

“We all just want a flag to get behind”: The Politics of English National Identity

Dr Tabitha Baker, Senior Lecturer in Politics, Bournemouth University

“Everyone wants a flag to get behind”: The Politics of English National Identity

Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative exploration of English national identity, that draws upon interviews with English identifying voters. This study followed a tumultuous political period following Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. It follows a wealth of literature that has begun to explore the transformative and disruptive nature of English national identity in Britain’s political sphere post devolution and Brexit. The findings in this study draws on a thematic analysis of 16 in-depth interviews with English identifiers residing in rural South-West England to explore in further depth what the micro-level foundations of English identity that underpin broader national indicators are, and shed light on how individuals articulate what Englishness is to them. The findings found that participants conveyed a multifaceted view of Englishness as an absent identity. Their expressions hinted that, as members of the dominant cultural and ethnic group, their identities revolved around their exclusive embodiment of what they deemed 'normal'. The concept of who could claim English identity was rooted in the notion that anything diverging from their norms was depicted as foreign and distinct from the typical behaviours and values of the majority English. Additionally, the themes revealed that Englishness was also shaped by reactive feelings of resentment concerning perceived asymmetrical norms of identity expression in England in comparison to neighbouring devolved nations. These findings go some way in shedding light on the nuanced nature of English identity in rural areas where Englishness is identified with most strongly, and informs discourses surrounding the potentiality of a progressive and inclusive English identity.

Key words: England, Englishness, British politics, identity, devolution,

Introduction

The nation often lies at the foundation of solidarity, representing the strongest motives behind a large majority of political mobilisation and action (Greenfeld & Chirot, 1994; Huddy & Kathib, 2007). Therefore, national identity is a persistent and powerful force in

modern day politics, giving impetus to other influential movements and ideologies. In this paper, national identity is understood as an attachment to a specific geopolitical entity (Verdugo & Milne, 2016) that provides meaning, and serves functions of belonging, unity, mobilisation, and cohesiveness (Rankin, 2001; Bar-Tal, 1993).

England is a country that shares its borders with Scotland and Wales and exists in the union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The subject of English national identity is contentious; England has been analogous with Britain for so long that any attempt to disentangle English identity from British identity and that of its neighbouring nations is challenging. In recent times, two distinct periods witnessed a surge in academic and political interest in Englishness: the decade of the late 1990s which saw the process of devolution take place; and the decade of 2010 where growing Euroscepticism led to the United Kingdom's European Union referendum (Wellings & Kenny, 2019). In both periods, the multifaceted nature of Englishness has been investigated from the perspective of cultural historians, sociologists, and political scientists (Colls, 2002; Kumar, 2009; Aughey, 2013; Henderson & Wyn Jones, 2021).

Drawing clear cut conclusions about English national identity is not an easy task, as national consciousness in England is rooted in deep divisions in political culture and plays out on varying levels that cut across generations, social class, ethnicity, and location. Therefore, this paper addresses the research agenda set out by Kenny (et al., 2018) and Henderson and Wyn Jones (2021) to investigate post-Brexit English national identity at a deeper and nuanced level that pays attention to how these larger themes that we see nationally play out on the ground at the local level. By doing so, this paper seeks to understand what underpins these broad national indicators and evaluate the sentimentalities attached to Englishness, particularly in areas where Englishness is identified with most strongly.

The findings show that, firstly, participants expressed a nuanced perspective of Englishness, one characterised by its absence as a distinct identity. Participants also articulated how their identities were closely tied to their exclusive embodiment of what they perceived as 'normal.' This exclusive notion of English identity articulated by participants in the ethnic majority framed anything deviating from these norms as foreign and different, and separate from the customary behaviours and values of the majority English population. Furthermore, the study's themes underscored that Englishness was

underpinned by reactive sentiments of resentment, particularly in response to perceptions of asymmetrical norms of identity expression when comparing themselves to neighbouring devolved nations.

Background

English national identity has been widely understood through scholarly perspectives of party and constitutional politics (Hayton 2016; Mycock & Hayton 2014; Hayton et al. 2007) far-right nationalism (Hazell, 2000; Jackson & Feldman 2011; Pilkington 2016; Stocker, 2017), sovereignty and Euroscepticism (Smith, 2006; Wellings, 2010; Wellings & Baxingdale, 2015; Henderson et al., 2016), postcolonialism and the British empire (Kumar, 2006; MacPhee & Poddar, 2007), race, space, and working-class politics (Leddy-Owen, 2014a; 2014b; 2019; Winlow et al., 2017) and nationalist populism (Vines, 2014; Gifford, 2015). Alongside politically-oriented studies, it has also been discussed within cultural, historical, and literary studies (Nairn 1964; Thompson 1968; Greenfeld, 1992; Mandler, 2006; Doyle 2013), showing a prolonged and ongoing interest across academic fields of social science and humanities.

Academic debates have focussed on English national identity post-devolution and post-Brexit, which follow a consensus that devolution ignited a renewed sense of English identity or 'English Backlash' (Curtice & Heath 2000, p. 3) grounded in grievances concerning the asymmetry of devolution (Bognador, 1999; Aughey, 2001; Colls, 2002; Wyn Jones et al., 2012; Mycock, 2013) and Brexit acting as a vehicle for English political discontent (Barnett, 2017; Henderson et al., 2017; Cooper & Cooper, 2020; Henderson & Wyn Jones, 2021). 'The Vow' that followed the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, which promised Scotland more powers in the event of a No vote (Mullen 2014), resulted in increased attention to rebalancing devolution south of the border (Dover & Kenny 2016). The development of English Votes for English Laws (EVEL), establishing Metropolitan Mayors, Northern Powerhouses, and Levelling Up agendas are all key examples of this increased constitutional and political attention to England. Further arguments have been made by politicians, commentators, and academics around a greater need for Englishness to be disentangled from Britishness, both in terms of

national identity and governance (Denham, 2017; Kenny et al., 2018), and that dissatisfied English voters have been swept up with nationalist populist political parties, as demonstrated by support for Brexit (Barnett, 2017; Kenny et al., 2018; O'Toole, 2018).

