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Interrogating boundaries of the everyday nation through first impressions: experiences of young people in Norway

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ABSTRACT
This article interrogates boundaries of the everyday nation, based on how young people in Norway experience and reflect upon first impressions. The data consists of 289 texts written by pupils and 33 focus groups with the same youth. First impressions are conceptualized as boundaries of the everyday nation, characterized by heteronomy and multiplicity, as embodied encounters with emotional dimensions. Perspectives from both the observed and the onlooker shed light on relationality here. Everyday encounters trigger both automatic reactions and conscious reflections, which may be managed by the individual. Visibility and race are crucial to the dynamics of first impressions as sites where boundaries are (re)produced, harboring potential for both recognition and exclusion. Beyond mere boundary-making instances, first impressions, as situated encounters, hold potential to be sites for normative reflection on the nation and its boundaries. Relationality, we find, may contradict or trump, visibility as a taken-for-granted boundary-making mechanism.

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Boundaries; encounter; nation; race; migration-related diversity

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fronteras; encuentro; nación; raza; diversidad relacionada con la migración.

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Réflexion normative sur la nation et ses limites. Nous avons trouvé que la relationnalité pouvait contredire ou surpasser la visibilité en tant que mécanisme de production de limites tenu pour acquis.

**Interrogando los límites de la nación cotidiana a través de las primeras impresiones: experiencias de jóvenes en Noruega**

**RESUMEN**
Este artículo interroga los límites de la nación cotidiana, en función de cómo los jóvenes en Noruega experimentan y reflexionan sobre las primeras impresiones. Los datos consisten en 289 textos escritos por alumnos y 33 grupos focales con los mismos jóvenes. Las primeras impresiones se conceptualizan como límites de la nación cotidiana, caracterizada por la heteronomía y la multiplicidad, como encuentros corporales con dimensiones emocionales. Las perspectivas tanto del observado como del espectador esclarezcan la relacionalidad. Los encuentros cotidianos provocan reacciones automáticas y reflexiones conscientes, que pueden ser manejadas por el individuo. La visibilidad y la raza son cruciales para la dinámica de las primeras impresiones como sitios donde se (re) producen los límites, con un potencial inherente tanto para el reconocimiento como para la exclusión. Más allá de las meras instancias de creación de límites, las primeras impresiones, como encuentros situados, pueden ser sitios para la reflexión normativa sobre la nación y sus límites. Se sostiene que la relacionalidad puede contradecir o sobrepasar la visibilidad como un mecanismo de creación de límites que se da por sentado.

**Introduction**

As anxiety about migration-related diversity is on the rise, it is crucial to consider what constitutes the nation and its boundaries, and whether these can be negotiated. Consciously or not, people experience the nation and its boundaries in everyday life. Various encounters make these boundaries evident, as something to be upheld or altered, produced and reproduced. First impressions are one such encounter where the boundaries of the everyday nation are drawn. They can be characterized as embodied face-to-face encounters, as well as cognitive arenas that produce impressions in more or less conscious ways (Ahmed, 2000; Nayak, 2017; Wilson, 2017). First impressions are located in the realm of the everyday, which we approach as a domain of inquiry (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Jones & Merriman, 2009).

To begin, we open with quotes from two pupils (details on the data set are provided in the methods section):

Meeting someone with dark skin color, I will most likely think that he or she is from abroad and is not Norwegian, but even so they can be Norwegian. I know a lot of people with dark skin who are born in Norway and who are really just like me, just with a different physical appearance. This just shows so well how we humans judge based on first impressions, instead of opening ourselves up to opportunities.¹
Physical appearance is probably the biggest factor deciding whether you’re Norwegian or not. Physical appearance is the first thing you see and get an impression of. If you’re ethnic Norwegian, then at least two generations before you have been Norwegian. When people ask you “Where are you from?” and you answer “Oslo,” this might easily lead to follow-up questions, like: “But where are you really from?” If you have Norwegian physical appearance, you never get to that point in the conversation, which says something about how important it is to be “white” to be accepted as Norwegian.

The first quote reflects a physical appearance-based first impression. It reveals reflexivity, and underscores the temporal layeredness of a first impression, as something that occurs in a moment in time, but not in isolation from past experiences (Ahmed, 2000; Valentine, 2008). The second quote indexes a boundary to nationhood experienced as skin color, evoking the commonly used, yet rarely defined emic term “ethnic Norwegian.” The pupil connects national boundaries to ancestry, concluding that to be recognized as Norwegian, ‘whiteness’ is critical. Referencing the one-two punch ‘Where are you from?’ and ‘But where are you really from?’, the pupil underscores the issue of the right to naturally and without question belong (Antonsich, 2018; Koefoed & Simonsen, 2010; Skey, 2011).

We set out to interrogate boundaries of the everyday nation, using the case of present-day Norwegianness, and drawing on experiences of and reflections about the production of first impressions. We do so by addressing a three-pronged research question: i) how and to what extent are first impressions perceived and experienced as boundaries of the everyday nation?; ii) how do youth actively manage first impressions in this context (or not)?; and iii) how do experiences of and reflections on first impressions feed into young people’s ideas about what the nation is and what they think it ought to be?

First impressions are embodied experiences, with emotional dimensions, common to all people (Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Our analysis of first impressions as boundaries of the everyday nation centers on visibility, and more specifically on the roles of race (including whiteness/blackness) and attire (Fanon, 2008, 1963 [1961]; Hage, 1998; Malik, 2008; Skey, 2011). This focus emerges from our data, as the quotes above indicate. Questions of who is or is not assumed to naturally belong (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2010; Skey, 2011) and of assumptions about what national belonging looks like, were central in our data (see also Antonsich, 2018). Thus, visibility as it relates to recognition, on the one hand, and to social control, exclusion, and ambivalence, on the other, is central to our argument.

