

# The (in)significance of citizenship in white British citizens' narratives of national belonging

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between citizenship and belonging through empirical analysis of citizens' narratives. Specifically, through analysis of interview narratives produced with twenty-six white British citizens, the paper explores whether/how citizenship is recognised as a basis for national membership by those for whom citizenship and national belonging are largely taken for granted. In doing so, the paper sheds new light on the meaning and significance of citizenship within informal economies of national belonging and draws critical attention to the role of discursive recognition in sustaining hierarchies of national belonging. The paper finds that formal status has limited significance as a practical marker of belonging and that, even where citizenship is constructed as significant, its significance is often undermined. It concludes that citizenship on its own is insufficient to guarantee substantive national belonging in the sense of being recognised and included as belonging to a national community and does not necessarily legitimise more ambiguous claims to national belonging.

## Introduction

*I am British born, British passport, but neon hijab and signposted skin  
Scanner goes off, obviously  
A woman feels over me and looks straight through me  
Random swabs are made, I am unmade  
Passport says British, her eyes say British born only*

*(Manzoor-Khan, 2018)*

Highly regarded by policymakers around the world (Erdal et al. 2018), citizenship is used both as a means to define and delimit the political community (Anderson et al. 2011) and to foster social cohesion, loyalty and solidarity within it (Joppke 2010). Research suggests that becoming a citizen increases well-being and political participation (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017), but states often want citizenship to come with identity, assuming that this produces belonging, and top-down efforts to thicken citizenship have drawn on ideas of national identity (Joppke 2010), using the imperfect overlap between nation and state to give citizenship texture and depth. In the UK, citizenship has also been used to exclude racialised 'others' from the nation (Tyler 2010, Hampshire 2005) and recent citizenship policy has coalesced around reified notions of British national identity, culture and values (Bennett 2018). However, despite their overlap, citizenship and nationhood remain analytically distinct concepts.

The distinction between citizenship and nationhood is often clearer to those citizens whose belonging is more ambiguous (Birkvad 2019, Jašina-Schäfer and Cheskin 2020). In the poem *British*

*born*, for example, Manzoor-Khan (2018) highlights the lived distinction between citizenship and national belonging experienced by British citizens of colour,<sup>1</sup> articulating a difference between what a passport says – ‘Passport says British’ – and what the eyes of others say – ‘British born only’. Invoking a dominant white gaze that distinguishes between ‘British’ and ‘British born only’, the poem exposes the horizontal reproduction of national belonging and the power of majoritised groups in relation to boundaries and hierarchies of belonging (Clarke 2020, Skey 2013, Wemyss 2006).

In the UK, research from the perspective of migrants and British citizens of colour has shown that in spite of birth-place, formal citizenship, and assertions of ‘Britishness’ experiences of national belonging have been and continue to be undermined by cultural exclusion and racisms across scales, from the micro-politics of everyday interaction to national law and policy (Benson and Lewis, 2019, Gilroy 1987, Hirsch 2018, Modood 1992, Nayak 2017, Phoenix 2011, Tufail and Poynting 2013). While self-identification, attachments and feelings are fundamental to any sense of belonging, belonging requires more than emotional attachment. As Jones and Krzyzanowski (2008, 49) note, ‘at some level belonging needs to be supplemented and recognised by the “others”, those who already belong to the group’. Belonging is, in other words, as much about being recognised as belonging as it is about self-identification, a full and substantive sense of belonging requiring recognition in the eyes of existing members (Wood and Waite 2011, Yuval-Davis 2006), and to a lesser extent other ‘others’ (Back et al. 2012). As Tyler (2008, 1) explains, ‘it is the majority that decides who is welcome, who has the right to claim belonging and ultimately who has the right to live there’. This informal gatekeeping, which operates alongside formal boundaries of citizenship, explains why for many people – and particularly those racialised as ‘other’ – experiences of national belonging do not neatly align with nationality.

While formal citizenship provides a basis for identity that may be difficult to delegitimise (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017), it cannot be assumed that claims based on citizenship will necessarily be recognised, accepted or considered meaningful as a basis for national belonging. Consequently, in thinking about contemporary politics of belonging it is crucial to consider the informal and relational horizontal dimensions through which citizenship is lived. In pointing to the dissonance between citizenship and national belonging, my intention is thus not to deny the importance of citizenship – which affords very real rights and protections and can be central to individuals’ sense of belonging (Birkvad 2019) – but to interrogate its significance within broader economies of recognition.

Within the fields of migration and citizenship studies, there have been several efforts to show how citizenship is experienced by naturalised, naturalising and/or racialised migrants and citizens (Bennett 2018, Birkvad 2019, Blackwood et al. 2015, Byrne 2012, Erdal et al. 2018, Fortier, 2021, Hagelund and Reegård 2011, Pogonyi 2019, Prabhat 2018). While much of this work suggests that established communities and ‘mainstream’ society affect individuals’ feelings of belonging, there has been limited comparable research on how citizenship is understood by dominant and/or majoritised groups, and what this means for how they recognise others as citizens and/or nationals (though see

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<sup>1</sup> I use ‘people of colour’ to refer to individuals and groups racialised as “non-white”. Although the term risks flattening divergent experiences of racism, it allows me to highlight shared experiences of exclusion.

