ethnicities

Becoming an active citizen: The UK Citizenship Test

SAGE

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Abstract

This article explores the effects of the UK citizenship test on migrants through the focus on the injunction to become an active citizen. We draw on qualitative interviews with 158 migrants of different nationalities who are at various stages in the process. We identify two responses. First, participants in our study drew on neo-liberal repertoires of active (knowledgeable) citizenship whereby they proved they are responsible and law-abiding agents of 'social cohesion' yet also simultaneously presented themselves as politically passive. Second, some participants perform critical, alternative narratives which contrast with the neo-liberal understanding of active citizenship. We note that these responses are not mutually exclusive and show the process of making sense of and positioning oneself around the competing, unsettled understandings of what counts as 'active' and what it means to be a citizen. The coexistence of these different responses shows that migrants going through the citizenship test process experience this policy instrument – and the injunctions on which it is based – in unsettling and contradictory ways. Through the citizenship test, and specifically the call to be an active citizen, adherence is sought to particular values – 'British values' – and the performance of active dispositions in a certain way. However, the neoliberal understanding of what it means to be an active citizen is also exceeded and challenged, in sometimes quite 'ordinary' and everyday ways. These coexisting and contradictory narratives bring to

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light the uncertainties through which migrants perceive the injunction to become an active citizen and the paradoxes of active citizenship more generally.

Introduction[1]

Since its introduction in 2005, the 'Life in the UK' test has been studied as a new paradigm in British immigration and integration policies (Byrne, 2014; Joppke, 2007; Ryan, 2008, Van Oers, 2013; Vink and de Groot, 2010). The knowledge of language and of British "history, culture and traditions," also referred to as knowledge of life in the United Kingdom, becomes an objective that migrants have to prove they have achieved via citizenship testing before they can become citizens or long-term residents (Kostakopoulou, 2010; Schinkel and van Houdt, 2010; Van Houdt et al., 2011). Throughout this 'journey', [2] migrants have to prepare and pass the Life in the UK citizenship test as well as other tests in some cases[3], attend a citizenship ceremony, and go through multiple administrative procedures and interviews.

The focus of this article is to explore the effects of the UK citizenship test on migrants through the focus on the injunction to become an active citizen. We analyse how migrants experience the demand to become an active citizen in and through the UK naturalization process. More generally, we explore the stakes around what counts as 'active' (Neveu, 2015) and, specifically, who counts as an active citizen.[4] We argue that, at this insertion point of policy into everyday life (McNamara and Roever, 2006), it becomes possible to render 'visible and uncomfortable – the network of assumptions that sustains and supports the existing field of distinctions, regulations and practices' through which citizenship is defined (Clarke and Newman, 2009) in (Neveu, 2015: 150).

We conceive of the naturalization process as a tool of institutional 'filtering' (Kostakopoulou, 2010), reinforcing external borders while transforming and improving those allowed to apply to naturalise. The requirement to be an active citizen invokes 'transformative intent' (Menjívar and Lakhani, 2016), that seeks to 'nudge' (Room, 2016; Thaler and Sunstein, 2009) or change behavior (Bartram, 2019; Perri et al., 2010). Migrants are one group among many who are required to be active citizens (see Clarke et al., 2014, Ch 4, for a broader discussion). While our empirical work highlights the specific experiences of migrants, it also speaks to the ways different social groups, not only migrants, are called upon to be certain kinds of active citizens who increasingly must 'earn' citizenship (Kostakopoulou, 2010; Monforte et al., 2019).[5] Yet the experiences of required active citizenship through naturalization are particularly revelatory because 'the artifice and precariousness

of citizenship appear better when it is inscribed as a recent acquisition' (Derrida, 1998: 101).

We consider how migrants' conceptions and practices of active citizenship relate to official accounts, sometimes endorsing (and performing) it and other times revealing its tensions and contradictions. We identify two responses. First, participants in our study drew on neo-liberal repertoires of active (knowledgeable) citizenship whereby they proved they are responsible and law-abiding agents of 'social cohesion' yet also simultaneously presented themselves as politically passive, referring to individual rather than collective ways of being an active citizen (Brown, 2003). Second, some participants perform critical, alternative narratives which contrast with the neo-liberal understanding of active citizenship. We note that these responses are not mutually exclusive and show the process of making sense of – and positioning oneself around – the competing, unsettled understandings of what counts as 'active' and what it means to be a citizen. Through these responses we show how prescriptive and depoliticised neoliberal versions of active citizenship as a 'tick-box' exercise co-exist with forms of collective engagement and action that exceed or do not fit in the prescribed idea of active citizenship. Our general argument is that the coexistence of these different responses shows that migrants going through the citizenship test process experience this policy instrument – and the injunctions on which it is based – in unsettling and contradictory ways. Taking a view of active citizenship from below, we argue that citizenship is always *in the making* (see Clarke et al., 2014 on citizenship as *imparfaite*), always invested with meanings that are reworked, refashioned and realigned in specific times and places and disputed by different actors (Clarke et al., 2014: 6). We show that these reworkings are particularly significant in the UK context, due to the intensification of citizenship as a technology of governance in the last decades (Tyler and Marciniak, 2013: 144). Through the citizenship test, and specifically the call to be an active citizen, adherence is sought to particular values – 'British values' – and the performance of active dispositions in a certain way. However, the neoliberal understanding of what it means to be an active citizen is also exceeded and challenged, in sometimes quite 'ordinary' and everyday ways. This excess suggests that the necessary 'desire' in participation and integration (Fortier, 2017) has not been 'manufactured' (Merolli, 2016) in a totalizing and complete fashion (see also Bartram, 2019). These coexisting and contradictory narratives bring to light the uncertainties through which migrants perceive the injunction to become an active citizen and the paradoxes of active citizenship more generally.

