

## Talking Like a Generation: The ‘Documentary’ Meaning of Ethnicity for Aging Minority Britons

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**Abstract:** This article contributes to the ‘cognitive turn’ in the study of ethnicity and nationhood, which focuses on how individuals construct identity categories pertinent to social cohesion. Using Mannheim as a methodological and analytical guide, we show how examining ethnicity as a relational enactment devoid of *a priori* categorisations allows situational identities that intersect with classical sociological concepts other than ethnicity – namely generation, class, and citizenship – to emerge within and across typical ethnic categorisations. We draw on an analysis of micro-level interactions between 40 aging ‘Black and minority ethnics’ (BMEs) engaging in small-group discussions and a large deliberative assembly held in London in 2011.

**Keywords:** citizenship, class, deliberation, documentary meaning, enactment, ethnicity, generation, immigration, national identity, United Kingdom

There is a longstanding concern about the feasibility of social cohesion in multicultural Britain, particularly around tendencies towards inclusion and exclusion associated with various ethnic, religious, and national identities (Demireva, 2011). Part of understanding how these identities are linked to processes of inclusion and exclusion involves looking at how people deploy and perceive particular ‘identity markers’ (e.g., birthplace, accent, parentage, and race) in order to align themselves and others with socially advantageous or disadvantageous positions. To this end, scholars working in the United Kingdom (UK) and other national contexts have embraced what Brubaker (2009) calls the ‘cognitive turn’ in the study of ethnicity and nationhood, which seeks to understand how identity categories pertinent to social cohesion are constructed by individuals (e.g. Hussain and Bagguley, 2005; McCrone and Kiely, 2000; McCrone and Bechhofer, 2008, 2010; Merino and Tileaga, 2011).

As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue, leveraging ‘identity’ as an analytical concept involves avoiding the pitfalls of categorical essentialism (i.e. the assumption of fundamental sameness within a category such as ethnicity) on the one hand and a constructivist proliferation of particularistic self-understandings (i.e. the absolute rejection of sameness) on the other. Categorical essentialism is particularly difficult to avoid when researchers rely on large-scale data sources such as official statistics and surveys. Modern states have powerful tools for categorizing their populations according to their gender, religion, ethnicity, immigration status, etc., and enjoy the ‘power to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Censuses and surveys built around these categories set durable, *a priori* boundary markers between groups, and respondents must articulate an identity within those confines. They also elicit responses that capture only one component of identity: a consciously articulated sense of one’s location within the available classification system that cannot capture the implicit, situational, and interactive component of identity. In the UK, this occurs when surveys or interviews ask their subjects to situate themselves explicitly *vis-à-vis* national, ethnic, and immigration-related categories (cf. McCrone and Bechhofer, 2008; Hussain and Bagguley, 2005).

Within the vast literature on the origins, contours, and qualities of social and personal identities and their production (see Thoits and Virshup, 1997 for an overview), we explore the extent

to which institutionalised social classifications comprise a salient element of individuals' self-representations in situations that explicitly frame those individuals as representatives of socially-imposed categories. To this end we analyze micro-level interactions among forty aging individuals who were recruited by an NGO to participate in small-group discussions and a large deliberative assembly in London in early 2011. These participants were recruited as representatives of an identity category that permeates institutional discourse in the UK: Black and minority ethnics' (BMEs). Using Mannheim ([1936] 2000a) as an analytical and methodological guide, we expand on recent claims about ethnic, national, and citizenship identity in the UK by looking beyond the 'intentional content' of identity entertained by an actor at the moment of the interview or survey to access the 'documentary meaning' or 'essential character' of being a subject engaging in everyday practices that are bound to a particular location, social structure, and historical moment. Our method draws on analytical techniques developed by German sociologists for operationalizing the notion of documentary meaning in qualitative analyses (see, for example, Bohnsack et al., 2007; Nohl, 2009). Instead of asking subjects who they 'were' or 'were not' in relation to this official category, we *implicitly* explore what it 'meant' to be an aging BME by observing how subjects engage in political communication on matters central to being a member of a political community. At the core of this technique is an intersectional impulse wherein identity markers are seen as emergent through practices, relationships, and interactions and thereby deeply enmeshed with other identity markers.

