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The Sense of an Ending: Ageing and Coping in the Words of the Boys

Gary Armstrong

(City, University of London, UK)

Gary.Armstrong@city.ac.uk

James Rosbrook-Thompson

James.Rosbrook-Thompson.4@city.ac.uk

In this paper we explore the lived realities of ageing through the experiences of a small group of men, all in their 60s, in “superdiverse” London. The group, which gathers regularly in a local pub, engages in certain ritualised behaviours which reflect the group’s sense of propriety in an area that has changed drastically during its members’ adult lives. The changes, common to many superdiverse urban areas, are bound up with demographics and associated structural and material shifts registered in the cityscape. As we seek to show, the group has a complex and differentiated stance on urban change; some changes are embraced, others negotiated, and others resisted. Documenting the rituals and moments pertaining to the group’s illness, leisure and routine meaning-making in tandem with the transformation of their locality underlines the significance of place vis-à-vis processes of ageing.

Keywords: Ageing, conviviality, ethnography, propriety, superdiversity.

Boundaries vary with an individual’s sense of propriety; such thresholds can change with time. The identity of those who set parameters of any type, why and when, is difficult to ascertain. For some the boundaries evident in domestic milieus trump all others. Not all, however, have extensive kin systems and not all are enamoured by those that constitute “family”. The complexity experienced by those residing in densely populated housing units of a neighbourhood will often prioritise notions of conviviality and tranquillity as the most needed qualities in life be it in their home, on the landing or block or street they live on. Often reduced to the term “good relations”, this sought-after state of being was informed to a large degree by what those seeking it considered their primary public arenas. This forces the curious to consider what behaviours various spaces ideally required and how any sense of propriety was established and claimed. What follows considers such issues in relation to five men, all aged in their 60s, who met weekly in a pub to enjoy the conviviality of conversation and beer. Seeking essentially to document the impact of urban change on a group of ageing, white working-class males in the specific context of North London, the discussion utilises concepts of “the global city”, “conviviality” (Gilroy 2004) and “superdiversity” (Vertovec 2007, Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong 2022).

Conviviality: Space and Enthusiasm

The research draws on extended ethnographic conversations arising from deep “hanging out” (Barker et al. 2013) with five men, henceforth referred to as the Boys. The five — Jimmy, Pete, Paul, Jack and Chris — were residents of the Lashall Green neighbourhood of North London (Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong 2018, 2022). All five identified as white, heterosexual, nominally Christian and considered themselves “British” by virtue of their passport stating as such. All were of second- or third-generation Irish or Scottish heritage, were either two years the right side or three years the wrong side of 65 and had in four instances grown up in the area and were known to one another for some 50 years. At the time of the research, all lived within one mile of each other. The Boys were mates (they eschewed the word “friends”) and all knew what the term implied even if it could not be easily defined.

The Boys reminded themselves of this mutual status every Friday in the pub, and in the course of the previous decade holidays to the warmer climes of Southern Europe where cheaper beer and generally better food than that available locally was enjoyed.¹

Over the decades, the Boys had grown to know each other's moods and tolerance levels; they could nonetheless in their weekly pub *entente cordiale* become a little peeved with an opinion about contemporary political affairs or more frequently a football-related assertion (not all supported the same team). As mates, they got over this, did not to carry a grudge and when controversy appeared were wise enough to move on to the more pressing issue as to who was due to buy the next round of beer. Beer consumption (no more than six pints in the space of three hours) helped the frequent sense of the bemused and the absurd which defined their weekly meet.² Their often-lively Friday evening narratives were dotted with questions which addressed issues that left them incredulous, the narrative often ending with the words "Hello"? or "Are you Sure?" and "That's bollocks". When a response was articulated which agreed with their point of view, the responder received a resounding "Thank You" for his sensible complicity.

Onlookers in the shape of other pub regulars sort of "knew" the Boys and were both fascinated and enchanted by their seeming inability to pause any conversation for more than a few seconds. Christening the location the Boys usually gathered in as both "Bullshit Corner" and "Last of the Summer Wine", the Boys were aware of such stigmas and could not care less. They were more than happy to include others in their conversation and could draw on 40 regulars who might drop in on their gathering to add to the merriment or recount a momentary moan or feature of the absurd. The Boys spent what they perceived as "good monies" in the place (each Friday cost a minimum of £25 each) and in return wanted well-kept beer of a maximum 4% "session" strength, a warm welcome from the proprietor, attentive bar staff and to be unaffected by any errant behaviours from other pub-goers. The ideal evening ended with everyone equal in buying rounds of beer.

