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On the threshold: Becoming Romanian Roma, everyday racism and residency rights in transition

Rachel Humphris¹

School of Social Policy

University of Birmingham

Birmingham

This article examines the reaction of welfare state actors and ‘Romanian Roma’ migrants to the political environment on migration in the UK. Based on ethnographic fieldwork between January 2013 and March 2014 the article focuses on how processes of everyday racism infused understandings of the legal framework for European migrants’ residency rights. The article first explores how state actors developed ideas about ‘Romanian Roma families’ as opposed to ‘Romanian-not-Roma families’ in a context marked by pervasive uncertainty about legal entitlements; welfare restructuring and decreasing resources. Second, I draw on new migrants’ accounts to identify their perceptions and understandings of discrimination placed within their previous experiences of racism and state violence. The article argues that processes of racialisation are subtly enfolded into everyday life shaping the narratives through which both welfare state actors and new migrants understand their situated experiences and future plans. The article reveals the small and mundane practices that reproduce racialised hierarchies which maintain the notion of ‘Roma’ as a group with particular proclivities and the affects for their socio-legal status as European migrants in the UK.

Keywords: Roma, racialisation, welfare state, legal status, European migration

Introduction

Dikh! Murre fatsa si Romania, murre lila si Belge!

¹ School of Social Policy, Muirhead Tower, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston B15 2TT Birmingham UK

(Look! My face is Romanianⁱ, my papers are Belgian!)

This short statement from Serban to his cousins illustrates the main concern of this article.

Serban, who moved to the UK from Brussels in December 2013, called HMRCⁱⁱ (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs) to book himself an interview for a UK social security number (known as a National Insurance number or NINo).ⁱⁱⁱ He was surprised to hear that he had a choice of dates, times and locations for the interview, including an interview in two days. He was surprised because he had just called to make a similar appointment for his Romanian wife, Anca, and she received an appointment scheduled for three weeks' time, falling after the change in transitional restrictions for Romanians in January 2014.

Transitional restrictions were imposed on Romania and Bulgaria (henceforth A2) when they acceded to the European Union in January 2007 and remained in place for seven years until January 2014. These migration controls were more restrictive than those imposed previous European Union accession migrants (Ciupijus 2011; Cook et al., 2011; Currie 2016; Somerville 2007) and constrained A2 migrants' labour market mobility leaving them more vulnerable to precarious work (Fox et al. 2015). Although A2 migrants were entitled to exercise their right of free movement to enter the UK they had to achieve a 'qualifying status' within three months to remain legally in the country.^{iv} In addition to this legal change, the interpretation of these restrictions in practice shifted throughout the course of my fieldwork, including the definitions of 'genuine self-employed work' and 'right to reside' which were crucial to gaining a 'qualifying status' to remain legally within the UK.

Returning to Serban's comment, the distinction between his 'Romanian face' and his 'Belgian papers' caused his cousins to laugh because the HMRC seemingly did not know that Serban was 'Romanian' because of his Belgian passport. His cousins were sure the distinction made between Serban and Anca was further proof of the rumours circulating

through families at this time that Romanians were ‘not liked’ in the UK. Furthermore, because the appointment fell after the transitional restrictions had ended, they believed their situation would be worse after January 2014. Many conversations between family members focused on trying to gain a NINo interview before the end of 2013 as it was increasingly believed that the ending of transitional restrictions would usher in increased refusals and removals.

This article explores why these new migrants (living in the UK for less than five years)^v believed ‘England didn’t like Romanians’ and would ‘close the door’ following the withdrawal of transitional restrictions, particularly when they were told by welfare state actors that it would be easier to gain a NINo *after* January 2014. Crucially, the article explores new migrants’ own understandings and perceptions of racialisation; where they come from and how they are identified in everyday practices. Research with East European migrants has revealed reports of discrimination (Spencer et al. 2007; Kraler and Kofman 2009; Favell and Nebe 2009). But as highlighted by Fox and colleagues (2015) it has proven difficult to observe and measure the different combinations of ‘biological and cultural indicia’ that reproduce systems of racial domination (2015: 733). This article uses a different approach. It explores how processes of racialisation can be revealed through encounters, and stories of encounters, between new migrants and welfare state actors. It argues that the uncertainty created during this time could itself be seen as representing a process of racialisation leading to dilemmas for new migrants and state actors alike.

