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Reproducing belonging in and through genealogical narratives: Hierarchies, exclusion, and power

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Abstract

Traditionally associated with anthropologists, genealogy is increasingly recognised as a concern for sociology with existing research highlighting the importance of genealogical imaginations for individuals' identity formation and belonging. In this article, I argue that sociologists can play a much greater role in attempts to understand and unpack the wider role and significance of genealogical thinking and practice, particularly in terms of its productive potential and impact on social inclusion and belonging. Through the article, I bring existing literature on genealogy into dialogue with sociological work on hierarchies of belonging and draw on a subset of empirical interview data to illustrate the potential further contributions of sociology to this field of research.

Keywords: Belonging, exclusion, family history, genealogy, narratives, hierarchies, race

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1 | Introduction

From family stories transmitted orally across generations to the meticulous documentation of lineage, genealogy, and family history more broadly, have long captivated people across cultures (Erben, 1991; Zerubavel, 2012). In recent years, technological advancements, including the digitation of archives and genetic testing, have made family history research more accessible and helped to boost its popularity. In the UK, the practice has underpinned twenty seasons of the television show '*Who do you think you are*', demonstrating a public interest in family stories beyond those who actively engage in genealogical practices. Growing public interest has been mirrored by increasing academic interest in genealogy – including family history and genetic genealogy – in terms of motivations (Shaw, 2019; Moore et al., 2020), practices (Bottero, 2015), effects on familial relationships (Moore et al., 2020), individual identities and sense of self (Kramer, 2011 Bottero, 2015), and entanglements with individuals' sense of belonging and relatedness (Edwards, 2000; 2018; Nash, 2008).

Genealogy refers to the study and documentation of biological descent and lineage (Erben, 1991; Moore et al., 2020). In practice, however, many genealogists are also family historians, engaged in the wider investigation of family stories. Genealogy ‘shades into’ and/or exists alongside family history and biography (Nash, 2002: 30) and genealogical practices can also encompass local and social histories, and – increasingly – DNA testing. In this paper, I take genealogical practices to include various kinds of family history work, including genetic testing and heritage travel, and use genealogical narratives to refer to the stories people produce about the family histories of themselves and others, which I argue are reflective of individual and collective genealogical imaginaries. Genealogy is thus more than a practice; an imaginary, a way of thinking about and understanding the social world and one’s place in it. The extent to which these imaginaries are based on research and ‘facts’ also varies. While standards of proof are important for professional genealogists (Moore et al., 2020), for others, genealogical imaginaries – the way people ‘envision ancestry, descent, and other forms of relatedness’ (Zerubavel, 2012: 11) – are shaped by family stories, as well as cultural and societal discourses of relatedness, place and belonging.

Within the interdisciplinary academic literature, research has established the ‘unmistakably social’ nature of genealogy and ideas of relatedness (Zerubavel, 2012: 3), as well as the deep entanglement between ideas of roots and contemporary politics of belonging, race, and ethnicity (Nash, 2008; 2016). Yet, despite this social dimension, the vast majority of empirical research has focused on individual practices and identities, rather than genealogy’s broader social effects and political significance. Where a broader macro-sociological approach has been taken, the focus has also tended to be on political or media-driven genealogical discourses (e.g. Fortier, 2012), rather than the social impacts of individual narratives. Taking a different approach, in this article I examine the productive potential of genealogical thinking, focusing on the way that individuals’ genealogical narratives and imaginaries underpin and reproduce constructions of place-based belonging that manifest in the social world as exclusionary and hierarchical politics of belonging. This is important in the UK context where public and political discourse (e.g. around Brexit) and events like the Windrush scandal continue to demonstrate the importance of being perceived as belonging in time for one’s ability to belong in the present (Bhambra, 2016). But it also has broader relevance across contexts where national belonging has been autochthonised and hierarchical divisions lay the ground for postcolonial racism (Sharma, 2022).

The article is based on a subset of interview data produced with white, middle-class British people as part of a larger study on British national identity and belonging. Given the shifting and manipulating of Britain’s national community over time and in relation to imperial motivations, postcolonial multiculturalism, and contemporary migration, the British case helps to shed light on the different and complex layers of belonging, providing an instrumental case-study of their reproduction. Through the analysis I examine the ways that genealogy was employed in the reproduction of exclusive constructions of belonging, focusing on two participants who engaged strongly with genealogical thinking, and show how their narratives connected with and underpinned autochthonous

logics and racialised hierarchies of belonging. Notably, while genealogy can destabilise essentialist identities and is not necessarily regressive (Nash, 2002; Edwards, 2012), in my research, the most exclusionary constructions of belonging were strongly associated with genealogical narratives. However, the decision to focus on exclusionary constructions of belonging is also part of a broader effort to reveal the ways that relatively privileged white middle-class Britons contribute to the reproduction of exclusionary hierarchies of belonging (Clarke, 2020; 2021).