Akinci 2020, Erdal et al. 2018). Responding to calls for empirical actor-oriented analyses of citizenship (Erdal et al. 2018), this article contributes to filling that gap through an examination of whether/how white British citizens – people for whom citizenship and national belonging are relatively secure and taken-for-granted (Skey, 2013) – recognise citizenship as a meaningful basis for national belonging. In focusing on this relatively privileged group, the paper sheds new light on the significance of citizenship within power-laden economies of belonging and recognition, appreciating that formal belonging may be undermined by informal processes of recognition (Birkvad 2019) and acknowledging the value of studying citizenship horizontally (Jašina-Schäfer and Cheskin 2020). Furthermore, through a critical focus on white British citizens' narratives and appreciation of their relative power as informal gatekeepers of the nation (Tyler, 2008), the paper contributes to literature on whiteness by revealing how white British narratives of citizenship work to sustain existing hierarchies of belonging.

The paper begins by reviewing existing literature on citizenship, nation, belonging, and the myriad connections between them. After outlining the particularities of the British case and research methodology, I then examine the empirical material produced in interviews with twenty-six white British citizens in two parts. In the first, I examine the narrative construction of citizenship as significant for national belonging and show how it was implicitly undermined even within those narratives. In the second, I examine narratives in which participants explicitly undermined citizenship's significance. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the main findings and outlines their significance for understanding citizenship and belonging in the UK and beyond.

### **Citizenship, nation and belonging**

Citizenship is a notoriously contested term with numerous meanings and uses (Koopmans, 2005; Shachar et al. 2017). While work has been done on different spaces, forms, and scales of citizenship (Painter and Philo 1995, Staeheli 2010), this paper focuses on formal citizenship, understood first and foremost as the formal relationship between individuals and states (Joppke 2007). Citizenship, in this sense, refers to membership of a political community (Howard 2006), as well as the rights and responsibilities conferred by that membership, and associated identities (Joppke 2007).

In distinguishing members from non-members, citizenship has the potential to 'ground identification' and strengthen belonging (Pogonyi 2019, 977). However, given the common conflation of nationhood and citizenship, nation and state, it may be unclear what citizenship grounds identity in or to, if not the nation, particularly in countries like the UK where citizenship is a weak and relatively recent concept (Joppke 1999). Citizenship and nationhood are routinely conflated in talk about nationality and nation-states, at times appearing 'virtually indistinguishable' (Cesarani and Fulbrook 1996, 147, Erdal et al. 2018), and ideas of nationhood have also been used to justify exclusions from citizenship (Fanning and Mutwarasibo, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite these overlaps, Hage (1998) argues that conceptual distinction can and should be maintained between the two; citizenship denoting membership

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the production of citizenship and nationhood as coterminous see Gans, 2017.

of the state, and nationhood membership of a nation. After all, as Yuval-Davis (1993, 625) explains, the hyphenation of nation and state ‘camouflages the only-partial overlap’ between the two.

Identification with a nation does not denote loyalty to a state (Connor 1978); nor does citizenship necessarily equate to a practical or emotional sense of national belonging (Hage 1998, Gilmartin 2013). Indeed, while research shows that people without formal citizenship can, and often do, feel a sense of belonging in and/or to a nation (Erdal et al. 2018), and may also be recognised as such by wider society (Akinci 2020, Anderson et al. 2011, Clarke, 2020), there is also evidence that citizenship may be more meaningful as an instrumental status or strategic practice than as a form of identification or site of belonging (Joppke 2019, 2010, Harpaz 2015, Harpaz and Mateos 2019, Mavroudi 2008, Wood and Gilmartin 2018). While citizenship is seen primarily in instrumental terms by some, this does not necessarily negate its emotional, symbolic and identificational importance for others (Pogonyi 2019). Rather, as Erdal et al. (2018) note, it suggests a pressing need to scrutinise the relationship between citizenship and belonging, allowing for ‘the fuzziness of belonging and its intersection with the rigidity of citizenship as legal status’ (706).<sup>3</sup>

In their conceptualisation of a ‘citizenship-belonging nexus’, Erdal et al. (2018) establish two central axes: the first representing relatively fluid experiences of (more or less secure) belonging, the second representing (more or less implicit) experiences of citizenship. In doing so, they bring the fuzzy experience of national belonging into dialogue with citizenship and draw out existing hierarchies of belonging. The resulting analysis identifies four groups – (1) people whose belonging is secure and citizenship implicit, who experience citizenship as prosaic and enjoy a secure sense of belonging; (2) people whose belonging is secure but for whom citizenship provides proof of belonging where it is questioned; (3) people whose belonging is insecure and citizenship implicit, who are not seen as belonging regardless of formal membership; and (4) people whose belonging is insecure and citizenship explicit. For the authors, the elucidation of these four groups highlights the fact that citizenship interacts with belonging in different ways for different people – including in relation to racialised ideas of nationhood – and that being a citizen ‘does not automatically equate with being seen as “one of us”’ (Erdal et al. 2018, 719). In examining citizenship’s significance among secure and relatively privileged white British citizens this paper expands Erdal et al.’s work by highlighting the flexibility and differential application of citizenship narratives and drawing attention to the role of secure citizens in reproducing and sustaining the hierarchies of belonging that make others less secure.

