'It's true, I'm English… I'm not lying': essentialized and precarious English identities

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Abstract

This article explores relationships between Englishness and racialization in order to consider the potential for English identities that are progressive in anti-essentialist or multicultural terms. The article draws on data from interviews in which people from a South London area talk about Englishness. I will examine how English identities are understood by participants who are white and participants who are not white. While white participants experience Englishness as a taken-for-granted identity, for participants who are not white English identities are a more calculated, precarious performance. I will then examine discussions of 'who can be English'. While most participants argue that 'anyone can be English' in principle, this is not necessarily the case in practice. It will be suggested that talk of Englishness is particularly constrained by relationships between Englishness, whiteness and ancestry, but that for those who experience Englishness as precarious there are signs that this is not necessarily the case.

Background

Since the devolution of powers to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the late 1990s, questions surrounding English identity have moved up the political and academic agenda. Today, discussions on what the future holds for England and the English take place on an almost daily basis in English newspaper comment and letter pages – a process that received a spur from recent announcements in relation to a referendum on Scottish independence. This widespread and increasing interest in Englishness has been reflected in the publication of best-selling non-fiction titles aiming to examine 'who the English are' or what 'makes us English' (Paxman 1998; Fox 2005), as well as political treatises arguing in favour of some kind of reinvigoration or reclamation of English identities in the twenty-first century (Scruton 2000; Bragg 2007; Kingsnorth 2009). With the previous references taking viewpoints that are respectively conservative, socialist and environmentalist, it is notable that no particular position on the political spectrum dominates this recent upsurge in interest.

This media and political interest has been matched in the academic social sciences and humanities. Historians and political scientists have focused on relationships between apparently problematic expressions of Englishness

and the wider political and historical contexts. While Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have their own specifically national parliaments or assemblies, nationalist political parties and riotously celebrated national days, the English are in the peculiar position of dominating the UK in many respects yet experiencing their Englishness as politically and culturally unformed or inhibited. This has been explained by the notion that Englishness, as the identity and culture of a 'dominant ethnicity', has perhaps, at least until recently, been 'hidden' behind a 'broader nationalist or imperial appeal' (Kaufmann 2004, 1). For social historians Linda Colley (1992) and Krishan Kumar (2003), the historical submerging and potential re-emergence of a confident cultural and political sense of Englishness is indexed respectively to the rise and decline of Britishness and the British Empire. A core concern of political scientists has been to explore expressions of – and anxieties surrounding – this apparently inhibited political identity (Aughey 2007), particularly in relation to European history and contemporary Euro-scepticism (Smith 2006; Wellings 2010).

From sociological and anthropological perspectives influenced by post-structuralist and post-colonial approaches, studies of Englishness have emphasized the relationship between English identities and 'race', thus approaching the legacies of the Empire from a somewhat different perspective. According to these accounts, English identity in the latter half of the twentieth century became bound up with reactions to post-colonial migration, leading to the subsequent redeployment of colonial, binary distinctions onto England's population (Gilroy 2004; Tyler 2012). At its most extreme, this manifests itself today in the relationships between Englishness, white backlash and far right politics, as reflected in the recent emergence of the English Defence League, an Islamophobic protest movement. On a more everyday level, the Parekh Report's committee of experts in race, identity and multiculturalism famously argued that Englishness, even more than Britishness, was a 'racially coded' white category (Runnymede Trust 2000, 38). While Britishness might be seen as a 'civic' national identity open, in principle, to anyone based on the adoption of citizenship and basic political principles, Englishness remains an 'ethnic' national identity, the boundaries of which relate to notions of ancestry and whiteness.[1] This coding of Englishness as a white, ethnic identity has been confirmed to an extent in empirical research.

The British Social Attitudes Survey 2003 found that while 64 per cent of 'White Europeans' considered themselves to be English, the next highest score from an ethnic category was 33 per cent for 'Asian Indians', followed by 17 per cent for 'Black Caribbeans' and 11 per cent for 'Asian Pakistanis' (cited in Condor, Gibson, and Abell 2006, 134). This can be instructively compared to the significantly higher percentages from the same survey who identified as British: 81 per cent 'Black Caribbeans', 72 per cent 'Asian Indians' and 81 per cent 'Asian Pakistanis' (cited in Condor, Gibson, and Abell 2006, 132). Qualitative research has explored this association between Englishness and whiteness in depth. Les Back's (1996, 135) ethnography of a London area demonstrates how Englishness, whiteness and racism can form 'an interrelated ideological triangle' to the exclusion of nonwhite and migrant populations. Back confirms Gilroy's (1987) earlier suggestion that, for many, 'blackness and Englishness are viewed at best as problematic and at worst as mutually exclusive' (Back 1996, 148). More recently, Bridget Byrne's (2006, 142) study of white mothers in London describes the 'enduring racialisation of Englishness' in which white English identification 'can act… as an unacknowledged norm or position of privilege' (Byrne 2006, 140). Michael Skey (2010, 725) supports this conclusion, arguing that many white English identifiers consider themselves to be the 'proper English' and that this provides a platform from which they feel a sense of privileged belonging and sovereignty within England. Robin Mann (2011, 116) has similarly found 'a common-place tendency to define Englishness in opposition to local multi-ethnicity… through reference to the presence or absence of "other" peoples, cultures and ethnicities.'

