Indifference towards national identity: what young adults think about being English and British*

STEVE FENTON

Department of Sociology, University of Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT. National identity should be sharply distinguished from nationalism. People speak by reference to a general and assumed membership of a country, and routine markers of behaviour and style may exhibit this sense of membership. This matter-of-fact acceptance of ‘national’ membership does not guarantee enthusiasm for the ‘nation’ and it cannot be taken as a signal of nationalism, banal or otherwise. While theoretical statements and assumptions often suggest that national identity is fundamental to individuals in contemporary societies, empirical investigation of people talking about national identity uncovers some broad strands of indifference and hostility towards national identity in general, and towards British and English identities in particular. This may reflect young adults’ wish not to appear ‘nationalist’ just as many would wish not to appear racist. But the level of apathy and antagonism towards national identity among young adults suggests that we ought to reconsider any assumption that national identity is ‘normally’ a powerful and important marker, embraced with enthusiasm.

KEYWORDS: banal nationalism, Britishness, Englishness, indifference, individualism, national identity.

In all the current discussion of British and English national identity (see for example: Kumar 2000, 2003; Langlands 1999; Bryant 2003; McCrone 2002; Johnson 2002) the question of how seriously people take the whole question of national membership has been largely neglected. Considerable energy, and ingenuity, has been devoted to considering whether people regard themselves as British, English or Scottish, and whether they see being Scottish or English as prior to, or subordinate to, being British (McCrone 2002; Kiely et al. 2005a, 2005b; McCrone et al. 1998; Curtice and Heath 2000); and to whether the sense of Englishness is rising (Heath et al. 2006, Lee 2000). For the most

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part, this literature affords few opportunities for considering the disregard, the apathy, the casual indifference, and the ‘so-what?’ dimensions of national identity. Nor do we find, in this literature, a theoretical account of why individuals might be expected to accord high importance to their own national identity. In the present paper I will consider the question of the salience of national identity for individuals, by examining, in sequence, the ‘classical literature’ on nations and nationalism, contemporary British debates about national identity, and recent research incorporating qualitative interviews in which young adults discussed their ‘national identity’.

Nations, nationalism and national identity

In the field of nations and nationalism, we properly distinguish nationalism from national consciousness and national identity (Hroch 2000). Only nationalism as a term can be reserved for an ideological framework which promotes ‘the nation’ as the highest political value. Most people see themselves, more or less distinctly and emphatically, as members of nations (Gellner 1983) living in nation-states. But by no means do most people express personal sentiments or embrace political ideologies that could be called ‘nationalist’. Their language may betray a certain sense of national belonging; tacit assumptions betrayed in their speech and routine behaviour may point to national membership (Thompson 2001; Condor 2000), quietly assumed, but not to nationalism. In this sense ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 1995) is a curious term. If we take nationalists to be people who take the category of nation very seriously then we cannot speak of people who merely express national identity as nationalist.

In the discipline of sociology we have few tools available to help us judge how seriously some item – an act, intention, opinion, value – is viewed by individual actors. Barbalet (1992), for example, has argued that theorising class relations has been weaker for its under-consideration of emotion, both as located in individuals and as ‘embedded in social structures’. But ‘national feeling’ is assumed to be strong – that is the kind of sentiment it is: one cannot, it seems, be a lukewarm or casual nationalist. I have no simple solution to the question of ‘seriousness’ and ‘importance’ but I can here probe, theoretically and empirically, the apparent salience of nation for individuals.

Intensity and commitment: nations, nationalism and identity

A long line of work in the field of nationalism has assumed that national attachments are by their very nature powerful and enduring. Nations are seen, both by nationalists and by some observers of nationalism, as natural communities which command the loyalty of their members through birth and socialisation. At the very least, (ethno-)nationalists appeal to sentiments of kinship, as Connor has argued in his ‘Beyond reason: the nature of the ethnonational bond’ (1993), an article whose title conveys his argument.
There are allegiances and attachments which are seen, variously, as unreflective, unthinking, irrational, and infused with strong sentiment – strong enough that people kill for them and die for them. The willingness of people to die in defence of national and nationalist causes is taken as the supreme indicator of the intensity of commitment which nation can call forth.

The ‘modernist’ approach associated with Ernest Gellner (1983) and the ‘perennialist’ approach associated with Anthony Smith (1991) also have indirect implications for our question. The perennialist approach suggests depth of attachment, if only because it portrays nations as long-enduring, historic identities. Certainly the tenor of Smith’s argument is that modernists underestimate the power of historic identities by portraying ‘nationalism’ primarily as ideologically functional, a consequence of cultural homogenisation in modern(-ising) states. Smith sees most modern nations as having historical roots in ethnie which have attracted a sense of attachment and loyalty for centuries prior to the period of modern states.

