ATTITUDES TO NATIONAL HISTORY AND DIVERSITY IN GREAT BRITAIN

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ABSTRACT

The British sample's responses to the closed-ended questions in the ACS poll demonstrated widespread pride in national history, but more ambivalent attitudes towards cultural diversity. Responses to the open-ended question revealed differences between the national historical narratives used by people living in Scotland and England. People in England could invoke images of their national past in flexible ways, to support ethnic nationalist lines of argument, or else to construct critical, liberal images of the national present.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between historical consciousness and national identity has represented a contentious issue in Britain for the past century. On the one hand, commentators from the conservative political establishment often argue that history teaching should be used to instil patriotic allegiance. For example, in 2009 Michael Gove promised that a Conservative government would build a "modern, inclusive, patriotism" by ensuring that the school curriculum conveyed "the proper narrative of British History - so that every Briton can take pride in this nation"[1]. On the other hand, commentators endorsing more liberal political views have tended to endorse Geary's (2002) concerns over the tendency of national historiography to turn understanding of the past into a "toxic waste dump, filled with the poison of ethnic nationalism" (p. 15), and consequently advocate changes to school history curricula in the interests of promoting critical multicultural and cosmopolitan sensibilities (Ostler, 2009; Tosh, 2008).

Despite the prevalence of these debates, there has been little research on the ways in which ordinary social actors in the UK do currently understand their national history. The ACS poll provides a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between attitudes towards national history and competing understandings of national identity amongst the British public.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS NATIONAL HISTORY AND MULTICULTURALISM: THE CLOSED-ENDED MEASURES

In response to the closed-ended questions, British respondents generally reported positive attitudes towards their nation's history. Seventy nine per cent agreed with the statement, "*I take great pride in our history*", and 76% agreed that, "*we should maintain a strong connection to the past*", although fewer (47%) reported feeling "*uncomfortable with criticism about our history*". The youngest respondents (aged 18-24) reported the lowest levels of pride, and people aged over 65 years the highest[2]. Attitudes to national history did not generally differ by gender, income or level of education.

The ACS poll included several questions tapping attitudes to multiculturalism. On most, opinion in Britain was divided relatively evenly between the agree and disagree response options. On two questions ("*the majority should try harder to accept the customs…*", and, "*It is best for the United Kingdom if all people forget their different …backgrounds…*") responses were skewed towards the disagree options, and on one ("*I prefer living in a neighbourhood where most people share my cultural background*") they were skewed towards the agree options.

Surveys often reveal public ambivalence towards policies promoting ethnic inclusion and equality. In the case of the ACS poll, 61% of the respondents from Britain agreed that, "*Society is strengthened by having many cultural and religious groups*". However, of these, more than half also said that they preferred "*living in a neighbourhood*

where most people share my cultural background"; and 43% agreed that, "*If people of different ethnic and cultural origins want to keep their own culture, they should keep it to themselves*". Even more counter-intuitively, of those who agreed that society is strengthened by ethnic and religious diversity, 34% also endorsed the view that "*Having many ethnic groups weakens the national culture*", 40% agreed that "*It is best for The United Kingdom if all people forget their different ethnic and cultural backgrounds as soon as possible*", and 40% endorsed the view that "*A country in which everyone speaks the same language and has similar ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs is preferable to a country in which people speak different languages and have different ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs*".

It is tempting to attribute inconsistency in survey responses to problems with question wording, or else to a lack of political sophistication on the part of the respondents. However, we should not dismiss the possibility that public attitudes towards multiculturalism may be genuinely nuanced. An evaluation of the implication of cultural diversity for the "strength" of society need not correspond perfectly with assessments of what is "best" or "preferable". Similarly, "society" need not be interpreted as synonymous with "a country", and people might reasonably distinguish these generic categories from more concrete referents such as "the national culture", or "the United Kingdom"[3].

Because no single question in the ACS poll could be used as a reliable indicator of an individual's general attitude towards multiculturalism, I constructed a composite measure by summating responses to five questions[4]. Consistent with previous research on the correlates of racial and ethnic intolerance, there was a small relationship between attitude to multiculturalism measured by this 5-item scale and level of education, but not household income. Men and women did not differ in their attitudes. In terms of age effects, the least positive attitudes were reported by people aged 60 and above.

Findings from the closed-ended questions provided some support for the view that pride in national history may be associated with more exclusive views of national identity and citizenship. Pride in national history correlated with the composite measure of opposition to multiculturalism (r=.35). This correlation was higher for men (r=.39) than for women (r=.23), and was higher in Scotland (r=.45) than in England[5] (r=.31).

NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF NATIONAL HISTORY

The ACS poll included the open-ended question, "*If you had to summarize the history of your country up until the present day in a couple of phrases, what would you write?*"[6] Although responses were short, they provided a fascinating insight into the various lines of argument that could underlie the answers to the closed-ended questions. For example, although most of the British sample said that they took great pride in their national history, a high proportion of their narrative responses displayed negative or ambivalent attitudes towards certain historical events. This did not necessarily indicate a logical contradiction. In some cases, a "bad" national past could be construed as an essential precursor to eventual national development: "*Strong and brutal at times, but has made us what we are today*". In other cases, respondents adopted a heritage frame (cf. Condor, 1997), and expressed positive evaluations of national history in quantitative language (*lots of history, a long history*) and through reference to aesthetic considerations (*interesting, colourful, varied, exciting*). From this perspective, catastrophic events and malevolent characters can make for the "best" national history: "*lots of fascinating history. lots of wars, kings and queens some good some evil*"; "*Colourful, exciting and dynamic, often brutal.*"

Respondents from England and Scotland[7] did not differ in their answers to the closed-ended measures of attitude towards national history. However, there were clear differences in the narrative responses of the two groups. For example, in England "your country" was typically interpreted as a reference to Britain, whereas in Scotland it was more often interpreted as a reference to Scotland. People in England often used narratives of decline, whereas people in Scotland more often produced accounts of victimhood. Respondents in Scotland often treated the relationship between Scotland and England as the central thematic of their national story, but people living in England never did so (only two of the 609 England-resident respondents alluded in any way to the multi-national constitution of the UK)[8].

NARRATIVES OF NATIONAL HISTORY AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS MULTICULTURALISM

Due to the small number of respondents from Scotland, for this part of the analysis I focused specifically on respondents from England. To simplify matters, I concentrated on four subgroups, defined by answers to the closed-ended questions: (A) People who reported pride in national history and expressed strong opposition to multiculturalism; (B) People who reported pride in national history and expressed strong support for multiculturalism; (C) People who disclaimed pride in national history and expressed strong support for multiculturalism, and (D) People who disclaimed pride in national history and expressed strong opposition to multiculturalism.

Group A: Proud of national history, oppose multiculturalism

The narrative responses from this group of respondents often displayed classic authoritarian concerns over power, respect, leadership, and law and order. Their celebratory accounts typically focused on Britain's history of international leadership, and global influence:

> *"Had a good influence on other countries. Leader."*

> *"A glorious past which has helped shaped the world for the better and one which we should be proud of."*

Their narratives of national decline typically focused on Britain's loss of authority and autonomy in the international arena:

> *"once a leader now a doormat for anybody"*

> *"We ruled an empire and now we can't rule ourselves"*

> *"Britain conquered the world and then gave it all away to foreigners, and now we just do what america and europe tell us to do."*

These respondents often attributed decline in national fortunes to weak leadership and liberal political policies:

> *"We were great, but the PC brigade (another name for left wing views) have dragged us down."*

> *"Britain has formally been a respected leader in world affairs. However, recently our standards seem to have slipped leading to more family breakups and a loss of religion and morality and the higher standards of the past."*

Ethnic diversity and multicultural policies were often as evidence, and cause, of national decline:

> *"Our history is rich, but somehow over the years Britain is becoming less like traditional Britain. A lot of our traditions have either died out or are no longer allowed for fear of upsetting someone"*

> *"Was a strong world leader but now very third rate due to politicians and the influx of imigrants"*

> *"In the past our Country was a great one but in recent years things have taken a turn for the worse we have let too many imigrants come into England and I think that our future will be a lot different than it is now."*

Group B: Proud of national history, support multiculturalism

These people combined a positive view of national history with a commitment to liberal, inclusive, understandings of national identity. Their narratives were often characterised by integrative complexity, recognizing multiple dimensions of, or competing perspectives concerning, their national history[9]. People in this group were typically highly educated (83% had undergone higher education).

When these respondents presented celebratory accounts of national history, they were less inclined to focus on Britain's history of global political power than on cultural or technological achievements:

> *"Horrible history of Conquereres! Great and groundbreaking industrialists amazing scientific minds";*

> *"a country full of innovators and inventors".*

Their responses to the open-ended question often included optimistic narratives of liberal historical progress,

> *"an evolving understanding of the things wrong in the past eg giving the vote to all men and then women"*

or at least the potential for national redemption,

> *"Our history is very complex and interesting. We haven't learnt lessons from our past and need to look at what is happening at this moment in our country to make our future better."*

From this liberal perspective, Britain's declining global power could be cast not so much as a tragic fall from grace, as an ironic reversal of fortune:

> *"Invasions, empires, a source of medevil history full of legend. Then tea drinking empire, civilised, Got invaded, developed, invaded other countries, then apologised and gave them back."*

> *"We abused the world. Now we lecture it."*

Group C: Not proud of national history, support multiculturalism

People in this group generally displayed a critical, cosmopolitan consciousness. Their answers to the open-ended question commonly expressed negative attitudes not only towards British history, but also towards their nation, and towards nationalism as a general political principle.