However, some studies also suggest more complicated, less significantly exclusionary English identities. Condor, Gibson, and Abell (2006, 129–130) suggest that among white participants English identities can be

defined as ethnically white but not accorded a privileged place in relation to other ethnicities in England. Mann (2011, 125) supports this claim, recently arguing that the category English can be 'treated as one of… many… ethnicities within a multiethnic national space … Thus the use of the term English to refer to white majority people is not, in itself, incompatible withmulticultural political projects.'While Back's (1996, 150) study found a relationship between English identity and racism, he also suggests that, for some London youth, reinterpretations of Englishness as multiracial 'have reached advanced stages of development'. This prospect for more inclusive English identities is supported by recent research suggesting that younger generations of the British population are demonstrating more 'civic' and less 'ethnic' conceptions of national identity (Tilley, Heath, and Exley 2004, 155). Even Paul Gilroy (2008, 195), who has written so much about white English racism, has expressed cautious hope, particularly through struggles and re-significations of Englishness in popular culture and sport, for 'the belated prospect of being recognised as being both black and English'.

In this article I will explore these debates on racialized formations of Englishness using data from a recent study. The article will conclude with a discussion of the potential for English identities that are progressive in, first, the multicultural terms discussed by Condor and Mann and, second, the potentially anti-essentialist, hybrid terms discussed by Back and Gilroy.

The study

Data used in this article were produced during semi-structured qualitative interviews in an ethnically diverse area of South London, the population of which was estimated to be 51 per cent white British in the 2001 Census, a figure usefully compared to the nationwide figure of 87 per cent. It is therefore important to recognize that the findings presented here are perhaps representative of a very particular urban context. Forty-two participants were interviewed about their sense of belonging to the local area, their views about their own Englishness, and their ideas about whether 'anyone can be English'. Eighteen of these participants took part in second, follow-up interviews. The final data set therefore includes sixty interviews ranging from thirty minutes to three hours in length. Recruitment took place through ethnographic involvement in the area and by snowball sampling through participants' friends, neighbours and family members.

Participants were asked to think of people they knew who would be willing to be interviewed about the local area and their opinions on Englishness. An emphasis was put on recruitment of white participants who ultimately made up twenty-five out of forty-two of the sample. The achieved aim was not to find a representative sample in terms of who does or does not identify as English, but to nevertheless recruit participants who would represent a cross-section in terms of stratifications of ethnicity, gender, age, class and sexuality. The following analysis centres on the relationship between talk of Englishness and selfidentification as white or as not white. The use of this problematic, binary distinction throughout what follows should be seen within the critical context of the article and specifically in relation to the findings discussed.

While in discussions of Britishness it is often said that the elephant in the room is Englishness, here that situation has been reversed. Although British identity is an important element of the wider study, there is not enough space here to consider its relationships with Englishness in depth. For many white participants the categories British and English were used interchangeably, but for many non-white participants white Britishness was more comfortably identified with due to its greater inclusiveness as a 'civic', political identity in comparison to a more 'ethnic', ancestral or white Englishness. For some white participants, 'anybody' could potentially be British for the same reasons, but to be English required an 'English' ancestry. However, this article is particularly concerned with the white participants who made up a majority of the sample and argued that, in principle, Englishness should be open to anyone of any background but who then, in practice,

constructed a rather different, more restrictive membership criteria for the category. As will be demonstrated, a key finding is that Englishness is being discussed by participants in ways in which racialized difference is habitually and unintentionally essentialized. It is important to also note, however, that in discussing Britishness – and therefore in discussing matters of *citizenship* – these same participants may hold significantly different, less essentializing perspectives. Some potential consequences of this disparity will be discussed in the conclusion.