Research with migrants and racially minoritised groups acknowledges the role of society in recognising claims to belonging beyond a formal granting of citizenship (Benson and Lewis, 2019, Birkvad 2019, Blackwood et al. 2015, Erdal et al. 2018). As Birkvad (2019, 802) explains, ‘National membership is not only governed by the state from above, but also between ordinary people, employing tacit understandings of belonging’. Citizenship, then, is experienced as both a vertical relationship with a state and a horizontal relationship with fellow citizens. However, these relationships may matter

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<sup>3</sup> Although legal citizenship appears stable and rigid, Fortier (2021) explains that, in practice, citizenship has always been uncertain, flexible, and contingent.

differently depending on the security of one's position within the citizenship-belonging nexus. Birkvad (2019), for instance, found vertical recognition to be highly relevant to non-citizen denizens, while naturalised citizens tended to focus on horizontal recognition, particularly where formal status was devalued in racialised negotiations of belonging. Therefore, while citizenship may legitimise belonging and provide discursive basis for the claims of more ambiguous citizens (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017, Bloemraad 2018, Erdal et al. 2018), whether/how claims to belonging based on citizenship resonate requires research. By exploring whether/how white British citizens recognise citizenship as a basis for national membership, and the extent to which membership based on citizenship is considered meaningful by those who take both citizenship and national belonging largely for granted, this article contributes to that agenda.

### **The British case**

Conflation of nation and state is highly problematic in the UK where national identities have 'evolved in a highly implicit manner' and notions of Britishness sit alongside pre-existing national identities (McCrone and Kiely 2000, 19). Writers have, over several decades, attempted to understand the overlaps and distinctions between Britishness and its nested English, Scottish and Welsh identities,<sup>4</sup> often concluding that the former is a state identity and the latter national identities (e.g. McCrone and Bechhofer 2015).<sup>5</sup> This distinction has, however, often been stated, rather than empirically grounded (Modood 2016) and, as Leddy-Owen (2014, 1) notes, it is 'important not to exaggerate the extent to which Britishness and British identities can be characterised as civic or as somehow deracialised', especially given the exclusions experienced by British people of colour. There are also differences across Britain's constituent nations. In England, Englishness carries more racial connotations than Britishness (Leddy-Owen, 2012); yet Britishness and Englishness are still widely conflated (at least among white English people). Meanwhile, Scottish and Welsh people are more likely to distinguish Britishness from Scottish/Welshness as a supranational state identity denoted by citizenship (McCrone and Kiely 2000, McCrone and Bechhofer 2015) and in Scotland the strongly civic rhetoric around Scottishness is often contrasted with Englishness. This is the case, for example, among EU nationals in Scotland who perceive Scottish identity as welcoming and inclusive compared to Englishness (Sigona and Godin, 2019), despite evidence that the inclusive claims of Scotland's civic nationalists may be overstated (Davidson et al. 2018).

Another factor contributing to the unclear relationship between British nationhood and citizenship is the implicit, yet institutionalised, relationship between race and belonging. *De facto* British citizens, referred to as 'British subjects', only became citizens after the 1948 British Nationality

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<sup>4</sup> Although [Northern Ireland](#) is part of the UK, it has a complex relationship with Britishness that is beyond the scope of this article (see, for example, Ni Laiore (2002)).

<sup>5</sup> The fact that Britain is a state and was an empire should not negate the possibility that it may also be imagined as a nation. Indeed, to the extent that Britain is imagined as a single and meaningful community, research should remain open to the idea of Britain as a nation. As Modood (2016, 2) suggests, 'there is no reason to treat British as only a state identity and not also a national identity'.

