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Stakeholder Identities in Britain's Neoliberal Ethical Community: Polish narratives of earned citizenship in the context of the UK's EU Referendum*

Derek McGhee, Chris Moreh** and Athina Vlachantoni

Abstract

This article examines the narrative strategies through which Polish migrants in the UK challenge the formal rights of political membership and attempt to redefine the boundaries of 'citizenship' along notions of deservedness. The analysed qualitative data originate from an online survey conducted in the months before the 2016 EU referendum, and the narratives emerge from the open-text answers to two survey questions concerning attitudes towards the Referendum and the exclusion of resident EU nationals from the electoral process. The analysis identifies and describes three narrative strategies in reaction to the public discourses surrounding the EU referendum – namely *discursive complicity*, *intergroup hostility* and *defensive assertiveness* – which attempt to redefine the conditions of membership in Britain's 'ethical community' in respect to welfare practices. Examining these processes simultaneously 'from below' and 'from outside' the national political community, the paper argues, can reveal more of the transformation taking place in conceptions of citizenship at the sociological level, and the article aims to identify the contours of a 'neoliberal communitarian citizenship' as internalised by mobile EU citizens.

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Introduction

The UK's 2016 EU Referendum was the pinnacle of protracted public debates in which the question of 'free movement' rights had occupied centre stage. The thrust of the 'free movement' principle is the entailed *citizenship* rights designed to guarantee EU 'migrants' equal treatment to 'native' member-state citizens in their access to the labour-market and social welfare, as well as certain limited rights of political participation. This configuration of rights has allowed, on the one hand, for the perception that welfare generosity was the main driver behind intra-EU destination choice – the so-called 'welfare magnet' hypothesis

(Borjas 1999; Razin and Wahba 2015) – to become a pervasive trope in the media and public discourse, alongside concerns over unfair competition at the lower-end of the labour market (Balch and Balabanova 2014; Allen 2016; Blinder and Allen 2016; McCollum and Findlay 2015). On the other hand, the limitations of the political component of EU citizenship have only become evident to EU 'migrants' in the UK when the Parliamentary franchise was applied in respect to the EU Referendum, a plebiscite on a question directly affecting their citizenship rights (cf. McGhee and Piętka-Nykaza 2016). In one possible reading of the EU Referendum in relation to 'free movement' based on the observed curtailment of the social and political edges of EU citizenship, therefore, it reaffirmed a conception of citizenship bound around some principle of 'nationality' (cf. Miller 2000: 81–96; Miller 1995). As Masquelier (2017) noted, 'the vote *against* the EU was in fact also a vote *for* a particular idea of England' (2017: 1; emphasis in original).

In this paper we aim to qualify this reading of the EU Referendum as a unitary process of renationalisation of citizenship rights, and to reveal the contours of another conception of citizenship that underpinned the Referendum process, which is markedly distinct from one based on 'nationality'. We attempt this through a novel qualitative insight into folk conceptualisations of the relationship between the 'social' and the 'political' dimensions of European citizenship as it emerged in the context of the Referendum process, from the perspective of the UK's largest and most established EU 'migrant' community, that of Polish nationals (White 2011; Burrell 2009). Such a perspective 'from below' and, simultaneously, 'from outside' the national political community, the paper argues, can reveal more of the actual transformation taking place in conceptions of citizenship at the sociological level than could normative analyses of prescriptive political strategies and discourses.

Empirically, the paper identifies and examines discursive narratives emerging from optional qualitative open-ended elaborations on two multiple-choice online-survey questions concerning (1) the perceived legitimacy of the Referendum and (2) EU nationals' exclusion from the political decision-making process. The survey was conducted over the three months running up to the EU Referendum, a period of heightened emotional charge dominated politically by Prime Minister David Cameron's attempts to renegotiate the UK's terms of EU membership by securing – or rather confirming – national rights to limit EU migrants' access to certain welfare provisions (Glencross 2016). Perhaps unsurprisingly in this broader discursive context, the textual responses provided by our Polish participants were not mere clarifications or elaborations on their chosen answers to the two essentially *political* questions, but coalesced into broader emergent narratives concerning *social welfare* entitlements. In effect, questions of political citizenship and national sovereignty were recast in terms of social citizenship and the ethics of belonging.

Through the data to be presented we argue that rather than unambiguously supporting the UK's continued EU membership – as one might reasonably be inclined to expect given Poles' legal status as EU citizens – the EU Referendum was a site of symbolic struggle for Poles determined to claim belonging in an ethical (but not political or national)

community based on neoliberal principles of hard work and economic independence. Our respondents' views were generally more favourable to the Eurosceptic position, in cases mimicking the dominant public discourse on these issues. It is this puzzle that the article addresses by arguing that instead of calculating their choices in accordance with their legal status, Polish EU migrants often base their ethical outlook on their social status as people who have made their lives in Britain and seek recognition as such.

We propose that the identified narratives can be interpreted as narrative 'strategies' through which social actors situated outside the UK's political community negotiate their belonging to its 'community of value' (Anderson 2013), or its 'ethical community' (Miller 2000; Miller 1995). The notion of community conceived of is, of course, necessarily different from that assumed by Anderson or Miller, and the paper contends that the examined narratives reveal the sociological operation of a form of 'neoliberal communitarian citizenship' which emphasises the importance of work and economic contribution as central to the ethical foundation of the 'nation' (van Houdt, et al. 2011; Hansen and Hager 2010). This invites a reinterpretation of the Referendum as a multi-layered process, which, on the one hand, excluded EU 'migrants' from political participation and challenged their rights, while at the same time allowing for a segment of them to feel represented in the ethical re-bordering of Britain's community of value along so-called 'neoliberal' principles (Jordan and Brown 2007).

