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Gate-keeping the nation: discursive claims, counter-claims and racialized logics of whiteness

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ABSTRACT




This article analyses the racialization of discourses about national identities, and explores the implications for populations racialized as white. Two extensive datasets have been brought together, spanning a decade and 560 interviews, to explore discursive interplay, the oppositional nature and relationality of majority and minority claims about national belonging. We demonstrate that national identity claims are constructed discursively from positions of relative advantage and disadvantage: here the English majority and Polish minority. Discourses of national identity involve positioning and using resources differentially available. Dominant majority groups, perceiving themselves as entitled through their conceptualization of the nation-state and indigeneity, interpret and police minority claims in ways that equate to a gate-keeping function. The analysis examines the contingent hierarchy of whiteness and the discursive implications for entitlement, deservingness and resentment. The framework of whiteness helps illuminate the construction and contested racialization of hierarchies around national identity and belonging.

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Introduction

Discursive claims of national belonging and concomitant entitlement to national resources are formulated from differential positions of relative advantage and disadvantage. By exploring the relationships between position, claim and counter-claim, we demonstrate that scholarship on nationalism needs to engage with this complexity. While multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, integration and super-diversity, have received attention, we argue that race constitutes an integral part

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of nationalism and national identity in Europe (Fox 2013). We build on a minority stream of work exploring the complexity of national identity claims by considering the impact of racialization (Bhambra 2017; Valluvan 2019; Virdee 2015). We assert that race is a structuring element neglected by much mainstream social science writing on nationalism.

Our contribution is threefold: First, we analyse the national identity claims of two groups racialized as white, the English and the British Poles, outlining key elements of the discourses they deploy. We use whiteness as a conceptual tool to demonstrate the power imbalance of national identity claims, based on the claimants' positions. These claims demonstrate that understandings of who belongs to the nation differ (both within and between the groups whose discourses we analyse here) because of the occupation of relatively powerful and disadvantaged positions. The discourses used are important in terms of their function, not just their content (van Dijk 1992). We focus on the relationships between these discourses, particularly their power to construct the notion of homogenized groups. People make connections using subjective elements such as the position of their group being in competition for resources with another group. In such discourses, the speaker's group is posited as deserving, while the other is not. As a bonding discourse of solidarity, this highlights a recognizable narrative of perceived and unfair competition reliant on distinctions between nationals and others. Such discourses generally revolve around culture, civilization, and implicit talk about belonging and entitlement, rather than physical difference. Occupying a majority position entails the labour of drawing and policing boundaries between those perceived as "indigenous" or "migrants", whether the latter have migrated or not. People who see themselves as the majority may speak as "gate-keepers" of the nation, a position rendered possible by invoking the entitlement of the "indigenous" people, who implicitly revokes other groups' entitlement.

Second, we combine material to compile an extensive qualitative database (spanning a decade and 560 interviews) to develop our arguments. The two constituent sets of fieldwork consist of interviews with self-identified white English and British Poles (self-identified migrants from Poland or their descendants). We combine this material to examine the discursive interplay: the oppositional nature and relationality of majority and minority claims about belonging to the nation. This unique sample size is more extensive than is usually the case for qualitative studies in this area, enabling us to make broad claims about the patterns of discourse. Thus, our theoretically-driven analysis relies on empirical rather than secondary data.

Third, we explore the idea that whiteness generates *de facto* hierarchical subcategories based on "indigeneity" and migrant status, and that dominant groups assert power by defining the "common law" rules of membership (as opposed to the formal laws on citizenship), thereby "gatekeeping" the nation. Consequently, claims to belonging from a minority position depend on the

content of dominant claims to establish counter-claims for negotiation into existing hierarchies.

In this paper we confine ourselves to investigating the intersection of “whiteness” with “nation”, acknowledging the relationship to power and relationship to “indigeneity” that applies to members of a given group regardless of class and gender. By selecting two groups racialized as white, we highlight the centrality of whiteness in the articulation of national identity claims and reveal how the relational positioning of the groups impacts on claims of belonging and feelings of entitlement. Key to understanding this is the emphasis on bloodlines that allows people racialized as white as “indigenous”. We answer the question: how are racialized hierarchies and discourses of nationalism mutually constituted, and what are discursive implications for different groups racialized as white?

Claims and strategies cannot, we argue, be separated from the racialized positions of the claimants. In both discourses analysed here, whiteness frames and impacts nationalist strategies, contributing to the production of logics of entitlement and resentment underpinning these claims. We identify three broad categories of claims to entitlement based on: indigeneity; loyalty in the past and present; and, on work and contribution to the UK economy.