First, I explain my methodology before describing the conceptual framework which builds on anthropological perspectives of the state and the position of state actors as relationally embedded in local contexts. Second, I review the perspectives of new migrants who make sense of legal regulations through rumours and previous experiences of racism and state

violence. Third, the article explores how state actors developed ideas about ‘Romanian Roma families’ as opposed to ‘Romanian-not-Roma families’. State actors’ mechanisms of labeling (re)produce certain expectations and perceptions of those identified as ‘Roma families’ which infused narratives that are passed between them. These narratives are then mobilized to justify particular courses of action and normalize practices of withdrawing support for families identified as ‘Roma’. Fourth, I draw on new migrants’ accounts to identify their perceptions and understandings of discrimination placed within their previous experiences of racism and state violence. I use these accounts to explain how and why new migrants imagined their status would be affected by the ending of transitional restrictions and identify how perceptions of discrimination affect the assessment of truth claims; their incorporation into belief systems and decision making for the future. Finally, I demonstrate how this uncertainty shifts identities and narratives of belonging. The accounts demonstrate how processes of racialisation are subtly enfolded into everyday life shaping the narratives through which state actors and new migrants understand their situated experiences. The article concludes to argue that the creation of a context of pervasive uncertainty is representative of processes of racialisation, or at the least, provide the techniques to obscure these processes.

Methodology

For this article, I draw on long term ethnographic work with living with three new migrant families in the UK between January 2013 and March 2014.^{vi} The new migrants most often referred to themselves as ‘Romanian’, however, were keen to point out to me that the language they spoke (between each other and in the home) would not be understood in the shops in Romania. Most of the new migrants addressed in this article spoke *romanes* in the home, a predominantly oral language spoken by those who are identified as Roma (Matras

2013).

Over the course of 14 months spending my everyday life with twenty extended new migrant families I observed numerous interactions of various lengths between new migrants and welfare state actors (health visitors, education family liaison workers; welfare advisors; Children's Centre workers; social workers; housing officers; health and safety officers and volunteers from a local Baptist Church). I also attended multi-agency meetings and accompanied welfare state actors on home visits. Living in the homes of new migrant families and following their networks and connections over many months revealed the complex relations of acts, expectations and perceptions on which different practices became prevalent and routine. Stories about the consequences of changing residency rights were rife at this uncertain time. The implementation of transitional restrictions noticeably changed and became the topic of stories and conversations among and between new migrants and welfare state actors alike throughout 2013. The clearest indication of this shift were the increasing refusals of National Insurance Numbers (NINo) and assessments that these migrant families did not have a 'right to reside' in the UK. The inconsistent application of transitional regulations and lack of clear guidance led to increasing uncertainty for welfare state actors at the front line of service provision provoking dilemmas when they advised new migrants about their residency status.

At the front line of uncertain residency rights

The use of the term 'front line workers' specifically alludes to those who assume the 'face of the state', referring to the notion that state forms can be 'located' in everyday practices (Mountz 2003; Trouillot 2001). The state operates not as a locatable object but as a located series of networks through which governance takes place. As Wendy Brown remarks, the state is a 'significantly unbounded terrain of powers and techniques, an ensemble of

discourses, rules and practices, cohabiting in limited, tension-ridden, often contradictory relation with one another' (Brown 1992: 24). In this formulation, state actors and their 'clients' are examined as a series of relations. Locating the state in interactions allows the incorporation of the situated perspectives of actors to be brought to the fore. State actors, who are themselves relationally embedded (Thelen et al. 2014: 7), have to reconcile the idealised versions of bureaucratic practice held in policy with the everyday and often incoherent enactment of those policies when faced with individuals (Mountz 2003: 627). This process becomes more highly contested when these policies are in flux and seem to be rapidly shifting. Front line workers' decision making has most widely been discussed as bureaucrats' 'discretion' (Lipsky 2010). Focusing on the perspective of street-level bureaucrats allows an analysis of the negotiations that take place within these interactions and how they become sites where different narratives emerge, are contested, and are either re-inscribed or transformed. The meanings made in these everyday encounters are crucial as they are the sites of the delivery of public services, the implementation of state policy and where decisions around access to state resources take place. Dubois, drawing on Bourdieu's idea of 'state acts', notes they are 'inseparably symbolic and material, relying on abstract categories and on concrete objects – consisting of both discourses and bureaucratic routines – that shape the perceptions of the people as well as their material situations' (2014: 38).