The EU Referendum and Britain's 'neoliberal ethical community'

Public debates on 'immigration' are symptomatic of 'deeper (and often submerged) values and ideational structures' and can thus reveal fundamental aspects of a nation's conception of itself (Balabanova and Balch 2010: 384). The debates around 'free movement' during the months preceding the EU Referendum are no exception. The social-psychological mechanisms underlying such phenomena, as often identified in the literature, operate through incessant processes of nation-building and ethno-national boundary work (Wimmer 2013). Whether acting from top down or bottom up – driven by elite agendas or shaped by everyday social interactions in the public sphere – they effectively delineate 'communities of value' populated by 'good citizens', whose malleable borders are shaped by their interaction with externally excluded 'non-citizens' and internally rejected 'failed citizens' (Anderson 2013). During the EU Referendum debates this 're-bordering' focused particularly on non-citizens who nevertheless were seen as enjoying full social citizenship entitlements. It is in this sense that the political renegotiation of the terms of Britain's EU membership can be interpreted as the culmination of decades-long processes effecting a restructuring of the ethical foundations of Britain's 'community of value', the characteristics of which are worth briefly disambiguating.

The restructuring of the borders of Britain's 'ethical community' over the past four decades has arguably centred on the idea of social deservingness, to the effect that the

popular concerns emerging from the more recent trends of 'superdiversification' in local communities (cf. Vertovec 2007) were absorbed into this broader discursive frame (Bommes and Geddes 2000; Kootstra 2016). In their analysis of UK public debates on the free movement of people over a crucial seven-year period landmarked by the 2007 EU enlargement, the economic recession and the electoral defeat of Labour, Balch and Balabanova (2014) have emphasised not only the general dominance of 'communitarian' – as opposed to 'cosmopolitan' – frames in media discourses, but also a noticeable shift over time from a general economic nationalism towards a more specific welfare chauvinism, and within the latter, a move from issues such as education, healthcare or housing, to that of 'immigrants'' access to social benefits (2014: 26).

This period has also seen a clear shift in the general publics' attitudes towards the role of the British welfare state in general (Hamnett 2014). As reflected in the 2012 British Social Attitudes Survey, more than half of the British population believed that 'people would "stand on their own two feet" if benefits were less generous with only 28 per cent disagreeing', while results from the 1993 survey had shown the exact opposite distribution of opinion (Goodhart 2012, quoted in Hamnett 2014: 492). Goodhart (2012) also puts forward a description of the ethical restructuring process paralleling this attitudinal shift: as society as a whole has grown richer and income inequalities have increased, so has the 'social distance between middle Britain and the typical social security recipient', with the latter becoming 'more like a separate caste'; 'The average taxpayer thinks that too many people are getting something for nothing' (Goodhart 2012: np), and as such, they are perceived as 'failed citizens' undeserving of inclusion in the nation's core ethical community (Anderson 2013).

A commonly invoked explanatory framework for these processes is offered by the rather vague term 'neoliberalism'. As critical observers often caution, processes defined as such are undoing the progressive achievements of modern citizenship as envisioned by T. H. Marshall (1950), starting with social rights as its supposed evolutionary frontline and down to the bases of democratic politics (Brown 2015; Masquelier 2017; van Houdt, et al. 2011; Soysal 2012). At the same time, these principles have been forging such 'mutated' forms of 'post-national' citizenship – neither premised strictly on nationality, nor reliant on universalist ideals (Ong 2006; Harmes 2012; Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010) – that were experienced as enabling by many intra-EU movers (Jordan and Brown 2007; Favell 2014).

Neoliberalism is most often conceptualised as a model of (govern)mentality: a 'new form of governmental reason' that 'configures all aspects of existence in economic terms' (Brown 2015: 9, 17). Adopting this analytical framework, van Houdt, et al. (2011) have also observed the emergence of a 'neoliberal communitarian citizenship' model in Britain and other Western-European countries, which simultaneously emphasises the value of 'earned citizenship', individual responsibility, and a policy focus on strengthening the 'national community'. Hansen and Hager (2010) discuss developments 'within EU citizenship politics' in very similar terms, raising questions about whether the emergent 'neoliberal communitarianism' is indeed rooted in national policies rather than in broader

'supranational' processes. The latter, according to Hansen and Hager (2010: 97; emphasis in original), rely on balancing the 'twin goals of economic competitiveness *and* social cohesion' by way of

> ambiguous appeals to social citizenship, and concrete commitments to redefining the "social" away from the unconditional social right of the welfare state towards a focus on citizens' responsibilities to make themselves "employable" and "adaptable" in the transition to a globalized knowledge-based economy (2010: 97).

In this article we adopt a characterisation of Britain's 'community of value' as one reliant on such ideals of 'neoliberal communitarianism', while shifting the analytical perspective from that of 'governmentality' to a bottom-up and outside-in sociological approach, by focusing empirically on the question of how *non-citizens* themselves 'actively' partake in the redefinition of Britain's ethical community. What we expose for analysis is thus the process through which migrant voices make visible and audible the often unspoken consensus that unifies Anderson's (2013) depiction of the 'community of value', or Miller's (1995) position on the nation as an 'ethical community'. What is interesting about this process is that our participants' assertion of their membership of Britain's 'community of value', while sharing many of the characteristics of Anderson's differentiating and judgemental community in terms of expected criteria of membership, it nevertheless does not rely on formal criteria of national membership, but rather on economic identities as hard-working and solvent migrants who actively contribute to the economy. It is for this reason that we differentiate the term 'neoliberal ethical community' from Anderson's more value-laden categorisation of the good citizen, or Miller's (1995) treatment of ethical communities as 'solidaristic communities' (see also Miller 1999). Instead, what we observe has more in common with Miller's (1999: 27) depiction of 'instrumental associations', or rather the instrumental assertion of membership claims by a group of seeming outsiders through emphasising not necessarily the common values of the good and ethical citizen, but the instrumental values of a 'neoliberal' ethics of community.