In conceptualizing ethnicity as a relational enactment in our analysis, we expand on the cognitive turn and show how subjects placed in an institutionalised ethnic category (i.e. BME) have experiences and understandings of that category that intersect with classical sociological concepts other than ethnicity. The 'documentary meaning' of identity expressed by our subjects centers on a generational conception of self as a historical and social unit born of empire and bounded by notions of class and citizenship (Marshall 1965). Far from the 'weak' citizenship identity Hussain and Bagguley (2005) have found in first-generation immigrants (in opposition to the 'strong' national identity of younger generations born in Britain), the generational perspective uses the language of citizenship rights and responsibilities derived from empire to articulate belonging in the United

Kingdom from a position of strength: that is, as (former) citizen workers who favour maintaining the welfare state as a mechanism for correcting market-based social inequality.

## **The ‘documentary meaning’ of ethnic identity in the United Kingdom: Setting the stage**

We eschew both essentialist, state-based categorizations and purely cognitive responses to identity questions framed in those terms in favour of the ‘documentary meaning’ (Mannheim, [1936] 2000a: 55) of being a subject engaging in everyday practices that are bound to a particular location, social structure, and historical moment. Operationalising this theoretical stance requires an analytical approach that takes into account the relational and situational character of identity markers such as ethnicity and nation.

Since Barth’s (1969) revival of the Weberian (1968) assertion that ethnic groups are not discrete aggregates of individuals who share a common culture, but a form of social organization based on self-ascription and ascription by others, a substantial body of literature has arisen around the notion of ethnicity as a relational concept (e.g., Lamont, 2000; Nagel, 1994; Waters, 1990; Wimmer, 2008). Rather than treat the concepts of ‘race’ (associated with phenotypes, involuntary ascription, and colonialism) and ‘ethnicity’ (associated with culture, voluntary ascription, and nation-state formation) as different phenomena, scholars now emphasise how each concept provides a range of dimensions along which boundary distinctions can be drawn relationally (Brubaker, 2009). Far from empty semantics, ethnic demarcations are also acknowledged as social boundaries, shaped in part by the structural features of institutional environments, along which inclusion and exclusion are negotiated (Wimmer, 2008). In the process of these negotiations, both boundary markers (e.g., skin colour, class) and boundary content (e.g., cultural practices) are mobilised.

Brubaker (2009) asserts that, like ethnicity and race, the concept of ‘nation’ has recently been subjected to the ‘cognitive turn’. A ‘nation’ is no longer regarded as a substantive thing, but as a way of viewing the world, ‘...of identifying oneself and others, construing situation, explaining behavior,

imputing interests, framing complaints, [and] telling stories...'(Brubaker, 2009: 32). Thus the 'nation' becomes an additional boundary defining the 'size and scope of solidary social units'(Hechter, 1975: 4). A great deal of recent literature on ethnicity and boundary-making has centered on polities like the United States or France, which are considered as single 'nations' (e.g., Alba, 2005; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Zolberg and Woon, 1999); however, discussions of ethnicity in the UK face the additional challenge of situating race and ethnicity within a range of geo-political frames: (1) internal, national divisions between England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland; (2) external divisions between the United Kingdom and its former colonies that are the legacy of Empire; and (3) European Union (EU) frameworks that give citizens of other member states a basis for claiming membership rights in the UK.

Since geo-political frames pertaining to the UK population have changed over time, it seems particularly useful in this context to consider the concept of 'generations' as a boundary marker used to view the world in terms of social units. We come to this position both by drawing on the work of other scholars and inductively from the data presented below. For Mannheim, a generation is a social location originating in a 'biological rhythm of birth and death' that can be shared by individuals born 'within the same historical and cultural region' (Mannheim, [1936] 2000b: 303). But it is not just circumstance of birth that turns a generation into a sociologically relevant location. Rather, a concrete bond is created between members of a generation only once they are 'exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization'(Mannheim, [1936] 2000b: 303). Shared origins and experiences of destabilization result in the accumulation of 'mental data' which become sociologically relevant when they are shaped by formative forces of accelerated social change, giving them 'character and direction', and giving those sharing them 'a set of collective strivings'(Mannheim, [1936] 2000b: 305). Mannheim's original aim, revived and expanded on recently by Edmunds and Turner (2002), was to use the concept of generation in order to further macrosociological discussions of historical change in the wake of large-scale destabilising events, such as those that marked Mannheim's own trajectory: two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Russian Revolution, and mass migratory movements of displaced persons. However, one of the aims of this

paper is to demonstrate that the generational lens can also be applied usefully to the micro-sociological level of interactions between individuals, who may belong to cohorts who experienced life-changing events (like postcolonial waves of migration).

