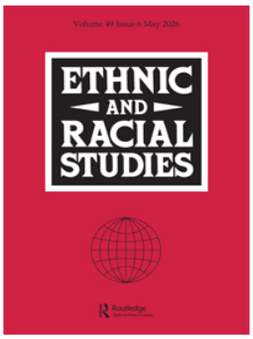

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Ethnic and Racial Studies

ISSN: 0141-9870 (Print) 1466-4356 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rers20

Between solidarity and hostility: exploring the paradox of community through peer research

Elena Vacchelli & Franca Roeschert

To cite this article: Elena Vacchelli & Franca Roeschert (09 Mar 2026): Between solidarity and hostility: exploring the paradox of community through peer research, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2026.2631054

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2026.2631054

Published online: 09 Mar 2026.

ETHNIC AND RACIAL STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2026.2631054

Between solidarity and hostility: exploring the paradox of community through peer research

Elena Vacchelli [a] and Franca Roeschert [a,b]

[a]Faculty of Law, Arts & Social Sciences, University of Greenwich, London, UK; [b]School of Social Sciences and Professions, London Metropolitan University, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper explores migrants' experiences of settling in Greenwich, London, using peer research and taking into account the socio-political context and specific place-based politics unfolding in local communities. Resulting from a research collaboration between academic researchers, two civil society organisations, and four people of migrant origins as peer researchers, this paper interrogates community, reflecting on its dichotomous understandings in sociological literature. By cautioning against idealised notions of community, we foreground Greenwich's history of racial violence and show how communities function as liminal spaces where everyday interactions with local government and services unfold, and where forms of intra-migrant solidarity emerge. Yet it is within communities that, despite London's diversity, racism continues to order residents into hierarchies of belonging, affecting migrants and racialised citizens. In articulating this paradox, we argue that assessments of personal trajectories of integration must tend to local specificities, including the tensions migrants experience in their everyday.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 8 September 2025
Accepted 6 February 2026

KEYWORDS
Belonging; community; migrant hostility; immigration; peer research; solidarity

Introduction

This research takes place in Greenwich, a borough situated in the Southeast of London, UK, and interrogates the extent to which migrants understand where they live as safe, cohesive and welcoming. Drawing on Greenwich's history of demographic change, this paper offers a contextual imaginary for an inclusive city, particularly focusing on recent and more established migrants, who under current policy circumstances are experiencing various forms of exclusion. With this small-scale study, we aim to highlight the importance of understanding local communities as places where migrant hostility and solidarity coexist, and forms of resistance are being ongoingly developed.

For the past few years, we have been involved in community organising through a consortium of civil society organisations working with the council to create a local community that is a place of sanctuary for precariously positioned migrants, including asylum seekers,

CONTACT Elena Vacchelli e.vacchelli@greenwich.ac.uk

refugees and other migrants who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). In line with our participatory ethos, we decided to obtain this evidence using peer research to explore access to services and belonging to the local community through stories told by Greenwich residents. We trained peer researchers with the help of two grassroots organisations LRMN (Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network) and GrIP (Greenwich Inclusion Project). When studying Greenwich, it became evident that local communities do not exist in a vacuum; they are highly dependent on the context in which they are located and are inherently contested. From the way people understand their local community, we can see how the concept is contradictory – some participants refer to narratives of community loss; others express racial stereotypes, having internalised racist tropes. Depictions of community during the interviews contribute to our understanding of how participants perceive their sense of belonging to the borough and articulate their emotional ties with the place where they live. Belonging refers to the emotional, social and symbolic experience of feeling accepted, recognized and connected within a community in ways that are deeply tied to specific places. It involves developing an attachment to environments – neighbourhoods, cities, landscapes or nations – that provide continuity, meaning and a sense of "being at home". Belonging is thus both a relational and spatial condition, shaped by how people inhabit, move through and are positioned within particular places (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Place-based politics is key to the argument we put forward in this paper, especially because the central government in the UK tends to idealise the local level as a place where social cohesion should be achieved. This contrasts with what we found on the ground, as the idyllic vision of socially cohesive communities does not take into account the complexities of migration and belonging. In discussing social cohesion, Back (2009) argues it implies "the assumption that (…) cohesion and social order are ideal states to which society should aspire" (2009, 11) and is critical of the ideologically loaded idea that London has been "tainted" by diversity hence losing its "purity". Developing alongside "social cohesion", debates on "integration" moreover frame it as a moral technology, producing hierarchies between good and bad migrants, rewarding conformity whilst expecting migrants to adhere to majority norms and fundamentally concealing a hidden assimilationist agenda. Critical voices have also highlighted that racialised migrants are depicted as harder to integrate (Schinkel 2018: Favell 2019). Using the London Borough of Greenwich, situated in South-East London as an example of these contestations around place, our research points to a complex set of experiences requiring different ways of negotiating belonging that are highly contextual to the community environments in place at the time of need, and to diverse experiences of access to available services. Time was also important to factor in, as the long-standing migrant residents could provide a more rounded contextual understanding of Greenwich by offering personal memories of settling in the borough in the 1990s, with their stories involving experiences of discrimination and racial hatred. Our research with migrant populations in Greenwich included refugees, asylum seekers, people with No Recourse to Public Funds and racialised citizens, conscious that the process of migrants becoming citizens represents precisely the personal integration trajectories we are interested in exploring.

We acknowledge that negotiations of belonging to local communities are not always linear, easy to capture, or generalised in the context of academic work. On the contrary, they are highly contextual and often even imply migrants internalising some of the

Hostile Environment[1] discourses as a strategy to find their place in the destination country, as was the case with some participants in our research. What adds to this complexity is that immigration laws, including access to services is constantly changing, rendering it "almost impossible for non-state actors such as service providers, civil society, NGOs, faith groups […] to make sense of a migrant's legal entitlements at any given moment" (Benchekroun, Humphris, and Sigona 2024, 287).