Essentialized identifications as English

Of twenty-five white participants interviewed, twenty-two stated that they 'feel English'. This can be usefully compared to just seven out of the seventeen participants who are not white. All twenty-two of the white English identifiers would choose 'White British' on a standard UK 'equal opportunities' forms. Many struggled to account for the notion of a 'meaning' behind this identification, although, as the below excerpts demonstrate, they could make reference to and draw upon a set of cultural or historical characteristics and representations:

> Dennis (white, sixties):
> Well… [what Englishness means to me is] liking English things… I like English furniture, I like English traditions…You know these abstract ideas, justice, fairness and, stiff upper lip, reticence, things of that kind I think.

> Terri (white, twenties):
> The food you cook [represents Englishness to me]… the little traditions like you know the Sunday roast and English cooked breakfasts.

> John (white, forties):
> Of course the classics, the two World Wars [represent Englishness to me]… [And] just… cleaning the car [represents Englishness to me]… out there Sunday afternoon, cleaning the car.

None of these participants are finally sure what Englishness is or what it might mean to them, and the meanings and representations they associate with Englishness often change during their interviews. Certain historical and cultural symbols were nevertheless consistently drawn upon. Dennis draws on English cultural 'things' and a set of supposedly English values, while Terri invokes English rituals involving the cooking of family meals. John draws on the historical symbols of the First and Second World Wars, which he describes, in a way reminiscent of references to seminal works of fiction or cinema, as 'the classics'. John is also concerned, however, with more mundane representations of Englishness such as the ritual of 'cleaning the car' on a Sunday afternoon.

As Oliver Zimmer (2003, 190) suggests, cultural, historical and everyday symbolic resources such as these 'provide the symbolic raw material…which social actors use as they define national identities'. Although participants construct their English identities through intangibilities and apparently vague or mundane symbols and practices, they all at some point refer to symbolic resources that they perceive as specifically English. As Uzelac (2010, 1731) argues, the key point is not that nationalist 'traditions can be invented or artificially created, and that some of them are just fakes', but rather that this specificity is based on symbolic resources that are perceived as specifically national and *accepted* as authentic.

As hesitations and vagueness did not translate into any discernible feeling of precariousness in participant identifications with the category, this suggests that, as well as the acceptance of the authenticity of Englishness,

some importance lies in the habitual *expectation* that there is a substance to this identification. This process is underlined by participant responses to the question of how often they think about being English.

> Nicholas (white, sixties):
> Not very often… I just don't. I know that I am an Englishman.

> William (white, sixties):
> Not that frequently [laughs], no I don't, no. You just accept what you are.

> Guy (white, forties):
> It's not really a fair question because it is what I am… I just do feel English.

> Sally (white, sixties):
> Well I can't say I think or don't think… it's just my lifestyle. No I can't think that I think or not think about it at all really.

> John (white, forties):
> I don't know, it's just part of who I am.

> Oliver (white, twenties):
> Not very often. More since I've started talking to you.

These data suggest that 'being English' is something that is not thought about often or frequently by these white participants, if it is thought about at all. It is just 'what you are' – it is what 'I am', 'part of who I am' – it is something that one does not 'think or not think about'. As Guy argues, asking how often he thinks about being English 'is not really a fair question', as being English does not require his conscious thought – he is simply English by default. It is something these participants feel is definitively *there* and is apparently, as with Oliver's response, only raised into consciousness by the interview situation. Guy expands on this in his response to the question of whether he ever acts 'in a way that's English'.

> Guy (white, forties):
> I trade heavily on being English… I do try business-wise sometimes to use that to… convince [people] that what I'm saying is straight and is honest… So yes, yeah, [I] regularly [act in a way that's English]… And it's true, I'm English… I'm not lying to anybody.

Even though Guy can pinpoint the moments when he instrumentally 'acts English', this is not, he argues, a performance of Englishness – it is not an act, not a lie – it is, rather, 'true' Englishness. English identity for Guy and other white participants involves the bypassing of any experience of calculation in relation to their identification and thus of any critique of its constructedness. They experience being English as taken for granted rather than as something achieved through social practice and reliant upon the naturalization of a socially constructed category. Englishness is thus identified with habitually as a category to which these participants are seemingly 'objectively attuned' (Bourdieu 1984, 167) – participants simply know that they are English because they expect to be and *are* English, and they have no reason to suspect that the legitimacy of their Englishness will ever be questioned.

This sense of security in identification was not, however, found among the English-identifying participants who are not white, suggesting a relationship between essentialized identifications with Englishness and racialized social location.