Social attitudes surveys tell us that identification with Englishness has increased significantly since the 1990s. In their Future of England (FoE) surveys, Henderson and Wyn Jones (2021) identified that English national identity is connected to a set of attitudes that heavily emphasise values, a particular vision of England as a polity, and a vision of an ideal and legitimate government. Their data also revealed that English national identity correlates with attitudes of an English national grievance, relating to both the domestic union in the United Kingdom and Scotland, and to the UK's external union with the European Union. These developments echo previous studies highlighted above that consider Englishness a significant theme in political grievance relating to the domestic union and international European Union (Kenny et al., 2018).

Henderson and Wyn Jones' (2021) recent extensive investigation into Englishness and its political challenges highlight a clear-cut theme that follows the political and constitutional preferences in England through the vehicle of national sentiment. From 2011-2016, they found that not only has identification with English national identity strengthened in this time, but it has become associated with what they call "devo-anxiety" (2021, p. 118), which relates to a sense of grievance about the ways in which England is recognised and treated within a devolved United Kingdom and its consequent lack of political community. This involves grievances relating to differential levels of public spending and other parliamentary procedures. They also find that Englishness is heavily connected to imperial pride and deep Euroscepticism, echoing previous understandings from those such as Kumar (2006), MacPhee and Poddar (2007) and Wellings (2010). Many of these sentiments had been seized upon by recent Conservative party election campaigns and manifestoes, one clear example of this was the perceived danger of a Labour-SNP coalition in 2015, which posed Scottish independence as a threat. Further, Hayton (2016) has argued that the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), although a unionist party, exploited the politics of English resentment in relation to questions surrounding governance and constitution. Thus, it became a vehicle for English nationalism, which as Hayton points out, expands on Aughey's (2010) characterisation of Englishness as a 'mood' and sheds light on its capacity for political action.

Post-Brexit, evidence of cases where England has been distinctly highlighted and directly addressed in mainstream British politics is sparse. During the 2016 European Union referendum campaigning, it was claimed that the Leave campaign targeted what the Remain campaign had left out: England (Denham, 2018). The Remain campaign focussed on all but one nation of the United Kingdom: “Scotland stronger in Europe”, “Wales stronger in Europe”, “Northern Ireland stronger in Europe”. However when it came to England, the campaign preached “Britain stronger in Europe” (ibid; Stronger In, 2016). It can be argued that English identity found political form in Brexit, building on growing discontent in the period leading up to 2016. Furthermore, McGeever and Virdee (2018) understand this awakening of Englishness via Brexit as a new politics of resentment underscored by structural decline and class de-composition. They explain how the working-class defeats and de-legitimisation of collective power throughout Thatcher’s leadership together with austerity post-2008 financial crash led the loss of alternative frames of class resistance for the English working class. They therefore understand Brexit as a response to these class injuries amongst the English working class. Such arguments have been suggestively explored by McKenzie (2016; 2017a; 2017b), who has pointed out the heavy toll deindustrialisation and austerity have taken on English working-class communities, all of which contributed to seeking an alternative to the status quo.

Given the rise of the far-right in European politics, which has seen an emphasis on an ethno-centric form of nationalism (Lazaridis et al., 2016), much of the literature on Englishness has also paid attention to the relationship between English far-right nationalism, ethnicity, and Whiteness. Most notably the works of Pilkington (2016), Winlow et al. (2017), Stocker (2017), Baucom (1999), Macphee and Poddar (2007), and Allchorn (2019) have paid important attention to racism and xenophobia, imperialism and postcolonialism, and far-right movements such as the British National Party and English Defence League. These historical and cultural perspectives of Englishness shine important light onto the legacies and power structures of Englishness in a postcolonial and globalised world. Such approaches have helped to reveal the impact of England’s colonial history on its culture, institution, and national identity, including the ways in which the construction of English identity has been historically defined in contrast to the ‘other’ – colonised people. They demonstrate how notions of race, ethnicity and nationality have been inherent in shaping English identity. A recent radio exchange with Labour MP David Lammy exemplifies these forces. In response to a caller suggesting

that Lammy's Afro-Caribbean heritage meant that he could not identify as English, Lammy replied, "'How is it that, in England, you can only claim Englishness if you are white?'" (Lammy, 2021). The full exchange between Lammy and the caller received a significant amount of media attention, stirring public debate over English national identity, and demonstrated the contentious confluences of race, ethnicity, and English national identity.

Other writers who have studied English nationalism have analysed the way in which ideas of national consciousness have grown up around a perceived oppression felt by the English owing to them being prevented from expressing their English identity (Weight, 2002; Aughey, 2010; Mycock, 2013). Weight (2008), for example, insists that Englishness rests upon victimhood arising from a belief that the English cannot express or articulate their national identity in the same way as the Scottish and the Welsh, implying a sense of perceived oppression and lack of ability to exercise their political liberty. Weight claims that those who believe English identity is being oppressed and denied usually feel that the state is instead indulging ethnic minorities at the expense of the English majority. Burdsey (2008) believes that the dominance of these narratives is ingrained in history due to the interrelations between whiteness, imperialism, nationalism, and Englishness. He goes on to say that these notions have been both characterised by and derived from the British Empire, via the likes of Winston Churchill, Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher, meaning that English national identity has always been exclusively racial and ethnic. However, this is largely a top-down reading. Perryman (2008) also believes that the rejection of EU immigrants is linked to the rejection of an English-European identity. Instead, the English mourn their all-white non-EU Englishness. On the notion of the non-white non-English Other, Langlands (1999) questions whether Englishness is a set of essential characteristics that strictly belong to the English, or whether it is made up from a set of cultural markers that in turn change and respond to the other. She argues that within the myth of the 'Freeborn Englishman', particularly the fear of foreign invasion indicates notions of otherness where common ancestry and genealogy are most clear in English self-identification.