Theoretical framing: towards the integration of nationalism, racialization, and whiteness

Here we identify key concepts for this study: nationalism, racialization, and whiteness, and explain how they merge in our analysis. We begin from the proposition that mainstream analyses of nationalism and national identity tend to downplay “race” as an impactful element of perceived membership of the nation. Work in nationalism and political theory typically elides race, tending to focus more on ethnic conflict (Brubaker 2002; Chandra 2012). In response, a small number of studies on the UK centre bottom-up discourses of the nation and belonging (Elgenius 2017a; Garner 2015; Leddy-Owen 2014; Mann and Fenton 2014; Tyler 2012). However, these rich studies have not displaced canonical works viewing nationalism as a doctrine, ideology, political movement, language of symbolism, or as the basis for identity, cohesion, and unity (Anderson 1993; Miller 1995; Smith 2009). Their relative emphasis and theorization of the “when”, “why” and “how” of nations mean that the positions from which identity claims are made or the unequal access to the socio-cultural capital enabling belonging, have not been sufficiently analysed. We argue that actors’ positions need to be distinguished from one another in terms of resources available and the discourses produced. We see nationalism as a discourse of solidarity (Calhoun 2007), and nationalist discourses as reflecting struggles over belonging. Various versions of such discourses circulate at a given moment and construct “dominant” and

“subaltern” categories, and the actors producing them are positioned in multiple hierarchical relationships (Elgenius 2011; 2019). We acknowledge the contributions that postcolonial studies have made in identifying the unequal terms of knowledge reproduction (Leonard 2005) that generate identity binaries and privileges. These are examined through secondary analyses of the formation of British citizenship and national identity via Empire and its racialized legacies, enshrined in immigration and nationality law (Bhambra 2017), and deployed in contemporary political narratives about national belonging (Valluvan 2019). This article complements such engagements with political discourse by exploring the relationship and dialogue between two strands of contemporary discourse on nationalism – produced by the majority and a minority and derived from a large qualitative interview database. This relational focus demonstrates that such discourses are dialogic and deploy resources like bloodlines and historical affiliation with values to establish solidarity and privileged membership. We use “bloodlines” here as a rendering of *ius sanguinis*, the concept of belonging based explicitly on ancestry, as opposed to residence or other form of acquired / earned citizenship.

Racialization is a process whereby race is made salient in a particular set of social relationships, social context, place, or space (Weiner 2012). It can be identified in discourses, laws, institutional and individual practices that construct racialized groups. Racialization builds on the history of “race” as a set of hierarchical ideas and practices, used as the basis for national and international political domination, and explains how the systemic practice and patterns of outcomes of such domination, racism (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Bonilla-Silva 1997) are sustained. In relation to the nation, racialization frequently determines membership, citizenship, immigration status. However, racialization does not have to be explicitly expressed in a racial idiom to produce the outcome of constructing a racial group. This is exemplified in the discussions of entitlement and earned membership we capture, where groups are posited as belonging / indigenous or not-belonging / foreign, and the criteria used are ancestry and culture. Both groups in this article are racialized as “white”, yet the power relationship between them enables us to see how distinctions within that group are discursively produced.

Whiteness is best understood as a structural power relationship in which people racialized as white are collectively advantaged vis-à-vis those who are not, and where other distinctions such as gender, class, religion, etc. are temporarily downplayed, if not overridden by affiliation through belonging to a “white race” (Garner 2007). Outcomes thus consistently favour white people across several domains such as wealth, employment, housing, health, etc. (Bhopal 2018). Theorizing the global domination of white Europeans in racial terms became explicit in the late nineteenth century, and into the

twentieth century. Such theorization of intra-racial distinctions produced putative sub-groups, two of which were Anglo-Saxons (North-West Europe, including the English) and Slavs (Eastern and Central Europe, including the Poles) (Deniker 1897; McMahon 2016). The Anglo-Saxons were placed above Slavs in the hierarchical schema of that time, which has fed into the civilizational “orientalism” of Western hegemony over Eastern Europe in political and popular culture. Yet while the predominant dividing line in the whiteness literature lies between “white” and “other”, there is also a series of “contingent hierarchies” within groups nominally racialized as white (Garner 2007) based on religion, migrant status, culture and other criteria. Here, we examine one of these hierarchies involving English and Poles, the latter a category constructed as a disparaging discourse about Eastern Europeans in general (Moore 2013). This is an effect of whiteness, demonstrating the dominant group’s capacity construct the “Other” as a projection of its own understandings rather than a reflection of the target group’s understanding of itself.

