

Who Can Represent the Nation? Elite Athletes, Global Mega Events and the Contested Boundaries of National Belonging

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Abstract

For those studying national belonging, elite athletes competing in international mega events offer particularly compelling case studies as they represent the nation during periods of sustained media attention and heightened emotional registers. But when compared with other types of representatives – such as heads of state, ambassadors, political leaders – they have received much less scholarly attention. This article analyses reporting of the ‘Plastic Brits’ debate, where elite athletes brought in to represent Britain at the Olympics were subject to ongoing scrutiny and critique. Developing an analytical framework that uses insights from Elias, Goffman and Hage, we focus on three key issues. First, how a taken-for-granted ‘logic of nationalism’ underlies discussions about which athletes should (not) represent Britain. Second, how the nation’s boundaries are discursively marked with reference to a range of everyday features. Third, the use of different ‘destigmatisation strategies’ by athletes caught up in the ‘Plastic Brits’ debate.

Keywords

elite athletes, migration, national belonging, nationalism, Olympic Games, stigma

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Introduction

It is now a commonplace to argue that national identities are contested and contingent and stand as a key site of social conflict in the contemporary era. Recent work (e.g. Skey, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2011) on this topic has begun to chart the hierarchies of belonging that are used to mark out insiders and outsiders, paying particular attention to the continuing power of gendered, racist and classist categories to define who counts as truly national. In this article, we look to extend some of these arguments by focusing on two key issues. First, is the manner in which varying forms of, what Hage (1998) labels, institutional and practical belonging come to define in- and out-groups at particular moments and, second, how relations between different groups within (and beyond) the national space are contested and negotiated. To do this, we draw on insights from two key figures from contemporary social theory, Norbert Elias and Erving Goffman. Elias' work (Elias and Scotson, 1994) on insider and outsiders is an obvious reference point for work on national belonging and recent studies have begun to engage with it in a more concerted manner (Pratsinakis, 2017, 2018). However, 'rather than simply highlighting [the reproduction of] simple "us" and "them" binaries' (Black, 2016: 979), our main aim is to show *how* established-outsider relations are discursively managed with reference to key, often banal, markers of nationhood (Skey, 2011). Then, given the extent to which Elias' study alludes to, but does not necessarily address, processes of stigmatisation, we use Goffman's writing on *Stigma* (1963) to develop a complementary perspective that explores the destigmatisation strategies of those defined as 'other'.

We employ this framework to study a particular case, media debates around the status of elite athletes chosen to represent Great Britain at the 2012 Summer Olympics. While a link between sport and nation, as well as the key role of elite athletes therein, is already well established in the literature (Bairner, 2001; Hobsbawm, 1992; Maguire and Poulton, 1999), we contend that events such as the 2012 Olympics provide particularly fruitful opportunities to study wider debates around national belonging. The 'London spectacle' was designed to (re)present (and market) Britain as a multicultural, tolerant and inclusive nation (Burdsey, 2016; Silk, 2011). For instance, Asian-British and black-British athletes prominently featured as 'London 2012 Ambassadors' in an attempt to assert Britain's multicultural successes.

Notwithstanding such attempts, what makes the London Olympics even more interesting in terms of issues of nationhood, is the fact that in the build-up to the event, Martin Samuel (a *Daily Mail* columnist) coined the moniker 'Plastic Brits' to criticise the selection of athletes who had switched to compete internationally for Great Britain under a 'flag of convenience' (Samuel, 2011). According to Samuel, the then head coach of UK Athletics Charles van Commenee (a Dutch national) had 'imported' athletes from around the world as part of a plan to 'cheat' his way to building a stronger team for the London Olympics. The Plastic Brits label sparked a fierce debate about the measure of Britishness of certain athletes included in Team GB. We examine these debates about elite foreign-born athletes in the British Olympic team as a 'site of social conflict' (Ahmed, 2000) from which discourses of nationhood emerged.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first outlines the theoretical framework to be used, making particular reference to the work of Elias, Hage and Goffman, as

a means of building a more dynamic model that is able to track the tensions between dominant and subaltern visions of nationhood and the often-routine forms of practice and knowledge used to substantiate them. The second discusses how the data from this study were collected and analysed. The final section presents a number of illustrative examples from newspaper reports that highlight the arguments of those who frame such athletes as potential threats to established forms of national organisation and identification, as well as reported responses from the athletes and their supporters.