In terms of voters' identification with Englishness, more recently quantitative studies have been undertaken by YouGov (2017; 2019a; 2019b) which has shown that four in five people in England regard Englishness a strong part of their identity. Furthermore, forty-nine percent believe that England was better in the past, eight in ten believe the

being born in England makes you English, seventy-five percent believe that having two English parents makes you English. Quantitative survey data collection conducted in 2018 (BBC and YouGov 2018) found that English identity was strongest amongst white men and women, aged 50+ and amongst C2DE social grade with low educational attainment. It also highlighted that English identity was strongest within what Barnett (2017) calls 'England-without-London' that includes Conservative voting areas, small to medium towns, fringe towns, rural, coastal, and ex-industrial areas. According to Henderson and Wyn Jones's (2021, p. 55) FoE data, English identifiers held pride in the Queen, NHS, English tradition of democracy, English language and literature, English sense of humour, English countryside, England's sacrifices in world wars, English sense of fair play and English openness to different cultures and faith. Notably, this meant that participants were less likely to refer to cultural and symbolic indicators of Englishness such as the St George's flag, music, and sport, and instead refer to institutions, traditions, history, and values. These findings indicate a difficulty in clearly distinguishing between Britishness and Englishness.

Englishness outside of urban areas is a theme explored by Tyler (2003; 2006; 2008) who has examined the ways in which the English countryside occupies a racially coded place in Britain's 'national story', particularly where symbols of the English countryside are idealised and "intertwined with specifically white middle-class values and lifestyles" (2006, p.129), whereby colonial remnants are inscribed on the English rural landscape (Neal 2002). Furthermore, cultural geographer Halfacree (1997) describes English ruralism as having a populist cultural appeal due to its perception as a site of "safety, tranquillity community, anti-modernity, small-scale-ness: an 'Old England'" (Neal & Agyeman, 2006, p. 104).

In their edited collections, Neal and Agyeman (2006) have explored rural conceptions of national identity, connecting ideas between rural spaces, identity and nation formation by reflecting upon notions of rural belonging and racialized exclusion in the countryside through an analysis of forms of 'ethnic whiteness' illustrated through national identity. Petersson and Tyler (2008) also explore identities in local contexts understanding the politics of ethnic difference, finding that these are expressed through an everyday and banal (Billig 1995) politics of difference, where majority cultures construct themselves as normalcy, and difference is constructed as Other and alien to majority behaviour. The everyday and banal here refers to national identity and

nationalism as ‘every-day nationhood’ characterised through everyday contexts (Billig 1995).

Qualitative interview studies within sub-populations have helpfully illustrated the nuanced multidimensionality of English national identity and how they orientate to visions of the nation. Condor (2006; 2010; 2019) looks in depth at how these national identities are performed and displayed, finding importance in the rhetorical contexts in which these are expressed. She reported that English national identity is expressed in a hybrid collective nature, consisting of both social and natural elements: “people, places and things” (Condor, 2006, p. 676). Mann (2011) focussed on these ‘places’ and looked to localised interpretations of Englishness, finding that localised Englishness was defined by referring explicitly to people; an English place was distinguished from a multi-ethnic place. Mann also concluded that the term English was also used to refer to a white majority people. Leddy-Owen (2014, p. 1463) too found English national identity to be racialised. In his interviews with individuals in South London, he found there to be dominant narratives of “a sense of racialized distinction held in a relationship with a non-white or ancestrally distinct non-English ‘other’”. In terms of social class, Mann’s (2012) study on Englishness found that English identities are often structured in classed ways.; His findings revealed binary ideas that cleaved to either the upper-class English or the working-class ‘hooligan’ English.

In his book *The Politics of Englishness*, Aughey (2007, p.7) encourages us to think of engagement with Englishness ‘as participation in a conversation’. Following his cue, this paper aims to explore how participating in conversations with citizens on what Englishness is to them can illuminate and enhance our current understandings of English national identity. This paper addresses the following research questions: 1) what are the micro-level foundations of English identity that underpin broader national indicators; and 2) how do individuals articulate what Englishness is and what it means to them. This paper will now outline the method undertaken to answer these research questions.

Data and method

To illustrate the everyday processes of constituting and defining English national identity, this paper draws upon the personal testimonies and experiences of English-identifying voters residing in towns and villages in rural South West England. A qualitative thematic analysis of 16 in-depth interviews was undertaken, where these interviews formed part of

a larger doctoral research project and were held between May and August 2020. The interviewees for this research were chosen using convenience and purposive sampling, a technique used in qualitative research involving the selection and identification of “information-rich” (Palinkas et al. 2015, p.533) cases that are related to the phenomena of interest. As explored in the previous section, it has been shown amongst statistical data that rural areas tend to identify with Englishness more strongly than Britishness. Recruitment took place on Facebook local community groups and noticeboards in towns and villages across South-West counties Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire.

Out of sixteen English identifying participants, eleven voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum and five voted Remain. In the 2019 General Election, five voted for the Labour Party, eight for the Conservative Party, two for the Liberal Democrats and one for the Green Party. Fourteen identified as white, two as white other, and participants’ ages ranged from twenty-nine to seventy-seven years old. All participants either lived in a rural village or small town in the South-West counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. Participants took part in online in-depth interviews over Zoom. These in-depth interviews allowed for the enactment of ‘deep stories’, which are “a feels-as-if story—it’s the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 135).

The interviews took place in an eleven-week period between 19th May 2020 and 5th August 2020. The interviews in this research were semi-structured, organised around predetermined open-ended questions, with additional dialogue emerging from the probing of answers, allowing me to delve deeply into social, political, and personal matters (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interview guide consisted of three sections of questions that focussed on participant’s sentiments, reflections, and expressions on and of national identity and British politics.