Yet, as the two quotes illustrate, when expressing national boundaries, power dynamics are revealed (Ahmed, 2000; Fanon, 2008, 1963 [1961]; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Belonging, national or otherwise, is relationally produced, as an individual’s sense of belonging and with regard to the politics of belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The production or non-production of boundaries in the unpredictable encounter that is the first impression depends on both the onlooker and the observed.

Interrogating the boundaries of the everyday nation through first impressions allows us to make a contribution to literatures on encounters, the everyday nation, and migration-related-diversity. Whilst attention to visibility and race, as well as embodied and emotional geographies, is not new, we connect discussions about the (potentially) dynamic nature of nations, with the power dynamics of race, but with attentiveness to the agency of young people in both managing their own boundary-making (in relation to first impressions), and reflecting on the normativity
Theorizing first impressions as boundaries of the everyday nation

The dynamic everyday nation

Debates about nationalism as either a primordial or a constructed phenomenon may seem passé. Whilst the primordial nation may be a social construct it remains a discursive reality, which has implications for everyday life (Goode & Stroup, 2015). We consider the nation as (re)produced in an institutionalized form – nationhood – yet simultaneously happening as events in everyday life – nationness (Brubaker, 1996).
Nations thus become subject positions that individuals identify with, as much as they identify with other members of the nation (Brubaker, 2004). But, nation is not necessarily an identity-marker overriding all others (Millard, 2014).

We draw on conceptualizations of the nation as ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983) and everyday experiences. Building on contemporary debates about the everyday nation and the salience of perspectives of ‘the masses’, we foreground agency in the (re)production of nations (Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox, & Grancea, 2006; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Accordingly, individuals are not considered passive recipients of macro-structural forces, but rather co-producers of nations in the everyday, reflexively or not (Brubaker et al., 2006; Edensor, 2006; Fox, 2017; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). This notwithstanding, structural constraints and racialized power dynamics within nations contribute to reproducing powerful national institutions as a backdrop to everyday life, often in largely unnoticed ways (Billig, 1995).

Cognizant of the roles of visible difference and race in contemporary debates about the everyday nation (Antonsich, 2018; Nayak, 2017), and belonging in diverse societies broadly (Malik, 2008; Tolia-Kelly, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006), we reject a ‘Manichean nationalism pathologically certain about its divisions (Self and Other; black and white)’ (Farred, 2011, p. 170). We draw on Rogers Brubaker’s critique of seeing nations as either civic or ethnic (Brubaker, 1999), what he describes as a ‘Manichean myth’, arguing instead for an understanding of nations grounded in the complex, contradictory, dynamics of everyday life (Brubaker et al., 2006). Such a rejection of a Manichean vision echoes Frantz Fanon’s conceptualization of nations, on the one hand embedded in a rejection of exclusionary, racist, colonial nationalism, and on the other hand, celebrating the (possible) emancipatory and uniting force of nationalism in a period of anti-colonial struggle, holding the promise of transcending race (Fanon, 1963 [1961]; 2008 [1963]; Farred, 2011). Through this, Fanon approached nations as potentially exclusionary, potentially unifying, as empty vessels that could be mobilized (2008).

This approach to nations differs from that proposed by Michael Billig (1995). Inspired by Hannah Arendt’s work on the banality of evil (1963), Billig unmasks the power of the unnoticed (re)productions of national institutions, which are (assumed to be) inherently exclusionary. We recognize that nationalism obviously has the power to exclude. However, we argue that mechanisms of boundary-making (Alba, 2005; Brubaker et al., 2006), especially as concerns ordinary people in their everyday lives, are both inclusionary and exclusionary, and that exploring their nature and dynamics should be an empirical question. The everyday nation, then, is both a site of boundary-making, and constituted by this very boundary-making (Strømsø, 2018). As we will now discuss, such boundary-making usually involves interpersonal encounters, which are embodied and involve emotional dimensions.

**Boundary-making in everyday encounters**

Our focus is on boundaries as socio-spatial practices in everyday (re)productions of national imaginaries of who naturally belongs (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2010). Following Michael Skey (2011), we acknowledge that for many, national belonging is a taken-for-granted backdrop to everyday life and the everyday nation’s boundaries are not necessarily consciously experienced or reflected upon.
Meanwhile, understanding encounters as bounded requires acknowledging their inherent heteronomy (Andersen, Klatt, & Sandberg, 2012). For a boundary ‘does not exist in and of itself’ (Sohn, 2016), but is (re)produced through the significance and content that involved individuals endow it with. That boundaries mean different things to different people can also be referred to as the multiplicity of borders (Andersen et al., 2012; Paasi, 2012).

Difference (and similarity) often play a role in interpersonal encounters (Ahmed, 2000; Wilson, 2017). However, difference is not fixed, but rather something that emerges from encounters (Butcher, 2017). Encounters may be considered unpredictable face-to-face meetings between individuals (Wilson, 2017). Yet, encounters are more than face-to-face meetings in everyday life, in the sense that they are intimately connected with the past and the future. They are also to a large extent a function of the many boundaries, power dynamics, and social relationships that an individual is exposed to, which may be more or less taken for granted (Ahmed, 2000).

Encounters, then, are sites where boundary-making takes place (Brubaker et al., 2006), but they are also, as we argue, instances where individuals may create, shift, and transform boundaries. Meanwhile, not everyone is equally positioned, and encounters are embodied experiences, often with emotional dimensions. The study of everyday nation engages with affect when ‘the nation emerges in moments of encounter between different bodies and objects through embodying, sharing, enjoying or disliking what feels national’ (Militz & Schurr, 2016, p. 54). It is relevant to point out that affect – and emotions – matter not only to subject identities, but also to the broader context within which encounters happen. Closs Stephens describes this in relation to the ways in which nations endure through affective and emotional atmospheres, which are also inherently political (2016). Here, attentiveness to the power dynamics engrained in embodied experiences, where differences, not least in terms of race, condition experiences, is critical (Nayak, 2017; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). This underscores the need to approach human experience plurally in relation to the different capacities individuals have for both ‘affecting and being affected’ (Tolia-Kelly, 2006, p. 216).

