‘All people living in Norway could become Norwegian’: How ordinary people blur the boundaries of nationhood

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Abstract

This article draws on 60 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2015 to explore how ordinary people produce and reproduce boundaries of Norwegian nationhood in their everyday lives. This is achieved by unpacking the entangled relationship between individuals’ perceptions of nationhood and their everyday experiences. The finding is that individuals are inconsistent when producing and reproducing boundaries of nationhood in their everyday lives, drawing on various symbolic resources at different times and places. Exposing the inconsistency – both within and between individuals – challenges the structures and preconceived notions of a fixed and stable boundary demarcating Norwegian nationhood. When boundaries are produced or reproduced, they are clear; however, by approaching boundary-making as a contingent event, the uncertainty of where, why and if a boundary will be produced and/or reproduced blurs people’s perceptions and experiences of these very boundaries. The study examines this contingency through individuals' unique and changing circumstances and along public and private dimensions.

Keywords: Nationhood, everyday life, boundaries, perceptions, experiences, inconsistency, contingency, Norway

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Introduction

‘I think all people living in Norway could become Norwegian really.’ So concluded Lene in an interview, reflecting on who (potentially) can be a member of the Norwegian nation, in the present or the future. While this kind of inclusive and normative statement is not uncommon among everyday Norwegians, the perception persists of a relatively fixed and stable boundary between those who are considered nationals and those who are not. What remains disputed, however, is where the boundaries of nationhood are drawn and whether or not they are permeable (Gullestad, 2002; Skey, 2013; Wimmer, 2013).

Like all people, Lene is more complex than a single quote can convey. Her bold statement on nationhood’s boundaries, as she perceived them, is only one part of a complicated picture. She described her everyday life as a struggle to make ends meet, notably during some years prior to our interview when she was a single mother receiving limited social security benefits. At that time, the local municipality was settling refugees who, under the Norwegian settlement model, are entitled to five years of financial support (IMDi, 2016). Diverging from her stated understanding of who falls within the boundaries of nationhood, Lene expressed feeling more entitled than the refugees to resources. ‘We are not doing enough to take care of Norwegians who are struggling,’ she said. In doing so, she drew a clear boundary in the present between settled refugees and herself, based on perceptions of a nation with fixed boundaries and hierarchies of belonging (Skey, 2011, 2013, 2014). Still, as I return to in the discussion, a temporal dimension; featured as both time living in Norway (the refugees) and how Lene’s own circumstances change over time, helped blur this clear boundary of who she was willing to include into her notion of ‘all people’ and their potential for national becoming as Norwegians in the future. Nonetheless, by revealing self-contradictory perceptions of nationhood, Lene demonstrated inconsistent boundary-making.

This article’s aim is to examine more closely how boundaries of Norwegian nationhood are produced and reproduced – from herein ‘(re)produced’ as a shorthand for the interplay of production and reproduction – in people’s everyday lives. To this end, the analysis unpacks
inconsistencies between individuals’ perceptions of nationhood and their everyday experiences, not by upholding a clear-cut distinction between the two, but rather by approaching them as entangled. The entanglement occurs between individuals’ different perceptions of nationhood, as illustrated by Lene, between perceptions and experiences as well as between different everyday experiences. Heeding Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg’s (2012) call to pay more attention to variation and contradiction within each individual’s relationship to the nation – thus considering boundary-making from a bottom-up perspective – the article asks: to what extent do potential inconsistencies between perceptions of nationhood and everyday experiences influence the (re)production of its boundaries?

This article draws on 60 semi-structured interviews conducted with ordinary people between June and November 2015 in Norway. Before proceeding, two caveats are in order. First, ‘ordinary’ here implies that research participants were interviewed as individuals with unique intersections of identity-markers, not as representatives of a profession or a group, such as national, ethnic or religious (Antonsich, 2016; Jones and Merriman, 2009; Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg, 2012). What participants all had in common was living within a shared national space at the time of the interview (Bauböck, 2002). Second, drawing on interview material, the analysis centres on participants’ representations of their perceptions of nationhood and their everyday experiences, as well as their reflections thereof – herein referred to simply as ‘perceptions’ and ‘everyday experiences’ (and elaborated in the article’s method and data section).

This study finds that boundaries – when (re)produced – are clear, free from ambiguity. Yet simultaneously, individuals are inconsistent when (re)producing boundaries of nationhood, as illustrated by the potential match or mismatch of perceptions and experiences that arise when individuals draw on various symbolic resources at different times and places (Zimmer, 2003). This inconsistency results in a blurring of Norwegian nationhood’s boundaries, thus also exposing their permeability.