We argue that the stated preference for Englishness over Britishness in the twenty-first century is partly a racialized identification. Although Virdee (2015) compellingly argues that English progressive movements have long been racially diverse, Englishness is seen as less multicultural than Britishness. Moreover, the co-existence of Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalisms means that there is a set of intra-British divisions alongside a imperial history that has racialized populations of colour. Polish migrants and their descendants thus inhabit a space that is a palimpsest of historical discourses distinguishing both between white and non-white, and within the “white” group (Garner 2015). Specifically referring to majority group discourse about Eastern Europeans, Abranches et al. maintain that the key elements of this discourse are “nationalist defensive, anti-immigration views, based on narrow and often nostalgic imaginations of one’s country’s national identity, and the presentation of migrants as a threat to its cultural and economic integrity” (2020, 3).

To examine the national discourse of positioned actors, our theoretical map is as follows: Racialization is key to the production of national discourse of social solidarity and the process by which “whiteness” becomes a salient element of a social relationship. The discourses we identify deploy bloodlines to position their producers in relation to Englishness and Britishness, and counter-claims made in Polish discourse on belonging to Britain seek to leverage whiteness and historical solidarity.

Methods

The data for this project derive from two sets of fieldwork that are interrogated together for the first time here (see Higgins and Terruhn 2020). This

extensive dataset constitutes of over 560 interviews across our projects and is the foundation for this study of critical cases of claim-making for national belonging, from positions of advantage and disadvantage. Elgenius researched Polish civil society and diaspora in the UK (2009–2018) through projects funded by the British Academy, John Fell, and the Swedish Research Council. The findings of this article draw upon 120 in-depth and semi-structured interviews from these projects. A strategic purposive sample was recruited from representatives of self-defined formal and informal Polish organizations (chairs, trustees, members, and volunteers) that work for cultural, educational, political, professional, recreational, and religious associations and organizations mainly in Greater London. A maximum variation sample thereafter secured the participation of different generations and genders, of self-defined migrants from Poland, or British citizens of Polish descent from different socio-economic backgrounds, affiliated to Polish organizations. Interview topics covered civil society practices, claims and narratives; experiences of settling in the UK, experiences of discrimination and attitudes to diversity; homing desires, social capital resources and integration, external and internal pressures. The thematic, focused coding uncovered key themes such as discourse on the migrant position, the lack of recognition, mechanisms of solidarity and exclusion (Elgenius 2017a, 2017b, forthcoming).

Garner researched the racialization of white identities in a set of interlocking one-off studies, from 2004 to 2011, and via secondary data on Britishness and Englishness, 2003–2018. The project sites were all in provincial England. The original ESRC-funded study of Bristol and Plymouth (2004–2007) was followed by pieces commissioned for local authorities, and a government department. The principal research tool was semi-structured qualitative interviews about community and nation. More than 400 respondents were involved in interviews in these projects. Recruitment of self-identifying white UK respondents was achieved by snowballing from different points within communities, and generally drew people aged over 25. The sample was evenly split in terms of men and women, and overall, the samples comprised working- and middle-class respondents, but favoured the former by around 7:1. An inductive thematic analysis was applied, identifying key recurring topics such as; mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion; entitlement; relationship to the national community. Our assumption underpinning the analysis was that the most important element of discourse is not its substantive detail, but what ideological labour it accomplishes. Our respondents construct their identities relationally against those of Others (Garner 2015).

Elgenius' research on British and English identities supports this analysis with another forty semi-structured interviews collected for the related ESRC project (2004–2007) on the decline of traditional identities. Participants of the British Social Attitudes survey were strategically sampled for qualitative interviews with permission of the BSA, based on preferred identity,

Englishness or Britishness. This enabled the analysis of identity-claims and illumination of the quantitative analyses of BSA data (Heath, Martin, and Elgenius 2007).

The overall size of the dataset from which conclusions are drawn thus amounts to 560 interviews, based on the purposive sample of two specific groups re-analysed about the specific theme of claims of belonging to the nation, and associated sub-themes of entitlement and resentment. The combined effort is unique, providing the opportunity to compare discourses and analyse the interplay of themes and framings whose patterns are representative as they are drawn from uniquely large database. While the data-collection overlapped, there are limitations: the material on the majority is older than that on the Polish diaspora, was collected in different places, with non-identical questions. However, all projects specifically addressed national identities, communities and belonging.

Gate-keeping the nation: national identity claim-making, positioning, and whiteness

We first demonstrate the racialized stakes of the distinction between Englishness and Britishness; second, the connections between Englishness, indigeneity and whiteness, and lastly, how the Polish negotiate themselves into this “contingent hierarchy” (Garner 2007).

