Citizenship and identity: an exploration of the British naturalisation context
AHRC/CRONEM Conference 2009

Eleni Andreouli
Institute of Social Psychology, London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract

Contrary to ideas of boundedness and strict national demarcation, the processes of migration and naturalisation, whereby a non-member enters a ‘foreign’ national territory, create possibilities for boundary crossing and new forms of national belonging. Yet, these processes remain mainly regulated by the nationality and immigration legislation of national governments. Through the introduction of the citizenship test and ceremony, the British government has recently tried to redefine citizenship within a framework of common values and social cohesion creating a ‘thicker’ conception of national citizenship.

Therefore, rather than a neutral legal concept, citizenship is a dynamic social object closely related to the politics of integration and belonging. This paper explores issues of identity formation and representation from the perspectives of two sets of stakeholders in the British naturalisation context: citizenship officers and naturalised British citizens. In-depth interviews with fifty-three participants examine constructions of British citizenship and Britishness in relation to issues of national identity formation and belonging. Discussion of key findings illuminates our understanding of the relation between citizenship, national identity and transnationalism. Whereas the official public policy discourse and the citizenship officers define British citizenship as an earned identity, naturalised citizens see Britishness as irrelevant to their everyday lives. For many new citizens, becoming British is equated to the British passport which allows international travelling. While the former discourse focuses on national boundaries and requirements of membership, the latter emphasises transnational boundary crossing.

National identity in British citizenship legislation

Even though there has been an analytical distinction between state (civic) identities and national (ethnoc-cultural) identities (e.g. McCrone & Kiely, 2000), the relation of citizenship and national identity is much more complicated. The UK is a particularly interesting case because it is a multi-national state; it consists of four nations all associated with a single British citizenship. Post-war immigration and subsequent debates over multiculturalism and the accommodation of diversity add to the complexity of British national identity. It can be argued that because Britain is a multi-national country, citizenship is solely defined as the legal (‘neutral’) relation of the citizen to the state, whereas national identity refers to the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish identities and other ethno-cultural affiliations. However, citizenship is, even in so called civic societies, closely interlinked with national identity. In fact, the very meaning of the term nation-state assumes that the state as a sovereign and territorially bounded entity is associated with an equally bounded population, the nation. The conflation of the political and cultural spheres of membership characterises the modern model of citizenship, which assumes that democratic participation and cultural membership are in alignment (Benhabib, 2002, 2004).

Nowadays, ‘identity talk’ is becoming more and more salient in British public policy discourse. In a pamphlet entitled ‘Our Common Place’, Ruth Kelly, at the time Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and Liam Byrne, at the time Minister of State for immigration and asylum, have argued that: “Our approach to citizenship has been laissez faire. But today, more than at any time since the Second World War, we need a more vigorous debate about what it is that holds us together and how we express these links more clearly […] We believe that the way we collectively develop a more overt but inclusive sense of citizenship will be one of the issues that define the coming decade in British politics” (Kelly & Byrne, 2007, pp. 3-4).

After the ‘race riots’ in the north of England in the Spring and Summer of 2001, ‘shared British values’, social cohesion and integration have become key terms in public policy on citizenship and immigration. Concerning naturalisation, the ‘Life in the UK’ test and the citizenship
ceremony have been introduced to enhance the integration of new citizens. The current community cohesion strategies are based on the assumption of failed integration and lack of Britishness which the government aims to combat by establishing a common identity among the British (McGhee, 2005a).

Alongside social cohesion policies, the government has also introduced the notion of ‘earned citizenship’ and the points-based system which both make entry and stay in the UK harder for migrants, in particular low-skilled migrants (Home Office, 2008). From now on eligible migrants will have earned their right to stay in the UK by showing that they have contributed to the country and that the benefits they acquire by living in Britain are matched by their responsibilities. Migrants will have to demonstrate that they have proficiency in English, are self-sufficient, obey the law and are ‘active citizens’. Earned citizenship places emphasis on the commitment and assessment of potential new British citizens. For example, a period of ‘probationary’ citizenship is being established whereby the migrant’s contribution would be tested before he/she becomes eligible to apply for citizenship.

