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## **“It’s Not Being Racist, but . . . ”**

### A Youth Gang and the Creation of Belonging Based on “Othering”

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**Abstract:** This article explores the tacit endorsement of male youth gang members engaging in “race”-based conflict to gain localized levels of power. It examines the importance of belonging to an “in-group” for these young people via their connectedness to the broader residents, through cultural essentialism toward a Roma “out-group.” The young, male gang members, drawing on what they perceive to be their role, adopt physical and symbolic strategies to assert their control over their space and to concretize their sense of belonging with the wider community in-group. The article considers how a labeled and excluded group of male youth gang members from wider social structures find connection, commonality, and belonging in hardening their self-image through an othering process against those deemed inferior to them.

**Keywords:** belonging, community, othering, racism, youth gangs

This qualitative study demonstrates how one youth gang, in an area fictionalized to Dixonvale, Scotland, construct their group identity by othering a migrant community. Simultaneously, these young people are often pathologized by wider societal structures, systems, and policies, resulting in attempts to gain microlevels of power within local neighborhood. The perspectives of young people and community members and stakeholders are examined. Using primary data from young people, whose voices are often excluded, I conclude by arguing that the relationship between the youth gang and the local community is based partly on the creation of symbolic and physical boundaries with people or communities deemed to be outsiders—in this case, the “Roma”

community. This creation of boundaries reflects a contemporary form of racism through the othering of the Roma community and highlights localized racism that reflects broader societal dynamics.

The importance of this research lies in its demonstration that youth gang members do not create or articulate views in isolation of their broader community. In fact, a sense of security and identity in a deprived community may well be ameliorated by the study participants' othering in response to their own othering and exclusion from broader societal structures. Moreover, the intergenerational tacit endorsement of fighting behaviors and a particular display of masculinity to secure this identity is an important aspect of the othering process. While not subscribing to a crisis of masculinity (Morgan 2006) discourse, this study discovers a process of "othering" based on cultural essentialism that young men adopt due to a tacit sense of what it means to be a young man. They do this as a key to achieve a sense of belonging and identity and to consolidate a broader community in-group against a clearly identifiable out-group. To contextualize this article, theoretical explorations of "race," Roma, othering, belonging, and masculinity will be explored. This will be followed by methodological approaches and findings on belonging and identity creation.

### **"Race" and Roma**

Throughout, "race" (with quotation marks) is used to connote this term as a contested concept, not fixed or an illusion (Omi and Winant 1994). The comprehension and interpretation of "race," and how shapes individual identities and state collective action, demonstrate it is fundamental to social relations (Cashmore and Jennings 2001). Connection between humans, social structures, and the way they are organized (Omi and Winant 1994) facilitate an understanding of the youth

gang and their connectedness with the local “white” community. A similar process of othering takes place against those not deemed to be within the community, such as law enforcement officers (Gormally and Deuchar 2012), social services staff, or other gang members (Gormally 2015), but specific focus on racial othering as a means of creating a sense of belonging provides broader insight into how solidarity was created against a unified “other.”

“White” is also a constructed and contested label. It does not signify that all “white” Scottish people have the same views or are a homogeneous grouping—for indeed they are not—but is used as a means of signifying the distinction made in practice. Roma is the accepted umbrella term (Murray 2012) that collectively describes identity, culture, language, and tradition. It is used by the European Commission (2004), in EU policy documents, and relates to Europe’s largest ethnic minority. It also recognizes the shared experience of being “othered” and the discrimination faced due to the perceived culture, “race,” and/or ethnicity of this group (Harda 2006; Poole and Adamson 2007).

The Roma community were mainly from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Romania (Poole and Adamson 2007). Many of the interviewees did not use the politically accepted terminology of Roma, rather using “Slovakian” or more generalized statements such as refugees, often intended in a derogatory manner. This accords with evidence that Roma and travelers experience high levels of marginalization, prejudice, and discrimination (Fekete 2014; Murray 2012). Equality (2020), a UK national organization that works with the Roma community, estimates there are roughly three hundred thousand Roma in the United Kingdom, with four thousand to five thousand living in Scotland (SMG 2013). The Roma community have been identified as one of the most vulnerable in Europe (Harda 2006), something this article in its demonstration of othering concurs with. Therefore, the theoretical exploration of othering and

belonging is now analyzed to provide contextualization to the practices explored in detail later.

