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**British citizenship and the 'other': an analysis of the earned citizenship
discourse**

Keywords: Britishness, citizenship, ideological dilemmas, ambivalence,
immigration

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of interviews conducted with citizenship officers in London, working within the field of British naturalisation. We draw from a rhetorical psychology perspective to study the dilemmatic tensions that exist in the participants' discourse about naturalisation applicants who are constructed as 'good' and 'bad', as both 'deserving' and 'undeserving' of British citizenship. In line with a rhetorical approach, we argue that these different constructions of the migrant are strategic and are associated with different constructions of Britain as humanitarian and tolerant, on the one hand, and as being under threat by the influx of immigration, on the other hand. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this ambivalence for processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Introduction

Reforms in legislation concerning the process whereby migrants acquire British citizenship are part of a social cohesion agenda. These citizenship policies are linked to the politics of belonging and the management of national boundaries. This is evident in recent naturalisation legislation in the UK. Applicants for naturalisation, since 2005 and 2004 respectively, are required to pass a 'Life in the UK' test and attend a citizenship ceremony whereby they affirm or swear their allegiance to the Queen and pledge their loyalty to the United Kingdom. These new practices are in contrast to the everyday, 'banal' ways that people make sense of and enact national identity (Billig, 1995). In England for example, national identity is downplayed or even disavowed by the majority of White nationals (Condor, 2000). Naturalisation legislation has thus become part of a paradoxical top-down nation-building project in Britain; citizenship, more than a set of formal rights and duties, is linked to national identity and belonging. Citizenship officers, as implementers of the changing citizenship policy, are given a fundamental ideological role in securing and perpetuating the national agenda. One of their main tasks is to organise and conduct citizenship ceremonies. Their role is thus integral to the national apparatus.

The data reported in this paper are part of a larger project, conducted by the first author, researching discourses about citizenship and naturalisation among different social actors as a means of understanding constructions of national identity and otherness in border-crossing settings. In this paper we focus on the

ways in which citizenship officers construct British identity and the 'migrant other' within an 'earned citizenship' discourse. We employ a rhetorical psychological analysis following Billig's (1987, 1991; Billig et al., 1988) approach which demonstrates how participants represent and argue about British identity and new citizens in multiple and ambivalent ways.

Ambivalence in constructions of national identity and citizenship

Ambivalence has been described by Billig (1995) as a key characteristic of nationalism. Billig's thesis is that nationalism is constructed on the basis of two opposing but dialectical themes: universalism and particularism. Nationalism is a dilemmatic concept (Billig et al., 1988) in that it requires both that we see our nation as unique and at the same time, as one nation within the world of nations. Both universalism and particularism are necessary for nationalism. For example, national flags or anthems are symbols of a nation's particularities (e.g. history, culture) and at the same time, are universal emblems of nationhood across the world.

Billig and colleagues' (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988) use of the term 'ideological dilemmas' for such phenomena emphasises the antinomic and argumentative nature of common-sense thinking. Dilemmas such as 'serving justice versus showing sympathy' are sources that people draw on to make arguments and are part of everyday, 'lived' ideologies. The term 'dilemma' is also indicative of the fact that such contrary themes and arguments can appear equally reasonable to

common sense. For instance, both justice and mercy are equally valued ideals, but guide social behaviour in opposing directions. Even when one pole of a dilemma seems to be more salient, the counter pole or argument would still be present (Billig, 1987).

Condor and others have elaborated these ideas and applied them to the study of national identities in Britain drawing attention to the strategic nature of these constructions. They have shown that national identity can be represented ambivalently, on the basis of opposing themes, such as multiculturalism and Anglo-centrism or national diversity/tolerance and cultural homogeneity (Condor, 2006, 2011a; Verkuyten, 2004), nationalism and imperialism (Condor & Abell, 2006), or national pride and ethnocentrism (Condor, 2000). With regards to cultural diversity, Condor (2006) has shown that respondents in England made strategic temporal comparisons between the past and the present. A homogenous and singular national character was portrayed as anachronistic, whereas diversity was seen as characterising British society in the present. This can be explained as an effort to suppress negative stereotypes of the ingroup. Similar results have also been found by Condor (2011a) in her analysis of the Labour party representations where she found that multiculturalism was portrayed as a distinct British virtue or accomplishment and at the same time an Anglocentric historical narrative was evident in the politicians' accounts. The co-existence of conflicting themes on which people draw can be the basis for the construction of ambivalent identities because these themes allow for the

existence of multiple and conflicting positions for the self and the other (Andreouli, 2013).

