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Public conceptions and constructions of 'British values': A qualitative analysis

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Abstract

This article draws on original focus group research to explore constructions of 'British values', in 'everyday' discourse. Two prominent, yet competing conceptions of this term are identified: political/institutional and social/cultural. Although each of these conceptions risks essentialising 'British values', this risk is mitigated by publics in at least three ways: (1) explicit recognition of the term's ambiguities; (2) discussion of its political motivations and exclusionary outcomes; and, (3) identification of qualitative change in the meaning of 'British values' over time. As the first exploration of public understandings of this term, their differences, and these complications, the paper offers three contributions: (1) adding breadth to existing studies of everyday nationalism through focus on 'British values' specifically; (2) shedding light on this trope's work in broader conversations around social and political life in the United Kingdom; and (3) facilitating reflection on the reception of, resistance to, and re-making of elite political discourse.

Keywords

British values, discourse, everyday, focus groups, nationalism, national identity

Introduction

> . . . it's interesting that we tend not to give Britishness a second thought, because we just make the assumptions that that's how things are. But coming here, it made me stop and think and consider what it means to me, and what, what is the essence of Britishness, do we have any unique characteristics, or, if so what are they?[1]

'British values', argued Prime Minister David Cameron (2014) in a *Mail on Sunday* article of 14 June 2014, include 'a belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility, [and] respecting and upholding the rule of law'. Values such as these, he continued, are rooted in national historical struggles, maintained by contemporary institutions from newspapers to the Houses of Parliament, and so important – so

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'vital to our future' – as to merit celebration and concerted promotion alike. After all, Cameron noted, 'we can be a bit squeamish about our achievements, even bashful about our Britishness. We shouldn't be'.

Although the immediate background to Cameron's comments was the 'Operation Trojan Horse' affair of March 2014 (see Poole, 2018; Richardson, 2015), questions around Britishness, belonging, citizenship, and community relations have been prominent within British political debate for some time. Doing justice to the multiple sources of this is beyond the scope of this article, but significant here are developments as diverse as devolution and increasing enthusiasm for nationalist political movements in Scotland and Wales, urban unrest culminating in riots across northern towns and cities in 2001 and a new 'community cohesion' agenda, the introduction of citizenship ceremonies and citizenship education, the rise of 'Islamist' terrorism within and beyond Britain, the Prevent counter-radicalisation agenda, and, a resurgent far right populated by the English Defence League, Britain First, and National Action among others (see Henderson and McEwen, 2005; Jerome and Clemitshaw, 2012: 22–26; Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015; Mycock and Hayton, 2014; Richardson, 2015: 38; Uberoi and Modood, 2010: 303–304; Yuval-Davis, 2007). Such developments, of course, also dovetail and intersect with frequently fractious public conversations including around immigration, multiculturalism, and British membership of the European Union (Wolton, 2006).

The recent prominence of a 'British values' discourse, then, may be situated within a trajectory of increasing political readiness to address questions of national identity and belonging.[2] Politicians, as Uberoi and Modood (2010: 303), note, 'seem keen to promote Britishness using the state', irrespective, indeed, of party allegiances. Such initiatives raise questions that are conceptual – what values are or should be included in this framing?; normative – how desirable are governmental efforts to promote these values?; strategic – what impact will such efforts have on individuals and communities?; and, of course, political – who decides what we mean by British values', who do existing constructions benefit, and who loses out? While questions such as these which concentrate on elite political actions and agendas have stimulated commentary and critique (compare Furedi, 2006; Katwala, 2014; Poole, 2018; Vincent and Hunter-Henin, 2018; Weale, 2015), this article addresses itself to an equally significant, but rather more neglected, question that also follows these developments: How do non-elite or 'ordinary' individuals in Britain conceptualise or construct 'British values'? What, put otherwise, does the term 'British values' mean in 'everyday' discourse, and how is the term used in practice by various publics?

To address this question, this article offers a qualitatively rich analysis of public conceptions and constructions of 'British values' generated via a series of eight focus groups held within the East Anglia region of the United Kingdom in 2017. Our findings suggest two prominent and competing conceptions of 'British values' in operation at this level: one political/institutional, and one social/cultural. Importantly, although there is a risk that each of these conceptions works to essentialise 'a' British way of life, we also find this risk to be mitigated in everyday discourse in at least three ways: recognition of the term's ambiguities and elusiveness, concerns around the term's political usage and consequences, and, public identification of meaningful, qualitative change within 'British values' over time.

Our analysis of these conceptions, their differences and nuances, we argue, offers three contributions to knowledge. First, it adds empirical breadth to existing studies of 'everyday' or banal nationalism, by focusing specifically on discourse around 'British values'.

