# Epistemic implications of living with 'difference': experiences of young people in Tottenham, North London

UNIC Superdiversity Academy Seminar Series
University College Cork

@JuliusElster

Senior Lecturer, London Metropolitan University

1. briefly look at the notion of "super-diversity;"
2. provide context to my research in Tottenham;
3. consider:
   - how some young people live with "difference;"
   - normalisation of diversity;
   - the lens of conviviality;
4. discuss epistemic implications of experiencing "difference" as an everyday component of life.

Point of departure…

Super-diversity

- intended to "underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything […] previously experienced"

<div align="right">(Vertovec 2007: 1024)</div>

- not only a matter of "difference" or "diversity," but "*diversification* of diversity;"

- typically used to describe an area where no single ethnic group dominates;

- more descriptive than a normative concept; not meant to be a theory.

Haringey Borough

Bounds Green

Northumberland Park

White Hart Lane

Woodside

Alexandra

Noel Park

Bruce Grove

Tottenham Hale

Fortis Green

West Green

Muswell Hill

Hornsey

Tottenham Green

St Ann's

Harringay

Crouch End

Seven Sisters

Highgate

Stroud Green

10th percentile   10th–30th   30th–50th   50th–70th   70th–100th
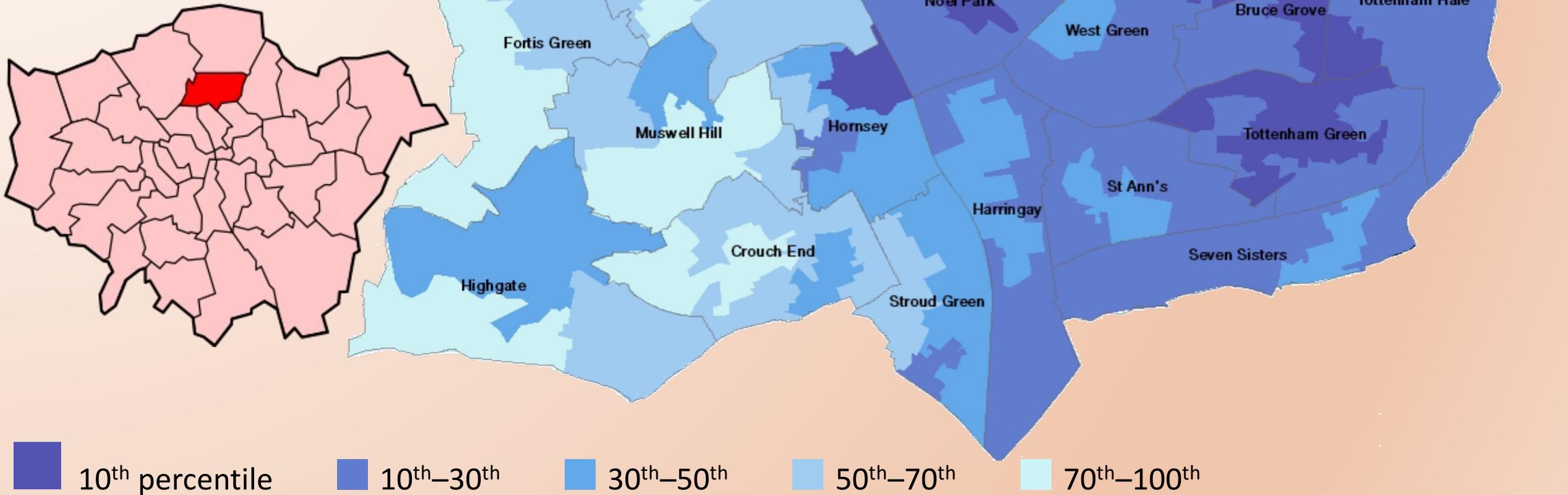
Index of Multiple Deprivation: deprivation decile by small neighbourhood areas

Data source: Elster 2019/DCLG 2015

Tottenham's diversity

"The most diverse constituency in the world"

(Baker *et al.,* as cited in Visser 2020)

"Broad ethnic groups" in Tottenham (Census, 2011)

