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# Unimagined Community? Some Social Psychological Issues Concerning English National Identity

SUSAN CONDOR

*Lancaster University, England*

My interest in English national identity was first aroused a couple of years ago on a trip to the USA. The immigration card asked for details of my "nationality" and "country of birth". After a good deal of hesitation, I filled in the card with "British" as an answer to the first question, and "England" to the second. My friend who was travelling with me responded "British" and "Scotland" respectively. On arrival, my friend's card was accepted without comment. My card was snatched by an irate official who overscored both of my answers with "UK" in thick blue ink. Somewhat bemused, I pondered a number of questions. If the authorities had wished to know my citizenship, why had they instead asked about my nationality? Why was it apparently legitimate to claim an identity as Scottish and British, but not as English and British? Why had it taken me so long to answer these apparently simple questions? Why had it not even occurred to me to answer "UK" to either of them?

These commonsense questions translate quite easily into a social scientific problem. How can it be, in an age of increased international contact, when national distinctions are of such personal and political significance (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Giddens, 1985), that a relatively well-educated, experienced traveller is unable to answer apparently straightforward questions concerning national identity and citizenship to the satisfaction of North American immigration officials?

When I began to consider questions concerning English national identity from a more academic perspective, I came across a relative absence of contemporary social scientific literature on the subject. There has been a wealth of work in the humanities on issues such as "English architecture", "the English novel", "the English character" and so forth. Most of this scholarly work adopts what Tajfel (1978), would term an "objective" perspective: discussing "The English" from the viewpoint of an external observer. It is from this sort of perspective that scholars have, for example, developed their well-known analyses of English individualism (Macfarlane, 1978; Stone and Stone, 1984), and of the English way-of-life (e.g. Blake, 1982; Langford, 1989; Porter, 1992). What is lacking from many of these accounts is any analysis of how English folk perceive and represent *themselves* as a national group. There is, of course, some work on cultural representations of the English, focusing on a range of phenomena including images of the physical terrain and representations of national character and social life. However, these analyses tend to rely on political speeches or on published documents representing dominant voices from various sites of cultural production (such as the cinema, literature, children's comics, newspapers, design, advertising and the "heritage" industry). It is, of course, possible that texts such as these may be more prescriptive than they are descriptive of popular consciousness. However, with few exceptions (e.g. Coetzee, 1992), authors have tended to assume a simple correspondence between the "contents" of these media and the consciousness of ordinary folk (e.g. Bommers and Wright, 1982; Colls and Dodd, 1986; Hobsbawm and Ringer, 1983; Porter, 1992; Strathern, 1992). Furthermore, existing analyses have tended to focus on those particular historical periods during which English national self-construction has been self-conscious and transparent, including the periods 1740–1830 (Newman, 1987); 1880–1920 (Colls and Dodd, 1986), 1920–40 (Samuel, 1989a).

Social scientific work which might be expected to shed some light on contemporary constructions of Englishness is, however, lacking. Considerable efforts have been expended in examining the claims to national identity on the part of peoples from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and there has been much concern for the "marginal" national identities of ethnic minorities in the UK (e.g. Feldman, 1989; Gilroy, 1987; James, 1989; Kelly, 1989). However, there have been few parallel analyses of the indigenous English,<sup>1</sup> and extant discussions have been based almost entirely on the intuition of the author. Nevertheless, some of the existing "theories" (if they can be accorded such a title) suggest that the issue of English national identity may be worthy of greater theoretical and empirical consideration.

A number of writers have commented on the confusion that people (including academics and government officials) may face concerning the distinctions between the terms "English", "British" and "UK citizen" (e.g. Crick, 1991). It has been suggested that the inhabitants of Great Britain accept the label British when it is applied by outsiders, but tend to prefer to label themselves as English, Welsh or Scottish (Kearney, 1991). Others, however, suggest that the English

may not identify themselves as a distinct national group. This claim is usually warranted with reference to the assumption that English folk equate the terms "English" and "British".<sup>2</sup> The failure on the part of social scientists to consider distinctive English identities (and their own tendency to slip between usage of the terms "English" and "British") is attributed to the belief that the English themselves act in this way. Less commonly, an absence of work on "English" national identity is justified with reference to the comparative lack of authorised public symbols of Englishness (see Nairn, 1988; Samuel, 1989a). Today, the only significant cultural icons specifically designated as "English" are the national sports teams. The English flag and the red rose are seldom used as popular symbols. There is no English national costume and no distinctive English national anthem.<sup>3</sup> In England, public holidays have no national significance, and most English people do not even know the date of St George's day. The recent revitalisation and re-invention of English "heritage" has been aimed almost entirely at the tourist market.