Englishness vs. Britishness

Whether Britishness is a “civic” or “ethnic” identity, and the coexistence of Scots, Welsh, English, Northern Irish, and British identities (McCrone 2002) constituted foci for twentieth-century analysis of British national identity. Two significant patterns of identification have since emerged. The first is a shift in preferred national identity. In 1992, the British Social Attitudes Survey found that in England, 31 per cent described themselves as “English” and 63 per cent as “British”. By 2014, these figures had increased to 41, and decreased to 47 per cent respectively (Park, Bryson, and Curtice 2014). This disidentification with Britishness and embrace of Englishness can be charted chronologically up to a 2018 YouGov poll (Easton 2018), via the Leave vote in the 2016 EU referendum (Lord Ashcroft Polls 2016). Moreover, once national identity surveys disaggregated samples into racialized groups, another pattern became visible. Englishness – equivalent to being Scottish or Welsh, rather than as a synonym of being British – had become increasingly associated with whiteness as a marker of indigeneity (Garner 2015; Lloyd 2009). Conversely, identification with Britishness among BAME groups is significantly higher (80+ per cent for some) than for white UK respondents (under 45 per cent). In the BBC’s 2018 YouGov poll, 84 per cent of the

white English sample identified “strongly” or “very strongly” with Englishness, whereas only 45 per cent of the BAME sample did so (Easton 2018).

A growing corpus of qualitative studies has therefore provided much-needed insight into the complexity of the intimate relationship between Englishness and whiteness in a variety of rural, urban, and suburban settings (Burdsey 2011; Condor, Gibson, and Abell 2006; Garner 2015; Leddy-Owen 2014). This scholarship confirms the fractious, uncomfortable relationship between Englishness and Britishness, best understood through a lens of perceived decline of Britain as a nation (Mann and Fenton 2014; Tyler 2012), and the putative causal role of immigration in it. Claims about Britishness in our fieldwork cover both civic and ethnic formulations of nationality. The civic criteria (long residence in Britain, contribution to the life of the nation, etc.), are complemented by references to shared ancestry, cultural values, Christianity and especially, the English language. A recurring theme is an attachment to British history (narratives around Empire and the Second World War). Significantly, Britishness is mainly defined by what it is not, e.g. examples of minority groups practising their own, rather than British culture (Heath, Martin, and Elgenius 2007). Englishness as a discourse of ethnic nationalism and bloodlines thus revolves relationally around shared understandings of Britishness as a racially inclusive space.

Indeed, as Britishness refers increasingly to a multicultural national community, Englishness, has become a more defensible position of national identity from which to engage in claim-making about “indigenous” entitlement. The discursive struggle over who can be recognized as English or British is therefore key: an increasingly racialized distinction means that English-identifiers are hierarchically positioned vis-à-vis their access to material and non-material resources enabling the articulation of compelling identity claims.

Below, we distinguish between claims derived from the positions of relative advantage, articulated through majority assumptions and definitions (gate-keeping), and counter-claims.

Entitlement claims

In the context of the statistical data, we identify three main drivers for the process of actively distinguishing between British and English identities and making connections between Englishness and whiteness. The selected quotes summarize key claims and have been selected on the basis of sample saturation.

First, internal distinctions are made resentfully over the positive connotations of other national identities:

I think of myself as English, mainly because I get very annoyed when you get Welsh people and Scottish people who seem to be allowed to celebrate their

identity (...) but when you say you're proud of being English, it has almost BNP [*British National Party*] (...) which annoys me. (Garner 2015, 106–107)

Second, the positioning of “white English” as separate from the Welsh and Scottish nationalities, and the concomitant evacuation from diverse Britishness. Many expressed frustrations about formal categorization in pre-2011 Census and equality-monitoring forms (without “English” as an option):

I'm not allowed on a form to be anything other than “white British”. If I was Jamaican, I would be allowed to be British Jamaican, British Indian, British African, and have a nationality. I am not British Welsh, British Scottish, or British Irish so I've lost my country, I've lost my nationality. (Heath, Martin, and Elgenius 2007, 12)

As a response to a question about making distinctions between the British and the English, another respondent replied:

... for the first time in all these years, yes, I do (make distinctions) (...) I am just fed up with all the British that aren't, you know, the non-British that are now British, and I think in so many years' time, the English, we're just going to be the minority. (Garner 2015, 111)

The “non-British that are now British” category captures the widespread perceived discontinuity between bodies and nationality that can be sutured by official citizenship but is simultaneously unpicked by understandings of belonging. Another respondent articulates this discrepancy pithily: “... after five years (...) they've got British citizenship. I suppose that's when they can start calling themselves British, *but they'll never be English*” (our emphasis) (Garner 2015, 108). This comment implies that citizenship and authentic belonging are not equivalents: Englishness cannot be accessed except by *bloodline*.