The next section outlines the theoretical framework linking nationhood with the everyday and the making of boundaries. It then explains the Norwegian context and research
design, before exploring inconsistencies between individuals' perceptions and everyday experiences through four cases. The cases are followed with a discussion of two notable findings: (i) boundary-making as a contingent event through individuals' unique and changing circumstances and (ii) boundary-making along public and private dimensions. The conclusion addresses how the entangled relationship between perceptions of nationhood and everyday experiences contributes to blurring the boundaries of Norwegian nationhood.

**Everyday nationhood and the making of boundaries**

Since the mid-1990s, a growing body of literature has recognized the place of the individual in the nation as an ‘imagined community’ – a place where individuals (re)produce nationhood and its boundaries in the context of their everyday lives (Anderson, 1983; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). This emerged in reaction to traditional research on the nation which mainly limited itself to questions concerning origins (e.g. Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 1991). Viewing the nation from a macro-structural perspective was also once considered the appropriate way to study nations, such as through prime ministers’ and kings’ speeches, media debates and school curricula (Edensor, 2002, 2006; Jones and Fowler, 2007; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008; Miller-Idriss, 2009). Meanwhile, although nationalism is considered a mass phenomenon, individuals have been conspicuously absent from the analysis, and nationhood has been assumed to resonate evenly among people. Critics of this approach argue that individuals are not passive recipients of national discourse, and that such discourse does not necessarily reflect how ordinary people relate to the nation in everyday life (Edensor, 2002, 2006; Kaufmann, 2016; Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg, 2012).

By contrast, the everyday nationhood approach, as per Fox and Miller-Idriss’ (2008) line of thought, provides a framework which allows for a bottom-up analysis of individuals’ agency. Further, it encourages understanding of how they are involved in the (re)production of nationhood, reflexively or otherwise (Fox, 2017), and consequently in boundary-making.

Everyday nationhood is often connected with the work of Billig (1995) and the concept of ‘banal nationalism’. While the focus of banal nationalism is on top-down symbolic signifiers
of the nation in the everyday (e.g. the classic case of a national flag hanging unnoticed on a public building), the everyday nationhood approach takes the everyday as the *domain of enquiry*. In other words, the everyday is considered a domain – with no readily defined boundaries – through which practices of nationhood can be explored (Antonsich, 2016; Fox and Jones, 2013; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008).

Nonetheless, since the 1990s, post-national research has rejected the nation as a meaningful category in view of processes such as globalization and migration (Antonsich, 2017; Antonsich and Matejskova, 2015). Notions of de-territorialization and flow were considered more progressive than the boundedness of the nation, as illustrated by ideas of the nation as a container of singular belonging, unable to cope with contemporary societies’ booming diversity. Although more recent research acknowledges that people do in fact live somewhere, other geographical scales remain privileged over the nation within this strand of literature. The local and the urban are considered the lived and experienced scales, with the nation relegated to an abstract – not experienced – imaginary (Antonsich, 2018; Gielis, 2009; Millard, 2014; Rossetto, 2015).

It has most recently been argued, however, that the nation should not be rejected a priori on a normative basis and that ‘the progressive and inclusive character of a space is not to be associated with a given scale’ (Matejskova and Antonsich, 2015: 496). Building on that, this article argues that everyday life does not only consist of a local context. The nation is, as much as the local, experienced in everyday life. However, nationhood does not define people’s experiences of interactions at all times (Brubaker et al., 2006; Jones and Merriman, 2012; Paasi, 2016). It is thus not some overriding, omnipresent subject position, but rather something that ‘crystallizes as an event’ – ‘nationness’ as termed by Brubaker (1994: 8, 1996: 19).

Neither should nationhood be regarded as something that only emerges from ‘extraordinary’ events, such as national day celebrations (Edensor, 2002). Rather, nationhood is experienced through social practices in everyday life, and its salience is contingent in time and space (Brubaker et al., 2006; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008; Jones and Merriman, 2009; Skey, 2011). It is this notion of contingency to which the present study contributes empirical
and theoretical insight. During the past decade, literature within the everyday nationhood approach thus emphasizes individual and everyday accounts of when the nation becomes meaningful, and in relation to what, how and where (Antonsich, 2016; Brubaker et al., 2006).

In this article, the nation is understood as a subject position with which individuals identify. 'Nation' is thus a category of practice rather than something that exists in itself (Brubaker, 2013a). By identifying with a particular nation, individuals also identify with other members of that nation. Nations, like other groups, are often defined by what they are not, specifically in opposition to other nations (Barth, 1969). However, this understanding of group formation entails a level of consensus on the content with which to fill the subject position. Vertovec (2007) and Kaufmann (2004, 2016), among others, see greater diversity within rather than between nations. Meanwhile, individuals who identify with a certain nation draw on the available discursive landscape and symbolic resources in order to perceive the nation. Such perceptions may exist at different levels and be influenced by societal structures as well as individuals' own experiences.