Nevertheless, we aim to adopt the explanatory framework of 'neoliberalism' descriptively, not as 'a term of abuse' (Favell 2016: 2), and not despite but due precisely to its ambiguity. The latter allows us to treat it loosely as a set of social-psychological dispositions whose meaning is to be arrived at through empirical analysis. As such, we discuss our participants' statements as reflecting a combination of 'communitarian' and 'neoliberal' elements in their vision of 'citizenship' and 'belonging'. Our analysis and findings tie in with other recent research on Polish 'migrants' in the UK, which has already highlighted a surprising alignment between Poles' attitudes towards welfare deservingness and those of the majority population (Osipovič 2015), finding that 'some of the aspects of post-socialist subjectivities dovetail unexpectedly with the neoliberal project' of the host country' (Matejskova 2013: 984).

Data and methodology

The data analysed in this paper originate from an online survey conducted between 11 March and 23 June 2016. The questionnaire was translated into Polish – among other languages (see Moreh, McGhee and Vlachantoni 2016) – and we directly targeted Polish online communities, particularly through Facebook groups and the Facebook pages of the main UK-based Polish language newspapers. The data collection generated a cleansed dataset of 894 Polish respondents, whose main socio-demographic characteristics are presented in *Table I.*

Although our chosen method of data collection is prone to innate respondent and coverage biases (cf. Sue and Ritter 2012), social media in particular has been identified as an increasingly useful platform for accessing migrant networks (cf. Dekker and Engbersen 2014), and the adopted strategy of 'appropriate targeting' has proved effective at reducing biases and increasing the representativeness of our sample (see McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017, where we compare our sample to that of the Annual Population Survey). In the context of our present analysis, the most important cautionary note in respect to the latter is that our sample will reflect more closely the attitudes of women, those of working age and the economically active. Our sample also consists mostly of post-Enlargement movers, although their length of stay is balanced, with 30 per cent having lived in the UK for less than five years, 47 per cent for between five and ten years, and 23 per cent for over ten years. In terms of regional distribution across UK countries and relationship/marital status our sample compares well with that of the Annual Population Survey (McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017).

Table I here

While the questionnaire consisted of 194 question items, in this paper we focus mainly on the qualitative answers received in the open-ended optional response boxes connected to two multiple-choice questions:

(1) 'In your opinion, is it legitimate for the UK to hold a referendum on EU membership?', and

(2) 'You may be aware that non-British EU citizens living in the UK do not have the right to vote in the referendum. What is your opinion on this?'

The first question had three answer options ('It is legitimate, and it should be held', 'It is legitimate, but it should not be held', and 'No' [it is not legitimate]). The second question had four answer options ('I agree, they SHOULD NOT have the right to vote', 'They should only have conditional right to vote (e.g. depending on length of stay, employment etc.)', 'I disagree, they SHOULD have the right to vote', and 'Do not know'). All who answered the first question, and those selecting the second option to the second question ('Conditional right to vote'), were asked to elaborate on their opinion.

Table II here

The open-ended questions had been designed to provide additional space for elaboration on the answer-choices, but the rich textual data provided by our participants has allowed for a more comprehensive thematic analysis. As described in *Table II*, we received 161 qualitative explanations to the question of the *legitimacy* of the referendum, and 104 explanations to the question regarding EU nationals' *voting rights*. In total, we obtained 265 responses from 197 individual participants.

All textual answers were professionally translated into English, and we undertook a thematic analysis of the transcripts using a technique advocated by Boyatzis (1998). Initially, an overview thematic grid was produced to identify and collate the participants' views on the two survey questions. Relevant sections of the transcripts were then assigned appropriate thematic codes and refined sub-categories emerged.

Attitudes to the EU Referendum: a quantitative overview

If we interpret the EU Referendum as a political reaffirmation of nationality-based entitlements over supra-national rights, we would expect Polish nationals living in the UK, whose rights of residence, work and family life are largely premised on their EU citizenship, to be overwhelmingly opposed to the Referendum and supportive of the UK's continued EU membership under status-quo conditions. It would also be reasonable to assume that given the particular import of the issue to their statuses, a majority would have preferred to be able to participate in the Referendum. Based on the data emerging from our survey, however, we can begin to form a more nuanced understanding of how members of the largest EU migrant group in the UK related to the Referendum.

Three survey questions are particularly relevant in this respect: those on *legitimacy* and *voting rights* discussed above, and one concerning the *preferred outcome* of the Referendum. The distribution of answers to these questions are highlighted in *Table III*. As we can see, 44 per cent of our respondents thought that the Referendum 'is legitimate, and it should be held', another 24 per cent considered it legitimate, but believed that 'it should not be held', while 32 per cent did not consider the Referendum as 'legitimate'. The definition of 'legitimacy' was purposefully left open, inviting participants to further elaborate on their answers in the open-text sections.

In respect to EU nationals' voting rights, we see that 19 per cent believed that resident EU nationals in general should have been enfranchised, 15 per cent agreed with the Government's decision to exclude non-British EU citizens from the electorate, and an overwhelming majority of 64 per cent were of the opinion that voting rights should have been granted, but only dependant on certain conditions, which in the qualitative comments were tied mostly to residency and economic participation.

Finally, in respect to the preferred outcome of the Referendum, while only few (6 per cent) were supporting a Brexit outcome, the most popular response option was for the 'UK to stay in the EU *only if* it gains more freedom to make its own laws' (45 per cent). This formulation had been chosen to reflect popular expressions in political discourse at the time of the Referendum campaign – what we later refer to as the *mainstream political narrative* illustrated through the Prime Minister's statement following the Government's negotiations with the EU representatives ahead of the Referendum (Cameron 2016). Comparatively, only 33 per cent supported the status quo, and 17 per cent were favouring further EU integration.