The pub was nominally "Irish". Some 25 years before, all pubs in the locality fitted this description by virtue of every pub landlord originating from Ireland. Most had gone, the remaining licenced premises were now *managed* not by "Guvnors" (as such landlords were termed in local parlance) but by individuals often no older than 30 years of age, who did not live above the premise like the Guvnors once did, and hence had little buy-in to the neighbourhood. As late as 1995, the neighbourhood was host to 30 plus pubs in a one-mile radius. Some 20 years later that number was halved and what we can best term the "traditional pub" numbered just two. The neighbourhood thus lost places where conviviality and information exchange were integral to entering. Such pubs were at various times places of refuge, comfort, social networking and places for seeking employment opportunities.

¹ One of the Boys' daughters was *au fait* with online purchasing. She did the holiday bookings – the Boys paid her in cash. Their request was sunshine, decent hotel (not top of the range) and a resort that hosted at least a dozen bars but not one notorious for attracting youthful revellers.

² The recurring themes were the proclamations of the local council and the irritation that was ever-present when trying to get answer from organisations that had replaced human interaction with a voice-phone asking the caller to answer its pre-programmed questions.

The pub the Boys met in every Friday, The Donna, was the last of its kind. The premise was inclusive, and its clientele changed with the hours of day and days of week. The midday to late afternoon period saw mostly retired local men drink slowly while watching the televised horse-racing. The venue in such hours was in a sense a social service for the lonely and the retired (mostly male) providing easy company and the chance for winners and losers to reflect on both good and bad fortune. Other punters entered from the many surrounding small enterprises for a cheap lunch of traditional English/Irish fayre. The clientele changed around 5.00pm, when workers (usually under the age of 40 and 50/50 male-female) from a nearby fashion house HQ and white-collar industries entered and remained until mid-evening. Local working-class and middle-class residents would enter around 8.00pm and remain until closing time, combining their conversations with watching a live football match on one of the pub's 15 TV screens in its four rooms. The TVs also attracted groups of French and Spanish people who worked in London but wanted to watch their hometown teams via satellite broadcasts. The pub also attracted scores of tourists per week, and a regular contingent from Brazil who worked in London and brought their compatriots when visiting them. Many tourists were delighted by the pub's famed beer and the dozens of items of sporting paraphernalia that adorned its walls and ceilings. The Donna was a convivial place.

Conviction and Co-habiting

Two of the Boys had retired — one by choice, another on account of ill-health. The two who worked full time utilised overtime opportunities to trade for time-off in lieu which freed up time for vacations. The Boys averaged an annual holiday in a Mediterranean resort and one annual trip to a UK holiday camp. The latter, known as “weekenders”, were themed around music and extended drinking hours. The out-of-season dates saw such camps packed with the over-55s, empty-nesters re-living, to a degree, the music of their youth and reminding themselves that they could still move, most certainly could still drink and, for those inclined, could still attract women. Such occasions were life-affirming. The trips abroad were sometimes delicate affairs. The realisation that no single place and the accommodation therein could please everyone in the group meant that some of their party would have a gripe about something. The one comfort was that the beer was cheap, and the bars rarely closed before 4.00am. After a week of such indulgence, returning to the familiarity of the neighbourhood was both comforting and sobering.

The Boys were long connected to the neighbourhood by family, work and friendship. Factors of time, information and identity (Wallman 1984) were integral to the Boys' sense of well-being. They had a stake in the place. They knew people and enjoyed the fact that on any day of the week a walk would be interrupted by up to half a dozen short conversations, a sociability that made the local both “human” and likeable. All could in earlier times enter a number of bars in the neighbourhood alone, but certain in the knowledge that such premises would contain people they knew. The longevity of the Boys' residence meant they knew — generally — how things locally “worked”; which medical doctor to see (“he's the best of the three in there”), which garage car-mechanic to trust, which fruit and veg market stallholder

to buy from, which kebab shop to eat from post-pub and which mini-cab firm were reliable and honest in their charging. Such knowledge was comforting, and sharing such insights added to their sense of community. Being in the know was also a marker of masculine credibility.