These dilemmas illustrate the interplay between sameness and diversity, or inclusion and exclusion, in constructions of national identities. Every identity construction provides a model of social relations (Reicher, 2004); it locates not only the self but also the others. Moreover, national categories can be strategically constructed and selected to pursue various projects. Reicher and Hopkins (2001) have shown, for example, that there was a link between the way the Scottish identity was defined by the political parties during the 1992 election and the way people were mobilised in order to protect it. They demonstrated that the different parties evoked different understandings of Scottish identity to pursue their various political projects, such as devolution or independence. Thus, national category definitions can be used as arguments that promote different types of national identity projects.

In addition to national identity, citizenship has recently been the focus of attention of social psychologists working within a rhetorical, discursive or social representations perspective (Andreouli & Howarth, 2012; Abell, Condor & Stevenson, 2006; Condor & Gibson, 2007; Gibson, 2009, 2010; Barnes, Auburn & Lea, 2004; Haste, 2004; Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). Barnes, Auburn and Lea (2004), for instance, called for a shift in focus in the study of citizenship: instead of asking 'who is a citizen', social psychologists should ask 'how do people claim citizenship', conceptualising citizenship as a political practice, not

just a status. Condor (2011b) also made a case for a social psychology of citizenship with a focus on the contested nature of the concept and the inherent tensions of the way it is experienced and understood in social encounters. Diversity and contradiction are fundamental parts of everyday citizenship – so that, for example, citizenship can be constructed around the tension between communitarianism and liberal individualism (Condor & Gibson, 2007). Different constructions of citizenship depend on the context of what is being debated. For example, Gibson and Hamilton (2011) have shown that British young people's talk about polity membership was structured on the basis of ideological dilemmas, framed around the dualism between respect of diversity and protection of the majority culture. Employing 'rational' arguments, such as the need to respect the law, participants were able to explicitly reject assimilation, on the one hand, and also argue for the pre-eminence of British culture in the public sphere, on the other hand. Gibson's (2009) research moreover suggests that the idea of conditionality or 'earning one's right' is very important in constructions of British citizenship. He showed that the invocation of the 'effortful citizen' could be employed to resolve the tension between rights to welfare and the responsibility to contribute to society (see also Gibson, 2010).

Our data similarly illustrate the importance of the theme of conditionality or 'earning one's right' in constructions of British citizenship. 'Good migrants' are seen as worthy of British citizenship while 'bad migrants' are seen as unworthy. Thus, while social psychological studies, starting from Tajfel's (1981) pioneering

work on outgroup derogation, commonly discuss how minorities are constructed as inferior or threatening and consequently, how they are excluded from the definition of the ingroup (for example, through racialising discourses; see Howarth, 2002), a central argument of this paper is that the 'other' is not only constructed in a singular or one-dimensional way. Different constructions of the 'other' may be linked to different constructions of in-group identities. As a result, national identity, Britishness in this case, is an ambivalent construction that can be inclusive in some contexts and exclusive in others.

Data and Methodology

Data collection

The paper draws on data from twenty interviews with citizenship officers working in twelve local councils in London. Citizenship officers were selected for this project because they play a key role in the rituals of national identity construction in Britain. The officers mediate the relationship between applicants for naturalisation and the state through the services they provide. Citizenship officers do not have authority over who should be granted citizenship. Their role is to facilitate the naturalisation process, mainly through the nationality checking service which ensures that naturalisation applications are correctly filled in and submitted. However, their role is symbolically significant. They are responsible for conducting citizenship ceremonies, where new naturalised citizens swear or affirm their allegiance to the queen and the country and also receive their naturalisation certificates. While having some basic guidance from the Home

Office, citizenship officers have a degree of freedom in organising the ceremonies – for example through choosing and decorating the ceremony venue and deciding whether to invite local dignitaries to give a speech. For instance, some councils conduct ceremonies in a formal and highly symbolic way (e.g. in a nice venue decorated with ‘symbols of Britishness’ such as the picture of the queen, with the mayor presenting the naturalisation certificates to the new citizens), while others conduct them in a more routine way (i.e. by simply following the minimal requirements set by the Home Office). This may depend on how citizenship officers make sense of their role in ‘welcoming’ new citizens as well as on how they construe the significance of naturalisation and British citizenship in general.