Our analysis is based on 158 in-depth interviews with people preparing for the test or having taken the test in two highly diverse cities in England (Leicester and London).[6] We interviewed people at different stages of the citizenship process who, for example, were considering entering the test process; had gone through the process and passed the test; had gone through the process and failed the test; were in the preparation process through colleges, migrant advocacy organisations, private providers; had just taken the test; underwent the ceremony; had a passport

interview which, while not formally part of the process, was perceived to be so by participants.

Our sample is composed of participants with different migration trajectories, social backgrounds, nationalities, and personal characteristics: we interviewed participants from 39 nationalities, 63 men and 95 women,[7] ranging from less than a year-over 20 years in the UK (the average was 9.8 years), and a variety of legal statuses (e.g. UK citizens, EU citizens, Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), Applying for ILR). We accessed participants primarily through migrant advocacy and community organisations, colleges providing language training and snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted from April 2014 to March 2016.

We note here the difficulty of imposing a quantitative logic on this qualitative study when presenting our findings. We observe different responses to the state's injunction to become an active citizen. However, these responses cannot be systematically linked to specific groups of individuals composing our sample. This is due to two factors. First, one-third of the sample did not fully express themselves on the questions related to political participation. Second, our analysis shows that many participants formulated ambivalent positions, where different responses to the injunction to become active citizens were mixed together. We have selected quotes for this article where there was a clear statement about the theme of active citizenship, and we provide anonymised background information about the participant who is speaking. The quotes that we selected correspond to 'ideal-types' that enabled us to distinguish between different positions in relation to the active citizenship component of the Life in the UK test. We do not note a specific set of demographic characteristics associated with one of the two positions for which quotes are provided here. We first provide background to the emergence of the UK citizenship test and active citizenship more specifically. We then explore the two responses that emerge from the analysis of participants' interviews: 1) Becoming a neo-liberal active citizen: narratives on law-abidingness and responsibilisation and the avoidance of politics; 2) Alternative narratives of active citizenship.

Background

The UK citizenship test was introduced by the New Labour government in the wake of civil disturbances in the northern towns of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in 2001. As Turner (2014: 337) notes, the framing of these disturbances is very significant: the citizenship test was perceived as the solution to the perceived lack of cohesion and integration of longstanding minority communities (see also Fortier, 2008). For instance, the Independent Community Cohesion Review Team (2001) or 'Cantle Report' identified a lack of community cohesion as the root cause of the civil disturbances in 2001, requiring a 'meaningful concept of citizenship' that would foster loyalty to the nation. This suggestion was in turn taken up in the *Secure Borders Safe Haven White Paper* (2002), and then formalised through the *Nationality and Immigration and Asylum Act* in 2002. Specifically, the White Paper, *Secure Borders, Safe Haven*, promoted the necessity for migrants

to learn English and a citizenship test in order to '...strengthen the ability of new citizens to participate in society and to *engage actively* in our democracy' (Home Office, 2002: 12) in (Khan, 2019: 23, emphasis added).

The notion of active citizenship has been disputed yet shared as a policy project by different political parties in Britain[8], particularly from 1980s onwards (Marinetto, 2003: 107). Multiple aims have included combatting perceived apathy and social fragmentation as well as promoting self-reliance and responsibilised citizens, and loyalty to the nation (Bartram, 2019; Turner, 2014). The idea of active citizenship can serve as a vehicle for neoliberal and nationalist demands (Mustafa, 2016), express a logic of voluntarism (Fuller et al., 2008), and act as an antidote to what is perceived to be a decline and weakening of citizenship and political engagement (Turner, 2016). Proof of passing tests such as the Life in the UK provides an evidential basis that migrants are exhibiting the symbolic value of engagement and adherence to 'British values' that testing seeks to elicit (Khan & McNamara 2017).