Identity is widely regarded as relational and situational. Goffman (1982: 3) famously speaks of ‘moments and their men.’ The ‘moment’ our study takes place in is London in early 2011. The UK has seen a decade of recurring racialised conflict, including the 2001 riots in northern England and the London Underground attacks of 7/7. In response, government offices, think-tanks, and academics have taken to pondering social cohesion in racial, ethnic, and religious terms, often in reference to the BME population. As an aside, the term BME is used in the UK by public institutions, NGOs, and the media to refer to individuals who are ‘non-White’ according to official Census definitions. This institutionalised categorisation frames individuals as relatively weak and visibly different: the word ‘minority’ implies a position of marginality in society, and the association of ‘black’ and ‘ethnic’ implies that no one who identifies as ‘white’ has an ethnicity.

This ‘moment’ is also marked by the financial crisis, which is placing further strain on a welfare state that is struggling to meet obligations towards retiring baby boomers while educating a dwindling number of young people into the knowledge society meant to sustain the welfare system. As we write, the Conservative government under Prime Minister Cameron is setting about implementing its vision of a neo-liberal Big Society in which citizens take greater responsibility for managing themselves and others.

If, according to Mannheim (1967: 249), ‘both motives and actions very often originate not from within but from the situation in which individuals find themselves’, an examination of the BME identity and the processes of inclusion and exclusion linked to it must focus on how actors labeled as such produce particular relations within life’s many contexts (e.g. Garfinkel, [1967] 1984). To do so, we conceive of ethnicity as an enactment, a process that exhibits a performative character. The performative turn to ethnic boundary making asks us to examine how people *do* ethnicity in interactions, not just what they *say* about it. By thinking about ‘ethnic enactments’, we are moving the

unit of analysis away from individual talk about boundaries to an interactive-relationship context wherein actors do a range of things to *make* ethnicity (and their identities more broadly).

Finally, in order to observe the ‘documentary meaning’ or ‘essential character’ (Mannheim, [1936] 2000a: 55) of being a subject engaging in everyday practices that are bound to a particular location, social structure, and historical moment, it is necessary to deploy a method of data collection that serves as a stage on which enactments can unfold. Recently, German sociologists have developed analytical techniques for retrieving the documentary meaning of a phenomenon from qualitative data (see, for example, Bohnsack et al., 2007; Nohl, 2009). Proceeding from the assumption that utterances have both an immanent or face-value meaning as well as a documentary meaning that captures the orientations or structures behind face-value statements, the emphasis in analyzing qualitative data shifts from examining *what* an interviewee says to *how* he or she frames and discusses issues (Bohnsack et al., 2007). Key to this analytical technique is gathering qualitative data (in the form of interviews, focus groups, etc.) that elicit narrative accounts of personal experience rather than face-value responses to direct questions about a person’s relationship to set analytical categories. While we do not adhere to the stringent methodological procedures advocated by these practitioners and their followers, we share their view that the orientations and experiences underlying research subjects’ statements are more important than their explicit content when it comes to understanding a concept as implicit as ethnic identity.

## Data and Methods

The data on which this article is based were collected as a part of a larger project examining how ethnicity influences deliberation, which we understand as a particular type of political communication involving reason-giving and an ethic of inclusiveness (Author A and Author B). The subjects, all BMEs approaching or in retirement, were recruited by the Runnymede Trust, an independent policy organization that focuses on racial and ethnic social justice, for an event aimed at gathering information on the ‘financial inclusion’ of BMEs – people’s experiences, understandings,

and views on banking, public and private pensions, and societal resource allocation. The subjects were recruited using snowball sampling and received honoraria for participation. In total, forty individuals participated in the portion of the study this paper draws upon (see Table 1 for the basic demographics of our participants).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

We maintain the Runnymede Trust's BME framing because subjects were recruited explicitly as representative of this institutionalised identity category. Its centrality to the particular situation in which our data were collected presents a unique opportunity to observe how individuals choose to deploy identity-related boundary markers when presented with the opportunity to drawn on either standard, top-down, reductionist classifications and/or frames that emerge in the course of discussing political matters of interest to the UK population in general. The BME-focused recruitment strategy has a modest disadvantage, namely the absence of white participants (though half of the administrators present were white). Still, this disadvantage arguably gives our study increased internal and external validity. The absence was uniform across groups and approximated real-world political conversations, in which people place themselves into self-selected groups along dimensions that are salient. For our participants, BME was such a salient condition.<sup>1</sup>