Ambitious never to be “mugged off” and “topped up”, i.e. overcharged or having to suffer poor and insulting service, none wanted to be made to look gullible; to be a victim of such practices implied an absence of foresight and an inability to stand up for yourself. Four were not shy in what they termed “saying what needed saying”. Jimmy was the least assertive of the Boys and probably the kindest. The Boys, as local parlance might state, had “lived a bit”. Two had been arrested in their youth for barroom fights. They were fined for their efforts and thus held a criminal record. Two had seen the inside of a prison in their early twenties. One three-month custodial sentence was a consequence of football-related disorder, the other the outcome of defying the orders of a despised higher rank when in the uniform of the British army; military detention ensued for 60 days.³ Both the latter had overcome any career-defining potential such living arrangements might have afforded. The circumstances of their respective incarcerations were embellished over the decades when the talk turned to celebrations of youthful carnival and the Boys’ frequent laments about the futility and uselessness of the contemporary criminal justice system, opinions informed by the various tabloid and middle-brow newspapers they read daily.

The Boys had worked and earned since leaving school at the age of 16. They had thus worked for 40 years or more in local occupations, none of which required a post-16 education. All had worked — laboured, essentially — in communal industries such as railway track maintenance, postal delivery, council caretaker turned cab driver, plasterer and decorator, military personnel turned delivery driver. Such work necessitated a tolerance of workmates and an accommodation of the human foibles that such company brought, in what were all essentially customer-facing occupations. All had lived in local authority-owned premises in the various three-storey estates of the neighbourhood and understood densely-populated circumstances. All had a sense of ownership of the neighbourhood by virtue of being outside of the domestic home for hours of a day in journeys that saw them going to and from work, drinking in local pubs and, at times, shopping in local stores. One of the five — Paul — explained his philosophy on life:

“Nothing fancy. Do right by your kids, pay your bills, be polite to people [...] light ale every now and then and hope the rest looks after itself.”

That was perhaps too much to hope for. What Paul called “the rest” was the unknown which was a combination of local changes, global forces and personal health. Such factors had always constituted the unknown, but ageing added a new dimension.

³ The military prison stories fascinated listeners. The one-time prisoner added to the mystery by his refusal to accept being released early from his punishment just to prove a point to the Commanding Officer that the intended humiliation had not succeeded.

Doing Right by Your Own

By their thirties three had become fathers and thus joined the extended social network that parenting brought. The two that did not become fathers had extended family enough to keep them involved in the sense of “family” and its obligations around the ceremonies of baptism, weddings and funerals. For two of the parents the necessity of bigger living quarters by virtue of children saw them temporarily leave the neighbourhood on local authority property exchanges wherein they traded up by moving out — one to a neighbouring borough and one to a local authority property five miles away. Both were to drift back to the neighbourhood of their birth upon divorcing. Both were to return temporarily to the parental home, when aged in their 40s. One later moved out to another council property, the other to remain in his one-time childhood home by virtue of the death of his father shortly after he returned. Of the other three, two had taken over the tenancy of the local authority flat when their parents died, the other began cohabiting late in life in a local authority flat owned by a local woman; meanwhile, one rented out his own local authority flat — to sell the property would be considered ludicrous; relationships could go wrong.

The Boys had in all instances “done alright”. Those who fathered children believed they had brought up children the “right way”. In two instances, the Boys’ marriages had ended in divorce, but both were still in touch with their ex-wives. Two had cohabited but not married. All had a roof over their heads and money in the bank on top of their personal or work pensions. All but one of their children had moved out and lived between 20 and 200 miles from their place of birth, unable to ever obtain social housing and unable to ever earn an income that could attract a mortgage to pay for private housing in the area. Only one of their four children lived locally. He was able to by virtue of being “given” a local authority flat on account of a drug problem.

The needs of kinship, when combined with earning to pay bills and ensuring their kin had a roof over their heads, were all -encompassing considerations between the age of 25 and 50. These realities meant that the Boys had little time for the formal forums of tenants’ association meetings, neighbourhood watch, and forums with local councillors and police officers. For the Boys, the neighbourhood just “was”; any crisis required a response best achieved by “knowing someone who knew someone”. In effect, living was managed by — usually male — resource networks, such people were assumed to be in the know; such people could “say things”. The occasions for “saying something”; that is, challenging that considered that “out of order” changed with the life cycle.

As young men they were, in their parlance, “out and about”. They played in local amateur football teams and drank weekly in up to a dozen local pubs. To add to their networks and make life interesting, two of the Boys attended all home and away games of the local professional football team wherein friendships were long-established with fellow fans — local, national and indeed global.⁴ Two others had a wider local friendship network by virtue

⁴ Their longevity in the ranks of the supporters made them well-known “faces” in their co-fraternity and provided them with a network of further mates that was initially national but over the previous decade included new mates from Ireland, Belgium and Scandinavia.

of playing to a good standard in the weekly inter-pub darts competitions. The two had made wider connections via their employment on building sites and the railway. The Boys had all worked with people drawn from across Britain and later with “foreigners” as a consequence of the global flows of migrants. None of the Boys were “Little Englanders”. It was not possible to hold such a mentality and enjoy life where they lived. In their world, they were “faces” in the area. But faces only to the working-class demographic. There were other social classes and waves of day-trippers who had no knowledge of who lived in the neighbourhood and indeed were not curious about such people.