Everyday encounters have received significant attention in debates about diverse societies (Matejskova & Antonsich, 2015). Valentine (2008) discusses what living with diversity may entail. For example, situations where political correctness leads to civility, or when over-sensitivity to cultural difference causes unintentional othering. Over the past decade, the academic literature has experienced a convivial turn (Lapiña, 2016; Nayak, 2017), notably concerning the ‘meaningful’ encounter. While acknowledging the transformative potential of encounters, criticisms charge that conviviality is not a given (Amin, 2012; Halvorsen, 2015; Nayak, 2017; Wilson, 2017). The encounter’s potential for transformation or non-transformation lies in its nature as a site of boundary-making. In the context of this paper, encounters engender boundaries of the everyday nation which may be upheld, demolished, moved, or transgressed (Cresswell, 1996).

**First impressions as boundary-making encounters**

We argue that first impressions are connected to, but distinct from, further encounters for three reasons: their temporal limitation; their potential to lead to further interaction
or not; and individuals’ potential reflexivity or non-reflexivity before and after a first impression. This brief moment in time and space is the scope of our analysis.

While much literature has focused on the encounter’s temporalities (Ahmed, 2000), critics question the value of increasing emphasis on sustained and meaningful encounters (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Wilson, 2017). First impressions may be a starting point for sustained encounters, though they need not. Therefore, there is value in analyzing the spatial dimension of where first impressions happen, whether between passersby on the street with no prior or future interaction, or as the first of sustained encounters, such as at schools, or as several of our quotes exemplify, on public transport (Valentine, 2008).

Despite the first impression’s temporal limitation, it is a moment into which we bring our perceptions – for the purpose of this article – of the nation. Consequently, layers of temporalities accompany us during this brief encounter (Wilson, 2017). A first impression can crystallize nationness. Yet, nationhood as an institutionalized form remains present, informing our perceptions (of who may or may not naturally belong to the nation) and thrives off our experiences (of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the nation) (Brubaker, 1996).

Echoing Valentine’s (2008) analysis of a paradoxical gap between values and practices in encounters, we underscore actors’ agency as well as their automatic subconscious and embodied reactions. Individuals can manage their subject positions through clothes, religious symbols, body language, and hairstyle, but boundaries mean different things to different people, so the other’s response is never fully predictable. This kind of ‘performance of self in everyday life’ (Goffman, 1959) is of course not unique to the focus of our study, but rather a central trope of social scientific inquiry into interpersonal relationships, and the roles of agency therein. We draw on ‘implicit bias’, a concept developed in the study of human reactions to racial difference and later applied to gender, ethnicity, and sexuality (Fiske, 2004; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). The roles of implicit associations and automatic subconscious reactions (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2010) have also been acknowledged in studies of the nation (Fox, 2017; Sibley & Liu, 2007). This closely ties in with internalized imaginaries of what it means to be a national, and what a national ought to look like (Antonsich, 2018), where whiteness as a perceived key trait has a stronghold (Hage, 1998; Vassenden, 2010).

First impressions connected to physical appearance and race constitute the core of our analysis. However, it is worth noting that first impressions and recognizing the familiar are equally relevant to other types of identity markers, which may be differently embodied. For instance, two fathers each holding a toddler by the hand or two smokers huddling on a street corner are examples where mutual first impressions may be more readily viewed through the respective lenses of parenthood or being a smoker than through the binary of national or not.

Nevertheless, race remains a crucial dimension when considering boundaries of the everyday nation. We understand race as historically, culturally, and geographically constructed in discursive and relational ways (Malik, 1996, 2008). Concretely, people’s skin color, hair texture, and other traits are discussed as race. When people with different skin color from each other reproduce, their children may be described as mixed-race – testament to both the real and the dynamic nature of race. Meanwhile, everyday racism can very often be insidious and connected to neither a racist ideology nor individuals who would label themselves racist (Essed, 1991). Still, individual acts may be racist. The distinction between racist acts and individuals as racists is significant because it helps
understand racism as small-scale experiences. In this light, we can see human diversity as real and deem acts of racial discrimination illegitimate (Malik, 2008).

First impressions as boundary-making encounters where race matters center on visibility that leads either to recognition, or to social control, exclusion, and ambivalence. Our conceptualization of first impressions as embodied experiences with emotional dimensions draws on Fanon’s seminal work on race in the context of colonial injustice – *Black skins, white masks* – where he (among other things) questions the future roles of particular group identities, including racial ones, and instead focuses on the hope and freedom which lies in future shared communities, including the national (2008 [1961]). Considering the everyday nation as dynamic and as potentially conducive to both exclusionary and inclusionary mechanisms, we suggest that an individual’s investment of agency in boundary-making may yield effects. We do not deny the real challenges of racist power dynamics. We do, however, argue the need for investigations into concrete boundary-making processes of the everyday nation that approach the nation empirically. In this article, we do this by drawing on experiences of and reflections about the production of first impressions.

**Empirical context**

The contexts of both Norway and of upper secondary schools are of particular relevance to questions of changing notions of the everyday nation, due to their specific demographic and historical contexts. As of 2018, 14% of the Norwegian population are immigrants, whereas 3% are the children of migrants, and another 5% have one migrant parent and one Norwegian-born parent, adding up to more than a fifth of the population having some kind of migration-related background. Historically, as briefly mentioned, a narrative of sameness and homogeneity prevailed in Norway (Gullestad, 2002), and this has bearing on contemporary national self-understanding too (Bendixen, Bringslid, & Vike, 2017). Meanwhile, ethnic diversity was always present, with the Sami indigenous population, as well as other national minorities. Similarly, religious diversity is also not new, whether considering Sami religion, the Jewish minority, the diversity within Lutheran Christians, and also within Christian churches beyond the Lutheran. Diversity, however, in racial terms, is historically a relatively new phenomenon in the Norwegian context, which perhaps goes some way to explaining the prominence of questions exactly of race in the negotiations of everyday nationhood in Norway today (Erdal & Strømsø, 2018).