A sample of twelve local councils was selected to recruit participants for interviews. We included boroughs that are relatively ethnically homogeneous and boroughs that are heterogeneous and, also, economically deprived and non-deprived boroughs. Seventeen of the citizenship officers were British citizens of various ethnic backgrounds (White, Black and Asian), two officers were South African and one was French.

The interview topic guide was designed to address the topics of immigration, citizenship and national identity through the discussion of the naturalisation process in Britain. The topic guide was structured around the following themes: questions regarding the citizenship officers’ work, questions about the process of

naturalisation, questions about naturalisation and immigration and questions about the meanings of British citizenship.

Data analysis

We employed what could be referred to as a theoretically guided thematic analysis using discursive principles, and adopted a 'latent thematic analysis' approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, we were interested in not only the ways in which something is constructed in discourse, but also the assumptions and functions that underpin those constructions.

In our analysis, we followed Billig's (1987) rhetorical psychology by focussing on oppositions and dilemmas in the ways participants talked about citizenship. Billig (1987) observes that thinking takes the form of argumentation, since every argument on which people draw to make sense of the world has an opposing argument. Arguments, and counter-arguments, themes and counter-themes are in dialectical relationship with each other. In seeking to understand this dynamic way of talking and arguing about what it means to be British, attention was paid to thematic tensions in the discourses of participants. Themes and counter themes that structured their discourses were identified. Examining such tensions allowed an appreciation of the dynamic and dialogical nature of thinking about Britishness, and also enabled the analysis to track the argumentation of participants. We thus analysed the rhetorical acts aimed to win over opposing

positions or possible criticisms; the ways in which discourse attempts to make itself persuasive (Gill, 1996).

Findings

Earned citizenship and conditionality

Earned citizenship – the idea that British citizenship is a right to be earned – was the underlying narrative in the majority of the interviews with citizenship officers (see Andreouli & Stockdale, 2009). The very idea of earned citizenship creates a fundamental distinction between deserving new citizens (who have earned their right to citizenship) and undeserving new citizens (who have not earned their right to citizenship). This stance towards immigration is also reflected in the government's recent skilled migration policy which is based on the distinction between 'wanted' (skilled) and 'unwanted' (unskilled) migrants (Andreouli & Howarth, 2012). This is not too different from the discourse that assesses inclusion on the basis of effortfulness (Gibson, 2009). In line with a reciprocity principle, migrants can earn the right to British citizenship and associated benefits only if they abide by a set of conditions. In the interviews, skilled migrants who can contribute to the economy were differentiated from unskilled migrants:

I think what we have to do is make a decision about who are the people we actually want to come to the UK in terms of their skills, in terms of the skills and abilities that we need to make the

economy grow and continue to grow. [...] I think for people who are virtually economic migrants, who are not able to contribute in the way in which we need them to do, then perhaps there's an argument, perhaps it's saying "Well, I think we got to be restrictive" [...] I think that's a perfectly reasonable aspiration, we do have a finite amount of resource in terms of just the infrastructure; the burden on the National Health Service, the burden on schools, the burden on GP practices, the burden on housing has all been difficult (Extract 1: Male participant, age 43)

By framing the issue in a sustainability framework, this participant puts forward a 'rationalistic' argument ("I think this is a perfectly reasonable aspiration") and thus manages to counter accusations of prejudice and achieve not only a positive (non-prejudiced or non-racist) self-presentation (Van Dijk, 1992; Augoustinos & Every, 2007, 2010; Figgou & Condor, 2006; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) but also a positive image of the in-group as a whole, i.e. the British nation – evident in the participant's use of 'we' in this extract. In addition, the use of the word 'perhaps' functions to make the participant appear open-minded (as he does not dogmatically propose a single viewpoint but appears open to other views). This norm against prejudice is an important social value whose roots can be found in the ideals of the Enlightenment (Billig et al., 1988). It follows that excluding some (unskilled) migrants is presented here as a justifiable, and thus rational, response to sustainability issues and not as a prejudiced viewpoint (see also, Gibson &

Hamilton, 2011; Every, 2008). Presenting himself as non-prejudiced and rational allows this participant to say what would otherwise be 'unsayable' (Augoustinos & Every, 2007), that is, that immigration ought to be limited. Thus, although the above extract is to an extent exclusionary ("we need to be restrictive"), the 'rational' discourse functions to conceal this.