The classic dichotomy between civic and ethno-cultural forms of nationhood has been the predominant way to distinguish between perceptions of the nation (Brubaker, 1992). Civic nations, it is argued, derive legitimacy from members’ ‘voluntary subscription to a set of political principles and institutions’ (Zimmer, 2003: 147). By contrast, ethno-cultural nations are built on deterministic ideas of a perceived common ethnic descent. As noted by Yack (1996), the former suggests that national identity is merely a matter of choice, while the latter leaves no room for choice whatsoever. Although referring to ideal types, the dichotomy is increasingly criticized for understating the complex nature of contemporary societies. The debate is manifold (see e.g. Brubaker 1999 and 2004 on the Manichean myth, which thoroughly rejects the dichotomy even in terms of ideal types), though two criticisms are particularly pertinent to this analysis. On one hand, the dichotomy asserts that institutional and individual practices of nationalism are, more often than not, a complex blend of the two forms of nationhood. On the other, an ethno-cultural boundary, as with any predefined boundary, is not necessarily the most
significant within the context of a given nation, or in individuals’ everyday lives within that nation (Brubaker et al., 2006; Goode and Stroup, 2015).

To demonstrate whether boundaries of nationhood are the result of social practice – continuously (re)produced in everyday life – rather than a fixed state of mind, I argue that research exploring these boundaries cannot reproduce a certain perception of nation in the design. Therefore, which boundaries of nationhood are perceived of or experienced as relevant, and when, is an empirical question rather than something that can be defined a priori (Terrier, 2015). Following Zimmer (2003), among others, I employ the analytical tool of symbolic resources, such as political values and institutions, culture, history and geography, which individuals draw on when they (re)produce boundaries. In the Norwegian context, Lynnebakke and Fangen (2011) identified three symbolic resources, referred to as ‘perceptions of Norwegianness’: ancestry, cultural practice and citizenship. Vassenden (2010) added a fourth symbolic resource: whiteness. While these resources may be actively (re)produced in Norway, they are not constant markers of the boundaries of Norwegian nationhood.

Hence, symbolic resources are not boundaries. Rather, in this article, boundaries are understood as socio-spatial processes. They do not exist in and of themselves; they mean different things to different people (Andersen et al., 2012; Cresswell, 1996; Sohn, 2016). When (re)producing boundaries, individuals draw on different symbolic resources, though, as I will return to, individuals are inconsistent. Boundary-making is thus complex, with boundaries manifesting in different ways, times and spaces (Alba, 2005; Midtbøen, 2018). This conceptual framework allows for both agency in boundary-making and contingency of boundary-making in time and space.

**The Norwegian context**

In the public eye, Norwegian nationhood is presumably built on notions of an imagined sameness – often understood as observable similarities (Gullestad, 2002). A grim example of this being the 22 July 2011 terror-attacks in Oslo and Utøya where a total of 77 individuals
were killed by a man who argued that he was defending the Norwegian nation from heterogenization, in particular caused by Islam.

Meanwhile, Norwegian nationhood was never homogenous. Internal heterogeneity such as the nationalist liberation struggle which led to the establishment of a Norwegian constitution in 1814 and later to independence from Sweden in 1905, is often by-passed in historical accounts (Kjeldstadli, 2008). Norway’s demography – as within any nation (Vertovec, 2007; Kaufmann, 2004, 2016) – is heterogeneous along various axes of diversity, such as gender, age, geography, ethnicity, religion and socioeconomics. Albeit, since the late 1960s, the Norwegian population has become even more diverse with the arrival of international labour migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and family reunification (Brochmann and Kjeldstadli, 2008). By the start of 2017, Norway had approximately 5.26 million people, about 14% of whom were ‘immigrants’. Defined by Statistics Norway (2017a), ‘immigrants’ are individuals who have themselves immigrated to Norway. Meanwhile, Norwegian-born inhabitants with two immigrant parents amounted to 3% of the population and individuals with one Norwegian born and one immigrant parent comprised nearly 5% (Statistics Norway, 2017a) – statistics which underscore the ever-changing population composition in Norway.

Citizenship – as the formal membership regulated by the Norwegian state – is applied by descent, in contrast to application by territory, and there is a seven-year requirement for naturalization (Pettersen, 2012). Moreover, while dual citizenship in theory is prohibited, there are many legislative exceptions to this rule.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway has held the position as state church in Norway since the reformation in 1536. And only as late as 1 January 2017 was the final separation between the Norwegian State and the Church of Norway implemented (Norwegian Government, 2017). At the same time, Norway is often referred to as a secularized society (Botvar and Schmidt, 2010). One reason for this claim is the reduction of membership in the Church of Norway since the 1970s until today. However, increased immigration has led to religious and life-stance diversity rather than a reduction in religiosity (Taule, 2014), where the
largest groups include Christian denominations, Islam and the Norwegian Humanist Association (Statistics Norway, 2018).

