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Living with Difference in Europe Brief No. 2

# Integrative Encounters: the challenge of creating meaningful contact across difference.



In this brief the *Living with Difference in Europe* Research Programme (LIVEDIFFERENCE) considers the challenge of fostering positive attitudes towards difference. While the question of how to develop the capacity to live with difference is one confronting all countries of the European Union, the extent to which national communities are currently characterised by mobility and diversity varies. In particular, many studies of integration primarily focus on 'Western' societies where the scale of recent immigration into western societies has produced 'superdiversity', such that encountering difference in everyday public spaces has become regarded as a mundane, unremarkable part of everyday life.

In contrast, to this picture of superdiversity in Western Europe, in Eastern Europe the socialist era (1945-89) which followed World War II severely circumscribed population mobility, and as a consequence opportunities to encounter 'difference', for nearly half a century. As such, the context for contemporary immigration into countries like Poland is very different from that experienced in most Western European societies. Immigrants have not been the subject of intense media attention, and concern amongst members of the public about immigrants' formal status and claims on the State are therefore lower than in Western European societies. The relatively low-level of immigration means that 'difference' is much less visible in public and institutional spaces. This absence of regular encounters with 'difference' can make Polish people vulnerable to absorbing stereotypes, and to miss out on understandings of 'other' cultures and identities which can be picked up through everyday life in superdiverse societies. Rather, in the Polish context, purposeful, organised, group activity is therefore a particularly important means to provide people with an opportunity to encounter migrants and to promote integration, precisely because such encounters are less likely to occur in neighbourhood or the workplace

The study reported here involved qualitative research with a Warsaw based NGO which runs a football league with the explicit aim of bringing Polish people and new immigrants together. The League has 20 registered teams, consisting of 260 participants from 44 countries. As most people 'naturally' seek out or cluster with those like themselves the competitive nature of sport means that divisions risked being enhanced if teams were allowed to be mono-national. To prevent this from occurring the Football League developed rules that each team should consist of people of at least three nationalities and at least two women/two men.

## Background

- Poland, historically a multicultural country, became (at least officially) culturally homogenous after World War II when it became a Socialist State. At this time, according to official doctrine, there were no ethnic minorities in Poland, and until the end of the Socialist era issues of multiculturalism were absent from public discourse.
- Poland is often regarded within, and outside, of the country as a relatively cohesive and homogenous 'white' society.
- Yet, growing number of studies evidence the fact that in recent years Poland has become a country of growing immigration. One of the many consequences of the events of 1989, alongside the growth of metropolitan spaces and their attendant diversity, was the arrival of immigrants. Joining the European Union accelerated this process.
- Although immigration to Poland remains low in comparison with western European countries, the number of foreigners resident in Poland almost doubled between the 2002 census (n=64,600) and the 2011 census (n=111,700).
- There are estimated to be approximately 145,000 undocumented migrants in Poland whose countries of origin are unrecorded and so who are difficult to assess statistically, but which qualitative research and anecdotal evidence from NGOs, suggest include a diverse range of nationalities, extending across Africa, Asia and South America.



- While traditional national and ethnic minorities (formally Polish citizens) are now recognized in Polish law, the issue of immigration remains practically ignored.
- An increasing number of NGO projects in Poland, and in Warsaw particularly, are focused on promoting intercultural contact and communication as part of social integration even as the Government is slow to take up this issue.

## Evidence

- Our research found that many Polish people had little other opportunity aside from the football league to encounter non-Polish people. Both residential concentration and segregation in other areas of life, such as at work, reduce the number of opportunities for many Polish people to meet people from minority ethnic communities, which impedes integration.
- In a national context where encounters between Polish people and migrants are relatively uncommon in everyday life, and encounters therefore require more purposeful organisation we found the motivation to take part in these activities to be critical to the success of 'integrative encounters'. Yet, apathy or an indifference to difference was commonplace.
- Here, the research suggests that it is important to put the conditions of possibility for 'integrative encounters' in place. Rather than try to artificially induce or force relationships where individuals have little self-motivation to pursue intercultural encounters they must be allowed to emerge 'spontaneously'