This paper offers the first exploration of the workings of this – increasingly prominent – trope at a non-elite level, and therefore extends related research within the United Kingdom and beyond via the detailing of original, primary findings. Second, conceptually, the article explores the work that tropes such as 'British values' (can) do in the production and negotiation of meaning within public conversations, not least by contributing to the framing of what life is like 'here' (in East Anglia, in England, and in the United Kingdom), vis-a-vis elsewhere.[3] Exploring variation here, moreover, contributes to contemporary efforts to disaggregate ostensibly homogeneous publics which are too easily conceptualised as uniform and passive consumers of elite political projects (Skey, 2009). The article's third contribution – which develops this point – is to shed light on public reception of, resistance to, and remaking of contemporary elite discourse around 'British values'. As demonstrated below, those individuals who participated in our research engaged with 'British values' in a wide variety of ways, illustrating, *inter alia*: faithful reproduction of government narratives, critique of prominent uses of this term, and, indifference to its meaning or usage. Put simply, we show that elite discourse around 'British values' is received and repackaged in a variety of ways by citizens within the United Kingdom.

The article begins by situating our research within a growing body of academic literature on 'everyday' articulations of (1) (global) politics and (2) national identity. This literature provides scholarly rationale and context for our findings, as well as a set of conceptual moorings from which our analysis proceeds. A second section introduces our methodological approach, expanding on issues of research design and analysis. The article's third section explores findings from our focus groups, organised around three themes: (1) constructions of 'British values', (2) efforts to compare 'British values' with others, and, (3) problematisations of this term. It concludes by reflecting on the significance of these findings in the context of the contributions noted above, before sketching avenues for future research.

Global politics, national identity and everyday life

Our exploration of the ways in which 'British values' are constructed and conceptualised by 'ordinary' people builds on two contemporary literatures around (1) everyday global politics and (2) everyday nationalism.

Recent years have seen a steadily increasing scholarship within Politics and International Relations engaging with public efforts to make sense of and construct international affairs. Emblematic of this are three recent collections. The first – a forum in *International Political Sociology* – sought answers, 'to the questions "why and how" the everyday is an important tool to understand the international as a practice and a process' (Guillaume, 2011: 446). It did so via brief exploration of five different issues: 'gender, gaming, counterinsurgency, world economy, and resistance' (Guillaume 2011: 446). A 2016 Special Issue of *Politics* focused more specifically on what it termed 'everyday narratives in world politics' in an ambitious critique of the multiple 'blind spots' constituted by a 'methodological elitism' within Politics and International Relations (Stanley and Jackson, 2016: 224). This collection's thematic breadth – encompassing 'everyday peace indicators' in sub-Saharan Africa (Mac Ginty and Firchow, 2016), British counter-terrorism policy (Jarvis and Lister, 2016), media representations of fiscal austerity (Seabrooke and Thomssen 2016) and beyond – offered important illustration 'of the way[s] in which political orders are justified and contested in everyday sites' (Stanley and Jackson, 2016: 233). Third, and more specific still, is a special section of *Globalizations* on 'feminist

political economies of the everyday' which set out to 'critically interrogate the multifaceted ways in which global transformations are constituted by deeply gendered economic practices at the 'everyday' level' (Elias and Roberts, 2016: 787).

Elias and Roberts' (2016) discussion offers an important reminder of the risk of presentism here. That is, although the mundane, quotidian, every day, and banal have generated much recent academic attention – especially in relation to security threats and policies (Bubandt, 2005; Crawford and Hutchinson, 2015; Croft and Vaughan-Williams, 2017; Jarvis and Lister, 2013; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2016) – there are important established traditions of engagement with non-elite actors, spaces, processes and dynamics, particularly, although not exclusively, within feminist literatures (e.g. Enloe, 2011, 2014; Sylvester, 2012). Such work adds breadth, depth and disruptive potential to traditional analyses of security, economic or other issues. It does so by demonstrating that (global) politics is (also) made sense of, and thereby constituted, in non-elite sites and spaces, and that non-elite practices have capacity to disturb (as well as reproduce) taken-for-granted or habitual assumptions within elite political dynamics and analyses thereof. In doing this, moreover, this work has also been responsible for considerable methodological innovation, helping to drive forward the use of methods such as focus groups (Stanley, 2016), narrative analysis (McLeod, 2013; Wibben, 2011), and auto-ethnography (Brigg and Bleiker, 2010; Dauphinee, 2010) within Politics and International Relations.

This growing engagement with the 'everyday' speaks to a related, yet largely distinct, sociological literature on 'bottom up' constructions and practices of national identity. Although, again, conceptually and thematically diverse, running through this literature is a constructivist orientation towards the nation as, 'not simply the product of macro-structural forces . . . [but] simultaneously the practical accomplishment of ordinary people engaging in routine activities' (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 537). Here, we see a similar movement to that within work on everyday (global) politics, with a desire to rectify traditionally 'top down' analyses via examination of 'the actual practices through which ordinary people engage and enact (and ignore and deflect) nationhood and nationalism in the varied contexts of their everyday lives' (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 537).