From the 1800s onwards, Norwegian schools have played a major role in the establishment and narration of a national consciousness, especially since the Norwegian constitution of 1814, and independence from Sweden in 1905. Schools continue to be key sites of (re)production of the nation. As with research on the nation in general, the majority of research on schools and the nation emphasizes the top-down perspective: how the nation is represented in curricula, textbooks, and policy documents vis-à-vis overarching educational goals (Edensor, 2006; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Mavroudi & Holt, 2015; Miller-Idriss, 2009; Osler & Lybaek, 2014). Meanwhile, emergent research on youth and the nation seeks to uncover the active participation of youth in (re)productions of nations, e.g. Italy (Antonsich, 2016) or Wales and the UK (Jones, Merriman, & Mills, 2016).
In relation to our research context, according to Osler and Lybaek (2014), ‘a monolithic national culture is reinforced in the school curriculum in Norway’, although some changes have lately reflected a more heterogeneous perception of the nation. Only more recently has a curriculum that reflects a ‘new Norwegian we’ and asymmetrical power relations materialized (Osler & Lybaek, 2014). In our data, clear patterns of difference in teaching between teachers (and schools) are not easily identifiable. It is noteworthy though that on themes to do with the nation, everyday experience from outside the school arena predominate in our material.

It is relevant to note, with regard to the Norwegian context, that the terrorist attacks of 22 July 2011 (at Utøya and the central government buildings in Oslo), where the perpetrator was motivated by anti-Islam, anti-migrant, Eurabia-inspired ideologies, have perhaps had less impact on public reflection about and discussion of diversity than might have been anticipated (Kolås, 2017). In our material also, we find a relative absence of references to the terrorist attacks and their ideological underpinnings in pupils’ reflections about nation and diversity (Erdal, 2018).

**Methods**

This article builds on a data set comprised of three types of sources: essays; transcribed focus group discussions; and background information about the research participants: young people in Norway. We collected our data in six upper-secondary schools, from pupils between ages 16 and 18. In order to gain geographic variation, a total of six schools, in four geographically representative regions of Norway were approached and selected: two in Oslo; two in Bergen; one in the country’s west; and one in the north.

The data drawn on in this article stems from all four geographic locations, as the salience of first impressions appeared in data across the schools in quite similar ways. Whereas it could have been assumed that there would be differences between the more diverse cities of Oslo and Bergen, and the rural and smaller city contexts of the west and the north, this was not evident in the data.

The pupils were first asked to write an essay responding to the prompt: ‘What does it mean to be Norwegian in 2015?’ All participants wrote between one and three pages on the topic, providing us with 289 essays in total. We subsequently conducted 33 focus group discussions with all participants, dividing pupils into groups of six to 10. The focus groups enabled dialogue and conversation about the nation, its boundaries, transgressions thereof, and perceived challenges of migration-related diversity in the public eye. The dynamics of the focus groups were strengthened by the fact that the pupils knew each other.

Recruiting research participants via schools provides a cross-section of the population within a particular age bracket and a certain geographic area. Inspired by the concept of superdiversity, such a strategy thus avoids reiterating notions of what the nation is or is not and, consequently, who are considered nationals (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015; Vertovec, 2007).

We engaged with the pupils on two occasions: first when introducing the research project and providing them with the essay assignment; and second, when we returned to the schools a few weeks after the essays had been written to conduct focus groups (see also Erdal & Strømsø, 2018). The focus groups were conducted following a structured plan.
with five components, which were identical to all groups. Our positionality, where one of us has an immigrant background, the other not; that both speak the dialect of one of the four locations of schools; that both are female and white, and that we entered the schools as adults, with higher education, was something we reflected on how to manage in engaging with pupils. The issue of positionality, particularly that of invisible immigrant background, was especially reflected upon.

Our analysis is based on the pupils’ reflections on and discussions about first impressions, drawing on text and focus group data. Everyday (re)productions of nationhood are largely considered as unreflexive, quasi-automatic, and ‘not easily available for analysis’ (Fox, 2017). We argue, however, that combining the two methods of essays and focus group discussions, as well as adding background information on the research participants, provides us with the necessary insights to analyze everyday (re)productions of the nation.

The following three analysis sections address each of the three research questions in turn. We start with how and to what extent first impressions can be perceived and experienced as boundaries of the everyday nation. We then look at how and to what extent first impressions are managed or not. Last, we examine the relationship between first impressions and perceptions, and experiences of the nation in the everyday lives of young people as these emerge normatively, including reflections on normative implications on what the nation is or ought to be.

**First impressions as boundaries**

In this analysis section, we address how and to what extent first impressions are perceived and experienced as boundaries of the everyday nation among young people in Norway. This contributes to shedding light on the nature of such boundaries; the roles that visibility plays in constituting many of the first impressions discussed; and on the relationality of first impressions as encounters, involving the observed and the onlooker:

P1: If you feel Norwegian, then you are Norwegian […]
P2: I agree […] but I am surprised at how much it has to do with first impressions.
P3: First impressions matter a lot, but when you get to know the person, then clothes, skin color, physical appearance, and things like that don’t matter anymore.

Participants in this focus group agreed that feelings of national belonging do – or should – depend on the individual’s own feelings of national belonging. However, they also agreed that first impressions function as a boundary of nationhood in everyday life. The boundary is (re)produced based on easily visible subject positions, such as clothing and skin color. As such, first impressions constitute an embodied boundary, reflecting dimensions of affective nationalism (Closs Stephens, 2016; Militz & Schurr, 2016).