When these respondents referred to national decline, they often used emotive, moral language, and characterised past national strength as illegitimate domination:

> *"Great Britain achieved perceived greatness by relentlessly bleeding dry countries too weak to fight"*

The members of this group were less disposed than those in group B to formulate optimistic narratives of national progress or redemption. Rather, they were inclined to depict their country as living in the past, still characterised by – increasingly unjustified -nationalist hubris:

> *"Dominating and leading invention but gradual decline leading to present day situation but many still believing we are world leaders."*

> *"Delusions of grandeur from a faded empire. The insecurity of an island nation."*

> *"thinks its stronger than it is. used to bully to get what it wants but no longer can"*

Unlike respondents in group A, these individuals did not discuss ethnic diversity and multiculturalism within a national decline frame. Rather, they treated cultural diversity as an historical accomplishment:

> *"Diverse country which has always been made up of many different peoples goes colonial, then tries to retain its prominence and power in a post-colonial world."*

> *"Many people from around the world have moved into Britain over the centuries and most have settled as part of the very varied, mixed community."*

> *"Many different groups from many different places combining over time. Social history of the country more interesting than kings and queens etc."*

Group D: Not proud of national history, oppose multiculturalism

The members of this group rarely displayed historical consciousness, or much inclination towards abstract social or political reasoning more generally. These respondents were the least likely to have experienced post-compulsory education. Their answers to the open-ended question seldom took the form of coherent narratives or even a chronological catalogue of events. Rather, they tended to provide minimal responses, often consisting of a single word or phrase, and rarely distinguishing between present and past:

> *"we line in a democracy"*

> *"reccession!!!"*

> *"Royal family"*

> *"History is History, I have enough problems at the present"*

Although people in England did not typically refer to enduring national character in their narrative accounts of national history[10], this particular sub-category of respondents did so relatively frequently:

> *"hard working people that have shaped my country"*

> *"stiff upper lip and respectful"*

> *"very colourful and interesting people"*

> *"Hard working"*

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The ACS poll provides a fascinating glimpse into current British attitudes towards national history and multiculturalism. The survey has some obvious limitations: in particular it does not allow us to compare the ways in which people from different ethnic backgrounds orient to British national history. Nevertheless, the data allow us to question the prevalent stereotypes of public opinion currently promoted by the British political and cultural elite. For example, it is clear that there is no straightforward relationship between pride in British national history and ethnic nationalism. Certainly, there is a correlation between survey measures of the two constructs, and among residents in England a subset of people do combine pride in the historical achievements of their country with resistance to immigration and policies of multiculturalism.

However, other people in England treat ethnic and cultural diversity as evidence of national historical progress. Moreover, many people in England who voice resentment towards people from ethnic minority backgrounds do not claim pride in national history or display any inclination towards historical reasoning.

More generally, the ACS encourages us to question elite representations of the British public as a homogenous opinion community, and as the passive recipients of historical information delivered through formal education. It is clear that people in Britain currently endorse a wide range of perspectives on national history. Moreover, individuals from different generations, who would have experienced very different formal education, can mobilise similar national historical narratives. Conversely, people from the same generation can use stories of their national past to construct both ethnic and civic versions of national community, and also to construct cosmopolitan critiques of national identity.

NOTES

[1] *Failing schools need new leadership*. Rt Hon Michael Gove, Conservative Party Conference, Wednesday, October 7 2009. http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/10/Michael_Gove_Failing_schools_need_new_leadership.aspx.

[2] In view of the large size of the sample, analyses use estimates of effect size rather than statistical significance.

[3] It is common for people to endorse more liberal views when policies are described in abstract rather than concrete terms (Luguri et al., 2012).

[4] The five items were selected using principle components analysis:

D4B Having many ethnic groups weakens national culture;

D4C Immigrants should give up their customs;

D4E I prefer living in a neighbourhood where most people share my cultural background;

D4J If people of different ethnic and cultural origins want to keep their own culture they should keep it to themselves;

D4R A country in which everyone speaks the same language/has similar ethnic backgrounds/religious beliefs is preferable to a country which does not;

The summated scale had good internal reliability (Alpha: .854).

[5] For purposes of analysis, the data from England exclude respondents from the *South West and Wales* region.

[6] Quotations reproduce the original spelling, grammar and punctuation.

[7] It was not possible to identify the population of Wales from the ACS data.

[8] These findings are similar to conclusions drawn from more focussed qualitative research in Scotland and England (Condor & Abell, 2006).

[9] This is consistent with their responses to the closed-ended questions: people in this group generally endorsed the view that "*we should maintain a strong connection to the past*", but also tended to say that they were not "*uncomfortable with criticism about our history*".

[10] People from Scotland relatively frequently referred to enduring national character (20%), whereas people from England were less inclined to do so (4%).

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