Much of this literature draws inspiration from Benedict Anderson's (1983) *Imagined Communities* and, especially, Michael Billig's (1995) *Banal Nationalism*. The latter, in particular, encouraged reflection on those routinised and familiar reminders of national identity from rhetorical deixis such as 'we', 'them' and 'here', to the omnipresence of national flags everywhere from public buildings to clothing. As Antonsich (2016: 33) summarises, references such as these serve 'as a daily reminder of one's national place in the world which, exactly because of its pervasiveness, goes unnoticed'. Although Billig's thesis has attracted important conceptual critique – including for its neglect of public heterogeneity and agency (compare Billig, 2009; Dodds, 2016; Skey, 2009) – its recognition that national identity is not only (re-)made in those 'hot', revolutionary moments 'elsewhere' has proved fertile ground for significant subsequent research. This includes qualitative studies of national identity amid feelings of resentment among white, English-born people living in England (Skey, 2011) as well as related work on the heterogeneities, exclusions, and growing salience of Englishness as a form of national identity (Cox and Jeffrey, 2014; Hayton et al., 2007; Wyn Jones et al., 2012), brought into particularly sharp relief in the context of Brexit (e.g. Henderson et al., 2016). Other studies explore reproductions of Welsh nationalism among students in Aberystwyth (Jones and Desforges, 2003); competing conceptions of nationhood and belonging among schoolchildren in Italy (Antonsich, 2016); constructions of New Zealand as a singular, English speaking,

English-looking society – albeit one enhanced by immigration – by young adults in Auckland (Lyons et al., 2011); and, productions of Austrian national identity (Wodak et al., 2009).

Towards an everyday analysis: methodological groundings

Our article builds on the above literature by attending to 'the ways in which ordinary social actors construct themselves as nationalised subjects' (Condor and Abell, cited in Skey, 2009: 337) in attempting to make sense of 'British values'. Everyday perspectives, experiences and memories, we argue, offer rich opportunity to examine the working and contours of public understandings in this context, and to assess the resonance, reproduction, contestation, and subversion of elite discourses around this trope. This focus reflects its contemporary pervasiveness, noted in the article's introduction, but also its significance for identity construction, given that claims to shared values are often vital in describing, 'who we are as a people, and what it is that binds us together, while distinguishing us from others' (Henderson and McEwen, 2005: 173).

As this suggests, our approach employs a broadly constructivist orientation, in which national values, like national identity, are 'made, not given' (Henderson and McEwen, 2005: 173), including, importantly, in the spaces and interstices of everyday life. If, as Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) argue, bottom up productions of national identity emerge from a combination of (1) discursive claims, (2) choices made within institutional contexts, (3) ritual performances, and (4) consumption habits, our emphasis here is very much on the former: on 'the practical accomplishments of ordinary people giving concrete expression to their understandings of the nation' (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 539). Focusing thus facilitates investigation of the content within competing claims around 'British values', as well as demonstration of the limitations of essentialist renderings thereof via reflection on disagreement, contradiction and aporias therein.

The data on which this article draws was generated via a mixed methods research project that ran between October 2016 and January 2018 within the East Anglia region of the United Kingdom. The project's overarching focus was the turn towards 'British values' in elite political discourse which had become increasingly pronounced following allegations of an 'Islamist' attempt to take control of several Birmingham schools (see Richardson, 2015) in the March 2014 'Operation Trojan Horse Affair'. Situated thus, the project sought to investigate, first, how different publics make sense of the phrase 'British values'. And, second, how publics understand the relationship between 'British values' and Islam. This article concentrates solely on the first of these research questions, with its emphasis on everyday experiences and narratives.[4]

To answer these questions, the project employed three distinct methods: (1) video auto-ethnographies, in which participant researchers identifying as Muslim produced their own short films (8–10 minutes) on the theme 'British [Muslim] Values'; (2) semi-structured interviews with the participant researchers and other residents of East Anglia; and (3) eight focus groups with Muslim, non-Muslim, and mixed participants on the project's theme.[5] These focus groups were supplemented with a further discussion that followed a public screening of four of the auto-ethnographies, and by two separate group discussions with hard-to-reach communities facilitated and recorded by a participant researcher.

The focus on the East Anglia region within our research design was a product of intellectual and logistical considerations. Under the former, was the neglect of this region in media, political and – indeed – academic discussion around multiculturalism, extremism,

national identity, and 'British values'. East Anglia offers an important alternative to those metropolitan spaces which dominate attention here – such as London and Birmingham – its own internal heterogeneities notwithstanding. Pragmatically, the research design also accounted for the research team's proximity to – and connections to gatekeepers within – relevant communities in the region. This focus, of course, impacts the findings explored below. Discussions held in different macro- and micro-locations (e.g. different regions and different buildings) would almost certainly have drawn upon different understandings and signifiers of national identity and national values (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: 63) and East Anglia's demographic profile[6] and location within England, specifically, requires acknowledgement.[7]