Established-Outsider Relations Within and Beyond the Nation

The growing mobility and diversity of human populations around the world means that questions of (national) belonging are becoming both increasingly contentious and contested with a wider range of markers used to define who belongs *at particular moments* (Skey, 2013). It is these debates that this article looks to analyse and theorise by developing a framework that uses Elias and Scotson's (1994) study of *The Established and the Outsiders* as a starting point. In this canonical work, the authors focus on community relations in a suburb of the English city of Leicester in the 1960s. In particular, they point to a noticeable division between a more established group of residents and a group who were *relatively* new to the area, many of whom had moved from London to escape the bombing during the Second World War. The former developed 'a system of attitudes and beliefs which stressed and justified their own superiority and which stamped the [outsiders] as people of an inferior kind' (Elias and Scotson, 1994: 18). What is also noteworthy about the study is the extent to which this 'system' is underpinned by, and evidenced in relation to, everyday forms of practice, including behaviour, dress and accent. As we will argue later, it is these everyday features that often come to the fore when there is any uncertainty about who does and does not belong to a given group (Skey, 2011: 87–89).

The study is a model for intensive micro-sociological investigations into community relations and more recently scholars have used the established-outsider framework to study processes of (national) othering and exclusion, both outside (Loyal, 2011; Pratsinakis, 2018) and within the realm of sports (Black, 2016). While this shift in scale offers fresh insights into debates around national belonging, some points are worth addressing in more detail.

First, it must be acknowledged that the boundaries between established and outsider groups are never fixed and that boundary management is a contested and dynamic process. Black (2016: 983) argues that simplified dichotomous representations could 'serve to ignore the coalescent complexity of in-group and out-group relations'. Second, relatively little attention has been devoted to the discursive construction of national boundaries itself, that is, which attributes are used to draw distinctions between those who are perceived to (not) belong (Skey, 2011: 39–44). While established-outsider relations in the Leicester suburb mainly rested upon 'oldness of association' (Elias and Scotson, 1994: xviii), alongside other venerated social practices, criteria that mark national belonging are much more difficult to pin down and will be tied to the particularities of a given national context, both in terms of its institutional orders and everyday cultural norms.

This is where introducing Hage's (1998) analytical distinction between institutional and practical belonging may be particularly fruitful. The former comes from official recognition from the state, generally in the form of citizenship rights, while the latter can be understood as, 'the sum of accumulated nationally sanctified and valued social and physical cultural styles and dispositions . . . as well as valued characteristics' (1998: 53). While, of course, citizenship rights are fundamental in providing access to important economic and political resources in a changing world (i.e. voting, healthcare, social security, employment rights), practical forms are also crucial in underpinning claims to, and the recognition of, belonging. Indeed, research on the moralisation of citizenship has shown how formal citizenship alone is often not a sufficient prerequisite for immigrants, or even the children of immigrants, to be recognised as fully 'integrated' members of the (national) society (Pratsinakis, 2014; Schinkel, 2017).

In western countries, such as Britain, skin colour has often been used as a primary marker for identifying those who do and do not belong, with the status of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups subject to ongoing scrutiny and continually called into question (Gilroy, 2013). As Critical Race Theorists have observed, examining the intersections of race and nation becomes particularly significant as the racialised 'other' can only be identified as a 'problem' in relation to the bounded spaces of the nation (Back et al., 2012; Carrington, 2004). Importantly, however, these unequal relations of power within the nation can be subject to change via the accumulation and loss of national forms of capital (Hage, 1998). As Burdsey notes, sport has been one of the primary domains in which BAME groups have, at particular moments, been able to challenge established hierarchies in Britain, both through well-documented domestic achievements and, crucially, in representing the country on a global stage. As a result of these shifts, 'victorious [BAME] British sport stars draped in the Union flag has become an unremarkable sight' (Burdsey, 2016: 18) demonstrating the extent to which dominant forms of practical belonging are also subject to contestation and transformation.

Identifying the markers of belonging that are discursively used to define, *and contest*, the nation's boundaries is one prime objective of this article. However, this emphasis on contestation and transformation also means focusing on an aspect of the established-outsider relationship that has been subject to much less scrutiny, the status and position of subordinate groups and how they may respond to existing relations of power.

Otherring and Stigmatisation

While Elias and Scotson (1994: 78–79) did address the ways in which members of the 'outsider' group are marginalised, denigrated and excluded, and the feelings of inadequacy, shame and anger that this engendered, their approach is limited by a 'lack of attention to the strategies of outsider groups to better their position' (Pratsinakis, 2017: 102). To address this gap, we draw on the work of Goffman, who has studied insider/outside relations from a different perspective using the key concept of stigma. Goffman (1963: 12) defines a stigma as an attribute that makes one 'different from others in the category of persons for him [sic] to be, and of a less desirable kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak'. Although in this case we are dealing with elite athletes, the concept of stigma is still relevant. The term 'Plastic Brit'

not only marks them out as 'different' but also 'less desirable', because, as we will see, they are portrayed as insincere, opportunistic and dishonest. Moreover, as representatives of the nation during periods of national self-reflection, their elite status makes the stigma 'loom . . . large' (Goffman, 1963: 125).