*There are Poles, they come at ten in the morning, even though they have their match at 3 in the afternoon, they grab some beer and barbeque equipment and integrate with others who have come earlier. They complement teams who don't have players and it's happening. Maybe I'm not the best example because I don't happen to get seriously involved in this integration but I know more and more of them, even though I don't try, it's just spontaneous*

*But do you talk... in what circumstances do you get to know each other?*

*Yes. For example we sit, watch a match, comment and we get to know each other, next week it's like: 'Oh hi, how are you, mate, how was your match? Oh good, one player is missing today, why don't you play with us?' 'All right, nice, why not'. It's spontaneous, nobody truly cares to meet somebody else, it's just happening (Male, Serbian/Polish, 28).*

- Most football participants suggested that diversity, in terms of cultural, ethnic, religious or racial difference within Poland, had become more real to them as a consequence of their encounters in the League. It had exposed them to immigrants, started to normalise their presence, form cross-cultural friendships, educated them about some of the challenges faced by new arrivals to Poland and in some cases challenged their prejudices.

*I've never had any prejudices against people of different origins, religion or orientation. But the fact that foreigners live in Poland, for various reasons, I've become more familiar with that and it's more tangible, there was an opportunity to have a direct contact with these people, I don't know, and find out about their problems and their situation (Polish, male, 32).*

*Well, there's this trend in Poland for some, tongue in cheek, jokes, sexist ones about women, racist ones about black people. They're always tongue in cheek. Now these jokes are starting to irritate me more and more. Before it was like, well you know, a joke's a joke. No one takes it seriously [...] And now the jokes are starting to irritate me more and more.*

*Do you bring that up with your friends?*

*[...] Even if I wanted to react, the response is always the same, leave it, they're just jokes, no one takes it seriously, right? But I definitely try to limit these jokes now. Definitely they're not heard with pleasure, so you don't talk about them with such pleasure (Male, Polish, 23).*



- The sport itself facilitated the conditions or possibility for 'integrative encounters' because this common enterprise creates an emotional bond or tie between participants which some likened to familial intimacy:

*Football is the best integrator...it's something that truly creates some bonds.. So, football is the best facilitator (Male, Serbian/Polish, 28)*

*...we came there to do something, we play. Football is kind of a connector in this initiative, people who are passionate come here and help this passion develop, some other people came, it's nice they are totally different, different in quotation marks, of different nationality, different culture. It's a common idea, common development of skills, watching together and one big football family, that's for sure. (Female, Polish, 32).*

- Academic and policy literatures suggest that the language ability of immigrants is a major barrier to spontaneous mixing. Yet, the evidence of this research is that language was rarely a barrier to communication in practice. Indeed, the spontaneous way players pooled linguistic skills in diverse teams to get by was in itself an intercultural way of communicating. While others suggested that football itself was a universal language which needed no translation, and 'naturally' facilitated a connection.

*You can communicate in English. A bit in Spanish, a bit in French. And I translate when guys from Spain were swearing, he translated it to us [laughs]..in general, there are no problems (Ukrainian, male, 22).*

*But on the pitch, normally people usually speak Polish, right, so do you understand each other or does it vary?*

*Usually. There are players who don't understand Polish, but there's no problem then. The language of football is universal, after all. (Polish, male, 23).*

- There were educational disparities in terms of the ability of Polish people to communicate, and therefore integrate with, non-Polish residents. Those who spoke not only their native Polish but also English and possibly one or more other European language were at a distinct advantage. For those who were not from a socio-or educational context in which they were neither accustomed to language diversity, nor expected to have second language ability, the problems created by Polish language deficiency were heightened. There are implications for integration here, in terms of the differential capabilities of individuals and groups to engage in organised encounters.

## Analysis

- In the Polish context where intercultural encounters are rare in everyday spaces, opportunities for what we term 'integrative encounters' must be deliberately sought out, but the incentives for engaging in such 'bridging' activities are lower for the majority population than new migrants.
- Apathy or indifference to difference was commonplace amongst our interviewees. It was the attraction of the activity -- football -- rather than the encounter which motivated members of the host society to become involved.
- In this sense, we understand our case study 'integrative encounters' to be spontaneous. That is they emerged as a product of the participants' self-motivated, and shared, desires to play football, rather than being artificially induced as a consequence of the more contrived activities of the League.