There were three parts to the data collection in London. First, we administered a survey to gather basic demographic information and attitudes towards ethnicity. Second, we randomly assigned participants to one of five groups for ninety minutes of deliberation on who should bear the costs of university education. Each group was facilitated by a research assistant. Participants were provided with an information sheet containing general facts about university funding and tuition that they could (but were not required to) refer to in the course the discussion. Before and after the discussion, participants were asked to write down the percentage of university fees they felt should be paid by the individual student, the student's family, and the state. We chose this question (and topic for discussion) because it is relevant for all participants, is contentious without being polarizing, and involves basic position-taking on social justice and the role of the state. We provided each group with

a set of deliberation rules<sup>2</sup>, derived from Fung and Wright (2003), with scripted interventions to remind participants of these rules. Finally, all participants reunited to deliberate as an assembly on what government should do about financial inclusion in the UK. The proceedings were modeled on a procedure known as Participatory Budgeting (Baiocchi et al., 2008), which has proven successful with participants from a wide range of socioeconomic and racial backgrounds and with differing levels of political engagement in everyday life.

Our methods were conducive to eliciting the ‘documentary meaning’ of being someone defined by UK institutions as a BME. While participants were recruited based on an externally-imposed conception of ethnicity, by an organization that is known as an advocate for ethnic minorities in the UK, they were not asked to reflect on themselves explicitly as ethnic persons. Instead, they were asked to talk about issues that are central to being a member of a political community and social cohesion: education and the distribution of financial resources. Moreover, the rules guiding group interactions included a prompt to support any statements made with reasons grounded in personal experience. This aspect of the research design encouraged participants to give their contributions the narrative quality that is considered indispensable for getting beyond subjects’ explicit statements to access the ‘atheoretical knowledge’ (or *habitus*) that is structuring them (Forehand et al., 2002: 48–49).

### **Coding and Variables**

Both the small-group deliberations and the deliberative assembly were video-recorded, transcribed, and coded.<sup>3</sup> A start list of codes for ethnic boundaries was compiled based on boundary markers commonly discussed in the theoretical literature on ethnicity as a relational concept and our hypotheses as to how these boundaries may affect deliberative processes (the broader concern of our project). These included ‘visible minority’ (speaker differentiates between individuals or groups through explicit reference to difference in physical features); ‘ethnicity’ (speaker differentiates between individuals or groups based on reference to heritage, culture, or tradition); ‘religion’ (speaker

differentiates between individuals or groups based on reference to belonging in a religious group); and ‘immigration’ (speaker differentiates between individuals or groups based on immigration status). Because ethnicity as a relational concept is necessarily *situational and intersectional*, we also included in the start list boundary codes that we thought likely to arise in the context of a discussion on the issue of economic redistribution in a welfare state. These were ‘class’ (speaker differentiates between individuals or groups based on class, either by proxy – in terms of income – or using terms such as ‘middle class’); ‘citizenship’ (speaker differentiates between individuals or groups based on citizenship, including reference to civil, political, and/or social rights); and ‘generation’ (speaker differentiates between individuals or groups in terms of age or generational differences). Ethnic and gender identities are intertwined (e.g. Collins, 2000), yet in our analysis individualized gender identity was not articulated as a salient boundary marker by our participants. As such, it does not play a major role in our analysis. This is not to say that gendered processes do not matter or are unrelated to our findings. Many of the generational concerns expressed in our data are gendered. While participants do not use gendered language in the classic sense (e.g. ‘as a man moving to Britain...’), they nonetheless evoke what are classically understood as gendered concerns throughout as they speak about their children, grandchildren, and the future of their families.

## Results

Of all the potential boundary markers for which we coded, those pertaining to generation (52), citizenship (50), and class (43) were employed most often in a speech act. In contrast, references to being a visible minority (6) and religion (1) occurred rarely, with immigration status (27) and ethnicity (34) generating middling counts. Additionally, speech acts related to generation occurred three times more often in the context of subjects using personal narratives than in the context of abstract universal warrants to support an opinion. References to citizenship occurred twice as often in the context of personal narratives.

These counts suggest two things. First, despite the fact the subjects were community activists recruited by an organization that champions ethnic equality to engage in political communication as BMEs, neither race nor ethnicity emerged as the primary social location structuring the meaning of what it is to be a subject in this particular situation. Second, the tendency towards story-telling as a form of reason-giving in the deliberative discussions means that the research design successfully elicited speech acts with the narrative quality needed to access the ‘documentary’ meaning of being someone designated as an aging BME person in the contemporary UK context.