Act, which conferred equal citizenship to all those born or naturalised in the UK or colonies via the shared status of ‘Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies’. Early British citizenship was thus based on the principle of *jus soli*, according to which all those born in the imperial territory became citizens. Since then, British citizenship has only become more restrictive. In the 1960s, after significant migration of citizens from the New Commonwealth, new legislation worked to draw formal distinction – albeit indirectly via patrilineage – between racialised citizens from the New Commonwealth and mostly white citizens from the UK and Old Commonwealth (Paul 1997, Hampshire 2005). The legislation reinforced the idea that some Britons were more British than others and formalised an understanding of nationhood as ‘derive[ing] from the historic ties of language, custom and race’ (Gilroy 1987, 46). Later, in what Tyler (2010, 62) identifies as ‘a pivotal moment in the design of British citizenship’, the 1981 British Nationality Act removed the automatic right to citizenship for those born in the UK as well as the entitlement to citizenship for those born in the Commonwealth, indirectly removing Commonwealth citizens’ right to live in the UK (Anderson, Gibney, and Paoletti 2011).<sup>6</sup> While race was not directly mentioned, the Act effectively ‘stripped rights away from British citizens on the basis of race’ (Bhambra, 2018, no page). As Tyler (2010, 63) explains, it ‘designed citizenship so as to exclude black and Asian populations in the Commonwealth while leaving “routes home” for white nationals born within the boundaries of the empire’.

More recently, there has been further tightening of the legal path to citizenship with the introduction of the Life in the UK test and a requirement for naturalising adults to pledge their commitment to the Queen, the state, and Britain’s laws and ‘democratic values’ at a citizenship ceremony. While tests, oaths, ceremonies and language requirements were designed to promote the integration of naturalising citizens and add value to citizenship (Home Office 2002), they also work to ‘migratise’ new citizens (Fortier, 2021, 15) and must be read in the context of the UK government’s subsequent policy of creating a hostile environment for (unwanted) immigrants, a policy that disproportionately affects racialised minorities (Jones et al. 2017, Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2017) and exists ‘in stark contradistinction’ to political narratives about community cohesion and shared national belonging (Tyler, 2010, 62). UK citizenship has also been framed ‘as a privilege not a right’ (Kapoor and Narkowicz 2019, 652) and new legislation allows citizenship to be withdrawn if it is thought to be in the public good (provided individuals are not made stateless). Again, this legislation disproportionately affects British citizens of colour, while placing new restrictions on the lives of dual-citizens (Kapoor and Narkowicz 2019) and effectively reproducing the long-established racialised hierarchies within Britain’s citizenry (Choudhury 2017). While not new, these racialised hierarchies, according to which some people’s rights and belonging are more recognised than others, have become more visible in recent years amid the racialised debates around Brexit (Benson and Lewis, 2019) and in the wake of the Windrush scandal (Fortier, 2021). Yet, while research demonstrates the existence of racialised inequalities in formal citizenship and its lived experience, there has hitherto been little

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<sup>6</sup> A similar boundary was constructed in Ireland via the 2004 Nationality and Citizenship Act which removed ‘*jus soli*’ rights from Irish-born children of immigrants (Fanning and Mutwarasibo, 2007).

empirical research on the reproduction of these inequalities among those for whom citizenship and belonging are largely taken-for-granted.

### **Producing narratives of nation and belonging with white British people**

This paper is based on analysis of interview transcripts produced with twenty-six white British adults in the suburbs of northeast London and west Essex as part of a broader project on the reproduction of boundaries and hierarchies of national belonging.<sup>7</sup> The interviews took place between spring 2015 (following Scotland's independence referendum) and spring 2016 (marked by the build-up to the UK Brexit referendum), a period when ideas of nation, citizenship and belonging were widely discussed. While this context made discussion of nation more pertinent, interviews explored everyday narratives of nation and belonging rather than political opinion, meaning that the data was not strongly marked by the political moment.

Although all of the participants had held British citizenship from birth and were broadly recognisable as part of Britain's white middle-classes – characterised by engagement in processes of distinction and an ability to establish their lives and values as normative and/or implicitly superior (Lawler 2005, Skeggs 2004) – it is important to recognise their heterogeneity. Indeed, while all the participants fell within Erdal et al. (2018)'s 'secure and implicit' category, the security of their belonging and the implicitness of their citizenship were not equivalent, with Jewish participants in particular articulating past challenges to belonging.<sup>8</sup> Participants' articulations of class varied, as did their proximity to whiteness, particularly in the case of Jewish participants,<sup>9</sup> and they also identified variously, and with differing intensities, with nationhood. Some participants identified strongly as British (but not English), others as English and British, some as English (but not British), and others as simultaneously British/English and Scottish.<sup>10</sup> Two participants had migrated from overseas – having been born to British parents in the colonies/Commonwealth – and six had at least one parent who had migrated to the UK, providing bases for identification beyond the UK. Despite these differences, the vast majority took their national belonging in the UK for granted as something that 'just is'. Although this did not mean they were oblivious to the privileges of British citizenship, they often played down the significance of nationhood, in some cases brushing it aside as something unimportant and not meaningful, either as a demonstration of anti-nationalism and/or in asserting more meaningful local identities.

Over 2-3 interviews, participants were asked about their identities, local change, integration and ideas of Britishness (which sometimes slipped into or overlapped with Englishness). While most

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<sup>7</sup> The research was approved by the Social Sciences and Arts C-REC at the University of Sussex (application ER/ALC28/1). All participants were fully informed, gave written and rolling consent, and received a copy of their transcript.