The paper brings the interdisciplinary literature on genealogy into dialogue with sociological work on boundaries and hierarchies of belonging (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Wimmer, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Phoenix, 2011; Back, Sinha and Bryan, 2012; Clarke, 2020). In doing so, I attempt to take this literature in a new, more critical, direction by examining it through the lens of boundary and hierarchy-making. I argue that the application of these sociological frameworks for understanding belonging as something that is produced, maintained, and reconstructed horizontally (via boundaries) and vertically (as hierarchy), has potential for enhancing interdisciplinary understanding of genealogy and family history, particularly in bringing individual practices into dialogue with wider social structures and discourses.

Following this introduction, part two presents existing literature on genealogical practices and imaginaries, drawing on literature from anthropology, geography, history, and sociology, and part three introduces key sociological work on boundaries and hierarchies of belonging. After outlining the methods used to produce the empirical data, I then analyse two participants' narratives through the theoretical lens of hierarchies of belonging, highlighting the significance of genealogical imaginaries to participants' exclusionary constructions of belonging. Finally, I conclude by arguing that sociologists can – and should – play a greater role in unpacking the significance of genealogical thinking and practice for contemporary modes of belonging.

2 | Genealogical practices and imaginaries

Existing literature on genealogical practice has tended to privilege individual experiences and affects. Within this literature, much has been written about individuals' motivations. While research shows that genealogy is intrinsically enjoyable as a leisure practice (Bottero, 2015), many writers contend that genealogical practices in the West are driven by feelings of disconnection stemming from individualisation, globalisation, secularism, and postcolonial migration (Lambert, 1996; Basu, 2007, Erben 1991). Others suggest that increased multiculturalism has triggered interest in roots and rootedness, driven by individual quests for meaning, coherence, and belonging. Such macro-level drivers may not, however, be recognised by genealogists, who Shaw (2020) finds more likely to cite family-specific or individualist motivations.

The search for ontological security, self-discovery, identity and belonging are all widely cited motivators for individuals' engagement in genealogical practice. By connecting the self to previous generations, places, and to the past in general, genealogy, like history more broadly, is 'a resource for identity-work' (Kramer, 2011: 391). People 'put the past to work' (Edwards, 2000: 36) in order to

make claims to identity and belonging. However, this is a selective process – part of a creative project of self – and when, how and why people choose to make pasts and relationships explicit may vary over time and space, reflecting ‘desires of the present’ (Barnwell, 2013: 265; Edwards, 2000; Kramer, 2011). Individuals engaged in genealogical research choose which lines to follow and focus on, and may choose to reject others (Nash, 2008; Shaw, 2019). As Lambert explains, family history involves ‘a significant degree of invention’ (1996: 138) and ‘imagination’ (2002: 123). Genealogical practice can also involve a re-shaping of one’s understanding of self, including through what Kramer (2015) refers to as ‘bioconvergence’. As new information is uncovered, it is processed subjectively by each individual and may be incorporated into their personal genealogical narrative, involving a reshaping of one’s identity (Kramer, 2015), including in relation to others (Moore et al., 2020).

Recognising this active dimension, Zerubavel (2012) explains that, rather than passively inheriting our ancestors, we use genealogical narratives to *construct* them (p.10). According to Edwards (2000), closeness and remoteness can be actively ‘mobilized for particular reasons’ (p.20), although the elements and connections available are ‘not infinitely elastic’ (p.19). There is also a social limit to their relevance. As Kramer notes (2011: 387), ‘Genealogy may create connections, but the bonds it creates can be ‘stretched’ too far in time and space to be adequately meaningful.’

While these authors all stress the creativity involved in producing genealogical identities, Bottero (2015) argues that ‘features of ‘identity-work’ emerge as a consequence of how the practice is organised, rather than primarily as the outcome of personal choice or individual creativity’ (p.538), noting, for example, how creativity and selectiveness may be constrained by the records available (p.544-545). Nonetheless, genealogy evidently offers opportunities for individuals to justify, assert, or disavow connections to people and place by proving (or disproving) a connection. It is, therefore, not only about bringing individual kin closer (Kramer, 2011; Cannell, 2011), but connecting to wider communities, cultures and places (Nash, 2002) and attesting authenticity (Barnwell, 2013). Genealogy provides what Kramer (2011) describes as a ‘geographical and/or temporal “place to stand”’, a spatial and temporal location that offers a sense of rootedness, helping individuals to make sense of themselves and their place in the world (p.392). In this way, genealogical narratives can help account for, and give meaning to, the self in the present, while also offering ontological security and connection in times of dislocation or discomfort (Kramer, 2011: 380; Basu, 2005; Erben, 1991).