Third, some respondents explicitly bind Englishness to whiteness:

British can be so many different things now. I'm English, and I want that put down. That sounds like I've got a racist problem, but it isn't. (...) I actually come from this country originally and I'm English and I want them to know (...) It's almost like saying I'm white and I was born here, isn't it? (Garner 2015, 107)

The racialized logic underpinning the white English positioning include the markers of origin, being ethical, deserving, and beleaguered by “others”, defined as unethical and undeserving. We find many claims that white people “seem to be pushed to the back”, and of constituting “the last white outpost” in diverse areas (Heath, Martin, and Elgenius 2007), where stories of migrants of colour unfairly accessing resources abound (Garner 2015). However, immigration status cannot be deduced from appearance alone, and we conclude, based on our interviewees' frequent amalgamation of groups, that racialized physical markers are typically used to categorize others as not belonging and, thus, unentitled, and undeserving. Since

Britishness alone does not guarantee white UK people priority access to resources ahead of Black and Asian neighbours who may also be British, the shift towards Englishness occupies a less controversial platform for entitlement than one articulated on sensitive racial grounds.

While white identities are wrought with distinctions of advantage between class, gender, region, etc., the similarity of the discourse *across* those variables in our data demonstrates the existence of a set of common positions: a preference for English over British; an emphasis placed on immigration as problematic and threatening; a lack of precision about who is an immigrant and who must integrate, and into what (Garner 2015). These patterns of discursive production of identity are expressed as a set of claims to belonging, entitlement, and solidarity. Englishness claims are distinct from those of Britishness in this context and aimed at enhancing the entitlement of the speaker. For the white English, this consists of claiming entitlement based on your bloodline rather than your contributions; unfairness and loss of rights (Skey 2012); potential “white flight” into English rather than British identification and feeling empowered to discursively gatekeep the nation. Minority groups, in turn, construct their own narratives of deserving-ness, for which similar themes may be deployed. Next, we examine the discursive resources deployed by the British Polish, and ways in which they position themselves as worthy members of the nation (Elgenius 2017a, 2017b).

Counter-claims to belonging

Poland is currently the most common country of birth and citizenship among migrants in the UK (Rienzo and Vargas-Silva 2019), and Polish migration has played a key role in public discourse about belonging, deservedness and exclusion. Anti-Polish sentiments, long predating Brexit (Moore 2013; Richards, Heath, and Elgenius 2020; Rzepnikowska 2019), have centred around othering of migrants perceived as an “external economic threat”, “flooding the country”, and “taking jobs” from “native manual labourers” (Spiegelman 2013). The discourse on Polish migration has contributed to the idea of UK-based Poles as a homogenous, white, group, characterized by nationalistic, traditional, and Catholic values (Burrell 2009; White 2011, 2016). However, the Polish in the UK, who arrived in waves following the Second World War, the Cold War, the Solidarity movement, and EU expansion, comprise a heterogeneous population. Considerable heterogeneity is evidenced in terms of class and status, places of origin and destination, type of migration (multiple, circular, open-ended, circular, or permanent settlement), opportunities in and experiences of the labour market, and approaches to integration (Drinkwater, Eade, and Garapich 2009; Friberg 2012). The small corpus on Eastern European migrants’ experiences of the British racialized hierarchy confirms that they occupy an ambiguous position

(Fox 2013; Fox and Mogilnicka 2019; Parutis 2011). Their putative whiteness does not protect them from racialization but provides an opportunity to realign with the majority discourse, and thus constitutes a claim-making resource. Claiming whiteness becomes a “privileged vantage point” (Fox 2013, 1874) in relation to other minorities assigned a lower status. The racialized framing of this heterogeneous population is therefore of particular interest, especially given the development of a Polish civil society that has mobilized against stigmatization and engaged in counter-claims on behalf of the Poles in Britain (Elgenius 2017a, 2017b).

English indigeneity claims and exclusive distinctions, or stigmatization in the press, are met with bewilderment, and counter-claims are devised in dialogue with the majority claims. This also contributes to the discursive making of this “group” as “Poles” along the lines of available identity resources; being white, Christian and European. As “white” Eastern European migrants in the UK, they are racialized as culturally and economically different, and racism becomes a tool they may also deploy (McDowell, Batnitzky, and Dyer 2009; Ryan 2010) for “assuaging anxieties and restoring status honour” (Fox 2013, 1873). Yet as Moore (2013) notes, although whiteness should “work” discursively for the Poles, it succeeds only partially. For the majority gate-keepers, the salient distinction and contextual dividing line is the amalgam of whiteness with Englishness: the Polish version of whiteness does not suffice.

Counter-claims derive from Poles sharing a history with and showing loyalty to the British in the past, and are fuelled by contemporary stigmatization. Although Polish organizations and activities have multiplied and diversified with different generations of migrants arriving, nostalgia for the Second World War, and recognition for Polish loyalty are visible framings of minority counterclaims and practices (Elgenius 2017a). A symbolic repertoire (Spillman 1997) supports counter-claims emphasizing loyalty and sacrifice: Polish troops’ loyalty to Allied forces, their deportation and displacement, and being unable to return to Poland after the war, frame diasporic activities and claims for recognition. Significantly, diaspora commemorations align with official British commemorations such as Remembrance Sunday and commemorative ceremonies take place at the Polish War Memorial in London or other Polish gathering points in Britain. As noted by the organizers of the largest of the 250 Polish Saturday or Supplementary schools in Britain: “We lay the wreath at the Polish War Memorial every year” (Elgenius 2011).