Goffman's work has been very influential, and the concept of stigma has been employed across a range of disciplines (see Link and Phelan, 2001). Of particular interest to this article, are the arguments of those who have discussed the relationship between stigma and prejudice, that is how certain groups, including those from particular ethnic backgrounds, are stigmatised and the consequences of this, in terms of socio-economic exclusion, status loss and psychological damage (Phelan et al., 2008).

Contemporary approaches to stigma look to position the stigmatised as 'agents' focusing on, 'the possibilities . . . to contest and transform representations and practices that stigmatize' (Howarth, 2006: 442). Much of Goffman's original work examined the issue of passing, how members of stigmatised groups attempted to conceal their damaging attributes in order to 'fit in' with mainstream society. This type of 'destigmatisation strategy', which seeks to avoid the taint of negative cultural stereotypes, can be seen in the work of Bursell (2012) and Wallem (2017) who examined the practice of changing one's name among immigrants in Sweden and Germany, respectively. They showed how, by changing their names, individuals try to conceal their immigrant backgrounds so as to pass as 'normal' Swedes or Germans. Two other strategies are worth noting, with the second of particular relevance to this article. First, are those who attempt to shift focus away from the stigmatised and instead critique the established social order that views some groups as a problem (Howarth, 2006). In the case of the nation this means, 're-appropriating, and sometimes redefining the meaning of national belonging' (Wallem, 2017: 82) so that a wider variety of groups can be accommodated. Such an approach demands a change in wider social attitudes and is therefore much harder to accomplish. The final strategy is simpler as it tends to focus more on the individual and the means by which they seek recognition as part of the established community by associating themselves with a range of valorised cultural practices and representations. As Goffman (1963) observes, this means disclosing some aspects of their 'biographies' in order to situate themselves more favourably in relation to dominant norms. This article looks to extend research on stigma in the context of nationhood by exploring the use of various destigmatisation strategies by athletes caught up in the Plastic Brits controversy.

Methodology

Building on insights from the literature on established-outsider relations alongside a more agent-centred focus on the destigmatisation strategies of subordinate groups, this study uses media reports that discuss the Plastic Brits debate to focus on the ways in which questions of national belonging were framed and contested. The media play a central role in how narratives of nationhood are articulated, whether in relation to ordinary (Billig, 1995), crisis (Mihelj et al., 2009) or commemorative (Dayan and Katz, 1992) periods. The latter have been conceptualised as forms of 'ecstatic nationalism' (Skey, 2006, 2009) and are of particular significance in representing the nation during moments of widespread co-ordinated public activity, sustained media attention and heightened emotional registers.

Table 1. Overview newspapers in corpus.

Newspapers	Articles
<i>The Times/The Sunday Times</i>	97
<i>Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph</i>	81
<i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i>	68
<i>Guardian/Observer</i>	53
<i>Independent</i>	49
<i>Sun/Sun on Sunday</i>	27
<i>Daily Express/Sunday Express</i>	25
<i>Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror</i>	22
<i>London Evening Standard</i>	12
<i>Daily Star/Daily Star Sunday</i>	5
<i>Daily Record/Sunday Mail</i>	2

In order to differentiate our approach from related studies that focused on individual athletes (Black, 2016; Burdsey, 2016) or different theoretical approaches (Poulton and Maguire, 2012), we undertook a qualitative content analysis of 441 newspaper articles derived from the digital newspaper archive LexisNexis. We used the search query ‘Plastic Brit*’ and selected only major British newspapers (see Table 1). The corpus, which includes printed versions of newspaper articles that can also be found online, spans a period between June 2011 and December 2017.

The qualitative analysis was primarily guided by the theoretical questions outlined earlier: in newspaper reporting, which markers are commonly used to demarcate national belonging and what strategies are elite athletes seen to employ when their status is called into question? The coding process took place as follows. First, we drew a sample of 50 newspaper articles in order to develop categories of markers of belonging. Following Hage, we distinguished between institutional and practical membership criteria. See Table 2 for an overview of the markers used and excerpts coded accordingly.

Then, for each article, we checked which athletes were associated with the Plastic Brits debate, whereupon we coded if the athlete in question was explicitly accepted or rejected as a Brit by the author and on what basis. In addition, we checked whether reference was made to other persons (e.g. officials, coaches) who expressed their opinions on the selection and Britishness of foreign-born athletes. Lastly, we coded how the athletes in question (or persons in their entourage) responded to the Plastic Brits debate.

Figure 1 shows how the use of the ‘Plastic Brit’ label reached its peak in the year of the London Olympics, with over 60 per cent of all articles published in 2012. We contextualised our qualitative analysis with data (Jansen and Engbersen, 2017) on foreign-born Olympic athletes who participated in the Olympics of 2008, 2012 and 2016. These data include information on how the athletes had acquired British citizenship and if they had already competed internationally for another country. Figure 1 shows that neither the proportion of foreign-born Team GB athletes nor the number of athletes who switched their nationalities was disproportionately higher in 2012 than in adjacent Olympic years, forming empirical evidence for the fact that hosting the 2012 Olympics ‘encouraged

Table 2. Markers of belonging and excerpts coded accordingly.