In addition, the decisions of front line workers were becoming increasingly crucial to the life chances of new migrants due to two changes to front line bureaucratic work. First, front line workers were decreasingly employed directly by the Local Authority creating complex partnership and co-commissioning arrangements (Forbess and James 2014). The fragmentation of public services, the imposition of financial targets in welfare services, the rise of 'new public management' (Andersen 2005; Barry et al., 2007; Clarke 2005), the co-option of for-profit logics in the state bureaucracy, public-private partnerships increasingly

guided by commissioning and co-governing; and transformations within civil society have elevated the significance of forms of governance based on targets, measures and reduced resources (Born and Jensen 2005; Clarke and Newman 1997). Second, migration controls were being increasingly diffused to the front line, a process which Yuval Davis has termed ‘everyday bordering’ (2013; 2017). The interactions between front line workers and their ‘clients’ therefore provide a privileged position from which to examine how representations provide meaning to front line workers, how they act on those representation and with what consequences (Tervonan 2017).

Everyday racism and rumour publics

Attention to how encounters between front line workers and new migrants shape future decision-making helps to identify forms of ‘everyday racism’ (Essed 1991) and connects the structural forces of racism within everyday ‘routine’ and sometimes ‘mundane’ situations (Billig 1988). The ideological dimensions of racism can then be linked to daily attitudes and reproduction of racism can be interpreted in terms of experiences in everyday life. Focusing on the complexity of lived experiences is vital for understanding the processual and shifting nature of racialisation and is pivotal to avoid reductionist accounts of social relations (Balibar 1998; Hall and Du Gay 1996). Examining experiences and subsequent actions of new migrants and front line workers provides insights into how the narratives of belonging that condition racist structures are situated (Brah et al. 1999) and how previous experiences of racism can shape the interpretive lenses through which truth claims about legal systems are assessed and incorporated into systems of belief. As Essed elaborates: ‘the experience of everyday racism is a cumulative process. New experiences are interpreted and evaluated against the background of earlier personal experiences, vicarious experiences and general knowledge of racism in society’ (1991: 8). It is crucial to account for new migrants’ own

understandings and perceptions of racism and the contexts within which they emerge. This article provides an account of where assessments of discrimination came from; how these assessments were used to comprehend (racist) events; and the consequences for future decision making.

In the particular case of these new migrants, the consequences of legal restrictions and residency rights circulate in a social field that has an excess of stories and rumours about how to make a life in the UK, such that the repetition, or what Butler (1997) terms reitability, constitutes the way new migrant families understood their situated experiences. These stories of interactions with front line workers act as improvised news in the absence or rejection of more formal and verifiable news. The stories therefore offer an interpretative frame for those participating in their circulation. This resonates with what Harney has called ‘rumour publics’ (2006: 276), where people make use of the knowledge they possess to solve problems; make sense of changing or uncertain conditions; and construct explanatory narratives in the face of fluid and ambiguous situations (Shibutani 1966; Stewart and Strathern 2004).

Word of mouth communication of ‘unsubstantiated’ information extends into wider social fields. The information is ‘substantiated’ to the extent that it is received by word of mouth from an interpersonal relationship and is subjectively evaluated against standards of experience, knowledge, and the trust in or prestige of those from whom one receives the news. The assessments of stories of encounters with front line workers and new migrants are therefore contingent on prior knowledge and the relationship between those exchanging information. They contain a judgment of the person claiming; the claim itself and the context in which the claim is spoken. As De Certeau expresses:

“believing” designates a relation to the other that precedes me and is constantly occurring. Citation appears to be the ultimate weapon for making people believe. Because it plays on what the other is assumed to believe, it is the means by which the

‘real’ is instituted. To cite the other on their behalf is hence to make credible the simulacra produced in a particular place... to cite is thus to give reality to the simulacrum produced by a power, by making people believe that others believe in it, but without providing any believable object’ (1984: 188-189).

De Certeau’s analysis of how truth claims are incorporated into systems of belief takes on particular salience in the context of these new migrant families and the uncertain situation created by transitional restrictions. First, because almost all of the adult new migrants were illiterate and therefore had severely curtailed access to sources of information. Information was exchanged almost entirely through oral transmission and memory. The credibility of the speaker and the plausibility of their speech are assessed on particular forms and norms of performance linked to social position. Second, new migrants’ previous and current situations and their own understanding of the palpability of racism inflect their evaluation of interactions and accounts of encounters. Almost all of the new migrants addressed in this article had previously directly or indirectly experienced eviction, deportation, imprisonment or had a child taken into the care of social services. These experiences seemed to change the contours of plausibility when assessing narratives about the future and had particular consequences for interactions with state actors and how changing residency rights were interpreted and understood.