This research approach incorporated a thematic analysis as a “method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (Braun & Clarke, 2017, p. 297). Once completing familiarisation with the data, an inductive coding approach was used to interview transcripts. Codes become the building blocks for larger patterns of meaning (themes) underpinned by central concepts relating to my research questions. The themes demonstrated that participants were articulating a

complex perception of Englishness as an absent identity. Expressions from participants contained suggestions that as members of the dominant cultural and ethnic group, their identities had been built around their exclusive embodiment of what they consider 'normal'. The dynamics surrounding who could identify as English revolved around this idea: that anything that strayed from their norms, deviates, or is different, was portrayed as something foreign and separate from the customary behaviours and values of the majority English. Secondly, the themes found that Englishness was also expressed through and underpinned by reactive feelings of resentment revolving around perceptions of asymmetrical norms of identity expression in England in comparison to neighbouring devolved nations.

As with any research method, in-depth interviewing in this case had limitations due to a small sample size and geographical skew to the South West. However, the analysis of this data intended to interpret these short-comings instead as an opportunity to explore how participant's expressions, testimonials and articulations can help to illuminate in-depth and nuanced understandings of Englishness at ground-level, which can be used to inform wider understandings of broad national indicators.

Finding 1: Characterisations of Englishness as an absent distinct identity

While participants responded to questions surrounding English identity in varied ways, I begin by discussing those that found difficulty in defining what Englishness meant to them. Participant #6 articulated Englishness as an empty and absent idea that has never been given substantial meaning. When I asked her what she felt Englishness was she told me: "I don't think I've ever had a conversation about Englishness. It's not something that has ever been a topic of conversation". Similarly, Participant #7 told me she was unsure "what Englishness is". When I asked her why she felt English rather than British, again, I found that she could not express her reasoning: "I always put English rather than British down on forms; I guess there is a difference, but I don't know how to verbalize it". Similarly, participant #20 echoed sentiments of the difficulty in attaching clear meaning or definition to Englishness:

I feel the English do need to discover their identity from... [pause] I mean not to create conflict, but, to recognize probably being English. It's... you know. It doesn't really mean anything... Being English is quite hard thing to pin down.

Participant #20 expresses a need for discovering English, but he showed awareness to the threat of this being construed as creating conflict, reflecting the contentious nature of Englishness. This was also true for participant #11 who before expressing his English national identity told me “please don’t judge me on this”. A lacking ability to define Englishness did not however inhibit participants’ self-identification with English identity. For example, participant #2 indicated that “I still like to be known as English”, despite his struggle with describing and defining it.

On the occasions that participants were prompted further to define their English national identity, they articulated it in terms of what it is *not*, rather than what it is. This was particularly the case in resentful opposition to the people of the UK’s devolved neighbouring nations: Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. For example, participant #4 told me “Englishness is so badly defined, you just know that you’re not Welsh or Scottish”, similarly participant #18 echoed similar sentiments telling me “I’m not Scottish, Irish or Welsh”. Participant #2 also echoed these sentiments, pointing immediately to the rising prominence of Scottish and Welsh national identity post-UK devolution. He told me he used to call himself British until “the rise of Scottish and Welsh national identity” and, since the Scottish independence referendum, he went on to say, “it’s important we call ourselves English”

Participant #14 held similar sentiments, telling me if “the Scottish, the Irish and the Welsh are claiming that they are different”, then “we should be allowed to be just English”. There was a sense of resentment here, with the idea that other nations have a positive identity whilst England does not. Furthermore, participant #14 told me she felt that those that identify as English are “frowned upon”, whereas Scottish identifiers are not. At the time of speaking, Wales and Scotland were asserting their own rules and guidelines surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak, so it is important to note that these notions of national autonomy were enacted in wider discourse in news commentary.

On other occasions, when participants were asked to define their Englishness, and whether anyone could be English, they did not refer to Scotland and Wales but did struggle to say what it means beyond a label. Instead, they resorted to assimilatory ideas relating to Englishness as a birth right. Participant #24 told me “if you’re born in that country, that’s where you’re from”. Although participants did not make direct reference to race, they did refer to assimilation. I asked all participants “can anyone be English?”

and the responses were mixed; although some answered yes, others held a different view. For example, when asked whether “anyone” could be English, participant #5 told me: “only if they’re born here”. Furthermore, participant #18 told me that people should only call themselves English if they show loyalty and obedience to the monarchy and laws of the country; in other words, by not deviating from the majority’s cultural norms and customs He told me:

You’ve gotta be loyal to the queen, obey the laws of the country, and then you can call yourself English [...] if you reside in the UK and comply with the laws and respect the people then yes I think so, you can be called English.

Participant #22 told me “Yeah, if they are born here yeah, it doesn’t matter what your parents are I think if you’re born here and brought up in English culture then you’re English, of course you are”, which implies both birthplace, assimilation to majority culture as integral aspects to English identification. However, when asking whether others such as participant #1 whether anyone could be English, participant #1 also told me it was about values, yet these values were undefined.

Culturally speaking, some participants made efforts to put together what they felt was English culture. This consisted of religion, values, characteristics, and the countryside. Participant #2 emphasised a difference in England, and spoke of English sense of humour, values and rural culture, such as country dancing and Morrismen, insisting that “we do things slightly different in England”. Participant #2 and participant #4 reduced Englishness to idealised cultural icons, referring to Michael Caine, fish and chips and the English football team. However, there were feelings that Englishness was also rooted in social class, such as the “chirpy northerner” and the “upper class posh”, though participants did not feel they fitted either designation.

Ultimately, participants were finding difficulty in recognising what Englishness was, despite it perhaps being a core feature of their everyday experience. Resentment relating to the neighbouring devolved nations suggested a perception of lacking power. In cases, participants were relating Englishness to birth right and assimilation to the majority culture, risking an essentialist and reductive idea of Englishness national identity.