Institutional membership	Birth country	'But the men's and women's teams have been highly criticised for containing a high number of foreign-born players' (<i>Sun</i> , 25 July 2012, 7)
	Domicile	She's [Bechtolsheimer] lived here since she was 1 so she's no Plastic Brit' (thetimes.co.uk)
	Ancestry	'Porter, 24, is perfectly eligible to compete for Britain as she is a dual national. Her mother was born in London and her father is Nigerian' (telegraph.co.uk)
	Marriage	'Cuban Yamile Aldama, triple jump finalist, married to a Scotsman, waited a decade to get British citizenship' (<i>Independent</i> , 6 August 2012, 30)
Practical membership	Language/Accent	'She [Butkevych] speaks broken, heavily accented English' (thetimes.co.uk)
	Cultural affinity	'If you are going to represent Britain at the Olympics then I think it is sensible to know the words of the National Anthem' (<i>Independent</i> , 13 March 2012, 16)
	Pride	'Farah, as proud and patriotic as anyone in Britain' (thetimes.co.uk)
	Civic engagement	'Aldama's British credentials are more persuasive than some of her dual national team-mates [. . .] She has paid British tax for a decade and is a longstanding member of the Barnet Copthall club, where she is also a volunteer coach' (<i>Sunday Telegraph</i> , 11 March 2012, 5)
	Military service	'But after he [Derek Derenalagi] was so badly injured fighting for Britain in Afghanistan in 2007 that he lost both legs and was pronounced dead, who can doubt his right to pull on a Team GB vest?' (<i>Daily Telegraph</i> , 25 August 2012, 28–29)
	Loyalty	'Mullens only received his British passport this year and Gordon left England as a child, facts that may be thrown in the face of British basketball officials given the apparent lack of commitment to the cause' (thetimes.co.uk)

journalists and politicians alike to (re)interpret and attempt to make sense of contemporary Britain' (Poulton and Maguire, 2012: 23).

In what follows we focus on three themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis. First, we address the banality of nationhood that underlies discussions about which athletes should (not) represent Great Britain. Second, we discuss *how*, informed by a range of practical and institutional criteria of belonging, the nation's boundaries are discursively marked. Third, we examine some of the responses of athletes and their entourages that were reported by the media and examine whether and in what ways they tried to avoid the stigma of being labelled as a Plastic Brit. One final point is worth making at this juncture. While we look to highlight the destigmatisation strategies of elite athletes

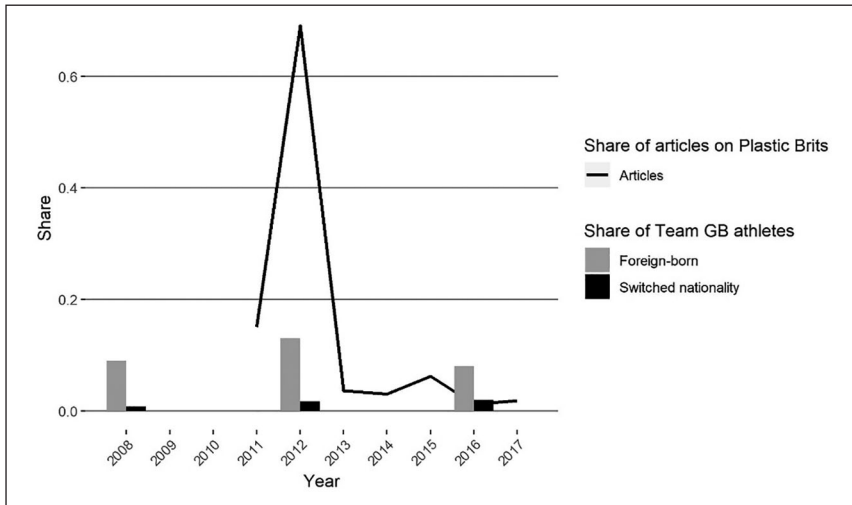


Figure 1. Plastic Brits debate versus actual foreign-born athletes.

caught up in the debate, it should be noted that we are relying on quotes that have been selected by professional journalists. Therefore, while such reports do offer a useful proxy for the athletes’ views, the context in which they were generated needs to be acknowledged.