The enduring appeal of discourses of sacrifice and loyalty can be understood as positioning, staking out claims for belonging and countering a majority discourse in which “Polish” is demoted to “migrant” status. Moreover, these practices distinguish between Poles in the UK and in Poland, and between Poles and other ethnic communities. A key symbolic marker is the red and white checkerboard Polish Pilots’ flag. This giant flag was introduced at Wembley stadium in 2013 by a Polish organization to “honour the Polish pilots” who

“contributed to Britain in the past and still continue to do so” (BBC 2013). This flag brings the past into the present, claiming a special connection between the Polish Pilots of the Battle of Britain and the Poles now in Britain, whilst distinguishing the latter from those in Poland, and consequently, linking British Poles to the British majority. Other diasporic campaigns have been organized around similar themes, such as “Donate Polish Blood” (2015), where thousands committed to donating blood to the National Health Service: an act intended to remind the British public about wartime Polish sacrifices, at a time when anti-Polish sentiments permeated the media (Elgenius 2017a, 2017b).

The widespread discourse of deservingness also revolves around experiences of employment and tax-paying and is articulated across social class and migrant generations from Poland. Yet being hardworking taxpayers is insufficient due to Poles’ “migrant” status. Counter-claims have developed in direct response to the exclusive majority discourse, as vocalized by many interviewees of Polish descent who arrived around EU expansion: “I really do not understand. The Poles contribute so much to society by paying taxes – and they helped the Allies during the war – why is the press writing these things about us?” (Elgenius 2017a) Claims about the right to belong are made due to having earned membership through financial contributions, but also on the basis of loyalty, sacrifice and heroism felt to be insufficiently recognized: “We had the 70th anniversary of WW2 ... and they didn’t even mention much about the Polish Pilots. All the programmes were talking about English pilots.” As noted by interviewees, soldiers from the Polish Armed Forces had not been invited to the original victory parade in 1946, although Polish war veterans were included in the 75th anniversary of VE Day celebrations in 2020, and those commemorating the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Britain (Elgenius 2011; Polandin 2020).

Direct or indirect diasporic claims, their idiom and stance (Brubaker 2005) construct a space for membership negotiated discursively through loyalty, sacrifice and shared history. Discursive claims are supported through a nostalgic narration of the past, and identity claims that challenge, or at least mitigate the statements expressed by the exclusionary media and political discourse suggesting that Poles do not belong. Thus, claims-making is conditioned by a position relative to the nation and indicative of access to some discursive resources.

Below we consider the mechanisms of exclusion by which discursive racialized boundaries of belonging are constructed and encountered.

The implications of discursive claims: entitlement, resentment and “contingent hierarchies” of whiteness

We turn now to the *implications* of the discursive depictions and claim-making in which majorities and minorities engage, and the discursive

strategies that minorities use to handle them. Two key implications are the ongoing construction of hierarchies and dichotomies of value. For majorities in our sample, hierarchies are constructed on perceived bloodlines, and origin and indigeneity often translate into dichotomies of those who belong, the entitled, and those who do not, the resented. A sense of entitlement extends to material resources, such as social housing, welfare benefits, and job opportunities. Resentment, in turn, is directed towards recipients “who do not really belong” and “who do not deserve” the same opportunities but still get them. The interplay between majority claims and minority counter-claims is vital to understanding the basis of the latter’s discursive strategies for recognition, established through their relative disadvantage and group resources, be they historical, financial, cultural or phenotypical.

Limited access to social housing is a profound source of frustration for our majority sample who see resources as a zero-sum game in which rights of indigeneity are ignored:

if I wanted to go out and get a house or get a flat, I would be put further down the list for someone that is not a British citizen to, say, someone that has come over into the country (...) people that have hardly been in the country (...) are getting more rights than what we are. (Garner 2015, 61)

Resentment is also directed against the presumed access to resources of Eastern Europeans and Poles in Britain:

[The Polish] get to come over here and they get a house, a job, a shop. Look at all our corner shops. All Asian people. (...) Obviously I’m not racist but it just seems that the growing community ... they are wiping us out and taking our jobs, and that’s one of the reasons why none of us can get a job ... I think they should employ British people first. (Garner 2015, 76)