This article concentrates solely on material from the project's focus groups, each of which was moderated by an academic member of the project team. Focus groups offer a particularly useful research method for exploring public expressions – or everyday discourse – around important and contentious social and political issues such as experiences of national identity (see Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999; Morgan, 1996, 1997). They do so by offering a dynamic and interactive environment with sufficient flexibility for participants to shape the parameters and content of the discussion. Our groups were structured according to a common topic guide which began with an introduction to the project's objectives and four deliberately open initial questions: (1) What does the term 'British values' mean to you?; (2) How do you feel when you hear people talk about 'British values'?; (3) What does the term Muslim values mean to you?; and, (4) How do you think 'British values' relate to Muslim values?[8] Participants were then shown short clips from three of our films (totalling approximately eight minutes in length), and asked for reflections on these. The focus groups finished with a final question – 'If you could say one thing to the government about British values and Islam, what would that be?' – and, where time permitted, an opportunity for participants to discuss anything not covered in the discussion. This structure, importantly, was employed only as a guide, given our ambition to 'maximize free-flowing discussion among participants in order to elicit their views, experiences, and stories . . . using their own vocabularies and cultural repertoires of knowledge' (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2016: 46). As such, the conversation in different groups varied according to the contributions and interests of participants.

Recruitment to the focus groups took place via a range of strategies, including public advertisements in 'classified ad' websites, direct invitations to individuals who had indicated a desire for involvement (e.g. by attending earlier events), snowballing through individuals and organisations in the region, and contact with local community organisations. The focus groups took place in a range of settings, including small rooms on a university campus, participants' homes, and the premises of community organisations. Forty-five individuals contributed to the groups in total,[9] the composition of which varied from two participants to nine as detailed in Appendix 1 below. In total, the groups generated a corpus of 56,716 words. The discussions were recorded on audio equipment, and participants were provided with a participant information sheet detailing the project's scope and aims, and asked to complete an ethics consent form and participant questionnaire (containing questions on self-identification). All participants were compensated with a £10 supermarket voucher at the group's conclusion.

On completion of the research, our audio files were professionally transcribed, with the transcriptions checked for accuracy by an academic researcher. These files were subjected to a discursive analysis via the 'framework method' (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002), generating five core 'topics' arrived at inductively through an immersive reading of the

data: (1) Public articulations of 'British values', (2) Public articulations of Muslim values, (3) The relationship between 'British values' and Muslim values, (4) Direct responses to the film clips, and (5) Miscellaneous (including wider reflections on religion, multiculturalism and national identity). Each topic was subsequently divided into sub-topics, to arrange and categorise contributions to the group discussions.[10]

As with related research employing similar methodology, we make no claim here to the statistical representativeness or generalisability of our findings (e.g. Jackson and Hall, 2016; Jarvis and Lister, 2013). The numbers of research participants render such claims untenable and our emphasis here is on *how* 'British values' are discussed rather than the recurrence or otherwise of specific discussions thereof. Moreover, as alluded to in the above discussion of location, we approach the perspectives discussed below as a product of the contexts in which they were generated, and as co-created between group participants and moderators (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2016: 46). Thus, although the empirical discussion supports a '*moderatum* generalisation' (Payne and Williams, 2005) that public understanding of 'British values' is more varied and nuanced than elite framings imply,[11] our research cannot speak to the wider frequency or distribution of the perspectives we discuss.

British values in everyday discourse

Vernacular depictions of 'British values' within our focus group research were – as one might expect – neither homogeneous, nor uncontested. The following explores our findings in three stages: (1) concrete characterisations of 'British values', (2) efforts to differentiate 'British values' from those of other countries, and (3) public contestations and complications to the very idea of 'British values'.

Articulating British values

Public efforts to frame 'British values' in concrete terms across our focus groups fell into two broad types. First, were explicitly political characterisations emphasising established norms, rights and institutions. Prominent here were reflections on civil liberties – 'individual freedom and mutual respect: I think those are *modern* British values' (G2; R7,[12] original emphasis) and – 'I was going to say sort of freedom to be whoever you are without yeah, being repressed . . . we don't expect to go out and, you know, be arrested unexpectedly' (G6; R3); democracy and the rule of law – '[the] rule of law . . . and with that a democratically elected government as well. Which as you say, we might not agree with, but we have a right every general election to overthrow them or to get in somebody else'. (G3; R2); fairness – 'I think we are . . . treated quite fairly as a country' (G4; R); and tolerance – 'I think the point about tolerance is really important. Tolerance of difference, tolerance of different faiths, religions among others' (G6; R1). In one participant's summary of this first framing:

> I don't think we have any, if you like, unique selling point, but we are a little bit different because I think we are probably one of the only countries in the world where the defining characteristics of freedom are upheld as strongly as they are here. And, I would give those as being the rule of law, equality under the law, personal liberty . . . And by that, I mean freedom to think, to speak, to do, to own property, to do pretty much what we like. Our personal liberty is restricted only by reference to the limits that we place on it, in order to accommodate

> substantial other sectors of the population. And finally, and very, very importantly, representative government, so that whatever sort of a mess they make of it, we can sling them out and try somebody different. (G3; R3)