No direct clue emerges here as to how and why national identity might be powerful in its hold on a community and the individuals within it. The fuller account of the deep roots of cultural memories does begin to provide a hint, for Smith speaks of national symbols being conveyed in taken-for-granted ways in so much of the life of a political community:

... flags anthems, parades, coinage, capital cities, war memorials, ceremonies of remembrance for the national dead, passports, frontiers, ... national recreations, the countryside, popular heroes and heroines, fairy tales, forms of etiquette, styles of architecture, arts and crafts, modes of town planning, legal procedures, educational practices and military codes ... all those distinctive customs, mores, styles and ways of acting and feeling that are shared by the members of a community of historical culture ... (Smith 1991: 77).

Smith intends us to understand national identity as capable of holding a strong influence over the individual, and uses the terms ‘potent and durable’ in describing the emotion of attachment that is reinforced by national ceremonies (1991: 78). Modernists emphasise the active construction of nationhood as the cultural and political basis of membership in modern states. People have to learn or be taught that they are members of a modern state (Weber 1976).

The well-known distinction between civic and ethnic nationalisms (Brubaker 1992) might suggest that ‘ethnic nationalisms’ engender strong commitment. But the distinction does not provide a foolproof answer to our principal question: how seriously do citizens of a nation-state, or putative members of a nation, take their membership of that nation? States founded on a purported ‘civic nationalism’ can clearly also create a strong sense of nationhood, as the examples of the USA and France would attest. The basis of appeal may be different from that in a ressentiment-driven ethnic-nationalist state like Serbia (cf. Greenfeld and Chirot 1994), but as Calhoun (1997) argues, all nationalisms make a direct appeal to the individual.

Indeed, Calhoun suggests that modern ideologies of nation are closely linked to the modern idea of the individual. Quite contrary to the idea of the
nation being continuous with sub-national or pre-national communities, ‘an immediate direct relationship is posited between individuals and their nations’ (Calhoun 1997: 125). National membership, he writes, ‘is not derived from membership in any other collectivity’. Rather, as Geertz (1973) and Simons (1997) have argued, national participation, especially in democratic polities, actually requires some detachment of individuals from local or sub-state communities, precisely because encapsulation within them poses a threat to both nationhood (Geertz) and democracy (Simons). Modern nationalisms require a certain level of individualism. This means that individual identity has a special importance in modern nations:

... the modern discourse of national identity is closely linked to the idea of the individual. ... National identity assumes a special priority over other collective identities in the construction of personal identity (Calhoun 1997:125).

This echoes Greenfeld and Chirot’s conclusion:

... in the modern world, national identity constitutes what may be called the ‘fundamental identity’, the identity that is believed to be the very essence of the individual ... other identities are considered secondary (1994: 79).

The emotional power of national identities does not depend on ‘culture and ethnicity’ (cf. Greenfeld and Chirot 1994: 126). The modern nation-state makes a direct appeal to the individual, in an individualistic society. Thus national identity is not only important, it is supremely important, making other identities secondary or ‘trumping’ them in Calhoun’s phrase:

The individual does not require the mediations of family, community, region or class to be a member of the nation. Nationality is understood precisely as an attribute of the individual ... the trump card in the game of identity (Calhoun 1997: 46).

Here the importance of national identity is stipulated rather than explained or demonstrated. By contrast, the arguments of Smith do explain why national identity makes an important impression on the individual – we handle the national coins, we watch the parades and national recreations, we practice the etiquette and the ways of acting and feeling, and we visit the countryside. This does not mean we will love it all or treat it all as supremely important, but it does suggest that the message of national membership will be conveyed by, if nothing else, sheer routine and familiarity. Even this last interpretation is open to question: people may experience things as routine and familiar, such as the coins, sporting events, or forms of etiquette, but still fail to link these things to national symbols.

By contrast, in the civic modernist account there is no obvious explanation as to why individuals should take national identity completely seriously as a facet of personal identity. If it is ‘fundamental’ and ‘trumps other identities’, we are entitled to wonder why this should be so. Calhoun’s suggestion here is that:

The power with which such categorical identities shape us, reflects importantly the power we know that states and large-scale economic activity have over us (Calhoun 1997: 125).
It is certainly persuasive to suggest that we recognise the importance of the state as the political container for our lives. We read and hear daily of the activities of governments and political leaders, and of political issues in which ‘the state of the country’ is the organising principle of both action and value. Even closer to home, taxation policies, pension policies, health and education policies have a real resonance in our daily lives, enough to induce in us the thought that being in ‘this country’ is an important part of our fates, collectively and individually. All of this might add up to taking our incomes, health care, and even our pension seriously – but does it mean taking the ‘nation’ and ‘national identity’ seriously?

Finally, in a variety of postmodernist accounts (cf. Sarup 1996) of identity, there is again no immediate clue as to whether national identity has salience for individuals. The plurality of identities and the de-stabilisation of (modern) identities are the two recurrent themes in these accounts. In the words of McCrone, ‘the demise of over-arching or meta-identities appears to have allowed a plurality of new ones to emerge’ (1998: 33). It is not clear which, if any, of these identities have a kind of primacy. The same may be said of destabilised or fragmented identities. Hall (1992) suggests that ‘global cultural homogenization [sic]’ erodes national identities. Yet these identities are ‘strengthened by resistance to globalization [sic]’ (Hall 1992: 301). So identities which are in some sense ‘broken’ or ‘threatened’ may also be presented as identities in crisis, which provokes their own reactions to search for new certainties. If national identities are threatened, some people may go in search of reassurance, others may stop worrying.

