we’ll do it ours’. *Arabs* – ‘You do it your way, and we’ll do it ours’, they’re *slobs*, these are *wild nationalities*, they’ll [...] cut a human’s throat as [they do with a] goat’s. It’s simply, in the name of Allah.

(Mieczysław, male, 60–65 years old)

denote a person who wears one; ‘*dresiarze*’ refers to the group/subculture), they both designate young working-class males.

- 6 We stress that we speak of Communist times when Poland was politically propagated as a ‘homogeneous’ socialist state. We also acknowledge that a small white Muslim-Tatar community has lived in Poland for six centuries now. It has been, however, excluded from racialising discourses as it is socially constructed as an element of folklore, not an Islamic tradition (Górak-Sosnowska 2012).

Whereas the ‘gender’ of those labelled as ‘Muslim Others’ is not explicitly addressed as male, but implicitly conveyed in this quote, the following analysis of the slang words ‘*dres*’/‘*dresiarze*’ is typically used for visible difference associated with class, a younger age group and the male gender. The sole usage of the term ‘*dres*’ not only designates difference, but was commonly employed in prejudiced narratives. The term ‘*dresiarze*’ emerged in Poland in the 1990s and became socially associated with usually young working-class men living in urban tower blocks (Stenning 2005). Their visibility was emphasised through their distinctive appearance (i.e. tracksuits, jewellery), which was claimed to be a symbol of strength, the rejection of social normativity via the rejection of mainstream fashion, group pride and solidarity (Dąbrowski 2005). ‘*Dres*’ or ‘*dresiarze*’ seemed to embody ‘the other’ face of a post-socialist working class, particularly burdened with unemployment and social exclusion as a consequence of the transition from the Communist to the capitalist system (Stenning 2005). Stereotypically, they are presented as uneducated, anti-social, aggressive and vulgar. As such, although produced in a distinctive postsocialist context, the image of ‘*dres*’ could be compared with that of ‘chavs’ in Britain, explored later in this chapter.

The quote below is illustrative of how our Warsaw informants narratively distanced themselves from ‘*dresiarze*’ and constructed them as visibly different, intellectually inferior and socially unwelcome. Although the respondent claims to hold fairly ‘neutral’ attitudes towards those whom she considers ‘*dres*’, at certain times she seems to employ quite a stigmatising rhetoric.

I do know them [*dresiarze*] by sight so of course we say ‘hello’ to one another [...] [but] we do not have any closer contact, because this is not my company. [...] Since we were from different schools, then through one of my friends I met his friends [...] and they were evidently such *dresy*. But they are also humans and perhaps there’s not much to talk about with them since they are *not exactly intelligent*, but if they are there, then I think, there is nothing wrong and I always think that they are OK and if they know somebody long enough, one can count on them by all means. Whatever they are, they have their own code of honour.

(Paulina, female, 20–24 years old)

In the narratives we collected from our informants, ‘*dres*’ rarely appeared as referring to a single person, but occurred as a stigma in plural form – i.e. ‘*dresy*’

or ‘*dresiarze*’. This indicates that interview respondents regarded their annoyance as caused by their being members of a *group*, several individuals acting out their difference in the streets, for example, or in neighbourhoods with their peers. Some respondents reflected that individually ‘*dresiarze*’ were nice and not dangerous, but that they behaved differently when in a group. Hence, the group-related image was central.

Having introduced some of the prejudiced slang words addressing visible difference in Warsaw, we look next at Leeds. Do we come across similar slang words targeting the same gendered and visible difference?

Leeds: Avoiding ethnic slurs, but stigmatising ‘chavs’

Whereas amongst the Warsaw participants in our study Muslims were commonly homogenised and mistaken for ‘Arabs’, this occurred infrequently amongst respondents in Leeds, who were more likely to mention particular ethnicities. As such, the city’s Pakistani or British-Pakistani population was frequently referred to. This appears to reflect the increased awareness of distinctive social, ethno-national and cultural histories of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi communities across different regions in Britain (Vieten 2013), created and encompassed by a body of academic literature (Modood et al. 1998; Brah 1996; Brah 2006) and local community reports produced in response to the 2001 Northern riots (e.g. Ouseley Report 2001).

Here, we would like to give one example, which also introduces the moral control of language, hinting at the prominence of legal sanctions for ‘hate speech’ in the British public sphere.

Interviewer: Do you think that prejudices have changed over the course of your lifetime? [...]

Emma: Well, yeah – well when I were younger it were just more like *Paki shop*. Oh God I shouldn’t call it that – I’ve always called it *Paki shop*.

(Emma, female, 30–34 years old)

As Collins and Clement (2012: 389) argue, there are ‘inconsistent findings on the role of self-censorship norms, which has implications for the utility and effectiveness of both inclusive and positive language campaigns and also social norms that suppress explicit expressions of prejudice. The second is related to conditions under which communication strategies are, or are not, effective in attaining communication goals such as impression management (e.g. appearing unprejudiced).’