Precarious identifications as English

Precarious identifications 1: 'I am English but I don't feel I'm allowed to be English'

Ten out of seventeen non-white participants stated that they did not feel English because they associated the identity with whiteness, and often with white racism. Furthermore, the responses of the seven who did identify as English suggested an altogether more precarious relationship with English identity than was found among white participants. Salam and Jacqui's interviews provide clear examples of this. Both participants are in their early thirties and of 'mixed heritage', with one 'White British' parent and one parent who is not white. Neither participant would self-describe as white. In the following excerpt Salam states that he feels English, but in contrast to white participants he sees this identification as qualified by the colour of his skin.

> Charlie:
> And would you say that you feel English?
>
> Salam (non-white, thirties):
> Erm [pause], yeah [drawn out, inflected]? Now… ethnically English? No… It was never something that I could have, but I think, it's something I probably would like to have. I mean I am ethnically part English, so I have some stake in the identity… I mean if, say, an Eastern European family settled… because they're white… there's no problem there. Say an Indian family settling, as so many have… I still don't think Englishness as a culture is sort of available to them… I am English but I don't feel I'm allowed to be English.

In contrast to the white participants quoted in the previous section, Salam is guarded and hesitant about whether he feels English. He does feel English, due in part to his cultural affinity with Englishness, which he discusses at length elsewhere in ways no different from the white participants discussed in the previous section. Salam also constructs his Englishness around the heritage he describes himself as inheriting from his white father – this ancestrally framed legitimacy gives him 'some stake in the identity'. Having a stake in an identity is, however, very different to having an unproblematic identification. Although Salam feels English, and *wants* to be English, the taken-for-granted sense of Englishness described by white participants is, he feels, withheld from him because of the colour of his skin. While William, quoted earlier, feels able to say that in being English 'you just accept what you are', Salam's lack of acceptance as English means that he feels English but does not feel accepted as English due to the racialized boundaries of the category. In Salam's statement – 'I am English but I don't feel I'm allowed to be English' – the taken-for-granted reasoning of many white English people – 'it's just part of who I am' – is inverted. Salam identifies as English but, because he is not white, an identification that white people take as a given is not possible; Englishness cannot 'just' be part of who he is.

As the below excerpt demonstrates, Jacqui also associates Englishness very closely with whiteness.
Jacqui (non-white, thirties):
I think anyone can be English, but obviously if you've got different colour skin then you're not a hundred percent [laughs]?

> Charlie:
> Not a hundred percent.
>
> Jacqui:
> Yeah, 'cause I mean I feel like I'm English but I know that my colour's black, you can't say that I'm white, you know. My ways might be white ways…

Jacqui sees English identification as distancing her from her black heritage and from what she imagines to be African-Caribbean culture. Like Salam, Jacqui legitimates her Englishness by drawing upon her white, and therefore English, ancestral heritage, and – again like Salam – she would very much like to be accepted as authentically English. Despite this strong identification, however, Jacqui feels that her nonwhiteness mediates her authenticity as English. Although Jacqui's 'ways', her dispositions, might be considered to be the ways of white – and thus English – people, she nevertheless feels that her skin colour 'obviously' prevents her from being 'a hundred percent' English.

By drawing on symbolic resources such as their knowledge of English culture or their partly 'English' ancestry, Salam and Jacqui attempt to legitimate their sense of Englishness. Core to both Salam and Jacqui's identifications is their use of racialized discourses that position them as having English ancestry. However, these racialized discourses legitimating English identification contain within them the seeds of the identification's disruption. Salam and Jacqui see their paths to authentic Englishness sent off course by way of the same embodied, racialized location from which they depart – their white heritage is supposed to legitimate their sense of Englishness but ultimately their appearance to many within society as not white marks them out as un-English. Therefore, for these participants their nonwhiteness makes their experience of English identity precarious.

Precarious identifications 2: 'It's not that exclusive a club'

Another, more confident and positive, pattern of English identification was found among further non-white participants. This confidence was not, however, manifested in the kind of taken-for-granted, habitual Englishness demonstrated by white participants. These identifications were instead achieved in ways that firstly recognized and then built upon a disjuncture between Englishness and non-whiteness in ways that were framed by critiques of essentialized Englishness.

Rashid is mixed heritage with one 'White British' parent and one parent who is not white and of South Asian heritage. He began to consider himself English while living in Australia, after Australians and UK citizens there referred to him, to his surprise, as English. Since then, after much reflection, he has adopted an English identity which he constructs in ways directly opposed to its essentialized forms. Ayan is black, has lived for most of her life in Somalia and the Netherlands, and identifies as English due to her cultural affiliations with England. Ayan's identification as English centres on her deconstruction of, and opposition to, racism.