- Where individuals have little self-motivation to pursue intercultural encounters attempts to stimulate them need to be predicated on creating spaces for spontaneity which motivate diverse people to engage with each other because they appeal to shared interests, rather than just because they offer a simulated opportunity to encounter difference.
- Football provides all of the conditions of possibility necessary for spontaneous integrative encounters to take place. It is a transnational sport which provides, in effect, a universal language. Participants from most countries of the world understand its rules, there are shared terms of reference given football's global nature (e.g. players they admire or clubs they follow), and a common passion for the game. It is relatively cheap and easy to facilitate -- which is significant given other studies have highlighted cost and organisational difficulties as barriers to establishing successful integration projects. Football's team-based nature promotes mutuality or bonding around a common goal - the desire to win - which can overcome perceived differences and the complexity of identifications between participants. A league structure creates continuity by establishing regular and repetitive encounters (both within a season, and over seasons) which are facilitated or managed in controlled circumstances but alongside this it provides space for sociality during training, in the dressing room, in post-match celebrations and on the pitch side amongst spectators.
- Activities like the Football League can bring different groups together who would not normally have the opportunity to meet and create the possibility for intercultural dialogue and understanding to develop, but they cannot overcome structural inequalities -- for example, in terms of differential educational opportunities -- between migrants and host communities

## Conclusions

- Organised group activity is a particularly important way to provide opportunities to encounter difference and to promote integration and understanding in Post Socialist contexts precisely because such encounters are less likely to occur through chance in everyday spaces.
- The evidence of our research is that contrived 'integrative encounters' do have the power to break down preconceived notions of 'otherness' amongst populations less familiar with immigration, and can certainly facilitate relationships which move beyond 'façade tolerance'.
- Where individuals have little self-motivation to pursue intercultural encounters attempts to stimulate them need to be based on creating spaces for spontaneity which motivate diverse people to engage with each other because they appeal to shared interests, rather than just because they offer a simulated opportunity to encounter difference.
- The critical factor in stimulating 'spontaneous integrative encounters' to occur is the creation of an appropriate space which will attract diverse participants and which provides an appropriate framework -- the conditions of possibility -- for new forms of relationship to emerge.
- Previous research has suggested that for integration activities to be successful such positive outcomes must be scaled-up beyond the time and space in which they occur. Our work identified some evidence of individuals who claimed to be translating attitudes understandings developed in the League into their wider relationships in the spaces of everyday life.



- Activities like those outlined can bring different groups together who would not normally have the opportunity to meet and create the possibility for intercultural dialogue and understanding to develop, but they cannot overcome structural inequalities between (for example) migrants and host communities. Educational or socio-economic inequalities) and unfavourable dynamics of power between migrant and established groups can undermine or hinder the possible long-term effectiveness of intercultural social projects. For integrative encounters to be scaled up effectively there needs to be a commitment to address structural inequalities as well as cultural diversity.

### Further reading:

Mayblin, L., Valentine, G. and Andersson, J. (in press) In the contact zone: Engineering meaningful encounters across difference, *The Geographical Journal*.

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Piekut, A., Rees, P., Valentine, G. and Kupiszewski, M. 2012. Multidimensional diversity in two European cities: thinking beyond ethnicity. *Environment and Planning A*, 44, 12, 2988-3009.

Valentine G. and Harris C. (available from author) Encounters and the spatiality of (in)tolerance: implications for future social relations.

Valentine, G., Piekut, A., Winiarska A., Harris, C. and Jackson, L., (2014) Mapping the meaning of 'difference' in Europe: a social topography of prejudice, *Ethnicities*.





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*Living in Difference in Europe: Making communities out of strangers in an era of super mobility and super diversity* was a four-year research program (2010-2014). The research involved five inter-linked projects which explored the extent and nature of everyday encounters with 'difference', by each collecting original data in the UK (a post-colonial European state) and Poland (a post-communist European state). The findings provide an integrated evidence base that can be used to inform European policies and strategies for living with difference.

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More information is available at: [www.livedifference.group.shef.ac.uk](http://www.livedifference.group.shef.ac.uk)

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