A second, more expansive, framing substituted this institutionalised, explicitly political emphasis for one concentrated on the everyday habits, expectations, behaviours, and interactions of Britain's residents. Beyond the obligatory mention of tea-drinking (15 times across our focus groups!), this framing emphasised social norms including politeness – 'It's sort of like a politeness as well' (G1; R3), or reserve – 'something we are famous for, politeness, is often used to hide what people really feel . . . I think it's quite a British thing to be reserved, in a way [although] we are generalising here' (G2; R7). Others pointed to a sense of moderation – 'the ability not to appear to take things too seriously . . . we have a sort of ironic distance from a lot of things that exorcise many people' (G6; R2); or self-deprecation – 'I think we like to champion the underdog, that's a British quality. Also, . . . I think we like to see somebody who can actually be able to laugh at themselves, and not to take things too seriously' (G6; R4). Less positive accounts focused on materialism within contemporary Britain, such that 'A lot of our values seem to be quite focused around money at the moment . . .we measure most value financially' (G7; R4).

These two constructions take as their foci different strata of the socio-political topography. In the former, it is the formal protections and responsibilities conferred upon and required of citizens, residents and visitors to Britain that dominate. Expectations of authoritative institutions, notably the criminal justice system, and their incumbents are prominent here. As, indeed, is a normative commitment to the formal equality of citizens, even if that commitment – as one participant put it – remains rather aspirational: 'I like to sort of think British values means equality of opportunity for everyone. That isn't the state we're in, but I think there's a kind of belief [in] that, roughly' (G6; R3). This construction positions contemporary Britain as an established liberal democracy, which is tolerant of difference and welcoming to outsiders. Depicting its inhabitants as rights-bearers, it also, quite closely, approximates contemporary governmental discourse, with its familiar, repeated, reference to: 'the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' (HM Government, 2011: 34). Such a construction links to public accounts of the overtly political origins of 'British values', whether historical – 'you could go back to Magna Carta . . . But since our Civil War, we've had effectively the sort of freedoms that we have now, albeit not such a great extent' (G3; R3), or more contemporary – 'from my involvement as a governor with a primary school, I think it's come about with Prevent training and things' (G7; R6).

The second – broadly cultural – construction, in contrast, grounds 'British values' in ostensibly banal, quotidian, taken-for-granted experiences of everyday life, seeing such values perhaps as biographical – 'Going to London at 19, I think I learnt a great deal in a very short time about what being British meant. It changed me quite a lot I think' (G2; R2); or even preconscious:

> I often think that sometimes we know things without ever having learned them, as far as we know consciously learned them, they're just in us. I mean, I'm an English language teacher and when I became one I had to learn how to teach grammar. But grammar itself was not something I learned particularly, but just something in me, it was something that I knew from a very young

> age. It's similar to that, British values is something I'd never really come across even as a term until very, very recently. (G3; R2)

The distinction between these two constructions is not, however, absolute. Several individuals in our focus groups moved between the two in the same conversation. Ideas such as tolerance, for instance, were deemed to operate at a political and everyday level: as something protected in law and witnessed in everyday life:

> I think British values, everybody kind of accepts each other, so if you go town no one looks at you, kind of thing, even if you're, I don't know, lesbian, gay, transgender or whatever you want to call yourself, you don't get judged and picked up by anyone, where in Poland it's massive. And, you, if you look different and if you go out in your pyjamas, or whatever, you'll just get beaten up or killed, whatever. But, I just think that could be a British value because it's not a judgmental country, if you know what I mean. (G4; R1)

Indeed, these issues of multi-scalarity were mentioned explicitly in two of our groups, although – interestingly – primarily to distinguish between different levels of analysis, whether familial and national: 'I think maybe it's more than a cup of tea and I think family values are separate from kind of a nation's value' (G1; R1), or between everyday and elite values:

> I don't know if your average British person is really that welcoming when it comes down to it. I think that's the government making the decision. There's lots of reasons for migration, but I don't think the average British person is that welcoming, unfortunately. . . . Even my Indian family who were migrants, they don't want, a lot of them don't want more migration here. (G2; R7)

Differentiating British values

A common theme within the above discussions was the distinctiveness – or otherwise – of these values, with much focus on perceived national and cultural differences and their implications for personal conduct. As one individual – who was particularly keen to differentiate empirical observation from normative judgement – put it: 'there are lots of different cultures in the world that have lots of different practices, and we're one of them' (G6; R2). In the words of another – eliding distinctions between Britishness and Englishness: 'It's weird how even, you know, I don't know, even France which is like two hours away on a ferry . . . can have so many different values and laws to England' (G4; R).