When the Life in the UK test was designed, the reference to active citizenship could be seen by some as a measure that was to be helpful, not restrictive, with integration as its goal (Kiwan, 2008; Meer et al., 2019). For Labour Government advisor Bernard Crick, citizenship education more generally was squarely located in the civic republican tradition, to:

> aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves (cited in Crick, 2010: 22–23).

In his view active citizenship involves 'individuals voluntarily acting together for a common purpose'. Rather than demanding good citizenship, invoking the rule of law and requiring good behaviour it is 'people combining together effectively to change or resist change. I call that true citizenship' (2010: 23–24).[9]

However, as many studies have noted (Löwenheim and Gazit, 2009; Monforte et al., 2019; Schinkel and van Houdt, 2010; Turner, 2014), the notion of active citizenship (as part of the citizenship test) has become increasingly restrictive and limited to a neo-liberal understanding of citizenship, in particular in the British context of a turn from multiculturalism to more assimilationist policies in which migrants have to 'prove' that they can participate in society (Turner, 2014; Van Oers, this special issue). In particular, this view constructs the active citizen through a logic of responsabilisation. As Lemke (2001: 201) argues, '...neoliberal forms of government feature not only direct intervention by means of empowered and specialized state apparatuses, but also characteristically develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being

responsible for them.' From this perspective, the test puts forward an under-standing of what it means to be an active citizen that focuses on the responsibi-lisation of new citizens, a disciplinary function that can be channeled through the demand to be active and docile. This injunction to become a 'responsible' citizen emerges in several ways as Turner (2014) points out. It brings together respon-sibility, empowerment and self-improvement as key attributes to be learned and displayed in the citizenship process, 'whilst concealing all of the coded and implicit connections this has to certain economic, cultural and social forms of capital – communication skills, access to resources, economic *solvency*, etc' (Turner, 2014: 342).

This neoliberal definition of active citizenship connects to a broader move away from the welfare state, as debates around the idea of 'Big Society' have shown. These debates have framed social problems as related to a lack of social cohesion and lack of responsibility on the part of citizens. The Big Society projects aimed to give communities more powers; encourage people to take an active role in their communities; transfer power from central to local government; support co-ops, mutual, charities and social enterprises. In doing so, it promoted a vision of society that made individuals responsible for their own problems and that aimed to encourage active, responsible citizens to engage in their community, in a context of cuts in government funding.[10]

The definition of active citizenship through the idea of responsibilisation is already visible in the 2009 *Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act*. In this doc-ument, 'earned citizenship' was formalized in the form of 'probationary citizen-ship' whereby migrants would first be granted temporary residence status (for a period up to 5 years), then allowed to progress to probationary citizenship (for a minimum of 12 months) to finally reach permanent residence, i.e. British citizen-ship.[11] As Puzzo (2016: 4) notes, conditions were attached to probationary citizenship, particularly that applicants "*make the right contribution to the country*". Moreover, the notion of 'active participation/contribution' to British society as deployed in this proposal was ambiguous requiring proof of good character and tax payment as well as positive interaction with the local community (Puzzo, 2016: 4). This emphasis demonstrated the importance and arbitrariness of what was considered active citizenship when it was a formal, explicit requirement of the naturalization process. While formally aban-doned by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government in 2011, as it was considered to be too complex and bureaucratic, its legacy is still operating in the test materials and requirements of immigrants. We agree with Puzzo (2016: 4) that the subsequent amendment to the process 'has not modified the overwhelm-ing spirit of the definition, citizenship under the coalition and now the Conservative government remains prescriptive and utilitarian: the right to stay must still be 'earned' by prospective citizens'. Active citizenship has been reformu-lated, rather than disappearing, as part of a broader neo-liberal understanding of citizenship.

The intent to make active citizens through this specific lens is evident in the prescriptive test preparation materials, specifically the third edition of the official 'Life in the UK' handbook:

> Becoming a British citizen or settling in the UK brings responsibilities but also opportunities. Everyone has the opportunity to participate in their community . . . Although Britain is one of the world's most diverse societies, there is a set of shared values and responsibilities that everyone can agree with . . . Taking on these values and responsibilities will make it easier for you to become a full and active citizen

> (Home Office, 2015: 153–154)

Similarly, the handbook reminds applicants of their 'role in the community', and 'values and responsibilities' such as 'being a good neighbor', 'getting involved in local activities'. They are then told how they 'can support [their] community' which includes jury service, helping in schools, school governors and school boards, supporting political parties, helping with local services, volunteering, blood and organ donation, looking after the environment. Also, the handbook provides practical information about voting and contacting elected members (Home Office, 2015: 126), income tax and National Insurance number (Home Office, 2015: 150–151), domestic violence (Home Office, 2015: 149) Female Genital Mutilation and forced marriage, reporting extremism (Home Office, 2015: 143) but not, for example, trade union information, arguably an important form of active citizenship. Instead, the handbook notes under the heading on 'Problems in the economy in the 1970s' (2015: 66): 'Many industries and services were affected by strikes and this caused problems between the trade unions and the government. People began to argue that the unions were too powerful and that their activities were harming the UK.'[12]

In the following sections, we turn to participants' responses to the injunction to become an active citizen in this specific way. We underline in particular the contrast between narratives that endorse a neoliberal understanding of active citizenship and those that open the way for alternatives visions of what it means to be an active citizen, as well as their co-existence and overlap with each other. In doing so, we highlight the contradictions and uncertainties that are at the core of how migrants experience the citizenship test.