The Boys’ lived reality of the neighbourhood was ever-changing. In the 1950s, migrants from Cyprus and Portugal joined the pre-existing Irish and Caribbean. The former went into restaurants and property ownership and rental, the latter joined the ranks of the NHS and worked in local hospitals as catering staff and cleaners. In the late 1970s, new migrants arrived from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh to work in “Indian” restaurants and a variety of entrepreneurial business enterprises. In the 1990s, came further migrants carrying refugee status from war-torn East Africa (Somalia, Eritrea and later Sudan). Later again, arrived Lusophone Africans from Guinea Bissau. Accompanying such peoples were the white middle classes drawn to the neighbourhood for its proximity to hospital and university employment and, in the 1980s, its relatively cheap townhouse properties being sold from the one-time local authority property portfolio. This gentrification brought a very articulate middle class to the area who were to live cheek by jowl with the working classes. Occasions for shared conviviality were very rare. That said, there was no evident arena for class conflict either. The proximity to Lasham Green of three mainline rail termini meant also that up to half a million passengers a day were disgorged into the neighbourhood. The area’s famed street-market and night-time economy brought in up to 100,000 visitors each weekend at times. The neighbourhood saw all walks of life and in many ways was an exemplar of conviviality.

Post-1990 saw waves of migrants to the UK from the former Eastern Bloc upon the expansion of the European Union. An estimated one million people of Polish origin arrived and changed the face of London. Diligent workers in construction, service and hospitality, they were also cheaper labour and thus much sought after by firms and business. This caused tensions with other workers but ultimately did not bring social unrest. These migrants, in fact, reminded the boys of the Irish of the 1950s and in some instances thus their fathers. Tony’s father, once de-mobbed from military service, did not return to his Northern Ireland village of origin but headed to London and sought work in post-war reconstruction, the correlate was recognised:

“The East Europeans was a tough one for me. Twenty years ago, I was on £120 a day painting a decorating. I had work seven days a week in Central London in banks and hotels. Then they came over and they charge £80 a day and the jobs went to them [...] (I’m) fucked if I’m working for that money. I get the same today as I did 15 years ago, it’s never going to get any better. I have to travel to Essex for that money. That takes me 50 minutes every morning just to start work. I know they’re good people, hard-working and not scrounging off the dole and

family men bringing up their kids and all that, but I couldn't get close to 'em cos in a sense they'd halved my wages."

Negotiating Difference

Things changed. What had disappeared in the neighbourhood in the eyes of the Boys was "people like them". For the past three decades, men similar to them had "taken the plunge" and sold their local authority home bought in the early 1980s Buy-to-Let bonanza that typified Thatcherite housing policy (Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong 2018). Having bought cheap, they sold their properties sometimes for three times the price they paid and relocated to the assumed arcadia of usually new-built private housing between eight and 30 miles north. At its most innocent, the move was inspired by the prospect of a front and back garden and less dense living conditions which equated to tranquillity and implicitly a "quiet life". At its most honest (and to a degree deluded) the move was to get away from "the Bangladeshis" and "the Somalians" who had settled in the area since the late 1970s and mid 1990s respectively. It was a move to escape having to negotiate with *difference*, most notably with those who did not look or speak like them. In most instances there was no flashpoint which made the departure desirable or inevitable; the departed just did not want to deal with the differences, be it in language or cultural practices. Racial politics were articulated but, in most instances, boiled down to a rage against the (Labour controlled) Council whom they believed bent over backwards to help newcomers to the detriment of local white people. It was the children of such newcomers, they argued, that were dragging down the standards of local state school. It was the teenage boys of such migrants, they claimed, who were the largest threat to their personal safety. They insisted they were not racist in such calculations.

What was missing in the life of the Boys today was in some instances the intensely personal and in others the comfortingly familiar. The latter was people who had moved out or died. It was also places; shops had changed hands, lots of pubs had closed. Other licensed premises appeared in their place, but they were not venues for the Boys. Appealing to the under 40s, such premises served beer in bottles and played music that was "too loud". The door security decided who did or did not enter. The neighbourhood was increasingly about craft beer and "exotic" beers imported from ever greater distances. The ambience of such premises was younger than that the Boys sought, the bar managers younger than the Boys children. The Boys sought cheap beer which was well-kept and The Donna supplied this with beer from seven nations alongside wine from six nations. By contrast, the Boys' choice of breakfast had been lost in the neighbourhood. The former plethora of "greasy spoon" cafés had closed and from 2010 their replacements were increasingly about coffee (with many varieties of milk), croissants and variants of porridge. This meant that the Boys had to travel one mile up the road for their preferred tinned tomatoes, fried eggs, chips, mugs of tea and toasted, sliced white bread. They were not being consciously driven out; rather, their world was shrinking.

