**Understanding Difference amid Superdiversity: Space, ‘Race’ and Granular Essentialisms at an Inner-City Football Club**

Using the findings of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at an inner-city football club, the article examines the relationship between superdiversity and understandings of human variation. It is argued that club personnel relied on what I have termed ‘granular essentialisms’ to make sense of their superdiverse surroundings. These were assertions about ethnicity and ‘race’ that resulted from sustained engagement across various categories of difference and saw these categories intersected in various ways, with notions of space and place being invoked in the process. This granular approach is compared with the attitudes to migration-related diversity encountered outside the inner city. I conclude that proponents of superdiversity should take greater account of the inequalities, tensions and prejudices evident in and around superdiverse areas if they are to construct a more comprehensive picture of the lived realities of contemporary cities and the understandings of ethno-racial difference which take hold there.

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Author name: James Rosbrook-Thompson (Anglia Ruskin University, UK)

Corresponding author details: James Rosbrook-Thompson, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Anglia Ruskin University, East Road, Cambridge, CB1 1PT, UK

Email: [james.rosbrook-thompson@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:james.rosbrook-thompson@anglia.ac.uk)

Since Vertovec (2005, 2007a) introduced the term ‘superdiversity’ to describe the increasing social complexity evident in many (particularly urban) areas, researchers have used it to make sense of a range of social phenomena. As well as studies in sociology and migration studies, scholars carrying out work in academic areas as varied as business studies, demography, economics, education, law, linguistics, social work and public policy studies have adopted the term. Despite this wave of research on superdiverse social settings, studies have only indirectly addressed the basic question of how superdiversity has affected understandings of human variation. For example, we might ask what the set of transformations triggered by shifts in global migration – collectively described by the term superdiversity – have meant for understandings of racial, ethnic and cultural difference. Have these understandings been challenged or renewed, undermined or reinscribed?

Given that sport and sporting institutions have long been used as a way for people to get to grips with patterns of migration and resulting demographic changes at a national and local level (see commentary around the French World Cup-winning team of 1998 [Back et al., 2001], or Jess Ennis’ apparent role as the face of the 2011 UK Census [Ford et al., 2011]), it is also surprising that sociologists of sport have yet to look at how sporting institutions may act as sites for the accommodation of and/or resistance to superdiversity. As noted by Carrington and McDonald (2001: 2), sport ‘articulates the complex interplay of “race”, nation, culture and identity in very public and direct ways’, and as such the sociological study of sport might be a useful way to capture the effects of superdiversity on understandings of these concepts and dimensions of difference.

Here I seek to examine these effects using the findings of ethnographic fieldwork carried out at Oldfield United (OU),1 a football club located in a superdiverse area of London. More specifically, I investigate how a group of young men – all of whom were migrants or the children/grandchildren of migrants – understood human variation, and how intersections between ‘race’, ethnicity, culture, religion, etc. figured in their understandings. I argue that an awareness of the bewildering diversity which surrounded them saw these individuals appeal to what I have termed ‘granular essentialisms’. These involved taking account of intersections between numerous categories of difference on the basis of sustained engagement across categorical boundaries, in some cases in a seemingly ironic manner. However, granularity was no guarantor of accuracy, and there was evidence that light-heartedness and irony may have been part of a mitigation strategy; that is, a process through which incidents of racism are denied or downplayed by, for example, classing them as humorous.

In what follows I describe and analyse this approach in relation to the players’ understandings of space, place and migration, and consider what implications the paper’s findings have for the concept of superdiversity and the study of superdiverse areas. I conclude that in order to tackle claims that the concept promotes an uncritical celebration of diversity, and thereby ignores the realities of racism and intolerance (Back, 2015), its proponents must pay more attention to durable qualities of the city such as inequality and the tensions and prejudices related to migration.

**Difference, Superdiversity and Sport**

Of course, long before the term superdiversity was coined many studies in urban sociology had looked at the relationship between migratory trends, patterns of settlement and notions of ethno-racial difference. A number of these studies contended that people’s coding of urban terrain issued from an implicit bias (Bobo, 2001; Sampson, 2009). This bias is ordered by racial categorisations and accompanied by a set of cultural stereotypes which exists at an almost subconscious level; one can subscribe to these stereotypes without possessing any conscious racial prejudice. Despite this, Gilroy (2009) has contested the universality of implicit racial bias (and its attendant categorisations and stereotypes), challenging us to explain how the visual field comes to be ordered in relation to both systems of ethno-racial classification and the organisation of urban space.