Asian — 10.70%
Black — 26.70%
White British — 22.30%
Other White — 27.70%
Other/Mixed — 12.60%
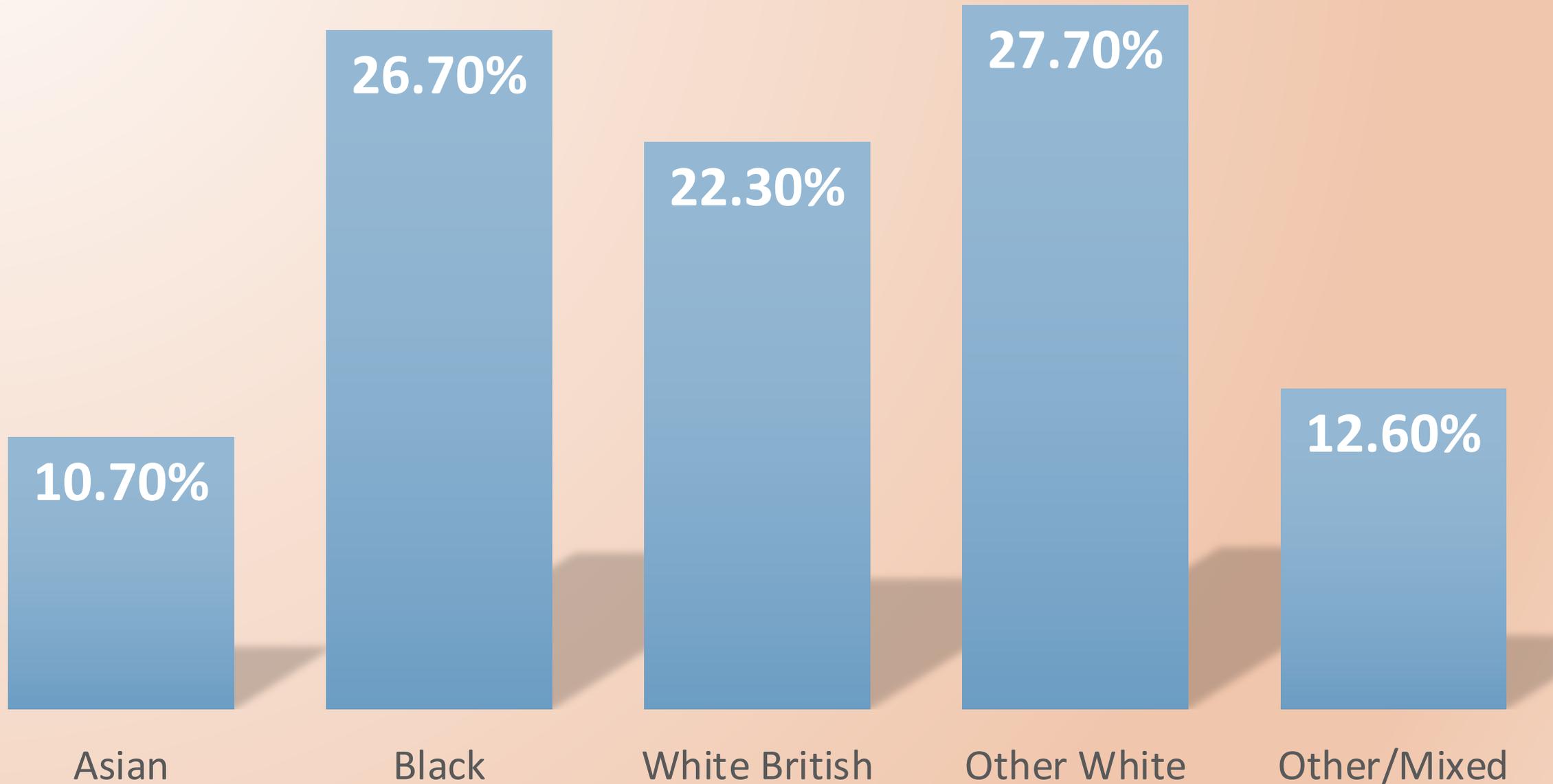
Data source: Nomis on behalf of ONS

Yet, there's a tendency to portray Tottenham residents:

- as a homogeneous entity;
- using sweeping generalisations and stereotypical representations;
- in ways that (apparently) "demonstrate" that multiculturalism has "failed."

"I don't get why some think we're all the same in Tottenham coz most likely Tottenham residents are known to be, like, diverse."

Temi, 24*

BREAKING NEWS TOTTENHAM RIOT
TWO POLICE CARS, A SHOP AND BUS SET ON
FIRE DURING DISTURBANCES IN NORTH LONDON
01:50 RS, A BUS AND SHOPS SET ON FIRE DURING DISTURBANCES IN TOT

POLICE

BORIS ISN'T WORKING.