Conviviality: Taste and Distinction

The Boys' concerns, they would admit, were once primarily about proximity, notably "them next door". This expression covered those sharing the landing, those living in the block and latterly those that constituted the wider neighbourhood. Decades previously, the concerns might have merited a consensus; recent decades changed perspectives. As Tony explained:

"We once used to sit around talking about people allowing their dog to shit on the grass and people mending their cars on the estate and garage doors not opening properly. Now there's people just got here as refugees from Afghanistan and Sudan and they've been in civil wars and massacres and worse and what have-you [...] You think they care about the stuff that pissed us off?"

At the same time the familiar moans of those left behind are to the Boys tiresome — because they are never-ending and not resolvable. As Alan explained:

"All some of 'em want to talk about is how it's all going downhill and getting worse and things ain't what they used to be [...] (of) course they aren't, life moves on and there's enough people to get on with round here. What do they want? There were always wrong'uns in the neighbourhood and bad families and hard men who liked to bully innocent people."

Nostalgia pooled with various senses of disappointment to provide for a combination for unhappiness and at times resentment. It did not however result in electoral changes. The neighbourhood always returned Labour candidates. The far-right vote was always negligible. The 2016 Brexit vote however split the Boys. Paul wore a union flag lapel badge for the duration of the electoral hustings; he wanted out of the EU. His reason was not focussed but more the protest of an individual confused by what he saw around him. The blame was "all fuckin' politicians" (i.e. those of the two main UK parties). The vote was his protest against "everything". Tony and Chris wanted to remain. They had foreign relatives and had plans to retire to the sunny climes of Southern Europe. Jack needed freedom of movement because of entrepreneurial activities (he made monthly excursions to a hypermarket on the French North Sea coast to pack a small van full of alcohol and cigarettes which he bought cheap and sold at a profit in the neighbourhood. Jimmy voted leave but regretted doing so on learning of the new bureaucratic requirements that travel to many European places would bring as a consequence. His hatred of negotiating the complexities of online systems was famed in the Boys' conversations.

Appreciating Superdiversity

The three Ds of (personal) decline, (medical) doctors and death (of loved ones and neighbours) had visited the Boys to varying degrees. This had brought them into contact with people they had not considered neighbours or indeed facilitators in any way of their lives. One of the Boys was the primary carer of an octogenarian father who, while mentally competent, was wheelchair-bound. One was primary carer to a mother (also in her eighties) with dementia. Another was the dedicated grandparent to a grandchild born to his daughter

who lived as a single mum and who could not have worked were it not for the time and love the grandfather gave to her child. Another had two children married and had safe tenancy in a local authority house and had the added worry as to how debilitating his Parkinson's disease would become. The final one had a partner who had lived in the neighbourhood all her life and knew nothing of anywhere else and was undergoing a variety of medical tests for a mystery wasting ailment.

Anxieties were a daily matter for the Boys. The issue for them was how an individual managed such anxieties. This meant compartmentalising those worries into what they could do something about and that which they could not. The primary anxiety was personal health and the care of loved ones. The appointments and medical schedules that their conditions required pre-occupied the Boys tasked with caring. All the Boys had seen hospital beds in the past decade, and all had conditions that they and their doctors were “keeping an eye on”. Four of the Boys had suffered medical conditions in their 50s which, while they recovered, lingered a decade later. In such times, introspection becomes the priority over the locale. The same people had brought new perspectives. Paul's mother (aged in her early 80s) had dementia. Unable to afford the nursing home fees, Paul had to be primary carer in his mother's local authority flat. Politically, Paul articulated his contempt for both the Tory and Labour parties for in his opinion abandoning “normal British people”. His concerns about the neglect of “your own” saw him involved in the day-to-day care of his mother assisted by professional staff of the local health authority when he was out at work. This brought thanks and a degree of accommodation around what he termed “ethnic circumstances”. As Paul explained:

“The Health Visitor Rani calls in on my Mum twice a day. She's Bangladeshi and lovely. She lives locally and has got kids in the school. Anyway, cos of her religion she can't touch bacon and mum loves bacon. We agreed a solution. I cook it and leave it in the fridge. Rani comes in and micro-waves it. She don't 'touch it' see? Result!”