Becoming ‘Romanian Roma’

Front line workers distinguished Roma from their Romanian co-nationals in subtle but consequential ways. Roma women were primarily identified by the way they dressed; wearing a long handmade skirt (*fuwsta*) and headscarves arranged tightly round their head (*diklo*). However, this also led to confusion when families who didn’t dress in this way were also identified as Roma either through speaking *romanes* or through association with the Roma Pentecostal Church (*khangheri*). This confusion provides an indication of the how ‘the

Roma' were treated as a generic group despite wide variations across all axes of differentiation. The new migrants in this article come from three different areas in Romania (a large city, a town and a rural area) and have widely diverging experiences, migration trajectories and legal statuses. Front line workers recognize this diversity however; they endeavoured to retain an idea of distinct 'Romanian Roma' and 'Romanian-not Roma' groups. As argued in the introduction to this Special Issue, this can be seen as an effect of a larger process of EU institutionalisation and racialisation of those identified as 'Roma'. When I visited homes with front line workers, they often commented that they knew a Roma house before they entered because all the windows were open and, if there was a garden in front of the house, it did not conform to notions of orderly and tidy space, with rubbish, chairs or children's pushchairs outside.

A distinction between 'Romanian-Roma' and 'Romanian-not-Roma' was introduced and repeated between front line workers when they met at bimonthly 'multi-agency' meetings. The aim of these meetings was to bring together those who provided education, health and welfare support to new migrants for information sharing and to ensure that front line workers were not duplicating work. The ambiguous legal situation of these new migrants, who were citizens of an EU member state but were not able to access state resources, was a new phenomenon for many front line workers, and their organizations. Legal information was available however; these guidelines did not reflect the rapidly shifting interpretations of the transition restrictions. Rather than receiving guidance from team leaders, front line workers were considered to be the 'experts' on the situation of these new migrants and the different regulations and legal statuses that affected their clients. When debate regarding transitional restrictions increased in the media leading to a moral panic regarding the number of A2 migrants that might settle in the UK (Allen 2014), front line workers were consulted and asked to provide reports on the possible impact on their services, particularly schools and

early years' education.

Front line workers discussions at these meetings provide a lens to grasp their understanding of the changing legal framework in January 2014 and how this bled into their daily activities, infusing the expectations and perceptions of those identified as 'Roma'. In one such meeting in November 2013, Paula, an education diversity officer expressed the view that those who were working long hours in low-wage jobs and not applying for a NINo were 'doing the right thing' by waiting until transitional restrictions were lifted. She provided the example of a 'Romanian-not-Roma' married couple who were working for 14 hours a day for £80 in a factory and a cleaning company. It was agreed that 'Romanian Roma' should also be waiting for January 2014 when transitional restrictions would be lifted. It was eluded during these meetings that 'Romanian Roma' were misusing front line workers' time and resources by trying to obtain a NINo in 2013, particularly when they were unlikely to be granted a NINo due to increasingly strict interpretations of the transitional restrictions.

Romanian Roma families were also distinguished from their national counterparts using old tropes of nomadism and a desire for living in caravans rather than houses. Rosemary, a family liaison volunteer for a primary school was working with a new migrant family who she identified as Romanian Roma because she had received their referral from the pastor of the Roma Church. She commented that there were no toys in the house because 'it is like living in a wagon isn't it? If your whole family is living in one room then you don't keep things do you?' She also presumed that the family would not stay in the local area. She noted that 'I wouldn't be surprised if they suddenly disappear' and did not pursue contact with them when they did not respond to her initial attempts support them. Attention to these small mundane practices identifies how different socio-political and legal statuses can be (re)produced. Different practices for 'Roma families' developed and became routine as

experiences were shared between front line workers. For example, front line workers would often visit Roma family homes unannounced because it was believed that Roma did not keep appointments (Humphris 2016).

However, front line workers also expressed personal experiences of discrimination and frustration with the terms on which they were able to fulfill their roles. The contradictions in front line workers' narratives highlight their own ambiguous positions regarding whether, and if so, how, to support these new migrant families. It also shows how their understandings of the future after transitional restrictions shaped, and provided justifications for, their present actions. These narratives emerged at multi-agency meetings. Lisa was a family support worker who was subcontracted by the local government to assist 'Gypsy, Roma and Travellers' with welfare claims and to ensure they were accessing their entitlements. She commented, 'they are going to put another obstacle in their way. They are not going to make it easy. They will say something like you have to have an offer of a job before you can have a National Insurance Number or something like that. They [HMRC] are not giving them [a NINo] unless they [Roma] can show that they are self-supporting. This didn't used to be the case. But they don't just want to see a bit of income they want to see that you can really support yourself otherwise you don't get anything'. Paula concurred surmising that 'they [Roma] might not ever be able to get good jobs. At the moment lots are doing car wash for cash-in-hand but the Albanians don't want to give them a contract – they will just find somebody else'.