As the language of roots and groundedness indicates, genealogical imaginaries are typically placed, often with an essentialist logic connecting bodies to land. Nash (2003) identifies this as linked to a nostalgic longing for a time ‘when place, identity, culture and ancestry coincided’ (p.179), even if such a time never existed. She also notes that genealogical connections to place can be ‘experienced in intensely affective and embodied ways’ (2008: 71). An embodied experience of place as shared with one’s ancestors may involve physically connecting to the land, as in heritage travel or ‘roots’-tourism (Nash, 2008; Basu, 2005; Timothy, 2008) and return migration (Yankholmes and Timothy, 2017), but can also be part of everyday life for those who reside in the same place as their ancestors (Edwards, 2018).

Genealogical connections can also be experienced remotely, but nonetheless bodily, through DNA testing. Genetic genealogy offers an additional tool for producing or articulating identities and claims to belonging, one that is especially valuable given the status afforded to DNA as the ‘final arbiter of truth’ (Nelson, 2016: 4; Scully et al., 2013). However, according to Zerubavel (2012), ‘social logic’ often overrides ‘the biological reality [DNA] supposedly reflects’ (p.9) and people are also able to discursively work through and interpret genetic genealogy results in ways that make sense to them and/or support existing identity narratives. For example, Scully et al. (2013; 2016), found that Viking migrant ancestry could be used tactically to enhance claims to indigeneity and Britishness through its association with the national past.

Zerubavel (2012) identifies ‘tactics’ within the construction of genealogical narratives, arguing that genealogies are routinely ‘manipulated’ to ‘accommodate personal and collective agendas’ (p.78). As this implies, genealogical imaginaries are not just ways of thinking about, making sense of, and narrating the self, but ways of making sense of others, including in relation to the self and to place. They thus have impact beyond the individual or family, and beyond those involved in genealogical practices, in terms of producing and reproducing discursive categories, boundaries and hierarchies of inclusion (and exclusion). While it is vital that research attend to these constructions, as well as their wider social impacts and consequences, to date, this has received far less attention than the motivations and experiences of individual genealogists.

A notable exception is Fortier’s work (2012) which links genetic mapping and wider narratives of identity, race and belonging, arguing that the context in which genetic relatedness is mapped between ancient and contemporary inhabitants matters (p.159). Noting that ‘genetic knowledge travels outside the walls of the laboratory and is used in various domains of social life’ (p.154), Fortier calls attention to powerful discourses that shape belonging, including the idea of ‘European indigeneness’. Nash’s work on ethnic and national identities (2002; 2008; 2016) also shows how ideas of roots and origins are entangled with politics of nation, race and ethnicity. Looking at, but also beyond, the individual, Nash describes genealogy as ‘a practice through which ideas of personal, familial, collective, ethnic and sometimes national senses of culture, location, and identity are shaped, imagined, articulated, and enacted’ (2002: 28).

While Fortier (2012) highlights the potential dangers of genetic narratives, Nash (2002) suggests that searching for roots – despite being seen as backward-looking and essentialist – cannot be read as ‘necessarily regressive’ (p.28). Rather, genealogy should be recognised as having potential to both reinforce *and* trouble essentialist and exclusionary identity categories, to call ‘the naturalness of the nation into question’, ‘anchor and protect exclusive national cultures’ and/or ‘rework the nation as hybrid and heterogeneous’ (ibid., p.47-48). Others have further asserted the progressive potential of genetic genealogical practices, including for connecting people across other lines of difference and fostering cosmopolitan conceptions of belonging (Kramer, 2015; Mountain and Guelke, 2007). However, contrary to Fortier (2012), these arguments tend to focus on individuals and stop short of drawing out the wider implications for the politics of belonging.

As well as providing resources for identity claims, ancestral connections to particular places – real or imagined – may foster or support autochthonous claims to authenticity, ownership and/or entitlement in ways that are inherently social, relational, and productive. But genealogical thinking can also be used to make sense of others and their place in the world, including people who do not have the power to contest their interpretations. Crucially, some people inevitably have more power over their construction and positioning within hierarchies of belonging than others.

3 | Boundaries and hierarchies of belonging

Belonging is not natural but produced, performed, and maintained (Wood and Waite, 2011) and, while self-identification is fundamental to any sense of belonging, belonging requires more than emotional attachment. As Jones and Krzyanowski explain, ‘at some level belonging needs to be supplemented and recognised by the ‘others,’ those who already belong to the group’ (2008: 49). Belonging is, in other words, as much about being recognised as it is about self-identification, a substantive sense of belonging requiring recognition – if not acceptance – in the eyes of existing members (Taylor, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 2011) and, to a lesser extent, external others (Paz, 2013). The importance of recognition is also shown in empirical work. Ratna (2014), for example, identifies a ‘perennial quest for social acceptance and belonging’ among older British Gujaratis and associated desires to be seen as ‘valued members of the nation’ (p.2).