In light of Vertovec’s (2007a) conceptualisation of superdiversity (and the demographic changes it describes) we should perhaps redouble our efforts to call the dominion of implicit bias into question. In introducing the term Vertovec sought to encapsulate three aspects concerning the realities and study of global migration. The first of these is descriptive and concerns the relationship between changing population configuration and patterns of global migration over the past thirty (or so) years. As well as migrants hailing from a wider range of national, ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, this has seen a diversification of movement flows, legal statuses, levels of human capital, etc. The second aspect entails re-tooling our theories and methods so they can more effectively respond to the changes in population configuration and patterns of migration just described. More concretely, theoretical and methodological models should be attuned to emerging patterns of inequality, segregation, cultural mixing and mobility, and seek to challenge the outmoded opposition between transnationalism and integration. The final aspect relates to changes at the practical, policy-oriented level. For Vertovec (2007a), policymakers and public service practitioners must respond to the qualitatively new conditions of superdiversity by moving away from community-based, ethno-focal initiatives towards issues such as legal status.

Though these aspects have not been acknowledged in all invocations of superdiversity (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015), the various applications of the term have thrown up some interesting findings. For example, studies have yielded fascinating insights into how superdiversity is refracted through the specificities of place as well as spatialized and registered in the urban landscape.

In examining the complexity of new geographies of settlement at the level of the neighbourhood, Robinson (2010) has argued that the ambiguous and contradictory picture of the impacts and consequences of new immigration are at least partly the result of an insufficient appreciation of the importance of place. Arguing along similar lines, Knowles (2012) sets out to ‘spatialize superdiversity’ in showing how a variegated Nigerian community makes its presence felt in London differentially, through the hypervisible Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and the invisible Igbo Catholic Church (both situated in North London), respectively. In scaling down the analysis of space and superdiversity to units of housing in Kumkapi, Istanbul, Biehl (2012) notes that while for recently-arrived migrants the search for housing is ‘a heavily gendered and racialized experience’, a set of commonalities is realised among newcomers which seemingly transcends the differentiating axes of superdiversity.

Wessendorf (2014) maps the ‘commonplace diversity’ evident in Hackney, East London, across public, private and parochial spheres. These spheres, which can be “described as social territories defined by specific relational forms” (2014: 12), are subject to differences in the nature and level of engagement with the ‘multiplex differences’ which make Hackney superdiverse. In the public realm, places like bus stops and corner shops, there is a ‘civility towards diversity’ conditioned by the assumption that because everyone comes from elsewhere, the issue of diversity isn’t worthy of mention. The parochial (or semi-public) realm, however, which includes places such as schools and sports clubs, demands more concrete acknowledgement of, and interaction across, categorical differences, while the friendships constitutive of the private realm are for the most part characterised by shared class and ethno-national status.

Despite this intriguing set of insights into the social realities of superdiversity, a recent article (Back, 2015) has pointed to some of the concept’s potential weaknesses and blind spots. Though in agreement with Vertovec insofar as ethnic groups may harbour significant differences in legal status and pathways of migration, Back (ibid.) laments superdiversity’s inattention to racism and, relatedly, its celebratory attitude to diversity. As a result, he concludes that “super-diversity as a concept is politically one-dimensional and ultimately culpable in letting the sentiments of anti-immigrant times go unchallenged.”

Researchers in the sociology of sport have not yet examined the relationship between sport and superdiversity, although a number have shown how racism (Back et al., 2001; King, 2004) and discourses of racialisation (Burdsey, 2006, 2007; Fleming, 2001; St Louis, 2003) operate within particular sporting subcultures. Drawing on Omi and Winant’s (1994) notions of racial formation and racial project, Carrington urges us to conduct ‘sporting racial projects’ in appreciating the way that sport tends to shape, not simply reflect, the racial discourses which circulate within wider society. As he puts it, “*Sport helps to make race make sense and then sport works to reshape race*” (2010: 66 [emphasis in original]). This approach proved fruitful for Burdsey (2011) in his study of the racial micro-aggressions directed at British Asians in first-class cricket. He found that the use of such micro-aggressions, defined as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue et al., 2007: 273), served to reproduce the colour-blind ideology which dominates Western sport.2 More specifically, the ideology perpetuated itself by compelling British Asian cricketers to dismiss racial micro-aggressions as ‘banter’ or ‘jokes’ via mitigation strategies (Doane, 2006). Similar studies carried out among mixed British Asian and white British cricket teams have underlined the role of the coded racisms which are expressed and legitimated in changing rooms, clubhouses, etc. (Fletcher, 2012, 2014; Fletcher and Spracklen, 2013).