With few notable exceptions (e.g. Nairn, 1977), this lack of public symbolism or celebration of Englishness, and the assumed tendency of the English to identify themselves as Britons, has led theorists to regard English national identity as simply "unproblematic", and to focus instead on the "problems" caused by the English tendency to co-opt the term "British". However, in a world of proliferating national and regional identities (Marquand, 1991) this apparent absence of Englishness is itself a phenomenon worthy of consideration. In this chapter I shall explore, from a social psychological point of view, the question of how "ordinary" English people in the 1990s may represent themselves in national terms.

### National Self-Identification

I start this section of the chapter with a disclaimer. A comprehensive analysis of national identity would have to take account of complex contextual variation. This would include variation due to the social location of individual subjects (in concrete social networks, family structures); geographical, historical and ideological variations in the significance and meaning of national identity, and the intersections of national identities with gender, generational, ethnic and class identities. Such analyses would have to consider context-specific norms in the expression of national identity and contextual variations in salience. A full analysis of national self-identity would have to take account of the various ways in which identity may be symbolised (visually as well as verbally), and the possibility that, for the individual subject, national self-identification may exist at varying levels of consciousness. I shall be alluding to some of these issues in the course of discussion. However, it is beyond the scope of a single chapter to engage fully with the subtleties of national identification. Rather, I shall confine myself to discussing (as is usual among social psychologists) a set of data drawn from a few rather specific research contexts.<sup>4</sup>

I noted earlier that although there has been plenty of scholarly speculation concerning the national self-definition of the English, there exists little empirical data on this subject. As an initial point of departure I conducted two studies which simply involved asking English people direct questions concerning their national identity and their feelings about their nationality. The first study used semi-structured interviews with 50 adults (25 men and 25 women) from the North-West of England. Interviews opened with questions concerning identity and self-perception in general, and then went on to focus on more specific issues pertaining to national identity and sentiment. The respondents were all attending adult education classes. They were aged between 21 and 68 (mean age was 45 years), and were mainly skilled or semi-skilled workers. All were white, with English parents. The interviews were conducted in the respondents' colleges after classes, and lasted between 25 and 95 minutes (the average duration was 40 minutes).

The second study used self-report questionnaires which were administered to students from Lancaster University. The questionnaires, which consisted of a series of open-ended questions concerning national identity, were distributed to students in their rooms on campus, and were collected approximately one hour later. In the following pages I shall consider only the responses of 170 students who had been born in England of English parents. All of these respondents were white, 99 were female and 71 were male. Ages ranged from 17 to 27 (with a mean age of 19.5 years). Although insufficiently detailed information was obtained to classify the respondents accurately according to social class, the majority of respondents came from professional or managerial families.

For the purposes of this chapter, I should like to extract four aspects of the results of these studies for particular consideration.

### *Hesitancy in National Self-Definition*

The manner in which my initial (straightforward) questions concerning national identity were answered in the interview study confirmed suspicions that English people may experience, and certainly express, difficulty in categorising themselves in national terms. There was a marked tendency for respondents to hesitate before answering the question, "What is your nationality?" (the average latency period was just under four seconds) which was not apparent in their answers to other questions on a range of issues concerning identity and self-perception. Only a minority of the respondents (N=10) gave an unqualified answer to this question (eight of these defined themselves as "English"). Typically, responses were qualified by expressions of uncertainty or ambivalence:

Well, British I suppose, although [...] yes, British  
English or Brit [...] British. English probably  
Hummm [...] I think English

or by various rhetorical attempts to distance themselves from their answers:

I suppose you could say I was British

I have a British passport, so I suppose that means I am British.

Written answers to questions are less likely to yield information concerning uncertainty or prevarication. Nevertheless, a sizable number of the respondents in the questionnaire study avoided answering the question, "What is your nationality?" (see below), and a small minority (N= 10) appeared to have misunderstood the question, giving "inappropriate" answers such as, "a student at Lancaster", or, "a WASP".

### *Self-Identification as "British"*

There was a good deal of evidence that, in general, respondents were confused by the distinction between "English" and "British" (no respondent in either of the studies ever used the term "UK"), and in many contexts they tended to use the terms interchangeably. For example, it was common for the students in the questionnaire study to refer to "British" sports teams.<sup>5</sup> However, there was very little evidence that respondents used these labels thoughtlessly or treated them as synonymous in all rhetorical contexts. In particular, the respondents in the interview study rarely applied the category "British" to *themselves* in a thoughtless or straightforward manner. Rather, they seemed uncomfortable with the category "British" as being self-descriptive, but were unsure about using the term "English".