Most of the participants argued for more stringent immigration controls in order to protect the British infrastructure. Within this discursive framework, Britain was constructed as a giver (mainly of freedom and economic opportunities), whereas migrants were seen as takers:

I think the people that should be applying are people that have probably come here as asylum seekers, people that have spent many years here, people that want to put back into the community, into Britain, what Britain has done for them. I think if Britain, how can I explain, when you take somebody in and offer them shelter, then, when they're in a position, they should repay, I think they should put back into society what society has given to them to enable them to be safe and secure. (Extract 2: Female participant, age 65)

In accordance with the earned citizenship discourse, migrants were seen as having a moral duty to be grateful and committed to Britain. This expectation of gratefulness suggests that humanitarianism to asylum seekers are not

necessarily given in an altruistic fashion, illustrating a conditional type of hospitality (Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008). Humanitarianism is here framed as a matter of charity that needs to be appreciated (see also Grove & Zwi, 2006; Pickering, 2001). Underlying this (apparently rational) 'reciprocity' argument, the above account expresses an expectation that new citizens compensate, or in some ways demonstrate appreciation for "what Britain has done for them".

Freedom in Britain was a common argument used to explain why becoming a British citizen should be appreciated as something important in a person's life. Thus, the refugee or asylum seeker is seen as the victim of an oppressive regime and as being in need of Britain's humanitarianism and generosity.

I wouldn't feel happy if we turned them away, where would they go? [...] we should still be seen as a safe haven for people who really need help and need assistance, that need to flee their country. We shouldn't take that away, you know, that's part of us.

(Extract 3: Female participant, age 42)

The construction of the migrant as a person in need is the basis for the image of British identity as the 'giver' of help. We notice a discursive strategy that works to affirm a positive image for the self; a valued in-group identity based on values of hospitality, humanitarianism and respect for freedom. In fact, some participants argued that naturalised citizens are prouder than British-born citizens about being British, as shown in the second extract below. By appreciating British

tolerance and freedom, new citizens validate this image of Britishness and deserve to become British citizens. Some officers felt proud for being the ones who present the naturalisation certificates to these new citizens.

In my experience, the majority of them have been quite moved by the whole experience. Last week, we had a guy from Bulgaria who actually filled with tears. At the end, he came up and said, thank you for the ceremony, this is such a wonderful country. He was just moved by the whole thing. And lot of people from other countries that have come from quite tough areas, yeah, where there is civil war, there is different strife, their political beliefs or whatever, have meant that they were really sort of under a terrible regime. (Extract 4: Male participant, age 47)

I think sometimes the people that we take as citizens are prouder than people that are actually born here, to be honest, I think, cos they know how important it is, they've taken on the importance, they have lived in other cultures, so they, they know the differences and they appreciate. (Extract 5: Female participant, age 52)

However, naturalising simply to obtain the benefits of a European Union passport was also a key and very salient theme in the interviews, undermining the legitimacy or deservingness of (some) new British citizens.

...I still think that deep down they're more with their country from where they were born. [...] I think they may use the British citizenship more for legal or travelling [...] I don't see why become a British citizen [in this case]. They're only getting benefits to become a British citizen... (Extract 6: Female participant, age 56)

I think a lot of people who come to be British citizens will never understand what it means to be British, because they don't really care. They, they've done it for a reason. They want to stay here, they want to have the advantages of having a British passport. (Extract 7: Male participant, age 60)

In extract 6 there is an appeal to common sense reason again that functions to de-legitimise the validity of migrants' claims to British citizenship. In both extracts above the argument rests on the critique of the personal motives of migrants which undermines their subsequent actions, i.e. applying for citizenship. This is similar to a 'blaming the victim' (Van Dijk, 1992) rhetorical strategy whereby migrants are viewed as not really wanting to become British.