Method and data
To move beyond the potential pitfalls of methodological nationalism requires acknowledging how contemporary societies are diverse in multiple and intersecting ways. As such, the point of departure for sampling research participants in this study was the diversity of individuals inhabiting a shared national space (Bauböck, 2002; Fox and Jones, 2013; Meissner and Vertovec, 2015; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). For this reason, the sample encompassed various identity-markers rather than reproducing preconceived notions of nationhood in the research design, such as citizenship, birth, ancestry and race. A key dimension in the sampling strategy was the research participants’ self-identification with various identity-markers (Brubaker, 2004; Crotts and Litvin, 2003).

A two-step recruitment strategy secured access to participants as diverse as possible along multiple axes of diversity. The first step was to engage four different localities for geographical diversity: two city districts in the capital (identified as Oslo I and Oslo II), a municipality in western Norway and one in northern Norway; for the sake of participants’ anonymity, none of them is named. Oslo is the country’s largest city, with approximately 667,000 inhabitants, 33% of whom are ‘immigrants’; the immigrants are not distributed evenly throughout the city. Oslo I falls within the city’s more affluent area; Oslo II has a more diverse population, socioeconomically and socioculturally speaking (Ljunggren, 2017; Statistics Norway, 2017b). Compared to Oslo, the western and the northern localities are much smaller, and in terms of population composition, they are also more homogenous. Although, both localities have long-standing migrant inhabitants as well as newly arrived settled refugees. In travel time, both are a distance from the capital and their labour markets are less diverse than in Oslo.

The second step was to engage locally anchored arenas in the localities in which the only thing participants potentially had in common was something irrespective of their
backgrounds, such as having children in the same nursery school or in a sports club (parents) or patronizing the same daytime senior centre. However, access challenges and the homogeneity of recruitment arenas required a wider variety of arenas as well as networking and snowballing to be used throughout the process.

The sample draws from 14 interviews in Oslo I, 16 in Oslo II, 16 in western Norway and 14 in northern Norway. Thirty-four participants were women and 26 were men, their ages ranging from 20 to 86. The majority had completed tertiary education; most who only had a primary education background fell in the 60+ age bracket. Most worked fulltime; those who did not were retired or stayed at home with children. Identified on the basis of their last vote, 26 were politically left-of-centre, 18 centre and 10 right. Six participants did not want to state their political affiliation. The majority belonged to the Church of Norway, although most did not consider themselves active members. Sixteen identified with other religions and life-stance communities; eight did not identify with any. Fifty of the 60 participants held Norwegian citizenship and two held dual; of the remaining 10, seven held citizenships from elsewhere in Europe and three from outside Europe. Six of the participants with Norwegian citizenship originated from countries outside Europe but chose to naturalize. The sample was further nuanced by the participants’ self-identification with various nationalities, including intersections between national and other ethnic and/or religious affiliations.

Research participants were invited to take part in a project exploring national identity in light of increasing ethnic and religious diversity in Norway and how this may manifest in everyday life. Using a topic guide, I began each interview by asking the participant to talk about everyday life, thereby employing a ‘wait-and-listen’ approach (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 556) and participants were encouraged to illustrate statements with anecdotes from their everyday lives. In line with understandings of nationness as a contingent event (Brubaker, 1994), immediately asking topical and direct questions could have risked treating nation as a salient identity marker in everyday life. Conversations were followed with questions about belonging and Norwegianness, among others. We talked about their mobility background; internal and/or international and reflections on feelings of ‘home’ (Antonsich, 2010). We also discussed
participants’ own and others’ right to belong with reference to who and what they considered Norwegian. Oral representations of the nation were encouraged throughout the interview by direct questions and by employing breaches which helped elicit reflections on the relationship between place and ideology, i.e. who and what belongs where. Examples of breaches employed were questions about immigration and national minorities, such as the Sami and Romani (Cresswell, 1996; Fox, 2017).

The methodological choice of the semi-structured interview for the primary source of data was informed by similar studies exploring nationhood in everyday life of ordinary people (Mann and Fenton, 2009; Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg, 2012). Still, ethnography is by many foregrounded as better suited for moving beyond ‘talk of’ the nation in the analysis because there is a difference between observing what people do in everyday life and interview accounts of what people say they do (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008; Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). As described, the topic guide was designed to elicit life stories, contexts and experiences to examine how and when nation emerges as meaningful out of these broader narrated contexts (Brubaker et al., 2006). What came to the fore through the analysis was the inconsistencies between the participants’ perceptions of nationhood and their actions. So, while acknowledging that certain features, such as routinized practices, might be overlooked – and reiterating that my analysis is built on participants’ own representations of their experiences, and reflections thereof – I contend, in agreement with Lamont and Swidler (2014) that the distinction between what people do and what they say they do is somewhat exaggerated. Also because the interview situation is not freed from observation. Furthermore, they argue that, while boundary-making is not something individuals are aware of (re)producing, the semi-structured interview allows for scope to probe the imagined meanings of their actions and experiences.