Rashid (non-white, thirties):

People have said… how do you justify calling yourself English?…Well enough Englishmen don't give a damn for me to say actually it's not that exclusive a club, there are those who will say positively yes I should be included, and yeah there are those that think I should be chucked into the channel… but ultimately I don't care what other people think… Englishness should be about leading the way for inclusion.

> Ayan (non-white, twenties):
>
> When you say English and then you're not white, it seems to some people it might not be the correct term that we should be using…Do I see myself as being English?… If English being means having a set of characteristics or a set of virtues then yes, I like curry, I like going to the pub and having a Sunday roast… then yes I would say that I do consider myself [as English]… Part of me thinks that the whole word English, or Englishness, I think it's a bit of a construct… If [being English] only relates to the natives of the country then I think that might be… perceived as… having a racist undertone… I see myself as being [English] because like I say because of the characteristics that I've mentioned that… some of us share… The trouble is… you can never give a simple answer to that question because there's someone who will look at you and they will think [Ayan affects a look of surprise] because their

idea of what Englishness is isn't what you or I think what Englishness is, you know, so they will look at you rather funny.

Both Rashid and Ayan's identifications as English are, through a critique of essentialized Englishness,[2] explicitly politically engaged. Rashid identifies as English for contingent reasons following his trip to Australia. His identification has developed in part because of cultural affiliations developed over a lifetime in England and in part as a way of highlighting a disjuncture between the category and his non-white appearance for anti-racist, political reasons. Ayan, who has a degree in sociology, articulates her Englishness using the notion that the category English is a social construct. She describes how the essentially constructed nature of the category renders racialized constructions of Englishness problematic. Ayan's argument that there is never 'a simple answer' in terms of her identification as English due to the there always being 'someone who will look at' a person who is not white as not being English, is the perfect example of a precarious English identity. She only feels able to affirm her own Englishness after making an argument critiquing racialized constructions, prior to explaining how she identifies as English because of her affinity to English cultural practices and symbolic resources.

Rashid and Ayan's routes to their identification as English both involve them drawing on symbolic, cultural resources, but their Englishness is, crucially, consciously rationalized and calculated in ways not found among white participants. Rashid and Ayan both take self-consciously political perspectives from which they consider it strategically necessary to build sophisticated and defensive rhetorical arguments aimed at subverting norms, legitimating their Englishness, and thus resisting the feelings of inauthenticity experienced by Salam and Jacqui. Rather than simply expressing and experiencing Englishness as a fixed identity, the non-whiteness of these participants means that they have to defend an inherently precarious right to identify as English.

Precarious identifications 3: 'If I chose to pass myself as English… I could do it'

The relationship between whiteness and Englishness is thrown into relief by the accounts of participants who are white and *do not* identify as English. Stephen has an Irish mother, has lived all of his life in London and considers himself to be Irish. Simon is also white, has also lived all of his life in London, and identifies himself variously and situationally with his grandparents' Spanish and Irish ethnicities. However, Stephen and Simon both state that they and others like them could 'pass' as English.

> Stephen (white, fifties):
> If I chose to I could pass myself off as English, I mean there's no doubt about it, I could do it. It would break my heart to do it, but I could.

> Simon (white, late teens):
> Yeah I could be [English in the future], yeah. I may well be in years to come when I have my own children.

> I may change a little bit, but at the moment I don't feel it, but I think it's very easy to be.

Stephen and Simon have what Mary Waters (1990) calls 'ethnic options' in that they feel that they have some choice regarding their ethnic identity. If Stephen or Simon were to, in Simon's words, 'change a little bit' and declare their Englishness, then they are confident that they would be fully accepted as English. Unlike the participants in the previous two sections, neither feels English or wants to be English, but if they did then they feel that they could be, with few if any questions asked.

One white participant describes having been through a process like this. When Joanne (white, forties) was younger she felt British rather than English as she was born in South Africa and her family spoke Afrikaans in the house in London where she grew up. Now, however, Joanne unhesitatingly identifies as English. Although Salam, Jacqui, Rashid, and to a lesser extent Ayan, have very similar cultural backgrounds and family histories to Stephen, Simon, Joanne and other white participants, they feel that they cannot fully achieve – they cannot *do* – English identity, or pass as English, in the same way because they are not white and the expectation in society is that to be English is to be white. The disjuncture between the colour of their skin and Englishness requires that their English identity is worked for, argued for, and rationalized – their Englishness is always on precarious ground. For white identifiers, being English can just *be* what they *are*, and the doing of Englishness, the work that goes into it, is obscured.