### **“Othering” and Belonging**

Several markers can be used to assert identity, including place of birth, length and place of residence, accent, name, and appearance (Bond 2006; Kiely et al. 2001). To secure this identity and differentiate who is not part of this unified construction, “security operations” or “sincerity operations” often take place (Laing 1961: 52), through the process of “othering”: “to reassert one’s values as moral absolutes, to declare other groups as lacking value, to draw distinct lines of virtue and vice” (Young 1999: 15). A process of self-affirmation becomes apparent when, for example, youth gang members use outward displays that assert their sense of security, self-identity, and collective identity against what they are not. This can occur in a symbolic manner through harmful or negative behaviors toward others or engagement in personal risk behaviors, used to regain microlevels of control and security.

A key variable in the process of othering is power, “making the subordinate aware of who holds power, and hence about the powerful producing the other as subordinate” (Jensen 2011: 64). This happens on several intersecting—and potentially reinforcing—levels, when young, working-class people who live in areas of deprivation are pathologized and othered by the policy interventions implemented under neoliberal society and austerity (Giroux 2014; Wacquant 2007; White 2019). At the same time, communities facing multiple levels of deprivation are demonized (Kelly 2015), depicted as being “work-shy” or needing tough interventions to ensure they are active contributors to society (Coburn and Gormally 2017; Cooper et al. 2015). Such othering is frequently reflected in a terminology of homogeneous objectification of, for example, “the unemployed,” or NEETs (not in education, employment, or training)—characteristics of

generation X or Y. Therefore, young people responding to a changing world often seek meaningful identities and sense of belonging in peer relations and cultures (Habib and Ward 2019). Though belonging is multidimensional, this study specifically demonstrates the importance of space, place, and social class (Shildrick et al. 2009; Stahl and Habib 2017). It also demonstrates how cultural essentialism is used as a marker of difference to establish a collective sense of identity and belonging against those deemed to be “outsiders” or “others.”

### **Cultural Essentialism**

Cultural essentialism provides the opportunity to apply stereotypes to other groups. This demonization allows for disproportionate allocation of societal problems to be blamed on “them,” as opposed to analyzing the underlying root causes of, for example, poverty, discrimination, and social injustice: “It furnishes the targets, it provides the stereotypes, it allows the marshalling of aggression, it reaffirms the identity of the in-group” (Young 1999: 117). Powerlessness and stigmatization directed at both the Roma community and the youth gang members from broader social structures (Giroux 2009, 2012; Gormally 2015) and marginalization from numerous forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986) can result in people becoming essentialist in order to assert their self-/group identity and sense of belonging. This essentialism takes three forms (Young 2007): first is to reaffirm personal values and qualities; second is the stereotyping of others as not having these values, giving rise to prejudices; third, those who are othered and essentialized can respond by presenting a hardened image of themselves as a protection against their own experience of being excluded. To establish self-security, Jock Young suggests, barriers are created, most notably in the process of “othering” based on cultural essentialism, which allows the individual, the self, to become more secure and projected as

superior to those who have been “othered,” be that based on race, class, territory, or gender, as was done by the young men in this study.

### **Boyhood and Masculinities**

This article is drawn from a broader doctoral study analyzing the relationship between youth gang members and their local community (Gormally 2011). However, within this study, no young women actively identified with the youth gang in the way the young men did. The young men were willing to symbolically or physically defend their space. The correlation between young men using violence, particularly in a gang context, as a means to assert their masculinity is not new (e.g., Bannister and Fraser 2008; Davies 1998; Deuchar 2009; Fraser 2015; Goldson 2011; Zatz and Portillos 2000). Traditional masculinity and a demonstration of being “tough” have been linked to a lower class culture (Miller 1958), with others citing the nonalignment of traditional industry and contemporary economic opportunities (Fraser 2015) as causing tension. However, this study explicitly demonstrates the use of fighting and protecting territory as an active way of othering a newly arrived community. It demonstrates how young men act on complex, tacit endorsements of masculine in order to create an in-group identity with the broader “white” community.