Other researchers have shown how local conditions shape both the forms that expressions of racism and racialisation take within sport, along with the manner in which victims are able to respond. The work of Bradbury (2010) and Campbell (2011) carried out in Leicestershire illustrates how Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) football clubs formed as a result of historical patterns of migration and settlement, and in response to the structural exclusion of non-white players from organised football. In spite of this, both authors observe how changes in the spatial distribution of BME communities and in the social fabric of local society, more generally, have seen mixed BME clubs emerge and the function of existing BME clubs evolve.

As well as weighing Back’s (2015) criticisms of superdiversity against the lived experiences of the inner city, the research presented here will address a set of questions concerning the relationship between superdiversity and notions of human variation. How do people make sense of human variation in superdiverse settings? What notions do they employ? And, furthermore, how are these conditioned by sporting subcultures and understandings of place and space?

**Settings and Method**

Vertovec (2007a: 1024) contends that conventional understandings of Britain’s migrant and ethnic minority populations, which focus on ‘large, well-organised African-Caribbean and South-Asian communities of citizens, originally from Commonwealth countries or formerly colonial territories’, are now outdated. The last two decades or so have seen the arrival of an ‘increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified migrants’ (ibid.)

Both of these narratives were needed to make sense of the composition of OU’s squad. Every player was either a migrant or the child or grandchild of migrants, and this meant that the squad was incredibly diverse in terms of ethnicity, including young men who had moved to London from France, Colombia, Rwanda, Liberia, Poland, Kosovo, Albania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The parents or grandparents of other players had arrived from Ireland, Jamaica, Grenada, Greece, Cyprus, Nigeria, Germany, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Algeria. Lying behind this host of countries of origin was a series of mutually conditioned variables including migration channel and legal status, all of which tally with a transformative ‘diversification of diversity’ (Hollinger, 1995; Vertovec, 2006). Some players had travelled to London from other EU states, some had fled persecution in Africa or Eastern Europe; the parents/grandparents of other players had travelled from Commonwealth nations at various points since the Second World War, while others were undocumented migrants. This variegated set of migration channels was matched by an equally diverse set of legal statuses including citizen, naturalised citizen, asylum seeker and resident non-citizen (denizen).

Oldfield United is a semi-professional football club situated in Oldfield, London. The district of Oldfield is located in the London borough of Bridgegate, one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in Britain. Two local men, Geoff and Gianni, founded OU in 1994, with the club playing its first competitive fixture in a Bridgegate youth league. By 2008 it had secured a place in a semi-professional league covering London and the South Midlands,3 with Gianni and Geoff acting as CEO and Fixture Secretary, respectively. There wasn’t much of a female presence at OU. That said, the woman who was an ever-present at matches and other club functions, Chairwoman Deborah, was all-powerful. Very much a matriarchal figure, she commanded the unwavering respect of all players who knew that if she had become involved, things had got serious. The wives and girlfriends of players attended matches relatively rarely, and as a result the subculture at OU was abidingly masculine. This masculinity was expressed in explicit banter between teammates (described in more detail below) as well as physical altercations with members of opposing teams.

I became involved with the club when I began to attend home matches regularly. After getting to know Gianni, Geoff, Deborah, plus a handful of players, and explaining the nature of my research, I offered to carry out statistical analysis of the players’ performances (pass completion rates, etc.). I fulfilled this duty, attending every match armed with pen and clipboard. Within a few months Gianni and Geoff suggested that I could be utilised more effectively in ‘working the door’ (sitting at a table in the stadium reception area charging for admission and match programmes), locking and unlocking the changing and referees’ rooms, and hosting officials from the opposing team in the boardroom at halftime and after matches. The latter consisted of serving tea, coffee, biscuits and sandwiches to the Chairman, Club Secretary and other board members who had travelled with the away side.

At the end of the season I became Club Secretary, a role which entailed the registration of all first and reserve team players, payment to the Football Association of fines for bookings, dismissals and other club misdemeanours, the completion and submission of team-sheets and match reports for every first-team fixture, and the overseeing of all transfers, contract cancellations and requests for international clearance. In my three seasons at the club I followed the conventions of the ethnographic approach, combining observation, participant observation and in-depth interviews (O’Reilly, 2011). I normally travelled to matches with various sets of players, and this afforded the opportunity to discuss a series of issues relating to ‘race’, ethnicity and migration, which included players’ own and their teammates’ pathways of migration (or those of their parents/grandparents), patterns of settlement in the local area, their understandings of ‘race’ and ethnicity, and their thoughts on security and danger. While conversations and interviews were not recorded, an account of each exchange was written up as soon as possible after it had taken place, and transcripts were later checked with discussants to ensure fairness and accuracy.