Unfavourable comparisons between Britain and elsewhere were rare in our research. Some participants questioned the desirability of specific values, as in this discussion of politeness – 'even if you compare British people to Mediterranean Europeans, for example, they're a lot more open with each other, I think a lot more open with their emotions' (G2; R7). Others emphasised the negative social consequences of 'British values', as in this connection between teenage pregnancy and British licentiousness:

> I know people very free but in some point, I said that's wrong and some point I'm happy. For example, when some girls they are 19 years old, or 18 years old, they make a baby, I say that's wrong because they are . . . for example I have a neighbour, she's 19 and she's make a baby. She told me last week, she say, 'Yeah, we make a baby', and she's 19, she's too small. (G8; R5)

Favourable comparisons were more common, and tended to illustrate the distinctiveness and desirability of British life. These comparisons were wide-ranging, spanning gun culture in the United States – 'One other thing is the gun culture compared with in America where people do carry guns, women have guns in their handbags often and that would be frowned on here, wouldn't it?' (G7; R7); freedom in Afghanistan – 'I'm a Muslim and I come from Afghanistan, so when I was there I had to wear a scarf all the time because my parents were like 'You cannot go out without the scarf'' (G8; R2); women's rights in much of the world – 'a lot of what we call reasonably civilised countries like South American countries or East Asian countries, seem to me to be more or less where we were maybe as recently as 100 or 150 years ago' (G3; R2); and intolerance in Saudi Arabia – 'I've taught and worked in Saudi Arabia, so I know, it's a good, an extreme example of Islam and Wahhabism, it's a very strict, very intolerant, very intolerant, it's almost the opposite of the UK' (G3; R2).

Where similarities between 'British values' and those of other states were identified this tended to be either in relation to other liberal democracies in the global North: 'I'm a bit of an outsider. I grew up in Canada, but I think in terms of what England or British values are advertised to be are very similar to what Canadian values are advertised to be' (G1; R1), and, 'As a German I find that I would probably say that British values and German values are sort of more like European values and not that different from each other'. (G7; R6). Other examples saw more general assertions of universalism: 'I think the British values are universal as we see them repeated in other countries' (G4; R), and, 'values are things like honesty and generosity, and they're concepts that just travel everywhere, whether it's Iran or Britain or Canada or wherever, right?' (G1; R1). Or, less optimistically:

> It's the same everywhere. I mean I see the young generation from my country [Iraq]: my nieces, nephews. Their value is different to mine. Yeah, there are things that I don't understand about them and I say, 'We weren't like this when we were your age'. So it is different all around the world I think. (G1; R2)

These efforts to compare British values to those elsewhere constitute a discussion about value pluralism and global cultural diversity. This maps, albeit imperfectly, on to the above distinction between political conceptions of values (rights, citizenship, and so forth) on the one hand, and cultural conceptions (cups of tea, politeness), on the other. Although discussions of the former were accompanied by reflection on both sameness and difference, the latter much more frequently focused on inter-cultural differences experienced within everyday life (e.g. in relation to gun culture or female dress). Such reflection on difference, however, was rarely explicitly celebratory. We encountered very few instances of joyous cosmopolitanism, for example, in which the excitement, wonder, or simple desirability of different values and practices was celebrated. It did, however, frequently lead to descriptions of the importance of respecting or 'fitting in' with local customs and norms:

> I would make it a point before I visited another country, to read up about that country, to learn about the dos and don'ts, what's accepted, how to dress, you know if you should cover up, if you should cover your head. Whether it's going into a place of worship, or it's just walking around the streets. Is it different beachside to in the town? . . . I would want to know all that, because I wouldn't want to make a mistake, and upset or insult anybody. (G6; R6).

> wherever you go you have to respect the laws, isn't it? . . . if you go somewhere like Thailand they've got very specialist laws. You wouldn't take over all of the British values over there because they might not agree with them. You would have to respect their values and, you know, look at what they do and you think, 'Right, well, I'm going to have to do that while I'm out here'. You may not like it but yet it's the show of respect that counts really. (G4; R3)

Such arguments, typically, came out of, and were linked to, reflection on the need for migrant – and especially Muslim – communities to 'fit in' to British ways of life, for instance:

> obviously, when they come here they should follow the rules we have, obviously, and the values we share, but that would be exactly the same if we go there. If we go to any Muslim country we should respect their values, and what they think, and what they follow. (G4; R)

Public discussions of this sort – especially where they involve the identification of national or cultural difference – run an obvious risk of essentialism; a risk – as argued below – often acknowledged by participants in our research. British values – and, by extension, Thai values, Canadian values, Iraqi values, and so forth – potentially emerge here as relatively fixed, unchanging and readily identifiable, such that there exist recognisable differences between different countries which bring responsibilities to those crossing national borders. On top of this – as in the discussion of 'Muslim countries' above (which was softened following probing by the group moderator) – these discussions of difference position particular communities (often identified as non-white, non-Christian, non-indigenous) as outsiders to, rather than participants in the making of, (here) British culture. These outsiders – who may even be identified as 'British' – become, as a consequence, bearers of obligation not agency: they must gain literacy of, and integrate within, an external and pre-existing British culture, rather than contribute to the continual re-making and contestation thereof.

Complicating British values

Although the above discussion of British values – and, by extension, British culture and life – implies a relatively static, essentialised public understanding of this term, this is only a partial picture. For, across our research at least, we found this production of British values complicated in at least three ways.