Table III here

These results first and foremost highlight the lack of an unequivocal condemnation of the Referendum and EU nationals' exclusion from the decision-making process, as well as a set of more complex attitudes towards its outcome – indeed, a complexity that had been notably denied to enfranchised voters – that does not lend itself readily to interpretation. Nevertheless, support for an idea of 'national' popular sovereignty interlaced with non-nationality-based principles of democratic political participation appears to be the more general aspect of the underlying ideational picture. The question, then, is the substantive meaning attributed to the 'nation', the 'ethical community', by a group of social actors situated without its political boundaries. We will attempt to work towards an explanatory hypothesis from the qualitative data relating to the first two of the discussed survey questions. In the ensuing analysis, therefore, we will focus primarily on trying to elucidate the more counterintuitive aspects of the findings emerging from the above quantitative overview, duly acknowledging at the same time that these may not be the prevailing attitudes of a majority of the target population.

Narrative strategies of ethical positioning

Many of our participants' textual elaborations on the survey question concerning the 'legitimacy' of the Referendum were short statements mirroring divergent philosophical positions on the virtues and pitfalls of direct democracy: 'People should decide on their own future, not the politicians', said one respondent (Male, 47 years old, 5y7m in UK; L1, V2, O2), and another echoed that 'The British have the right to decide about the future of their country' (Female, 44, 4y1m; L1, V2, O3).[i] Others, however, considered that 'British society is not ready to take part in such an important vote. People have incorrect information, illusionary dreams and concerns' (Female, 35, 4y2m; L3, V2, O2); or, expressed more coarsely, 'This society is too ignorant and uneducated to understand the consequences of leaving the EU' (Male, 38, 6y7m; L3, V–, O3).

Some participants also reflected on their outsider status in the British political community and were rather forthright about the conflict between their moral stance and pragmatic position in respect to the Referendum:

> It is a justified decision, but from my personal point of view this referendum shouldn't be taking place, because leaving the EU would work to my disadvantage. (Male, 45, 11y10m; L2, V2, O3)

> I have a dilemma regarding this, because for me, someone without the British citizenship, this referendum isn't beneficial, but perhaps if I had it, I would be in favour of it… (Female, 51, 3y8m; L2, V2, O2)

Often the answer option that the Referendum was 'legitimate, but should not be held' offered a resolution to such moral 'dilemmas'. We can also see from the quoted respondents' chosen answers to the three survey questions that there is no direct relationship between opinions on legitimacy and outcome preferences, between means and ends.

More interestingly, the thematic analysis has also brought to light an emergent narrative theme centring on the seemingly unrelated issue of *social welfare* rights, which, moreover, connected up with the question on the voting rights of EU citizens. This may be unsurprising in the context of the broader political and media discourse at the time, dominated by an unqualified acceptance of the disputed 'welfare magnet hypothesis' (Razin and Wahba 2015; Giulietti 2014). As then Prime Minister David Cameron had expressed it, 'preventing our welfare system acting as a magnet for people to come to our country' was an important aim in his widely publicised negotiations with the EU, and the Government's campaign in favour of remaining a member of a reformed EU was itself premised on having secured the right to introduce 'tough new restrictions on access to our welfare system for EU migrants – no more something for nothing' (Cameron 2016: , para. 44 and 5). Reactions to such coupling of welfare abuse and free movement rights would therefore be expected.

However, one theoretically plausible narrative reaction – namely, the defence of 'free movement' ideals on post-national ethical grounds and of EU citizenship as an entitlement – was conspicuously absent. This also chimes with earlier research focusing specifically on the question of Polish migrants' attitudes to welfare deservingness, where 'participants perceived some of the rights conferred by the EU as normatively dubious' (Osipovič 2015: 741). Instead, what we find are different strategies of positioning oneself in respect to an ethical community defined through work, economic contribution and self-management, values that we have earlier described as stemming from more general principles of neoliberal 'social ordering' (Masquelier 2017). We propose that these can be understood as 'strategies of boundary making: different ways in which individual and collective actors can relate to an existing, established mode of classification and closure, and how they can attempt to enforce their vision of the legitimate divisions of society' (Wimmer

2013: 44). Our participants' vision of legitimate societal divisions, as we will argue, is fundamentally reliant on a vision of the 'neoliberal ethical community'.

In the following we briefly exemplify the three main narrative strategies that we have identified – *discursive complicity*, *intergroup hostility* and *defensive assertiveness* – before discussing how they ground an implicit ethical challenge to classical conceptions of citizenship based on 'nationality'.

Discursive complicity

In essence, the strategy of *discursive complicity* entailed the appropriation of the 'welfare magnet hypothesis' in the variant that had permeated public discourse. As one respondent expressed it:

> There are too many people here who want to take from the state without giving anything back; this has to stop. People who arrive in the country need to work first for a period of time, rather than start claiming benefits right away. (Female, 44, 6y2m; L2, V2, O2)

We find reflected in this quotation not only the political mainstream's position on socio-economic contribution – 'no more something for nothing' (Cameron 2016: para. 5) –, but also its policy remedy: 'that EU migrants cannot claim the new unemployment benefit … while looking for work', those 'who haven't found work within 6 months can now be required to leave', while those in work 'will have to wait 4 years until they have full access to our benefits' (Cameron 2016: , Para. 50–52).