However, these perspectives were not shared with new migrant clients. The end of transitional restrictions in January 2014 was presented as a time of hope for a better future. Lisa also expressed this different view of the future to me in an interview I conducted in her

office. She was well aware of the problems that her clients faced acknowledging the discrimination attributed to being identified as 'Roma', informed by media portrayals:

'It is the same as when black people came – we weren't allowed in the same pubs as the white. They have got bad stigma for themselves. All communities have got stigma but they are new to the UK. You can see why people see them in this. I only saw in the paper the other day, a Romanian selling his daughter as a slave – as a working girl for him. Then you are seeing them in the streets begging. As someone who has never been alongside them – they are not getting to know them... Before (January 2014) it was self-employed, selling the Big Issue, but that was with their culture. It was cleaning cars but that was with their culture. Now they can go out into the factories. These other cultures will see these Romanian people, as the people they are, not as the stigma. You will see a lady working in Wilkos. That is how these barriers start coming down – it's just getting the bosses to give them a break, you know? They are up against a brick wall. As long as people have these views about Roma people they are going to find it really difficult to get jobs – really difficult. I sent her [Maria, a new migrant mother] down to the Job Centre to get a list of employment agencies and we sat there and we rang them all for her and they asked what nationality: "Oh they are Roma". It's got to take a few bosses to start employing them.'

Lisa's account demonstrated her awareness of the individual situations that those identified as Roma faced when trying to find employment and drew on her own experience as a visible minority. She acknowledged that 'Roma' are unlikely to get jobs due to the stereotypes that had proliferated in media reports and the structural conditions that dictated their working opportunities. She assigned her own work a degree of futility in the face of these categorisations. Lisa attributed the intensity of discrimination Roma faced to their 'newness' in the area which she believed would fade in time. However, she also drew on an idea of an

easier but undetermined future to justify her own decisions to defer support to new migrants until after transitional restrictions had been lifted.

The idea of a future that would be less marked by discrimination with fewer regulations was mobilized when front line workers interacted with new migrant clients. Front line workers also told some Roma clients that National Insurance Numbers would not be issued before January 2014. This statement provided front line workers with the justification to defer helping new migrants with their NINo claims until after January 2014. However, these assertions served to undermine their credibility when stories spread that others had gained a National Insurance Number. These actions also fueled rumours that England ‘didn’t like us’. Therefore, in some cases even when front line workers were sympathetic and trying to be helpful to those they identified as Romanian Roma (because they were also speculating about what changes with the transitional restrictions will actually mean) they ended up appearing to mislead new migrants and created conditions that exacerbated uncertainty.

Failed encounters and uncertain futures

The decision regarding whether to help a new migrant family or not was highly contingent on the person who had referred the family and how they presented themselves at initial meetings with front line providers, which usually took place in their homes (Humphris 2016). From six front line workers (one health visitor, two Children’s Centre workers, one education diversity officer, one welfare advisor, one housing officer), one never mentioned transitional restrictions; one previously dealt with welfare benefits but had stopped because the regulations were ‘too complicated’; an education officer, welfare officer and one children’s centre worker told some families they would help and in other cases would withdraw support; and one children’s centre worker helped one family because of shared religious beliefs.

Front line workers were not trained in the intricacies of the legal situation for A2 migrants

and complicated legal regulations increased their wide areas of discretion (exacerbated by the withdrawal of legal aid^{vii}). Front line workers understandings were infused with uncertainty about legal regulations and how they should be interpreted, their own job security and decreasing resources and wider fears regarding the trajectory of legislation about migration and welfare. Drawing on these understandings, practices developed which reinforced new migrants' perceptions that they were gaining a bad reputation, were not wanted in England and should gain a NINo before transitional restrictions were lifted in January 2014.

The consequences of the context of uncertainty can be illustrated through Georgetta, a new migrant mother, and her experience of a 'failed encounter' with Lisa. When Lisa arrived at Georgetta's house in September 2013, Lisa found Georgetta had no NINo and no other documents or receipts. Georgetta was working as a household cleaner but was often paid in furniture or food rather than money. Georgetta was also not aware that she needed to keep receipts or have business liability insurance. Moreover, Lisa found that her housing contract was not 'valid' because she was renting from a private landlord who would not provide her with receipts or a legal rental agreement. Lisa sat on the couch in the front room and sifted through the documents, bills and other papers including solicitor letters regarding a car accident that involved Georgetta's husband. Lisa could not find an order to the papers. Georgetta could read and write in Romanian and she often told me she attended school for ten years. She also told me that she only spoke Romanian in her family and learned *romanes* when she married her husband, Rosvan. However, she could not read or write in English. Rosvan could not read or write in Romanian or English. Rosvan watched the action from the other side of the room but was silent. Lisa told Georgetta that she could not help her until Georgetta had a NINo. Lisa also explained to Georgetta that she should wait until January (in three months) when the rules would change. Lisa assured her it would be easy to get a National Insurance Number in January 2014.