When Emma spontaneously utters ‘Paki’ in the interview, followed by the remark ‘I shouldn’t say that’, she makes it clear that she is aware that ethnic slurs are penalised in Britain. It is here that some of our project findings hint at a complicated tension between public practices and individual (hidden) attitudes, and we can evidence that some changes have occurred in the more self-reflective use of slang terms. This *conscious correction* indicates a cautious reasonable reflection of a more immediate ‘emotional’ negative evaluation of visible minority difference.

More prominent in the conversations, however, was the explicit blaming and shaming of a ‘white underclass’ – the ‘chavs’ or ‘scally’. This is most relevant to the notion of a dominant (hegemonic) notion of masculinity which on the one hand is based on securing status for the traditional gender (‘the role of the bread winner’), and on the other on anxiety about failing in this regard. As pejorative and explicitly racist words like ‘nigger’ are penalised in the British public sphere, it seems that there is a greater popular *consensus* that whiteness, when combined with a lower-class background, provokes moral panic (Valentine and Harris 2014). It brings to the fore an individual attitude of wanting to keep a distance from this stigmatised group. This applies to working-class men and women alike, though the interview respondents more often referred to the gendered male. It also confirms the findings of other research (Jones 2011; Nayak 2006). Like the case of ‘*dresiarze*’ in Poland, the expression ‘chav’ is meant to designate working-class males in Britain. The term ‘chav’ was popularised in the first decade of the twenty-first century by the British mass media to refer to an anti-social youth subculture in Britain. In the early 2000s the term became widespread, signifying a white working-class youth who, by wearing sham designer clothes and specific jewellery, appeared to exemplify urban and

classed difference. Jones (2011) controversially suggests that the expression stigmatises poverty and social exclusion in Britain.

In the interviews with Leeds residents (excluding Polish migrants), many of the respondents used the term ‘chav’ to describe their class prejudices. They often accused ‘chavs’ of claiming benefits extensively and being unwilling to work for their living. Unlike some other prejudices, respondents were unashamed of their unfavourable attitudes towards ‘chavs’. Rachel, in the quote below, felt particularly irritated by people who don’t obey the ethics of work.

I think the main group of people that I can’t tolerate, is the people [...] that don’t do anything, that don’t think they have to work, that come from that *chav society*, that type of person no matter what colour they are or where they’re from. [...] These people choose not to take the job.
(Rachel, female, 35–40 years old)

In some cases, narratives included somewhat contradictory attitudes (from prejudice and avoidance to sympathy) towards what is generally constructed as class difference, yet involved various hierarchies of acceptable and unacceptable otherness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted to understand how language and difference play out in two distinctive national and urban settings. We have explored how ethnic/religious and class/gender difference are discursively produced in these two distinctive socio-historical national contexts, Poland and Britain respectively. Alongside similarities in the construction of the gendered working class (parallels between ‘*dresiarze*’ and ‘chavs’), significant differences are noticeable with regard to how people in Warsaw and Leeds relate to the intersection of ethnicity, religion and gender (i.e. non-white Muslim or ethnic minority people in our study).

We have analysed and presented how the use of explicitly prejudiced language that our research found in interviews challenges the perception of a civic consensus in non-prejudiced attitudes against difference. We examined specific slang words that appeared in interviews with English and Polish participants. The slang words used reflected the particular histories and perceptions of visible difference in Warsaw and Leeds.

The narratives of Warsaw residents demonstrated that they equated nationality ('Arabs') with religion (Islam/'Muslim men') as well as demonised gendered working-class youth ('*dres*' or '*dresiarze*'). This was mirrored in Leeds with regard to class/gender ('chavs'), but was less noticeable in reference to ethnicity/religion. Leeds interviewees used distinctive ethnic and national categories to a much greater degree, revealing a familiarity with their post-colonial history, equality legislation or social pressure to conform to political correctness. Whereas intersecting dimensions of gender, 'race' and religion play out very differently with respect to historically and geographically situated experiences with non-white Muslim communities ('Arabs', 'Pakis'), the slang signifier of a morally disregarded 'white working class' came up in both lingual-national settings ('*dres*'; 'chavs'), both in Warsaw and in Leeds. As we noticed in the Warsaw case study, Leeds respondents did not hold back their social prejudices against 'chavs', distancing themselves from their so-called 'anti-social' behaviour and carefully manoeuvring their own social narrative of 'working hard' and being members of the 'deserving' working class. It might be worthwhile to advance this research by looking at how broader international and global neo-liberal discourse targets social deprivation as individual biographical failure, and hence creates an ideological and social climate of anxiety for all people across different countries who risk being trapped in a position of low social status.

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Acknowledgements

The research was funded by the European Research Council under an Advanced Investigator Award granted to Gill Valentine and entitled: 'Living with Difference in Europe: Making communities out of strangers in an era of super mobility and super diversity' (LIVEDIFFERENCE); REC grant agreement no. 249658.

We are grateful to our former colleagues, Jo Sadgrove, Johan Andersson and Aneta Piekut, for collecting the data on which this chapter is based. We would also like to acknowledge Aneta's and Catherine Harris's input into this chapter, as they both helped us to extract and contextualise the narrative data on which it draws.