Finding 2: Englishness as Reactive and Resentful

Across the interviews, participant's definitions and explorations of Englishness were at times reactive to wider socio-political contexts, where participants seemed to be responding questions surrounding English identity with articulations underpinned by resentment. Participant #1, for example, felt resentful toward the appropriation of English national identity by the far-right. Discussing the anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE) day, he held reservations about which flag to put out, recalling that to hang a St George's flag out of the window created worries about "what it might say in terms of my form of national identity and how it might reflect on me to some people". He went on: "It does make me angry that I do feel robbed of a national flag and the national identity because of it being appropriated by racists and Hooligans. [...] Everyone wants a flag to get behind". Other participants told me they felt an "immense level of shame that comes with Englishness", that English identity has been "hijacked" for something "toxic", with some participants citing instances of racism from the far-right. This sense that English national identity has been appropriated by members of far-right organisations created feelings of loss particularly associated with group identity, belonging and pride.

For some interviewees, feelings of resentment towards the perceived asymmetry of devolution gave way to a sense of loss, and in reaction, a retaliation that strengthened identification with Englishness. Some participants expressed sentiments in favour of further devolution of the UK, to allow England to self-govern and restore a sense of Englishness. There was recognition from participant #24 that the Scottish and the Welsh had held onto their national identity "a lot better than we have", whereas the English have "lost some kind of Englishness". Other participants reflected on devolution in the late nineties and told me that during that time, they started to fly the St Georges flag more. When questioned by neighbours, participant #28 said "well, now we've had political devolution, we should fly this", to which he related in our interview that "compared to other people, I probably do recognise it a bit more than some". Furthermore, there were resentful expressions from participant #16, who felt unfairness at devolution due to the way that "Scotland and Wales are devolved but England still finances them" and "Scottish MPs can interfere with English law" but not the other way around. Such testimony shows how debates surrounding devolution present in the first decade of the twenty first century are persisting today and manifesting in misinformation.

Some of the resentment experienced by participants was also bound with reactive victimhood and retaliation. Participant #24 told me “I’m very proud to be English and it almost feels like in recent years we’re kind of not allowed to be English?” she made comparisons with the Welsh and Scottish where she felt they could express their identity with no backlash; “but if your English, it’s almost like an air of oh you’re not allowed to say that, so I’m really proud to say that I’m English”.

On a similar note, participant #29 proposed a similar idea to me but instead placed otherness on British Muslims. He told me a story of his brother who lived in “a very large Muslim area” where he “he put an England flag up in the window. And the police knocked on his door and asked him to take it down because the residents in the area found it offensive”. He then went on to say:

“That was a key moment for me because that to me is offensive. That’s discriminatory. And that’s where we need to be able to stand up and kick back against that and say no that’s wrong. It’s the flag of our country and we can proudly wave it.”

The symbols in this story - a Muslim area, an England flag, and the state authorities - represent a complex relationship participant #29 has with multiculturalism, authority and autonomy, which shapes how he feels he can express his national identity. Participant #29 placed himself into a role of victimhood as he describes England being discriminated against due to an inability to wave the flag of his nation. His reference to Muslims here as an Other who are inhibiting English people’s ability to exercise their pride is notable as it places the Other as imperialistic, whereby rules are perceived to be imposed on territory and flags, a collective infringement on Englishness that appeases and indulges in the Other at the expense of the victim.

Discussion and Conclusions

These findings revealed that many participants had difficulty defining what Englishness meant to them. Some articulated Englishness as an empty and undefined concept, with little recognition, discussion, or conversation around it in their lives. Participants struggled to articulate a clear definition of Englishness, often resorting to explaining what it is not, comparing English Identity to the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales, and

Northern Ireland. There was a sense of resentment among some participants, feeling that these neighbouring nations had positive identities while Englishness did not. Some participants associated Englishness with birth right and assimilation to the majority culture, suggesting a potentially reductive and essentialist view of English national identity. Participants were finding difficulty in recognising what Englishness was, despite it perhaps being a core feature of their everyday experience. Resentment relating to the neighbouring devolved nations suggested a perception of lacking power. Overall, participants found it challenging to pin down the meaning of Englishness.

The interviews also revealed that some participants' explorations of Englishness were reactive and driven by resentment. They expressed resentment toward the appropriation of English national identity by the far right, which led to feelings of shame and loss associated with their identity. Some participants cited instances of racism within far-right groups as contributing to this negative perception. In response to these feelings of resentment and loss, some participants expressed a desire for further devolution of the UK, allowing England to self-govern and restore a sense of Englishness. They believed that Scotland and Wales had preserved their national identities better than England had. Additionally, there was a sense of victimhood and retaliation among some participants who felt that expressing their English identity was met with backlash or discrimination, particularly in multicultural areas. Overall, participants' definitions of Englishness were influenced by these negative emotions and reactions, revealing a more complex relationship with their English national identity.

Participant's expressions of an inability to locate Englishness reflects arguments from Weight (2002, p. 726) who describes England as a "stateless nation". Therefore, with no devolved political community, there hasn't been the foundations to form a coherent sense of identity around. As Goodhart (2006, p. 22) states, it is the "the relative absence of an institutionalised Englishness" that is fundamental here. The idea of a general identity void that needs filling is common across discussions of Englishness in scholarly literature (Kumar 2010; Aughey, 2007; Bryant, 2008), and perhaps the idea of it as a void is a more helpful metaphor rather than dialogue. As Young (2008, p. 236) argues, there is a 'curious emptiness of Englishness' that lacks 'cultural essence'. However, it is possible that as Aughey (2001) argues, the English have never felt a need to exert or question their identity, that it was something that has always been omnipresent and never under threat and therefore the need to defend or explore it just hasn't been there, unlike the Welsh and

Scottish. This is until now, where the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the necessity of devolved political assemblies to deal with and enforce rules surrounding significant political, welfare and economic issues.