This paper explores migrants' belonging to their local community, highlighting the complexities inherent in emotional attachment to place, and provides contextual insights on how they make sense of the community where they live. We first interrogate and point to dichotomous ways of understanding community in sociological literature. Warning against the potential pitfalls of idealising community, we provide a contextual account of the recent socio-political history of Greenwich before moving on to discuss the methodological approach and present the findings. We conclude that communities are where forms of intra-migrant solidarity take place, yet belonging and exclusion coexist. Our work demonstrates that research, too, can be a form of solidarity, as evident from the relational dynamics that occurred between peer researchers and research participants during the interview encounters.

Interrogating community

The interpretation of the term "community" is fluid and varies according to how it is applied in conversation, media or policy discourse. In the UK's common parlance, it is sometimes used to refer to specific ethnic or cultural groups (see Anderson 1983), such as, for instance, the Black community, the South Asian community, the Jewish community and the Traveller community. In these cases, "community" reflects a sense of shared identity, heritage, and often, a collective experience of marginalization or solidarity. However, speaking of heterogeneous ethnic groups as "one community" also has the effect of essentialising and reifying ethnicity as a social category. In the English language, it is one of the most widely used and emotionally resonant terms, evoking a sense of belonging, solidarity and togetherness, despite the term being vague and context dependent, and used to depict groups that are far from cohesive (Williams 1976).

We understand communities as liminal spaces where horizontal practices of daily solidarity converge with vertical mobilisations at different scales, including the national scale. Aware of globally networked connections inscribed in place-based politics (Castells 1997, 2004; Massey 1994, 2005), in our work, the urban level is central to articulating the importance of community for integration purposes, as evident from Greenwich Council's commitment to being a Borough of Sanctuary. It is here that our key contribution to scholarship is situated, i.e. the acknowledgement that community is produced by national and global forces while at the same time being contextual and practiced from the bottom-up. Ambrosini (2020) highlights that local policies must continuously define new frames and languages, pointing to an increasing divergence between national models of integration and actual policies at the local level, leading to a variety of multiculturalist practices.

Urban communities have been at the centre of classic sociological inquiry with scholars conceptualising "community" in ways that reflect broader concerns about modernity, industrialisation and social change. Early sociological theory often contrasted traditional

rural communities with social interaction in modern, industrialised cities, concerned with how modern societies could stay cohesive as traditional forms of community declined (Tönnies 1887; Durkheim 1893). In trying to establish a statistical causality between social capital and diversity, more recent sociological studies confirm these dichotomous views, arguing that higher demographic diversification leads to a weakening of community ties to the point of social isolation (Putnam 2007).

Recent studies have contributed to a shift in the understanding of community as a relational concept where the role of social networks is emphasised (Blokland 2017; Massey 2005). While the traditional notion of community sees it as solely and necessarily tied to specific geographic locations, such as neighbourhoods, the work of Blokland (2003) frames communities as relational rather than spatial, formed through social interactions and networks that may or may not be anchored to a particular place and geographical proximity. Blokland (2017) explores how processes like gentrification, globalization and neoliberal urban policies reshape communities by disrupting existing social networks, displacing vulnerable populations and altering community dynamics. Yet, new forms of community can also emerge as resistance to these changes, through collective action and acts of solidarity. While the emphasis of Blokland's (2017) work is on community as a practice that involves creating and sustaining connections among individuals in active, relational and performative ways, our research points to the fact that communities are not either spatial or relational. Instead, they are formed through social interactions and networks that are simultaneously materially and relationally emplaced.

While some sociological perspectives argue that urban, diverse communities weaken affective ties in local communities (Putnam 2007), Back's (2009) work in South-East London affirms the importance of understanding how places change over time to assess how kinship and belonging develop in specific contexts, a perspective that is lost in much quantitative research. Our view is aligned with scholars such as Back (2009), emphasising the need to rethink the categories used to describe communities and, rather than decrying the decrease in social cohesion, embrace the demographic changes that bring new types of solidarity.

Our paper understands community as resilient and evolving in the face of rapid social change. While some emphasize the erosion of traditional bonds in cities, others highlight the adaptive capacity of communities to form new types of relationships. Whether through neighbourhoods (Swaroop and Morenoff 2006), public spaces (Jacobs 1961; Sennett 1974) or virtual networks (Castells 2004), community remains central to understanding urban life. We contribute to this debate by using peer research to capture an "insider" perspective of local communities in Greenwich, provided by the vantage point afforded by the peer research process.

A relational way of understanding community in Greenwich: from cradle of racism to Borough of Sanctuary

Greenwich's socio-economic transformation reflects changes in the communities living in the area and experiences of peer researchers and participants are closely intertwined with the social history of the borough. Human geography complements and enriches the sociological debate, articulating community in terms of space, place and identity and highlights social relations developing in given spaces. Communities are spatial, relational

and dynamic, shaped by socio-political, economic and cultural environments which, in turn, contribute to forge place (Massey 2005). Communities are not static entities but are constantly being made, unmade and remade.

Until the 1990s, Greenwich was a predominantly white Borough, with its central and eastern parts (Eltham) in geographical continuity with Kent, identified in the public imaginary with the garden of England, given its white hinterland. The Borough is also home to Woolwich, a manufacturing stronghold and site of ship building and cable production, described as "once the heart of the British empire's military-industrial complex" (Bates 2018, 987). Subject to industrial decline from the late 1960s, Greenwich saw a rapid shift from manufacturing to the service industry, creating a new middle class but, simultaneously, high youth unemployment rates during the 1980s and 1990s. At a time when these economic shifts were disrupting the class composition of local residents, immigrants from the Commonwealth had started to arrive in the areas of Charlton, Plumstead and Woolwich from the 1950s, so had Gujarati, and Sikhs in the 1960s and Vietnamese, Somali and refugees from other parts of Africa during the 1980s and 1990s (Hewitt 2005).