Quests for recognition have often been conceptualised in relation to boundary-crossing, a key cross-cutting theme in the sociology of nationalism (May et al., 2020). Work on boundaries has a long history in this field, including in Anderson (1983)’s theorisation of nations as imagined communities in which he foregrounds the limited nature of community as an inherent feature of nations. Within the sociology of ethnicity and migration, researchers have also demonstrated the significance of boundary-making and maintenance to the formation and persistence of communities, noting that boundaries are never fixed and who is included/excluded may change over time (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2008).

In her work, Yuval-Davis (2006; 2011) explains that belonging involves active and ongoing processes of boundary-making that operate within frameworks of power to separate “us” from “them”, involving ‘the inclusion or exclusion of particular people, social categories and groupings [...] by those who have the power’ (2011: 18). However, as Anthias (2008: 9) notes, belonging is not just about boundaries, but ‘hierarchies which exist both within but across boundaries.’ While boundaries are formed through processes of differentiation and constitute horizontal ‘lines of separation or contact’ between individuals or groups, hierarchies divide vertically through processes of stratification (Newman and Paasi, 1998: 191; Anthias, 2016; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). Both concepts are inherently relational, their position and meaning shifting over time, and both are entangled with power; boundaries produced and maintained by existing group members and hierarchies suggestive of top-down relations (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Leitner and Miller, 2007). As I argue elsewhere (Clarke, 2020), the point at which the two intersect is crucial as this is where difference comes to be organised

hierarchically. Boundaries are not necessarily hierarchical and a lower position in a hierarchy does not necessarily constitute exclusion; however, we need to recognise when and where they are produced as such. Otherwise, the marginalisation of minoritised groups may be masked by their inclusion within less substantive boundaries.

Empirical work on hierarchies of belonging in the UK has tended to fall into one of two camps. In one, research has shown how hierarchies are formalised in institutions (Aliverti, 2018), discourse (Wemyss, 2009), and policy (Bhambra, 2016; Yuval-Davis et al., 2017). Here, researchers have shed light on the structures and logics that underpin hierarchies to show how they suppress migrants and minoritised Britons. In the other, researchers have examined the negotiation of hierarchies of belonging by minoritised groups (Back et al., 2012; Phoenix, 2011; Ratna, 2014), including ostensibly white minorities (Hickman et al., 2005; Lulle et al., 2018).

In work with young migrants in London, Back et al. (2012) identify complex hierarchies of belonging involving selective and conflict-ridden processes of inclusion and exclusion that position people as ‘contingent insiders’. Contingency is also evidenced by Phoenix (2011), who documents Somali girls’ strategies to ‘shift up’ hierarchies of belonging, including by distancing themselves from other low-down groups (a tactic also used by EU migrants in the UK (Lulle et al., 2018)). Ratna similarly shows how British Gujaratis make claims to ‘activate their citizenship and belonging’ in relation to racial hierarchies that undermine that belonging (2014: 4). As these studies show, migrants and racially minoritised Britons are not passive in relation to hierarchies of belonging, often constructing identities outside existing hierarchies (Back, 1996) or within new ones (Back et al., 2012). Nevertheless, this agency does not negate a lack of power relative to other groups.

Ideas of shared descent are highly significant to both the articulation of exclusionary place-based identities and reproduction of hierarchies of belonging (Clarke, 2018). In previous work, I outline three hierarchies of national belonging – ‘belonging in,’ ‘belonging to,’ and ‘being of Britain’ – reflecting, respectively, the civic, ethno-cultural, and genetic dimensions of nationhood (Clarke, 2020). While migrants and ethnically minoritised Britons can be, and often are, recognised as belonging in and to Britain, they are much less likely to be considered *of* Britain in the sense of belonging to an imagined genealogical national community (ibid.). Moreover, even within genealogical communities of belonging, there are hierarchies as people position self and other according to strength of connection, depth of attachment, and authenticity (Nash, 2008: 71).

According to Barnwell (2013: 266), ‘in genealogical discourse, there is an implicit hierarchy... from the native to the expatriate’. Sharma (2022) associates such hierarchies to an autochthonous world view within which the ‘National-Native’ is produced as one who *naturally* belongs and ‘native-ness’ provides the primary ground for making legitimate claims (p.639). She further also notes that the hierarchical division between allochthony and autochthony is particularly challenging to overcome since ‘it is nearly impossible to become native’ and the border between the two is thus ‘largely impassable’ for (p.640).