<sup>8</sup> Although in recent decades the area's Jewish community has been in decline, it is still above the national average and was once one of the largest in Europe (Garfield, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> With one exception – a middle-aged Jewish man – all the participants took their whiteness for granted, and some looked confused when I asked their ethnicity, presumably assuming that I could 'see' it.

<sup>10</sup> None of the participants identified as Welsh or Northern Irish.

research on the meaning of formal citizenship draws on narratives *about* formal citizenship, the data I draw on thus place citizenship within broader conversations about everyday life and nationhood, revealing when and how citizenship was considered relevant. Participants' narratives also provided insights into how they made sense of themselves and the world around them, as well as more abstract concepts like citizenship and belonging. Recognising that interview narratives are always the product of human encounter, my analysis looked not only as *what* people said, but what they *meant*, and *how* and *why* they said what they said (Riessman 2005), keeping my own identity as a young white British woman in mind. By examining the content and context of participants' narratives about citizenship in this way, as well as silences and contradictions within them (Stanley and Temple 2008), I aimed to better understand how citizenship was understood in relation to national belonging, as well as its relative significance within broader power-laden economies of national recognition.

### **Inclusivist exertions, exclusivist cultures**

When asked what Britishness is or what makes a person British, several participants suggested that Britishness was dependent on citizenship status and/or that being British was a matter of having a British passport.<sup>11</sup> While this glossed over the variety of British passports that exist<sup>12</sup> – demonstrating a lack of knowledge about nationality law that is perhaps unsurprising given that all participants felt secure in their own citizenship – it also revealed the extent to which Britishness was associated with formal citizenship. Yet it was clear that what participants meant when they talked about Britishness was different and, consequently, the suggestion that being British was about formal status and the passport could mean very different things.

On one hand, the centrality of formal citizenship to Britishness was expressed by participants who did not themselves identify as British (although they recognised that legally they were British citizens) and who understood Britain as a state, but not as a nation or basis for national identity. The clear separation of nation and state for these participants meant that when they said that citizenship determined Britishness, they were not talking about *national* belonging. Being British was a matter of legal status, but that did not mean it was meaningful as a basis for national belonging, certainly not compared to other, more exclusive, identities. Below, for example, Karen<sup>13</sup> – a woman in her 50s who identified strongly and 'spiritually' as English – asserts the importance of citizenship to Britishness but concurrently denies its significance as an identity, drawing a clear line between formal citizenship and meaningful personal identities:

Karen:       What makes a person British is having a British passport. That's the top and bottom of it. It has no other meaning because Britain is an artificial entity ...  
So, anybody can become British because that's all it means to me.

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<sup>11</sup> Participants also talked, more and less seriously, about British cultural traits and behaviours. However, given the subject of this paper, I focus here on narratives of formal citizenship.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-british-nationality>

<sup>13</sup> All names given are pseudonyms.



Karen: I have a British passport. If I go abroad, I fill in a form. ... You're handed a boarding card and your nationality's British ... But that's not actually part of an identity in my view.

In constructing Britishness as artificial and relatively meaningless, participants like Karen undermined the significance of citizenship for national belonging even while seeming to state its importance. That citizenship was presented as integral to Britishness did not, therefore, mean that it was necessarily understood as important or significant for belonging. As Bloemraad and Sheares (2017, 841) explain, 'For some people, citizenship might become an empty membership label'.

The ability to deny the significance of formal citizenship is, of course, a privileged one. Not everyone is able to so readily denounce its relevance and, for naturalised citizens, formal status may represent an important anchor for identity (Birkvad, 2019; Erdal et al., 2018; Pogonyi, 2019). In undermining the significance of citizenship for belonging in and to the nation, Karen indirectly positioned those British citizens who *did* base their national belonging on citizenship, or relied on formal citizenship to legitimise their belonging, as *less* national and *less* belonging, or as somehow artificial. And yet, paradoxically, her construction of Britishness was inclusive of all British citizens, regardless of ethnicity, race, or migration background. Indeed, some of the most open and inclusive definitions of Britishness were articulated by people like Karen who saw Britishness as a political or legal identity, as the extract below illustrates:

Amy: Do you think it's possible for immigrants to become British?

Karen: Oh yes. But not English.

Amy: What would it take for them to become English?

Karen: It's not possible. I could never become Indian. If I went to live in India for the next hundred years, I could never become Indian. I could become legally an Indian citizen, but I couldn't become Indian. And I don't think an Indian can ever become English. They can become British, legally British, they can integrate and speak English, they can go to schools, they can open businesses, they can do everything. But they can't become spiritually English ... but a Welshman can't become spiritually English, a Frenchman can't... [...] [It]'s not to say they wouldn't be fully integrated in every other respect. They'd be as British as I am, more so maybe in some respects.