Significantly, minorities are placed in the category of “non-British people”, whether British citizens or not. Race still constitutes a marker of indigeneity (the position of the speaker) with the leap from Polish, to Asian, to “the growing community” “wiping us out” (the exclusiveness of the indigenous group and the amalgam of Others). While one assessment of “the Poles on this estate” was that “they’re all white people and they’re really nice”, their loyalty is also questioned over money transfers:

they send all their money back out to their own families, so they’re not really putting much back into this country, are they? . . . I don’t agree with them *all* coming over here and getting money for nothing, using our health service for nothing, when the people in this country have paid all these taxes for years and years. (Garner 2015, 83)

Thus, Poles may be perceived as “all white” but are located ambiguously within an existing racialized hierarchy of value that includes visible minorities. Whiteness alone is not the determinant of entitlement vis-à-vis the discursive

claims from a majority position, yet it does constitute a resource for counter-claims of belonging.

Fox and Mogilnicka (2019) demonstrate that Eastern Europeans' experience of racism in the UK contributes to their racialization of other groups. Again, racialization enables counter-claims seeking to redeem status by claiming superiority over others. The negotiation of racialized difference in itself becomes a discursive strategy:

Racism is one part of East Europeans' overall toolkit for negotiating racialized difference in the UK (...) colour matters to them: they wear their whiteness as a badge of deservingness, to place them on the right, and white, side of the racialized boundaries of the community of value. (Fox and Mogilnicka 2019, 20)

Claiming whiteness can be a compensatory status-preservation mechanism that offers a strategy for adopting "white" majority identifications and embedding oneself into the racialized hierarchy. Since BAME people can be assigned a lower status, claiming whiteness compensates for exclusion.

Racialization also figures in our data on Polish reactions to multicultural Britain. Some reproduce a definition of nationhood in alignment with majority claim-making about the English as white:

I was approaching London, and heard the driver announcing that *this* is London, I think coming through South London and Brixton and those areas where there are Black communities. (...). It was absolutely *shocking* to me. I had imagined there was going to be English people in England. (Elgenius, forthcoming)

Gawlewicz (2016) draws our attention to Polish migrants' full range of responses towards difference, from embrace to rejection, and to how they form, alter and are complicated by migration.

The racialization of Poles and conceptualizations of whiteness thus filter into their counter-claims. The insecure, disadvantaged labour-market position of Polish migrants is of contextual importance, with their documented feelings of being deskilled, devalued and overqualified (Currie 2008; Altorjai 2013). Whiteness is always relational and contingent. McGhee, Moreh, and Vlachantoni (2019, 1104) analyse strategies deployed to mitigate Poles' position by helping to realign them with new forms of exclusive hierarchization stemming from the EU referendum. Their responses are categorized as "complicity" (endorsing the values enshrined in the dominant discourse); "assertiveness" (arguing that "we" embody those values, despite what the dominant groups says); and "hostility" expressed toward other minority groups to help position Poles as mainstream white British denizens.

We argue that similar strategies existed before Brexit and are connected to discursive whiteness. Clearly, economic contribution, work, and values – like historical material – fundamental to claims-making in this context.

The impacts of the close discursive association between “low skilled” and “East European”, and the Poles’ own positioning vis-à-vis the majority, other Poles and other migrants or minority groups is considerable (Bulat 2020).

Racial categories associating people of colour with low status may also impact other Poles’ choice of partners and knowing when to voice or not voice racist comments (Fox and Mogilnicka 2019). A racialized discourse of whiteness and blackness is also emerging in Poland (Balogun 2020). Moreover, religious, and ethnic groups other than white Catholic Europeans are discursively absent from the ethnic framing of the Polish diaspora (Elgenius 2017a, forthcoming).

Based on a substantial dataset that enables us to identify critical discourses about national belonging from a majority and minority position, we have argued that claims are crafted from a variety of positions of relative (dis)advantage. Claims are relational: discursive exclusionary majority claims have implications for the minority counter-claims. Here, the latter coalesce around nostalgic narration of the past, supported by symbolic repertoires and diasporic activities commemorating the war dead. Moreover, Polish migrants find themselves simultaneously racialized as white and non-indigenous. They may pass un-othered, but this may require self-positioning and realignment, to negotiate belonging through commitment and contribution to discursive solidarity with the nation. Minority claims are therefore articulated as the defence of group deservingness, countering welfare chauvinism and anti-immigrant claims.

Conclusions and discussion, positions, claims and racialized logics of whiteness

We have demonstrated that dominant claims and subaltern counter-claims of entitlement engage relationally, and are constructed dialogically and through tension. Moreover, the function of such discourses is to either bond speakers (internally), as in the white English trope of “unfairness”, or bridge them, or both, as with the Polish tropes of loyalty and sacrifice, and that of the ideal hardworking immigrant. Our aim has been to establish that racialization is a constituent element of this conversation on national belonging, rather than an aberrant throwback that can be deprioritized in scholarly accounts of nationalism. Indeed, an exclusionary racialized discourse on white European migrants (Irish, Jewish and Eastern Europeans) in the UK goes back to the nineteenth century. In our fieldwork we have identified contemporary versions of such nationalist “gatekeeping” discourses, plus the counter-claims from one such group, Polish migrants, aimed at retaining their position as respectable and unproblematic denizens within ongoing hierarchies.

