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Citizenship under Covid-19: an analysis of UK political rhetoric during the 1st wave of the 2020 pandemic

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Abstract

The paper presents an analysis of the UK government discourse on citizenship during the first nine months of the Covid-19 pandemic (March-November 2020). We adopted a socio-cultural approach to citizenship drawing on the scholarly tradition of ideological dilemmas and rhetorical psychology as well as interdisciplinary work on neoliberalism. In our analysis of over one hundred briefings and other material by the Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet, we identified five interrelated constructions of the ‘good citizen’: the confined, the heroic, the sacrificial, the unfree, and the responsible citizen. The paper maps these constructions onto the ideological dilemmas of freedom/control, passive/active citizenship and individualism/collectivism. We show that, through the rhetorical use of notions of gratefulness for citizens’ sacrifice and shared responsibility, the UK government’s discourse appears to challenge the dominant model of the neoliberal citizen. However, it solidifies this very same model by responsabilizing individual citizens whilst abdicating itself from responsibility. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article’s Community and Social Impact Statement.

Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation, as of 4 March 2021, the novel coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic has been responsible for the deaths of 2,543,755 people across the world. Government figures in the UK show that the death toll stands at 140,062 with over 4,194,785 people having tested positive for the virus. The transmission of a virus is dependent on human behaviour and therefore it is a question for social psychology as much as virology and epidemiology (Smith & Gibson, 2020). The long-standing notion within psychology, and beyond, of the ‘frailty’ of people - that they are unable to deal with stress and uncertainty, and therefore cannot cope in a crisis - has influenced greatly the government response to Covid-19 (Reicher & Stott, 2020). However, this view of human behaviour has been criticised by recent social psychological work which instead develops a social identity-based approach to behaviour change during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jetten, Reicher, Haslam & Cruwys, 2020). In this paper, we adopt a similar approach and examine constructions of citizenship under Covid-19 through a rhetorical analysis of UK political discourse.

Our decision to study the UK political context was informed by its particularity when the pandemic was declared. 2020 was the UK’s ‘transition year’ before Brexit was to be fully implemented. The economic and political future of the UK outside of the EU remained unresolved at the time and it was the subject of intense debate, both internally and in discussions with the EU. The UK government, having only come into power in December 2019, was immersed in dealing with post-Brexit negotiations when it was forced to shift its attention to the pandemic. In March 2020, it

passed the Coronavirus Act 2020 empowering the UK government to implement a three-month national 'lockdown' in England which entailed a series of restrictions and changes to the rights and duties of citizens, such as social distancing, working from home, travel restrictions and quarantines. The devolved governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland also implemented national lockdowns at or around the same time.

This paper examines the political rhetoric around the pandemic focusing on the implications for citizenship. In the next two sections we outline our socio-cultural approach to citizenship and discuss how neoliberal citizenship has unravelled in the context of Covid-19, before presenting our methods and rhetorical analysis of the key themes that anchored the government's discourse of citizenship under Covid-19.

'Citizen-making' as a socio-cultural practice

The present paper draws on a critical and constructionist social psychological approach to citizenship (Andreouli, 2019). A key question for this approach is: how do political actors enact their positions as rights bearers vis-à-vis others and how do they construct the category of citizenship itself (Barnes, Auburn & Lea, 2004)? First and foremost, this perspective suggests that citizenship ought to be studied as a practice (Condor, 2011a) through which political agency, in both its scope (rights and duties) and boundaries, is constituted. In other words, citizenship is something that is *done*, not held, by citizens themselves and by other political actors who have a voice and/or a stake in how citizenship is defined and enacted.

An increasing amount of social psychological work has sought to examine the ways in which citizenship is (co-)constructed by citizens in everyday life and social interaction. Such work has often taken a rhetorical approach, examining, in micro-detail, argumentative lines and ideological dilemmas of everyday talk. Ideology here is understood as a network of 'common-sensical' ideas, which provide the symbolic material for everyday political reasoning. Further, this approach suggests that common-sense is not internally consistent, but it draws on a range of values and ideological themes, rooted in cultural and political history, which may be in tension with each other. The dilemmas of everyday ideologies provide the preconditions for engaging with different sides of an argument, and consequently for rhetorical deliberation (Billig, 1987). Using this framework, recent social psychological work has studied, for example, the dilemma between humanitarianism and pragmatism in everyday talk about 'naturalised' citizenship (Andreouli & Dashtipour, 2013), between civic responsibility and individual rights in young people's talk about political participation (Condor & Gibson, 2007), and between personal responsibility versus social circumstances in talk about welfare (Gibson, 2011).