When Lisa left the house the family was confused and frustrated. Rosvan exclaimed that his son's wife had given birth in England, his granddaughter was 'English' (*englezoika*), and therefore 'they must help us'. This was based on the actions of another family member who had received child benefit for their daughter who was born at the same time. However, Rosvan did not know that this family member had gained refugee status and therefore was eligible for social support. He believed Lisa's withdrawal and refusal of help was an indication that 'England is closing the door'. This encounter plunged the family into a sense of confusion, unsure about what course of action to take next or where to seek advice. Lisa made the decision not to help Georgetta gain a National Insurance Number due to resource constraints, shifting bureaucratic structures and lack of training about complex legal entitlements. Lisa justified her actions to me by combining ideas from the multi-agency meetings and her own experiences. She felt she would be wasting her time and creating hope for nothing if she helped Georgetta with a futile NINo application. In addition, she would have to invest a lot of time and resources without a successful result. She was under increasing pressure achieve results by her organisation due to funding demands from the local government. Therefore, Lisa used the idea that it would be easier to gain a NINo after transitional restrictions had been lifted in order to justify her withdrawal of support.

In contrast, Georgetta believed that she had 'gone straight' by getting an invoice book, cleaning jobs, business cards and a mobile phone and therefore felt as though she had been mistreated. This feeling was exacerbated when she found out two of her extended family members had gained National Insurance Numbers before January 2014. Georgetta felt she had received misinformation decreasing the credibility of front line workers and the plausibility of the words that they spoke. This vignette demonstrates the different situated positions of front line workers and new migrants. For front line workers, withdrawing support was a response to the wider context of employer discrimination of Roma; shifting NINo

requirements and front line workers' own employment situation which was based on results and targets. For new migrants, they understood their experiences and assess their plans for the future through the stories and rumours told by other family members and their own past experiences.

Previous encounters in different migration contexts were also drawn on and folded into understandings of the legal status change in January 2014. When attending a church service at the end of October 2013 Margereta, a new migrant mother, immediately asked me whether I thought she would be 'put out' of her house when England 'closes the door'. I asked her whether she was paying rent and she confirmed that she was staying with a family who were paying rent to a private landlord. I asked her why she thought she would be moved from her house. She answered that she had heard it on the Romanian televised news and from other mothers who didn't have a National Insurance Number. Margereta moved to England in June 2013. She proudly showed me a photograph of herself with her son when they lived in Montpellier but she told me she was sent back to her village in Romania in the previous year. She left her son with her parents while she tried to gain work in England. She was extremely anxious and often asked me how she could live in a flat by herself so she could bring her son to join her. Margereta increasingly believed she would not be able to get 'good work' (such as cleaning in contrast to begging which was considered 'hard' (*zurelli*) work); would not be able to bring her son to join her in England and conversely would be sent back to Romania.

Attention to these stories particularly bearing in mind that many could not read and write revealed migrants' subjective understandings of the legal systems in which they were subject and they provide comment on their own economic and legal situation and how previous experiences were mobilized to make sense of current situations. Margereta's anxieties provide a glimpse of how she understands her position within situated migrant hierarchies. It

specifically locates her desires within a work trajectory and imagined future for her and her son. However, her previous experience formed part of her assessment of possible futures in the UK, shaping her understanding of regulations and she eventually returned to Romania.

Racialised practices and identity formations

The affects of this generalized condition of uncertainty shifted many new migrants' relationship to the Roma Church (*khangheri*). The effects of processes of racialisation through the perceived lack of any clear information about what was going to happen in January 2014 shaped the narratives through which new migrants understood their experiences and their decision-making strategies.

Many new migrants began attending the *khangheri* shortly after they arrived in the UK. The Roma Church developed from small meetings organised by Violeta, one new migrant mother. She told me she had made a 'promise' to Jesus when he saved her eldest son from meningitis. At first the religious services took place in Violeta's house and were attended by up to ten members of her extended family. In 2013, precipitated by the arrival of Grigore and Dan from a different village in Romania and with the support of a local vicar, the Roma Church expanded to a large service. It took place in a rented Methodist Church on Sunday evenings and attracted up to twenty-five extended families. The context and structure of services was highly contested and fluid. Those who attended regularly described themselves as 'Pentecostal' or 'baptised' (*bokhaimy*). I was often told that the *khangheri* provided 'a straight path' and where 'God washes the heart'. The experiences of two brothers, Dan and Grigore, demonstrates the interrelationship between the Church, residency rights and understandings about uncertain futures that are based on previous and current experiences of everyday racism.