The specific locality these young men are situated within (Ward et al. 2017), as well as the tacit endorsement of behaviors that secure collective identity and demonstrate masculinity, influenced their practices. However, as Eric Baumgartner (2014) warns, there is a complexity to a man’s life that is not limited to one form of identity creation, assertion, or context, and although this study does focus on young men and the protecting role they adopt, it does not negate recognition of the intersectionality between masculinities, sexualities, gender, and

ethnicities. Rapid social change both locally within communities and globally (Habib and Ward 2019) impacts the need for a sense of belonging. This belonging can also be multidimensional, but in this study, the young men assert their masculinity as a means to secure microlevels of power and control within their geographical space.

## **Methodology and Methods**

Adopting a constructo-interpretive epistemology, a social constructionist worldview with an interpretative analysis, this research began “with participants, putting people and their experiences first, rather than privileging existing ideas” (Gormally and Coburn 2014: 7). The views of participants are provided verbatim to allow the voice of experiences to be heard unedited. Some views expressed are difficult to read and were hard to listen to. It would be more palatable to remove all racist words or replace them with paraphrasing, but to prevent the academic washing of language, I have opted to produce the words as spoken with dashes replacing letters in some places. Methodologically, constructivist grounded theory was adopted, as this “seeks to define conditional statements that interpret how [participants] construct their realities” (Charmaz 2003: 273). Various engagement strategies, including detached street work, football coaching, and participation in youth and community events, were carried out. Building rapport was crucial (Gormally and Coburn 2014), and once built, semi-structured interviews and small focus groups were held with participants.

Being a young woman at the time of this research and studying a predominantly male phenomenon obviously had a bearing on the interactions, but mainly one where the young men tried to protect me within their space. Being a trained youth worker aided my interactions and building of rapport. In-depth interviews with 25 participants (9 young people aged 14–26, 10



community residents, 3 youth workers, a police officer, a statutory agency worker, and a church worker) were conducted. Data was collected over a two-year study as part of doctoral research and was recruited via snowball sampling from being present in the community and through professional youth work contacts. Interviews were conducted in community spaces such as youth centers and cafés, ensuring anonymity yet comfort in the surroundings. Pseudonyms have been used throughout. This study explored attitudes of those young people identifying with the youth gang in Dixonvale and their relationship with the community, so one limitation is that corresponding perceptions by Roma residents were not collated. Nevertheless, this article provides an insight into perceptions of masculinity and belonging for youth gang members.

### **Youth Gang Masculinity**

There is often lack of clarity as to what a youth gang is (Goldson 2011) or how it should be defined (Bjerregaard 2002). While many academics adopt the Eurogang definition—“a street gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (van Gemert and Fleisher 2005: 12)—others find it too indiscriminatory (Densley 2013) or caution against using the term at all (Hallsworth and Young 2008; Smithson et al. 2013). In Dixonvale, there was a group of young people who were named, both by the young people and the broader community, as a youth gang. They socialized in a relatively small territorial area, had strong friendship ties, and engaged in territorial fighting with other groups of young people (Gormally 2015). The young people defined the youth gang partly based on the willingness to engage in fighting behaviors, undertaken to protect the identity and security of the youth gang and the territorial area more broadly. Young people identified as being a part of the gang to differing degrees depending on their active role or willingness to engage in fighting

behaviors. Those who were interviewed felt that young women tended not to fight or identify with gang behavior to the same extent as young men:

No, like, the lassies [girls] don't really fight. (Donna, 16)

No, there isn't really any lassies that hang about Dixonvale; you get the odd couple who come down and hang about three to four months, and then they go away 'cause it's too wild. (Pauline, 16)

Although these interviewees did not think gang identification was strong among young women, others within the community suggested they have a bigger role within the gang. Some community members implied that the girls start the fights but the boys get physically involved in combat with others as a result of this: "If you walk by a fight, it is usually a lassie screaming at somebody, just 'cause she is drunk she feels like watching someone getting smashed in. A lot of the time lassies can be worse than the guys, it is just unfortunate that the guys are the muscle" (Michael, 29, community resident). Michael blames the women for instigating violence but clearly sees the male's role as being the "muscle" in the situation. There is lack of agreement about the role female's play within the gang, if any at all. Susan Batchelor (2009) argues there has been increasing attention on the "violent female" with little justification. Michelle Burnam et al (2001) discovered that while many females had witnessed violent acts and showed a high tolerance of violence in various guises, none reported being a gang member.