International Competitions in Globalised Times

Before addressing how national belonging is demarcated, it should be observed that in discussing the status of elite athletes who participate in *international* sporting competitions, many journalists show significant reflexivity with regard to the impact of processes of globalisation and, in particular, international migration on changing citizenship regimes and the blurring boundaries of national belonging:

Obviously, as the planet shrinks there will be increasing numbers of children born in one country and growing up or moving to another. More people will have dual citizenship, through parentage or migration. The business of nationality will become more complex generation to generation. (Samuel, 2012)

This issue [nationality in sport] mirrors, to a large extent, the debate over the meaning of nationhood in a world where boundaries are losing their significance . . . The desire for national identity is in competition with the logic of globalisation. (Syed, 2013)

Importantly, however, this reflexivity operates against the background of a national order that is largely taken for granted. That is, underlying discussions about the status of ‘foreign’ athletes who competed under the British flag at international sporting competitions is a wider logic of nationalism. This logic consists of the idea that ‘the world is (and

should be) divided into identifiable nations, that each person should belong to a nation, that an individual's nationality has some influence on how they think and behave and also leads to certain responsibilities and entitlements' (Skey, 2011: 152–153). Many journalists in our sample commented on the necessity of upholding the authenticity of *international* sporting competitions, which are threatened by the presence of hyper-mobile athletes:

Every sporting competitor who has the option of representing different countries in international sport can choose once – and then must stick with their nation through thick and thin. What destroys the concept of international sport more than anything is the ability to transfer from country to country, as if they were just another club or team. (*Sunday Express*, 2012)

Those applying official cunning to the lenient rules of nationality are utterly bare-faced. Keen [UK Sport official who called the debate 'unpleasantly xenophobic'] talks of the diversity that makes Team GB great, but it didn't need ringers from the NBA [National Basketball Association] or Eastern Europe to make it so. We have plenty of diversity already. A wide range of ethnicity is revealed each time a British team takes the field. (Samuel, 2012)

In many cases, debating whether foreign-born athletes can be legitimately included as members or representatives of the nation can be seen as a form of repair work undertaken to restore the national order of things (Malkki, 1995). As Hage (1998: 53) observes, 'repair work' is generally undertaken by 'spatial managers' (e.g. journalists, politicians) who feel that the nation, as well as their dominant position in that nation, is threatened. Following Critical Race Theorists, within such discourses of decline, whiteness operates as the default 'norm' against which 'others' are defined or treated as a possession, as illustrated by the claim 'we have plenty of diversity already'. Furthermore, the desire to defend or restore the 'normal' state of affairs often goes hand in hand with the explicit denial of racist motives (Hylton, 2010). As we shall see, some degree of accommodation can be made for athletes with the 'right' combination of characteristics, but if too many athletes compete for countries to which they do not 'genuinely' belong or show no loyalty towards the nation, the national order of things becomes threatened and requires careful management.

Marking National Belonging

Perhaps the most striking element that emerged from our analysis is the fact that among the various reports it proved impossible to chart clear-cut hierarchies of belonging that were consistently employed by journalists, government officials, athletes and others.¹ There is no defining marker with which discussions about Britishness could be settled. As Bonikowski (2016: 437) writes, the question of 'who belongs to the nation?' is so difficult to answer because there is simply too much 'variation and ambiguity in respondents' conceptions of legitimate criteria of national membership'. This ambiguity is evidenced by disagreements over the actual number of Plastic Brits, ranging from eight athletes who previously competed for another country, to 61 foreign-born athletes (Poulton and Maguire, 2012).

Table 3. Athletes featuring in Plastic Brits debate.

Athlete	Articles	Sport	Birth country	Switched sporting nationality	Black athlete	British ancestry	Marriage to Brit
Tiffany Porter	166	Athletics	United States	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Yamile Aldama	107	Athletics	Cuba	Yes	Yes		Yes
Shara Proctor	62	Athletics	Anguilla	Yes	Yes		
Shana Cox	40	Athletics	United States	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Mo Farah	34	Athletics	Somalia		Yes	Yes	
Olga Butkevych	28	Wrestling	Ukraine				
Yana Stadnik	17	Athletics	Ukraine				Yes
Zharnel Hughes	15	Athletics	Anguilla	Yes	Yes		
Michael Bingham	11	Athletics	United States	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Cindy Ofili	11	Wrestling	United States		Yes		
Delano Williams	10	Athletics	Turks and Caicos	Yes	Yes		
Philip Hindes	10	Athletics	Germany	Yes		Yes	
Laura Bechtolsheimer	9	Cycling	Germany				

Table 3, which shows athletes who most prominently featured in the debate, offers an illustration for the ambiguity in conceptions of national belonging. Two observations are worth discussing more. First, we found that although blackness alone is not the *sine qua non* for being relegated as outsider, BAME athletes seem to be more easily represented as ‘outsiders in a western setting’ (Gilroy, 2013). Aldama and Porter, for example, are much discredited for switching their sporting nationality, while others (Hindes) seemed to pass under the radar. However, as Black (2016) argues, Mo Farah, has never been labelled a Plastic Brit, but instead has often been referred to as a positive example of ‘assimilated Britishness’. Moreover, the reception of Butkevych and Stadnik (both white) in some parts of the press was similar to that of Porter and Aldama: negative.