In the first instance, the term was frequently depicted as ambiguous, elusive or uncertain, such that 'It's hard to say exactly what they are' (G2; R7), and, 'I'm not very clear about British values, although I've been here 40 years' (G1; R2). Slightly more forthright were acknowledgments of the importance of place and suggestions that 'British values' might have different connotations, or even radically different meaning, for different individuals and communities: 'coming from London to Norwich, it has made me change my view of what Britishness is . . . people's values are different in more multi-cultural areas because they have more influences' (G2; R7), and, 'people have different definitions of British values, so what might be a British value to one might not be to another' (G4; R3). Different, again, were suggestions that the term is little more than illusory; a convenient construct that 'people use to feel a bit of pride in themselves . . . [to] give themselves something to believe in' (G1; R4), for example, 'There's this thing that we're such a generous nation and we're welcoming everyone. I think there's a certain amount of

mythology around that' (G2; R2). Sentiments such as these reflect a fairly widespread view from our research that British values might resist ready capture, provoking – for many – a need for circumspection in this term's usage, given that 'the actual idea of British values, that collocation, seems to be a very recent and somewhat nebulous term' (G3; R1).

This cautiousness around the elusiveness of 'British values' was extended further within more sceptical stances towards the phrase, or very idea of, 'British values'. Here, 'British values' was approached by some as an ideologically driven discourse in that 'politicians and the media use that term in a manipulative way' (G2; R4) for their own specific interests, often with deleterious social consequences. Some participants tied this discourse to specific policy challenges – 'it's politically driven and it's a reaction to immigration, it's a reaction to Islamic fundamentalism, quite often' (G3; R2). Others highlighted its outdated connotations: 'the media . . . refer to the values held by old fashioned ways . . . Not that being British is a lot of different cultures, a lot of changes, so . . . values should also change (G2; R1). Several noted a general discomfort with the phrase – 'I'm actually not very comfortable with the term at al' (G6; R) – not least given its potentially exclusionary connotations: 'calling something British values could potentially be seen as divisive' (G7; R4). This combination of divisiveness and anachronisity led some to posit an unsavoury colonial tinge to the term:

R6: I feel a little bit uncomfortable with that label.
R1: Which one 'British values'?
R6: *British* values.
R1: Yeah, yeah, so do I.
R6: It smacks of colonialism, that we are extra special and different, British values.
R5: Yes, I agree.
R6: So that's why I stayed quiet for a little while, because I'm not quite comfortable.

Others went further still, portraying 'British values' as a discernibly xenophobic, even racist, discourse, such that: 'some people from different backgrounds think that these values really exist but these values are for white people, they're not for all backgrounds, not for all people' (G5; R1).

A third way of complicating framings of 'British values' risking essentialism was found in public arguments that the content of those values – whatever they are – change over time, such that: 'If you'd asked 50 years ago what British values were and you asked now, there is . . .quite a difference' (G3; R3). This argument was particularly prominent in our focus groups, albeit with variation in the identified drivers of change, the direction of change (whether progressive or regressive), and the pace of change (whether evolutionary or revolutionary; incremental or radical).

A general declinist thesis was common across several of our groups, with younger or contemporary generations seen by some participants to hold fewer, or worse, values than their forebears: 'it was much better many years ago, but now the younger generation has no values at all, whatsoever' (G1: R2). Some saw this decline as a product of purposive action – 'there is a deliberate malicious attempt to subvert value structures . . . it is a systematic thing' (G1; R3). Others pointed to structural changes within Britain such as declining religiosity – 'I think we've moved away from Christianity anyway in this country, especially a younger generation . . . a lot of people aren't religious now, so they've lost those values' (G2; R7) – or the weakening of religious education, youth discipline, or national service.

These declinist constructions were countered by more optimistic accounts of historical progress, including in relation to racism – 'now . . . we are more open-minded . . . back in the days . . . people, like, 'Oh he's a different skin colour, I don't want to talk to him' (G7; R4); gender equality – 'so many guys and women . . . have learnt that we don't have to hold the traditional values . . . now its like the woman can go to work, the man can stay at home with the children' (G4; R1); or social mores – 'I think people are much more free and easy with each other, kissing and hugging when you feel like it, and it was just taboo, you couldn't do that, nobody did' (G7; R7). While advocates of such changes recognised that there would be resistance – 'Now you've got the situation where gay couples can get married and for a lot of people who have a strong belief, strong faith, that's a step too far' (G3; R2) – these arguments stand indicative of a far more optimistic account of the changing nature of British values.

Conclusion

The above discussion indicates that the comfortably straightforward depiction of 'British values' in elite political discourse across the past couple of years appears not well matched within public understandings of this term. 'British values' are not only made (by people) rather than given; they also appear to be made differently by different people. Although there is some evidence in our research of the resonance of governmental discourse at an 'everyday' level – particularly in political/institutional framings of this concept around the rule of law, rights, democracy and so forth – we also encountered competing understandings which take social or cultural mores as their cue. On top of this, our findings, importantly, indicate some scepticism towards elite discourse, evident here within concerns around the term's instrumentalisation, exclusionary consequences, elusiveness, and historical variability.