There are arguments to be made about the danger of Englishness being left to be defined by more assimilatory forms and via reductive essentialist approaches. Without the foundations to build a sense of English identity, this absence can leave free terrain for assimilationist distinctions which exclude and other those that do not fit with the majority ethnic group norms, leaving the field open to politically dangerous groups. The presence of this idea was evident amongst participants who expressed tensions within Englishness, as they did not want to associate themselves with the negative connotations bound up with ethnonationalism. This was also evident amongst participants who showed awareness in their interviews of the contentious nature of English identity and its potential for conflict. Cameron (2000) explains that “it is natural to make judgements about what kinds of talk are good and which are less good” (ibid, p.viii). In Condor’s (2010) study she too found that her interview participants were often invoking normative judgements regarding the right and wrong ways to talk about their English national identity. This is something that I found across participants who also felt forces of censorship were at play when expressing their sentiments, reinforcing the role of the suppressed victim. This shows what Condor (2010) and Cameron (2000) describe as the ‘reflexive’ character of British and English dialogue. By recognising its potential for conflict, participants were showing an understanding of the social norms of talk surrounding English national identity.

The inability to form a substantiated English identity when existing without a political entity arguably has implications for any potential community building. Arguments concerning the ways in which this erodes the capability for a sense of belonging require attention. This is because belonging reflects “emotional investments and desires for attachments” (Yuval-Davis 2006, p.202) and its usefulness as a frame for solidarity and union is becoming more important given the fast pace of globalisation and its effects. An inability to belong in a national community hinders the ability to locate oneself and find meaning in the world (Bell, 1999). In addition, a lack of civic structure to build a national identity around can harm the ability to form an identity that is inclusive and diverse (Mason, 2000). This is due to the way that a civic national identity endorses idea of the nation as being composed of all those who subscribe to the same set of political values

and practices, regardless of their gender, language, ethnicity, class, and race (Ignatieff, 1994). The limited capacity to view Englishness as something that could incorporate such values was evident amongst the participants' expressions. The salience of this issue was evident during the European football championships in 2020, where Gareth Southgate, the England football team manager, conferred meaning and depth upon 21st century Englishness by promoting and celebrating Englishness as something diverse and inclusive (Southgate, 2021). Despite Southgate's efforts, there is still a long way to go.

Although participants struggled to locate and substantiate Englishness with meaningful definition or significance, references to aspects such as culture and class were sporadic and failed to resonate unanimously. As Kumar (2010) suggests, there are small scraps that make up for Englishness such as cultural aspects like the countryside and an aversion to cities. Much of this was evident in the participants' answers, who located Englishness as something embedded in the rural traditions in England. However, to take another perspective, there might be some opportunity to build upon existing cultural and localised ideas of Englishness that are associated with agricultural life, working-class identities, collective experiences, food and music – attributes that don't require the same hostile notions involved ideas of assimilation.

In contrast to prior studies on Englishness (Leddy-Owen, 2014a; 2019), I did not find my participants' expressions of English identity to be based on racially exclusive notions of whiteness. However, there were some exceptions and whilst they did not make direct reference to race, they did fail to recognise the white majority's cultural norms as constituting Englishness. Some participants' sentiments also highlighted clear themes of loyalty to England, suggesting notions of abiding to traditional civic behavioural norms in England. However, these norms were British in nature, illustrating that English identity perhaps lacks its own cultural norms and is still heavily conflated with Britishness.

The findings also found that Englishness was heavily defined with comparative reference to Scotland and Wales. Not only does this resonate strongly with ideas of an Other being required for national identity to provide its function (Smith, 1991; Wodak, 2009), it reflects sentiments of resentment, which provides insight into the ways that participants understood themselves in a devolved UK. This reflects much of the literature on English identity post-1997 (Bognador, 1999; Aughey, 2004) and correlates with discussions on the awakening of English national consciousness as a response to devolved nations'

perceived desire for independence, and a reactionary English backlash or ‘devo-anxiety’ (Bognador, 1999; Curtis & Heath, 2000; Mycock, 2013; Henderson & Wyn Jones, 2021). The sense of grievance experienced here characterised much of participants’ sentiments towards Englishness and reflects the persistence of attitudes that have been documented in prior studies (Kenny et al., 2018; Henderson & Wyn Jones 2021).

The findings from this data demonstrate the need for further academic and political attention on the ways that Englishness continues to lack its own substantial meaning, instead forming around the majority ethnic group’s relationship with an Other, along with grievances persisting surrounding the consequences of devolution. The aspiration on the part of my English identifying participants for their own devolved government is arguably linked to a wish for the nation to provide an affective sense of belonging and for a form of Englishness that has concrete values of its own, separate from British national identity. National identity provides important affective functions such as belonging, unity and cohesiveness. The shared social identity of a nation is essential for forming a foundation of solidarity in which nation members are invested in one another’s best interests. Previous research evidences the ways in which national identity is important for political participation, mobilisation, and political well-being, and it is the case here that increased efforts should be made in favour of a progressive form of Englishness separate from Britishness (Denham, 2018) to mitigate the potential for English identity to be mobilised by politically dangerous groups. A progressive form of Englishness may take influence from postcolonial theorists surrounding the ideas of cultural hybridity, where Englishness embodies a product of intercultural exchanges, where it is understood not as a static identity but one that is malleable, appreciating its wider influences and forces that has shaped what it is today. Future work should investigate the resonance of ideas of cultural hybridity with the wider populace and aim to encourage further participation in on-going conversations about how Englishness can foster a foundation for solidarity, openness, and inclusivity. Such research and conversations should account for the influence of space and place on collective identities, particularly paying attention to the ways the rural may differ from the urban, due to disparate demographics and influence of the symbolic nature of the countryside. Finally, attention must be paid to the wider stories of loss and class de-composition in the background of neoliberal agendas and heightening economic crises, which illuminate understandings of collective identities, cohesiveness, and national solidarity in times of crisis.