Becoming a neo-liberal active citizen: Narratives on law-abidingness, responsibilisation and the avoidance of politics

As the overview above has shown, the aims expressed within the official test materials cast the test itself as an 'opportunity' to acquire the necessary knowledge to enable political and civic participation through the idea of 'good citizenship' (law-abidingness) and responsibilisation. For some participants, the knowledge conveyed in the test was 'useful' for political life in helping to know the system,

and how and when to vote specifically. In the case of a Canadian participant 'understanding the political system and voting, and all that. Yeah, yeah, that's, that's totally good. I think it was probably more the cultural and sport bit that I wouldn't have thought was really necessary' (LN76[13], Male, Canada, in UK 9 years, citizen with postgraduate level of education, currently working in the private sector). Similarly, an Iraqi participant found learning about the process useful:

LC11   Useful about citizenship, about how life in UK, how you living in UK, how was history and UK, how about elections and UK, how many years getting to people for going to vote. Every four years, yeah?

I   Yeah

LC11   And where is House of Commons, where is parliament in England, in London, they show you everything and they tell me everything about asking something, questioning something, I get just beginning useful things

(LC11, Male, Iraq[14], in UK 11 years, citizen, College level education, did not specify an occupation)

Yet knowledge of politics was also interpreted as the ability to be law abiding, as in the two examples here:

LN20   I am not [interested in politics] because my country's politics is not good that's why

I   And here are you more interested here?

LN20   The same [laughs]

I   Do you think from the test so far, have you learnt anything about politics?

LN20   Yes

I   What has been useful?

LN20   In politics we can learn about country's rule basically country's rule. Laws and something. Law is something important for us and that's what

(LN20, Female, Bangladesh, in UK 4 years, ILR, secondary level of education, specified holding no formal occupation)

LN24   I learnt a lot about politics that every 5 years the MP need to change and I learn about the law as well . . . It is really useful. To be honest, it was useful

> for me to know wherever you go also what will happen when you got a
> family, what are you going to do? And your work is next and the law is
> going to change because in this country it's a big thing if you do not know
> and you did not follow the law

(LN24, Female, Philippines, in UK 7 years, ILR, college level of education, occupation in education)

The significance of politics in both examples translates into the importance of law-abidingness and individual responsibilisation. Citizenship is understood as knowing the rules and complying with them, not as challenging authority and holding institutions to account.

These responses raise earlier criticisms of the mechanics of the British naturalization process, and the kind of citizens it would produce. These criticisms noted that 'the typical citizen is an obedient rule-follower' (White, 2008: 225–226) who can 'efficiently tick boxes' (227) to prove their good citizenship, rather than an individual who can be reflective, critical and identify with 'what determines the quality of life in a democratic community' (White, 2008; 228, 230 in Meehan, 2010: 121).

Our analysis shows that some participants work within this rubric of responsibilisation, accepting the parameters of active citizenship as set by the process and political context. They suggest experiencing a sense of political efficacy, the ability to 'make a difference', within pre-set norms of which they are knowledgeable:

I   Do you think it's possible for migrants coming here to make a difference in terms of influencing politics through voting and meeting members of parliament or councils?

LN24   You means it's a big influence

I   Can you make a difference?

LN24   Yeah you can make a difference yeah especially when you explain it nicely yeah it's really makes big difference

(LN24, Female, Philippines, in UK 7 years, ILR)

This is a self-presentation as an active citizen who draws on existing rules to participate in public life, but 'nicely': they are not necessarily questioning or disrupting existing arrangements.

These narratives demonstrate the unsettled meanings embedded in neoliberal 'tick box' injunctions to active citizenship. As shown for example by Brown (2003) and Hay (2007), the neo-liberal understanding of active citizenship can also lead to processes of depoliticisation, though which individuals come to avoid depicting issues as public problems. These processes are apparent in participants' narratives,

in particular those with the most precarious legal status. Legal status clearly con-ditioned the way in which participants responded to us in general, and in particular their willingness to discuss politics. In many cases, participants with citizenship describe the feeling of security and freedom to express yourself that the passport provides.[15] When asked if they learned much about politics some participants who didn't have citizenship (yet) resisted this discussion altogether: 'I am not sure I wanted to' (LN14, Female, Nigeria, 2 years 4 months, applying for ILR, College level of education, current occupation is housewife and previously worked in education).