Dan and Grigore applied for NINOs at the same time and had very similar backgrounds and

work experience. Grigore gained a NINo on his first attempt. He followed the advice of a Romanian solicitor in London. He did not ask the pastor of the *khangheri* to accompany him to his NINo interview, which was considered unusual by other members of the Church. In contrast, Dan was refused four times on the grounds that he could not prove he was engaged in genuine self-employed work. Dan had been following the advice of the pastor, who accompanied him to his NINo interviews. Dan was convinced that the pastor's presence was the reason he did not gain a NINo. He believed that the pastor didn't know what to do and could not 'speak well'. This was distressing for Dan not only because he felt he had made the wrong choice, but also because his assessment of credibility in the pastor was based on his Pentecostal faith. His wavering trust in the pastor caused him to question not only his actions in this matter but his wider life choices, including moving to the UK with his family, and religious beliefs.

When Dan received the news that he had failed his NINo interview for the fourth time he despaired, lying on down on the sofa in the downstairs room of his house with tears in his eyes. He questioned his actions, which had been shaped by his religious beliefs. These beliefs had led him to follow the advice of the pastor because this was the 'straight path'. He explained to me that his heart was turning 'black' and that he needed to pray and wash his heart. He was angry which seemed to be heightened by the poor quality of his house. He was getting into debt by sustaining the house which he thought was making his children unwell. He compared his situation to his brother's who was able to afford a better quality house and could 'eat well, drink well and sleep well'. He blamed the pastor and stopped attending the *khangheri*. In addition, his wife, Christina told me that Grigore was not coming to the house anymore and contact between the brothers seemed to cease because Grigore would not help Dan pay his debts. Dan told me he was planning to move to France where he had previously gained work but was unsure because he had a previous conviction for stealing (which he

strongly denied). He considered moving alone, without his family but his wife Christina did not want to be alone to look after their five small children. As previous and current discrimination coalesced at a particular moment he understood his experience through the lens of the failure of his own decision making and faith in the Pentecostal Church. Dan's experience isolated him from his family and the Church. Previously he had thought that if he took the 'straight path' that he would gain security for his family in the UK however his experience made him reevaluate his future and whether his family should move elsewhere. His choices were curtailed by his previous migration experience and the general context of uncertainty that had been created around the changes in the legal framework. However, he believed the reason for his situation was due to the pastor and by extension his own faith. He was plunged into a deep sense of despair and doubt, not only about his future decisions but also his religious faith. The consequences of previous experiences of racism pervaded everyday life for new migrants, affecting aspects of family relationships, decision-making and extended to religious identities. The uncertain conditions and shifting, complex regulations were propagated, and in some cases, exacerbated by front line workers and provided the context through which new migrants understood these situated experiences.

Conclusion

Shifting assessments of transitional restrictions including the changing definitions of 'self-employment' and growing numbers of refusals of NINOs and the 'right to reside' changed the contours of plausibility about the future after transitional restrictions had been lifted. The strategy of front line workers acted to increase the salience of transitional restrictions but also decreased their credibility when they offered advice about what would happen in January 2014. These actions lead to a generalized condition of uncertainty that could itself be seen as representing a process of racialisation or at the least, allowed racist practices to be veiled and

obscured.

This article has demonstrated how and why new migrants believed that front line workers ‘don’t like us’ and England would ‘close the door’ following the end of transitional restrictions in January 2014. These statements also indicate the impact of political and legal uncertainty on migration decision making and narratives of belonging that occur well before formal legal changes in residency rights. It also contributes to our knowledge of how different new migrants are treated differently in everyday practice as opposed to their portrayal as a homogenous group in media and public discourses. In addition to Fox and colleagues’ (2014) reports about the hidden racism and racialisation of all Romanians, this article demonstrates how subtle differentiations are made at the front line of services adding further complexity to the lived experiences of racism and the particular pervasiveness and consequences of being identified as ‘Roma’. This is vital when those at the front line are bestowed with wider discretionary duties as immigration regulations and welfare requirements become increasingly complex and fused (Yuval Davis 2013; 2017).