Some developed a proximity to the foreign-born because what they brought was literally life-enhancing and at times enchanting. As Jack explained:

“I sort of compromised my feelings (on migrant workers). My brother got MS (multiple sclerosis) and once a week he has these injections delivered which he does himself. The bloke who delivers is Kris — he's Polish. Over the years he's the only driver who's never been late and never missed a drop off. The time he saves on his round he cashes in to sit and have a cup of tea with my brother. I go in there sometimes and the pair of them are playing a computer game [...] they're like best mates. He looks forward all week to Kris coming. You can't dislike people like that.”

Similarity and Difference

The fusion of integrity and religion sat with national stereotypes and notions of the criminogenic. When Chris made his weekly shop at the superstore, he and his loaded

bags were brought home by the reassurance of a migrant cab driver. Chris had his own logic at large:

“When I want a cab home or from the supermarket, I always ring the cab firm and ask for Habib [...] he’s Moroccan and a devout Muslim and wouldn’t steal from a man.”

Nic sometimes took a cab the 1.5 miles home from the pub on account of being “a bit pissed” and having knee-joint problems that restricted his mobility. While frequently proclaiming his dislike for Muslims whom he assured everyone who would listen “were not like us”, he was more scathing of people whom he admitted he had no idea what faith — if any — they lived by: “Those Albanian bastards think we’re all pissed, and invent the (cab) fare and try to cheat you. Part of getting home involves a fuckin’ argument over a quid outside your front door.”

Jimmy rarely opined on ethnicity or religion and indeed believed in toleration. Two cancerous growths had been removed from his neck and shoulder by the NHS. In both instances the care had been provided *in toto* by migrants. Appreciative of all they had done for him, Jimmy believed he had a “connection” of sorts, albeit his attempt at kindness was gaffe-prone:

“The cancer specialist — or is it ‘consultant’? Anyway, he was from Jordan. We got talking about golf. He said he played off an 11. He also likes (mentions the local professional football team) and, when he could, he went to matches with his kid. Just a normal geezer [...] I asked him to come and have a round at my golf club which he said he might do [...] then I fucked up and invited him to come out for a drink when it (Jimmy’s treatment) was all over. He’s Muslim — he don’t drink!”

In his late 60s, Tony had no time for anyone who moaned — about anything. His take on life was uncomplicated by nuances; he celebrated the basics of what the locality offered and what he had witnessed both 50 years previously in and around the local Greek Orthodox church:

“Once a year the Greeks all meet up and carry a statue around the outside of their church singing hymns. You can watch it as it passes the pub. It’s nice, they all get dressed up and they have a bit of a ‘do’ after. They have these big parties where all the grub and booze are free—that’s their culture — dressing well, generosity, showing you can feed people.”

His sense of resentment was not about change *per se* or even ethnicity. His intolerance was directed at those who were “not doing their bit”; that is, contributing to shared citizenship and the assumed economic obligations. As he explained:

“It’s not about all migrants. Those who come from Eastern Europe and South America, they find a place to live and find work and bring their kids up properly. It’s the Africans and Bangladeshis who are the problem. They get the council

flats, have got big families which the social (security) pays for and can't control their kids who go round robbing people.”

The migrant presence was complicated by the social class and ambitions of those from the same continent. Adjacent to Tony's council flat kitchen window was a small, tarmacked basketball court. Those using it were renters of flats that made the owners a small fortune in rental income. The renters were wealthy students of the three nearby universities drawn to the UK University system and requiring a place to live in proximity to their place of study:

“There's six young Asian lads, I think they're Indian, who rent one of the maisonettes on my estate. Them and their mates use the playground for basketball and five-a-side football every night when it's light. They're training to be doctors and one's going to be a Vet — I asked them — and they're polite and good as gold [...] far better to have them than that fucking lot (white youths) who used to sit in there till midnight smoking weed and spitting all the time.”

Some people in the Boys' world remained distant and some were avoided. The former were those considered difficult to converse with by virtue of origins, culture and language. But significantly those theoretically and culturally close to home could be distant by virtue of political history. Jimmy explained how he located himself amid such diversity:

“I don't have contact with Muslims. I'm not avoiding them. I just don't mix in their circles. The kebab shop blokes are Muslims and I talk to them but they're what they call Modern Muslims, a bit like us. Their women don't walk 10 yards behind them in the street, head to toe in black.”