However, these pupils do not consider first impressions to be a static, fixed boundary. They are open to the possibility that first impressions may just be first impressions, but also that getting to know a person renders the visible subject position irrelevant. The multiplicity of first impressions as boundaries lies in the different perceptions and experiences individuals have of this boundary. Sometimes first impressions are a boundary which can be transcended, where relationality (as interpersonal relationships of one kind or another) supersedes first impressions, but other times this is not the case:
P1: Let me tell you one thing, if you see me on the metro, and if you hadn’t known who I was, then you would never had said, him over there, he’s Norwegian, for instance. If you’d seen him [another participant], you’d either have called him a Somali, an African, or something else.

P3: I actually agree with what he’s saying.

P4: How people see me, that’s kind of how I see myself, I don’t go around and kind of say that I am something, like, different than what I am.

P5: Here I’d present myself as a Pakistani. In my home country, I’d present myself as a Norwegian. I don’t know how it is really, if I’m taking the metro, then I sit there and think: “Oh and this person is from there and that person is from there,” regardless of whether they’re born here and stuff, so we don’t think they are Norwegian at once because (…)

P2: Your background means so much.

P5: Your physical appearance and where it looks like you come from then, no one would guess that I’m sort of Pakistani, because people sit there and think that I am from somewhere, they would never call me Norwegian either.

P6: It’s first impressions, then, that’s how I think that you’re not Norwegian, but then the way you act and how you speak, so then one thinks that you’re Norwegian.

P7: I think first impressions are important.

P6: It’s the first impression that makes you think that you’re a foreigner.

These participants emphasize how their own and others’ first impressions, in this case on the metro, function as a boundary of nationhood. Encounters on public transport are fleeting moments; individuals pass each other with little to no interaction. At the same time, this particular arena is a prolonged event delimited in time and space (Ahmed, 2000; Wilson, 2017). A crucial point is emphasized by P5’s statement ‘then I sit there and think’. The pupil has time to form first impressions and can consider, besides skin color and clothing, embodied experiences of sound (e.g. dialects, accents, and languages spoken) as well as smell.

We chose to consider clothes and skin color in detail because the pupils themselves emphasized these traits, when reflecting upon who or what naturally belongs within their perceptions of nationhood.

P1: How you dress?

P2: Does it matter?

P1: I don’t think it is important, but I have witnessed so many [people] who automatically think that if people wear scarves or wear…

P2: Pakistani clothes.

P1: Or at Furuset [residential area in Oslo, with a high proportion of people with a migrant background] the men also wear those…

P3: The white things.

P1: Yes, those that goes all the way down [to the ground]. It is a bit difficult to think that from what you see that they are Norwegian. Not if you know the people and know their background and stuff, know how they live. Then it is easier to think of them as Norwegian, but if you only see them walking in the street, and you see someone dressed in a certain way, you don’t automatically think of them as
Norwegian. You don’t see everything by their physical appearance, but if you know the people, background and their life, then it is easier.

This discussion reflects a taken-for-granted social categorization concerning clothing worn in everyday life and whether or not it represents a boundary for being perceived as a member of the nation. The pupils acknowledge throughout the discussion that an automatic connection may not exist between perceptions of what constitutes Norwegianness and clothes typically worn in another part of the world. However, actually knowing someone who wears such clothing makes all the difference. Because individuals bring a layer of temporalities into each encounter (Ahmed, 2000; Wilson, 2017), previous experiences may influence and perhaps contribute to the fact that first impressions as boundaries are not static (Andersen et al., 2012).

In the introduction, we quoted a pupil saying: ‘Meeting someone with dark skin color, I will most likely think that he or she is from abroad and is not Norwegian, but even so they can be Norwegian’. Here an onlooker shares what she observes. Her reflections are the result of her relationships with people who are not white. In the next extract, pupils with differing skin color express their experiences of being observed by onlookers.

P1: Skin color is irrelevant.
P2: Absolutely.
P3: I think it is irrelevant, but still, it does matter, for what others…
P1: But for being Norwegian then…
P3: For yourself it is not important, but I feel that…
P2: It may be easier to be seen as Norwegian if you don’t have a different skin color.
P1: Yes, in particular, first impressions.
P2: By looking at others then…
P1: With first impressions and stuff, it matters a lot for what other people think of you, but for what you think of yourself, it is…

In youths’ everyday life, skin color, whiteness, and race are highly visible subject positions for belonging to the nation (Ahmed, 2000; Antonsich, 2018; Hage, 1998; Vassenden, 2010). The onlookers’ perspectives, their first impressions and the assumptions made about others’ belonging based on such first impressions, stand out. As one pupil states: ‘It may be easier to be seen as Norwegian if you don’t have a different skin colour’. Notably, there is no need to say, ‘different skin color than white’ in this group discussion; white is the automatically perceived skin color associated with Norwegianness, even among youth who themselves self-define as Norwegian and are not white (Muller Myrdahl, 2010; Vassenden, 2010). Meanwhile, here visibility is shown to be relational, and potentially leading to both recognition and exclusion. There is the possibility that first impressions can be superseded through interpersonal relationships, but also the opposite alternative, that they are not, but rather contribute to upholding boundaries which are perceived as quite fixed. Experiences of race through first impressions become boundaries to the nation, and these are normatively questioned by youth, as we turn to in the final analysis section. The reflective and normative dimensions are where the extent to which first impressions are (or are not) experienced as boundaries of the everyday nation is most clear. The following analysis section addresses issues of the conscious management (or not) of first impressions as boundaries of the everyday nation.
Managing first impressions in everyday life

In this second analysis section, we focus on how youth do (or do not) manage first impressions. Entering a situation where first impressions happen can be a managed effort, by all parties involved. Each party may separately seek to manage its own or others’ performance and interpretations thereof. However, first impressions may also remain an automatic subconscious, and embodied experience, which may yield no further reflections, interpretation, or change. Under most circumstances, first impressions are not reflected upon. However, in some instances, people are expected to make efforts at self-presentation (e.g. a job interview, a blind date) (Goffman, 1959).