Overall, the government is seeking to establish stricter selection criteria concerning who has the right to enter, stay and naturalise in the UK, with the overarching aim to increase the (assumed low) integration and economic contribution of migrants. By redefining British citizenship and re-formulating the criteria of naturalisation in such a way, the British government is establishing a link between Britishness and naturalisation which in turn ‘nationalises’ the idea of citizenship.

Exploring stakeholders’ perspectives on British citizenship

Citizenship is located at the heart of many current debates over identity, inclusion and national solidarity. The social psychological investigation of this topic can shed light on the dynamics of membership and boundary construction under conditions of late modernity. In my research I have used in-depth interviews to explore how citizenship is represented and how people relate to or identify with these representations. In particular, I have conducted twenty interviews with citizenship officers and thirty-three interviews with ‘naturalised’ British citizens in London.

Citizenship officers

As in the official governmental discourse, the notion of ‘earned citizenship’ was dominant in the discourses of the citizenship officers interviewed. Earned citizenship here does not only refer to economic contribution, but rather to a wider commitment to the country which encompasses the economic as well as the social sphere of participation. There are two main features in this discourse. First, it is a one-way discourse in that it is characterised by an emphasis on the ‘duties’ and assessment of naturalisation applicants. In particular, three main ‘duties’ for applicants for naturalisation were mentioned by the interviewees that would test their ‘worth’ to become British citizens: the duty to contribute in economic terms, the duty to integrate into British society and the duty to be proud of becoming British. The second feature of the earned citizenship discourse is that it emphasises ‘lack’, meaning that what new citizens and migrants fail to provide takes prominence in the interviews rather than the positive impact of migration.

The first extract below illustrates this emphasis on conditionality regarding citizenship and naturalisation. The second extract shows on the one hand, the importance attributed to being proud of becoming British for new citizens and on the other hand, the concern over the rigorous assessment of new citizens so that their ‘worth’ to be British is properly tested.

---

1 The ‘Path to Citizenship’ green paper does not explicitly define active citizenship but provides a few examples like voluntary work. The green paper also makes a direct link between active citizenship and social cohesion.
2 For example, minor criminal activity can extend the migrant’s period as a provisional citizen and voluntary work (active citizenship) would reduce this period.
3 Citizenship officers are civil servants working in local councils who organise and perform citizenship ceremonies. In some councils they also provide the Nationality Checking Service, a service put in place to assist people with their applications.

---
“[Citizenship] isn’t something that’s open to everyone. You have to fulfil certain criteria before you are granted citizenship. And that’s important for the growth of the country. Because if you apply to become British citizen in your own benefit, you’re not actually bringing anything in. So, yeah, if you can offer us something, then we can offer you something. If you’re just coming here because you’ve heard that this is a wonderful free state where you can get a house, get all sorts of benefits, then you really, you’re not actually contributing.” (citizenship officer, male, 47 years old)

“An awful lot of them are very proud […] but you also get people that will ring up and come in, and you know, it doesn’t mean a thing really, it’s just a piece of paper, it’s a kind of thing for a British passport and the fact that they got British citizenship doesn’t mean anything really to them. I think it’s a shame and I don’t know what the answer is to that, to be honest, I don’t know whether the rules should be tightened up or, you know, the cases looked into better. But, I mean, when we do our nationality checking, we can put a footnote on to the Home Office [application], if we’re not happy with certain things, or we’re not happy with their application we can put a footnote saying ‘can you look into this further?’” (citizenship officer, female, 52 years old)

On the whole, the main issues emerging in these interviews were an emphasis on the ‘duties’ of new citizens, in particular their responsibility to contribute to the economy, integrate and be committed/attached to their new ‘identity’. There was also an element of distrust towards migrants; according to the citizenship officers, they need to be properly assessed in order to become good British citizens, their ‘worth’ is a priority contested. According to this discourse, which resonates with the public policy approach, the national boundaries should be reinforced and boundary crossing should become harder. This suggests that British citizenship is linked to a sense of national identity that new citizens have to live up to; it is a privileged identity that one has to earn.