Contemporary debates and empirical research

If the implications above are ambivalent for my question, let me now turn to recent research and debates in Britain. Here there are several intense empirically-grounded debates, all, it seems, sharing the assumption that national identity matters to individuals. McCrone et al. write that ‘questions of national identity’ are becoming ‘highly salient in the last decade of the twentieth century’ (1998: 629). These questions are part of what McCrone later calls ‘the rediscovery of identity politics in these islands’ (McCrone 2002: 303). On the other hand, the same author argues that ‘the individual’s sense of national identity. . . . is not fixed and can change over space and time’; individual national identity is not ‘unproblematic’ and unchanged, but continually ‘negotiated’. This argument for flux and instability is, however, modified by the argument that ‘a person’s sense of national identity is not in a perpetual state of flux . . . at certain times and places national identity is highly salient and for quite lengthy periods entirely stable’ (McCrone 2002: 307–8). What do we conclude from this? A stable identity may lack intensity because of its ‘taken-for-granted’ quality; equally, a threat to this taken-for-grantedness might make it highly salient. Since McCrone subsequently settles for the
view that ‘for most people most of the time their national identity is in all
probability relatively unproblematic and implicit’ (2002: 308), this would
appear to undercut the view that it is either ‘continually negotiated’ or ‘highly
salient’.

In his recent research, Heath (in Heath et al. 2006) does explicitly address
the question of the ‘seriousness’ with which people identify nationally. He
observes that social structural variables do not explain much of the variation
in national identifications:

The absence of any major social structuring to national identities in England might
merely indicate that British or English identities are not especially meaningful to
respondents and are not especially salient. It may be a reflection of the indifference that
people have towards national identity (Heath et al. 2006: 16).

The evidence available to Heath and his colleagues is a survey question in
which respondents were asked if they felt a pride in the Union Flag and in the
national (i.e. Welsh, Scottish, English) flags. While the great majority of
respondents in Wales and Scotland express pride in their national flags, less
than half express pride in the Union Flag. But in England, 62 per cent of
respondents express pride in the Union Flag and 47 per cent in the Cross of
St George. If the question about the flags is at all convincing as a measure of
the importance attached to national identity, then this appears to be
important in Scotland and Wales, but less so in England.1 Bond and Rosie
(2002) have tried to measure the relative importance of national identity, i.e.
relative to other identities. Respondents in Scotland were asked which
identities were most important to them, being invited to name the three
most important. One might expect national identity to feature strongly in
Scotland. In fact only 18 per cent make ‘Scottish’ their first choice of
identities most important to them, and even when all three choices are
summed less than half (45 per cent) nominate Scottish at all. Rather
unconvincingly the authors conclude that ‘the results do seem to indicate
that national identity (and in particular “being Scottish”) is regarded as
important to the sense of self of a large proportion of people in Scotland’
(Bond and Rosie 2002: 6). The ‘competing’ identities receiving most mentions
as important were ‘mother/father’, ‘working person’ and ‘wife/husband’ –
family and work identities. With respect to this question in our qualitative
study, respondents spoke about ‘other groups and communities’ that they
‘belonged to’ and this will be discussed in the subsequent data presentation.

McCrone’s discussion of ‘stable and enduring’ identities, as against
‘salience at certain times’, draws attention to the question of an identity
that may rise and fall. We have to consider whether a sentiment or disposition
(national pride, identity) is something which may be expected to have a
permanent or underlying significance for individuals, or is something which
rises and falls in accordance with external events or prompts. Is, for example,
the enthusiasm shown for the country’s sports teams a passing moment of
effervescence or the evocation of a relatively stable and compelling national
identity? Is national identity (like ‘situational’ ethnic identity, see Jenkins 1997: ch. 4; Fenton 2003: ch. 4) prompted by social contexts of the individual’s life? On the one hand, we may suggest that national identity is evoked in response to highly visible events, such as sporting occasions, deaths of leaders, or war. On the other hand, we may argue that national identity is salient in certain situations, such as living outside one’s country of birth, or living in border regions.

Even those identities described by Geertz as ‘primordial’ are seen by him as differing in strength ‘from person to person, society to society, and from time to time’ (Geertz 1973: 259). In this way salience in its core sense (prominent, standing above the rest) could be distinguished from ‘importance’. We are familiar with periodic exuberance about ‘England’ or ‘Britain’, moments in which national identity ‘stands out’. What is difficult to determine is whether those moments are consistent with a longer-term importance. If national identities appear to weaken then it may be because the national occasions (i.e. the occasions which can take on national meaning) are fewer and less compelling, and because in the lives of individuals, nation competes with other identities. This debate also raises the question of whether an identity which ‘merely’ appears from time to time can be described as ‘fundamental’. I shall return to this question of time and situation in discussing the interview materials.