### **Generation**

*‘I don’t want to be equal to the younger generation. I want to be treated better than them because I have given the country 50 years of my life, I’ve paid my dues, and I should get the respect that I deserve and we all deserve.’*

Participants’ contributions to the small-group deliberations and deliberative assembly were most often structured in terms of a generational perspective. The primacy of generation as an orienting framework is unsurprising if we adopt Mannheim’s view of generations as a key social location that ‘is a tendency pointing towards certain definite modes of behaviour, feeling, and thought’ (Mannheim, [1936] 2000b: 291). While participants were born in different countries, all were members of the historical and cultural region that was the British Empire, and they often referred to this history when recounting their biographies. The de-stabilisation required to forge a generational bond lies in their common act of migration within a globe-spanning political space and the subsequent crumbling of the structures upholding that space. In other words, they have not just experienced the de-stabilisation of international migration on an individual level, but also a de-stabilisation of their framework of belonging to the country they have been living in for decades. As McCrone and Kiely (2000) point out, before the 1948 Nationality Act, the inhabitants of the British Isles and the British Empire were formally ‘subjects of the Crown’, giving Britishness a ‘non-national, encompassing form of political identity’ that was subsequently dismantled through successive changes to citizenship law (McCrone and Kiely, 2000: 26). The accelerated social change affecting our participants is the transformation of the welfare state necessitated by a simultaneous growth in the aging population and decline in the number of working-age persons who can support them. Further, our deliberative

discussions took place in early 2011, after a Conservative government touting the notion of a Big Society (in which individuals should become more self-reliant and less dependent on the welfare state) had risen to power. As a generation, our participants are affected twofold by accelerated social change: as taxpayers suddenly competing for ever scarcer resources, and as parents who see the prospect of better futures for their children and grandchildren threatened in the face of rising debt (legislation had just been introduced to raise the cap on tuition fees for higher education) and lagging employment prospects.

In distinguishing themselves from younger members of society (including those in what we might think of as their ‘ethnic group’) our subjects reveal two characteristics of the ‘documentary meaning’ of belonging to their generation in this particular historical, social and deliberative context. The first characteristic is an orientation towards the future and willingness to persevere, which participants believe is not shared by younger Britons: ‘So a lot of young people are just struggling to survive now. You know what I mean? They are not thinking forward like we did about the future of our education and how it – the longevity of it. It’s like they’re living just for the now...’ Another participant used his personal biography – in which he went from being a farmer, to working for the railway, to being a British officer – to illustrate a mindset for getting on with it, doing what it takes, and looking for alternatives once one path comes to an end: ‘We are pushing forward.’ By positioning themselves as forward-facing, in contrast to the stalled younger generation, these subjects make a status differentiation that disrupts the implied homogeneity of ethnic categorisations.

The second characteristic is a tacit awareness of the shared good fortunes derived from growing up and working in the era of postwar prosperity and a strong welfare state: ‘...The timelines for a lot of things shifted because there is a different society. The timeline for information society in which you can expect free education at the university level, that has shifted...’ This is a position they share with those in government responsible for current social changes: ‘Because most of them who are doing this today are those who had free university education, during my own time and their own

time.’ Here, the generational orienting framework allows participants to align themselves with society’s power elites by virtue of shared, lived experiences of social change.

When generation rather than ethnic categorisation is allowed to come to the fore in ethnic enactments, subjects are able to draw on a shared experience that cuts across – and creates divisions within – standard ethnic categories. They then claim a higher group status than is generally assigned to BMEs as a purely ethnic category by highlighting their higher level of perseverance and ambition relative to younger members of society in general (including members of their own ethnic groups) and by aligning themselves with all of those in their shared generation, including political elites.

### **Citizenship**

*‘I have noticed that we put everybody into a category: Asian, Caribbean, English. Actually, to me, we are all British citizens. Why do we all cut and put everybody in a little box?’*

Based on our data, belonging to this generation means being a citizen, in the traditional, Marshallian sense. Marshall (1965: 8) wrote about citizenship as ‘a claim to be accepted as full members of the society’ and a sense of ‘full membership in a community.’ This membership is based on three sets of rights – civil, political, and social – that serve as the basis of a contract between a state and an individual.

In contrast to the findings of McCrone and Bechhofer (2008; 2010) and Hussain and Bagguley (2005), our results show that place of birth is not as central to a strong sense of membership in a community of citizens; instead, our group members focus on work. The centrality of work to belonging makes this generation’s notion of citizenship particularly resonant with Marshall; like our subjects, Marshall saw employment as the primary civil right, from which all other rights emerged. This is evident in participants’ frequent references to work tenure and being a taxpayer, with the expectation of concomitant benefits:

‘Now there is a government which is run by the people, not by the hidden hand in the sky who throw the money to the government and they fund the services. So let’s be honest and become the responsible citizens that whatever we pay in, we have to take that much out...’