Seismic shifts in Greenwich's economy and class composition during the 1980s and 1990s contributed to poor housing, leading to predominantly white and aggressively racist communities fuelled by the nascent BNP and National Front. In those years, Greenwich saw series of racially motivated murders by white gangs, including the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, a particularly impactful event for British society as it led to the Macpherson report (1999), a public admission of institutional racism in the police.[2] The Macpherson report drove public discussions on race relations, legal and policy reforms, and brought public attention to issues of racial violence and discrimination (Hewitt 2005). Whilst Stephen Lawrence's murder and the MacPherson report had a profound cultural impact, highlighting the violent racism faced by Black and minority ethnic communities in the UK, it however had little impact on dismantling institutional racism (Lea 2000). Some of the participants of this research witnessed this moment in British history and were at the receiving end of racial violence during this time.

Today, 37.5% of Greenwich's population are migrants, defined by being born outside of the UK (ONS 2023). A quarter of Greenwich's residents are from Black African or Caribbean backgrounds and a fifth are from Asian backgrounds (ONS 2023). Labour holds a strong majority in the council, having led the council continuously since 1971 (Heywood and Loftus 2023). The borough has an active civil society committed to work with the local authority to gain and maintain Sanctuary status, an award conferred by the City of Sanctuary organisation, committing in this way to a sustained effort to make Greenwich a welcoming place for migrants. In Greenwich, as in other Boroughs and Cities of Sanctuary, the concept of "sanctuary" is the campaigning focus for civil society organisations mobilising to create integration at a local level by providing advocacy and advice to access a connected bricolage of local services. In this sense, the Borough has undergone a profound transformation during the past four decades and is now exhibiting a rich tapestry of different people and an active civil society mobilising for migrants' rights.

This paper is situated within migration studies and aims to understand the role of community in enabling belonging in a specific urban context, the London Borough of

Greenwich, where our research and community organising takes place. It aims to shed light on how migrants make sense of their own experience of making Greenwich their home. Without wanting to idealise the local scale as an idyllic site for social cohesion (Back 2009 Massey 2005), in this paper we understand local communities as liminal spaces where negotiations with local authorities and a range of services happens daily. Fully understanding the local presence of migrants and racialised people also means deciphering transnational and global connections this presence entails, which is however beyond the scope of this paper.

Methodology

This paper draws on 25 interviews conducted by peer researchers who themselves are migrants living in Greenwich. Peer research is a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR) where community members with experience of the issue being studied contribute to the research process, using their contextual understanding to ground the knowledge-creation process and catalysing findings into action (Yang and Dibb 2020). Despite its strengths, peer research also poses challenges: for instance, scholars have reported peer researchers' confusion about their roles, with data collection turning into counselling sessions (Logie et al. 2012). Ethically, Wilson, Kenny, and Dickson-Swift (2018) found that peer research continues to offer greater benefits to academic researchers than the community where it is conducted. Notwithstanding its challenges, peer research is a suitable methodology for generating valuable bottom-up knowledge. It can facilitate peer researchers' access to careers in fields like research which have higher entry barriers for marginalised groups, as it happened to one of our peer researchers. Yet we concur with Pincock and Bakunzi (2021) that conditions for academic research production and funding are not always fit for the required ongoing mentoring and support of peer researchers by academic researchers, often themselves time poor and with tight research budgets to manage.

As social justice committed scholars, we use peer research because it involves community members in the research process, instead of doing research "on" them. The peer research approach calls for a questioning of the peer researchers' positionality and our own. At the time of the research, one of us was an Associate Professor and the other a PhD student at a post-1992 university. Both of us were involved in community organising through the Greenwich's Borough of Sanctuary group, representing our university. Although we are also migrants, our White European ancestry has contributed to our privileged position, evident in the fact we were able to conduct this research in academic roles, while the peer researchers involved were all racialised women, mostly from former British colonies and – at the time of the research – did not hold permanent jobs. In this sense, rather than countering them *per se*, peer research makes visible power imbalances in the knowledge production process. In our case, we entered the process as experts in research, we trained and oversaw the peer researchers' work, and were in charge of their reimbursement. Peer researchers, on the other hand, were largely novices in research and were at the receiving end of the training, supervision, expense reimbursements and payment in vouchers. As neither of us lives in Greenwich and given our relatively privileged position of navigating the UK's immigration system as European migrants with settled status, we are largely outsiders to the groups we are

studying (Nowicka and Ryan 2015). Using peer research, however, meant that qualitative data could be collected by insiders to Greenwich's migrant communities. The research process was also action-oriented as it equipped peer researchers with new skills and knowledge which they can draw on for their activism. Two civil society organisations, LRMN and GrIP, recruited the peer researchers and provided a venue for the training. Over two sessions in February 2023, we trained the peer researchers in foundational research principles, including research(er) integrity, methods and ethics. Once the data was collected, we listened to peer researchers' reflections about interviewing and initiated a joint analysis of the data.

We co-created interview questions that focused on participants' experiences of settling in Greenwich, barriers in accessing services, and generally their experiences of making Greenwich their home. One peer researcher left the project after the training because of an unexpected relocation, highlighting how the peer researchers are themselves affected by migration policies such as the dispersal scheme and local authority practices of providing accommodation for their residents in areas with lower housing demand, including outside of London (Walsh 2021). The four remaining peer researchers were racialised women whose varying migration journeys to Greenwich intersected with their legal statuses and, therefore, had implications for their employment, housing and family situations.

Peer researchers conducted interviews from March to April 2023 using purposive and later snowball sampling to interview people in their networks who had migrated to the UK and were residing in Greenwich at the time. Although demographic information was not systematically collected, some aspects of participants' identities and backgrounds became evident in the stories they shared.

Initially, interviews varied greatly in length. Hence, after some pilot interviews, we met with the peer researchers to discuss the approach and encouraged in-depth interviewing techniques, including using prompts and asking follow-up questions. Reflecting peer researchers' availability, of the twenty-five interviews included in the sample, sixteen were conducted by one peer researcher, five by another peer researcher, and the two remaining peer researchers conducted two interviews each. While we expected a more even distribution, the peer researcher who conducted sixteen interviews offered to take on the additional interviews of those with less time.