Ambivalence towards the 'other': Deserving and undeserving migrants

As the earned citizenship discourse suggests, migrants in the interviews were differentiated (see also Lynn & Lea, 2003) between those who earn citizenship (those who "put back into society") and those who do not earn it (those who do not "repay"). The argument of humanitarianism towards those in need was thus

in tension with the counter-argument that migrants abuse Britain's hospitality. The distinction between 'genuine' and 'bogus' asylum seekers (e.g. Kushner, 2003; Lynn & Lea, 2003) rests on this dilemma. The theme of hospitality abuse took mainly the form of abuse of welfare benefits in the interviews:

[...] once they get their indefinite leave, then they can go and get the benefits and... you know, it's as if to say, well, let's go to Great Britain, you don't have to work because they pay you what we would have got in a week's wages in benefits and you don't have to do anything. [...] You know, for some asylum seekers that's a get-away from their countries. Which is only right, you know. It's, sad things have happened to them in their own countries and you wouldn't wish that on anyone. But to come here and then just sit around and not even look for work, you know, just think, well, I'm gonna get benefits, that's OK, I can sit here and... you know, I wouldn't want to say, right, no, back you go, because that's not, that's not fair, they've got to live and they've got to live somewhere. (Extract 8: Female participant, age 56)

It's very nice you know, handing out benefits to people that are in need. Don't get me wrong, they are in need, they do need it, but it has to go, if you're giving out, you have to have some form of money coming back in again. (Extract 9: Female participant, age 65)

The participants above try to both argue that Britain should be a welcoming country and make claims against the financial help given to immigrants, especially asylum seekers. In other words, they engage in a negotiation between humanitarianism and pragmatism: while humanitarianism is valued, it is also portrayed as non-realistic and needs to be balanced with the practical aim of not stretching the welfare state. The seemingly rational social justice framework, found in the participants' discourse, functions once more to counter potential accusations of prejudice and legitimise anti-immigration attitudes. In these highly ambiguous accounts, the migrant shifts positions between 'the person in need' and 'the opportunist', while at the same time Britain's position alters between the 'saviour/benefactor' and the 'victim' of benefit abuse. While removing agency from migrants, especially asylum seekers, is fundamental for constructions of British humanitarianism, this agency has to be re-invoked in order to construct them as abusers of welfare benefits.

As shown earlier, in addition to economic contribution, migrants were also seen as having the moral duty to be proud of becoming British citizens. However, obtaining the British passport was commonly seen as a principal reason for naturalisation and it was construed as being in conflict with such feelings of pride because it is driven by opportunistic motives. The interviewees constructed a distinction between the practicality of the passport and feelings of pride towards British citizenship (mainly due to Britain's respect for freedom and democracy). The two were constructed as opposite and mutually exclusive, so that

naturalising for the sake of the passport did not leave any room for pride and commitment towards Britain.

P: ... I think that for everyone that you get like that, you get the genuine ones and that kind of, you know...

I: What do you mean by genuine ones?

P: Well, that's probably the wrong way to phrase it I suppose. People that actually want to come to this country, contribute to the country, work to earn a living I think, and are here, you know, for genuine reasons, they want to be part of the community. We do see, a lot in the citizenships ceremonies which is nice, you know, the bit where they stand up, take their oath and the national anthem. It is quite nice to see, an awful lot of them are very proud at that point, to sort of stand up, take the oath and the national anthem, which, I kind of sit here and I think, now, that's, it actually does, this means something, but you also get people that will ring up and come in, and you know, it doesn't mean a thing really, it's just a piece of paper, it's a kind of thing for a British passport and the fact that they got British citizenship doesn't mean anything really to them. (Extract 10: Female participant, age 52)

More than a travel document, the passport acquired a significant symbolic value for citizenship officers. In a way, the passport was the objectification of opportunism on the part of 'bad immigrants', while pride and commitment were

associated with 'good migrants'. This discursive strategy of 'differentiating the other' (see also Lynn & Lea, 2003) was key in the arguments of participants. The grateful migrant, who is committed and contributes to society, symbolises the ideal new British citizen. This is in conflict with the image of the immigrant who puts a strain on the British welfare system and is driven by opportunistic motives such as obtaining a European Union passport.