‘Of course, I don’t speak like this when I’m at work;’ a focus group participant said. His Norwegian sociolect was characteristic of youth of immigrant background in eastern Oslo. Youth who use this sociolect often self-describe as ‘foreigners’ (utlendinger). Our interpretation is that for some, this is a choice, as a measure to strategically relinquish power over social categorization (Antonsich, 2010). At his part-time job at a McDonald’s in another part of eastern Oslo, he spoke Norwegian ‘properly’, as he put it. When behind the McDonald’s counter, he was representing the company, thus dressing more formally and ensuring that his shirt was buttoned-up, all part of his performing a proper version of Norwegianness at work (Goffman, 1959). He felt able to negotiate his position from ‘foreigner’ (utlending) to Norwegian. Skin color was less significant because language and attire secured his position as a Norwegian at work.

This example shows how individuals may perform according to particular perceptions of what is expected from a national in everyday life (Edensor, 2002). Customers’ first impressions were this pupil’s concern, for that was also his boss’ concern, and thus key to the job. Language and clothing allowed him to control others’ first impressions, at least in the eyes of his boss. In this case, the agency exerted in consciously managing first impressions and juggling multiple identities was striking.

This echoes what Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) refer to as performing the nation, though they emphasize more banal expressions of the nation (Billig, 1995; see also Militz & Schurr, 2016). Our research participants performed the nation according to various perceptions of nationhood in different arenas. This example showed that despite skin color being seemingly non-negotiable, this pupil could still negotiate others’ first impressions by using language and clothes. How people heard him speak Norwegian and took in his whole person transcended skin color, revealing of the ways first impressions as boundaries can be mechanisms of both inclusion and exclusion. Here, relationality matters, but perhaps even more so the embodied and affective performance of nationhood, that contributes to first impressions being transcended as fixed boundaries.

The management of first impressions, however, is also related to their interpretation, as the below extract shows. These two pupils who wear the same type of head covering have different experiences of how others’ reactions influence their feelings of being Norwegian. This underscores the multiplicity and heteronomy of boundaries (Andersen et al., 2012; Sohn, 2016)
Moderator: Has anyone experienced being seen as less Norwegian because you wear a hijab?
P1: I haven’t
P2: I have.

Moderator: What happened?
P2: I don’t react to it anymore.

Moderator: But do people say things, or is it more that they look at you?
P2: People look at me and then they say, “Why don’t you take it off, it is so warm, it is summer now”, or “You live in Norway now, you don’t have to wear it”. I get things like that when it is summer.

One girl experienced others’ reaction as a boundary of nationhood as it made her feel less Norwegian. A hijab in itself does not imply automatically that first impressions will (re)produce a boundary of nationhood. First, she explains: ‘I don’t react to it anymore’. Perhaps it is an expression of resignation; she has grown so accustomed to her experience of being seen as different, which she feels reduces the extent to which she is seen as Norwegian. Such resignation might yield apathy, anger, alienation, or self-segregation.

We acknowledge the multitude of emotions that perceptions and experiences of first impressions as boundaries to the everyday nation may trigger or incubate, and the ways in which these are inherently embodied experiences, triggered by specific encounters situated in time and space (Ahmed, 2000; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). The experience of publicly wearing a hijab in Norwegian society differed for each girl, underscoring the subjective production of first impressions as boundaries in spatially and temporally situated moments. Yet, one girl’s experiences involved comments based on first impressions due to her wearing the hijab, such as: ‘You live in Norway now, you don’t have to wear it’. Her experience is that in the eyes of onlookers she encounters, her self-identification as Norwegian will never be recognized, at least not in the sense of her naturally and without question belonging (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2010; Skey, 2011). Meanwhile, her friend’s experiences – and interpretations of her experiences – contrast.

Overall, our data described many experiences of being the observed in the production of first impressions. While some responded with aggression and could subsequently uphold boundaries between themselves and what they perceived as an exclusionary Norwegian nationhood, some responded by feeling hurt or outright othered, as expressed by this pupil:

I have personally noticed that people have bad thoughts about me and my friends. We get mean looks from people, and people don’t want to be near us. I often experience that when the bus is packed, that people choose to stand instead of sitting next to me, when there are three free places and there are just people with foreign backgrounds who want to sit close by me. The people who stand often wait to get a seat next to someone other than me. This hurts sometimes. I feel that I am scary or something, and I am not. I just have slightly dark skin, but I have feelings and everything that everyone else has. I wonder what is so scary about me, which is not scary about someone with light skin. I often wonder if they think I am a criminal or something, but I am absolutely not. I get a thousand questions in my head and it is just sad.
The othering revealed in this quote is a source of disempowerment (Ahmed, 2000; Nayak, 2017). This pupil is highly aware of what is going on around him, yet also aware that there is no simple answer to how it relates to others’ first impressions of him; any and all possible answers are equally troubling, being undeniably related to his skin color (Fanon, 2007[1961]; Nayak, 2017; Malik, 2008; Tolia-Kelly, 2006).

The above examples show how youth do or do not manage first impressions. They show highly conscious management of first impressions, instances of recognition, but also resignation, disempowerment and ambivalence. The management of first impressions includes the observed and the onlooker. It includes both the active performative dimension, and the reflection prior to or in the aftermath of the first impression as embodied face-to-face encounter, situated, yet limited in time (Antonsich, 2018; Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2017). While first impressions are conditioned by power hierarchies, they appear not to be pre-determined by them; they thus have the potential to be managed. This allows space for individuals’ agency, as has been revealed in perspectives and experiences from both onlookers and those observed. Such experiences of agency arguably demonstrate dynamism and reflexivity among the boundary-makers contributing to the (re)production of the everyday nation.

Normative reflections on first impressions

We have considered how first impressions may be perceived and experienced as boundaries of nationhood, and how individuals do or do not manage them in their everyday lives. Through this, the nature of first impressions as embodied encounters has emerged. Here we focus on how experiences of and reflections on first impressions feed into young people’s ideas about what the nation is and what they think it ought to be. This section thus seeks to address the dissonance revealed between perceptions and experiences of nationhood, of who is (and is not) naturally and automatically assumed to belong without question (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2010; Skey, 2011; Strømsø, 2018). We therefore draw on the normative reflections among young people in our data by exploring first impressions as automatic reactions, shedding light on reflections about perceptions and experiences of what the nation is or ought to be.