Following the data collection, in an analysis session peer researchers read an excerpt of the transcripts, and together we identified initial themes through manual coding. We used the session to reflect on the process and the role of being a peer researcher. Due to peer researchers' shared experience or identity with participants, participants' stories at times resonated with peer researchers' own difficulties with the immigration system, prompting feelings of empathy with research participants' lives. One peer researcher described crying with participants over shared experiences of injustice and struggle, highlighting how the interview process is not only an exchange of information, but a relational moment (Vacchelli 2018). This also points to the emotional cost involved for those engaged in research related to their lived experiences who are not afforded the luxury of a distanced gaze that is available to academic researchers. Despite the ethical dilemmas and inequalities inherent in peer research (see Logie et al. 2012; Wilson, Kenny, and Dickson-Swift 2017; Pincock and Bakunzi 2021), for some of the peer researchers, the experience was a segue into further paid research employment. One participant was

offered a job as a Research Assistant, demonstrating her suitability for the role through her experience as a peer researcher.

After the joint analysis session, the data was imported into NVivo and thematically analysed. Some themes from the analysis session were used as initial codes, and new descriptive codes were constructed while engaging with the full data set. We then searched for meaning across the descriptive codes, using contextual information from the peer research process to build themes that would cut across the experiences of a wide range of participants. This approach helped our understanding of the interview data within the wider context of a peer research process and the rich, albeit complex, data it produces.

Findings: the paradox of belonging

Research participants shared a range of personal stories of migration and settlement in Greenwich. Some had been living in the Borough for over thirty years, others had arrived only 1.5 months prior to the interview. The conditions during the time of arrival in Greenwich reflected immigration policies, the government's stance on immigration and, for long-standing migrants, the climate of racial violence in Greenwich during the 1990s. Participants arrived in the UK under different circumstances, including from former British colonies and under nationality or crisis-specific resettlement schemes, such as the "Homes for Ukraine" scheme. As the first interview question was how long participants had been living in Greenwich, we have data for all participants, demonstrating the range of time they have lived in Greenwich (see Appendix 1).

The thematic analysis carried out here reflects paradoxical experiences of community life: on the one hand, participants referred to solidarity through their social networks and local groups advocating for migrant justice. We also witnessed peer-to-peer solidarity unfolding through the research process itself. On the other hand, hostile immigration narratives and policies infiltrate community life, evident in participants' experiences of racism but also in the ways in which participants themselves internalised some narratives hostile to immigrants. This included participants reproducing racial tropes depicting certain groups as inherently more violent or expressing gratitude or questioning their deservingness of welfare services. The complexity of belonging leads us to conceptualise it here as a paradox consisting of the co-existence of the feeling of being part of a community and at the same time recognising racism in the past and in the present. In some cases, the paradox of belonging also means that, as racialised migrants, some participants have internalised racist discourses. Throughout this section, we changed names of research participants into pseudonyms.

Experiencing belonging and solidarity

Belonging

Independent from idealised notions of community, the reality lived in Greenwich is one of spontaneous coming together of racialised groups particularly in areas deemed "unsafe" or undesirable for other reasons. Low house prices meant that immigrants moved to an area, and this multiculture is reflected for instance in market stalls catering for diverse food traditions. Participants recount finding a range of foods from their country of

origin in the market, as well as hairdressers and barber shops catering for Black hair. Jonathan, for instance, said:

> I used to travel all the way from Woolwich to Deptford or Hackney to cut my hair. […] There wasn't much Black people, and because of the way Greenwich Council have been willing to encourage ethnic minorities to settle down, look at the rate and the level migrants are in Woolwich now. You can hardly go out without meeting people from different nationalities. (Jonathan)

Jonathan highlights not having to travel far to get his hair done as a positive development speaking to the multiculturalism of the borough. Interestingly, Jonathan sees it as an intentional strategy by Greenwich council to "encourage ethnic minorities to settle down", rather than a spontaneous pattern influenced by a multiplicity of factors. In other comments, it was visible how living in a multicultural borough meant being able to access a range of international food.

> there's nothing in Nigeria that he cannot find in the Woolwich market, but there are so many things in Woolwich market that you cannot see in Nigeria […] I tell you, Borough has been wonderful. They accommodate people to put their wares to merchandise. Give them an opportunity just to satisfy the people in the Borough. (Ibrahim)

Ibrahim commends Greenwich's diversity as contributing to his ability to source the food from his country, including items that are notoriously difficult to obtain. Compared to the previous comment, he sees the role of the council as allowing for migrants to settle in the area when he notes that "they accommodate people". As in the quote above, participants highlight diversity (of food, services, cultural practices) as positive and contributing to their feelings of belonging.

Solidarity

Participants described how they received help as a form of experiencing solidarity in the community. A few participants expressed a notion that people don't help each other out anymore, for instance when noting that: "*They're just busy in their own lives and stuff and no one bothers to help you*" (Aisha). However, even when participants did not name it as such, they mentioned intentional, everyday solidarity with others, thus exposing a paradox which in itself contributes to our understanding of communities as complex and multilayered. Past forms of solidarity described by participants included when Black youths joined up to fight racist thugs in the 1990s, even when this later escalated to further violence. Nora notes how she experienced Black children coming together in gangs to protect themselves from racist gangs in the wake of Stephen Lawrence's murder, but that these groups later became themselves violent.

Nora:	In the borough, I think what didn't work well was because when our children were growing up, that was when all these gang activities started, do you understand?
Interviewer:	Yes.
Nora:	For me, that didn't work well at all. It was because of that Stephen Lawrence death, that's why the Black children also started ganging up.
Interviewer:	Right, to protect themselves?
Nora:	To protect themselves, yes. To protect themselves and–
Interviewer:	Then now became a negative thing for them as well.

> Nora: For them, yes. It was through that because they felt scared to go out on their own and so they started working together. (Nora)

A few of the participants who had lived in the borough for several years, shared experiencing solidarity from council employees who helped them to settle in. Safia appreciated the support of a council worker in getting her paperwork in order

> Yes, the lady from the council. She took all this in her hand, she did the application for the passport for me and my two daughters. She did all this, and she show me how to do the birth certificate, I think as well. It's a lot of stuff. She helped me a lot. She give me that feeling like she don't have anybody else. Just, I'm the only one. [chuckles] I'm sure this is not the case, but, yes, she give me that feeling like I'm just the only case she have. (Safia)

As this quote shows, Safia felt welcomed in the borough through the support she received from one council officer who took the time to help her with her applications.