As a white researcher, I should also say something about my position vis-à-vis the respondents in this study. Sociologists of sport have tapped into debates about the politics of representation (Ware and Back, 2002), urging us to consider the ways in which hegemonic whiteness may permeate not only the structures and institutions of research, but also the research process itself (Burdsey, 2008; Carrington, 2008). While taking this into consideration, the implications of carrying out research as an insider should also be discussed.

Both issues were complicated by the fact that the fieldwork took place in a superdiverse setting. As with groups in other superdiverse contexts (Wessendorf, 2014), the players at OU assumed that as everyone who lived in the area came from elsewhere, making explicit enquiries along these lines wasn’t a worthwhile pursuit. For example, club captain Alex often commented on the fact that, at bottom, all of OU’s players were foreign (see below). He once remarked, ‘Look at us. We all look foreign. I do … you do’. This confirmed that the players thought of me, too, as being foreign. ‘You ain’t, really!’ was how most responded when I told them I was British. They may have insisted on this because they knew I lived on a local estate and was roughly the same age as the club’s most senior players. A fracturing of whiteness within the squad may also have been influential; with white players hailing from so many different nations of origin, whiteness did not accord to any sense of Englishness or Britishness. Alex’s comment also appeared to consummate my status as an insider, a status traditionally associated with privileged access to intimate and ‘naturally occurring’ information. The conversations I was party to in changing rooms, boardrooms, cars and housing estates certainly seemed to bear this out. It is nevertheless possible to risk overplaying the status of insider. That is, given the levels of diversity *within* ethno-cultural groups, to decide once and for all who is ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ a group of research subjects would be to ignore the heterogeneity and contingency of social identities in a contemporary setting (Carrington, 2008; Fletcher, 2014; Song and Parker, 1995).

**Sniffing Out Superdiversity**

As already noted, OU’s squad was very diverse and categories such as ethnicity and nation of origin masked significant differentiation along the lines of migratory channel, cultural forms, legal status, religious affiliations and local identities (both immediate and diasporic). In spending time at the club, it quickly became apparent that some players had their own ways of interpreting the sea of diversity in which they found themselves. These tended to see racial, ethnic, national, religious, cultural and neighbourhood differences invoked and intersected in various ways. Perhaps the most interesting (though unseemly) of these was exhibited by Anis-Islem (“Slemie”), a twenty-one-year-old striker of Algerian descent who had moved to Bridgegate via Paris as a child.

Slemie had a sharp nose for flatulence, quickly detecting a foul emission and guessing at the culprit. These guesses could also be used as a means to comment on the lifestyle of other players, with various categories of difference being alluded to in the process. In the lead up to one match, as Alex (whose Greek grandparents had moved to Bridgegate in the late 1950s) passed Slemie in the corridor, the latter remarked: “What the fuck Al? That’s a black man’s fart. What you been eating? Fucking beans, fufu4 and that shit?! You need to clean that shit up. I’ll give you some couscous next week.” Though, at first, the invocation of a master category like ‘black’ indicated a simple system ordered by racial constructions, Slemie later explained that his olfactory detective work was much more complex:

Slemie: I’ve spent bare (an abundance of) time in changing rooms. Here, in France, even when I go (to) Algeria, so I know. The Muslim boys normally have alright smelling ones, have a clean enough diet … (the) ones from my part of the world anyway … The Caribbean boys like Del (Derek), there’s (will) be bad, you seen the shit they bring to eat? And the boys from the Grove (a local council estate), fuck knows what they’re eating – when I play up-front with Giro I can smell him coming!

This frankly odd system of classification was difficult to make sense of. It entailed differences along the lines of ‘race’, lifestyle and culture and, in turn, made muddled allusions to ethno-national, regional, religious and even neighbourhood variations. In fact, Slemie’s appeals to these categories of difference were reminiscent of the intersections encountered by those studying gender, sexuality and mixedness in their attempts to understand how various types of social division may find expression in and through each other.