All but one interview were conducted in Norwegian. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, acknowledging, as per Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg (2012), that transcripts capture complicated, sometimes contradictory statements which may be missed by other methods, such as observation. This permitted exploration of inconsistencies between participants’ oral representations of their perceptions of nationhood and their everyday
experiences. By taking a thematic narrative approach to analysing each transcript, the exploration becomes about what is said and told; that contrasts with more commonly applied strategies, such as discourse analysis which emphasizes how it is said and told (Condor, 2000; Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg, 2012; Riessman, 2005). Structures were not left out of the analysis, but rather explored both through what the participants emphasized in the interviews and through their self-identification with various identity markers. This article’s point of inquiry was first based on impressions formed during data collection. Still, drawing on the rationale of grounded theory linked with abduction, I built the analysis on a systematic back and forth between my data and theoretical concepts to identify patterns as well as more abstract conceptualizations (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Reichertz, 2007).

Unpacking the entangled relationship between perceptions of nationhood and everyday experiences

Individuals are ambivalent and sometimes self-contradictory in how they relate to the nation and to its members (Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg, 2012). Exploring the relationship between these traits and the (re)production of nationhood’s boundaries, my analysis centres on four individuals. Their cases serve to represent my overall findings from the 60 interviews, highlighting three commonalities. First, the (re)production of nationhood’s boundaries is inconsistent. This is illustrated by the potential match and mismatch of perceptions and experiences, emerging as individuals draw on various symbolic resources at different times and places. Second, by unpacking these inconsistencies, I identify a pattern revealing the contingency of boundary-making in time and space; the analysis’ purpose is not, therefore, to identify a pattern of the symbolic resources which are drawn on. Third, the cases demonstrate that all individuals living within a shared national space help (re)produce boundaries of nationhood, irrespective of background.
Case 1: Lene

Lene moved internally in Norway 15 years ago. As mentioned in the article introduction, Lene shared self-contradictory perceptions of who falls within the boundaries of Norwegian nationhood, both in the present and with a potential for national becoming in the future. While first expressing inclusionary and normative views, she later drew a boundary excluding the settled refugees and linking nationhood with the symbolic resources of ancestry and birth. While Lene did not include individuals who had recently arrived in Norway into Norwegian nationhood, she simultaneously did not exclude the potential for them to be included in the future. Therefore, the (re)production of this boundary may be considered in light of her financial struggles as a single mother and experiencing unequal access to resources. But, referring to the refugees being settled in the local municipality, Lene also said: ‘They probably receive assistance for the first five years, but after those years, they could end up in an equally difficult position [as I was in…] because you have to make ends meet no matter what.’ Lene thus indicated that the boundary she (re)produced between herself and the refugees was circumstantial rather than temporally fixed.

Throughout the interview, Lene revealed ambivalent boundary-making. Although her conclusion was that ‘all people living in Norway could become Norwegian really’, she began by sharing that ‘I will always automatically think that a person with dark skin is not Norwegian’ and thereby drawing on the symbolic resource of skin colour. This was nuanced by two reflections. First, Lene did consider adoptees and children of immigrants to be ‘as Norwegian as I am’. As such, the dimension of time lived in Norway blurred her perceived boundary between nationhood and skin colour, but also tapped the symbolic resource of ancestry (Erdal and Ezzati, 2015). Second, as the excerpt above shows, Lene reflected on how nationhood’s boundaries could be (re)produced following a first-impression reaction to skin colour, while simultaneously arguing that first impressions are nothing more than automatic reactions. Moreover, she invoked a normative discussion of what is and what ought to be concerning nationhood and boundaries in response to first impressions (Erdal et al., 2017) as she said,
‘You don’t need to have blond hair or blue eyes to be Norwegian’. Thus, Lene maintained no fixed boundary of nationhood linked to skin colour.

When it came to one symbolic resource, Lene was consistent – religion. Although she considered the possibility of being Muslim or Catholic and Norwegian, she was explicit in conflating Christianity and Norwegian nationhood as she said, ‘Norway is a Christian country’. In so doing she exposed the mismatch between her claim of a nationhood which potentially includes everyone and a nationhood that can include everyone so long as they are Christian.