Citizenship as practice takes place in different domains where rights and duties are negotiated and enacted: in official policies and practices (e.g., immigration rules); in enacting one's status through established forms of political participation (e.g., voting); in political movements that seek change of established models of citizenship (e.g., Isin, 2009); as well as in more 'mundane' practices such as everyday social interactions. This work convincingly urges citizenship scholars to expand the field of the political into the realm of culture (Andreouli, 2019; Shotter, 1993). This necessarily points to a focus on understanding the meanings of citizenship as these are developed, changed and negotiated across different spheres of 'citizen-making'.

The unravelling of neoliberal citizenship under Covid-19

In her work on neoliberalism, Brown (2016) has shown that neoliberalism is more than a political and economic agenda; it is a type of rationality which 'economises' every aspect of human life and the self itself. Neoliberal rationality is a cultural form, a means through which people engage with others and the world. Neoliberalism has become deeply ingrained into taken for granted everyday knowledge, or common-sense (Hall & O'Shea, 2015). Using the vocabulary of rhetorical psychology, it can be described as a lived ideology (Billig et al., 1988). This ideology foregrounds the market as the ultimate source of reason and progress; as such, "extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action" (Brown, 2003, p.40). In this context, the model citizen is the *homo economicus*; that is, the citizen who acts and thinks on the basis of costs and benefits, is entrepreneurial and self-interested.

Individual freedom is fundamental to neoliberal citizenship. Neoliberal citizens are 'obliged to be free' (Rose, 1989/1999): they are individually responsible for their own lives and wellbeing. They are called upon to self-manage while the state becomes less and less involved in their welfare. An example of this is social citizenship. Recipients of welfare benefits are 'responsibilized'; they are expected to be individually responsible for managing their wellbeing without the interference of the state (Clarke, 2005). This is reflected in everyday understandings of welfare rights, where making an effort and being individually responsible for one's life are routinely employed in representations of welfare recipients (Gibson, 2009).

Covid-19 appears to have unsettled this model of neoliberal citizenship. Strict rules and so-called 'lockdowns' to contain the transmission of the virus across the world have led to the suspension of normal economic activity. This has been described as the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, with the IMF predicting £21.5 trillion in lost output (IMF, October 2020). The very foundations of neoliberal capitalism have been shaken. For one, 'shutting down' the economy contravenes the basic principle of capitalism which is based on productive work (and its exploitation) (Mezzadri, 2020). Relatedly, a shift can be observed in the role of the state: from acting as facilitator for free market competition, to implementing economic measures, not simply for the purposes of profit-making, but to protect vulnerable populations.

Without a doubt, Covid-19 has disrupted the economic and political status quo. But this disruption to normality is both deeper and more expansive than its purely economic manifestations. Covid-19 lockdowns altered the very fundamentals of everyday life and 'normal' interaction with others, such as seeking special permissions to leave one's home and being prohibited from meeting one's friends and family. The very etiquette for interacting with others changed, with enforced measures for keeping a distance and wearing a face mask in public, for example. Such measures have required fundamental normative change about what makes a good citizen and what constitutes appropriate civic behaviour. It is telling that new types of social categories have emerged, such as 'distancers' and 'non-distancers' (Prosser, Judge, Bolderdij, Blackwood & Kurz, 2020), the latter, who do not abide by these new rules sometimes being dismissively referred to as 'covidiot's'.

Such disruptive events can unravel the ideological status quo. Using a Meadian approach, we have previously suggested that this creates a space of emergence, understood as a "stage betwixt and between the old system and the new", which urges us to examine processes of change in themselves, rather than patterns through which change becomes integrated and familiarized as 'the way things are' (Andreouli, Kaposi & Stenner, 2019). To do this, we draw here on the social psychological tradition of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al, 1988) and rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1987), which foregrounds the inherent openness of sense-making. We ask, how is citizenship re-constructed in the context of Covid-19 and what kinds of emergent citizenship(s) are taking shape?