Distinguishing between 'legal' Britishness and 'spiritual' Englishness – the latter constructed as more exclusive and more meaningful – allowed Karen to draw a line around an English nation that was exclusive of migrants, while still including them as citizens. Other participants similarly used the distinction between citizenship and nationhood to assert migrants' capacity to become British, but not English (citizens, but not nationals). These kind of comments seem to echo the 'inclusivist pretensions' of early British citizenship, which worked to include black and brown Commonwealth citizens within Britishness while maintaining their exclusion from white Englishness (Shilliam 2016, 245).

During interviews, exclusionary delineations between British and English were often justified on the basis that naturalised citizens get a British passport, not an English passport. This detail, which relied upon the distinction of citizenship and nationhood, enabled participants to articulate exclusions on non-racial terms while sustaining Englishness as white (the racial implications of the distinction often obscured by references to white ‘others’, in Karen’s case ostensibly white Welsh and French people). The British-English citizen-national dualism thus produced an illusion of inclusion that facilitated exclusion, the idea of open and inclusive British citizenship operating as a façade for the realities of exclusive nationalism. For participants like Karen, this meant that they could present a welcoming and inclusive attitude toward migrants, valued among many sections of London’s white middle-classes (Clarke, 2019), while still preserving an exclusive idea of Englishness.

In a different vein, the central importance of citizenship to Britishness was expressed by participants who identified as British (rather than, or as well as English), saw Britishness as both legal status *and* potentially meaningful national identity, and constructed inclusive visions of Britishness within which citizenship was positioned as an equalising force for belonging. Again, the distinction between citizenship and nationhood allowed these participants to perform ‘good’ ‘inclusive’ middle-class selves, although this time it was citizenship – presumed to be fixed and non-racial – that was seen to provide an acceptable boundary for exclusion. Despite asserting that being British was primarily about one’s passport, however, these participants tended to implicitly undermine the significance of citizenship for belonging by adding other qualifying factors, as Rachel and Kate do below:

Rachel: To me, it's just mainly the passport and ... mainly the passport and just a willingness I suppose, just an acceptance, a happy sort of acceptance of it. It's quite loose really, yeah. Which I think makes it quite an easy thing for most people in Britain to be.

Kate: I'm British, I was born in Britain, I've got a British passport, therefore I'm British. And I don't think it's anything more than that. I don't know whether I ... Do I feel that there are British values that I subscribe to and that's what makes me feel British? I don't know if there are. [...] When I think about what I am, my national identity, I think I literally ... I have a British passport, that's what it says. Or it says, 'United Kingdom' or whatever, but it's 'British'. So, I think that is basically what it is.

Rachel and Kate were in their late-30s/early-40s and had both grown up in the suburbs of north-east London. Kate identified matter-of-factly as English and British, while Rachel – who also identified as Jewish – saw herself as British but not English. Although both asserted that being British was mainly about the passport, their narratives revealed the parallel importance of other factors.

Rachel’s comment above was part of an interview in which she asserted an inclusive vision of Britishness. However, the fact that she felt the need to supplement formal citizenship with feelings of ‘happy acceptance’ – implying commitment and loyalty – seemed to suggest that the emphasis she placed on the passport was idealistic and overstated. Her comments also reflected the importance of

British values, which despite underpinning racialised logics have been widely constructed as an acceptable basis for exclusion (Clarke, forthcoming). Kate, meanwhile, drew heavily on birthplace – another non-racial and therefore relatively acceptable marker of belonging – when constructing herself as British. In doing so, she too implicitly undermined the significance of formal citizenship, even while asserting its importance, and her conflation of citizenship and birthplace also seemed to reflect a common but mistaken belief that people born in Britain automatically gain British citizenship.<sup>14</sup>

Although intended to be equalising and inclusive, Rachel and Kate’s comments suggest that citizenship alone may be a relatively weak indicator of national belonging, generally requiring other attributable factors. However, while their understandings of national belonging may be more exclusive than they first appear, both women appeared wholly unaware of the exclusive lines their comments could draw and did not associate *their* constructions of belonging (and non-belonging) with the reproduction of national hierarchies.

As in Kate’s comments above, the limited relevance of formal citizenship was also evident in some participants’ non- or partial deployment of citizenship when articulating their own national belonging. Indeed, while legal status was sometimes referred to, participants’ articulations of national selfhood were almost always supplemented by other, seemingly more meaningful markers, including culture, ancestry, and birthplace (Clarke, 2020). Only one participant was resolute in his belief that formal citizenship was the only factor. A Jewish man in his 50s, John – who identified as British but not English – had had his national belonging challenged and, perhaps influenced by the experience, drew a clear line, maintaining simply that ‘If we’ve got a British passport, we’re British.’ Although this may support suggestions that citizenship is most important for underpinning the belonging of those whose identities are more ambiguous, other Jewish participants and participants who had grown up overseas and might, therefore, be considered more ambiguous Britons, did not share John’s clarity.