While, however, there was no defining marker of inclusion, two other related arguments are worth making at this juncture. First, is the fact that practical forms of belonging trump institutional forms in all cases. That is, simply possessing British citizenship is never enough to guarantee recognition as a member of the nation. Indeed, it is a range of everyday markers of belonging that really matter when it comes to defining established and outsider groups, even if a passport may provide opportunities to live and work in (and compete for) a given country. In this study, a combination of extended domicile in Britain, cultural affinity, expressions of national pride and/or commitment to the country were primarily used to offer (sometimes grudging) acceptance of an athlete.

Earlier, we introduced Hage’s (1998: 53) concept of national cultural capital, the range of ‘valued social and physical cultural styles and dispositions [and] characteristics’ that mark someone out as (not) belonging. In the extracts below we see a number of markers employed, but what connects them (and many of the other, more positive reports we examined) is the idea that these athletes have shown *ongoing* commitment to the country. In Aldama’s case, this is evidenced by domicile and family life but perhaps more

importantly in the form of her service to a local community organisation, rendering less important the fact that she represented other countries at an earlier stage:

It actually feels almost an insult to mention the obnoxious moniker ‘Plastic Brit’ to a Cuban-born woman who has lived in London for more than a decade, holds a UK passport, is married to a Scot, has two British children and has been a servant to grass-root athletics at Shaftesbury Barnet for 11 years. (Chadband, 2012)

Critics would label her one of Team GB’s ‘Plastic Brits’ . . . There is a case for the defence, however. Butkevych has fulfilled the residency requirement, having lived in Britain for more than five years. ‘I fell in love with the culture and people and never looked back’, she said. Shaun Morley, British Wrestling’s performance director, insists that Butkevych is not taking the place of a British-born wrestler because none has reached the required standard. (Fletcher, 2012)

Likewise, with Butkevych there is a period of domicile but also the key phrase ‘never looked back’, which again suggests that her loyalties cannot be called into question. This mechanism operates in line with a broader ongoing moralisation of citizenship foregrounding the ideal of a culturally integrated and civically engaged immigrant who only has one loyalty (Schinkel, 2017). At the same time, Butkevych’s status is not settled. *Currently*, she is not taking the place of a British-born wrestler but, of course, this situation could change over time, making her acceptance temporal and conditional. Therefore, these extracts show both the repertoire of markers that can be used by ‘outsiders’ to generate some degree of acceptance, but also the conditional nature of these relations and the power of more established members to define who belongs.

Similarly, those who hold more critical views of the inclusion of (certain) foreign-born athletes, especially of those who already represented another country, tended to emphasise the incongruence between institutional belonging (formal citizenship) and practical aspects of membership, such as domicile, cultural affinity and, above all, showing loyalty to only one country. This became particularly apparent when Tiffany Porter posted a Twitter message about celebrating the 4th of July, which was picked up by a *Daily Telegraph* journalist, Simon Hart, who wrote:

In the face of such criticism [being labelled a Plastic Brit], the sensible thing for Ofili-Porter to do would have been to pledge her loyalty to her adopted country or, perhaps better still, just say nothing at all. But instead, on American Independence Day, the 23 year-old saw fit to post the following message on Twitter:

It’s the 4th of July!!!!!! Wishing I was in the States to celebrate this special day! I’m definitely there in spirit though

If the implications of such a message were lost on Ofili-Porter, they certainly were not on former sprinter Ato Boldon, now an NBC track and field commentator, who tweeted back: Thought u British now lol.

Laugh out loud, indeed.

While Hart (2011, emphasis added) states that Porter has ‘every *legal* right to wear a British vest’ because she qualifies through her London-born mother, his key argument revolves around the idea that foreign athletes who compete under the British flag should express a sense of national pride:

As fans, we want to see athletes cavorting with the Union Jack to celebrate their medal because they really mean it. We want to see the bottom lip quivering when the flag is hoisted and God Save The Queen rings out.

Our second, related argument is that this idea of showing commitment, of demonstrating your status as a ‘good’ immigrant (Schinkel, 2017), is often placed in direct opposition to the ‘narrow-eyed resourcefulness’ of others. Here, national pride is replaced with individual ‘ambitions’ alongside the spectre of someone *taking advantage* of their diverse (e.g. American/British) ancestry by merely using Great Britain as a flag of convenience. This is perhaps best illustrated with reference to the following extract, where Farah is discussed *in relation to* Porter:

Tiffany Porter, who became British only after finding her professional ambitions thwarted in America, can be accused of narrow-eyed resourcefulness in a way that Mo Farah, who progressed through the British system having arrived in this country from Somalia at the age of eight, cannot. (Samuel, 2012)