The disagreement and contestability explored above speaks to – and begins to flesh out – opinion poll findings around this theme. In a 2014 Ipsos-Mori poll for think tank British Future (2014), for instance, 49% of respondents believed that people in Britain have 'a clear set of values regardless of race or religion', with 43% of people disagreeing.[13] This lack of consensus in our findings – and in opinion polls such as this, is, of course, significant because it highlights the fragility of efforts to define who 'we' are in terms of our values, whether based in political norms or cultural practices. And, by exploring it, our discussion sheds further light on public resistance to, and reception of, elite discourse around the term – and arguments brought to bear to this end – adding breadth to existing studies of everyday or banal nationalism: two of the contributions outlined in the article's introduction.

The article's final contribution was to use everyday conceptions of 'British values' to explore the construction and contestation of public understanding more widely. As the above suggests, the trope offers a useful opportunity for facilitating public reflection on life in contemporary Britain, and how this might differ from life elsewhere. Although, again, there was little consensus here, the British national identity was, for our participants, most frequently framed as a liberal, democratic one encouraging of personal expression, tolerant of (sexual, cultural, religious) difference, and fostering of reserved, polite, self-deprecating citizens. Depicted thus, Britain was often situated within a community of similar states such as Canada and Germany, although we encountered considerable recognition, again, of the challenges of doing this, not least given processes of historical change within all of these states and their values.

As this suggests, there is considerable opportunity for future research around 'British values' and everyday life to extend and situate the above findings. Most obvious is the scope that exists for comparative research in other regions of the United Kingdom – and British territories abroad – as well as for large scale quantitative contextualisation of competing conceptions of this term. Longitudinal work into transformations in public understandings of 'British values' over time would add historical richness, enabling reflection on the significance of changing political administrations, educational initiatives, and so forth. There is also room, finally, for further investigation of everyday discourse on this theme away from the relatively stylised research setting of a focus group. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 540) argue, 'the nation does not resonate evenly across time or space: it comes to matter in certain ways at particular times for different people'. It is, therefore, as important to explore 'when' people speak of terms such as British values, as it is to ask 'what' such terms mean when they are used. This indicates the value of future work drawing on ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, in order to capture uses of this phrase in more organic context.

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Notes

1. Focus group participant, G3; R3.
2. We use the term address here in two senses: to speak to, and to (attempt to) tackle.
3. Our approach here relates to Charles Taylor's (2002: 106) conception of 'social imaginaries', referring to the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.
4. The latter question will be explicitly addressed in subsequent publications from this research.
5. Please see Appendix 1 for further detail on the constitution of these groups.
6. According to data from the 2011 census, 5,310,194 of East England's 5,846,965 usual residents identify as white with 3,788,236 usual residents recording an 'English only' national identity (Office for National Statistics, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).
7. We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pushing us to elaborate on this point.
8. The wording of these questions was varied according to the conversation within the different focus groups. Each question was also accompanied by a series of sub-questions on the topic guide where needed by the group moderator. For question 1, for instance, these included: (1) Would other people have a similar understanding [of 'British values'] to you? (2) Do 'British values' change over time? (4) Is 'British values' a useful term? (3) If someone wanted to learn more about 'British values', what should they do or where should they go? and, (5) Who decides what 'British values' means?

9. This emphasis on rich and detailed analysis of the experiences of a comparatively small number of participants is common within the relevant literature. For comparison, Lyons et al. (2011) worked with 14 participants, Antonsich (2016) with 22, and Jones and Desforges (2003) with 28.
10. The sub-topics for topic one – 'Public articulations of 'British values' – on which this article draws were as follows: 1.1 British values as contestable/debatable/confusing/non-existent; 1.2 Specific framings, for example, freedom, honesty, generosity; 1.3 Anecdotes or illustrative examples; 1.4 Changes to 'British values' over time; 1.5 Similarities/differences to other countries; 1.6 Problems with the use of 'British values'; 1.7 Origins of 'British values'. The numbering system reflected order of appearance of these themes in our data.
11. Payne and Williams (2005) discuss 'moderatum generalizations' as modest, pragmatic and moderate in relation to the extent of their claims and the firmness in which they are held.
12. G refers here to the focus group, and R to the respondent. Where no number is given it was not possible to identify the specific speaker.
13. For comparison, the poll's most frequently posited values were, 'respect for the law (69%); respect for free speech (66%); democracy (64%); respect for private property (62%); and equality between men and women (61%)' (British Future, 2014).

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Appendix 1

Focus group #	Number of participants	Constitution
1	4	Muslim participants
2	7	Muslim and non-Muslim participants
3	3	Non-Muslim participants
4	7	Non-Muslim participants
5	2	Muslim participants
6	6	Non-Muslim participants
7	7	Muslim and non-Muslim participants
8	9	Non-Muslim participants