This reticence could be further reinforced by past experience. For example, two participants from Somalia referred to politics as 'always poisonous' or something that 'will kill you' (LC21, Male, Somalia, in UK 16 years, citizen, Secondary level of education, occupation is self-employed and factory work; LC17 Male, Somalia, in UK 13 years, citizen, Secondary level of education, occupation in retail). But this does not have to follow, and past experience of political repression can also be followed by high interest in politics in the UK context and discussion of this interest and engagement with us in the interviews (see also Bilodeau, 2008).[16] In a sense, the citizenship process in these cases fails to 'manufacture' the necessary 'desire' in participation and integration promoted (Merolli, 2016) and there are pre-existing and understandable reasons for this. We are, therefore, mindful of the ways in which past experience and current legal status might condition responses.

In different ways, many participants presented themselves as politically passive (Brown, 2003), disinterested, avoiding politics altogether. The need to 'earn' citizenship through responsibilisation can lie alongside the refusal – or perceived inability – to create a collective mind (Brown, 2003). Here avoiding politics over-laps with responses that reproduce the idea of law-abiding, responsible citizens. One participant attributed a sense of constraint, and political passivity, to per-ceived lack of political efficacy:

I   Do you feel it's possible for migrants to influence politics so I mean through voting, meeting councillors do you think their voice is heard, they get through to politicians?

LN28   You would be heard if they wanted it to but not a lot of them feel like they can so they don't, I mean not a lot of people believe they voice can be heard but they don't try. I don't think there's many people who go out of their way to rally together and try to make a difference

(LN28, Male, Poland, in UK 11 years, EU citizen, level of education General National Vocational Qualification, occupation Administrative Role in private sector)

In another participant's experience, the political process is ultimately ineffective and instead he takes recourse to the legal apparatus (which he learned through his own experience of a conflict, not the test process):

LN45   I think it's better to have a good lawyer that can help

I   Than an MP

LN45   Yes sure a solicitor helps you with things and it's better because here if something's wrong no one takes note but when you come with a solicitor behind you, they take note and they respect you

I   They can't ignore you like that

LN45   They can't ignore you that's right, I am always worried

(LN45, Male, South American, in UK 10 years, EU citizen applying for ILR, occupation Skilled Trade, Postgraduate level of education)

As we will show in the next section, participants' narratives that reflect the neoliberal understanding of what it means to be an active citizen (whether through the reproduction of official discourses or through the avoidance of politics) was by no means universal, however.

Alternative narratives of active citizenship

In her study of young British Muslim civil society activists' discourses on citizenship and belonging Anisa Mustafa finds 'normative ideas of civic duty that have congruence with state demands for "active citizenship" but with substantially divergent ideals. This research suggests participants incarnate 'active citizenship' but with reference to universal ideals informed by faith and universal humanity in contrast to neoliberal and national models of citizenship based on individual pursuit of success' (Mustafa, 2016).[17]

Similarly, we find conceptions of active citizenship that diverge from and even explicitly reject the framework provided by the citizenship test process yet can be understood as active nonetheless. While not 'rupturing' with the logic of citizenship itself (Byrne, 2016; see also Isin, 2008), they make their own meaning of citizenship on their own terms, albeit within limited parameters. We find these conceptions expressed in the practice of 'ordinary' politics (Neveu, 2015) that participants defined for themselves. These were ways in which individuals carved out a separate space or definition that did not draw on the terms of the test's practicalities or the discourses surrounding it to define and enact citizenship and political engagement.

For example, citizenship and engagement were described as completely independent from the process:

I   And did gaining citizenship make you look at politics any differently from before because you said actually something you were already interested in, yeah

LN4   Yeah, no, no

I   OK not really

LN4   I can show you getting the, taking the exam and getting the passport for me personally doesn't make me any less

I   Or more

LN4   More, yeah

(LN4, Female, East Africa, in UK 19 years, citizen, University level education, occupation is Finance-related role)

The test of language and knowledge of life in the UK, and the process overall, are explicitly rejected as a means to foster active citizenship:

I: Okay. So, you mentioned you used the Citizens Advice Bureau.

LN73:   Yeah.

I: Have you, have you used any other services like the local library, neighbourhood office, or even contacted a local councillor?

LN73:   For the citizenship?

I: No, no, now we're talking about life...

LN73:   Yes, I've been, I used to live in Birmingham, and in London in two, three different boroughs, and every time I would register with my local library, I use the services, I try to engage with the community, I am a blood donor. So in that sense yeah, but that is no related to the citizenship because I was doing that before I became British and I still doing that, so it didn't change anything of my behaviour to be part of the community, be a positive member of the community.

I: And did you remember learning anything about politics through the process?

LN73:   Of the citizenship?

I: Yeah, do you remember anything about politics?

LN73:   No.