Without there being anything racist in my way of thinking, when I see a person who is obviously not ethnic Norwegian, my first impression screams: ‘not Norwegian’. […] at the same time, this first impression is something that I automatically get, but when I get to know this person, and get a proper impression, I make up my mind whether or not this person is Norwegian or not […]. Of course, this is not something that I think about all the time, but when I do, this is my honest way of thinking.

People of all ages, when they look at a person and see something that is different, then you think there is a reason for it. And the reason is often that they come from a different country. This happens completely automatically, and I notice myself that it happens inside my head without me doing anything about it. I guess I should stop and think about it, and there are probably many people in Norway who should do the same.

Both quotes describe first impressions as automatic reactions to physical appearance, which flag boundaries of Norwegianness. They also refer to reflections beyond the first impression itself. The first quote shows how first impressions that signal a particular
boundary can be transgressed (Cresswell, 1996), but only through further interaction and getting to know someone. The second quote reflects on boundary-signifying first impressions as automated reactions to difference in physical appearance, but here there is a normative urge to consider the implications of such reactions.

In both cases, the automatic reaction compels reflection about the act of (re)producing boundaries of Norwegianness in the brief moment of a first impression. The ‘without there being anything racist’ statement signifies a need to position the perception of Norwegianness as closely associated with, but not only about, race, while fully acknowledging that the boundary may be transgressed. In the second quote, the boundary of Norwegianness is associated with race, but the normative stance of what it ought to be differs. Rather than acknowledging the option of transgression, responsibility falls on onlookers to reflect on the implications of their boundary-making processes and how to (re)produce a more inclusive Norwegianness.

Refrainions on boundary-making result from first impressions shaped by automatic reactions, where visibility is central, particularly in the form of race. Perceptions of what the nation ought to be and how it is experienced, including during the production of first impressions, are revealed. Yet, as the two quotes suggest, nationhood is not taken for granted or static in pupils’ understandings. While a minority perceives the nation as fixed, most of the pupils in our study acknowledge its processual and dynamic dimensions, especially as the boundaries of Norwegianness are (re)produced in everyday life.

In the final extract, the pupils in this focus group demonstrate various ways of perceiving nationness:

**P1:** [Does] Skin color [matter with regard to Norwegianness]?
**Several Ps:** No.
**P2:** It matters a lot.
**P3:** Do you think so?
**P4:** To be Norwegian? Or to be seen as Norwegian?
**P5:** Or to feel Norwegian?
**P2:** To feel and be seen as Norwegian.
**P5:** Yes, but what about those who are adopted then?
**P2:** Exactly, it is a lot easier to become part of the Norwegian society if you have a Western appearance. If you have the wrong appearance, then you can easily become excluded.
**P5:** “Where are you from?” Then it’s like, “No, I was born and raised in Norway”, but then it is, “Where are you really from?” And then it’s like, “My grandparents were from India, but I am from Norway”.
**P1:** But it isn’t impossible to be Norwegian if you have a different skin color.
**P5:** But how irrelevant is it?
**P1:** I will say it’s pretty irrelevant, in my opinion at least.
**P4:** But I agree with what [P1] is saying (…) you want to say that it doesn’t matter much, but it may matter more than what we want it to.
**P1:** A bit more indirectly perhaps.
**P2:** I have a different appearance and I experience that it does matter.
**Several Ps:** Yes.
**P1:** Yes, but it shouldn’t be like that. We don’t want to admit that it is like that.
P2: It shouldn’t be, but...
P5: But we cannot start with what we want it to be.
P1: No exactly, but unfortunately it’s [like that]. It should change.

The group discussion underscores a dissonance. There is the experienced Norwegianness, where physical appearance in the form of skin color is a boundary, as P2 clearly states, first saying it is a boundary ‘to feel and to be seen as’ Norwegian, then ‘I have a different appearance and I experience that it does matter.’ This is, as the previous analysis sections discussed, a boundary that might be managed or transgressed, but is still felt as a social reality. And then there is a Norwegianness – in normative terms – which the pupils wish for. In relation to the ways in which visible difference, not being white, is experienced as a boundary to the everyday nation, pupils in this group stress that: ‘it shouldn’t be like that. We don’t want to admit that it is like that and it should change’. The pupils wish for a Norwegianness that does not question their classmates’ natural and unquestioned right to belong.

The ‘is’ and the ‘ought to be’ of perceptions and experiences of the boundaries of the everyday nation are most clearly articulated around visibility. In the Norwegian context, this links to race and is closely related to ancestry. Interrogating first impressions as boundaries of the everyday nation reveals a dissonance between experiences of, and perceptions about, Norwegianness. This dissonance is rooted in embodied encounters and is, for many of the participants in our study, highly emotional. The emotions are first and foremost characterized by ambivalence, often paired with a disempowerment in the face of the evident reality that racial difference matters and effectively functions as a boundary in the everyday experience of many young Norwegians of color. However, this ambivalence – expressed across an emotional register spanning anger and despair, sorrow and guilt, to assertive hopefulness – is one that is, especially upon reflection within the focus group discussions, shared, regardless of pupils’ own physical appearance.

We thus find that, rather than merely being boundary-making instances, first impressions as situated encounters hold potential to be sites for normative reflection on the nation and its boundaries. The temporal layeredness of first impressions, occurring in a moment in time, but not in isolation from past experiences, underscores their situatedness. Here relationality – in the sense of familiarity – appears to contradict, and often trump, taken-for-granted aspects of visibility as a boundary-making mechanism of the everyday nation. Boundaries of the nation in a more fixed sense, are closely tied to visibility and to race, and as shown above are clearly salient for the experiences and reflections of the young people in this study. However, whilst relationality does not always supersede first impressions, interpersonal relationships affect the ways in which the everyday nation is experienced – on many levels – but also the ways in which it is thought about; perhaps even, gradually, the ways in which the everyday nation is imagined.