Slemie had to weigh the implications of a number of intersections and, more specifically, judge how one variable may condition, modify or temper a host of others. For example, in arriving at a guess he would have to consider a player’s ‘race’, his religion, his nationality or nation of origin, and where he lived. This was complicated by the fact that the squad included Muslims with ethnic ties to North Africa, West Africa, Eastern Europe and South Asia, and that living on a particular estate – because it was such a melting pot of cultural forms – may negate the influence of religion and/or ethnicity.

Accounting for these factors required a certain level of intimacy and familiarity. It drew on knowledge which could only be gleaned by a sustained engagement with friends and teammates, and this knowledge had evidently led Slemie to the conclusion that his task was becoming ever more hopeless. His guesses at the originator of a given waft were almost always incorrect. It was interesting to note, however, that this lack of success didn’t surprise him in the least. Indeed, the fact that a white player of Greek descent could be accused of emitting a ‘black man’s fart’ perhaps best encapsulates the nature of this classificatory scheme. The latter could be characterised as a series of granular essentialisms. These are assertions about ethno-racial difference which draw on day-to-day experience of the inner city and try to take stock of intersections across superdiversity’s numerous axes of differentiation. This particular essentialism seemed to be an almost ironic attempt to understand human variation in a setting where superdiversity was rendering existing categories of difference unworkable – no matter how hard-won, the granularity of an assertion would not guarantee its accuracy or truth – and where there was no identifiable majority or minority in terms of ethnicity.

It shouldn’t therefore be assumed, because irony and humour were involved, that the related statements were necessarily neutral and inoffensive. Research on the incidence of racial micro-aggressions in sport shows that “a key strategy in mitigating the effects of racist comments is to locate them within playful, jocular discourses” (Burdsey, 2011: 273). This mitigation strategy can compel the targets of micro-aggressions to dismiss verbal discrimination as ‘banter’. The words of undocumented Liberian migrant (and central midfielder) Edward certainly hinted at this possibility:

Edward: It’s all a bit of a laugh isn’t it? I mean … I’m from Africa but I hardly eat West African food these days. Anyway, the Caribbean food … in the manor’s (fast food outlets is) cooked by Bengalis! He (Slemie) knows that. (He’s a) joker – pretending like he’s got some secrets – (there) ain’t no secrets!

Here he points to the difficulty of constructing essentialisms in a superdiverse setting and brands Slemie a ‘joker’, though the defensiveness of his tone suggests that offence may have been taken.

**Orbital Motion: Space and the M25 Frontier**

Given previous attempts to spatialize superdiversity (Knowles, 2012) and questions over the extent of superdiverse domains (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015), it was interesting to observe how the limits of the players’ granular approach to essentialism came into focus when OU travelled to away grounds situated outside the bounds of the M25.5 Here, where white British players and officials constituted a sizeable majority, Slemie became frustrated at being referred to as the ‘black fella/player’. ‘Are they fucking stupid?’ he would protest, rejecting the label because he couldn’t understand how his phenotypical markers could be read in this way. Other players teased him about this, also surprised at outsiders’ lack of knowledge and appreciation when it came to the realities of migration-related diversity. Carl, whose Irish grandparents had moved to London in the 1960s, gave me his view.

Carl: It’s weird because none of us would ever have him down as black. None of us could guess where he was from. He looked like Trezeguet (a French retired professional footballer of Argentine descent), so we thought maybe France. Another of the lads thought Lebanon, (because they) had a mate who had similar lines shaved in his hair … (He) had to tell us in the end that he’s from Algeria.

Colombia-born Diego had moved to London in 2004 with his mother, brother and girlfriend, joining his uncle who had made the journey three years before. He had since become a naturalised British citizen. He commented on the diversity of the squad:

Diego: It’s crazy, really. Doesn’t work because it’s a mess. When I came (to) London no one could guess where I was from either – Spanish, Portuguese, mixed (race). Me and him [Slemie] look similar, but (we’re) bare different. Same as, like, Alex … Sphres … Mariusz, or whatever.

Here he acknowledged that though outsiders may group a number of OU players together as white, this perceived commonality would be misplaced given the vectors (such as nation of origin, migratory channel, legal status, etc.) which distinguished them from one another. To compare just two white players, Alex and Sphresim: one was a nominally (Orthodox) Catholic Briton whose Greek grandparents had arrived in London in the 1950s as economic migrants; the other was a Muslim asylum seeker who had moved to London from Kosovo in 1999. Interestingly, no national stereotypes in terms of playing styles or attributes had taken hold in this setting. That said, older players did sometimes complain of having to ‘carry the bags’ or ‘do the running’ of their younger teammates (many of whom still hoped to play professionally).