Adam Baird (2019) notes violence—or in this case, fighting—is one component of a range of behaviors. Nevertheless, data here demonstrates the generational promotion of fighting

particularly from fathers to their sons as a demonstration of strength and reputation. The generational understanding or tacit endorsement of gang involvement and violence from male role models has previously been documented (Anderson 1990; Fagan 1996) and can arguably be seen as an expression of marginalized masculinity (Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson 2017). Nevertheless, some of these behaviors may be a “chameleonsation” (Ward 2015) for maintaining reputation, status, and belonging. Despite this, these young men were aware of the localized pressures of how a man should act (Ward et al. 2017): “Where you are brought up in that environment, where that is how you are expected to be or that is how you see your dad being, I think it is a generational thing, I think it is copied” (Sharon, equalities worker).

Sammy (24) and Willy (26) told me their fathers actively encouraged violent, fighting behavior and the repercussion for losing a fight was to get beaten from your father:

**Willy:** Because, because people don’t like losing face, whereas years ago you would go for a fight, you’d of been told by your dad, get fucking back and stick him.

**Sammy:** Aye fucking fight him or you’re gonna get your arse kicked off me.

Mel, a full-time youth worker, also linked this attitude to the dad as opposed to mother: “If you’ve got your dad in the house telling you it is cool to go out and bash that guy across there then . . . they are going to do it, because unless they get caught by the police or something, in their eyes they are going to get away with it because they are getting supported by their family.” Marjorie Zatz and Edwardo Portillos (2000) found that men who were part of gangs themselves understood their children’s involvement in gang activities. Ruth Horowitz (1987) found that most parents in her research would class, sometimes deadly, violence as an acceptable, justifiable

response to defending their family honor. Although this study cannot make such conclusive claims, there are indications that fathers, although not necessarily advocating extreme violence, tend to understand the need to fight in order to defend oneself.

Baird (2015: 116) argues that masculine capital (Bourdieu 2001) is denied to young men from disadvantaged backgrounds through structural obstacles, and as such, gang engagement becomes an attractive replacement for “masculinization opportunities.” However, the young men arguably access “masculine capital” through the gang because of their lack of access to other social and economic resources. This youth gang was situated in an area of multiple deprivations, and the young men clearly used a process of othering against the Roma community as a means to reinforce their self-identity.

### **Fighting and “Protection”**

The outbreak of fighting along racially constructed boundaries demonstrates the importance of symbolic boundaries alongside those based on geographic territoriality.

Sometimes I’m in a c—t of a mood and I say, “Who you talking to, you effing n—r, get to, why you even here, you smelly, effing b—s.” Just when I think about them sometimes it makes me pure raging [annoyed], but know how we were round playing football tonight? Some of them come round and play football, the wee guy [name], I like them. It’s just the older sweaty, greasy creepy ones. (Lewis, 25)

Despite points of commonality, such as playing football, there was limited evidence of relational connectedness forming a sense of “groupness” (Tilly 1996) or belonging. The youth gang

members chose to reevaluate the difference when it suited them. At other times, the youth gang felt it necessary to exert control resulting in physical fighting:

**Willy:** Well we had one run-in with them one night, and the reason we had a run-in was . . . some people, I know their fathers are maybe coming in from the pub, out working all week, few pints, and they were getting jumped, they were getting robbed, so there was a squad of us one night, maybe 10, 11, maybe 12 of us, and what we done was, 6 down one street and 6 down another street, and just ambushed and we just gave them a bit of their own medicine, just let them know . . .