In this consideration, clothing and cultural practices combined with a language barrier extended by a different faith made conviviality challenging. At the same time, Jimmy was occasionally uncomfortable — to the point of avoidance — around people who dressed and spoke similarly to him and nominally shared the same religion. Colonial history and nationalist sporting enthusiasm played a crucial role in this discomfort:

“When we're in the The Donna and there's an Ireland game on the telly you get a bit of an anti-English vibe from the Irish boys. Not them in there every week, but those who pack it out for the Gaelic matches and Ireland internationals in rugby and football. Some of them start singing Irish songs and you don't know what's the 'real' meaning of the songs. I avoid the place at them times and drink somewhere else.”

The Grass is Always Greener?

The Boys did not seek homogeneity or a monoculture. They rolled with the cultural experiences on their doorstep and, enjoying the complexity of the locality, were happy to talk with anyone to pass the time of day. The Boys also realised their sense of powerlessness to resist the changes they lived amidst and, while manifesting a degree of nostalgia, they were rarely sentimental; they were of an age to accommodate change. They had access in the

neighbourhood to simple pleasures and for the two of them still in work had an income they considered no other place would provide them with at this stage of their lives. All agreed they had the best free medical care the world could offer, via their local GPs and the two nearby hospitals. Three of the Boys were due life-changing inheritances by virtue of their parents buying their one-time local authority-owned properties in the area. When the surviving parent dies, they could (if motivated) sell the place at a market rate to an assumed foreign-born buyer leaving them with hundreds of thousands in the bank. They considered they would, in time, leave Lashall Green of their own volition and move to places that they had visited briefly and since loved from a distance. Generally, they believed there were kinder places, places characterised by the absence of some people and evidencing a smaller number of opportunities which made life that bit simpler.

For Jimmy, a combination of low-priced housing and a retail situation not evident in the London neighbourhood for the past 40 years was a pull: “It’s (the Isle of Wight) lovely. We’ve been going there for years. First went when I was 10. You can buy a seafront two bedroomed gaff for £200,000 and even the newsagent is white”. Paul’s ambitions were domestic and pastoral and were idealised in a semi-rural location he visited occasionally 200 miles northeast of London. Price was an issue, as was conviviality: “You can get a small place for £150,000, just enough for me. Couple of pubs in the high street and spend your time sitting by the river fishing all day. They’re nice people who don’t bother no one”. At the same time, some of the Boys knew that such a legacy-inspired departure carried potential downsides. Leaving was difficult when others were dependent on them to a degree and when making new mates was recognised as not easy. As Chris explained:

“I’d leave here tomorrow [...] but making new friends at my age — Where do I go where can I know someone to have a drink with? I haven’t got four mates like this lot anywhere else so I can’t go anywhere. Plus, I’ve got the little lad (grandson) to think about.”

For Tony, some places that were great to visit should not be longed for. To relocate could ruin the conviviality that annual trips established and brought involvement in matters best avoided. In his reasoning:

“We could go and live in Ireland with ‘her’ (wife’s) lot (relatives). But that takes the fun out of visiting. It’s great to go there twice a year and have the craic with them but if you moved there, you get dragged in to all that family stuff.”

White people could also be strange and lacking in appeal. Jack could speak with some authority on such matters which required love having to be balanced with the cost of living and cultural estrangement:

“I lived up north for a while with a ‘bird’ (girlfriend) I was seeing. It’s alright things being cheaper and slower and all that, but they can drive you fuckin’ mad with their stupid accents. A lot of them are thick as well...”

Conclusion: The Glass Half Empty

Four times a year over the past decade, the Boys would dress smart and, having attended a funeral service, drink in a pub to celebrate the life of individuals they once knew. Showing up was important; it respected both the deceased and the mourning family. On such occasions the ending was accompanied by the customary free bar and funeral fayre of a “spread” (buffet), courtesy of the deceased’s family. Such gatherings made for memories and renewed the necessity to live in the here and now. The personalities and practices of conviviality that meant so much at one time provided for the Boys’ memory-bank of laughter. They joked over whose monies they would be drinking on when the first of them passed away. They knew that whoever went first, and no matter the amount of money and custom their death brought for the pub landlord, no one was getting a lock-in (after-hours drinking). This was because the new posh neighbours around the pub premises would have the police banging on the pub door and the landlord would be facing the threat of the revocation of his license for his bow to the celebration of a life of a local. Implicitly, it was also a celebration of the shared humanity the neighbourhood housed, sustaining waves of humanity and the accompanying conviviality, diversity and complexity — just as it had done for the past 200 years.