**Conclusion**

By interrogating the boundaries of the everyday nation through first impressions, this article demonstrates the ways in which visibility functions as a boundary-making mechanism (Ahmed, 2000; Antonsich, 2018; Nayak, 2017). The central contribution of this article is that by interrogating the nature of these first impressions as sites where
boundaries are (re)produced and (potentially) negotiated, we find that relationality can trump visibility, when it comes to boundary-making mechanisms of the everyday nation. First, the finding that relationality can trump visibility in the boundary-making of the everyday nation says something about the nature of encounters, in that relationality can trump visibility through sustained encounters, even if these are not deep and meaningful (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2017). But this finding is also revealing at a normative and reflective level, where the role of visibility as a boundary of the nation comes into question. This in turn can allow space for the natural and unquestioned belonging of young Norwegians of color, as a normative ideal among peers (albeit it is recognized that this is not an everyday reality, yet) (Antonsich, 2018; Muller Myrdahl, 2010; Vassenden, 2010).

Second, the finding that relationality can trump visibility in the boundary-making of the everyday nation says something about agency. We find that despite prevailing power hierarchies (Ahmed, 2000; Fanon, 2008; Tolia-Kelly, 2006), there is scope for agency in the embodied encounter that is the instance of a first impression. The ways in which this agency is revealed underscores the relationality of first impressions – involving perspectives and experiences from both onlookers and those observed. We argue that this demonstrates reflexivity among the boundary-makers – ordinary young people – who contribute to the (re)production of the everyday nation.

Third, the finding that relationality can trump visibility in the boundary-making of the everyday nation, we argue, says something about the nature and potentiality of the nation itself, as an inherently relational entity. Our focus group data revealed the collectively negotiated reality of youths’ interactions, which included contrasting views, agreements, and accommodations of difference. On the one hand, feelings and experiences of powerlessness and frustration rose in the face of the hard-to-grasp notion of Norwegianness (Muller Myrdahl, 2010; Vassenden, 2010). On the other hand, there were feelings and experiences of togetherness, friendship, and co-producing the nation on youths’ own terms, as well as hopefulness that change is possible. These sentiments are intrinsic to everyday embodied encounters, such as first impressions, albeit often in taken-for-granted ways (Skey, 2011).

The everyday nation we find is a plural nation, confirming Matejskova and Antonsich’s statement that: ‘A plural nation is not only possible; it is already a reality, awaiting further investigation’ (Matejskova & Antonsich, 2015, p. 206). The plural nation for us refers to the inherent pluralism within the nation, which comes to the fore in our analysis. The plural nation involves an inclusive approach to migration-related diversity, as a part of the nation. But also, the plural nation includes a plurality of experiences of nationness and of perceptions of nationhood, that echoes the approach to nations and nationalism taken by Frantz Fanon in the context of anti-colonial struggle. In a sense, the nation is an empty vessel, to be mobilized in exclusionary or in unifying ways (2008). Future research, sensitive to racialized power hierarchies as well as outright racism, should nevertheless attempt to approach the sites and moments in which actors (re)produce the everyday nation; while these moments are not free from prevailing structural forces, they are not predetermined by them either. We see particular potential for further academic scrutiny of the ways in which young people in rapidly diversifying European societies, such as the Norwegian, contribute to the ways in which these societies come to terms with (or not) their diversity, also in terms of this diversity being within the nation.
Across Europe, perceptions of migration-related diversity and its impacts are driving the rise of populist parties and societal polarization. Such polarization relates to particular kinds of nationalist sentiments and is underpinned by deep-seated convictions about essential and unresolvable differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Responses differ as to whether or not the nation is seen as a potential resource for building togetherness within these European societies. But by approaching the nation as something which can be inclusive and plural, the idea of migration-related diversity as a threat to the nation can be defused (Matejskova & Antonsich, 2015). We argue for the need for further analysis of the plural everyday nation. We also contend that this is likely to be a valuable contribution to defuse polarization and the divisive power of exclusionary narratives of nationhood. For the nation unfolds and becomes, in the interplay of experienced nationness and perceptions of nationhood.

Notes

1. Quotes are deliberately not introduced with background characteristics about the individual pupils, beyond what they themselves say in extracts. This is in line with our methodological approach, where we seek to avoid a reproduction of preconceived notions of boundaries in and of the nation.
2. The pupils with whom we interacted were not recent refugees or migrants.
4. Statistics about ‘ethnicity’ as such are not collected in Norway, rather there are data on people’s country of birth, their parent’s country of birth, as well as data on whether or not Norwegian citizenship is held. Official statistics operate with a definition of ‘the immigrant population’ as those who are immigrants, and those with two foreign born parents, amounting to 17% of the population.
5. Schools in the selected areas received invitations via email, and those who responded with interest were included, with an eye to variation in the socio-economic characteristics of the schools, and securing sufficient geographic variation.
6. The assignment was part of our research project, and the wording was determined by the researchers:

Write a text where you convey your own thoughts on what it means to be Norwegian in 2015. Use your own experiences as a point of departure in addition to the questions below: Who is Norwegian – and who is not Norwegian? Is it possible to become Norwegian? In your view, is there a connection between visual appearance and Norwegianness? In your view, is there a connection between faith and life-stance and being Norwegian?

7. Due to higher interest from teachers and pupils in participation in focus groups, our research design changed from eight focus groups (two in each school), to a total of 33 focus groups. As a result, some focus groups were facilitated by teachers, some by pupils, and in each school at least four by the two researchers. Analyzing the transcripts across different facilitators, we found surprisingly little difference between focus groups facilitated by pupils, teachers and researchers, probably due to the structured plan which was followed in each case.

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