During 2 nights of rioting in London, Boris Johnson refused to cut short his holida

tssa SACK BORIS

" *A dismal environment*

" *...passive participants trapped in a vicious cycle of deprivation and degradation where unemployment, addictions, low educational attainment, poor health, youth alienation and crime inter-connect in a causal relationship as 'mutually reinforcing dynamics'*

(Summarised by Dillon and Fanning 2019)

IT TOOK ANOTHER RIOT

Living with "difference"

- maintaining a distinct cultural identity can go hand in hand with having everyday encounters in diversifying contexts;
  - separate together;
  - civilities of "indifference to difference" (Amin 2013: 3);
  - balancing between "separateness and unity" (Hickman *et al.* 2008);
  - the "strength of weak ties" (Granovetter 1973);
  - community of strangers (e.g., Derrida).
- public–private spheres (see, e.g., Foner *et al.* 2019: 8; Kesten and Moreira de Souza 2020: 64–5).

Tottenham's young people on diversity

What are the positives of living in Tottenham?

Ahuzar Demir, 17: Tottenham hosts a diverse range of cultures and communities from all around the world. Such diversity offers great opportunities for different jobs, knowledge of other communities, new tastes, new fashion, new literature... the list is endless. Also, there is the improving   …

(Exposure 2018)

Amaia, 16, speaks of Tottenham as "very multicultural." In her mind, the fact that Tottenham is ethnically, socially and culturally diverse makes it "more tolerant and accepting" than if it was an area dominated by a more homogeneous group (Elster 2020).

Super-diverse neighbourhoods have the potential to provide young people with:

- a social space in which they can "be themselves and where they [can] claim their multiple identifications with confidence" (Visser 2020);

- the "feeling that they [are] not judged by their peers on the basis of their race, ethnicity or class, where this was often the case outside their neighbourhood" (*ibid*.);

- a "sense of comfort and security" (Kesten & Moreira de Souza 2020: 56);

- "a safe environment where people can thrive without fear of everyday racism" (Mintchev & Moore 2018: 130);

- opportunities to "interact with others across ethnic divides," which, in turn, may generate a high level of trust (*ibid*.: 120);

- a "safe space" that affords relative freedom from being regularly subjected to misrepresentations or "othering" processes (Elster 2019: 177).

Normalising diversity and "difference"

Meissner (2020: 7): some YP grow up in social contexts that are so imbued with the implications of international migration that migration-driven diversity has become a habitual frame of reference – a fact of everyday life.

"…it's just the norm to have lots of people from different cultures around you."

Camille, 16

Lens of *conviviality*

"Conviviality is a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not—as the logic of ethnic absolutism suggests they must—add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication."

(Gilroy 2006: 40)

- being at ease in the presence of diversity;
- ethnic differences do not require special accommodation *vis-à-vis* the white majority

(Valluvan 2016: 205)

Epistemic implications of experiencing "difference" as a quotidian component of life

Can (super-)diverse neighbourhoods facilitate safe discursive spaces where young (often marginalised) people are more likely to:

- express beliefs and share experiences without having to regularly "smother" their testimonies/points of views?
  - that is, more likely to feel "epistemically relatively safe" (the avoidance of epistemic injustice [see Fricker] and epistemic oppression [see Dotson])?

Identity prejudice and epistemic oppression

Those who live in less diverse neighbourhoods:

"often perceive me as different, or 'other,' or may not think that there is more to me…"

Lesedi, 17

Camille, 16, agrees:

"From my experience, I would guess that people [situated in less multicultural areas] are maybe less tolerant; and maybe I might feel not as comfortable whenever I face people from these places since they may not see me as me—or an individual; they may see me just as 'another Black girl.'"

Lesedi, 17, reflects on experiences in and around her school:

"Tottenham is known for being very multicultural, whereas Muswell Hill and Bounds Green [areas surrounding her secondary school] to some degree are kinda homogeneous…"

"… you feel kinda small cos you can tell that you're different."

"…it got to that point where I was like […] am I supposed to be something special here, or am I just another statistic, I don't quite understand—cos I wasn't very confident about it."

Epistemic diversity

a community that:

- allows for several modes of knowing to exist alongside each other;
- doesn't aim for consensus, but is based on the acceptance or exchange of, or sometimes even "indifference" to, *differences*;
- is less likely to give rise to asymmetric epistemic power relations.