The empirical test – people talking about being ‘English’ or ‘British’

Let me now turn to a recent empirical study of young adults in Bristol, in which qualitative interviews offer us an insight into how people talk about national identity. In a wide-ranging interview, covering employment, education and family, a portion of interview space was devoted to questions about nation, ethnic diversity and attitudes towards ‘social change in Britain’. In a sample survey preceding the qualitative interviews, 1,100 young adults (aged 20–34 years) were interviewed, with sampling taking place in four zones of the city, offering contrasting socioeconomic profiles from one largely middle-class area, some white working-class areas and an area with a multi-ethnic population. Most of those interviewed agreed to be re-interviewed and in selecting respondents for the second interview we aimed for a similar representation of the four zones. The qualitative interview was led by a topic guide and interviewers were trained to introduce a topic with an open-ended question, and to follow-up respondents’ statements in a conversational style. In the majority of interviews a high degree of relaxed informality was achieved, indicated by casual talk, personal stories, laughter and ‘strong language’, all of this being helped by the similarity in age of interviewers and interviewees. The interviews were carried out between January and September 2002, a year in which England played in the football World Cup.
Bristol, the site of the research, is a city with a population of over 380,000, a reputation for prosperity built on older employers like Rolls Royce and BAE Systems and now a growing service sector. It is home to financial services, thriving real estate businesses, the Ministry of Defence administration, two universities, and a large regional headquarters of the BBC. So although manufacturing and construction still employ over 30,000 people, finance and real estate together employ nearly 40,000. Its population is 91 per cent white, with a substantial ethnic minority population but one which is considerably smaller than other large urban centres. Bristol received post-war European migrants from Poland and Italy as well as a marked in-migration from Wales in the 1930s. This Welsh presence occasioned some notable anti-Welsh sentiments which can be felt today, even if they have become more ‘jocular’. Just 3 per cent of the population are now recorded as born in Wales, though many more have Wales-born parents; 87 per cent of the population are born in England.

‘Nation’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘national identity’ are all terms which make appeals to ‘the people’ in the broadest sense, and we might expect to see these things represented in the ‘talk’ of individuals. Qualitative conversation-style evidence is particularly suited to affording some insight into how, and how importantly, respondents view national identity (Kiely et al. 2005a: 66). The ‘conversations’ in the interviews reported here centred around a question which was put to all respondents in the same form: ‘Do you think of yourself as British or English . . . or what?’ Interviewers were encouraged to pick up threads of the response with follow-up prompts such as ‘why’ or ‘do you think of that as important?’ or ‘are there particular times when you feel English (British/other)?’ The follow-up prompts varied according to the flow in the conversation and were not identical in all interviews. In this way, people used their own words and they qualified what they said. With that in mind, let us ask: Do people (young adults) really care about national identity?

The first point to make is that ‘importance’ or ‘taking nation seriously or positively’ cannot be easily estimated in percentage terms from qualitative interviews. It is a theme which cuts across several others, a dimension of responses and not respondents. We cannot readily allocate each respondent to one of a binary ‘takes/does not take national identity seriously’, and over 40 per cent were ‘neutral’ on this question. But after analysing all the interviews, it was impossible to escape the impression that considerable numbers of young adults were either not very interested in a question about national identity, articulated some kind of hostility to national labels, or rejected nation in favour of broader identities like ‘citizen of the world’. These responses all show some measure of ‘indifference’ to or ‘disregard’ for national identity. Within this broad category are three important sub-categories. One is casual disinterest (‘don’t know, never think about it’) and indifference (‘it’s not that important’); a second is a more specific disregard and even anti-nationalist stance (‘I hate nationalism’, ‘why do we have to have these labels’, ‘I’m just me anyway’); and a third is indifference to national
labels in favour of wider identities (‘a citizen of the world’). These forms of indifference are not the same, but they do have a key dimension in common, and that is a clear lack of enthusiasm for ‘Englishness or Britishness’ or for national labels of any kind and/or a positive rejection of them.

Two other types of responses emerge from the interviews. There are those who do speak very favourably about their English or British identity (‘enthusiasts’); and there are those who said very little in response to the question (‘neutrals’). For all the difficulties of classifying respondents we may attempt three broad groupings. First, the ‘enthusiasts’, who do make some statement of being ‘proud of being English or British’. Then the ‘neutrals’, describing people who make no statement which offers any clue to taking national identity seriously or otherwise. Their responses were purely descriptive, matter-of-fact, or offered other national categories. The third category of ‘indifference’ is the main focus of our attention here. These are the casually indifferent, anti-nationalist and ‘beyond nationalist’ types of response described in the preceding paragraph. The reservations about ‘counting’ which I have stated are important, but as a guide, an estimate of these types among respondents would be ‘Enthusiast, proud’ 15 per cent, Neutral 45 per cent, and Indifferent 40 per cent.