A complicit acceptance of the dominant discourse, however, did not necessarily determine views on the legitimacy of the Referendum. While it was perceived by some as a welcome opportunity to establish a legal distinction between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' migrants, others have also highlighted the potentially detrimental effects of the process:

> There are hundreds of people who are choosing to come to the UK only to take advantage of the welfare system. … That's why the referendum should be held, so that people are given the opportunity to voice their opinion on this matter. (Female, 30, 5y1m; L1, V1, O2)

> The UK should find a way of stopping people from claiming benefits, which would reduce the immigration numbers. Instead what this referendum is doing is deepening the negative attitudes of English people towards the immigrants from Eastern Europe. (Female, 44, 8y3m; L3, V2, O4)

In its ideal type *discursive complicity* finds the narrator fully represented by the dominant political discourse that it reproduces. As such, it sits best with an attitude towards the

Referendum which supports the latter's legitimacy and propriety, the exclusion of EU nationals from the electorate, and the UK's continued membership of a *reformed* European Union (as in the penultimate quotation). As an ethical positioning strategy it is apolitical insofar as it leaves unchallenged the fundamental tenets underlying the mainstream narrative regarding migration and the free movement of people. Yet, it carries an *implicit* challenge to 'the nation'. From a discourse-analytical perspective the use of deontic modal verbs and expressions (e.g. 'should') is telling (Hart 2010: 73); they are aligned with the assumed ethical in-group of the mainstream narrative and directed towards the migrant out-group. From a sociological viewpoint, the narrator unambiguously positions herself within an implied 'Us' which is 'consonant with … an imagined community of value' but *not* 'the nation' in any ethnic and intergenerational sense (cf. Anderson 2013: 179--180). The boundary between in-group and out-group implicitly cuts through the non-citizen Migrant imagined as a group category – the implied 'Us' does not inhabit a Herderian world (Wimmer 2013). From a policy perspective, *discursive complicity* rejects group entitlements in favour of individual deservingness and earned membership in a 'neoliberal ethical community'.

However, *discursive complicity* is best understood as an underlying attitude, and it rarely manifests itself in its ideal-typical form. In the last quotation, for instance, we find a strong belief in the association between 'claiming benefits' and 'immigration numbers' coupled with a preference for the 'UK to stay and become even more integrated in the EU'. Behind this lies, in fact, an interplay with another strategy, that of *intergroup hostility*.

Intergroup hostility

Often our participants exhibited a tendency to mirror the public debates at that time of the EU Referendum in terms of the homogenising and alarmist depictions of migration to the UK as a social problem, especially in relation to non-EU migrants. As well as mirroring public opinion, our participants also took this opportunity to expose what they deem to be non-EU migrants' undesirable (and therefore, non-neoliberal) characteristics. It is here that the 'neoliberal ethical community' that our participants were attempting to insert themselves into – and indeed to be recognised as having earned their place within (through their hard work and paying their dues) – is further exposed for analysis through employing social-psychological perspectives that reveal the particular purpose that lies behind their hostility towards non-EU migrants: namely, to expose a 'them' whose behaviour and characteristics relegate these 'others' to an outsider status within the neoliberal ethical community.

Intergroup hostility operates through redirecting mainstream prejudices and fears to other groups bearing markers of foreignness and undesirability, revealing in the process embedded perceptions of racial and ethnic hierarchy (cf. Hagendoorn 1993). For some, the legitimacy of the Referendum was premised on its potential for 'Reducing the number of immigrants – the Romanians, Bulgarians and Somalians…' (Female, 34, 9y8m; L1, V2, O2), while others challenged the mainstream discourse for not differentiating between a

European in-group and a non-European out-group, the latter being cast as the undeserving outsiders:

> The immigrants from Europe aren't the problem; quite the opposite, they contribute to the budget more than they claim. The problem lies with immigrants from outside the EU and it is their status here that the Prime Minister should be negotiating. (Female, 35, 2y10m; L3, V2, O2)

The most commonly called out 'problem' groups were in fact ethnic minority groups who may be full members of the *political* community, but who were considered to lack adherence to the values of the *ethical* community: 'Indian people', as 'sometimes you get a family of ten sitting at home and claiming benefits' (Male, 36, 11y8m; L2, V2, O2), or 'the Pakistanis, for example, because they really abuse the system' (Male, 28, 3y7m; L1, V1, O1).

Another narrative linked the theme of socio-economic contribution to aspects of the dominant discourse emphasising the national 'security' risks of status-quo EU membership (cf. e.g. Cameron 2016: para. 141–142):

> Enough of immigrants from outside the EU; they destroy this country and only take without giving much back. Constantly giving in to Muslims has to stop. Britain has let in so many terrorists into this country; it's scary to think what they maybe be plotting; it's no longer safe here. (Female, 31, 10y8m; L1, V1, O2)

Interestingly, in the above example the Referendum is legitimised as a tool to limit non-European immigration. In a similar fashion, another participant expressed hopes that it 'will strengthen the border security and … that the country will be safer for it', although in her assessment the fault lies with the EU, whose 'open borders have allowed far too many Muslim terrorists to enter its territory' (Female, 33, 11y7m; L1, V2, O1). Others drawing on the national security rhetoric, however, were more critical of what they saw as a conflation between EU free movement and outside threats: 'Everyone is scared of terrorists, but why are the Europeans blamed for it? … this issue could be resolved differently, for example by strengthening the border security' (Female, 27, 4y10m; L2, V2, O2).

In the broader social-psychological literature similar attitudinal dynamics are often explained in terms of conflicts of interest arising from competition over scarce resources (Levine and Campbell 1972) or perceived threats to group self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1985), with the scapegoat theory of prejudice suggesting that the conflictive drive emerging from such situations often becomes redirected towards safe targets who are not the real sources of the threat, but under threat themselves (Allport 1955). In the context of our research, these more general psychological mechanisms also relate to broader ethical stances. Although one distinguishing aspect of *intergroup hostility* is its acceptance of racialized *group* distinctions – rather than merely individual attitudes – as a basis for legitimate belonging to the ethical community, this legitimacy is again derived not from a

sense of mere entitlement as European citizens, but from active economic participation and contribution aligned to 'neoliberal' ethical principles. In the process, what becomes inherently challenged is the idea of *entitlement* itself, including any rights derived from colonial histories or universal personhood (Soysal 1994; Bhambra 2016).