This process is highlighted by the excerpt from earlier in the article in which Guy argues that he is 'not lying' when he 'acts English' in his professional life because he *is* English. Guy's expectation that there is such a thing as Englishness leads to its performative reproduction through routine, habitual practice, with the work of the performance itself obscured by its experience as something innate (Butler 1990; also see Byrne 2006, 15–25 for a discussion of performativity and 'race'). Guy is *not* lying about his feelings of Englishness, but nor are participants who are not white; however, for the latter, Englishness is experienced as a worked for, achieved performance rather than as an identity to which they feel objectively attuned. Guy's description of a naturalized performance of Englishness and the discussions of whites 'passing' as English, reveals that there is nothing natural or fixed about feeling English outside of the expectation and practice – the *doing* – of English identities held in an essentialized relationship with whiteness.

Can anyone be English?

This essentialization of Englishness as white is not, however, something that would be recognized, let alone advocated, by the vast majority of white participants in the study. Most participants who are not white described how they felt excluded from the category, arguing that only white people can be English. In contrast, all but two white participants who identified as English argued 'anyone can be English' regardless of their 'race'. John's response below was typical.

John (white, forties):

There is no such thing… genetically or historically as an English person… And so we are, and always have been, traditionally a mishmash of various races thrown together.

> Charlie:
> So do you think anyone can be English?

> John:
> Absolutely, absolutely. It's an… open club… None of us are English, and that's what being English is about… welcoming people and having the… liberty and the freedom… in this country.

John describes the English as 'a mishmash of various races' and Englishness as 'an open club' defined by civic notions of 'liberty and freedom'. He argues enthusiastically that nobody can be genetically English and that this multiracial inclusiveness is even 'what being English is about'. Englishness, for John and most white participants, therefore appears to be influenced by what Patricia Hill-Collins (2010, 23) calls 'relational' thinking, by which the binary systems of colonialism and racial segregation have been replaced by ways of thinking in which people see 'new connections among and across individuals, groups, [and] categories'.

This predominance of relational perspectives among white participants may be related to the multiethnic, urban situation of the study. Ford, Tilley, and Heath (2011, paragraph 1.1) have found that 'those whose work, family and friendship networks increasingly cross borders effortlessly no longer see the relevance of deep ancestral roots as a measure for deciding [who] belongs to their nation.' This suggests that the association between Englishness and whiteness felt by non-white people and manifested in feelings of exclusion or precariousness in relation to Englishness, may be the result of the historic association between racism and Englishness and the continuing impact of an aggressively nationalist and vocal minority. From this perspective, the sincerely inclusive English identities of the urban, white participants in the study can be clearly contrasted to essentialist constructions of Englishness.

On closer analysis, however, the critique of essentialized Englishness put forward by participants such as John is shown to be inconsistent and ultimately anchored by unintentionally essentialist thinking. Earlier in his interview John recounted an anecdote in which he was 'wounded' by a colleague's description of him, jokingly, as 'a Sikh' due to the length of his beard: 'For somebody to consider that I wasn't English. Whoah!' Towards the end of the interview I reminded John of this anecdote before asking him whether he thought someone who was Sikh could be English. He responded that 'absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt' a Sikh could be English as, he explained, Sikhism is a religion and 'not a nationality'. Initially John equates being Sikh with not being English perhaps in relation to a perspective from which Englishness is considered a normatively Christian identity. While someone who is Sikh can of course be white, it may also be that John was upset about potentially being associated with membership of a non-white and/or 'migrant' group. Later in the interview, when reminded of what he had said, John restates his colour-blind, culturally open construction of Englishness and does not seem aware of the contradiction within the anecdote between his inclusionary principles and essentializing practice.

This gap between principle and practice exemplifies the tensions between what Sinisa Malesevic (2006) calls the normative and operative realms of nationalism. The normative realm 'is built around principles outlining fundamental goals and values', providing 'a relatively clear and uncompromising set of ethical prescriptions… or "given" moral absolutes' (Malesevic 2006, 92). The operative realm consists not of outlined principles but of 'commonly… shared patterns of belief and practice' (Malesevic2006, 78). The operative realm therefore indicates what nationalist ideology does *in practice*, what it achieves, in contrast to the normative realm, which is indicative of what it *claims* to be aiming for or achieving. For Malesevic (2006, 94), 'while normative ideologies may be transient and ephemeral, and may change or proliferate in different directions, operative ideologies… tend to remain stable and endure, couched in the dominant narrative of nationalism.' In these terms, John's normative opposition to any relationship between Englishness and racialized boundaries, an opposition that rationally and morally legitimates his construction of 'who can be English', is operatively, unintentionally contradicted. While for most white participants Englishness is normatively colourblind, in the operative terms they often unknowingly reproduce, Englishness remains closely related to boundaries of whiteness, ancestry and notions of an indigenous ethnic culture.