This sense of citizen-as-worker is enhanced by ties to an older form of legal membership: empire. This can be seen in participants’ insistence that the entitlements of (former) citizen-workers, accrued qua citizenship status, should not be limited territorially. They particularly resent the present state policy of restricting pension pay-outs in the event that the recipient takes up residence outside the UK, although citizens from other European Union (EU) countries may have pensions accrued in the UK paid out in other EU member states:

‘I was born a British citizen and I’m still a British citizen, and it’s a shame when it comes to pension Britain is now is thinking at sending, allowing pensions to go to certain countries not including the African League, Caribbean, and the Asian countries. And yet a country who was practically at war with Britain few years ago are coming here, they getting pension, collecting [...], sent back home. Now think of that, you see, how can that be morally right?’

Here the generational and citizenship orienting frameworks combine to position subjects legally and morally above citizens whose rights derive from the supranational European frameworks that supplanted the Empire.

Participants also share Marshall’s emphasis on social rights, which range from ‘the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in society’ and are presided over, institutionally, by the educational system and social services’ (Marshall, 1965: 78). Having benefitted from the education system themselves, maintaining access to education in the face of welfare-state cutbacks is, for participants, the lynchpin for upholding the generational contract between citizens at the heart of the welfare state:

‘My father, my great-grandfather, have contributed tremendously for the benefit of this country [...] in the form of taxes [...] we have been contributing to British Raj [...] started contributing since working into this country, in the system. Even my child is paying, my wife is paying, everyone is paying. So, whenever we pay these, we expect that to be contributed towards education part of the department. And we shouldn’t pay anything for the education purpose, because it’s the human right.’

The orienting framework based on a citizenship rooted in the civil right to work is intertwined with the memory of empire and experience of social change found in the generational orienting framework. The sense identity that emerges among elder BMEs in a research context that removes ethnic categories allows subjects' ethnic enactments to indicate a sense of strong Marshallian citizenship. This contrasts strongly with the results of more standard approaches to studying ethnic identity, such as Hussain and Bagguley's (2005) findings that first-generation migrants articulate a 'weak citizenship identity' bounded by language barriers and a migrant status that makes them feel like 'mere' residents, rather than members of a broader, national community.

### **Class**

*'I'm not a Communist, although sometimes I wish I were!'*

In addition to generation and citizenship, class-awareness is the third main orienting framework, i.e. way of talking about the world and one's place in it. This is discernible in the evocation of (previous) occupation as a status marker and in a strong underlying concern about inequality, which (unsurprisingly, given the primacy of Marshallian citizenship as an orienting structure) should be rectified by welfare state mechanisms, particularly education. As with generation and citizenship, this is an orienting framework that cuts across ethnic sub-categorisations under the BME label. Through it, subjects located themselves within stratification processes that affect the broader, national community to which they belong.

Participants' occupational histories are varied, from civil servants, academics and military officers, to careers in service industries; it was not an identical class position but a common class lens that participants shared. This orientating framework allows for status differentiation within the common identity bounded by generation and citizenship:

'Against the background of being a university student myself in this country starting in 1964. I'm father of six children all of whom have been to university [...] Parents are not a homogeneous group. Nor are students. And, of course, income and wealth are unevenly distributed in this society.'

Rather than weaken the participants' shared sense of identity based on generation and citizenship, however, the class-based orienting framework allows participants to articulate a common challenge: maintaining the pathways to social inclusion that were open to them as a generation, particularly access to education:

‘And had it not been for the fact that I went to university at a time when there were no fees...I came from a poor family. My parents were hard-working people, but we never got money beyond what we needed to survive. I would never have been able to go to university. I think – my principal stand is that education is a right; it is for the benefit of the country.’

This challenge is one to be met by ‘strong’ citizens whose concern goes beyond interests pertaining to themselves and their families to building a better nation:

‘If we are going to talk about solutions now, the £3,000 that it used to cost to go to university has jumped to £6,000-£9,000...that gap is beyond most, even the middle class, not to say the lower class...so we are stepping backwards, as we are supposed to be building a greater nation...a multicultural nation whereby all things are equal...’

Considered alongside the orienting frameworks of generation and citizenship, class further strengthens the basis of the BME subjects' sense of ‘we’. Rather than accentuate status divisions among participants, articulations pertaining to class locate the speakers in a historical moment where their migration was associated with a rise of ‘the middle classes’ – an encompassing rather than divisive category. As such they place themselves in a national stratification system that cuts across ethnic categories and gives their generational orientation towards the future and perseverance a common challenge to be addressed (class inequality) in the name of the citizenry of which they are part.