Defensive assertiveness

A third positioning strategy directly challenged Britain's core *national* community by differentiating it from the core *ethical* community through a defensive counter-discourse in which mainstream stereotypical representations of migrants are inversed and redirected towards the ethnic majority population:

> … English people often finish education at the age of 16 … have kids, claim benefits or work part-time and claim the rest from the state… Obviously I'm not talking about all British people; just like with immigrants, there are people with ambitions and there are those who live off benefits. (Female, 32, 1y6m; L1, V2, O2)

This reversal of stereotypes was accompanied by an emphasis on the indispensable contribution made by the Polish migrant community to the British economy. In this sense it is a typical strategy of 'normative inversion' (Wimmer 2013: 57). As one participant put it,

> I think that if we left the UK, there would be nobody left here to work. The work I do, for instance, is hard and I don't think that any British citizen … would be up for … this kind of work. (Female, 57, 7y7m; L3, V1, O3)

Again, this strategy of *defensive assertiveness* could harmonize with very different attitudes towards the Referendum. While from the perspective of the respondent quoted above a popular vote on EU membership was illegitimate and the status quo would have been the preferred outcome, for others the Referendum provided a welcome opportunity to prove their point: 'They're right regarding the welfare issues…. perhaps this would make English people take up work for once and not complain that immigrants take their jobs away' (Male, 37, 4y8m; L1, V1, O2).

The political strength of *defensive assertiveness* as an ethical positioning strategy has two sources: on the one hand, it can be rhetorically mobilised as seen in various campaign groups' attempts to organise general migrant strikes to demonstrate the importance of the migrant workforce (see Day and Bingham 2015); on the other hand, its underlying ethical narrative can be shared with a segment of the core national community. The stereotype of the 'hard-working Pole' in particular has permeated public consciousness in Britain and elsewhere (Anderson, et al. 2006; Friberg 2012; Spigelman 2013; Krings, et al. 2013; Osipovič 2015), providing Polish workers not only with a source of self-esteem, but also valuable political capital. As Daniel Kawczynski – the Polish-born 'pro-Brexit' Conservative

MP for Shrewsbury and Atcham – contended in a House of Commons debate soon after the EU Referendum: 'I dare to venture that if we wanted the ideal sort of immigrant, it could possibly be a Pole? Hard working, ethical—I will come on to all the attributes that my constituents talk about Polish workers here having' (HC Deb 19 July 2016, vol. 613, col. 303WH). Such narratives, as Friberg (2012: 1919) has argued, highlight 'the dual role of ethnicity in the labour market', as both 'a system of hierarchy and subordination' and 'a tactical resource available to (some) ethnic groups'.

The strategy of *defensive assertiveness* therefore couples tactical ethnic stereotyping with a conflictive attitude towards the UK's own 'failed citizens' (Anderson 2013). This second aspect is arguably another source of narrative strength, as it tacitly folds into the broader political discourse of 'neoliberal communitarianism' which challenges the idea of 'unconditional social citizenship entitlements' based on the nationality principle (Hansen and Hager 2010: 113), in effect allowing for the question of 'immigration' to be decoupled from that of social welfare: 'The problem the UK has is not immigrants but the welfare system which grants benefits' (Male, 40, 5y8m; L3, V1, O2), as one participant made the point.

Stakeholder identities and citizenship in the 'neoliberal ethical community'

Our analysis has so far identified different narrative strategies through which our Polish respondents attempted to position themselves favourably in respect to Britain's perceived community of value. Through this ethical positioning our respondents were effectively participating in a broader political discursive process aimed at redefining the ethical community of the nation alongside 'neoliberal communitarian' ideals.

Analysed from a governmentality perspective, the modus operandi of these processes has been described as balancing 'an increased emphasis on the need to earn one's citizenship' with an equally strong emphasis on 'the nation' (van Houdt, et al. 2011: 423). Others have examined similar phenomena at the supranational level, arguing that a kindred vision of citizenship had permeated EU policies, with a noticeable shift from a narrower 'market based' model towards a 'neoliberal communitarian' version that is 'highly compatible with the EU's broader embedded neoliberal hegemonic project' (Hansen and Hager 2010: 115; see also Soysal 2012). Arguably, what ties these multilevel processes together, is their shared emphasis on *earning* rights – rather than being *entitled* to them –, particularly through active participation in communities of value based on *hard work* and economic *contribution*. In a neoliberal ethical community 'citizenship rights are given credence only to the extent that they equip citizens to take on their responsibilities to make themselves employable' (Hansen and Hager 2010: 114). A tension may therefore emerge between two understandings of neoliberal 'communitarian' values, depending on the respective weight given to *work* or *nationality* in defining the core values of the 'ethical community'.

This tension is palpable in the positioning strategies discussed earlier, which, in one form or another, share an ideological complicity in the redefinition of Britain's community of value, while simultaneously challenging the existing boundaries of the 'national' community that distributes privileges based on intergenerational or historical rights. In many cases, as we have seen, ideological complicity provided a strong basis for identification with a mainstream political narrative often perceived as inclusive rather than exclusionary towards individuals and groups who satisfied the criteria for a work-based 'citizenship' despite being outside the political community which defines citizenship in the classical sense (Marshall 1950). The following quote is a vivid example of such reasoning and the theoretical tensions emerging from it:

> Not every European citizen claims benefits; some (like myself) work like a dog in order to live with dignity. In Poland I have never been given the opportunity to know what work is, because nobody employs disabled people, but here there's no problem with that. You feel part of the society, a human being. (Female, 27, 4y10m; L2, V2, O2)

We find here a vision of the British ethical community as one in which membership can be earned based on individual effort and self-management regardless of nationality or disability. It is also a close reflection of the EU policy discourse of 'neoliberal communitarian citizenship' resting on the argument 'that "a job is often the best protection against exclusion," and the only politically feasible option for securing social cohesion' in a globalised world (Hansen and Hager 2010: 114). Soysal (2012) describes similar developments as integral to Europe's 'new social project', which 'while expanding the boundaries and forms of participation in society, (…) at the same time charges the individual as the main force for social cohesion and solidarity' (2012: 2-3). 'In this scenario' – she goes on highlighting its negative consequences – 'the 'outsiders' are not only immigrants, but also the "lesser" Europeans, who have the added burden of proving the potential and worth of their individuality' (2012: 3). We could see such attitudes reflected in the positioning strategies discussed above, and so while Hansen and Hager (2010: 124) remained sceptical 'that this citizenship model will be "internalised" by EU citizens', our bottom-up analysis from the perspective of a group of 'migrants' who 'proactively engage' their EU citizenship (cf. Osipovič 2015: 741) is an illustration of how a certain vision of 'neoliberal communitarian citizenship' has become internalised.