**Sammy:** We take no shite.

**Willy:** They realize now that they either work with us or we are gonna fight with them, when that's how when they come in now; they don't know our names, but they know we are cool. There is a certain level of respect now . . . They don't cross us, we don't cross them.

Although the normalization of violence among urban youth has been documented (Aldridge et al. 2007; Decker and van Winkle 1996), the youth gang fight with the Roma community as a reassertion of the boundaries, their identity and power. There is a broader understanding of the male role here from Willy, of men, working all week, going to the pub, and thus not being able to protect themselves from others. This role is thus adopted by young men, in what may be seen as a demonstration of their masculine capacity to protect the community.

Rab (17) suggested the community residents have used the youth gang as “muscle” in removing outsiders—in this case, the Roma community:

I don't know . . . Everybody else who stays about the scheme [area], even women in the street, old women, . . . are like, try and get these b——s out 'cause they came up and raped [girl's name] as soon as [local girl's name] got raped. It's just all their . . . all their motors and that got petrol-bombed and their windows and that smashed and seen about 60 weans [young children] of them all sitting in the one house.

**And do people say to you to get them out?**

Aye, old women and that all the time.

**Is that why you fight with them . . . ?**

That's why I hate them so much . . . Did you hear the other day two old women got robbed their handbags? The beasts . . . off Eastern Europeans they said, so who do you think that is? The Slovaks again . . .

**So people in the community want you to go and fight with them to get them out?**

Aye, and I'm talking about mad snitches [people who talk to the police] and all that, as in the ones who try and pure give us ASBOs [anti-social behaviour orders] have walked over to us and said get these b——s out.

The othering of those not from their area and willingness to engage in conflict with “outsider” groups in an attempt to protect their community, family, and reputation, is well documented (Davies 2007; Jankowski 1991; Zatz and Portillos 2000), as is the desire to maintain the security and integrity of the community residents who hold similar views and opinions. Some residents understood and sympathized with why the youth gang fought with the Roma community but dismissed reports about the levels of fighting, feeling they were not as bad in practice as reported:

Yeah, there is ethnic tensions, but I don't think there is anything like all the white people want to claim their territory or vice versa with them; there are skirmishes but not an organized kind of thing, you know. (Darren, 31, community resident)

They just view people as coming into their area as "this is our area, we live here, and they are kinda intruders." I think they see it like that, but . . . I don't think it is ongoing battles every night, nothing like that. (Josie, community resident)

According to Rita, a community resident, "at first there was only a couple of them and it was all right, but then hundreds of them came and they have just took over and it does feel like it."

The Roma are seen as a different community with different values and lifestyles and as outsiders who have come into "their" area and have negatively impacted the reputation and the external perception of the area. While not all community members believed the actions of the youth gang protected them, the ontological insecurity and "othering" carried out by the residents is inextricably linked to the actions of the young men. This "othering" of outsiders, particularly in the example of the Roma community, creates belonging, solidarity, and cohesion between the youth gang and many of the local residents; as Richard Jenkins (2008: 23) puts it, "one of the things that people have in common in any groups is precisely the recognition of other groups or categories with whom they differ." The joint "othering" of the same groups creates cohesion and similarity of views and sentiments between both sections.

## **Community Context**

Many young people blamed the Roma community for the social problems in their area. They often suggested their area was being brought into disrepute because of the increase of ethnic minorities: “Well, it was all right a couple of years ago, but now that all the refugees have moved in, it is just pure chaos everywhere . . . ’cause I stay in [South Central], which is right next to [Central Street], so it is terrible” (Pauline). Although a relatively small geographical space, a specific street is named as a signifier of separation between “their” community and the area where most Roma residents live. The division went beyond geographical separation as issues of culture, “race,” and violence were often discussed as both the cause of and justification for the separation. On more than one occasion, I was warned not to walk down the street on my own, as I would not be safe, particularly as a woman:

Nah, but see walking up there? I wouldn’t walk down there yourself; being a lassie, I wouldn’t walk down there yourself. (Sammy)

But I’ll tell you, don’t hang about over there by yourself at night. (Mo, community resident)

Even in daylight I wouldn’t go round to [Central Street]. (Marie, community resident)

The young people and community residents were trying to “protect” me from the Roma community, whom they had stereotyped because of essentialist views. The separation in the area is not solely geographical, but racial and cultural differences underpin the assertion of difference (Young 2007). The attacks on women were often discussed and were used as a means to not only



warn me of my own safety but also explicitly demonstrate the differences.