As the excerpts below demonstrate, this pattern of normative inclusion and operative essentialization was repeated in discussions of the number of 'generations' that were required before someone could 'become English'.

> Helen (white, twenties):
> There seems to be a real lack of understanding from people who are here who weren't born here, or aren't the second or third or fourth generation, of what being English is… For me it's kind of a generation thing.

Joanne (white, forties):
I'd say three or four generations down, I think [someone is English]. By the time you get to about… third or fourth generation… people are [English].

Helen and Joanne's discussions are consistently framed by the language of acculturation and integration. For them, the concept of 'generation' is a way of talking about the acculturation of someone towards an authentic Englishness. While the American literature on 'immigrant assimilation' does indeed suggest that from one generation to the next 'immigrant groups' become more assimilated to the majority culture (Waters and Jiménez 2005), for the language of 'generation' to make sense in the context of becoming English requires an essentialist racialized logic. Becoming English for these participants is not a matter of agency – declaring oneself English – or even a matter of adopting certain cultural dispositions or values. Both of these routes to Englishness are blocked by the barrier of ancestry – someone might act English, feel English, have English values and maybe look English, but they cannot *be* English unless they have a particular background in terms of a family history measured by the yardstick of somewhere between two and four 'generations' of residence in England. At three or four generations the timescale for the attainment of Englishness might be measured at over half a century, thus denying Englishness to the vast majority of post-war and post-colonial migrants and their descendants. Although conceived of as normatively a matter of cultural assimilation by Helen, Joanne and others, Englishness is operatively delimited by a highly restrictive notion of ancestral lineage.

This kind of unintentionally racialized construction of 'who can be English' is demonstrated further in discussions of 'English values'. The following excerpt from Paul's interview is one example of several similar discussions with white participants who stated that 'it should not matter what your race is for you to be English'. I asked Paul whether someone who does not practise 'English values', 'who is white and whose family has been resident in England for generations' can still be considered English:

Paul (white, seventies):
Erm [pause], yes that's an interesting one. But yes they are still English. You can't just say they're Hungarian can you? They have to come from somewhere, whereas many supporters of Al Qaeda could probably be called Pakistani or Afghan or whatever.

Paul here draws a boundary between being English and being non-white or a migrant. Here and in numerous other interviews the hypothetical someone who does not hold to particular values and is non-white or is not ancestrally linked to England is less likely to be accepted as English than the hypothetical someone who does not hold to these values and *is* white or *does*have an ancestral connection to England. Salam, Jacqui, Rashid and to a lesser extent Ayan have very similar cultural backgrounds and family histories to the white participants. All of the precarious identifiers discussed above other than Ayan were born in England, and all other than Ayan are from a Christian background of some kind. Culturally and in terms of dispositions, such as accent, nonwhite precarious English identifiers – and, crucially, many non-white *non-identifiers* – seemed to have as much access and affinity to English cultural symbolic resources as did white participants for whom English identification was taken for granted. Furthermore, a number of white participants such as Joanne and Paul, as well as the participants who felt they could 'pass' unproblematically as English, were themselves from similar, migrant family backgrounds to participants who were not white. As discussed earlier, Joanne was born in South Africa, she grew up with Afrikaans as the main language spoken at home and her mother and grandmother did not identify as English. Paul also has a migrant background as his parents migrated to England from Central Europe and North America prior to the Second World War. Both Joanne and Paul are very clear in their interviews, however, that the only ethnic or national identity they hold is that of Englishness and Britishness and there is no suggestion that their migrant backgrounds render their sense of Englishness precarious.

For many of the white participants in this study, the distance between those accepted or not accepted as English is therefore measured by a tacit essentializing logic in which difference is marked and fixed by notions of ancestry inflected by evaluations based on skin colour. It would appear that people of white migrant backgrounds can potentially experience English identities as racially invisible, but that the same cannot be said for people who are not white (for related findings, see Ford 2011). In the experience and reproduction of English identities as taken for granted, what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2012) calls the 'invisible weight of whiteness' is obscured behind the normatively relational veneer of Englishness. Despite the subtlety, from a white perspective, of the relationship between whiteness and processes of 'othering' with regard to Englishness, this relationship remains highly significant. The distance between those accepted or not accepted as English is ultimately measured by an essentializing logic in which difference is managed, marked and fixed in relation to skin colour or notions of ancestry.