Case 2: Adil

Adil (re)produced nationhood's boundaries in different situations, drawing on both inclusionary and exclusionary perceptions of Norwegian nationhood. He portrayed ambivalence and, to some extent, self-contradiction in his perceptions of nationhood and his everyday experiences.

Adil had a non-migrant background, was born and raised in Norway, but his parents immigrated to Norway in the 1970s from a country outside of Europe and his skin colour was brown. He identified with two nationalities; Norwegian and his parents' country of origin. He was married with children, who were also born and raised in Norway. According to Adil, you had to be born and raised in Norway to be considered Norwegian. 'I live here, I am Norwegian,' he said, tapping the symbolic resources of being born and living in a shared national space. The statement also reflected an insistence that he and his children have the right to be perceived of as Norwegian as this symbolic resource includes children of migrants irrespective of background. Nonetheless, Adil linked the symbolic resource of birth with that of ancestry, or as he phrased it, being 'ethnic Norwegian'. The term is highly contested, only appearing in Norway's everyday communication and public debate in the last 20 years. Initially used to distinguish between the Sami population and 'other' Norwegians, 'ethnic Norwegian' today signifies a separation between us and them more generally; the us mainly connotes a nationhood tapping the symbolic resources of whiteness and ancestry (Herbjørnsrud, 2017). By drawing on notions of 'ethnic Norwegian' in his perceptions of nationhood, and
simultaneously considering his parents’ immigration background, Adil consequently (re)produced a boundary between himself and Norwegian nationhood.

But Adil also reasoned that one can become Norwegian by participating in, and contributing to, society. Formal citizenship was not, in his view, requisite. The symbolic resources of participation and contribution were articulated as taking responsibility and integrating oneself in appropriate arenas in everyday life. He said: ‘If you have a job, you do your work properly and you pay taxes. And if you have children, you get involved in their lives and activities.’ Here again his perceptions of nationhood were inclusionary, revealing a match with how he described his own way of life.

Alongside Adil’s self-contradictory perceptions of nationhood, there were stories from his everyday life that also showed ambivalent boundary-making. Adil did not relate of experiences wherein other people (re)produced boundaries towards him personally, but he was not ignorant of the potential existence of clear boundaries. For instance, a fellow dinner party guest once spoke animatedly about moving into an apartment that was so appealing because there were no immigrants in the building. Although the statement was not directed at Adil personally, he took it upon himself to confront the guest, who later apologized. This affirmed his statement: ‘In many people’s eyes, I am not Norwegian.’

Throughout the interview, he referred to some people having ‘double standards’, a barb aimed at those who act ‘Norwegian’ in public but at home unyieldingly do their own thing, by which he meant cultural or religious practices he would consider non-Norwegian. Adil argued that these people could not be considered Norwegian. At the same time, he repeated: ‘There is a lot of Norwegian in our home,’ referring to the language and what he considered typically Norwegian traditions and activities. The message was that it was insufficient to act Norwegian in public; one must be Norwegian in private, too. While in the prior example a boundary between Adil and Norwegian nationhood was (re)produced by discussing immigrants in Norway as a proxy for himself, in this example, he continually positioned himself as Norwegian by (re)producing a boundary between himself and people he considered disloyal to the nation.
Case 3: Berit
Berit was married with children, who were born and raised in the same municipality in which she grew up in Norway. She had a permanent job and she considered her socioeconomic position as stable. She reasoned that to be Norwegian, one must be able to speak Norwegian or Sami, both official languages in Norway. Hence, Berit linked her perception of nationhood to the symbolic resource of language, while at the same time not considering the two languages to be mutually exclusive categories within Norway (Dankertsen, 2014). Language can feature in both inclusionary and exclusionary perceptions of nationhood (Brubaker, 2013b; Zimmer, 2003). In keeping her perception of nationhood untethered to symbolic resources of ancestry, skin colour, birth or religion, Berit expressed an inclusionary perception of nationhood.

Meanwhile, Berit recognized a mismatch between her public perceptions of nationhood – how she thought and acted in her role at work – and her private life. This occurred when a woman she met through her professional post became her neighbour; a woman who had recently immigrated to Norway. In the interview, Berit reflected on the experience of perceiving her own stance towards immigration as positive until this woman moved in next door and she was confronted with private perceptions. Namely, whom was Berit willing to identify as being in the same group with? The mismatch, indicating a clear boundary drawing on exclusionary perceptions of nationhood, was not something she was comfortable accepting. She described the process she had undergone, from initially keeping a polite distance from her neighbour to finally saying: ‘You’re you and I’m me, and you can be as good a friend as my Norwegian friends.’ Berit therefore managed to match her public and private perceptions of Norwegian nationhood.