### **Stereotyping and Pathologizing**

Stereotyping and pathologizing of the Roma community went beyond comments on the territorial demarcation with sweeping statements about a whole culture and the danger “they” posed to the physical and symbolic status of the community:

Shocking, man, 'cause I wouldn't mind them being in [Dixonvale]; it is the way they are treating the area, just run about as if it is their own place 'n' that, not that the fact that it is their own place, but they leave rubbish lying about and all that and leave rubbish and start raping and mugging women and all that, know what I mean? Prostitution and all that, so it is pure shocking, man. (Dylan, 18)

There were also repeated accounts of raping, mugging, and prostitution in relation to the Roma community in an attempt, whether consciously or unconsciously, to create a “wicked, stupid or criminal” (Young 1999: 109) other: “It's not being racist, but . . . they have pure took over our area, and they are pure spoiling it . . . And then that woman who got murdered up in [Dixonvale] Park, that was a refugee and still nobody has done anything” (Lewis).

Many interviewees provided examples of how the behavior of the Roma was having a detrimental impact on the community.

Do you know people actually . . . and you're not allowed to be racist . . . they hate them!  
And by law, they are not allowed to say these things and everything, and they are so

scared. Do you know, I have seen the Roma, see the bin that sits out on the street; they have actually went in the bin. First time in my life I have seen it, the mum and the boy stood there, and they took the bananas out of the bin. Now there is no need for that in this day and age; the government helps them. I seen them outside the cancer shops running away stealing the stuff and the people out of the shop running after them. (Ms. Lee, community resident)

For Josie, the lack of understanding had often resulted in community members being fearful in their own area:

Over the years, you have had the instances like up in [Dixonvale] Park—there obviously the woman got murdered—and you had heard of different people like assaults, just different things, and I think there is just that wee bit about fear and because you don't know—like, as I say before, people used to all know everybody; my mum has lived here since she was a wee girl, so she knew everybody, whereas now she'll go to the shops and doesn't know everybody.

The residents, like the young people, feel the Roma offer a threat both in structural terms where they are seen as exploiting the system by taking welfare benefits and personally where they are accused of rape and murder in the local area. The Roma are seen as undermining the ontological and physical security of the residents within the neighborhood. There was little analysis from the broader community as to why—or whether—incidents of stealing may have happened; instead, the focus was on the difference of the Roma from “mainstream” societal values and norms.

Importantly, the young, male gang members, as well as community members, see these attacks on women in the community as an attack on the young men's capacity to protect their area effectively.

Betty, an elderly, lifelong community resident, explained how older residents felt about the EU migrants entering the area:

Enoch Powell said this would cause a lot of trouble, there would come a day that we would open the floodgates too far—what were his words? It would cause a river . . . a sea of blood . . . It is, you have not got the neighbors you had before, where you could leave your door open and say, “Aw, Maggie, it is me, can I come in?” Aye, come in. Now it is, as she said herself, it is mostly immigrants in [Dixonvale] now.

The Roma community have been blamed for the physical dereliction of the area and have been accused of bringing the area into disrepute with little analysis of cultural difference or indeed structural or systemic indifference.

### **Labeling from “Others”**

Some youth gang members felt that not being able to control the influx of migrants into their area was negatively impacting their external reputation with other communities.

I want them out. Everybody wants them out—everybody's maws [mums], 'cause they have just come over here and they have made the scheme 10 times worse and it's pure talking about black and try and slag [make fun of] us and all, call us black names 'n' all

that because of these manky rats coming in . . . pure s—ing where they are sleeping and bathing in the same room. (Rab)

Sammy also suggested: “Aye, you say you’re from [Dixonvale] and they go, is that where all the Pakis [Pakistanis] are? And you’re like, no!”