Methodology

While the pandemic has understandably led to myriad scientific studies on Covid-19, there is a noticeable lack of work looking at ‘talk and text’ and the constructs that influence people’s relationship to authority and their responses to policies (Smith & Gibson, 2020, p. 581). This paper addresses that void by taking a rhetorical psychology approach to the analysis of political discourse during the pandemic. This was achieved through the analysis of 91 televised briefings and other relevant high-profile interviews, letters, articles and statements, which were given by the Prime Minister or his cabinet with members of the government’s scientific advisors, from 9 March until 5 November 2020 (n=105; see Appendix A). The briefings began on 9 March 2020 and, from 16 March until 23 June, they were daily. The format of the briefings consisted of a statement by the Prime Minister or a member of his cabinet, followed by an update on recent Covid-19 data and then questions from the public and members of the national press.

Our methodological approach is based on the principle that political language is constructive, purposeful, and performative (Edelman, 1988). Our guiding analytic question was how citizenship and the ‘good citizen’ were constructed in the dataset, and to what effect. We adopted a mixed approach to the analysis of the data. We first conducted a thematic analysis following the principles of Braun and Clarke (2006), and subsequently we conducted a more fine-grained rhetorical analysis. We proceeded in four steps:

- (i) We initially familiarized ourselves with the data and coded the material using our guiding analytic question. We followed an approach of collaborative analysis (Cornish, Gillespie & Zittoun, 2014). The two authors first coded the data separately and then, in a collaborative analysis session, we discussed and resolved similarities and discrepancies. We agreed on a coding framework and a set of initial themes, which we applied to the rest of the data. Each author worked on half of the dataset. When needed, we further revised our coding framework following discussion, by adding new codes and discarding redundant ones.
- (ii) Having applied our coding framework to the entirety of the data, we collaboratively reviewed and revised our initial themes in line with our guiding question. This analysis produced five interrelated themes: the confined, heroic, sacrificial, unfree, and responsible citizen.
- (iii) We subsequently conducted a more detailed rhetorical analysis of the raw data within each of the themes. We examined the lines of argument employed by the UK government to construct these versions of the ‘good’ citizen, considering how these are embedded both (a) in the local context of each communication and (b) within the more macro cultural and ideological context. For the former (a), we examined strategies of self-presentation in relation to particular interactive contexts, interlocutors and audiences. With regards to the latter (b), we examined the ‘common sense’ notions and ideological resources relied on by the government and the ideological dilemmas this raised (Billig et al., 1988).
- (iv) In a final collaborative analysis session, we brought together our analyses and produced an interpretative narrative within and across our five themes, which we elaborate theme-by-theme in the following section. The extracts presented below have been selected because they illustrate most clearly the thematic content and rhetorical strategies identified in our analysis.

Analysis

The confined citizen

The following extract comes from the Prime Minister’s statement when he announced a UK-wide lockdown, following weeks of reluctance to do so, with suggestions that the UK government was at the time pursuing a policy of achieving ‘herd immunity’.

Extract 1:

From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction - you must stay at home. Because the critical thing we must do is stop the disease spreading between households. That is why people will only be allowed to leave their home for the following very limited purposes: shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible, one form of exercise a day - for example a run, walk, or cycle - alone or with members of your household; any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person; and travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home. That's all - these are the only reasons you should leave your home. (23 March, Boris Johnson)

In this extract, the Prime Minister introduces the first UK-wide lockdown by initially constructing an 'I-you' formulation where he is positioned as 'instructor' or 'teacher' and citizens as 'pupils' who should follow his instruction. Swiftly, however, he turns to a 'we' formulation placing himself within the national effort to halt the spread of the virus (see Billig, 1995, for how national identity is 'banally' constructed through the use of everyday language). He seems to be oriented to the negative identity potentially attached to a leader who takes unpopular measures, and he attempts to position himself as part the in-group. The model citizen in this account is the citizen who stays at home. In direct opposition to the productive, entrepreneurial individuals under neoliberalism, this citizen has restricted freedoms. They are controlled by external authorities (namely, the state that decides the rules and the police that enforces them) in the very fundamentals of everyday life, work and social interaction. This citizen is therefore in a state of stasis: unproductive and passive rather than an active participant in the cycle of production and consumption.

The heroic citizen

Almost as the mirror image of the confined citizen is the heroic citizen epitomised in the NHS worker.