In what follows, I explore the role of genealogical narratives in underpinning exclusionary constructions of belonging through empirical analysis of two participants' interviews. While not representative, their narratives illustrate the potential application of hierarchies of belonging to a sociology of genealogy and add empirical weight to the literature on this kind of exclusion.

4 | Methods

The data presented in this article were produced as part of doctoral research on British national belonging. Contrary to previous work, the study focused on the role of Britain's white middle-classes, broadly defined, in the (re)production of boundaries and hierarchies of belonging. Through 2015 and 2016, I conducted multiple interviews with 26 white British residents in north-east London and west Essex. The area's large and well-established ethnic minority populations, alongside its proximity to the super-diversity of central London and entanglement with East London's renowned migration histories, made it an ideal location for examining the complexities of postcolonial belonging.

Initially, participants were self-selecting, recruited via online posts and strategically placed flyers. Later participants were purposively recruited to produce a more age- and gender-balanced sample. All participants had had British citizenship from birth, identified with Britishness, albeit in different ways, and were broadly recognisable as part of Britain's white middle-classes, understood as a heterogeneous group who nonetheless share a relatively privileged sense of belonging in and to Britain (Skey, 2010; Clarke, 2020).

I was interested in how participants imagined the nation and national community, the idea being that – as relatively privileged and culturally normalised Britons – their imaginaries would shed light on dominant conceptions of who and what is national. Although our ability to access individuals' imaginaries is always limited, interview narratives offered a window onto them. Interviews asked participants about their lives and families, their local area, migration, integration and national identity, all with the intention of unpicking understandings of national self and other. The research was thus not directly about genealogy or genealogical practices. Yet, the importance of family histories and genealogical ideas of roots and descent for participants' understandings of self (and other) *as national* was clear in many of the interviews.

The perceived relevance of ancestry varied across the 26 participants. One said he had 'no interest in the past at all' and felt comfortable with the knowledge he had going back just two generations. Another – reflecting on her father's interest – commented 'it's so remote... what's the point really?'. However, several participants did like the idea of rooting themselves in time. Among them, two male participants stood out for the exclusive way that they engaged with genealogy: Paul and Rob. Although the explicit exclusion in their narrative was atypical, and they were also the only participants to mention having taken a genetic ancestry test – other participants' narratives were marked by more subtle and implicit exclusions.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a combination of thematic coding – based on themes in the literature and ideas arising during fieldwork – and narrative analysis. In the

next section, I present analysis of Paul and Rob's narratives through the lens of belonging, paying particular attention to the way that boundaries and hierarchies were (re)produced. Taken together, the analysis shows how genealogical ideas can be operationalised discursively in ways that position other people as lower in the hierarchy of belonging, feeding into and underpinning exclusionary constructions of national belonging.

5 | Reproducing hierarchies through genealogical narratives

5.1 | Paul

Paul – 60s, born and brought up in west London – described himself as 'native' based on an idea that his ancestors had 'always been here':

I'm Native Briton, with a capital N. You know, in the same way that you have Native Americans, or Aboriginal Australians, you know people who have been there for thousands of years, whose roots are there. You know, my ancestors didn't sort of come here, I don't know, two generations ago; but they've always been here, probably since the last ice-age.

In asserting his family's supposed ubiquitous and continual ancestral presence in Britain, Paul staked a strong genealogical claim to belonging based on territorial presence. Perceiving himself as having been present in Britain over several generations, his body extending temporally through blood connections to ancestors, provided a narrative logic for claiming and authenticating autochthonous belonging. At the same time, Paul made explicit distinction between himself – as 'native' – and presumably 'non-native' others whose physical presence in Britain went back less far. This distinction demonstrates how genealogical narratives may not just be about rooting the self (Kramer, 2011; Basu, 2007), but rooting the self *over others*. In Paul's case, a genealogically informed logic of belonging as developing through ancestral presence was used to exclude, or at least marginalise, the British-born children and grandchildren (even great-grandchildren) of migrants within a national hierarchy of belonging. While they could be living *in* Britain, they were not *of* Britain (Clarke, 2020) and were positioned by Paul firmly outside of any 'native' national community by virtue of their migrant heritage.

The further back in time and space one's ancestry goes, the stronger the claim to autochthony and the higher one sits within the hierarchy of belonging. The understanding of himself as embedded not only in place, but also in its remote past, was central to Paul's construction of autochthonous belonging. Even so, the time scales in his narrative seemed remarkably long. For many, two generations would be considered a significant period of familial presence in a place, but Paul's understanding of his ancestral presence extending back 11,000 years to the last ice-age seem to negate the significance of two generations. The length of Paul's genealogical imagination begs the question of what length of presence is required to claim belonging; and when is someone 'too recent' to be seen as belonging (Higgins, 2018)? Indeed, while there is a social limit to the relevance of ancestral connections (Kramer, 2011), the creative nature of genealogical narratives means that even very

distant connections *can* be made meaningful, especially where those connections support a personal identity narrative or strongly held framework of belonging.