As Black (2016) shows in his detailed study of Mo Farah, the Somali-born athlete is often held up as the paragon of the immigrant-made-good. While Farah is also not a priori considered a true member of the nation, a liminal space can be created for certain outsiders who are ‘discursively managed as part of the *established* “us”’ (Black, 2016: 984, emphasis in original). In contrast to Porter, Farah, below, is prepared to continually (the ‘look mate’, pointing to some degree of exasperation, but here also operating as a very particular British expression that demonstrates in-group cultural knowledge) state how proud he is of representing ‘my country’:

‘Look mate’, he said, ‘this is my country. This is where I grew up, this is where I started life. This is my country, and when I put on my GB vest, I’m proud. I’m very proud.’ It was that ‘look mate’ that did it. Entirely natural, totally convincing, it made further debate quite redundant. (Collins, 2012)

These types of debates are also where Hage’s (1998: 37) concept of the ‘domesticated other’ – the idea that otherness within a nation can be tolerated provided it can be managed in a way that accords with the values and mores of the established group – may have particular purchase. Farah, as a product of the ‘British system’ can be seen as the archetypal ‘domesticated other’, while the figure of someone like Porter, with her dual loyalties and overlapping identities, seems to represent a particular problem. Those who define the conditions of belonging are prepared to offer some leeway to ‘outsiders’ provided that they demonstrate a degree of cultural affinity and commitment and, ideally, are successful. Elite athletes, of course, need institutional membership to be allowed to

compete at all, but this is often not enough to mark them as part of the insider group. Instead, it tends to be markers associated with everyday life and culture – some obvious, some curious – that come to the fore in defining belonging. As demonstrated in the next section, these markers are also employed by the athletes themselves as a key strategy of destigmatisation.

Responding to Stigma

In relation to the Plastic Brits debate, elite athletes whose status was called into question generally tended to stress their Britishness by disclosing details about their ‘biographies’ (Goffman, 1963). In some cases, they were assisted by family, coaches or teammates who helped to bolster their arguments. Importantly, these strategies were grounded in the use of the same markers of belonging, formal and practical, that are employed by more dominant groups. Note, for example, how the rather uncontroversial Norwegian-born handball player Britt Goodwin asserts that she is truly British:

I have the British manners and the British behaviour, even though I grew up abroad. I have always felt British. I have only ever had a British passport and we always took our family holidays in Manchester. There’s no foreign blood in my body. (Bateman, 2012a)

Here, it is noticeable that Goodwin uses both institutional (‘a British passport’) as well as practical (‘family holidays in Manchester’, ‘the British manners’) forms of national belonging to establish her credentials. Goodwin’s response can be interpreted as an attempt to keep any ‘stigma from looming large’ (Goffman, 1963: 125), thereby ensuring that she appears as a ‘normal’ member of the British nation (Wallem, 2017).

Another athlete who was never explicitly stigmatised as a Plastic Brit is Philip Hindes, a German-born track cyclist (Poulton and Maguire, 2012). He qualifies through his father, a former British soldier once stationed in Germany. While many reports mention aspects of his ‘discredited biography’ (his imperfect English, strong German accent and the fact that, like Porter, he has competed for his birth country as a junior), it is Hindes *himself* who felt the urge to ‘swat away a potentially awkward Plastic Brit debate’ (Majendie, 2012): ‘Hindes says: “I feel British. I am not really a Plastic Brit. My dad is British.” His argument seems robust, and he has those words to God Save The Queen memorised if it all goes spectacularly well in London’ (Dickinson, 2012). Elsewhere, Hindes assures the public that he is ‘not like an African runner who has two parents in Africa. My dad is British, loads of family live here and I feel British’ (Bateman, 2012b). This particularly noteworthy destigmatisation strategy not only uses ancestry to demonstrate belonging, but also points to the illegitimacy of ‘others’. Although Goffman (1963: 121–122) does not directly address these hierarchies of belonging, he does note how some *discreditable* individuals look to maintain distance from those already discredited. In other reports, Hindes’ Britishness is substantiated by references to cultural idiosyncrasies. To *The Times* (Dickinson, 2012), Hindes said he had developed ‘a passion for Yorkshire puddings since leaving the bratwurst behind’, and Hindes’ affinity with aspects of British culture is emphasised by his companion Sir Chris Hoy, who lends Hindes his DVDs:

Most recently The InBetweeners, to relieve boredom between training sessions. 'He's got a British sense of humour,' Hoy says. What about Fawlty Towers? 'No, I haven't given him that.' Hoy adds that 'it's not as if it's somebody who's visited the country a couple of times or has it on residency. His dad's British and if you're eligible, you're eligible.'

It is worth noting, here, the role of humour in marking out someone as belonging to a particular group. While the link between comedy and national identity has been studied in more general terms (Medhurst, 2007), knowing about, and getting, particular jokes or forms of comedy requires some degree of immersion in a given cultural setting and can be an important way in which people can distinguish themselves from others, including in national terms (Skey, 2018).