Extract 2

Thank you to all of those who are looking after us in our time of need. The NHS [National Health Service] workers on the front line who have treated the sick, saved lives and tended for those who, sadly, could not be saved. For the doctors and nurses who have died of coronavirus whilst caring for others, we will never forget their sacrifice, we will never forget their devotion to helping others. (9 April, Dominic Raab)

This account is reminiscent of a national war narrative, (see also Mols & Jetten, 2014, and Pettersson, 2019, for the use of war metaphors in political rhetoric). The Secretary of State constructs those in the 'frontline' of the health services as the nation's heroes. As in Extract 1, the Secretary of State is rhetorically positioned in this extract as part of the national 'we'. Taking this line of argument one step further, Raab is positioned as the in-group's representative: he is positioned as speaking on behalf of the in-group to express its gratefulness towards health workers. Health workers, specifically doctors and nurses of the NHS, are said to be sacrificing themselves to care for others. Like soldiers in a war, they die to save others, and their devotion and sacrifice is not to be forgotten. This is a construction of 'heroic' citizenship: doctors and nurses look after "those in need", they "treat the sick" and "save lives". Compared to the enforced ordinariness and passivity of staying at home for everyone else, these citizens are extra-ordinary, both because they continue to work and because their contribution is itself extraordinary. Much like the NHS as an institution, they appear to be a source of national pride. They exemplify the spirit of the nation in a moment of national crisis, like 'frontline' soldiers in wartime.

The sacrificial citizen

As shown by such references to national effort and sacrifice, the themes of the confined and the heroic citizen are intimately intertwined with a theme of sacrificial citizenship.

Extract 3

I know it has been tough. I know it has been inconvenient. But these actions that we're all taking together are already helping to take the strain off our NHS [National Health Service]. Bit by bit, day by day, by your actions, your restraint and your sacrifice, we are putting this country in a better and stronger position, where we will be able to save literally thousands of lives, of people of all ages, people who don't deserve to die now. People whose lives can, must, and will be saved. And as we take these actions together and as we make these sacrifices, we can see the impact on the real economy. (20 March, Boris Johnson)

The extract above is a typical example of the many references to citizens' sacrifice in the UK government's discourse. As we have found in other examples in our dataset, the Prime Minister's account starts from a recognition of the difficulties that restrictions pose on citizens' lives. These are presented as sacrifices for the good of the country and the NHS. These are national sacrifices and are requested in a spirit of solidarity ("taking actions together" as a national community). The value placed on citizens' sacrifice is further highlighted by stressing its immense benefit to "save literally thousands of lives". In the extract, we see again the construction of a 'we' position that puts the PM and the public in the same category of 'sacrificial citizens'. This allows the PM to avoid the position of an authoritarian outsider imposing strict rules, and to be instead part of the national ingroup that "takes actions", "makes sacrifices" and "saves lives".

This sacrificial citizenship draws on the ideological theme of collectivism. What we might call 'citizenship capital' is not measured here in terms of its economic value (as other research on constructions of citizenship in the UK has shown; e.g., Andreouli & Dashtipour, 2013). It is measured in terms of its social value, its contribution to the life of the national community as a whole. This is an other-oriented model of good citizenship and, again, it is seemingly at odds with the self-contained citizen of neoliberalism. The concept of sacrificial citizenship has been previously employed to illustrate the construction of citizenship under conditions of austerity in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (Brown, 2016). The concept is apt in this context too: whilst the sacrifice is not made for the benefit of the economy but for the wellbeing of people, what remains constant is the responsabilization of individual citizens.

The unfree citizen

As is shown in Extract 3 above, references to citizens' sacrifice were coupled with expressions of gratefulness towards the public for abiding by the newly enforced restrictions. Although in the dataset we also found references to citizens' duty to abide by the new rules and to their enforcement by authorities, these were by far fewer than talk of withheld freedom and rights. Indeed, throughout the course of the first wave of the pandemic, the UK government had shown reluctance to implement strict lockdown measures, an approach which was often publicly criticised by scientists.