Geoff, OU’s co-founder and Fixture Secretary – who also read out the names of players over a tannoy system at home matches – reaffirmed the frontier effect of the M25, complaining of a drop off in levels of tolerance outside its bounds.

Geoff: You definitely see it … They’re not affected by it like we are. Just not used to it … (So they’re) perhaps scared of it and that … Players coming over from all over the place. Just not the same out there. (That’s) why when you go outside (the M25) there’s this change.

I noticed how officials of hosting clubs often signalled their intolerance by complaining that the names on OU’s team-sheet sounded insufficiently Anglo-Saxon. Whereas Geoff enjoyed the challenge posed by the pronunciation of a name like ‘Sphresim’, those in charge of the microphone at other clubs did not share his relish. ‘Your lot are bad,’ alleged one opposing official, ‘but that mob at Brentwich, I fucking give up.’ He was implying that, because of patterns of local settlement, Brentwich Sports – created by a group of Bangladeshis in 1986 with the aim of providing young Bangladeshis with the opportunity to play organised football – now had a squad almost exclusively comprising players from Eastern Europe. Here we can see parallels with the racism encountered by BME clubs in the suburban areas of Leicestershire (Bradbury, 2010; Campbell, 2011). We might also recall the plight of migrants in Biehl’s (2015) study of space and superdiversity in Istanbul, where there was a clear tension between the migrant commonalities which transcended dimensions of superdiversity and discrimination felt within the wider community along lines of ‘race’ and gender.

One of OU’s growing contingent of Eastern European players was Polish striker Mariusz, who had recently arrived in London. A conversation we had before an away game at Pixford United (situated around 25 miles outside Central London), indicated that he already sensed the distinction between the urban and suburban.

JRT: Do you think you’ll stay over here?

Mariusz: Yes, for sure. For some time at least.

JRT: So you’ll be calling this place home at some point?

Mariusz: Here? No! I read what happens to us in Pixford! … But in London … Yes, I like it. Maybe.

Here he referred to an incident which had occurred immediately after a fixture between Pixford United and Brentwich Sports. A Pixford player had confronted Brentwich midfielder Aleksy Gryzbowski while players were shaking hands after the final whistle, calling him a “fucking Polish bastard”. Things quickly escalated, with the two players having to be separated by their teammates.

Incidents like this underscored the inner- versus outer-city/suburban divide observed by OU’s players and staff. They – along with the divide itself – also support Back’s (2015) assertion regarding superdiversity’s blind spot when it comes to racism and intolerance. As well as showing how superdiversity is registered and modulated within the cityscape, its boundaries (often marked by considerable friction) should also be part of the story. This is because, as we will see, it was their experiences outside Oldfield that sharpened the players’ related feelings of foreignness and solidarity.

To a large extent the players’ attitude to the ethno-racial identity of squad members was shaped by their awareness of Oldfield’s status as a migratory hub, in the past as well as the present. Given that every player was either a migrant or the child/grandchild of migrants, the central paradox was that to be local was *ipso facto* to originate elsewhere; to come from Oldfield or Bridgegate was to trace one’s ancestry to a foreign territory (Rosbrook-Thompson, 2015). As Alex commented at an away fixture: ‘Look at our team-sheet! There ain’t no English players on there … I’m local *and* foreign, everyone round my way’s foreign.’ In this sense, migration-related diversity was part of the players’ everyday lives (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015). Furthermore, the way that an awareness of this diversity shaped players’ attitudes to migration and human variation supports Robinson’s (2010: 2452) claim that place ‘represents the context within which new immigrants and settled residents come together and possess the potential to inform variations in both the impacts of new immigration and how people … make sense of these consequences for the local area and their own well-being’.

Sphresim reflected on the diversity of his surroundings.

Sphresim: I came over (from Kosovo) when I was so young … I’m just used to it. All these other boys have come over from someplace else, or their families have (before them), so how can they get vexed about us? They’re just like us. No one’s really *from* here, you know?

Reserve goalkeeper Max had also sought asylum in London, in his case fleeing the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. Like Diego, he was now a naturalised British citizen. I asked him about the squad’s ethno-racial composition:

Max: (I) never really think about it too much. It’s just, like, always changing so really it just stays the same … So many of us have been there (as new migrants) that they’re never going to stand out too much.