Of the thirty-four respondents who initially identified themselves (although possibly hesitantly and prefaced by expressions like "I suppose") as "British" in the interview study, the majority (N=30) in some way qualified this, either by also specifying their English identity, or by using various strategies to distinguish between their "knowledge" of their (official) British nationality and their "feelings" of "really" being English:

Well, I'm British, I suppose. But when people ask me where I come from, like, when I'm on holiday, I always say "England". I mean, I've lived in England all my life. I've never even been to Scotland or Wales. I would say that I feel more English.

(woman, aged twenty-seven)

Another common feature of the respondents' talk was a tendency to present Britishness as non-authentic, an alien identity imposed by external forces rather than emerging from within the individual:

In conversations like this, I have to keep reminding myself that I am from "Britain". It doesn't come naturally. It doesn't sound right, and I usually say "England", and then correct myself.

(man, aged twenty-seven)

It's just that sometimes you're sort of forced into it, you know. Like when you see the news on telly, and it's "Britain" this, and "Britain" that. Then you have to pinch yourself, and say, "yes, that means me". But, in general, I just don't think like that.

(man aged fifty-three)

A few of the respondents in the interview study alluded explicitly to a form of linguistic hygiene, which they saw as restricting their ability to use the term "English":

British [...] Yes, British. Well, it's not done to say you're English nowadays. I don't know why, but you just don't, you know.

(man, aged sixty-four)

I suppose I'd say I was British. That's what you say on forms, isn't it? That's what you are meant to call yourself if you are English, I think.

(woman, aged forty-five)

### *Refusal of National Identification*

The majority of the respondents in the interview study ( $N = 32$ ) at some stage denied the personal significance of national identity:

Well, I don't really think about being English. But I suppose, if you ask, I'd say I was English, but it's not something I often think about, to be honest.

(woman, aged fifty-two)

I do not see England as "my country". It is just a piece of land as other countries are, and anyone should be able to enter it.

(woman, aged twenty-nine)

This form of denial was particularly marked among the students who participated in the questionnaire study. This study did not allow the respondents the opportunity for discursive digression or qualification accorded by the interview study. Nevertheless, in answer to the opening question, "What is your nationality?", nearly a fifth of all respondents ( $N = 33$ ) "refused" the question, denying any personal sense of national identity:

My national identity is virtually zero.

(man, aged twenty)

My national identity isn't important to me.

(woman, aged twenty-one)

In response to the subsequent question, "What are your feelings about your nationality?", almost 70% of respondents denied any strong sense of national affiliation:

I have a very weak sense of national identity. I do not really have any feelings because I tend not to think about it. I think about my nationality at only the most basic level that I was born here and have always lived here. It is nothing more than a nationality to write down on forms and a place to live.

(woman, aged nineteen)

I think that my description of my national identity is more of a classification than a reflection of a feeling of solidarity with my country. I will certainly support the English in sporting activities but identity wise I tend to feel closer to smaller groups like the student population or people round my age group. My national identity I think I save for special occasions, mostly when I am abroad.

(man, aged nineteen)

Respondents in both studies often stressed that their feelings of national identification were confined to particular contexts, especially when viewing sport

or when abroad on holiday. The rejection of nationality as a basis for self-definition was largely expressed on the grounds of commitment to more local social identities, or to values of individualism:

I don't think that, left to myself, I think about being British or English or anything really. I'm just me.

(interview, woman aged nineteen)

I don't really think about being English. I don't think it is nice that people should be nationalistic like that, because we are all individuals.

(interview, woman aged thirty-two)

Respondents did not simply deny the salience of their national identity. They often displayed a positive resistance to national self-identification. This was often expressed with reference to a sense of "embarrassment" at being so categorised by others:

I find it embarrassing to be identified as English when I am abroad. As a homosexual I find it hard to be patriotic and have any national identity.

(questionnaire, man aged twenty-one)

I only really think about it when I am abroad on holiday. And then, sometimes I pretend that I am not from Britain, because it can be embarrassing.

(interview, woman aged thirty-one)

### *National Pride and Shame*

It was rare for respondents to express an unqualified sense of national pride. Only seventeen respondents to the questionnaire study and four of the respondents in the interview study made any reference to feelings of national pride, or any statements which might be interpreted as reflecting national pride, which were not immediately qualified:

[Question: "How would you describe your country?"]

I would say that I am proud to be English. It is a country respected by foreigners. I am proud of our traditions and heritage, and the beautiful countryside.

(questionnaire, woman aged nineteen)

Britain is a nice, stable country. Its democratic institutions and monarchy are respected throughout the world.

(interview, man aged forty-five)

More commonly, expressions of national pride were muted or qualified:

I'm very proud of the beauty of the countryside but I'm ashamed of the way Britain is becoming overdeveloped. I suppose I'm proud of the land and ashamed of the flag. The behaviour of British people abroad is embarrassing as is the politics. I don't think I have a tremendously strong National identity but I do feel a bond to many areas of Britain, because it's home.