Extract 4

Now this disease affects us all indiscriminately, we've seen that. In recent weeks, we have had to impinge on historic liberties to protect our NHS and our loved ones, and yet our goal must be freedom. Freedom from the virus, yes – and we will not lift measures until it is safe to do so. But also we care about the restoration of social freedom and

economic freedom too. Each citizen's right to do as they please. For now, we are working together to stay home. We are impinging on the freedom of all, for the safety of all. (1 May, Alok Sharma)

In this extract, freedom is juxtaposed with health. In a familiar trope, the Secretary of State is here again positioned as part of the national 'we'. He presents this position as a given fact that cannot be altered because the virus is, by its nature, indiscriminate. Sharma is thus presented as being impacted by the virus and as having his freedom restricted like everyone else. As in Extract 3, restriction of personal freedom is justified for the protection of the NHS and for the protection of vulnerable "loved ones" (possibly referring to elderly parents or grandparents). Whilst health is initially foregrounded in this account as the reason for restricting freedoms, in the second half of the extract, freedom is presented as being restricted for the sake of freedom itself. By giving up "historic liberties", citizens will not only return to safety and health, but also to a condition of social and economic freedom. This can be seen as an example of a particularism (Billig, 1987). Giving up historic freedoms is constructed as an exception to historical British norms. Freedom has a negative meaning (Berlin, 1969) here: it is freedom from the intervention of state authorities in citizens' social and economic lives. It is also a very self-centred conception of freedom constructed as "each citizen's right to do as they please".

The following extract demonstrates more clearly the particularisation of freedom as a specific trait of Britishness:

Extract 5

[F]or months with those disciplines of social distancing we have kept that virus at bay. But we have to acknowledge that this is a great and freedom-loving country; and while the vast majority have complied with the rules there have been too many breaches – too many opportunities for our invisible enemy to slip through undetected. (22 September, Boris Johnson)

The quote above is extracted from the Prime Minister's statement announcing stricter restriction measures following their substantial easing during the summer 2020. The extract starts with a recognition that the discipline shown by British citizens, including himself (as is shown by the use of the pronoun "we") has kept "the virus at bay". Whilst the second wave of coronavirus in the UK has been partly attributed to the easing of lockdown restrictions during the summer and the government's resistance to implement stricter measures, as advised by its own Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) (Sample, 2020), Boris Johnson is arguing here that the surge of coronavirus cases is attributable to the lack of compliance by a minority of British citizens. Not complying with restrictions is, in turn, justified (and implicitly forgiven) by the fact that Britain is a "great and freedom-loving country". In other words, freedom-loving citizens disobeying the rules acted in a manner aligned with the spirit of Britishness.

The responsible citizen

The theme of shared responsibility in the fight against coronavirus was very prominent in our data. The extract below is taken from the Prime Minister's response to a journalist's question about whether an immediate lockdown could result in avoiding deaths. The journalist referred to the fact that, at the time, Italy already had a two-week long lockdown in place, and the UK was assumed to be two weeks behind Italy in terms of virus spread. Boris Johnson starts by stressing the "difficulties of comparison between countries" and then continues as follows:

Extract 6

And we will do absolutely everything in accordance with the advice that we get from SAGE, from the CMO [Chief Medical Officer], from the CSA [Chief Scientific Adviser], about when are measures are going to have a maximum impact in stopping the spread of the disease. But basically what people need to understand today is that their best bet to stop the spread of the disease, protect our NHS, save lives, is stay at home if you possibly can. Stay at home if you possibly can. (22 March, Boris Johnson)

In his response to critical questioning about the government's handling of the pandemic, Boris Johnson argues that the government's decisions are based on expert advice so that the "maximum impact" of stricter measures can be achieved. Johnson is most likely referring to the idea that taking lockdown measures early on would cause 'behavioural fatigue' with people not complying with restrictions in the long run. This approach, since abolished, was criticised by behavioural experts including by some of the government's own scientific advisors (Jetten, Reicher, Haslam & Cruwys, 2020). Johnson does not elaborate further, but rather moves on to emphasise individual responsibility to stay at home. This is presented as the "best bet" to stop the virus and, consequently, protect "our" NHS and "save lives".

The PM's positioning in this extract is worth noting. Whilst in the other extracts presented so far, members of the government were positioned as part of the in-group, here Boris Johnson uses an 'us-them' formulation that creates a categorical distinction between the government, which places instructions upon the citizenry on the basis of scientific advice, and citizens who have to abide by them. This distinction allows the PM to distance himself from the citizenry and abdicate responsibility for public health. Responsibility for the spread of the virus is instead placed on individual citizens and on scientists on whose authority he defers.

In the extract below, from the beginning of April 2020 when deaths and confirmed cases of coronavirus were very high in the UK, the Cabinet Office Minister responds to a journalist's question about "government planning to do to make sure people stay at home because some people watching this broadcast will be asking if words are enough" (suggesting that the government could take more stringent measures).