### **Citizenship as insignificant**

As the previous section showed, the significance of citizenship for national belonging was often implicitly undermined even by participants who asserted its importance. However, others were more explicit in undermining the significance of citizenship, discursively constructing it as a very minor part of *being* national. Below, for example, Megan and Rob – both in their 30s – explain that, in their eyes, *who* someone is matters more than what passport they have. While for Rob, this was about where someone was from (in terms of genetics/heritage rather than birthplace), for Megan, it was a person’s attitude and values that made them British:

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<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that the UK has not granted birth right citizenship since 1981, many participants assumed this to be the case. As Dani (40s) told me: “obviously you’re British if you were born here”. This assumption is significant given Home Office deportations of people born in the UK (Anderson et al., 2016).

- Rob: I do feel as though in the eyes of the law they get a British passport and then they're considered as a British citizen. But in my opinion? Not really. They're still from wherever, Zimbabwe or...
- Megan: It can happen without getting that; that's just a passport. I think people get passports who shouldn't, who aren't British... That's just a bit of red tape... It's who the person is not what they've got. Definitely. [...] Yeah, how they've integrated, their attitudes, their... who they are as a person.

While Rob and Megan both presented citizenship as relatively insignificant, it was clear from their wider narratives that their intentions in making this point were different. Through our conversations Rob – who saw himself as British and English – spoke exclusively about nation, constructing a clear and impermeable boundary around the dominant white British group, which he perceived as under threat, reflecting popular narratives in England in the run up to Brexit (Virdee and McGeever, 2018). Seen in this context, Rob's comment about the irrelevance of citizenship, which clearly distinguished citizens from nationals, reads as an exclusionary redefining of the national community, based on a 'commonsense' idea that naturalised citizens (and their descendants) do not really belong and are not really national, despite their formal belonging (Fanning and Mutwarasibo, 2007, 441). The racialised nature of this exclusion was underscored by Rob's subsequent suggestion that white people from Zimbabwe, descended from imperial migrants, could be considered British if they came to the UK because they 'look British' and their DNA is British, which demonstrated the persistent salience of *jus sanguinis* principles among some of Britain's white middle-classes.

In Megan's case, the narrative context was different. Preferring to think of herself as British than English, Megan suggested that multiculturalism was an important part of Britishness and unlike Rob made concerted efforts to include migrants and people of colour within the national community. Asserting the limited significance of citizenship as 'just a passport' and 'bit of red tape', she suggested that migrants could become British and be accepted as 'one of us', part of a British nation, regardless of citizenship. By separating citizenship from national belonging and discursively positioning citizenship as relatively insignificant compared to 'who someone is', Megan worked to (re)define the national community as more fluid and permeable than formalised boundaries of citizenship. This allowed her to include non-citizen friends and family members who performed a particular kind of Britishness as belonging in and to the national community, while excluding people who 'get passports who shouldn't, who aren't British.' Distinguishing between citizenship and national belonging thus enabled Megan to challenge *formal* exclusions, while still drawing *informal* boundaries around the nation in relation to qualities of 'good' citizenship, including attitude and values. Although in practice such informal boundaries can be racialised and exclusionary (Anderson 2013; Clarke, forthcoming), they are generally more fluid and attainable than fixed markers of ancestry or birthplace.

While Megan and Rob's comments about the insignificance of citizenship must be seen in light of their own secure and implicit belongings (Erdal et al., 2018), they both highlight how other traits and attributes came to the fore when citizenship was set aside, each producing more and less permeable

informal boundaries to belonging. Although both participants articulated the limited significance of citizenship to belonging, they did so in different ways, with different intentions, and with different consequences for who was constructed and recognised as national, as British, and as belonging to the national community. In this sense, the narrative of citizenship as insignificant was flexible, meaning different things to different people. On one hand, the limited significance of citizenship was used to emphasise the fact that migrants could become British and be accepted as national, even without citizenship, suggesting that national boundaries of belonging were *more* permeable than formal citizenship (even if that permeability, in practice, was reserved for migrants who conformed to more dominant ideas of Britishness) (Clarke, 2020). On the other hand, the narrative of citizenship as insignificant could be used to undermine the belonging of naturalised citizens, despite their formal inclusion. Either way, it was clear that white British citizens' narratives of national belonging were highly flexible, aided by the partial overlap of citizenship and nationhood, and that citizenship did not necessarily legitimise claims for belonging beyond the political community.

Despite the timing of the interviews in the year leading up to the Brexit referendum, most participants had little to say when asked about citizenship, and very few had significant knowledge about UK citizenship law, again reflecting the security of their status. Most were, however, aware of the Life in UK test and, while they were usually unaware of the test's content, it nonetheless provided a focus for talk about citizenship and naturalisation. It was notable, therefore, that participants who mentioned the test tended to ridicule its content and belittle its significance, often suggesting that the version of Britishness presented in the test was flattened, lifeless, artificial and too far removed from everyday life. For example, Ann, who was in her 50s, identified as British and English, and had lived in London for several decades, suggested that you see 'better stuff on Facebook', while Linda – who was also in her 50s but identified as Scottish – referred diminutively to the test as 'the little test they have to do for nationality':

Linda: My son's girlfriend did her, um, the little test they have to do for nationality.