‘Naturalised’ British citizens

Regarding the interviews with the ‘naturalised’ British citizens, two main questions or issues are explored in this paper: Can new citizens relate to the images of Britishness promoted in the naturalisation process? Is British citizenship related to a shared national identity?

Despite attempts to forge a shared national identity, for the most part, naturalised citizens saw naturalisation as an administrative process void of any particular importance. For example, the citizenship ceremony aims to add significance to citizenship by making the granting of naturalisation a memorable and celebratory occasion. However, participants saw naturalisation mainly as a bureaucratic, administrative step that they had to go through to obtain their naturalisation certificates. By the same token, citizenship was seen as a top-down identification rather than a lived form of belonging.

“Yeah, there was hardly, yeah, nothing much I would say, it was just an official ceremony that I had to go, I mean, you know, get my certificate and so on. So, I cannot say anything beyond that. It was well organised, I cannot see anything wrong or anything. I would say, yeah, it was ok, I cannot say that it was an enjoyable thing. It was ok basically. But I’m happy that the Council had it every week […] So, it’s good, it’s convenient for people…” (naturalised citizen, female, 26 years old)

“Yeah, if I fill in a form I’m British, but this is admin, that’s not about my own definition, that’s about me dealing with other people’s things” (naturalised citizen, female, 37 years old)

What were predominantly emphasised in the interviews were the practical advantages of becoming British, namely having the British passport and being able to travel freely within the European Union and elsewhere. British citizenship, therefore, was not linked to national belonging for most of the participants. On the contrary, citizenship was distinguished from national identity and emphasis was given to international travelling and boundary crossing.
“And now I guess, I’m not English, but I’m a citizen, I got my passport, but I can’t say I’m English now, but this maybe only a small paper to make my life easier, to fly to anywhere I want and to see what I want.” (naturalised citizen, male, 25 years old)

“For me it was like a symbol of freedom. The British passport allows you to do anything in the world. You know, you can go anywhere [...] I didn’t see why if I wanted I don’t have an option of doing it, because to go anywhere you need to get a visa and that’s what killed me. Why do I need to go and ask these people if I had to go into their country? Why does the people who happen to be born in Britain don’t have to do that? [...] And I have this opportunity now to do that. Yes, I can go to any countries. I can go anywhere in Europe, I can go and settle with no problems. I can go to Australia and I can go to UK, um, US and so on.” (naturalised citizen, female, 28)

Concerning life in the British society, lived identities were talked about as more relevant than becoming ‘formally’ British. The extract below illustrates that being a British citizen does not have an effect on experiences of everyday social exclusion.

“That passport is not going to give me anything living and moving in the society. Society wouldn’t care whether I had a passport or not [...] Sometimes people can judge you by the colour of your skin. Somebody can judge you by different ways. So, in the everyday life I don’t think this is going to help the way I live in the society, the way I live with people, no, but only where official matters are concerned [...] Let’s be open, you’re not going to give me any more or any additional respect just because you found out that this person has got the British passport” (naturalised citizen, female, 26 years old)

Conclusions

This paper has examined the relationship between citizenship and national identity as represented in the British naturalisation context. In terms of official public policy, the aim is to enhance national solidarity, to promote a shared image of Britishness. In this sense, it is an effort to nationalise British citizenship. Another element in public policy is earned citizenship which renders naturalisation as a conditional right granted when the criteria of integration and contribution are fulfilled. The citizenship officers that were interviewed seem to agree with the official view that citizenship ought to be granted only to those who deserve it. Their discourse emphasises the rigorous assessment of potential citizens. This perspective assumes that becoming British is a privilege, an identity that one has to live up to. On the other hand however, new British citizens who have gone through the naturalisation process do not relate to the images of Britishness promoted within this context. Naturalisation is represented as a bureaucratic process. For most of the naturalised citizens, citizenship is not a means of identification with the national community, but has a practical significance because it allows free travelling. The emphasis in this discourse is placed on boundary crossing rather than boundary maintenance.
References