(questionnaire, woman aged eighteen)

Such expressions of "qualified pride" were identified in the accounts of thirty-eight of the respondents in the questionnaire study, and twelve respondents in the interview study. Often, however, the nation (whether "Britain" or "England")

was discussed with explicit reference to "shame" (interview study:  $N = 9$ ; questionnaire study:  $N = 31$ ), or in terms which implied a sense of shame on the part of the respondent (interview study:  $N = 12$ ; questionnaire study:  $N = 26$ ). Shame was often expressed in the context of a particular representation of history which focused on national decline. This was especially prevalent among the students who completed the open-ended questionnaires, and may be illustrated by two (not untypical) responses to the question, "How would you describe your country?":

A country in decline in terms of military and economic power and cultural influence.

(man, aged twenty-three)

A country and a nation in decline. We are a nation confused about our own standing in the world, while other countries overtake us. In many respects it is our country's past glories that carry us through modern day difficulties.

(man aged nineteen)

Explicit reference to national decline was also apparent in the accounts of a large minority ( $N = 16$ ) of the respondents in the interview study:

It is a once powerful nation, slipping from its position of glory.

(woman, aged forty-five)

A number of respondents in both studies presented national pride as an anachronistic throwback to the days of Empire:

I perhaps feel a little embarrassed sometimes because of the notion of superiority among the British seems a little misguided—more a reflection to days when Britain was colonising the rest of the world. The time of the British Empire. Britain is not as "Great" as it makes itself out to be. I am not really proud to be British. It seems to me, as a country, Britain has little to be proud of.

(interview, woman aged twenty-seven)

A sense of "shame" was often articulated in terms of a sense of inherited guilt. British or English national pride was commonly constructed in association with "prejudice":

I find it hard to identify with the nationalism and intolerance of others that seems to be part of being British. I often feel ashamed to say that I am British because in the past, and indeed the present, the British have seen themselves as so self-righteous and superior.

(questionnaire, man aged nineteen)

There was some evidence from the interview study that these sorts of sentiments were more likely to be expressed by respondents under forty years than those over forty.

In both studies respondents showed a tendency to differentiate self from "other people", who espoused a strong sense of English or British national identity:

National identity is not something that is very important to me, not something I think about very much. I don't go around thinking of myself as a Brit. Sometimes I see people doing this, and it looks very strange, like cheering to Rule Britannia, or waving Union Jacks. But it all seems rather strange and distant to me.

(interview, man aged twenty-nine)

And compatriots who openly exhibited national pride were described as shaming:

Although Britain used to be a great world power, it isn't any more. But, people still act as if it is, and think that Britain has a lot of standing in the world. Sometimes that makes me ashamed with foreigners.

(interview, woman aged 45)

Although these sorts of sentiments were often expressed with specific regard to English or British national sentiment (which were, after all, the focus of the questions), many of the respondents expressed more general antipathy towards patriotism or nationalism:<sup>6</sup>

OK, I support England in Football, and cheer on the British [sic] athletic team, but that about sums it up. The whole idea of being proud to be English or British is scary, as are the implications involved in patriotism and nationalism. With the rise of nationalism in Europe as well as in Britain, to be nationalistic involves a degree of "we are better than you", and is the most terrifying prospect.

(questionnaire, man aged twenty)

The term national identity makes me uneasy – it reminds me of fascism. So I like to think that my national identity is not very strong.

(interview, man aged forty-five)

### Images of National Character

In social psychology, analyses of popular images of a nation (or any other social category) tend to focus on "stereotypes": the characteristics (usually the personality characteristics) associated with a "typical" category member. Although social psychological work initially focused largely on images of national groups (e.g. Buchanan, 1951; Buchanan and Cantril, 1953; Katz and Braly, 1933), very few studies have considered stereotypes of the British or the English. Moreover, existing work has apparently used the category labels "English" or "British" without any principled rationale, and has occasionally confused the categories.<sup>7</sup> In this section of the chapter I shall discuss briefly three studies on English autostereotypes (these studies are presented in greater detail in Condor, in submission).

### *Stereotypes of the English and the British*

Social psychological analyses of (national) stereotypes typically employ some form of adjective check-list or rating-scale. As an initial step in analysing popular images of the English, I conducted a standard adjective rating-scale study. The scale consisted of 100 adjectives, selected from a review of existing studies of national stereotypes. Two versions of the scale were used. In one version respondents were asked to indicate how "typical" each adjective was of "English people", and in the other version respondents were asked to rate the adjectives for their typicality of "British people". The scales were administered to two groups of respondents. One group consisted of 100 students from Lancaster University