### **Ethnicity and Immigration**

Ethnicity and immigration boundary markers generated mid-range counts (34 and 27, respectively) in our analysis; thus, omitting them from our discussion would be an overly selective reading of the data. What does a closer examination of speech acts containing these two markers tell us about participants' orienting frameworks?

The majority of speech acts in which an ethnicity boundary was deployed were not parts of personal narratives, but of statements concerning the relationship between ethnicity and structural inequality in the United Kingdom and the questionable role of academic research and official statistics focused explicitly on ethnicity in ameliorating this inequality. One subject, who grew up in Jamaica, shows how framing transforms when moving between personal narrative and general statements about society:

‘And I think we... people have a history and we’re now looking at our history that the sweat of our brothers and sisters who built part of this country. And I always said that what is happening at the moment, with all this exclusion for people who don’t have money and so on and so on. That because we pay our taxes, our country...our country was plundered and it made Britain great. So therefore I am entitled to take part in that. We built... we contributed financially to the building of the house, but the house is now built and there’s no room for us. So we’re forever knocking on the door saying ‘let me in,’ and maybe they’ll build a little extension or something for us. But it’s my money that built the house.’

Here we can see the participant contextualise the personal orienting framework (‘our’, ‘we’, ‘brothers and sisters’) – which emphasises generation, citizenship, and class – by juxtaposing it with the impersonal metaphor of a house that was built and designed by ‘them’ to the exclusion of the ‘us’ who contributed financially to the building project. While the ethnic boundary marker used to describe exclusion from the house is implicit (the ‘we’ is linked to ‘Jamaican’ at the beginning of the narrative), other statements deployed the ethnic boundary marker explicitly to illustrate specific instances of structural inequality related to ethnicity, like the overrepresentation of ‘minorities’ in prisons and the tendency to stream Black children into the lower tiers of a stratified education system.

Indeed, the dissociation of explicitly ethnic boundaries from personal narratives was accompanied by a critical distance that explicitly allowed participants to challenge the empirical and analytical validity of that boundary in official state practices of classification, such as statistics. The statistics on BMEs contained in the fact sheets we distributed to provide a common baseline of information for the deliberations on financial inclusion and higher education drew the ire of some participants. As one stated:

‘It’s how you ask the question, because what you... what research does time and time again is trying to put... is preservation of the status quo but nothing to change. You talk about Black people’s health. Nobody asked me.’

The same participant went on to say that ‘Britain’s always looking for an underclass; they think we should fill it and respect it.’ For this person, officially sanctioned ethnic boundaries are part of maintaining the ‘status quo’ of ethnically based social inequality. Another participant saw the power of official classifications in a different light, as a strategic possibility for gaining visibility in political discourse:

‘We’re left with a story to tell, but not with the power... It’s like when [the moderator from The Runnymede Trust] was saying... all those statistics are here but they are never quoted because we don’t have the power to quote them.’

A third participant took a neutral stance to official versions of the ethnic boundary, seeing it as one of many frames employed by the state according to current interests:

‘I worked with BME groups for a long time and then gradually that word – whether it was in housing or it was in social care – started disappearing. And when I had a question I was told we are all equal. It is all equality. And then they came to gender and these things. And today, after a long time, actually BME in a report like that...’

Regardless of what they believed to be the normative function of official ethnic classifications – the preservation of ethnically-based structural inequality, the means for asserting group interests in political discourse, or one of many signifiers of changing state interests – ethnic boundaries were treated as abstract objects worthy of debates, but not generally as an orienting frame for narrative expressions of what it means to be someone who falls under such classifications.

Like ethnicity, the immigration boundary was mainly used outside personal narrative to describe a group of people who occupy a particular position in socially stratified Britain: recent Eastern European migrants working menial jobs in the service industries. Immigration entered into personal narratives insofar as references were made to the point in time at which a participant moved to Great Britain, but participants did not speak *as* immigrants. The immigration boundary helps reinforce the orienting frameworks of generation and (colonial) citizenship by playing a subordinate role in personal narratives (often reduced simply to just a mention of the year in which a move occurred) but a defining role in constructing a group of contemporary immigrant others. If mentioned directly, ‘immigrants’ and ‘migrants’ were generally either Eastern European migrants or irregular workers, and both were characterised as occupying disadvantageous socioeconomic positions:

‘All of us know pretty well that migrants come to this country and are the lower economic group. You get the lowest jobs, the dirtiest jobs, the filthiest jobs, and the jobs that pay the least so you have no chance of having great savings...You can’t expect those who have been cleaners and have substandard, sub-lower jobs to have money. They just don’t.’