Of course, whether such narratives carry weight will vary depending on the audience. In my case, following Paul's suggestion that he could trace his family to the last ice-age, I laughed, assuming he was exaggerating for effect. Unamused, Paul responded by suggesting that from my appearance – by which he meant my whiteness – the same could be said for me. The suggestion revealed that Paul's understanding of indigeneity was read from the skin, and through our conversations it became clear that his exclusion of migrants and their descendants was deeply connected to an understanding of national belonging based on biological conceptions of 'race'. Below, Paul clearly distinguishes between corporeally white people whose history, he assumes, is 'here', and people of colour whose history, he assumes, lies elsewhere:

They talk about 'our history', 'our culture', 'our ancestors' and I think, "Well whose?" "Whose history? Whose ancestors? Whose culture?" Not the woman's in the burqa, or that black guy. That's not his history. No matter how nice he is it's not his history! His history is in Africa or the West Indies or wherever.

Paul's explicitly racialised genealogical imaginary was based on an idea of a historically pure and homogeneous white Britain which overlooked the fact that people's relationships with Britain rarely begin 'at the moment they or their ancestors got off the plane or boat' (Sayyid in Tyler, 2012: 20), that people across the world were, for centuries, contributing to Britain's empire (Bhambra, 2016), and that white Britons also have histories beyond the UK. For Paul, privileging ancestral presence on 'these islands' over and above other forms of connection, provided a language for articulating racialised exclusion, the hierarchical division of autochthon and allochthons laying the ground for postcolonial racism (Sharma, 2022).

Paul comments revealed how migrant heritage was read somatically from racialised bodies and the importance of the body was further evidenced by his engagement with genetic genealogy. Paul's decision to genetically test his ancestry seemed primarily driven by the desire to authenticate his identity as 'white' and 'Native'. He told me that he had been 'sort of preparing [him]self, emotionally' because he'd always thought his grandmother 'looked a bit Swahili' and believed he might have a black ancestor, which would have challenged his identity:

Who knows? I mean there've been black people here for a long time, perhaps I've got a black ancestor somewhere. But, um, so I was sort of, you know prepared, you know. If that's what you've got that's what you've got. You can't deny the truth, can you?

Although he claimed that genetic ancestry could not be denied, Paul narrated his results – which showed genetic heritage from across Europe – in a way that made sense to him and supported his understanding of himself as 'native', working his genetic heritage into his identity (Kramer, 2015). Below, for example, he *re*-constructs himself as a native European, explaining that there is no such thing as an English or British 'race' anyway (even while suggesting that there *is* a European 'race'):

I must admit I was really pleased when it turned out that I'm completely European. And you can't actually- There's no 'English race', or even British race, but there is a European race. [...] You recognise a European when you see them.

Through this narrative, Paul works to protect his carefully constructed identity as a 'Native Briton', using his whiteness and genetic Europeanness to legitimise an autochthonous belonging in Britain. While this involved broadening his understanding of the national community to incorporate other white Europeans, it allowed him to continue excluding people of colour (Kramer, 2015).

5.2 | Rob

Rob was in his thirties and lived at home with his parents, primarily due to local house prices. He knew a lot about his family history and that knowledge underpinned his sense of belonging. Like Paul, Rob used his family's ancestral presence to assert his belonging as natural, legitimate and authentic, positioning himself at the top a national hierarchy of belonging. He also connected that belonging to entitlements in the present, notably articulating that entitlement in opposition to less-entitled others:

I do feel as though those communities ... if they've moved in they say 'Oh yeah but we're paying our taxes'. Yeah, but you've only been paying them for five minutes. My family history's been paying these taxes for centuries, and that's paying for me being here. You're only paying five minutes of taxes. In my opinion, it doesn't really count.

Rob's narrative positioning of himself at the top of the hierarchy of national belonging thus occurred explicitly in relation to lower down others, who he felt entitled to discount. This hierarchical construction of belonging reflects a 'governmental belonging' whereby one feels 'legitimately entitled' to make managerial statements about the nation (Hage, 1998: 46). According to Hage, this form of entitled belonging is most associated with ethnic majorities and betrays a fantasy of dominance in which the individual is 'master of national space' (1998: 17). In Rob's comments, we can see how this hierarchical belonging works through genealogical imaginaries.