Case 4: John
For John, Norway was home, though he did not identify as Norwegian. He immigrated to Norway as a young adult from a country outside of Europe and his skin colour was brown. He was married with children, who were born and raised in Norway. John’s case revealed a
mismatch between how he perceived Norwegian nationhood as one with static boundaries and how he described everyday life. John spoke of knowing everyone in the local community, saying people always came over for a chat – whether at work, in town or at home while in the garden. He juggled several jobs, and he was once active in politics and as a volunteer. He seemed so assured of his status among colleagues that he deemed comments, such as ‘The black guy can do that; it’s black work’, expressions of intimacy rather than harassment. He did not experience the symbolic resource of skin colour within this particular context as a boundary. To reiterate, boundaries mean different things to different people, and they are contingent in time and space (Andersen et al., 2012; Cresswell, 1996; Sohn, 2016). John did not experience such comments from his colleagues as racist, though that did not imply he would have the same experience at another time, in another space. Indeed, Norway grapples with racism, particularly as the conceptualization of nationhood is to some extent linked with the symbolic resource of skin colour and the aforementioned notion of ‘ethnic Norwegian’ (Bangstad, 2017; Vassenden, 2010).

Though an active member of the community, John chose to keep certain aspects of life more private, notably religion. He regarded Christianity as the religion of Norway. However, he reasoned that one need not change everything about oneself and can still practise one’s own religion at home, thus maintaining a static notion of Norwegian nationhood linked with the symbolic resource of religion.

John mentioned his garden several times in the interview. There was a lot of work to be done there and he seemed quite engaged in it. The garden provided a kind of meeting place for him and his neighbours. Although a garden is private property, it may also be considered a semi-public space because of its physical location outside of his house, something John found somewhat challenging.

If I work in the garden, I have to adjust to them [his perception of who the Norwegians are]. I cannot do all as I please, I have to ask [the neighbours] before I do this or that. But I always get the reply that I can do whatever I want.
John’s everyday experiences did not readily support the notion that he must conform to a fixed idea of what a ‘Norwegian garden’ may look like. But the interview excerpt exposes how vigilant he is, avoiding anything that might be considered stepping out of bounds and annoying people, to the extent that it interferes with his gardening. However, John had also experienced people in the local community being critical of immigrants coming to Norway and not contributing to society, yet at the same time telling him: ‘You are Norwegian … you work; it’s not you we are talking about.’ Despite being regularly included among people perceived of as being Norwegian – whereby the symbolic resource of contributing to society was emphasized – the inclusion sensitized John to a potential conditionality in boundary-making. The knowledge of clear boundaries – and most importantly, the uncertainty of where, why and if a boundary of nationhood may be (re)produced towards him – compelled John to uphold the perception of a Norwegian nationhood with relatively stable boundaries.

(Re)production of the boundaries of nationhood

The four cases illustrate that, by consistently drawing on various symbolic resources, the (re)production of nationhood’s boundaries is inconsistent. Moreover, they demonstrate that the (re)production of boundaries is contingent in time and place. Two findings concerning temporal and spatial dimensions can be derived from the four cases: (i) boundary-making as a contingent event and (ii) boundary-making along public and private dimensions.

Boundary-making as a contingent event

In line with Brubaker's (1994: 8, 1996: 19) definition of nationness as a ‘contingent event or happening’, I argue that (re)production of the boundaries of Norwegian nationhood may be considered a contingent event. It is an event because it is not constant, but rather something occurring at a certain time and place; it is contingent because, although there is a possibility of it happening, there is a degree of uncertainty surrounding if it will happen. While the contingency of boundary-making is not new (see e.g. Zimmer, 2003; Alba, 2005), identifying inconsistencies helps to nuance this uncertainty. As John’s case exemplifies, it is an
uncertainty that revolves around questions of where, why and if a boundary will be (re)produced.

Another source of uncertainty is how one’s own circumstances at a given point in time may or may not influence (re)production of boundaries. Comparing the cases of Lene and Berit, I observed how differences in their (re)production of boundaries could be explained by their socioeconomic positions. Whereas Lene was facing financial struggles when she (re)produced a boundary of nationhood, Berit was not. Lene, it should be noted, may not always find herself in a difficult economic situation; at the time of our interview, she had secured a permanent position as a manager and thus had steady income. She could envision a future in which she and the settled refugees could similarly fall on hard times, a situation Lene invoked to show how having to make ends meet created common ground rather more than it solidified differences.