In contrast to these sympathetic characterisations, a large share of the discussion on how to finance higher education was dedicated to what participants saw as the problem of immigrants who enter the country under the false pretense of being international students, in order to defraud the welfare state. Sympathy and antipathy aside, and despite our participants’ personal experiences of immigration, the immigrant boundary served in our research context to distinguish between our participants – elder citizens of empire persevering in the name of social cohesion in the national community of which they are a part – and recent, non-citizen arrivals.

The contrast between ethnic enactments around boundaries of ethnicity and immigration and those around generation, citizenship, and class highlights the importance of studying ethnic identity in such a way as to allow the ‘documentary meaning’ of subjects’ positions in particular interactive contexts to come to the fore. While the standard categories applied to BMEs – ethnicity and immigration status – emerged as impersonal means of describing their environment, subjects’ personal narratives framed experiences in terms of the intersection of generation, citizenship, and class – all of which cut across standard ethnic categories and disrupt the assumption of marginalisation that accompanies the use of those categories.

## Conclusion

We have adopted Mannheim as an analytical and interpretive guide to exploring the relative salience of top-down, institutionalised boundary markers and ones derived from other social and political frames in articulations of what it means to be someone designated as an aging BME in the UK. This approach distinguishes our contribution from other recent work on ethnic identity in Britain and offers a different vision of what it means to be a BME in this moment: foremost neither ‘Black’ nor ‘minority’ nor ‘ethnic.’ The main orienting frameworks displayed by participants were those of

generation, citizenship, and class. By virtue of their historical experience of empire, they viewed themselves as full members of a community of citizens, and they expressed deep concern for their rights, the rights of others, and the inequalities that have emerged in their country.

We argue that moving from an explicit examination of identity to one that looks implicitly at the way in which participants order their world enables a more nuanced view of a phenomenon that is inherently relational and situational. In our case, this meant inviting subjects into a context that was ethnically charged but leaving them complete freedom to choose their terms of reference in discussions (of education and financial inclusion) in which they had multiple stakes as political individuals. While we did provide a structure within which our participants could interact, we did not ask them to situate themselves explicitly in reference to the institutionalized ethnic identity category – BME – that they were recruited to represent. Our participants' speech acts are an activity – a political conversation among concerned citizens, where those concerns (and not the prompts or demands from researchers) drove the discussions.

We do not argue that race and ethnicity are unimportant or that the results of previous studies are irrelevant. Instead, our results show that these are not necessarily the most important social locations underlying the 'meaning' of being a person defined externally (by the state and/or academia) as ethnic. Our inductive research suggests three important points. First, rather than impose *a priori* categories upon research subjects, we should construct them from within real-world interactions and situations. Second, *a priori* categories often intersect with one another in ways that do not allow for a clean disembedding, so understanding one social category requires that multiple categories be examined simultaneously; this is largely a reiteration of what intersectionality scholars have been arguing for over the last two decades. Finally, our research suggests that we should take the concept of generation more seriously in social theory.

Our findings support theories of ethnicity that emphasise the situational quality of that identity marker; this suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to the ways in which public discourse – and academic work that supports it – frames interactions with ethnic and racial groups.

Public discourse in Britain focuses on including marginalised ethnic and racial groups (e.g. BMEs) in the political system. According to our conceptualisation of ethnicity, participants' presentation of themselves in terms of generation, citizenship, and class – and not as marginalised minorities – has as much to do with the context of a discussion focused on social justice and the role of the state as with the personal experiences participants bring with them. Perhaps a more widespread adoption of research methodologies that emphasize membership and inclusion rather than marginalization would help build a deeper understanding of what it is about being a 'Black and minority ethnic' – or someone denoted by any other *a priori*, institutionalized categorization – that can foster a sense of social cohesion.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> While it is beyond the scope of our study, it would be interesting to investigate how the introduction of white participants would affect ethnic enactments under otherwise similar conditions.

<sup>2</sup> Those rules were: (1) Participants listen to one another; (2) Participants do not just offer opinions, but rather provide reasons; (3) Conflict is okay; (4) Participants should find reasons they can accept; (5) Participants should be open to new proposals; and (6) All participants should be included in the process.

<sup>3</sup> Our inter-coder reliability was over ninety-five percent.

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**Table 1 - Ethnic and gender composition of participants**

Ethnicity	Female	Male	Total	Percent
Asian	9	10	19	47.5
Arab	1	0	1	2.5
Black, African	1	3	4	10.0
Black, Caribbean	6	3	9	22.5
Other	3	2	5	12.5
No Response	1	1	2	5.0
Totals	21	19	40	100.0