This study received ethical clearance from Bournemouth University Research Ethics Board with the ethics ID 28268 in October 2019.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the peer reviewers for their helpful and constructive feedback on previous versions of this article. Thanks also goes to Professor Darren Lilleker and Dr Ian Gwinn for reading and commenting on early drafts.

References

- Allchorn, W., 2019. Beyond Islamophobia? The role of Englishness and English national identity within English Defence League discourse and politics. *National Identities*, 21(5), pp.527-539.
- Aughey, A. 2007. *The Politics of Englishness*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Aughey, A., 2001. *Nationalism, Devolution and the Challenge to the United Kingdom State*. London: Pluto Press.
- Barnett, A., 2017. *The Lure of Greatness: England's Brexit and America's Trump*. London: Unbound Publishing.
- Bar-Tal, D., 1993. Patriotism as fundamental beliefs of group members. *Politics and the Individual*, 3(2), pp.45-62.
- Baucom, I., 1999. *Out of place: Englishness, empire, and the locations of identity*. Princeton University Press.
- Bechhofer, F., McCrone, D., Kiely, R., Stewart, R., (1999), 'Constructing National Identity: Arts and Landed Elites in Scotland' *Sociology*, 33 (3): 515–534.
- Bell, V., (1999). *Performativity and Belonging: An Introduction. Theory, Culture and Society*. 16, no. (2): 1-10.
- Billig, M., 1995. *Banal nationalism*. London: Sage

Bogdanor, V., (1999). *Devolution in the United Kingdom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bryant, C. G. A. (2008). 'Devolution, equity and the English Question', *Nations and Nationalism* 14, (4): 664–83

Burdsey, D., 2016. One guy named Mo: race, nation and the London 2012 Olympic Games. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 33(1), pp.14-25.

Cameron, D., 2000. *Good to talk?: Living and working in a communication culture*. California, United States: Sage.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, 2, 17-37.

Colls, R. 2002. *The Identity of England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Condor, S. (2019). *Sense and sensibility: The conversational etiquette of English national self-identification* (Doctoral dissertation, Manchester University Press).

Condor, S. 2010. Devolution and national identity: The rules of English (dis)engagement, *Nations and Nationalism*, 16(3), 525-543

Condor, S., 2006. Temporality and collectivity: Diversity, history and the rhetorical construction of national entitativity. *British journal of social psychology*, 45(4), 657-682.

Cooper, L., & Cooper, C. (2020). 'Get Brexit Done': The New Political Divides of England and Wales at the 2019 Election. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(4), 751-761.

Curtice, J. and A. Heath., 2000. Is the English Lion about to Roar? National Identity after Devolution, In: R. Jowell, J. Curtice, A. Park, K. Thomson, L. Jarvis, C. Bromley and N. Stratford (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 17th Report*, London: Sage. 155–74.

Denham, J. 2018. A Nation Divided: Identities, Politics and the Governance of England. *Open Democracy*. [online]. Available from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/john-denham/nation-divided-identities-politics-and-governance-of-england> Accessed: 03 October 18

Denham, J., 2017. A new progressive patriotism. *The Political Quarterly*, 88(1), pp.97-105.

- Doyle, B. (2013). *English and Englishness*. London: Routledge.
- Featherstone, S., (2009). *Englishness: twentieth-century popular culture and the forming of English identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ford, R. and Goodwin, M.J., 2010. Angry white men: Individual and contextual predictors of support for the British National Party. *Political Studies*, 58(1), pp.1-25.
- Gifford, C. (2015). Nationalism, populism and Anglo-British Euroscepticism. *British Politics*, 10(3), 362-366.
- Goodhart, D. 2006. *Progressive Nationalism: Citizenship and the Left*. London: Demos.
- Gover, D., & Kenny, M. (2016). *Finding the good in EVEL: An evaluation of 'English votes for English laws' in the House of Commons*. Centre on Constitutional Change.
- Greenfeld, L. (1992). *Nationalism: Five roads to modernity*. Harvard University Press.
- Greenfeld, L. and Chirot, D., 1994. Nationalism and aggression. *Theory and society*, 23(1), pp.79-130.
- Hazell, R. ed., 2000. *The state and the nations: the first year of devolution in the United Kingdom*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Henderson, A., & Jones, R. W. (2021). *Englishness: The political force transforming Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Wincott, D. and Wyn Jones, R., 2017. How Brexit was made in England. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(4), 631-646.
- Hochschild, A, R. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press,
- Huddy, L., & Khatib, N. (2007). American patriotism, national identity, and political involvement. *American journal of political science*, 51(1), 63-77.
- Ignatieff, M., 1994. *Blood and belonging: Journeys into the new nationalism*. Stuttgart, Germany: Macmillan.
- Jackson, P. and Feldman, M. 2011. *The EDL: Britain's 'New Far Right' social movement*. Northampton: The University of Northampton

Kenny, M., I. McLean, and A. Paun. Eds. 2018. *Governing England. English Identity and Institutions in a Changing United Kingdom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Kumar, K. 2006. 'Empire and English nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism* 12(1), 1–13

Kumar, K. 2009. 'Empire, nation and national identities', In: A. Thompson (ed.), *Britain's Experience of Empire During the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kumar, K., 2010. Negotiating English identity: Englishness, Britishness and the future of the United Kingdom. *Nations and Nationalism*, 16(3), pp.469-487.

Langlands, R. (1999). Britishness or Englishness? The historical problem of national identity in Britain. *Nations and nationalism*, 5(1), 53-69.

Lazaridis, G., Campani, G. and Benveniste, A., 2016. *The Rise of the Far Right in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan Limited.

Leddy-Owen, C. 2019. *Nationalism, Inequality and England's Political Predicament*. London: Routledge

Leddy-Owen, C., 2014a. Reimagining Englishness: 'Race', class, progressive English identities and disrupted English communities. *Sociology*, 48(6), 1123-1138.

Leddy-Owen, C., 2014b. 'It's true, I'm English... I'm not lying': essentialized and precarious English identities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37(8), 1448-1466.