While an idea of ancestral presence was important, more important for Rob's understanding of national belonging was genetic relatedness. For him, being British was primarily a question of genetics, with nationhood transferred genetically rather than through residence or culture. Again, rather than being focused on the self, Rob's ideas were extended toward supposedly 'less-national' others. Below, he asserts that the descendants of migrants will not be proper nationals until their DNA mixes with (supposedly indigenous and presumably white) English people:

It's got to filter out because quite often it's gonna be two people, that grandmother and that grandfather are gonna be both from that [other] nation. So their kids are gonna have the same DNA from that country; it's never gonna have any British in it ... There's never really gonna be any English DNA in that grandchild until they start mixing.

Although rejected by other participants, Rob's genetic understanding of nationhood revealed a strong ethnic element based on the idea of a 'national family tree' and 'community of shared descent' (Nash, 2016: 2). In this framing, 'those who are not part of that genealogical community,' or are not recognised as part of it, are understood to have 'no natural place in the nation' (ibid.). Their exclusion or lower position within the hierarchy of national belonging is justified on the basis of genetic non-relatedness. In Rob's case, a genetic construction of the nation allowed him to reproduce the national community as exclusive, not only of migrants but also their descendants, while reinforcing his own position at the top of the hierarchy of belonging.

Rob's genetic understanding of Britain as a community of shared descent was also heavily racialised. He repeatedly narrated the nation as exclusive of black and brown Britons, while simultaneously including the – presumably white – descendants of people who emigrated to places like Australia and the USA as part of the national community of shared descent.^[1] In Rob's mind, the descendants of white British imperial migrants were *genetically* British regardless of birthplace or residence, as evidenced in comments about his cousins:

I've got [distant] cousins who moved from Britain to south Rhodesia, which then became Zimbabwe. Yeah, but you know then in my opinion they are British because they look British and their DNA is all completely 100%, erm, you know British. So, if they then moved back to the UK and they then get a British passport, yeah, in my opinion they are considered British.

In this framing, British emigrants were constructed not as migrants but exported nationals, kith-and-kin. This was also reflected in Rob's suggestion that 'England, is their country. They've only just like briefly moved over there.' Here, the use of the word 'briefly' again raises questions of time. For Rob, British imperial emigration was seen as a mere blip in a much longer history of rootedness and connection. The fact that Rob could depict centuries of settler colonialism as 'brief' and recognise the imperial connections of colonisers while ignoring those of the colonised, also demonstrates the flexibility of genealogical thinking, as well as the malleability of temporal narratives, which could be discursively stretched and contracted to fit with existing racialised imaginaries (Zerubavel, 2012). This flexibility and malleability seems to complicate Sharma's (2022: 640) argument about the near impossibility of becoming native, since the boundaries of nativeness can clearly be stretched for some. The possibility of becoming native thus appears differently flexible according to 'race'.

Unsurprisingly given the importance of DNA to his understanding of nationhood, Rob had undertaken genetic ancestry testing. Like Paul, he had hoped for results that would validate his sense of self but had received results that slightly challenged his identity. He did not tell me the actual break-down of his results but said he was 50% English/British, 20% Scandinavian, with some Irish. Rob described his disappointment at being 'less' English/British^[2] than his American cousin and, having been teased for not being as English as her, explained that he had contacted the company to understand why their results were different:

[They] said, yeah that happens quite a lot because it means that they weren't able to identify the Irish bit and they weren't able to identify the Scandinavian bit so they just associate it all with Britain; hence why she's 95% [English]. Which kind of suggested that she might've been like mine.

Like Paul, Rob was prepared to broaden his conception of 'British/English DNA' to reconcile his results with his self-identity. While he would have preferred his Scandinavian DNA to be incorporated into his 'British DNA', he was able to discursively work through his results. This included efforts to attach himself to the Vikings, a group firmly positioned within accounts of national history (Scully et al., 2013):

It almost made me think have I got a great, great grandfather who came from there but they generally do think it's from the Viking age and things like that. So, it's interesting because you're thinking, 'Oh...', you know. But I don't think you'd ever get your tree going back that far anyway. I think going beyond 1500 is the maximum really.

Using the narrative frame of Britain as a 'mongrel nation' of 'ancient invaders', Rob positioned the Vikings within an imaginary of 'British' history. Viking ancestry was not antithetical to Britishness and allowed Rob to protect an understanding of himself as indigenous and entitled (Scully et al. 2013; 2016). While his own racialised logic purported that one can become English/British through genetic mixing, Rob's disappointment at recording only 50% British/English DNA also revealed the much higher bar he sets himself as someone at the top of the hierarchy of belonging. Given this, we can assume that, in Rob's eyes, most British people of colour would fail to match up.