Participants described small acts of solidarity in their everyday, for example through their extended network who helped them settle in, such as Ibrahim who had an aunt already living in the borough when he arrived 1.5 months ago: "*I have auntie of mine who has stayed in this Borough […]. She knows everywhere in the Borough, and she has always been guiding me and putting me to where to go, where not to go, what to do and what not to do*". These forms of solidarity, between newer and more established migrants, from council and civil society actors show them as acts of care filling the void from lack of state support. For instance, Betty, who has No Recourse to Public Funds, a status that excludes her from accessing welfare support, relied on the support of her personal network while hoping to get the condition lifted. She describes it as challenging to ongoingly rely on the same personal network: "*When people are really helping you for many, many, many years, there will be a time that they will be tired, and that time is now. I'm really, really finding it difficult*". As these examples have shown, solidarity from personal networks highlighted in the interviews ranged from family to friends, to broader social networks that are already settled in the area, employees at councils and charities who treat people with respect.

We argue that research processes which engage in "political listening" (Bassel 2017) of migrants' experiences with the aim of fully understanding and empathising with their experiences and possibly contributing to improving their material circumstances are in themselves forms of solidarity. In this research, the interview process itself can be seen as an act of solidarity where peer researchers often prioritised sharing information and giving advice over collecting rigorous interview data. In this context, the peer researcher interview represents in itself an everyday encounter and a practice of migrant solidarity which was set in motion by the research process.

Experiencing and internalising hostility

Experiences of racism

Alongside examples of everyday conviviality in Greenwich, some participants remembered racial hatred against them. This was particularly the case for those who arrived in Greenwich during the 1990s, with a participant describing how he had been attacked by white youths. Oliver, who has lived in Greenwich for 30 years recounts the initial hardship he experienced when he firstly arrived – some of it made worse by police racism. He

recounts being the object of racist harassment by neighbours in Eltham where he lived during the 1990s:

> I can say one thing that changed, especially in Eltham where I live, is that the racism there has collapsed or is collapsing. It hasn't collapsed completely, because I see from certain areas there's still some racial activities going on, which makes me sad. Compared to when I came to now, it's died down, because when I moved in, I can remember I moved in with a brand new white car. […] On a Sunday morning, I polish it. I left it, we walked to church. By the time we were coming back from church, I met two notes on my windscreen. "You Black–" I don't want to use the language here. "This place is not for you. […] They said, "Everybody warned you. Why do you come here?" That was actually when Stephen Lawrence was murdered there. (Oliver)

When Oliver says "racism here has collapsed", he is referring to what Gilroy (2010) calls street-level racial hatred, racism that is expressed in interpersonal encounters, and because of its banality, can be easily identified as such. Shortly after this incident, Oliver was also faced with institutional racism from the police, who did not believe him when his photography shop was broken into, leading to insurance payment not being paid out:

> When I called the police, the police came and said that they did fingerprints that it's me and my wife because we were insured that we robbed ourselves. (Oliver)

Over time, longstanding migrants like Oliver witnessed newer migrants arriving in Greenwich and previous residents of the borough move away, contributing to the multicultural and convivial reality of the borough now:

> a lot of them would put their house on sale and they go. They'd sell. Guess what, they would be purchased by either a Nigerian or a Ghanaian or a Chinese. Our streets became just like that, multicultural street. (Oliver)

While the borough has become more multicultural and racial intimidation by other residents may have declined – even though one could argue that the racist riots in 2024 and attacks on immigration hotels in 2025 paint a different picture – institutional forms of racism persist. Institutional racism is less easily identifiable, because those who perpetuate it "might not profess their commitment to race hierarchy in public after dark but [their] actions institutionalise it nonetheless" (Gilroy 2010, 33). Hence when we highlight migrants' sharing their experiences of racism in the 1990s, we refer to the instance of violence they experience which they have been able to identify and name as racism.

Some participants described racism as still alive and constantly affecting racialised people in their everyday lives, including some experiences of poor treatment; however, some more subtle forms of racism, such as institutional racism, are harder to identify. When faced with street-level racial hatred, participants exhibit diverse coping strategies. Nora recounts seeking to "overcome" racism by "not letting it affect you", in this way exposing the fact that current neoliberal diversity discourses tend to frame responsibilities to overcome racism as individual rather than collective and societal:

> Racism has always been a barrier, but then for me, I didn't let that overpower me, you understand […] I can't say there was any barrier to be honest, since we have– maybe it was one-off, but things worked well for me. When I had to access a job, I was able to have a good job and I was able to raise up my children. I was able to access education and everything I needed to access. […] Maybe it's me. They didn't let anything block me at all, no. (Nora)

Whilst acknowledging the continued existence of racism, Nora seeks to find individual-level strategies to tackle barriers. This shows how neoliberal discourses highlighting individual responsibility for societal issues become internalised (Gilroy 2013). Framing the responsibility to overcome racism as individual rather than collective resonates with Nikolas Rose's (1996) neoliberal critique of community. Neoliberalism places an emphasis on individual responsibility in this way, extending the reach of the state to communities in subtle ways, maintaining indirect control, as evident, for instance, in multi-agency partnerships at the urban level taking responsibility for their governance. The idea expressed by the above participant that it is her responsibility to overcome racism by not letting it overpower her suggests that personal resilience is seen as an antidote to discrimination rather than pointing to the duty of communities or indeed the state to address institutional forms of racism.

Internalisation of the hostile environment and perceptions of deservingness

The internalisation of hostile narratives we describe here connects to Frantz Fanon's work, who particularly in *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952] 2000), offers a powerful analysis of how racism is internalised by the oppressed and how colonised and racialised individuals come to see themselves through the lens of the dominant (white, colonial) culture. Fanon writes: "The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" ([1952] 2000, 76). Similarly to the process described by Fanon, migrant and racialised people in the UK may inadvertently reproduce dominant narratives of exclusion and undeservingness sealed in anti-migration legislation.