Extract 7

I hope that I and certainly Steve [Stephen Powis, Medical Director of NHS England] have been clear, when we look at the death rate, when we look at the number of increasing fatalities, when we consider the pressure on our NHS everyone has to ask themselves the question what am I doing in order to relieve pressure on the NHS? How am I helping in this shared national effort? [...] I know that lockdown is challenging, I know it's very difficult particularly for families with children it's a challenge, but people must at every stage respect these guidelines because that's the only way of making sure that we restrict the spread of the disease. (4 April, Michael Gove)

In the extract, Michael Gove argues that the increased death rate and pressure on the health services should instil in citizens a sense of responsibility "to relieve pressure on the NHS" and to help "in this shared national effort". As in previous extracts, the use of this solidaristic language enables the Secretary of State to construct the fight against the virus as a national effort of which he is part. Further, through the use of the personal pronoun 'I' ("what I am doing", "how am I helping"), Gove discursively steps into the position of the ordinary citizen. At the same time, he constructs the fight against the virus as a matter of personal responsibility. Further down, Michael Gove repeats the familiar trope of acknowledging the challenges of living under lockdown, before moving on to argue that individual action (abiding by Covid-19 rules) is the "only way" to control the virus. As in the

previous extract, citizens are placed in the position of having primary responsibility for national health. Gove also enlists the support of Stephen Powis, the Medical Director of NHS England. By doing so, Gove, like Boris Johnson in Extract 6, is able to provide scientific legitimacy for his argument.

As the lockdown started to ease in May and summer 2020, the government's public message in England shifted, for a period of a few months, from 'Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives' to 'Stay Alert, Control the Virus and Save Lives'¹. Following a 'save the economy' rationale, the government encouraged citizens to go out and return to their workplaces. A series of measures and tax cuts were introduced to encourage spending, particularly in the tourism, hospitality and entertainment industries. The quote below is extracted from July 2020 when the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport announced such economic measures.

Extract 8

As these places begin to reopen their doors, I'm really urging people to get out there and to play their part. Buy the tickets for outdoor plays and music recitals, get to your local gallery and support your local businesses. [...] And our fight began with a collective effort, and I really hope it will end with one. At the beginning, we all stayed home to protect the NHS and save lives. Now the British public has a new part to play. It's time to eat out to help out. To enjoy the arts to help out. And to work out to help out. It's over to all of you to help the country recover safely. (9 July, Oliver Dowden)

Despite the change in the government's agenda, the theme of citizen responsibility remained constant after the first UK-wide lockdown. In the extract above, Oliver Dowden is encouraging citizens to "play their part" by "getting out there", meaning spending money in entertainment. This too is presented as part of a collective effort, but now the aim is not to "save lives" but to boost the economy. Interestingly, the positioning of the Secretary of State shifts in this extract: from being positioned as an ordinary member of the British collective ("our fight began with a collective effort") to passing on the responsibility for economic recovery to the British public ("It's over to you all to help the country recover safely"). "Helping out", as the Secretary of State puts it, is centred around consumption. The sacrificial citizen of the lockdown is replaced by the productive and consuming citizen of neoliberalism. This citizen is a market actor: they are defined through their economic behaviour and their contribution as a member of the society is measured by their spending power.

Conclusions

In this paper we examined constructions of citizenship in the discourse of the UK government during the first nine months of the Covid-19 pandemic (March-November 2020). In our analysis of over one hundred briefings and other material by the Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet, we identified five principal constructions of the 'good citizen': the confined, the heroic, the sacrificial, the unfree, and the responsible citizen. These map onto three intersecting ideological dilemmas: freedom/control; individualism/collectivism; and active/passive citizenship.

Freedom emerged as a core political value in our data. The 'good citizen', especially in the beginning of the pandemic (March-June 2020), was the unfree citizen, that is, the citizen who stays at home and sacrifices their freedom. This is very much a passive citizen whose actions have an external locus of control. As the mirror image of this suspended citizen is the 'over-active' heroic citizen, epitomised in the NHS worker. Whilst ordinary citizens are expected to

¹ The Welsh government, Scottish Government and Northern Ireland assembly rejected this change and did not adopt the new public message.

stay at home and receive support from others and the state, health and other key workers are 'extra-ordinary' – they work 'heroically' for the benefit of all. This reconfiguration of the value of active and passive citizenship disrupts the neoliberal status quo. As discussed in the introduction, model citizens under neoliberalism are expected to actively take care of their own wellbeing, rather than passively receive state support.