(LN73, Male, South American, in UK 8 years, citizen, University level of education, occupation is Consultant)

In some cases, participants' narratives directly challenge prescriptive and depoliticised neoliberal versions of active citizenship as a 'tick-box' exercise for applicants to citizenship. These participants use citizenship and forms of collective engagement and action that exceed or do not fit in the hegemonic idea of 'active citizenship'.[18] Political engagement for the collective good challenges an all-encompassing 'neoliberal' reading in which citizens are active only according to responsibilising principles, and otherwise seeking individual ends (see also Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). This group of participants believes in the possibility for migrants to 'make a difference' and saw this as a key responsibility as citizens. This belief may be a matter of individuals acting on pre-existing attitudes and dispositions toward political life that, for those who have naturalized, the status of citizen now formally enables. In the case of a woman who had experienced political repression in an East European country but is now politically engaged:

I   And do you think it's possible for migrants here to make a difference here in politics?

LN31 Very much, absolutely I 100% agree because you live here, you affected by the politics and you can influence your politics to affect your community you have been given a right to vote and I think it's a duty to make your voice heard and make your views and doesn't like it then go and speak to councillors go and say that only doesn't make a difference only immigrants and the community so I think it will make difference

(LN31, Female, East European country, in UK 24 years, citizen, University level education, occupation in Social Services-related role)

Engagement in her case is a means of expressing political disagreement that can be effective, as an active citizen who works on behalf of her community to effect change by lobbying political representatives. This contrasts with the repression she has known in the past, and is a way to ensure just, well-ordered institutions that will positively affect her 'community'.

From this perspective, being a citizen also means having a stake in electoral politics:

LN3   Oh yes, definitely because the first thing when you become as a British citizen you are right to vote and then you have a right to speak out, have challenge to fight whatever you right, then definitely make a difference like before for example maybe I didn't care who is coming as a Prime Minister, which party is going to win but now I vote

(LN3, Female, Iran, in UK 18 years, citizen, level of education National Vocational Qualification, occupation Personal Service Occupation)

This is an expression of critical, reflexive citizenship and contribution to public debate and institutions, not 'box ticking'. Voting can even enable direct criticism of underlying power relations when framed as an antidote to a climate hostile to migrants, where political engagement by new citizens can protect migrant families:

I   And so, we had the elections in May [2015]. Did you follow them with interest?

LN50:   Yes, yes.

I: And how, what was your, what did you make of it?

LN50:   Well, I made the, the result was terrible for, as much as I care about British immigration, it was, it was terrible. The promise of reducing the migrants from the hundreds of thousand to thousands . . . Which I don't know why they, why they had to put the policy in the first place. It's causing a lot of harm, separating a lot of families. It's creating a society which is polarised to whether you are a migrant or married to a migrant. It doesn't feel welcome, you don't feel welcome if you're a migrant. That's my opinion. So I was following the election. And at the end of, yeah, I was following the election. I wasn't very happy with the results.

I   Would you encourage your next generation, children, whatever, would you encourage them to be voting here?

LN50:   Absolutely, and I will tell them the reason why it can affect themselves, or their families in terms immigration

(LN50, Male, Central American, in UK 13 years[19], applying for ILR, postgraduate level of education, occupation Legal Professional)

This case is especially significant since the participant's professional occupation provided him with extensive experience of dealing with immigration law and its effects in everyday life. This person's critical capacities were not formed or enhanced through studying for the Life in the UK test, which in the interview he did not identify as a political resource. He identifies voting as a means for collective resistance and expresses this as a responsibility of future generations to themselves and their families, and to a society 'which is polarised'. He is responsible rather than responsibilised, to act collectively and effect change despite not having himself the right to vote.

In other cases this articulation was more subtle, taking the form of 'ordinary', less visible forms of active citizenship. Participants who described themselves as uninterested in politics and not engaged actively in political life – and positioned themselves as politically passive – then provided multiple examples of 'helping' in

their communities and described themselves in active citizen terms that they did not connect in any way to the process, which they did not see as a political resource (see also Bassel and Khan, under review).[20]

Relating to community leads to advocacy and engagement:

> Firstly, because I attended English classes from the first day that I arrived. I became a volunteer in a Latin American association so that already gave me contact with the community in some ways I had advantages compared to other people in the sense that what I am going to know, to write for example there are people who can't do it. Firstly, I study and I study and try in English and I went to a course about rights of citizens, in this country and then I anything I want. I had a qualification I got here as an interpreter, community interpreter, so I mixed a lot with the community, all the time, all the time, all the time, permanently in different ways. All the time

> (LN55, Female, South American, in UK 12 years, citizen, University level of education, no current occupation though previously had worked in Management role in private sector)