Crucially, the article has placed the experiences of new migrants identified as ‘Romanian Roma’ in relation to front line workers and their own histories and backgrounds as visible minorities working in organisations that were responding to austerity policies and reductions in personnel and resources. Local processes of labeling and categorization effect and are woven into front line workers own understandings and experiences of racism. As such, the article places the experiences of these new migrant families within the historical specificity of contemporary socio-political dynamics and within wider racialised ‘minority’ social formations (cf. Introduction to this Special Issue).

The ethnographic cases presented here suggest that considering stories as social facts from which people draw meaning has implications for thinking about how histories of

discrimination and racism pervade everyday life and decision making for the future. Through the everyday representations and practices of migrant arrangements and interactions with front line workers that were produced and circulated in localised sites, new insights can be gained on the implementation and effects of legal regulations. In the cases offered here, stories about residency rights, fears for the future and encounters with front line workers offered subjective perspectives on the interconnections between situated racialised migrant hierarchies and strategies to gain legal status. Such stories may help explain how certain practices are condemned, condoned, justified or rationalised from particular perspectives and in specific locations. A strict focus on legal regulations and implementation overlooks how new migrants make sense of regulations through previous experiences in various 'elsewheres' including life histories marked by discrimination and unfair treatment. Representations and understandings of those regulations provide meaning to those involved, and explains how they may act on those representations and under what conditions. For migrants whose settlement strategies depend upon subjective evaluations of opportunities and dangers when they have been previously faced with harsh treatment and state violence, these narratives provide a key source of information to assess against their own transnational experiential knowledge.

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- ⁱ Serban (and almost all other families) referred to themselves as ‘Romanian’ and never ‘Roma’. They would sometimes tell me that a particular person or church did not like ‘Gypsies’ or ‘Tsigane’, the Romanian pejorative word for Gypsies. This is perhaps more surprising as Serban self-identifies as Romanian but was born and lived the majority of his life in Belgium.
- ⁱⁱ HMRC is a non-ministerial department of the UK Government responsible for the collection of taxes and the payment of some forms of state support.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Two quota based schemes were also introduced for work in the low-skilled labour market (Gower and Hawkins 2013). Job Centre assessors performed interviews to assess whether an individual has a qualifying status. If so, the individual was issued with a National Insurance Number (NINo). UK Job Centres were restructured in 2002 to form Jobcentre Plus which amalgamated the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency. In 2011, Jobcentre Plus was dissolved as a separate government entity and now refers to the public facing brand of the Department for Work and Pensions.
- ^{iv} Romanians and Bulgarians were required to hold a qualifying status in order to live in the UK for more than three months. A qualifying status was defined as being self-employed, economically inactive and self-sufficient, student and self-sufficient, a family member accompanying or joining an EU national who satisfies one of the other statuses, or a pensioner.
- ^v I use the term ‘Romanian Roma’ in this article when referring to their relationships with front line workers as this was how front line service providers identified and categorised these families. The modes of categorisation are discussed in the following section of the article. At all other times I use the term ‘new migrant’ families as they had all resided in the UK for less than five years. This characteristic was the only common defining feature that I could find between the families referred to here. The new migrants I live with have widely varying migration trajectories, legal statuses, nationalities, languages, religions, family structures, educational backgrounds and are engaged in a range of economic activities. Legal status includes UK citizens, refugee status (UK, Belgium, Canada), A2 migrants, irregular migrants and those who might be considered ‘over-stayers’ from Brazil and Argentina. In addition, the legal category of

some migrants changes around them due to 2007 and 2014 accession arrangements. Entitlements also widely differ between and among families due to different places of birth, background, education, employment and family position and how these characteristics are perceived and brought to bear by others. Therefore, although they are identified by state actors and religious volunteers as ‘Romanian Roma’, I found no common characteristic between all the different families apart from their newness in the local area. The most prevalent common characteristic is speaking *romanes* in the home. However, some new migrants I encounter only speak Romanian, and although they seem to understand *Romanës*, do not speak this language. I was also told by new migrants that two women were ‘*gadje*’ (non-Roma) and had learnt *romanes* when they got married.

^{vi} This fieldwork formed part of my doctoral research project which aimed to address how new migrants make place in a diverse urban environments. Over the course of fourteen months I was in contact with more than two hundred and twenty new migrants. I interviewed thirty nine individuals in the local authority and fourteen individuals who worked for NGO’s, charities and religious organisations. I attended many formal and informal meetings and gatherings. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in full. Field notes were taken throughout the course of the fieldwork and were analysed using NVivo 8 and thematic analysis. Ethical approval was gained through the University of Oxford CUREC process for social science researchers.

^{vii} Areas of Social Welfare Law advice were taken out of scope by Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012.