On this basis, while a small proportion of people do embrace and enthuse about English or British identity, there is within these responses a broad band of indifference and hostility towards assuming a national identity. If this is a reasonable judgement, then we would have to considerably revise a view of ‘national identity’ as core and fundamental in contemporary states like Britain. Indeed, given that we are reflecting on conversations with adults aged 20–34 years old, we could well argue that it is likely to become more general. We may be seeing a generation among whom many attach reduced importance or no importance to national identity. Setting aside the Neutrals who said very little on the issue, I turn now to filling out the Proud and the Indifferent (with its three sub-sets).

**Proud to be British/English**

The ‘proud’ to be English/British responses are presented first to guard against over-confirming our principal finding of ‘indifference and hostility’ towards national identity. Being proud of being English/British is often grounded in the simple truth of being born in England, or articulated as an unquestioned and natural consequence of birthplace.

Englishman yeah . . . this is my home so I’m proud to be an Englishman. BM09

The amount of time I hear this question, it always amazes me. It’s simple, if you’re born in England, you’re English. AM06

Even those who speak about their national pride may add significant qualifications. Respondent BM09 (above) follows up by saying, ‘it’s not
that important’. One respondent mixes his pride in being English with the suspicions about nationalism that we see later:

I’m quite proud, yeah. I’m quite proud to be English. I mean I don’t want to convey . . . there is a segment, a very right wing segment isn’t there. Of like you know sort of militantism and all this nastiness, which is completely not me. DM30

More frequent than these ‘simple’ assertions are those who attribute their own ‘pride’, and that of others in England (and it does tend to be England/English in this context) to the growing publicity given to Scottish and Welsh identities. The logic is that if they are going to play the nation game, then we might as well join in.

the Welsh are Welsh, the Scottish are Scottish, and I’ll certainly be English, yeah. AF35

more recently people are saying they’re Scottish or they’re Welsh and the English are being left out. DM47

You know Wales and Scotland they’re trying to be more and more independent. And I suppose really we should think of ourselves as being English cos I’m sure the Welsh wouldn’t write down British. They wouldn’t, or the Scottish they definitely would not think of themselves as being British, they would say I’m Scottish or I’m Welsh. So I think the English should think about being English more. DF61

A variant on this me-too-ism with regard to the non-state nationalities is the response saying that ‘we’ might as well be English because the Scottish and the Welsh ‘hate us’, and so does the rest of the world.

Yeah, English . . . the rest of the world has got things against the English, so I feel like sticking up for the English. The Scottish hate us . . . BM55

Of all the responses which touch on this, the following extended quote expresses it most emphatically:

Before I went to live in Wales, I was British. Since I’ve lived in Wales, I’m English . . . When you go to Wales as an English person, you are looked down on. And you are insulted. The English in this country have no social identity at all. I don’t think they do. The Scots do. Scots are very, very . . . the Scots are Scottish. The Welsh are Welsh. The English are British. And that to me is wrong. So I try now . . . I class myself as English (rather) than British now. Purely because of the way the country seems to be going. As I say, before that I was British and I thought everybody was British. And I know friends who’ve lived in Scotland who had the same experiences. You know, the English are insulted . . . CF46

These reports indicate the significance of personal experience of a kind related by several respondents – the sense of English-ness being reinforced by Welsh hostility. The research being in Bristol, close to the border with Wales, some kind of contact with Wales or Welsh-ness could well be, and often was, personal, and not just a matter of hearing ‘nationalist’ items in the media. People had lived in Wales, knew Welsh people, or had (for example) one parent with Welsh connections. Second, we can see that in these reports, the emphasis on being English (‘I think the English should think about being English more’) appears as a reaction to slights and hurt feelings. This runs against our thinking of Englishness as a dominant nationhood (Wimmer
2004) but it is not irreconcilable. Silent unasserted Englishness may be experienced as ‘weakness’ in the face of strong reasserted ‘minority’ nationalisms.

Indifference

i. Indifference: casual
There are subtle variations, with respect to national identity, among those who can be portrayed as casual, indifferent, and not caring. There are some whose casualness is suggested by phrases like ‘I suppose . . . ’ and others who simply say that they ‘never think about it’. In some cases there are few clues as to what the ‘never-think-about-it’ responses mean.

The simple understated responses read as:
British . . . don’t think about it really, CF15
British . . . English. whichever rolls off the tongue first, AM23
and
I’m British I suppose. I don’t really think about it. It’s never been an issue. BF40

There are several who give this type of response and while it may suggest something quite durable as an easy, taken-for-granted identity, there is nonetheless a notable absence of any strongly expressed sentiment. The question was asked in an open way to invite further comment and the respondents quoted above were not interested enough for that. The casual phrasing, such as ‘I suppose’ and ‘don’t think about it’ can also be found in cases where respondents do add more to their responses. And what they add does suggest an unmistakable indifference, as these examples show:

If I went abroad I would say I’m from England . . . . so I think I would be English but . . . yeah . . . doesn’t really mean that much. AF60

I’m not patriotic . . . you wouldn’t catch me feeling particularly English watching a football match . . . DM45

But I consider myself English because I was born in England. I’ve never been to Scotland. No, yeah I’d like to go. I’ve been to Wales a couples of time to see family, but I’m not Welsh, I’m English. Not in an English nationalist kind of sense. BM49

There is here no explicit denial of being English, but ‘admitting’ being English is coupled with something that demotes this identity, such as the phrases ‘doesn’t mean much’, ‘not patriotic’, and ‘not in a nationalist sense’. In more than one instance disinterest was coupled with an explicit disavowal of ‘traditional’ or popular views of the English or British.