'And We Still Drink Tea, of Course'

Athletes who were instead explicitly labelled as Plastic Brits frequently employed similar strategies, disclosing biographical information which centred on key markers of belonging (e.g. stressing ancestry, national pride or domicile). In the two examples below, it is banal markers associated with food and media consumption that are used to try and reaffirm the athlete's connections with the nation. While it is easy to denigrate these type of markers (by labelling them as cliches, for example), we have previously argued that when there is uncertainty about who belongs, official markers of identity generally become far less important than those quotidian features that are broadly recognised, and often valued, by more dominant groups (Skey, 2011: 88–92). An interview with Tiffany Porters' mother in the *Sun* (Samson, 2012), for example, speaks of the family's affinity with everyday British cultural artefacts:

I am happy Tiffany's running for Britain because I have such strong connections with the country. I used to read the *Sun* a lot while I was there. I really loved reading about the Royal family. The monarchy of Britain is just fantastic. I also loved Blankety Blank and Terry Wogan. And we still drink tea of course. And when we were in Britain it was the Iron Lady. She was a strong-willed lady, I liked her. I also loved fish and chips – that was the main thing I enjoyed.

In Aldama's case, initial accusations about her 'outsider status' were frequently countered with reference to her affinity with aspects of British culture. In her column in the *Observer* Aldama (2012) wrote:

I feel part of this country. At home we have Sunday roast and I love it, gravy and roast potatoes. Andrew, my husband, makes Scottish dishes, I drink tea. I didn't grow up with these things, but I embrace them because they are a part of my home, of my family.

From our analysis, providing biographical information in relation to various established markers of belonging, can be seen as a particularly attractive 'destigmatisation strategy' (Bursell, 2012), in the sense that they help Aldama and other athletes with 'questionable' biographies try and secure greater recognition as legitimate members of Team GB.

Concluding Remarks

Elite athletes who compete in international competitions offer a particularly compelling case for studying national belonging as they continue to embody and represent the nation during periods of sustained media attention and heightened emotional registers. And yet when compared with other types of representatives – such as heads of state, ambassadors, political leaders – they have received much less scholarly attention. Furthermore, the growing mobility of human populations in general, and elite athletes in particular, has begun to complicate the role and status of such national representatives, as cultural affiliations become more fluid and countries search for quicker routes to international glory.

In looking to address this lacuna, we have developed a more dynamic analytical framework able to attend to both established regimes of power as well as questions of agency and resistance. As regards the latter, we placed particular emphasis on the stigmatisation strategies of outsider groups. We first applied insights from Elias and Scotson's classic work on established-outsiders to the national context, before drawing an important distinction between institutional and practical markers in the assertion and contestation of belonging. Then, by bringing in Goffman's (1963) writing around stigma, we found a productive means of attending to the shifting status of different groups within the nation as well as the attempts by more marginal groups to assert a sense of belonging (often in relation to everyday markers).


Our framework was used to analyse media reporting of the 'Plastic Brits' debate, where athletes brought in to represent Team GB were subject to ongoing scrutiny and critique over a sustained period of time. Overall, our analysis reveals the complex and segmented nature of discourses of nationhood. While in the eyes of some (more) established members of society most outsiders could eventually be domesticated as part of the established group, certain others seemed to be more difficult to manage (Ahmed, 2000). More specifically, in line with our analytical framework, we have noted: the complex repertoire of formal and everyday markers used to define and manage national belonging; the conditional forms of recognition that are offered to those who demonstrate appropriate levels of commitment to and/or cultural affinity; and the varying ways in which athletes caught up in the Plastic Brits controversy sought to respond to and challenge processes of stigmatisation. Underlying all this, most reporting continues to reproduce a largely taken-for-granted 'logic of nationalism' – with the world 'naturally' divided into nations that compete against each other through the activities of committed, skilled representatives. In times when dominant forms of national belonging are felt to be under threat or in decline, debates over who counts as part of the nation, and on what grounds, become ever more contested.

Finally, we believe that our approach can also be employed in more quotidian settings to track the manner in which both dominant and subordinate groups look to understand and manage the thorny issue of national belonging and, of course, the entitlements that may flow from being seen as a legitimate member of the nation. Future research would benefit from paying more attention to these entitlements, whether tangible, as in the case of elite athletes being able to compete on a global stage with the full support of a well-funded government organisation, or more rhetorical, the feeling that one has the right to comment on, and regulate, the presence and activities of 'others' within the nation.

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1. Unsurprisingly, newspaper coverage in the *Daily Mail*, instigator of the debate, was overall much more negative than in, most notably, the *Observer* (in which Aldama had her own column). However, within and between the various newspapers included in our sample, each with their particular political connotations, contrasting opinions existed regarding the inclusion of (some of the) 'Plastic Brits' in Team GB.

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