The core of this social and political action is informal, made on their own terms and arguably they would have done this anyway whether or not they went through the test process, particularly the final example in which the participant becomes an advocate for her community. In the process of undertaking the test, and then giving advice about it, forms of solidarity emerge despite the structure and nature of the process, not because of it. These are 'hot' forms of knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1988) – about the test, rather than in the test – that are transmitted within communities, requiring engagement with others. When asked what advice she would give to someone undertaking the naturalization process, this South American woman responds with her reflections on her experience and her desire to help others:

> LN44 What advice would I give if they want to come . . . because we all have the right to dream, if I was advising someone I would help but if I saw someone who could suffer I would suggest to them another form of surviving here. But I think it's complex because to burst the dream is very sad and all we dream . . . I see it for the people who go to courses and without a little bit of English I see it being very difficult . . . But however wants to, will find a way, fight, insist, insist and meet people who are tolerant . . . . the experience I have met intellectual people or I have met people, who on the contrary, don't know anything simply housewives, a person working in the field who had never worked for a company, for all those statuses it's a process. I have met people who have all come here and for whom it's a suffering because they thought it was a paradise and they have to fight for things. And to sit down someone from the two extremes is very difficult to advise them but I like to help and this is my experience. Yes, don't go there because it's tough so I would like to help. It's worth helping without expecting a big change, it's all that I was grateful for

(LN44, Female, South American, in UK 25 years, citizen, level of education College, occupation Nursing and Midwifery Professional)

Solidarity emerges around the mechanics of the process itself in forms of collective support to negotiate the hurdles. This happens in ways that do not follow the script of the Life in the UK handbook, not least through the use of other languages that have been seen to be problematic in the past. For example, speaking Bengali in the home was deemed to contribute to the 'parallel lives' condemned in the Cantle report, a failure of social cohesion (Khan, 2019). Yet in the following example it is through these 'other' languages that people navigate the process collectively:

I   Now we're interested in your community, do you help other people in your
         community?

LN20   Yes, I help

I   How do you do that?

LN20   Like when we come in the college we sit in the canteen and some other people
         like they don't understand something we are Bengali so we talk Bengali and
         then he or she told me I can't understand this so I help them like this

I   Or you give them advice

LN20   Or by number on Whatsapp

(LN20, Female, Bangladesh, in UK 4 years, ILR, level of education Secondary, reported no occupation)

These expressions run counter to the responsibilised subject who must self-govern themselves through a process that is to benefit them by recognizing them as 'deserving' on individual, and not collective, terms.[21]

Different value systems are invoked in our study, recalling the origins of the test process, and referring to alternative repertoires and collective practices of solidarity and critical citizenship. Mustafa also identifies coexistence of competing reflections and divergence in 'the values and priorities that guided the participants' normative ideas of citizenship' (Mustafa, 2016: 464–465). The ways participants position themselves through these accounts are windows into the ways potential citizens and new citizens identify as political actors within, against, and independently of the citizenship test process. In turn, they indicate the competing, unsettled understandings of what counts as 'active'. These forms of collective engagement and action *within the process* can in fact exceed or do not fit in the hegemonic idea of 'active citizenship'.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the coexistence of different responses to the state injunction to become an active citizen shows that migrants going through the citizenship test process experience this policy instrument in unsettling and contradictory ways. The specific injunction to active citizenship must therefore be understood as always *in the making* (Clarke et al., 2014), always invested with meanings that are reworked, refashioned and realigned in specific times and places and disputed by different actors (Clarke et al., 2014: 6).

This is a British story that is politically, culturally and historically located across successive governments (New Labour, Liberal Democrat-Conservative, Conservative) but also a broader narrative of 'deserving citizenship' that resonates across national contexts (Monforte et al., 2019; Van Oers, 2013).

In the UK context, with the intensification of citizenship as a technology of governance in the last decades (Tyler and Marciniak, 2013: 144), it is significant that the responses explored in this article challenge as well as confirm prescriptive and depoliticised neoliberal versions of active citizenship *as* a 'tick-box' exercise for applicants to citizenship. The citizens revealed here are multiple and co-exist: active participants in formal political life alongside disengaged (and even fearful) non-participants as well as participants looking for alternative forms of engagement in public life. The process itself is endorsed, questioned, and arguably serves as a tool of discipline in teaching law-abidingness as well as opening some avenues for critique through which the neoliberal understanding of what it means to be an 'active citizen' is exceeded and challenged, in sometimes quite 'ordinary' and everyday ways.

The unsettling experience of the 'Life in the UK' test – and in particular the idea of becoming an active citizen – has particular future relevance in the ongoing Brexit context when understandings of the political community and what it means to belong are challenged across the political spectrum. Bridget Anderson (2013) argues that hierarchies of belonging and of exclusion are not stable and need to be constantly performed and reiterated. Both the 'Failed Citizen' and 'Non-Citizen' are citizenship's 'Others', and used to discipline each other e.g. the hardworking immigrant used as an example to the 'lazy' welfare dependent. Our exploration shows uncertainties and contradictions in responses by migrants who aspire to citizenship. These uncertainties and contradictions can open up the possibility to identify commonalities rather than differences with those who are already formally citizens. This challenges the distinction between Non- and Failed Citizens, who are defined as outsiders to the community of value from outside by exclusion and from inside by failure, respectively (Anderson, 2013). This can open a path away from competition for privileges (Anderson, 2015) toward questioning the whether and how one should be 'active' or not, and what role active citizenship should play in defining political communities.