When people bring up this British fighting spirit or stiff upper lip it sounds boastful . . . I can’t be doing with anything like that. BM59

While this is a rejection of a ‘conservative’ image of Britishness, others reject the very idea of national categories:
I just tick British? [Why?] I don’t know. I’ve never thought that much about it. I think everybody’s the same really. I don’t think it matters where you come from. BF80

There are certainly indications that some young adults see ‘British’ as the ‘cool’ civic term in preference to the warmer or ethnic ‘English’ (Miller 1995), and this may either be because ‘nationalist’ English-ness is rejected or because there is seen to be no English identity, by contrast with the vigour of Welsh and Scottish identities.

I also feel like the English don’t have a very strong separate cultural identity. I think the British do. You talk about ‘the Brit’. And actually separately the Welsh do, and the Scots do, and the Irish do, but the English on their own in isolation, I don’t think they do have a strong identity and I don’t think they necessarily have a good public image. DM29

I don’t feel that there is an English identity. You know we see other people in like Wales and Ireland and Scotland and they’ve got a very strong ethnic origin. Whereas people in England don’t seem to have that, so I’d say British. CF54

This fits with the characterisation of civic Britishness as formal and inclusive, and Englishness as ‘ethnic’ and exclusive (cf. Kumar 2003; Miller 1995). We should note that while others in our interviews rejected Englishness because of its exclusivity, the two quotations above reject it because it barely exists (‘they’ve got a very strong ethnic origin’, ‘I don’t think the English have a strong identity’).

### ii. Indifference: shame, embarrassment and anti-nationalism

One kind of anti-nationalist sentiment expressed is peculiar to being embarrassed by English or British identification; it is the attitudes or behaviour of other British people, or the things associated with Britain, that motivates this denial of identity.

I feel that this sense of being British has a slightly sour taste . . . I don’t like the connotations that go with it. BF18

So I suppose I am British, I can’t deny it . . . I’ve been brought up in this country. I am British and I would say that. The only reason I wouldn’t like to say that, is because saying that abroad is just such a real downer because Brits abroad are just such ridiculous twats. You just go ‘Yeah, I am British. I’m really sorry.’ DF71

I hate the doing down of other countries just because they’re another country for fuck’s sake. AM52

[ . . . do you see yourself as British?] . . . No, . . . because I hate any kind of nationalism. BM59

Much of what respondents say in this modality provides confirmation of Susan Condor’s findings in her analysis of ‘talk of this country’ (Condor 2000). She too found people embarrassed about national identity. But she argues in particular that respondents are treating ‘national categories’ like ‘racial categories’, where the latter are treated with a strong disavowal of racism. Two excerpts clearly demonstrate this:
I probably felt that if people are insistent on saying, I am English, it feels to me as if they are making a point by wanting to insist on being English to differentiate themselves and make sure they’re not mistaken for anything other than English. DM29

In another case the respondent makes a direct comparison with racial attitudes.

I feel when people turn around and say I’m English, I’m Welsh, I’m Scottish, you put up barriers straight away. And I’ve got this thing when people talk about racial discrimination, they’re sort of thinking well you can see it with black and white, but then you see it with English or German or French. And the minute you start saying, you know categorising yourself as that, you are saying I’m therefore different to you. BF62

This is an explicit, and morally argued, rejection of arbitrary differentiations. The rejection of national categories can, as some of the above quotations suggest, be discursively presented as a rejection of all categories. This is then presented as a celebration of the undiluted and un-objectified self – ‘I’m just me’. In our research this was widely found among responses to a question about the use of ethnic monitoring forms in job and other applications: ‘putting people into boxes’ was disliked by both ethnic majority and ethnic minority respondents. The same sentiment was applied to national categories:

British? . . . I’m me. I’m me. When you get the forms and they want to know the ethnic. . . . That shouldn’t come into things. It makes no difference who you are, what you are, what colour you are. People either accept you for what you are and who you are or don’t, don’t bother. AF64

Well I just think I’m me really, but if you asked me what my nationality is I’d say British. I just consider myself an individual really. Where you’re born is out of your control so it’s who you are that counts. DF77

Why do I have to be English? Why do I have to be British? . . . I just don’t care any more. BM59

This sits uneasily with Calhoun’s argument that national identity presumes a kind of individualism, in which the individual is ‘liberated’ from communal and kinship ties. The ‘I’m me’ individualism reported above is indifferent or opposed to national identity because it is opposed to any categorisations.

iii. Indifference: beyond the nation, citizen of Europe and the world

Finally, a rejection of national identities is articulated as embracing a wider category, seen as more inclusive, and less particularistic or ‘narrow’. In a number of cases this was coupled with a rationale of having a relationship to Europe such as a European wife, different European ancestries, and working in a European or international environment.