Recognising "epistemic diversity"

> " *I ain't gonna tell you how a Muslim brother should be thinking, or, like, what he should believe. He does his thing, I do mine...*

Luke, 22

> " *I don't get why you wanna judge someone because they're different from you. [...] I feel, like, because I've lived in this area for quite a long time you get to know some of the people and what you realise is the people that are [stereotyped] aren't always what people think they are.*

Sapphire, 16

Diversity and feeling "epistemically safe"

(1) "difference" is experienced as part of normal everyday life
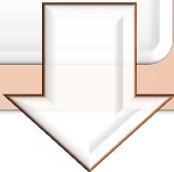
(2) different "stocks of knowledge" and points of views can coexist
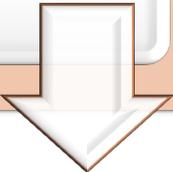
(3) identity maintenance and epistemic contributions are less likely to be suppressed
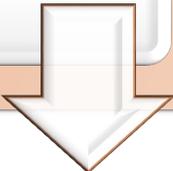
(4) some (marginalised) young people may feel epistemically (relatively) safe

References

Amin, A. (2013) *Land of Strangers*. Cambridge: Polity.

Barker, A., Crawford, A., Booth, N. & Churchill, D. (2019) "Everyday Encounters with Difference in Urban Parks: Forging 'Openness to Otherness' in Segmenting Cities," *International Journal of Law in Context*, 15(4): 495–14.

Dotson, K. (2011), "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing", *Hypatia*, 26(2): 236–57.

Elster, J. (2017) "The temporal dimension of reflexivity: linking reflexive orientations to the stock of knowledge," *Distinktion Journal of Social Theory*. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1600910X.2017.1397527.

Elster, J. (2019) *The reflexive voices of young people in Tottenham: youth-identity formation, reflexivity and negative representations.* University of Birmingham. Ph.D Sociology. Available at: https://etheses.bham.ac.uk//id/eprint/9665/.

Elster, J. (2020) "Youth voices in post-English riots Tottenham: the role of reflexivity in negotiating negative representations," *The Sociological Review*. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0038026120915706.

Fricker, M. (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gilroy, P. (2004) *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* London: Routledge.

Haringey Council (2019) *Haringey at a Glance: State of the Borough*. Available: https://www.haringey.gov.uk/sites/haringeygovuk/files/state_of_the_borough_final_master_version.pdf [Accessed: Jan. 2020].

Hickman, M., Crowley, H. and Mai, N. (2008) *Immigration and social cohesion in the UK: The rhythms and realities of everyday life*. Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/2230-deprivation-cohesion-immigration.pdf.

References (continued)

Kesten, J. and Moreira de Souza, T. (2020) Experiencing Diversity in London: Social Relations in a Rapidly Changing Neighbourhood. *In:* Oosterlynck, S., Verschraegen, G. and Kempen, R. V. (eds.) *Divercities: Understanding Super-Diversity in Deprived and Mixed Neighbourhoods*: 47–68. Bristol: Policy Press.

Kraftl, P., Bolt, G. and Van Kempen, R. (2019) "Hyper-Diversity in/and Geographies of Childhood and Youth", *Social and Cultural Geography*, 20(9), pp. 1189–97.

Meissner, F. (2020) Growing up with Difference: Superdiversity as a Habitual Frame of Reference. *In:* Titzmann, P. F. & Jugert, P. (eds.) *Youth in Superdiverse Societies: Growing up with Globalization, Diversity, and Acculturation*: 7–22. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge.

Mintchev, N. and Moore, H. L. (2018) "Super-Diversity and the Prosperous Society," *European Journal of Social Theory*, 21(1), pp. 117–34.

Nomis (2020) *2011 Census*. University of Durham/Office for National Statistics. [Last updated: July 2019] Available: https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/ [Accessed: Aug. 2020].

Valluvan, S. (2016) "Conviviality and Multiculture: A Post-Integration Sociology of Multi-Ethnic Interaction," *YOUNG*, 24(3): 204–21.

Vertovec, S. (2007) "Super-Diversity and Its Implications," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6), pp. 1024–54.

Visser, K. (2020) "'Because We're All Different' – Everyday Experiences of Belonging among Young People from Immigrant Backgrounds in Tottenham," *Geoforum*.

Wessendorf, S. (2014) *Commonplace Diversity: Social Relations in a Super-Diverse Context*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

White, J. (2020) *Terraformed: Young Black Lives in the Inner City*. London: Repeater Books.