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Notes

1. The research material for this project can be accessed on the UK Data Service ReShare website, persistent identifier: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-852967.
2. The naturalization process was presented as a "Journey to Citizenship" by the Home Office; with citizenship as a "continuous process" in which the formal acquisition of citizenship was "only the starting point" (Kiwan, 2008: 66). Under the Coalition Government of 2010 the preparatory handbook was renamed "A Guide for New Residents".
3. An example would be those entering the United Kingdom via spouse reunification who would need to pass and IELTS exam or its equivalent.
4. We wish to clarify that, more generally, we do not call for reviving a more participatory, 'civic republican' tradition. We reject this move, not least given the historical roots of this tradition in slavery which is constitutive, not an accidental feature of the republic (Bassel, in progress). Anne-Marie Fortier reveals the role of colonial legacies 'lining the language requirements in Britain' (2018: 1266) in her study of the naturalization process in the UK. We understand the field of 'active citizenship' to be constituted by these colonial legacies. It is beyond the scope of this article to unpack these legacies, however, which we do elsewhere.
5. Active citizenship has been invoked in the UK across different areas of social and political life and social policy: workfare and voluntarism (Fuller et al., 2008), foodbanks (Garthwaite, 2017), citizenship and naturalisation (as we explore here) but also citizenship education (Crick, 2010; Davies, 2012), urban policy and community development (Marinetto, 2003), volunteering (Davies, 2012; Fuller et al., 2008).
6. Leicester is one of the main 'minority-majority' cities in the UK, where non-white residents are in the majority. London boroughs range in diversity, with the proportion of the white ethnic group at 59.8 per cent, in 2011 (Office for National Statistics, 2012).
7. Please see (Bassel, forthcoming) for further discussion of gender and deservingness.
8. Davies underscores affinities between New Labour and Conservatism in 'active citizenship' policy (Davies, 2012) noting the 'continuities in the "social dimension" of an ongoing hegemonic project, whose objective is to overcome the 'weak citizenship' characteristic of neoliberalism by mobilising citizen assent'.
9. It is significant to note that in the broader field of active citizenship policy, there was significant continuity with the shift from Conservative to New Labour government in the early 2000s when the citizenship test process was being formulated. Citizenship education more generally maintained a conservative orientation toward rebuilding social capital in the face of social fragmentation, rather than fostering critical citizen dispositions (Davies, 2012: 10).
10. See the core UK Coalition government document 'Building the Big Society', in which from 2010–2015 the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government expressed these objectives (see also Garthwaite, 2017; Scott, 2011).

11. The probationary period prevented migrants from having full access to a range of benefits available to permanently settled foreign residents.
12. At the time of finalizing this manuscript, historians were calling for a correction of the way the history of slavery and colonialism in the UK are presented in the handbook 'Home Office urged to correct false slavery information in citizenship test' *The Guardian* 22 July 2020, an issue we discuss elsewhere (Bassel et al., 2018; Bassel, in progress). See also El-Enany (2020).
13. Characteristics of each participant cited are provided in the text along with this reference indicating interview number and location, LN being 'London' and LC 'Leicester'.
14. Nationalities and occupations are referred to in more general terms where required to ensure anonymity.
15. For example, LN3, Female, Iran, in UK 18 years, citizen.
16. For example, LN31, Female, East European, in UK 24 years, citizen, please see details in the text.
17. Others suggest: 'Very often participation patterns and engagement experiences of migrant youth diverted from the traditionally established norms. These findings correlate with an argument that conventional citizenship has declined across many societies resulting in a gradual erosion of trust, political participation and interest in politics' (Mansouri and Kirpitchenko, 2016).
18. See also the broader literature on the political effects of naturalization: whether, and how becoming a citizen of the country of residence prompts immigrants to engage with the political system (Street, 2015; see also Bloemraad, 2006).
19. We note with interest cases in which participants expressed this attitude and had been in the UK for a long time.
20. Examples include helping new migrants in the community to learn English and access services for children (LN21; LN32); getting involved in parents' committees at school, housing committees in the neighbourhood, organizing street parties as well as own cultural community (LN31).
21. It is also another example in which the language practices and repertoire of multilingualism, a supposed cause of fragmentation, is actually necessary for community building (Khan, 2019). Such divergence from the politically ascribed one nation-one language ideology reflects the idealized nature of discursively constructing nations as only able to function monolingually.

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