Discussion

This paper has provided an analysis of citizenship officers' discourse on British national identity and naturalisation, focusing particularly on constructions of earned citizenship. Citizenship officers play a key role in 'imagining' British national identity as they implement the state's recent citizenship legislation. It should be noted however that the particular setting of the interview could have had an impact in how Britishness was 'imagined' for the participants as different contexts may provoke different constructions of identity (Reicher, 2004). The context and setting of these interviews (about the naturalisation process) can be said to invite talk about the selectivity and conditionality of citizenship, so we need to be careful about generalising our analysis to other contexts. The participants of this study also constitute a quite specific sample. While citizenship officers are key 'national gatekeepers', they constitute a particular population precisely because of this role that they occupy.

In our analysis we used insights from rhetorical psychology which offers an understanding of the functions and strategic aspects of national identity construction. Earned citizenship was the underlying thematic thread in the accounts of interviewees. Earned citizenship emphasises conditionality and selectivity regarding who has the right to become British. This discourse makes a basic distinction between deserving and undeserving new citizens. In the interviews, words such as 'ungrateful' and 'opportunist' were juxtaposed with words like 'grateful' and 'committed'. New citizens were constructed in a binary way, as both 'good' and 'bad', as 'people in need' and as 'abusers' of British hospitality. Participants employed these opposing arguments, drawing on one or the other according to the argumentation strategies they adopted.

There is a strategic aspect in these constructions as in every construction of national identity (Billig, 1987; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Each image of the immigrant is bound to a particular construction of Britishness. On the one hand, the 'good immigrant' image functions to construct an idealised image of Britishness as the epitome of values of tolerance, freedom and humanitarianism. On the other hand, the 'bad immigrant' representation functions to construct an image of Britain as in need of protection from cultural threat and economic decline. This was justified in the interviews by seemingly rational arguments that propose immigration restrictions on the basis of pragmatic sustainability concerns. In this construction, Britain becomes the 'victim' of welfare and economic abuse by 'ungrateful' and 'opportunist' new citizens.

The ambivalence between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' migrants that we identified in this paper is also present in policy discussions on citizenship and 'managed migration' (Andreouli & Howarth, 2012). Overall, the dilemma between hospitality/humanitarianism and abuse/threat creates ambivalence within constructions of Britishness and constructions of 'others'. We see that both self and other are constructed in different ways according to different identity projects, making Britishness an inconsistent and contradictory identity.

While the 'other' constructed as a perceived threat is commonly discussed in social psychology, our study shows that otherisation can potentially be countered by discourses that embrace the other. As such, national identity is not always exclusionary – in the case of Britishness the 'other' can also be welcomed in a way that confirms Britain's image as an open and tolerant country. Indeed, tolerance, constructed as a distinctive British trait, has historically framed Britain's relations towards 'others', especially colonised populations (Favell, 2001). To this day, British 'multiculturalist' policies tend to recognise the right to cultural difference compared to the more assimilationist approach of the rest of Europe, such as France and Germany. Discourses of tolerance have however been criticised for maintaining the hegemony of dominant groups since it is these groups that have the power to grant or withdraw tolerance towards minority groups (Hage, 1998; Wemuss, 2006). Moreover, tolerance has been said to maintain a hierarchy of belonging because the tolerators are unquestionably members of the ingroup while the tolerated occupy by definition a precarious

position (Hage, 1998). This puts into question arguments that celebrate the humanitarian representations of Britain as enabling a more open and acceptable approach to the other, especially when, as we saw, openness towards immigration can slip into a more exclusionary stance when the other is constructed as someone who is ungrateful or does not contribute. While these points are important to keep in mind, it remains the case that most of the officers that were interviewed for this study did discuss immigration in positive terms (although the negative pole of the good/bad immigrant distinction was more salient) and some of them did, in fact, take pride in their role in welcoming new citizens. Following Billig (1987), we suggest that this ambivalence can provide the grounds for further debate and change. It opens up the possibility for resisting exclusionary discourses and advancing more inclusive ones.

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