I see myself as European . . . my wife is Spanish . . . (European identity) opens up a lot. BM58

Europe is my home. DF72

European . . . my grandparents are Irish and Polish and one was English. DF74
I don’t have a very strong national identity . . . for lots of my working career I’ve worked in a very international community . . . I see myself as a citizen of the world.
BF18

Technically, I’m British. That’s what my passport says. I don’t consider myself to be British, I don’t feel British . . . Having moved round the world so much, I don’t feel a particular allegiance to any country . . . I adore travelling, I love seeing the world and I largely consider myself to be a person of the world. DM36

There are global elements in what these respondents say here: their family migration history, their working life in Europe and beyond, provide the logic for demoting Englishness or Britishness. Supra-national experience is embraced, contrary to the view of Europe as a threat, thus giving some support to Dogan’s argument for a postnational Europe (Dogan 1994: 281).

**Context and identity**

In some of the responses cited above there is a tacit recognition of the part played by events (sporting occasions) and situations (e.g. ‘working in a very international community’). One respondent told us:

‘I’m very competitive and I love to win at sport. So you know when I’m watching football I’m very I suppose nationalist’. AM44

While other respondents made similar comments, some added disclaimers:

it’s not something I think about the rest of the time. CF50

One recurring disclaimer was that it’s ‘just fun really’:

I was proud as punch when we won that game. Things like that . . . I’ll get in with it, my friends at work and that. But other than that . . . I think it’s all just a bit of fun really.
BF80

Respondents also cited ‘being abroad’ or being ‘with people from other countries’ as a context of national identity, although we saw above that some respondents associated this with hiding their nationality or being ‘ashamed’ of it.

Living and working in other countries was a significant context for identity, usually cited as a source of internationalism or cosmopolitanism. But when we asked respondents whether there were ‘other groups or communities that you belong to?’ the most frequent – and warm and approving – mentions were about local areas of Bristol. Many respondents said things like:

Oh I love it . . . I like it, the community spirit, you keep seeing people you know. CM41

I live in Westville, it’s its own little community. CF46

For rather fewer respondents it was Bristol as a whole, ‘the biggest village in Europe’. One respondent turned this sentiment into a general principle:
So yes, I'm very much, I would say I'm very much more part of a community than a country. And I think there is a lot of that kind of change happening. It used to be that everyone was fiercely patriotic, but . . . people are becoming more community-based. DM36

This community spirit was linked to work:

I'm very locally based anyway and I see people . . .

I'm proud to be a BT engineer, I'm working class . . . they're putting their trust in me.

We all know one another we're a happy family. DM33

The areas of life that are embraced warmly and positively are career, work, family and friends, and local communities. On the whole, broader identification with ‘class’ was infrequent and often the concept of class was viewed with distrust (‘I hate the whole concept of class’; CF50). This dovetails with the individualist and anti-category sentiment expressed about nations and ethnic groups, as the following illustrates:

Individuals yes. You have to look at people individually, not as a group because that doesn’t work. I don’t think class in that sense works. You are who you are. It (class) labels people. BF62

**Indifferent identities: a summation**

There are importantly differing themes in the statements reported here, but I suggest that there is a significant element of indifference or disregard for national identity which has neither been much noted empirically nor absorbed theoretically. A widely diffused theme in young adult responses to questions about national identity is one of casual indifference, frequently signalled by phrases intended to signify this, such as ‘I suppose’ and ‘I’m just’. In some cases this discursive theme can be interpreted as casual because it is taken-for-granted and ‘I never think about it’. Even so, respondents are clearly declining the opportunity to enthusiastically embrace English or British identities. In other instances of the same (understated) discourse, it is linked to explicit indifference and principled refusal of national identity. There is an articulated rejection of nationalism which is presented as continuous with a rejection of all ‘labelling’ categories including racial ones. This is spoken either as a moral universalism (‘we’re all the same really’) or as a celebration of individuality (‘I’m just me’). Rejection of, or indifference to, national identity is also presented by those who embrace supra-national identities.

Of all the substantive influences which can be detected, the most notable is the frequent presentation of Welsh and Scottish identities as points of reference, and as the relevant ‘others’ (Triandafyllidou 2001) to which English-British identities were compared. This is in sharp contrast to the
arguments about British identity articulated in relationship to France (Colley 1992), which is a notable absence in our study. References to Europe are usually positive, with hardly any references to religion, and scarcely any in this context to multi-ethnicity in the United Kingdom. Among those who do identify enthusiastically with England, the context of Welsh and Scottish ‘nationalisms’ is overwhelmingly the most relevant. Here identification with England (not Britain) is justified because if ‘they’ can, why shouldn’t we? Furthermore they (the Scottish and Welsh) hate us.