In this way the players realised that the spaces they inhabited had been subject to waves of migration whose effects had accumulated over time. A sense of place directly informed their approach to migration and human variation (Robinson, 2010). Because of continuous migration there could be no simple equivalence between any ethnic group and the host community, while ethno-racial groups could be fractured along the lines of nation of origin, legal status, religious affiliation, culture and language. Any prospective policy guided by ethnicity would fail to appreciate these factors, being unlikely to resonate with players and the granular essentialisms they invoked in classifying fellow residents.

So on one handthe fact that players saw their neighbourhoods as hubs of migration supports the assertion that new migrants tend to settle in places which have been subject to previous waves of immigration; while the forms of solidarity described by squad members also corroborate Vertovec’s (2007b: 5) claim that ‘many immigrants often only meet, live in the same building with, socialize or work with other immigrants or British ethnic minorities’. On the other, the players’ comments on migration demonstrate that those living within superdiverse areas do not necessarily draw any distinction between old and new migratory patterns, recognising the characteristics of different waves but foregrounding the commonalities between migrant groups – whether first, second or third generation.

Another of Back’s (2015) criticisms of superdiversity seems to be borne out here. With its stress on new migration (Vertovec, 2007a), the concept risks ignoring the fact that to make sense of the lived realities of superdiversity, which in many instances see new arrivals embedded in durable structures of inequality, we must be mindful of the legacies of empire as well as more recently forged pathways of migration. By extension, in focusing on emergent phenomena when stubborn racisms are still at play, we overlook the ways in which new migrants become intricated with established local networks and structures of inequality and, furthermore, how old forms of migration are sedimented in the present. Indeed, in many superdiverse settings these processes are so entwined that the task of phasing migration becomes tricky. Put simply, it is difficult to separate old from new.

**Keeping Safe, Staying Fresh? Security and the Cityscape**

While the M25 ring road seemed to reinscribe the outer limits of superdiversity, closer to home the folds along which players shrunk social reality were conditioned by their everyday experience of the city. In time, a finely differentiated series of micro-locales emerged which centred variously on streets, council estates, as well as each estate’s individual buildings and walkways.

Alex talked me through the spatial configuration of his ‘ends’, Rydal Grove, the most notorious housing estate in Oldfield:

Alex: Down there are the crackheads, crack-houses. The blocks on the outside are okay, ones near the middle are shit mostly. You don’t want to be heading up some of them stairs (stairwells) that side where the Somali boys hang around … (It’s) only some of the fresh kids (that) you need to watch though. They’re crazy ... wherever they’re from. Trying to make a name and that, some of them even if they’ve been here for time, let everyone know that they won’t take no shit. The boys that (have) been here longer are mostly cool.

Another player born and raised on Rydal Grove was twenty-seven-year-old Lawrence, whose grandparents had arrived in London from Grenada in the 1950s. I spoke with him about the Grove:

JRT: Have you seen things change over the years?

Lawrence: Yeah … But (it’s) all the same really. (It’s) always been people coming in, but (the) same type of people … Poor, trying to get by. Wherever they’ve come from, whenever they’ve come. You see it in our team.

JRT: I’ve heard other lads talk about some youngsters being ‘fresh’ …

Lawrence: Oh yeah we see that. But it ain’t like that always. Look at Mariusz. (Has been) here five minutes but not (a) freshy at all.

Though lacking the sense of irony, this method of classifying people seemed to employ the same granular essentialist logic as Slemie’s taxonomy of foul aromas. While it is possible to identify loose intersections between ethnicity, nation of origin and length of residence here, the players’ comments indicated that being ‘fresh’ was by no means the preserve of recent migrants. It was an attitude that could be adopted by anyone, at any time. As a result, despite its granularity this essentialism was contingent, contextual and liable to be misapplied.

These characteristics highlighted the falseness of the transnationalism versus integration dichotomy. There was no guarantee that new arrivals would be fresh, and it wasn’t assumed that fresh attitudes would fade as time wore on and an individual ‘caught up’ with other migrant settlers by becoming more integrated. In Knowles’ (2012) terms, the players’ spatializing of urban terrain rendered differences *within* a superdiverse group of residents more visible by identifying risky, fresh individuals with particular zones and features of the city. But this was only a snapshot. Attitudes and the spaces identified with them were subject to change. Underlying all this was the assertion that, at bottom, all residents were from elsewhere; to be local was to be foreign.