The male youth gang feel their capacity to exert control is under question because of the influx of “outsiders,” which leads to the area being viewed negatively. Rab explained how other youth gangs call them racist names because the area is becoming known for having a large number of ethnic minority residents. This clearly is a challenge to their identity as fighters, protectors, and young men. Other youth gangs are using the changing demography in derogatory terms to question the continuing power and control the young men have in Dixonvale. The fact that they appear powerless to prevent ethnic minorities from moving into their community is used to “disrespect” them and their capacity to protect. In this sense, the young men are not only being viewed as being in deficit more broadly within neoliberal society, but even within their own neighborhoods—a space where they have traditionally exerted control—they are being seen as lacking the power and authority to prevent a new community moving in and changing the nature of their area. A similar feeling of insecurity may be felt by the community members who have lost the capacity to “know” their neighbors—a sentiment often reflected by people saying they “feel like strangers in their own place”—resulting in feelings of insecurity in relation to the incoming communities that are seen as different.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, differentiation based on culture and “race” was one way for the young men and the

broader “in”-community to define who belonged in “their” community and who did not. The issue of “race” was geographically divided, as many of the Roma community lived around Central Street. This street became a clear demarcation for residents of where “they” lived as opposed to where the white community lived. The parameters of who was recognized as belonging to the “community” were based, for some residents, along these “race” lines. A future study could address the limitation here in establishing the Roma community perceptions of these divisions. The Roma population were not considered part of the community that the youth gang members identified with. The normalized social connections between the in-group were not apparent between the youth gang and the Roma community. Rather, they are othered, based on essentialist views (Young 2007) that come from a lack of knowledge and knowing of the “strangers” who are treated with mistrust and antipathy (Tönnies 1955). This phenomenon was not solely created by the young men but rather reflected the views, understanding, anxieties, and tacit endorsement absorbed from the broader community, which amplified the nature of the resulting separation.

Excluding the Roma community resulted in a cyclical reaction: the more a group is excluded, the easier it is to essentialize them. The essentializing of others, as carried out by the youth gang members and to a lesser, although significant extent, by the community members toward the Roma community, allowed prejudices and community understandings to be more assertive and definite. The young people and community members used examples of child prostitution, mugging elderly people, and stealing from charity shops as examples of unacceptable behavior carried out by the Roma community. The Roma community were viewed as threatening the security of the traditional, established, white residents. The male youth gang members, knowing that members of their community treated these people as outsiders, felt it

necessary to engage in conflict with them to “protect” their community. Although the gang were not generally asked to adopt this position, the actions taken have been normalized in other guises and rarely faced criticism for their willingness to both symbolically and physically defend their territory against others. The young men act on the perceived or tacit endorsement of masculine behaviors with an implicit feeling of being expected to protect the community.

This research highlights that through this othering process toward the Roma community, there is a heightened sense of belonging, security, and identity enhancement for a group of people who are often excluded from broader societal structures. The youth gang used a process of othering against the Roma community as a means to reinforce their self-identity and collective sense of belonging with other white residents. Moreover, the process of fighting from young men to reassert their authority concretized the in-group identity. The “in-group” between the youth gang and some of the local community is based on the creation of symbolic and physical boundaries with people or communities deemed to be outsiders. The norms of this in-group become the basis for judgment of others, and interviewees often provided extreme examples of behavior against these norms to support the positions adopted.

The reassertion of the limited power available at a local level becomes crucial in circumstances of neighborhood poverty, deprivation, and marginalization. Significant policy change is required to ensure that even more intense marginalization and othering of new communities does not occur. More broadly, a counter-discourse is required to the deficit, pathologizing narrative that has gained momentum and seeks to individualize and place blame on young people and communities of deprivation who in turn seek power, control, and security through similarly essentializing those deemed to be inferior. This toxic cyclical relationship must be understood if we are to promote community cohesion and move from an essentializing blame

culture that will negatively impact young people more generally and, in this case, young men specifically who already face a challenging social and political environment in which to flourish, develop and find new sources of positive belonging and connectedness.

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