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Comments on the Paper Given at the Seminar

(in alphabetical order)

Subhadra Mitra Channa
(University of Dheli, India)
channa.subhadra@gmail.com

Question. James Rosbrook-Thompson and Gary Armstrong use the concept of poverty; what are the criteria for this definition of “poverty”.

Comment. It seems that people of South Asian and non-Anglo-Saxons are more likely to live in larger joint families, which is viewed by the dominant white community as “over-crowding”

and looked down upon as an undesirable trait. On the other hand, the white Anglo-Saxons who live in nuclear families tend to get lonely in old age and also dependent on their neighbours. This seems a paradox. James suggested “whites” tend to depend on those of better class, like students and higher educated people from these ethnic groups.

Svetlana Hristova
(South-West University “Neofit Rilsky”, Bulgaria)
sv.hristova@abv.bg

The two halves of the paper, presented respectively by James Rosbrook-Thompson and Gary Armstrong, brought to discussion the very acute topic of an ageing society, affecting Europe and the developed world. They offered an authentic “thick narrative” of various aspects of old-age precarity, be it where people live (how successful is the “home-owning democracy” in the search of basic security and safety in the UK?) or how old people spend their “leisure time” (defying death or speeding up the process?). In the Bulgarian language leisure time is also called “free time”, and in the case of old-age people, there is an excess of “freedom”, an excess of time, that actually marks the state of precarity (living in complete weightlessness, lacking of social gravity). Nobody cares what old people do, how they feel, how they live as social beings. The topic of the many faces of social precariousness can always awake some comparative reflection. Just an example: Bulgaria is known as the poorest country in the EU, but over 90% of Bulgarians had their own houses by the end of Socialism in 1989. Was that a “home-owning democracy”? I do not believe so. Rather, it was an instrument of authoritarian state regulation in order to keep citizens loyal to the regime, for it was that “state” that decided who and in what order could get housing. So, it seems, there are many different stories behind seemingly similar social facts. May be, this deserves to be discussed further.

Erin Lynch
(Concordia University, Montreal, Canada)
e.e.lynch.art@gmail.co

Comment: What struck me as a commonality across the two parts of the presentation was the emphasis on precarity across both fields – at once bodily, economic and social (in terms of shifting social networks/relations). This seems to be reflective of London’s status as a paradigmatic neoliberal city.

Question: Allowing that the research on the estates took place before the Covid-19 pandemic, how do you think the informal networks of exchange in both sites (the housing estate and the walking football club) shifted during/because of the pandemic? It seems as though these kinds of informal relations might have been disrupted by pandemic realities / formal regulations, but could also have been adapted in interesting ways.

Additional comments: I am intrigued by the Latour-inspired approach to following the ball (as object) in walking football. For me, what is most interesting about the ball in this context is the reconstruction of the bodily relationship to (and interaction with) the ball – and how that shifting

relationship carries with it not only the altered capacities of the player, but also cultural baggage regarding how one is *supposed* to play with a football (and what — if any — tension this creates in playing or learning to play).

Giuliana B. Prato
(University of Kent, UK)
g.b.prato@kent.ac.uk

This paper focuses on a demographic change that has become a major concern across the world; specifically, population aging and the socio-economic consequences, and related policy making, engendered by this demographic shift.

The two parts of the paper have several common elements that could be integrated more explicitly to strengthen the overall argument. In different ways, the two parts bring out the potential social isolation and loneliness of the older ages and the problems associated to pensioners' lower income, leading to feelings (and for some, a daily reality) of precariousness. Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson point out how different ethnic groups cope with this condition in a “superdiverse” London — notably, in some ethnic groups people can rely on the support of their extended family — and with demographic mobility and urban changes. In all cases, however, informality seems to be a key strategy in coping with poverty and precariousness; in particular, the use of informal exchanges and informal networks. The role of informality brings to mind Pardo's analysis of mutual help in central Naples (*Managing Existence in Naples*, 1996, Cambridge University Press), where the so-called *popolino* often “manage existence” through personal/resource networks — including kin, neighbours, “useful” contacts — and, thus, get access to public services that should be provided by the welfare system, but are virtually inaccessible.

The ethnography discussed in this paper could stimulate further analysis on two areas of contemporary welfare policies. In the first part of the paper, it would be interesting to see how different social groups make use of state benefits that may help pensioners to “stay independent”, such as the attendance or carer's allowance, and whether they make use of informal “live-in care” options. The second part of the paper raises questions on new health programmes, such as the so-called social prescribing, whereby doctors are encouraged to refer their patients to community leisure activities. One wonders whether this is a way for a declining welfare system to make individuals responsible for their own health and, thus, turn citizens' right to healthcare into citizens' duty to be healthy.