Though the players’ friendships were underpinned by this implicit assumption of fellow foreignness, commonality in terms of class – being poor – was also important.6 In turn, these assumptions shaped the players’ attempts to make sense of human variation. Their granular essentialisms were not fixed or simplistic and saw the intersection of notions of ‘race’, religion, ethnicity, culture, etc. in settings where no group was dominant. The granular nature of these essentialisms issued from players’ relationships in the parochial and private realms, as well as everyday exchanges in the public realm (Wessendorf, 2014). Despite this, however, the contingency and complexity evident in such assertions of ethno-racial difference did not always accurately reflect the realities of city life – a fact not lost on most players. Indeed, though club personnel found the ways of figuring human variation encountered outside the M25 clumsy and uninformed, to cast the attitudes to ethnicity and migration found within and beyond the inner city as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, respectively, would be unhelpful. Whether an assertion of ethno-racial difference was granular or not, it was prone to misapplication and capable of causing offence. Here we are reminded of Back’s (2015) warning that superdiversity shouldn’t be considered in the spirit of unreflective celebration. In showing how sport can both shape and reflect societal attitudes to ‘race’ and migration, we might also point to the usefulness of sporting racial projects (Carrington, 2010).

**Conclusion**

It is clear that the realities of superdiversity need to be woven into scholarly discussions of migration and ethnicity. Interlocking understandings of space, place and various categories of difference shaped the attitudes to migration and ethnicity presented above. While academics have rightly stressed the complexity and ‘diversification of diversity’ which have resulted from patterns of migration and settlement in the UK, on the ground these haven’t crowded out feelings of commonality and togetherness. Nonetheless, these sentiments do not foreclose the possibility of tensions being felt within superdiverse communities.

The young men at OU understood their superdiverse surroundings through granular essentialisms which tried to account for numerous contingencies and intersections. The construction of these essentialisms was foregrounded by the players’ shared status as foreigners, their day-to-day experience of the inner city, and the perceived hostility of a group of suburban outsiders. However, the potentially offensive nature of granular assertions was downgraded through strategies of mitigation, a dynamic which underlines the importance of refining the focus of superdiversity.

We would further our understanding of superdiversity as a concept, a set of variables and a social context (Meissner, 2015) by showing greater appreciation of the tension, friction and outright racism and discrimination which are evident in and around superdiverse settings. As well as piecing together a more comprehensive picture of the realities of superdiversity, this would also allow the concept’s proponents to respond more effectively to calls that they adopt an unreflective and celebratory stance with regard to the characteristics of contemporary cities (Back, 2015). But perhaps more importantly, it would acknowledge the fact that the kind of identifications and solidarities which take root in superdiverse areas (together with associated understandings of human variation) are forged in relation to subtle internal differentiations as well as to external resentment and prejudice. In fact, for OU’s players, amid all the characteristics of their surroundings which were qualitatively new, it was two of the city’s more enduring features which shaped their attitudes to migration and human variation: inequality and the prejudices of perceived outsiders.

The variables bound up with superdiversity are refracted through the specificities of place and give rise to particular understandings of space and spatial boundaries. The latter can be used to order the granular essentialisms I describe above. Although these are more subtle than the flagrant prejudices sometimes encountered outside superdiverse areas, they retain the ability to discriminate and offend.

Of the many parties to superdiversity, not all occupy its nodal points or partake of its realities in a celebratory mood. People on the fringes can feel as (if not more) strongly about the changes described by the concept, and as this article has shown, the course of the match can be influenced by those shouting from beyond the touchline, as well as those in the thick of play.

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**Notes**

1 I have changed the names of places (besides London), clubs and people to ensure anonymity.

2 For challenges to the notion of ‘post-raciality’ in US sport, see Douglas (2014) and Smith (2015).

3 In terms of its standing in the English football league system, this league was situated six ‘steps’ below League Two.

4 Commonly made with cassava flour and served with soup, fufu is a staple food with origins in Ghana, though it is also eaten in other West African nations and across the Caribbean.

5 The M25 is a 117-mile stretch of motorway which almost encircles the area known as ‘Greater London’.

6 The shared class status which characterised the players’ friendships (which, in turn, spanned the private and parochial realms) tallies with Wessendorf’s (2014) findings in Hackney.

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**James Rosbrook-Thompson** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Anglia Ruskin University. He is an urban sociologist whose research interests include ‘race’ and ethnicity, citizenship and belonging, youth delinquency, and sport. He is currently writing a book (with Gary Armstrong) about life on a mixed-occupancy housing estate in London.