There are competing constructions of the nation. The idea of a nation as an exclusive group linked through bloodlines and shared culture may flourish, despite decades of discourse positively emphasizing civic definitions of the multicultural nation. Moreover, multicultural Britishness acts as a deterrent to some white UK people, who then shift to Englishness. In our fieldwork, white English people locate themselves on the indigenous/deserving/belonging side of the equation, while amalgamating and homogenizing minority groups as undeserving, racially “other” migrants who do not belong, and ascribing collective choices and behaviours to them. These claims highlight the putative “unfair” distribution of resources away from the “indigenous” population. In this broader context, the preference and rationale for English over British identification means that Englishness becomes a “white” positioning (Leddy-Owen 2014). Indeed, the construction of “white English” only makes sense relationally, when juxtaposed with both “multicultural Britishness”, and other groups racialized as white. The power of the dominant majority group is tangible: it never needs to argue for its own inclusion, only for the complete or partial exclusion of other racialized groups. Where a subaltern group is white, the exclusion is justified because they; “work too hard”, “get something for nothing”, “send money home”, “don’t integrate”, etc.

The minority population however, seeks to engage relationally with the discursive strategies of the dominant in a variety of modes (McGhee, Moreh, and Vlachantoni 2019), such as “complicity”; “assertiveness”, and “hostility towards other minority groups”. Their racialization contributes to the production, exclusion, and devaluation of “less deserving” groups. Dominant majority groups, seeing themselves as entitled through the conceptualization of the nation state, indigeneity, nationality, and citizenship, interpret and police minorities, and perform a gate-keeping function. One such important strategy for including and excluding is the racialization of whiteness, which can be read both as a form of resistance to social change associated with migration, and simultaneously – for those groups to which it is feasibly available – as a strategy for group elevation.

The minority white group defends itself by stressing its similarities and solidarity with the majority, while emphasizing its differences from non-white others. British and Polish association during the Second World War, a particularly poignant and important moment for British nationalism (Gilroy 2004) is also emphasized. By investing in such discourses, British Poles can draw attention to their white European credentials. Yet their subordinate whiteness leaves them in limbo: not authentic enough to be incorporated unproblematically into Britishness, but authentic enough to consider themselves more entitled than other migrants.

These discursive ploys can be contrasted with those of the BAME Leave voters in the 2016 referendum (Begum 2020). Unable to deploy whiteness, they instead emphasize their Britishness, historical roots in Empire, and

service in the Second World War. From this perspective, British Poles and other EU migrants are “queue-jumping” beneficiaries of whiteness. The fight for inclusion in the nation is thus (at least) a three-way stand-off, but not one in which all parties are equally threatened. The white English majority hold the discursive strings while the others seek strategies to carve out a space of authenticity. This can be achieved by the Poles in the classic relational format of “whitening oneself”: engaging in racialized discourse and practices; and positing oneself as the ideal, ethical, and hardworking migrant.

Nationalist frames often attach meanings to experiences of belonging and thereby create “communities of value” through bonding discourses of social solidarity that discursively transform heterogenous populations into homogenous “groups”. In our study, we juxtaposed the English majority claims for entitlement with the Polish minority counter-claims for inclusion in the dominant group to explore the racialized logics of these two positions. The set of positions adopted by our majority and minority interviewees indicates the complexity of the struggles to belong and be entitled to work, benefits, and membership of the nation. These positions do not exhaust the range of possible frames. Neither the “English” nor the “Polish” discourses are monolithic or static, yet by using racialization and whiteness as explanatory concepts, we can contribute towards making sense of them. Membership of the “community of value” or the nation, is dictated by the gate-keeping majority, through claims about entitlement. These function through a bonding discourse of social solidarity and contribute to divisive discourses around citizenship (Bhambra 2017) that reference the “indigenous” population’s (unearned) membership via a value system associated with belonging and entitlement.

In closing, we return to our question; how are racialized hierarchies and discourses of nationalism mutually constituted? We have argued that nations are racialized constructions, and that nationalism and racism must be understood by reference to one another. Racialized logics are constructed on the basis of national hierarchies, and the discourse of nationalism as one of social solidarity, characterized by homogeneity and unity through linking bloodlines (race) to nation. The resources available for claiming belonging and entitlement, such as whiteness, are therefore inequitably distributed.

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