However, our analysis also concurs with earlier research showing how Polish migrants tend to root the moral validation of their active engagement with EU free movement rights 'in their contributions to the British society and not merely in the legal framework of the EU' (Osipovič 2015: 741). What we observe in our data, therefore, is not a rejection of 'nationhood', but a permutation in the meaning attributed to the 'nation' as primarily a contribution-based ethical community. Earlier research has also identified 'work' and 'law abidance' as the two main forms of contribution seen by Polish migrants as able to

secure their 'unequivocal belonging to the British welfare community' (Osipovič 2015: 737). Similar criteria have emerged in our data in respect to gaining belonging to the 'ethical community' itself, inclusive of political membership. A particularly interesting picture emerges in this respect from our participants' attitudes towards their disfranchisement in the EU Referendum.

As we could also see from the quantitative distribution of the answers to the survey question regarding the voting rights of EU nationals (*Table III*), there was a general acknowledgement that some, but not all EU nationals living in the UK should have been given the right to vote, that this right should have been earned by satisfying certain conditions: 'Anyone who works in the UK, pays taxes and doesn't break the law should have the right to vote', opined one participant (Female, 22, 5y9m; L1, V2, O2); 'it could be determined by the length of stay in the country', proposed another (Female, 29, 9y11m; L3, V2, O2). 'The length of residence *and* social status are important' – added yet another participant – because 'there are also people who have been here and claimed benefits for ten years, and they live each day as it comes, such people should not decide about the future of everybody else' (Male, 29, 5y5m; L3, V2, O2). Concurring with the 'social status' criterion, another participant 'understood'

> that this right has been taken away from people who come here solely to use the benefits system (or mainly for that reason), but … there are also other normal people who are not interested in benefits and who work and pay taxes (and, sadly, support those who claim benefits), who identify with this country, and simply live here. (Female, 32, 1y6m; L1, V2, O2)

The idea that economic participation and contribution to the 'growth' of the economy should be the primary criterion for membership in Britain's political community was a recurring one. Combined with a sense of 'identification' with Britain and either a lighter domicile principle – 'simply living here' – or a stronger expression of 'rootedness' (cf. Shachar 2013) – e.g. 'we pay our taxes, spend the money we earn, and it's here we're raising our children' (Female, 29, 9y11m), or 'we pay taxes, vote in local elections, buy properties; we live here' (Female, 35, 7y8m; L3, V2, O2) – we can see emerging what could be called a 'stakeholder identity' (cf. Bauböck 2007).

Such an identity – and the form of 'citizenship' it envisages – challenges distinctions between the 'British' and the 'non-British' based on the nationality principle, instead equating Britishness and the right-deserving 'Citizen' as sharing one core ethical dimension of 'normality' – as in the block quotation above – or 'averageness':

> If someone's spent most of their life here, paid taxes, hasn't got a criminal record in this country, and contributes to the society in the same way as an average British person does, then I think they should also have the right to vote. (Female, 23, 9m; L1, V2, O3)

> People who work and pay taxes here but aren't citizens also contribute to the growth of the country, support it financially (by paying taxes), and in my view are no different to people who have the citizenship. (Female, 22, 5y9m)

> People who have been working hard in this country and have paid taxes just like the British, and who fulfil other formal requirements just like the British do, should also have the same rights to express their views on the matter related to their country of residence, their adopted homeland. (Female, 28, 7y11m; L3, V2, O2)

Together with the narrative ethical positioning strategies discussed earlier, the insight of these discourses of earned citizenship and belonging highlight the contours of a version of 'neoliberal communitarian citizenship' as internalised by Polish 'migrants' in the UK, which surfaced in the politically emotive context of the EU Referendum. As we could see, the Referendum was often legitimised by those who were arguably most directly targeted by its outcome as a process which could deliver a form of citizenship that shifts the focus from national or supranational *entitlements* to one reliant on individual *contribution* to the national ethical community of an 'adopted homeland'.

Conclusion and reflections

This paper has explored Polish migrants' attitudes to the EU Referendum through what we described as narrative strategies of ethical positioning in respect to Britain's community of value. Although these strategies could be interpreted merely as reactions to the existential uncertainties posed by the EU Referendum from a passive position of weakness, we argued that their strength lies precisely in their convergence with mainstream narratives that have long been challenging an ethics of deservingness reliant on passive entitlement, be it *national* or *supranational*. From this perspective, the three broad strategies that we have identified reflected more active forms of discursive engagement in reshaping the borders of the ethical community through 'quality assessments' of 'their own and/or others' performances' on the labour-market (Masquelier 2017: 5).

Our analysis began by highlighting some counterintuitive but far from unambiguous attitudes towards the EU Referendum as it emerged from the quantitative data collected as part of our survey. These data showed that a relative majority of our Polish respondents were in favour of the Referendum being held, believed that EU nationals should have had the right to vote but not unconditionally, and that neither should the UK's continued EU membership be unconditional under the status-quo. In trying to better understand the most counterintuitive aspects of these data, we have argued that the positioning strategies identified through our qualitative analysis, complemented with attitudes towards the right of political participation, highlight an emergent form of 'neoliberal communitarian citizenship' which had been internalised by some mobile EU citizens. This 'citizenship', we

argued, is forged through combining ethical principles of *contribution*, *domicile* and socio-economic *rootedness* with a *stakeholder identity*. It is worth emphasising again, however, that through this analysis we are not making any claims to representativeness, and we are not suggesting that all Poles espouse such 'neoliberal' conceptions of citizenship, only that this is one of several discursive repertoires invoked by Poles to narrate their experiences of Brexit.