MacPhee, G. and Poddar, P. eds., 2007. *Empire and after: Englishness in postcolonial perspective*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Mandler, P. (2006). *The English national character: the history of an idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*. Yale: Yale University Press.

Mann, R., 2012. Uneasy being English: The significance of class for English national sentiments. *Ethnicities*. 12(4): 484–99.

Mann, R. 2011. 'It Just Feels English Rather than Multicultural': Local Interpretations of Englishness and Non-Englishness, *The Sociological Review*, 59(1), pp. 109–128

Mason, A. (2000) *Community, Solidarity and Belonging : Levels of Community and Their Normative Significance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mckenzie L (2016) Brexit is the only way the working class can change anything.

Opinion. *The Guardian*. Available

at: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/15/brexit-working-class-sick-racist-eu-referendum (accessed 04 August 2023).

Mckenzie, L., 2017. The class politics of prejudice: Brexit and the land of no-hope and glory. *The British journal of sociology*, 68, pp.S265-S280.

Mckenzie, L., 2017a. 'It's not ideal': Reconsidering 'anger' and 'apathy' in the Brexit vote among an invisible working class. *Competition & Change*, 21(3), pp.199-210.

Mullen, T. (2014). The Scottish independence referendum 2014. *Journal of Law and Society*, 41(4), 627-640.

Mycock, A., 2013 Understanding the Post-British English Nation-State. In: Gardiner, M. and Westall, C., (eds) *Literature of an Independent England*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.15–30.

Nairn, T., 1964. The English working class. *New Left Review*, 24, pp.43-57.

Neal, S. and Agyeman, J. eds., 2006. *The new countryside?: Ethnicity, nation and exclusion in contemporary rural Britain*. Policy Press.

O'Toole, F., 2018. *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain*. London: Head of Zeus Ltd.

Perryman, M., 2008. *Imagined Nation: England after Britain*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Petersson, B. and Tyler, K. eds., 2008. *Majority Cultures and the Everyday Politics of Ethnic Difference*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pilkington, H. 2016. *Loud and proud: Passion and politics in the English Defence League*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Rankin, D. M. (2001). Identities, interests, and imports. *Political Behaviour*, 23(4), 351-376
- Smith, A.D., 1991. *National identity*. Nevada, United States: University of Nevada press.
- Smith, A.D., 2006. 'Set in the silver sea': English national identity and European integration. *Nations and Nationalism*, 12(3), pp.433-452.
- Southgate, G. 2021. 'Dear England'. *The Players Tribune*. [online]. Available from: <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/posts/dear-england-gareth-southgate-euros-soccer>. [Accessed: August 2021]
- Stocker, P. (2017). *English uprising: Brexit and the mainstreaming of the far right*. Melville House UK.
- Stronger In. 2016. Britain Stronger in Europe. [online]. *Stronger In*. Available from: <https://www.strongerin.co.uk/>. [Accessed: 11 February 20]
- Thompson, E, P. 1968. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Pelican Books.
- Tyler, K., 2003. The racialised and classed constitution of English village life. *Journal of Anthropology Museum of Ethnography*, 68(3), pp.391-412.
- Tyler, K., 2006. *Village people: race, class, nation and the community spirit*. In *The new countryside?* (pp. 129-148). London: Policy Press.
- Tyler, K., 2008. Debating the rural and the urban: majority white racialized discourses on the countryside and the city. In: *Majority cultures and the everyday politics of ethnic difference: whose house is this?* (pp. 75-93). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Tyler, K., Degnen, C. and Blamire, J., 2022. Leavers and Remainers as 'Kinds of People': Accusations of Racism Amidst Brexit. *Ethnos*, pp.1-18.
- Verdugo, RR, Milne, A (eds) 2016, *National Identity : Theory and Research*, North Carolina, United States: Information Age Publishing.
- Vines, E. (2014). Reframing English nationalism and Euroscepticism: From populism to the British political tradition. *British Politics*, 9(3), 255-274.

Virdee, S. & McGeever, B. 2018. Racism, Crisis, Brexit. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41(10) 1802-1819,

Weight, R. 2002. *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940–2000*. London: MacMillan.

Wellings, B. (2010). Losing the peace: Euroscepticism and the foundations of contemporary English nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, 16(3), 488-505.

Wellings, B. Baxingdale, H. 2015. Euroscepticism and the Anglosphere: Traditions and Dilemmas in Contemporary English Nationalism. *Journal of Common Market planning*. 55 (1). Pp.123-139

Wellings, B., 2010. Losing the peace: Euroscepticism and the foundations of contemporary English nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, 16(3), pp.488-505.

Wellings, B., and Kenny, M. 2019. Nairn's England and the progressive dilemma: reappraising Tom Nairn on English nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, 25: 847– 865

Winlow, S., Hall, S. and Treadwell, J., 2017. *The rise of the Right: English nationalism and the transformation of working-class politics*. Cambridge: Policy Press.

Wodak, R., 2009. *Discursive construction of national identity*. Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.

Wyn Jones, R., Lodge, G., Henderson, A. and Wincott, D., 2012. *The dog that finally barked: England as an emerging political community*.

YouGov. 2017. What makes a person English, according to the English. YouGov. [online]. Available from: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/01/24/what-makes-person-english-according-english>. Accessed: [13 June 19]

YouGov. 2019a. YouGov / John Denham Survey Results. YouGov. [online]. Available from: https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/mq4fpl0ap5/JohnDenhamResults_190610_EnglishIdentity_w.pdf. [Accessed: 17 December 19]

YouGov. 2019b. YouGov / University of Southampton Survey Results. YouGov. [online]. Available from:

https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/ygcvzbeida/Internal_Union_191204_v4.pdf. [Accessed: 17 December 2019].

Young, R. J. C. 2008. *The Idea of English Ethnicity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing

Yuval-Davis, N., 2011. *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*. California, United States: Sage.