Another point worth mentioning relates to Skey’s (2011, 2013, 2014) theorization on hierarchies of belonging – that is, ideas that some people belong more than others in a national context and thus feel more entitled to certain things, such as material resources. In line with Skey’s work, my data revealed the existence of such notions, for example, in Lene (re)producing a clear boundary between herself and the settled refugees at the time. However, I would argue that hierarchies convey static power relations and consequently stable boundaries between so-called nationals and those who are not. The insights outlined in this article help nuance such preconceived notions of fixity. As one research participant stated when discussing increased immigration to Norway: ‘As long as I am fine, it is fine.’ By this she indicated that a boundary may be (re)produced if her own circumstances change. The fact that one’s circumstances will likely change continuously throughout a lifetime contributes to a level of uncertainty in (re)producing boundaries of nationhood. So, while hierarchies of belonging exist, they should not be considered as constant in individuals’ everyday lives.
Boundary-making along public and private dimensions

So far, the discussion about boundary-making has focused on its qualities as a contingent event and the temporality and uncertainty around the question of if a boundary will be (re)produced. However, another expression of boundary-making in my data, which strongly featured in the cases above, is dimensions of public and private; that is, a spatial dimension concerning where boundaries of nationhood are (re)produced in everyday life. While dimensions of public and private have been rather well explored within the tradition of feminist geography (see e.g. Valentine, 2008), there is a potential for further investigation within the literature on everyday nationhood (see Goode (2017) for a recent exception).

The distinction between public and private has multiple meanings and usages, historically speaking across different academic traditions and in everyday communication (for a detailed discussion, see e.g. Gal, 2002), though these debates go beyond the scope of this article. My own use of the concepts is based on how research participants related to them in their everyday lives.

Dimensions of public and private featured in the cases of Berit, Adil and John, albeit in different ways. Berit (re)produced inconsistent boundaries of nationhood in her public and private life. By contrast, Adil reasoned that one could not become Norwegian without performing consistent social practices in both public and private. Consequently, he (re)produced notions of loyalty to the nation and perceptions of it as a scale of singular belonging (Millard, 2014; Rossetto, 2015) – notions, which to a degree, are inconsistent with Adil’s own background as he himself identifies with two nationalities. John, however, chose to keep certain aspects of life, such as religion, private. His choice was not out of lack of loyalty or commitment to Norwegian society, but rather conforming to a perception of Norwegian nationhood with static boundaries.

The three cases simultaneously contrast with and complement each other. Drawing on various symbolic resources, at different times and places, they all employed different perceptions and experiences concerning where the boundaries of nationhood are – or ought to be. Moreover, they all (re)produced boundaries along public, semi-public and private
dimensions, and subsequently demonstrated that where a boundary may be (re)produced in everyday life is not fixed in space.

**Blurring the boundaries of Norwegian nationhood**

Lene, Adil, Berit and John revealed how the (re)production of boundaries of nationhood is inconsistent in everyday life – both within and between ordinary people. The study shone a light on that inconsistency by unpacking the entangled relationship between individuals’ perceptions of nationhood and their everyday experiences. The four cases also showed that boundary-making in everyday life is ambiguous and full of contradictions (Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg, 2012). I thus argue that identifying inconsistencies between perceptions and experiences helps challenge preconceived notions of a fixed and stable boundary of Norwegian nationhood.

Existing power relations are consistent enough to uphold a certain notion of what constitutes Norwegian nationhood; the boundaries, when (re)produced, are clear (Matejskova and Antonsich, 2015). Nonetheless, boundary-making understood as a contingent event shows the uncertainty of where, why and if a boundary will be (re)produced. That helps blur perceptions of the boundaries. An obscurity explored in this article through an individual’s unique and changing circumstances and along public and private dimensions. My findings emphasized temporal and spatial dimensions in boundary-making, and demonstrated how nationhood’s boundaries, both as perceptions and experiences, can be permeable and blurred in everyday life.

While most theories on boundary-making and nationhood are based on group-level analysis, this article’s findings are based on individual-level analysis. Still, as Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg (2012) did for Germany, I reason that individuals in Norway are not alone in having an ambivalent relationship to the nation and consequently are inconsistent in their (re)production of boundaries in everyday life. Although the symbolic resources that individuals draw upon when (re)producing the boundaries may vary across time and space, the inconsistency will likely extend beyond one particular national context.
This article offers a contribution to literature on the everyday nationhood, one of the main arguments of which is to include ‘the masses’ in any analysis of nationhood. Since today’s societies are comprised of increasingly complex populations, I argue that we must start by asking who these masses are. If we are to take seriously the processual nature of nationhood, we cannot take for granted understandings of who should be considered nationals and who should not be, whether in everyday life or in our research designs. And as shown here, all individuals living within a shared national space – irrespective of their background, and whether or not they identify with a Norwegian nation or are seen by others as nationals – help (re)produce the boundaries of nationhood.

References


Notes

i Research participants are referred to using pseudonyms. The interviews excerpts were translated from Norwegian to English by the author.

ii Left parties include the Labour Party, Red Party and Socialist Left Party. Centre include the Centre Party, Christian Democratic Party, Liberal Party and Green Party. Right include the Conservative Party and Progress Party.