As a conclusion it is thus worth reflecting on some possible shortcomings and avenues for further investigation. We would here highlight two such areas, although there will necessarily be others too. First, conceptually, there may appear to be a contradiction in our main argument that a certain conception of citizenship has been *internalised* by our participants, and the designation of the described positioning narratives as *strategic*. We would say that this is an inherent contradiction rather than an analytical one. Wimmer (2013: 44-78) provides a comprehensive description of 'boundary work' as 'strategic' in multiple ways that expand beyond a strictly economic or political definition of the term, which applies well to our analysis. We already noted earlier the ethical 'dilemmas' made explicit by some participants while attempting to resolve a conflict between their moral stance on the question of the Referendum and their pragmatic position in respect to it, and a similar awareness is evident in the following quote:

> Any decision resulting from the referendum will affect me and my family that consists of two little Britons. The only reason why I choose the [multiple choice] option which suggests imposing some conditions is to avoid providing more ammunition to those who assume people like me are only here to claim benefits and to put additional strain on resources… (Female, 32, 10y10m; L3, V2, O3)

While in instances such as these the *strategic* nature of the narrative positioning comes to surface, in other cases they may become internalised themselves. Disentangling the strategic from the ideological may still be possible, but it will require an in-depth critical ethnography beyond the scope and capabilities of this paper.

The above quote also highlights a second, analytic, caveat. While we aimed to highlight the 'active' character of the described narrative strategies and citizenship conceptualisations, we must bear in mind that our survey itself provided a unique space for such positive self-expression to a group of people who had been formally excluded from the political decision-making process and any medium of effective self-expression. Any attempt at shifting the boundaries of the nation, as Wimmer (2013) also accurately points out, ultimately 'depends on acceptance by the national majority, as this majority has a privileged relationship to the state and, thus, the power to police the borders of the nation' (2013: 29). Thus, what appears as 'active' involvement in mainstream political narrative processes, may actually stem from a discomforting awareness of powerlessness and exclusion. Furthermore, while the Referendum *process* itself may have extended to some individuals a sense of ideological representation as highlighted in our data, the Referendum *outcome* has

delivered an altogether different reality. Both the characteristics of the broader post-Brexit political ideological context and our participants' new circumstances remain outside the present analysis, requiring further investigation.

At the same time, while we deliberately adopted a descriptive, non-normative, approach to our data, the mismatch between the internalised ideological complicity identified in our analysis and the position of political powerlessness in which it roots allows the formulation of 'bare minimum' normative expectations derived from very 'real' empirical principles. Adapting the 'complicity' argument proposed by Michael Blake (2013) in the significantly more generous context of 'illegal' immigration, one could 'realistically' and to the very least raise an expectation of 'reciprocated complicity' towards the 'neoliberal ethical community', demanding that *where a community's social institutions either foster or rely on the free movement of people and their contribution, domicile and socio-economic rootedness, that community loses the moral right to exclude free movers from the full spectrum of socio-economic and political participation* (cf. Blake 2013: 112).

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Table I. Personal characteristics of the survey sample

		EU-Ref survey	
		N	**%**
Sample	Polish, over 16yo[1]	**894**	
Sex	Female	583	66%
Age	Mean (min–max; SD)	38 (19–65; 9)	
Age (groups)	Under 30	145	16%
	30 - 39	402	45%
	40 - 49	234	26%
	50 and over	106	12%
Years in UK	Mean (min–max; SD)	7y2m (1m–18y3m; 3y4m)	
Years in UK (groups)	Less than 5	267	30%
	5 - 10	417	47%
	More than 10	203	23%
UK Country	England	715	80%
	Wales	36	4%
	Scotland	122	14%
	Northern Ireland	18	2%
Relationship status	Married or in civil partnership	450	52%
	Not married (cohabiting / in long-term relationship)	140	16%
	Not married (single)	276	32%
Economic activity status	Employed (full-time)	512	61%
	Employed (part-time)	139	17%
	Self-employed	79	9%
	Inactive and unemployed	110	13%
Highest educational qualification	Master's Degree or above	141	16%
	Undergraduate/Bachelor's degree	107	12%
	College/post-secondary qualification	129	14%
	Secondary qualification	353	40%
	Vocational/professional qualification	130	15%
	Other qualification	5	1%
	No qualifications	-	-
	Missing	29	3%

Table II. The qualitative sample

Survey question:	Survey respondents (N)	Explanations provided (N/%)	
Referendum legitimacy	887	161	18%
EU nationals' voting rights	888	104	12%
	Total number of qualitative explanations	265	
	Of which:		
	Respondents answering both questions	68	
	Respondents answering only the Legitimacy question	93	
	Respondents answering only the Voting rights question	36	

Table III. The distribution of answers to three survey questions

		N	%
Referendum legitimacy (L)	(1) Legitimate and should be held	390	44%
	(2) Legitimate but should not be held	216	24%
	(3) Not legitimate	281	32%
	Total	**887**	**100%**
EU nationals' voting rights (V)	(1) Should not have right	132	15%
	(2) Conditional right	568	64%
	(3) Should have right	167	19%
	(4) Do not know	21	2%
	Total	**888**	**100%**
Referendum outcome preference (O)	(1) UK to leave the EU	50	6%
	(2) UK to stay in the EU only if it gains more freedom to make its own laws	398	45%
	(3) UK to stay in the EU under the current conditions	289	33%
	(4) UK to stay and become even more integrated in the EU	150	17%
	Total	**887**	**100%**

[i] Quotations include the following information: participants' gender, age, time spent in the UK, as well as their answers to the survey questions on the referendum's legitimacy (L), voting rights (V) and preferred outcome (O); see *Table III* for full notations. For reasons of readability, survey answers are sometimes excluded in repeat quotes from the same participant.