In the interviews, we came across various ways in which the participants seemed to have internalised narratives of the Hostile Environment. On the one hand, some participants reproduced discriminatory assessments about migrants' presence in the Borough. On the other hand, migrants displayed an internalisation of the Hostile Environment when sharing stories about their gratitude and doubts regarding the deservingness of services they received due to their status as migrants in the UK. Interestingly, several participants commented on the borough's racial composition. Although participants came to different conclusions about what would constitute an "ideal" racial mix, across their comments was an assumption that such an "ideal" racial mix exists and that increased immigration into the borough might disrupt it. Amanda, for instance, expressed how the council had done a lot of work mixing people in housing, leading to a more mixed, and in her eyes, better, racial composition of the borough:

> The council have done a very good job in mixing people in houses. […] Because at that time, if you say, "I live in Lewisham." "Oh, there is a lot of large area and a lot of African. Place is not safe. It's not a–" Now, they can't say that because now, it's mixed. You can see any nationality. (Amanda)

In the above quote, the presence of African migrants is depicted as not safe, while the fact that the area now is more mixed is seen as positive. Another example of the notion that there could be an "ideal" racial mix is that of Joseph, who noted how his area had too many Asian landlords but is now more mixed:

> You see different kinds of people now. When I came here before, they were just purely Asians, but now, a lot of different people comes in. Then when I came in, all the landlords here, like in [this] road, I think I was the only Black landlord here. They were all Asians. (Joseph)

The above quotes illustrate an internalisation of the Hostile Environment by reproducing narratives of what an ideal racial mix should look like. In this context, solidarity with newcomers is inhibited as showing solidarity with those in more precarious positions highlights participants' own marginality (Gilroy 2010). For similar reasons, some participants spoke about the need for security checks at borders and the risk of their own livelihoods being further undermined by immigration. When reflecting on difficulties to maintain oneself during a "cost of living crisis", Anna, for example, reproduced the false narrative of the UK being overpopulated due to "mass" immigration: "*I was saying we hope it gets better because the economy is crashing, there is inflation, there is immigration issues, overpopulation, people are coming in every day, every minute*".

On the flipside of internalising Hostile Environment discourses, evident in the quote above, some participants expressed gratitude for support received while simultaneously questioning their deservingness due to their status as migrants and living in a country that is not "theirs". Deservingness was explicitly discussed when participants assessed negative experiences of receiving services as allegedly justified by their migrant status. For example, in discussing access to healthcare, some recently arrived participants acknowledged long wait times but still expressed gratitude, viewing the NHS as better than healthcare in their countries of origin. Safia, reflecting on the poor post-natal care she received at a local hospital, describes the treatment as appropriate for immigrant people:

> I don't think the hospital at that time is bad, but I think the day I give birth was very bad because the staff there, there is no much staff. […] I give birth, and we've been in that room for long time until they completely finish us, me and my baby. It's okay for immigrant people, it's okay because this is better than back home by anyhow. (Safia)

Bradby, Humphris, and Padilla (2020) have observed similar attitudes amongst migrant women in different European cities. Expressing gratitude despite poor care was referred to as "positional gratitude" justified by the person's awareness of the marginalised position they occupy in society. The authors link this expression of gratitude to hegemonic narratives of welfare chauvinism, which sees migrants as welfare scroungers who use services that they have not, or not sufficiently contributed to (see Crepaz and Damron 2009). In this context, by expressing gratitude despite poor service, migrants have also internalised this hostile narrative that deems them undeserving of welfare support.

When talking about welfare and other state services, many participants made their identity as a migrant salient to justify sub-standard treatment. Anna, who had multiple issues related to being housed in a rural area through the Homes for Ukraine scheme outlines that as a refugee, she does not feel in a position to complain:

> We should be thankful at least, we were safe. There's nothing to complain. We were safe. We have food to eat, we have a place to stay. As a refugee, to be honest, yes, nothing to complain. (Anna)

The notion of not having the right to complain because of one's status as a migrant speaks to an internalisation of the narrow frame of what a "good" and "contributing" citizen should be like.

An internalisation of this frame was also visible when Ibrahim explained how, when helped by a relative to settle in, he felt like "*a good citizen of the Borough, not an*

anti-Borough person", implicitly referring to the dominant discourse that sees migrants and racialised people as hostile citizens. According to Honig (2001), foreigners are positioned as a problem due to not being fully integrated, while others are seen as naturally belonging. While Ibrahim does not use the nation state as his reference point, the comment speaks to an ideal of how a good resident should identify. In other comments, the nation state is still seen as a reference point for participants, like Betty whose comment highlights that the process of settling into the local community and making Greenwich her home is embedded in seeing herself as part of the imagined community of the nation state (Anderson 1983): "*Because somebody who has lived almost for 20 years, that person has become part and parcel of that nation"*. By having lived in the UK for that long, Betty feels she now deserves the right to be seen as a citizen of the country where she currently lives.

Discussion and conclusion

In answering our question on exploring community in the London Borough of Greenwich as described by a range of established and newer migrants, our research findings are articulated around a key paradox that emerged during the thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected through peer research. The paradox of belonging to the local community is expressed by the simultaneous experience of having found a place to live whilst also having experienced discrimination and racism. On the one hand, participants appreciate Greenwich, the fact they feel they belong there, and various forms of solidarity from other migrants, council officers and civil society organisations. On the other hand, the experience of living in Greenwich cannot be understood in separation from being discriminated against and racialised in the past and in the present. Our study reveals that research participants internalise racist tropes in the way they discuss their own entitlements, their community and the place where they live. The data collected through peer research importantly reveals that the interview encounter itself can be understood as a form of solidarity where peer researchers prioritised advice through empathy with research participants over the task of collecting data for the research. Similarly, the research designed to collect evidence of migrants' experience is in itself a form of solidarity set in motion by the University allocating the funds for this research, by us as researchers and community organisers involved in carrying out this work, by the community partners facilitating this work, and by the peer researchers themselves in taking up this role and during the interview encounter.