Amy: Citizenship test?

Linda: Citizenship exam. And there's a book that they can learn... But some of the things, I mean a lot of the things I didn't know. And does that make you a British national, knowing these... all these odd facts and things? I don't know. Some of it would be stuff that we'd've learnt at school, but a lot of them are quite obscure.

Such comments undermined the potential significance of the test for naturalising migrants, while reinforcing the idea – openly expressed by some – that taking a test is not how people become British; naturalised individuals become citizens, but remain non-nationals (Fanning and Mutwarasibo, 2007). This idea that naturalisation was less legitimate than other routes to national belonging (Erdal and Sagmo 2017), again facilitated by distinction between citizen and national, was further reinforced by participants' comments about white British people's inability to pass the test:

- Dani: There's this ridiculous citizenship exam that most of us wouldn't pass...
- Ben: Most of us wouldn't be able to answer them anyway.
- Ann: I mean if any of us did that exam I think we'd all fail it.

As these quotes illustrate, participants employed a specifically national deixis, positioning themselves securely within the national 'we' (one within which I was un-problematically included). In doing so, they revealed an underlying view of there being a 'British people', 'national community' and a 'we' that was distinct from those Britons who become British through naturalisation, again reproducing the imagined distinction between nationals and non-national citizens.

## Conclusion

Recognising the importance of unpicking the inequalities embedded within what Erdal et al. (2018) refer to as the 'citizenship-belonging nexus', this paper has sought to examine the significance of citizenship within white British conceptions of national belonging in order to shed new light on the relative significance of citizenship within informal economies of national belonging and draw critical attention to the role of white British citizens in sustaining hierarchies of belonging.

Despite government efforts to add value and meaning to British citizenship in recent decades, the data presented suggest that among those for whom citizenship is largely taken-for-granted formal status has limited significance as a practical marker of national identity and belonging. While several participants suggested that it was the passport (i.e., formal citizenship) that made someone British, citizenship alone generally appeared to be an insufficient basis for substantive national belonging and, even where citizenship was constructed as significant, its significance could be implicitly undermined. In fact, several participants undermined the significance of formal citizenship, both explicitly – in comments about it being 'just a piece of paper' or 'red tape' that did not make someone British – and implicitly – in the greater salience given to other markers (e.g., birthplace, attitude, heritage) and identities (including Englishness). Thus, while citizenship clearly mattered in terms of rights, benefits, and psychological well-being, it was unlikely to guarantee substantive national belonging in the sense of being recognised and included as belonging to the national community and did not necessarily legitimise more ambiguous claims to belonging. Inclusion within the *political* community guaranteed just and only that. This finding supports previous arguments about the non-equivalence of citizenship and national belonging (Hage, 1998, Erdal et al. 2018; Akinici, 2020) and further demonstrates that naturalisation 'does not necessarily translate into full membership and equality with the majority population' (Birkvad, 2019, 799).

The paper also highlights the flexibility of white British citizens' narratives about citizenship and national belonging. This includes the flexible use of overlapping national identities (particularly Britishness and Englishness) which allowed participants to position racialised 'others' outside the national community while maintaining an image of open and inclusive citizenship – and the flexible

construction of citizenship as significant or insignificant, depending on the person in question. The flexibility of belonging narratives, enabled by more and less explicit separations of citizenship and nationhood, was reflective of the security of participants' own citizenship and sense of belonging, as well as the relative power they had to construct the nation as white middle-class Britons. It was, however, also clear that the flexibility of narratives about citizenship and belonging, which existed in contradistinction to perceptions of citizenship as *inflexible* (Fortier, 2021), enabled some participants to articulate racialised exclusions in seemingly non-racial terms, demonstrating how white British narratives of citizenship could work to sustain existing racialised hierarchies of belonging.

Overall, the paper makes two main contributions. Firstly, through a focus on the understandings of relatively secure and normalised white middle-class British citizens, the paper helps fill an empirical gap in migration and citizenship studies, which in recent years has (rightly) focused on the experiences and perceptions of naturalised migrants and racially minoritised citizens. In doing so, it draws critical attention to the role of horizontal recognition and demonstrates the potential benefit of attending to discursive power in studies of belonging for revealing the mechanisms through which boundaries and hierarchies are (re)produced and sustained. Secondly, the article contributes to existing literature on the meaning and experience of citizenship by revealing the relative insignificance of citizenship as a practical marker of national belonging. Given that naturalisation is often 'motivated by a symbolic need to belong in the nation-state' (Birkvad, 2019, 799), this has important implications for naturalising migrants and academics interested in migrant integration and belonging. It also has implications for policymakers who attempt to foster national belonging through citizenship acquisition since the possibilities for producing substantive belonging are evidently limited by informal boundaries and hierarchies, many of them racialised. While citizenship seems to guarantee inclusion within a *political* community, it is clear that national belonging, although related, is understood differently.

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