People are conscious of the contexts in which national identity is evoked and, in a World Cup year, many spoke about enjoying supporting England. But it was quite common to see this temporary enthusiasm as ‘just a bit of fun’. The study provided indirect evidence of how national identity compared with other identities, and certainly young adults spoke warmly about local communities, family and friends. But it may be that, for many, national identity is weakly embraced not because it is giving ground to competing identities, but because many young adults are suspicious of collective identities. Their view of themselves is formed in relation to their life trajectories, their careers, families and friends, and a local area community. These more ‘private’ identities, which match Savage’s analysis of individualisation (Savage 2000:ch.5), are coupled with a distaste for racism and nationalism, and a sense that ‘it’s people that matter’.

Overall, there is little or no support here for the arguments that ‘national identity’ is ‘fundamental’ or an identity which ‘trumps all others’ – arguments which are found in the theoretical and conventional literature on nationalism. The evidence presented here confirms the value of qualitative research with those who are putatively the targets of nationalist appeals, that is, ‘ordinary members’ of the population. Nations, nationalism and national identities are reproduced in public discourse (De Cillia et al. 1999) and silently reinforced by visible symbols like the flag and the repetition of the national name, but they are also expected to resonate with the identities of individuals. For a notable proportion of young adults this does not appear to be the case. These findings vindicate the growing body of research dedicated to exploring national identities through qualitative research, ethnography and observation, of which there are now a number of excellent examples (including Condor 2000; Thompson 2001; Fox 2004; Jacobson 1997; McCrone 1998; Baumann 1996; Mann and Fenton 2006).

Of course the responses presented here are from young adults (20–34 years old), some of whom may be expected to be more averse to expressing sentiments likely to be seen as ‘ethnic nationalist’, at least compared with older people. But this could also signal the appearance of a non-national generation, rather than expecting these young adults to get more nationalist as they get older (cf. Heath et al. 2006). It might be thought that a younger group of people would be ‘more English’ as a response to a perceived decline in relevance of Britain. But there is no strong evidence for this, and as Heath

et al. suggest, young adults may ‘opt for the more inclusive, civic forms of
British-ness’ (Heath et al. 2006: 16).

The evidence can be seen as lending some support to the argument that
Englishness is ‘suppressed’ because of its dominance in the United Kingdom.
Kumar (2000, 2003), in particular has argued that the English have been shy
and unforthcoming about their ‘nation’ simply because to be otherwise would
be impolite and impolitic in a union which they dominate. One could argue
that dominant identities reflecting powerful states or populations are muted
because they can be so much taken for granted; and that some of the
embarrassment about identifying as English, that we have observed, confirms
this thesis. But muted expressions of identity were often accompanied by
implicit or explicit rejections of nationalism. We presented responses which
indicate that some people are learning to be English in relation to (rising)
Welsh-ness and Scottish-ness but, beyond this, there is little support for
Kumar’s argument that the once silent England will learn to be nationalist like
everyone else (cf. Curtice and Heath 2000). The respondents also, for the most
part but not entirely, lack that kind of resentment which is necessary for the
nationalism of victim nations like Serbia. If we are looking for intensity,
commitment or emotional energy attaching to national identity, we do not
find much among the young adults in this research. Some of the ‘proud of
being English’ statements were grounded in a kind of resentment (about the
‘treatment’ of the English), pointing to resentment rather than ‘pride’ as a
source of national identity. If circumstances generate more resentment then
this could promote more resentful nationalism. This makes the social
circumstances analytically critical, just as in the explanation of ethnic conflict
(Fenton 2004; Ruane and Todd 2004). Crucially, strong national identities,
and nationalism, cannot be read off from individual identities as a starting
point.

It has been argued that democracy depends on a good measure of apathy.
Perhaps the same could be said about national identity. And if national
identity is said to be located in the tacitly ‘national’ routines of everyday life, it
may be that young adults are failing to recognise their national significance.
What is described as banal nationalism may have little that is national about
it, and much that is banal.

Notes

1 Even in 2006, a World Cup year, fans are reported as being more concerned with club than
country (Campbell, The Guardian, 1 June 2006).

2 For a description of this study see Fenton and Dermott (2006): ‘We chose four contrasting
zones for our research which would provide a demographic cross-section and which we
hypothesized would contain cohorts of labour market winners and losers. This is not therefore
a true random sample of the city as a whole but, through the choice of zones, it does incorporate a
wide, and sufficiently representative, range of young adults to provide a valuable guide to types of
work and employment experience. Zone A is an area of multi-ethnic occupation in the centre of
the city, which features highly on indices of social deprivation. Zone B houses traditional white
working-class and lower middle-class groupings, along with some young professionals buying into the inflated Bristol housing market. Zone C is home to a mix of stable working-class families and more deprived white working-class communities either in newer forms of employment or unemployed. Finally, Zone D is one of the most affluent areas, with a large student population and comparatively expensive housing.

3 In 80 qualitative interviews the distribution was as follows: Zone A 24 per cent, Zone B 31 per cent, Zone C 21 per cent, Zone D 24 per cent.

4 In the reporting of respondents’ statements, few are quoted twice, and over one-third of all interviewees are quoted.

5 BM09: B = zone, see footnote 3; M = Male; followed by interview number.

6 Readers may also compare these responses with those quoted as G28, C52, G50, C27 and C26 in Kiely et al. 2005b: 156.

References