Due to the interviews being conducted by non-professional researchers, the data collected were complex, in part because of the inconsistency in the peer researchers' approach to interviewing. At times, interview data read more like advice sessions than actual strategies for harnessing the sharing of participants' experiences. This may have reflected peer researchers' understanding of qualitative data collection and was particularly evident when they interrupted participants' stories to ask about services accessed, which deprived some interviews of their narrative and story-telling value. At the same time, research encounters turning into advice sessions could be read as a form of practicing solidarity as the peer researchers – who were more established migrants in Greenwich – sought to share information about local services with newer arrivals, providing knowledge that may not be available to participants. Initially, we saw the somehow

patchy interviews as a deficiency because of our intention to gather rigorous research data, but after closer inspection, we realised this speaks to ethical issues in peer research that have been identified by others (in particular the discussion of research versus community needs put forward by Wilson, Kenny, and Dickson-Swift 2017), and also reflects one of the core findings of our research, namely how solidarity is practiced from the bottom-up in the interview encounter. An in-depth discussion of ethical aspects of working with peer research is beyond the scope of this paper.

From the way research participants talk about where they live, they identify their community with material and emplaced relationships grounded in their neighbourhood, which shapes and in turn is shaped by social relations based on proximity. The context of Greenwich as a neighbourhood, its history of racial violence, its urban transformations and layers of diversity, whose stratifications over time have been witnessed by its inhabitants, remain central for fully understanding the complexity and contestations around the concept of community. We concur that to value the diversity that exists within any social group, communities should not be seen as static or bounded but as relational and dynamic, shaped by connections that extend beyond their immediate locality. Our research, however, demonstrates that the relationality and performativity characterising recent understandings of community needs to take into account place-based and material experiences of access which are specific to migrant populations. Within the foundational dimensions of community identified by Blokland (2017), the role of material spaces in shaping community is defined as "access", which refers to one's ability to move through and inhabit urban spaces. Conceptualized as a spectrum ranging from private to public space, for Blokland (2017) community emerges in the middle ground, a condition where recurring, low-intensity encounters suspended between the familiar and the public generate belonging. In acknowledging the importance of place, Blokland's framing repositions community as an urban and spatial practice, shaped by mobility, inclusion and everyday interactions. Our research adds to this framework by demonstrating that, for migrant populations, experiences of belonging and inclusion are selective and fraught with contradictions. For some participants, such as Oliver, the private spaces of the home can be precarious or insecure, due to racism, undermining stability and limiting opportunities to build community networks. For others like Nora, the formal openness of public spaces is undercut by exclusionary practices preventing full use of public infrastructure and resources, as evident from her fear of gangs, having to protect her children from racist violence and rely on spontaneous acts of solidarity by a council worker. While public spaces are in theory open to all, migrants often face barriers through ID checks, surveillance, distrust from the police (as recounted by Oliver in this paper) and fear of immigration enforcement. Migrants frequently rely on community assets such as places of worship, organisations, libraries, markets (like Joseph does) where recurring interactions foster everyday belonging and relations of trust can be established. Yet their ability to move across urban space is shaped by economic factors (low income, transport costs) and legal status (asylum dispersal policies as was the case for one of our peer researchers, NRPF or gendered dynamics such as perceptions of safety and family responsibilities). These specific circumstances narrow the extent to which migrants can access broader urban spaces and confine them to specific neighbourhoods and circuits, revealing that access itself is not just physical but also social and political: it's about recognition, rights and safety in everyday life. The everyday nature of this

type of interactions happening in communities situated between the public and the private is therefore a fragile bridge for migrants into community life and its availability depends on a variety of factors which are specific to their paradoxical experiences of belonging and exclusion.

Greenwich is the place where the participants of this study live, shop, access services, go to the hairdresser and to the doctor. It is where migrant children go to school, where parents experience belonging to the place where they live and, at the same time, different forms of ongoing exclusion. The community we came across through this work is both relational and emplaced, materially situated on the streets of Greenwich, and many of the interactions described in the interviews were generated by physical proximity and social networks spanning beyond place. In conclusion, our research acknowledges the complexities of social relationships without romanticising community as a homogeneous, harmonious entity, yet affirms place and its specificities, its history and spatial features as central for understanding community and enacting solidarity.

Notes

1. The Hostile Environment is not easily identifiable with a single policy and is better understood as an ideological matrix orienting the current government's legal frameworks and practices. It manifests as a sprawling web of immigration controls operating far from ports and border controls and in the heart of public services and communities. Its effects reverberate beyond the government's stated target group to affect migrants with regular status, and black and minority ethnic (BAME) communities (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021 as cited in Vacchelli and Roeschert 2024).
2. Racism involves the construction of hierarchical difference accompanied by imbalance in historical, political, social and economic power (Kilomba 2008). Racism is both structural, embedded in institutions, and perpetuated in everyday practices.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the peer researchers Abimbola Junaid, Alshaymaa Muhammed, Karen Harris and Nkiruka Patricia Obiekwe for their work and dedication to this project. We are also grateful to GRiP and LRNM, and in particular Gilles Cabon and Sophie Gregory, for working with us on this project, identifying suitable peer researchers, and making their offices available for the training. Everyday practices of solidarity make all the difference, and this article would have never been written without your help.

Ethics statement

This research was funded through the University of Greenwich's internal HEIF fund "Valuing community-peer research for community leadership and organising" and obtained ethical approval from UREB, University Research Ethics Board at the University of Greenwich. A handbook of the peer researcher training and consent forms can be obtained upon request by contacting the authors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Elena Vacchelli http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6823-2647
Franca Roeschert http://orcid.org/0009-0007-6292-3395

References

Ambrosini, M. 2020. "Superdiversity, Multiculturalism and Local Policies: A Study on European Cities." In *Superdiversity, Policy and Governance in Europe (1st ed.)*, edited by J. Phillimore, N. Sigona, and K. Tonkiss, 122–145. Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447352068.008.

Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Back, L. 2009. "Researching Community and Its Moral Projects." *Twenty-First Century Society* 4 (2): 201–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450140903000316.

Bassel, L. 2017. *The Politics of Listening*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53167-4.

Bates, C. 2018. "Conviviality, Disability and Design in the City." *The Sociological Review* 66 (5): 984–999. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118771291.

Benchekroun, R., R. Humphris, and N. Sigona. 2024. "Mothering in Hostile Environments: Migrant Families Negotiating the Welfare and Immigration Regime Nexus." *Critical Social Policy* 44 (2): 285–306. https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183231223956.

Blokland, T. 2003. *Urban Bonds: Social Relations in the City*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Blokland, T. 2017. *Community as Urban Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bradby, H., R. Humphris, and B. Padilla. 2020. "Universalism, Diversity and Norms: Gratitude, Healthcare and Welfare Chauvinism." *Critical Public Health* 30 (2): 166–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2018.1522420.

Castells, M. 1997. *The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. 2004. *The Network Society: A cross-cultural perspective*. Northampton, ME: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Crepaz, M. M. L., and R. Damron. 2009. "Constructing Tolerance." *Comparative Political Studies* 42 (3): 437–463. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414008325576.

Durkheim, É. 1893. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: The Free Press.

Fanon, F. (1952) 2000. *Black Skin, White Masks*. UK: Pluto Press.

Favell, A. 2019. "Integration: Twelve Propositions after Schinkel." *Comparative Migration Studies* 7 (1): 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0125-7.

Gilroy, P. 2010. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gilroy, P. 2013. "' … We Got to Get over before We Go under … 'BR Fragments for a History of Black Vernacular Neoliberalism." *New Formations* 80:23–38. https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.80/81.01.2013.

Hewitt, R. 2005. *White Backlash and the Politics of Multiculturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heywood, J., and C. Loftus. 2023, March. London Borough Elections. Greater London Authority. https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/borough-council-election-results-2022?q=london%20borough%20elections%202022.

Honig, B. (2001). *Democracy and the Foreigner*. Princeton University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7t3z7

Jacobs, J. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

Kilomba, G. 2008. *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism (1. Aufl)*. Münster: Unrast.

Lea, J. 2000. "The Macpherson Report and the Question of Institutional Racism." *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 39:219–233. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2311.00165.

Logie, C., L. James, W. Tharao, and M. R. Loutfy. 2012. "Opportunities, Ethical Challenges, and Lessons Learned from Working with Peer Research Assistants in a Multi-method HIV Community-Based Research Study in Ontario, Canada." *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* 7 (4): 10–19. https://doi.org/10.1525/jer.2012.7.4.10.

Macpherson, W. 1999. The Stephen Lawrence inquiry: Report of an inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny.
Massey, D. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Massey, D. 2005. *For Space*. London: SAGE Publications.
Nowicka, M., and L. Ryan. 2015. "Beyond Insiders and Outsiders in Migration Research: Rejecting a Priori Commonalities." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 16 (2). https://doi.org/10.17169/FQS-16.2.2342.
Office for National Statistics. 2023, January 19. How Life Has Changed in Greenwich: Census 2021. https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E09000011.
Pincock, K., and W. Bakunzi. 2021. "Power, Participation, and 'Peer Researchers': Addressing Gaps in Refugee Research Ethics Guidance." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34 (2): 2333–2348. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa060.
Putnam, R. D. 2007. "*E Pluribus Unum*: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30 (2): 137–174. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9477.2007.00176.x.
Rose, N. 1996. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Schinkel, W. 2018. "Against 'Immigrant Integration': For an End to Neocolonial Knowledge Production." *Comparative Migration Studies* 6 (1): 31. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-018-0095-1.
Sennett, R. 1974. *The Fall of Public Man*. London: Penguin Publishing.
Swaroop, S., and J. D. Morenoff. 2006. "Building Community: The Neighborhood Context of Social Organization." *Social Forces* 84 (3): 1665–1695. https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0058.
Tönnies, F. 1887. *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft [Community and Society]*. Leipzig: F. Deuticke.
Vacchelli, E. 2018. *Embodied Research in Migration Studies: Using Creative and Participatory Approaches*. Bristol: Policy Press Shorts Research.
Vacchelli, E., and F. Roeschert. 2024. "Participation and Contested Forms of Citizenship in the City of Sanctuary." *Citizenship Studies* 28 (4–5): 424–443. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2024.2407766.
Walsh, P. W. 2021. *Asylum and Refugee Resettlement in the UK. Migration Observatory Briefing*. Oxford: COMPAS, University of Oxford.
Williams, R. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Glasgow: Fontana Press.
Wilson, E., A. Kenny, and V. Dickson-Swift. 2018. "Ethical Challenges of Community Based Participatory Research: Exploring Researchers' Experience." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 21 (1): 7–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2017.1296714.
Yang, C., and Z. Dibb. 2020. *Peer Research in the UK. Working Paper*. London: Institute for Community Studies. https://eprints.icstudies.org.uk/id/eprint/246.
Yuval-Davis, N. 2006. "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging." *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 197–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331.

Appendix 1.

	Pseudonym	Time in Greenwich (Months)	Time in Greenwich (Years)
1	Ibrahim	1.5	0.17
2	Natalia	3	0.25
3	Jian	3	0.25
4	Folasade	4	0.33
5	Anna	4	0.33
6	Ola	19	1.6
7	Grace	24	2
8	Iqra	48	4
9	Jonathan	60	5
10	Aisha	72	6
11	Nuriya	78	6.5
12	Cecilia	108	9
13	Femi	120	10
14	Joseph	144	12
15	Sarah	162	13.5
16	Amanda	180	15
17	Sanam	192	16
18	Fiona	204	17
19	Safia	204	17
20	Betty	210	17.5
21	Malik	240	20
22	Amy	360	30
23	Joshua	360	30
24	Oliver	360	30
25	Nora	456	38