6 | Conclusion

Bringing together sociological research on hierarchies of belonging, interdisciplinary literature on genealogical communities, and theoretical insights on reproduction and power, this article has started to explore the potential significance of genealogical thinking and practice to the reproduction of exclusionary and hierarchical constructions of belonging. In doing so, it attempts to take the literature on genealogy in a more critical direction and highlights potential contributions of sociology, while also shedding novel light on the socio-political significance of genealogy – and ideas of 'shared descent' more broadly – for the reproduction of communities of belonging.

The paper makes two important contributions to a critically-engaged sociology of genealogy. First, it reveals how exclusionary constructions of national belonging were underpinned by strong genealogical imaginaries and narratives of roots and shared descent. The two participants discussed reproduced exclusionary constructions during interviews in ways that positioned them (and me) securely at the top of a national hierarchy of belonging, while simultaneously pushing down others. Their genealogical narratives were also heavily racialised and provided a language and means of articulating (and justifying) racialised exclusion. Being 'indigenous' was reserved for bodies recognised as part of Britain's 'genealogical community of shared descent' (Nash, 2016: 2), often based on racialised ideas of genetic Britishness. Black and brown Britons were excluded from the

national community based on perceived non-relatedness, while that same community was perpetually open to white citizens of the Older Commonwealth. When we talk about how people ‘put the past to work’ (Edwards, 2000: 36) to claim autochthonous belonging, it is thus crucial to recognise that these claims may occur alongside, or even rely upon the exclusion or marginalisation of others.

Second, the paper draws attention to the flexibility of other-focused genealogical narratives. Not only did both participants discursively make sense of their genealogies (and genetic genealogies) in ways that fit with their racialised imaginaries and supported existing narratives of self, but they applied genealogical logics to others flexibly in ways that reproduced exclusion. Most notably, an exclusive white British indigeneity was reproduced through the discursive stretching and contracting of ancestral presence and imperial connections that allowed both participants to position people differently and in contradictory ways in relation to hierarchies of belonging. As I note elsewhere (Clarke, 2020), the fullest and most legitimate national belonging whereby one is seen not only as belonging in and to Britain, but also as being *of* Britain, requires a recognised belonging ‘in time’. The temporal flexibility of these participants’ genealogical narratives, however, raises the question of whether any length of connection or presence would be long enough for some Britons to be recognised as belonging. This is particularly pertinent given the discursive privilege of these white middle-class participants and the potential length of genealogical imaginations (back to the last ice-age), which suggests that efforts to write people into more recent national histories may have limited effect. Where genealogy troubles the essentialised identities these people hold dear, they potentially have the narrative power to overcome them.

While genealogy can support inclusion and anti-racism (Nash, 2008; Tyler, 2018) and the flexibility of narratives holds possibilities for more inclusive constructions of belonging, these participants clearly illustrate the vulnerability of genealogical narratives to white autochthonous discourses. In contexts of vociferous autochthonous politics like the UK, where events like Windrush and Brexit have repeatedly exposed entrenched hierarchies of belonging (Bhambra, 2016), the way that these narratives are used to reproduce racialised boundaries and hierarchies of belonging clearly deserves attention, including from sociologists. This is especially important given that discursively produced hierarchies have evidently underpinned violence, conflict and even genocides around the world (Sharma, 2022).

A larger sample could shed light on the typicality of the narratives presented, as well as how genealogical imaginaries are shaped by intersections of gender, ‘race’, class and/or migrant heritage. Although in these examples the exclusion was explicit, future work should also consider how genealogical narratives might work indirectly to maintain boundaries and hierarchies of belonging. Arguably, whenever people articulate their identity or sense of belonging through genealogical narratives, they normalise the idea of nationhood as transferred across generations and reinforce the importance of relatedness and/or ancestral presence in ways that exclude, or at least marginalise, British people with roots elsewhere. Focusing on these more subtle exclusions may also open doors to understanding when and how genealogically informed exclusions can be unpicked or unworked.

Sociology is ideally placed to contribute to a more critical literature on genealogy, engaged with questions of power and privilege, and to join the dots between individual thinking and practice and broader societal impacts. To date, there has been little research in these areas and the way the two intertwine. A power-informed, hierarchies of belonging framework has the potential to draw these threads together, especially given the disparity between the discursive power of people at either end of the hierarchy. Such an approach could be further extended through a multi-scalar approach that is able to attend to the nuances and overlaps involved in different scales of belonging (Clarke, 2020). This would mean examining how narratives operate at local and regional scales, and may also intersect with the national, as well as how more or less privileged belonging at one scale might support and/or hinder belonging at another.

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Ethics statement

This study was approved by the Social Sciences and Arts Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex on 23/01/2015 (application ER/ALC28/1). All participants gave informed consent prior to participating.

Notes

- [1] In reality emigrants from the UK also include people of colour.
[2] Rob used these terms interchangeably.

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