White participants are not necessarily saying that migrants or nonwhite people cannot be English per se, but their Englishness is nevertheless precarious and open to debate. White participants thus have a sense of what Ghassan Hage (1998, 46) calls 'governmental belonging' – a sense of entitlement and agency that involves 'the feeling that one is legitimately entitled in the course of everyday life to take a governmental/managerial attitude towards others, especially those who are perceived to be lesser nationals or non-nationals.' This can be contrasted with Rashid and Ayan's Englishness discussed in the previous section. For both participants, identification with the category did not involve the managerial positioning of essentialized 'others' – on the contrary, their Englishness emphasized a deessentialized, inclusive, agentic and genuinely cultural and political conception of Englishness in normative *and* operative terms.

Conclusions

At first glance, Englishness appears to be formed in relation to individuals drawing on cultural and historical symbolic resources. White participants, furthermore, *describe* their Englishness as authentically formed in this way. This article has demonstrated, however, that by analysing the margins of nationalist thinking, where it 'does not work' (Ozkirimli 2010, 218) – where its experience becomes problematic or precarious, or where a gap opens up between its normative and operative levels – important, critical perspectives on national identities are revealed. The data demonstrate that English identities experienced as taken for granted do not necessarily emerge in relation to the cultural assimilation of individuals to English values or by individuals ritually drawing on national discourses and symbols. Rather, a normalized sense of Englishness is reproduced habitually and unintentionally in relation to essentialized boundaries of whiteness and ancestry. Although the study, based in a multiethnic area of London, found that Englishness was widely and sincerely considered by white participants to be an inclusive category of identification, for most participants this principle of relational thinking obscured the essentialization of difference in practice. The dominant narratives of Englishness, despite appearances to the contrary, are built around a sense of racialized distinction held in a relationship with a non-white or ancestrally distinct non-English 'other'.

These findings may be related to the peculiar position of Englishness discussed in the introductory section of the article. A relative lack of English political institutions or specifically English cultural outlets through which recent debates relating to 'who can be English' can be debated may have contributed to the persistence of ethnically conceived English identities. More effectively inclusive national identities are more evident in relation to British national identity, and as such, from anti-racist perspectives it is perhaps possible to take heart from Mann's (2011, 125) findings, which suggest that 'the use of the term English to refer to white majority people is not, in itself, incompatible with multicultural political projects'. In other words, Englishness might be

seen by those who identify and do not identify with it as just one ethnic identity, no more valued than any other, within Britain. As such, the whiteness of Englishness, tacit or otherwise, may not be a major concern.

Despite this possibility, I would argue that the habitual obscuring and unmarking of essentialist racialized difference within talk of Englishness by participants such as John who are, in principle, passionately anti-racist, is concerning from politically progressive perspectives. A key finding of this article is that talk of Englishness provides platforms from which people can, often unintentionally, essentialize difference. As such, the acceptance of a fixed, white English identity, regardless of wider discourses of belonging and citizenship in relation to Britishness, would seem ill-advised from progressive perspectives. This is particularly the case given that large numbers of the English population who identify – or wish to identify – as English feel actively excluded from the category because they are not white.

It is perhaps in the precarious and de-essentialized English identities of Rashid and Ayan that the progressive potential of Englishness lies. For them, Englishness is *genuinely* centred on the utilization of cultural and historical resources rather than on a habitual and unquestioned sense of identity. The question remains, however, as to how it might be possible to destabilize the naturalization and legitimacy of essentialized white English identities without alienating those who experience their Englishness as if it is an authentic expression of their self.

Notes

1. Bernard Yack (1996) has persuasively critiqued the validity of the civic-ethnic distinction for evaluating the extent to which national identities are inclusive. Nevertheless, 18 Charles Leddy-Owen in the English/British case the evidence suggests that, for people who are not white, Britishness is easier to adopt (see the statistics from Condor, Gibson, and Abell (2006) referred to elsewhere in this paper). The civic-ethnic distinction is used in this paper as a reference to different sets of symbolic resources that are drawn on rather than as representative of two distinct types of nationalism.

2. While Ayan's example of 'going to the pub' could be seen as constructing a practising- Muslim 'other', she elsewhere suggests that pubs are not an *essential* symbolic resource (many of Ayan's family members – who she argues should be able to identify as English if they choose – are practising Muslims).

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