The tension between preserving freedom versus protecting health was fundamental in the UK government's discourse. Far from the self-managed and free individual citizen of neoliberalism, in our data, citizens are called upon to hand their freedom to the authority of the state. We are not arguing that citizens were free whilst now they are not. Rather, it is the status of freedom as a marker of citizenship that has changed: from being 'obliged to be free' (Rose, 1989), citizens' daily lives are now monitored by the state. In this context, one of the emerging faultlines in Covid and post-Covid politics appears to be around freedom. There are many signs pointing to this trajectory, most notably, Donald Trump's and other right-wing politicians' pro-economy rhetoric against lockdowns and the fact that European anti-establishment parties from the (extreme) right have shifted their anti-EU focus towards an anti-lockdown focus. Unavoidably, this raises the question of what freedom means. In the UK government's discourse that we analysed, it means freedom from external constraints and limitations, especially in this case, freedom from state intervention in one's everyday life. According to Berlin (1969), this is 'freedom from' (negative liberty) rather than 'freedom to' (positive liberty) and it speaks to the liberal political tradition.

In our data, freedom, as a citizenship value, is anchored in a nationalist ideological frame. Put simply, freedom is not simply a highly regarded political value; it is also constructed as a distinctively British political value. This is alluded to in Extract 4 where Alok Sharma refers to the temporary suspension of the nation's "historic liberties" as a means of restoring fuller freedom post-covid. It is even more obvious in Extract 5 where Boris Johnson attributes lockdown violations to the fact that Britain is a "freedom-loving country". This caused controversy at the time as the PM suggested in the House of Commons that same day that Germany and Italy had lower case numbers because they are not as freedom-loving. Arguably the subtext of the statement was World War II, and his words, unsurprisingly, led to political condemnation from Italy and Germany. This representation of Britishness as distinctively freedom-loving has been well-reported in social psychological work on constructions of British multiculturalism. It has been shown, in particular, that tolerance towards others is commonly constructed as a distinctively British trait in lay and political talk (Andreouli & Dashtipour, 2013; Condor, 2011b). Some authors have linked this contemporary representation of Britishness to Britain's imperial past – which was characterised by the principle of 'indirect rule' that allows a degree of freedom to colonised populations (Favel, 2001).

Whilst freedom is constructed as an individual right in our data, health is constructed as a matter of collective responsibility. It is the *nation's* health, which is safeguarded by the greatly valued and 'heroic' National Health Service. Under an apparent shift to solidaristic political discourse, individualism remains at the centre of this citizenship discourse. Individual action against the spread of the virus is praised as a commendable sacrifice whilst state provision remains inadequate. Our data show that, as the first-wave lockdown started to ease, starting in England in late spring 2020, the construction of freedom acquired more obvious economic undertones. It became freedom from constraints to individual productivity and consumption (demonstrated mostly clearly in the Chancellor's "eat out to help out" scheme, whereby restaurant meals were subsidised by the government). But this too was couched in terms of collective responsibility: each individual citizen is presented as having a moral duty to play their part in national recovery. These are, therefore, 'responsibilized' citizens (Brown, 2016):

they are held at once responsible for their own self-care and they are sacrificed, not only for the purpose of economic growth, but for the purpose of individually protecting national health, which has however been left increasingly unprotected by state resources (most notably, through the chronic underfunding of the NHS).

What kinds of resources does this vision for citizenship provide for coping, materially and symbolically, with this global pandemic that accentuates economic, social, generational, regional and international inequalities? Emerging political visions have called for a new social contract that centres around solidarity and care (Boston Review, 2020). Such calls appear to resonate with the public mood, as shown in the increased citizen-led initiatives and voluntary activity during Covid-19 and in other symbolic gestures, such as the ‘clap for carers’ ritual². Through the rhetorical use of notions of gratefulness, care and sharedness, the UK government’s discourse functions to seemingly appease this appetite towards more caring politics. However, our analysis shows that, at the same time, it seeks to solidify a citizenship model of personal responsibility and self-management. Ultimately, recovery from the virus is represented in terms of going back to an established normality, which is missed and longed for.

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² ‘Clap for carers’ took place every Thursday evening from March until May 2020. During this weekly ritual, ‘locked-down’ citizens opened their windows and front doors and engaged in a show of collective clapping to show their appreciation for NHS and other key workers.

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