

## Narratives and social identity formation among Somalis and post-enlargement Poles

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TITLE: Narratives and social identity formation among Somalis and post-enlargement Poles

ABSTRACT: The article examines the narratives of collective belonging among two migrant groups, Somalis and post-enlargement Poles, who live in the London borough of Ealing (UK). In order to gain a better understanding of the processes of social identity formation, the article proposes a synthesis of a social identity approach, in particular the recent discursive developments in the field, with a political opportunity structure approach. Drawing upon these bodies of research, the article analyses the understandings of collective identity among Somalis and post-enlargement Poles according to three sets of social relationships: the group's relationship with the political environment; its relationship with other groups; and its relationship with people who share the same ascribed identity. The findings of the study confirm that social identity is shaped by not only intra- and inter-group cognitive elements, but also by the political environment in which a group operates.

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As European societies have become increasingly diverse, governments have developed strategies to accommodate the needs of its migrant communities. In recent years, there has been a shift across Europe towards policy measures which promote migrants' civic engagement, and individual commitments to the country of residence (e.g. Joppke, 2004; Scuzzarello, 2010). Yet, relatively few studies have turned their attention to how such understandings of incorporation affect migrants' sense of social identity and of belonging to the society in which they are living.

The analysis wants to contribute to research on social identity in two ways. First, it studies how the local discursive and political environments shape the expression of social identities and

therefore systematically considers the mediating effect of socio-political context. This is done by bridging a social identity perspective (Tajfel, 1978; 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) with a political opportunity structures approach (Tarrow, 1994; Koopmans & Statham, 1999; Koopmans et al., 2005). Second, the article challenges static conceptualisations of social identities by analysing them through individual narratives about group belonging and identity. Narrative analysis brings forward the ways in which people position themselves in relation to the socio-political environment, and how they negotiate the ways they are located by other people and institutions. Empirically, it analyses how two migrant communities, Somalis and Poles<sup>1</sup> living in Ealing (London, UK), construct their social identities through their interactions and experiences of living in a specific urban socio-political environment.

First, I discuss the advantages of bringing together a social identity approach, a political opportunity structures approach, and narrative analysis into one analytic framework. Second, I present the article's research design. Section three introduces the structures of opportunities existing in Ealing which are relevant for the identification of migrants with their political community. The fourth section presents and analyses the narratives of social identity of Somalis and post-enlargement Poles in relation to the political environment, other groups and potential in-group members.

### **Narratives, social identity and political environment**

Research within Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1974; 1978; 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987) posits that the necessary and sufficient condition for group formation is the perception of belonging to a self-category. Individuals structure, systematise and simplify the complex social reality surrounding them by means of abstract social categories. These categories are either internalised as elements of their conception of the self or used by others to locate a person within a system of social

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<sup>1</sup> I focus on Poles who have migrated to the UK following the 2004 European Union (EU) enlargement (hereinafter 'post-enlargement Poles').

relations. Once an actor has categorised the self as belonging to a particular social group and therefore internalised certain categories, s/he will accept the norms, values and stereotypes associated to that group. The meaning of social identity depends upon a group's distinctiveness from others along relevant and valued dimensions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A social identity is therefore relational as 'the characteristics of one's own group (such as its status, its richness or poverty, the colour of the skin) acquire their significance only in relation to the perceived differences from other groups and the evaluations of these differences' (Tajfel, 1972 in Deschamps, 1982, p.87). In the context of migration, migrants' narratives comparing one's group to another are closely related to the social conditions in which they live as well as to perceived and ascribed differences.

SIT and SCT are of undeniable importance for the study of identity formations and intergroup relations. However, they have been criticised for reifying social categories and identities and for drawing boundaries between in- and out-groups which have little bearing in the real, contested life of social identity formation (Jenkins, 2008). In reality, contrasting interpretations about the group's characteristics emerge all the time. For instance, different Muslim groups in Britain actively deliberate upon what it means to adopt a Muslim identification (Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002). While there may be an analytical advantage in dividing in- and out-groups into neat categories, this ignores the importance of interactions among actors and between actors, and the socio-political environment in which they operate. It is therefore important to focus on how migrants position themselves as members of a group in relation to other groups, but also on how they position themselves within representations of their social identities. This sheds light on how the members of a group define group boundaries and negotiate the meaning of group membership.

A linguistic approach to social identity, which points at language's role in constructing and contesting social categories (e.g. Reicher & Hopkins, 1996) challenge the

rigid in- and out-group framework which characterises SIT and SCT. In this article, I analyse understandings of social identity through the study of individual narratives. Through stories, people make sense of the world and position themselves in it (McAdams, 1996; Hammack, 2011). Narratives are not only important for the development of a personal sense of self, but also for the development of social identity. Following this, narratives are ‘the sensible organization of thought through language, internalised or externalised, which serves to create a sense of personal coherence and collective solidarity and to legitimize collective beliefs, emotions, and actions’ (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012, p.78). By relating to stories about a shared history, memories, and symbolic, institutional and material practices, people make sense of their position in society as members of a group and act accordingly. Narratives about social identity are mediated by the subjective experiences of the context in which people operate. The experience of migration, for instance, mediates the ‘plot’ of migrants’ narratives about their collective identity. Leaving the native country under more or less traumatic circumstances, the modalities of reception in the new hosting society, as well as being confronted with stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes by the majority society are some of the realities that will affect the stories told by migrants about who they are, who they were, and who they will be as individuals and as a group. Narratives are contested by individuals through their lived experience of and attitudes to their group membership. The meaning of being ‘Somali’ or ‘Pole’ will vary according to people’s perceptions of group belonging. Which narrative will gain more visibility, resonance and legitimacy in the public sphere is however an empirical question.

According to a social identity perspective, the study of intergroup relations and group membership cannot be divorced from the analysis of social reality and in particular the perceived social structure of intergroup relationships (Israel & Tajfel, 1972). Reicher and Hopkins reiterate this, arguing that ‘any attempt to go directly from group processes to group

behaviour without considering the mediation of social context violates the meta-theoretical concerns which led to the development of social identity theory' (2001, p. 34). Following this, I argue that an important relationship which should be analysed in the study of social identity formation (together with relationships with other groups and self-positioning within one's social identity) is the contextual determination of categories. In doing this, I draw upon the literature on political opportunity structures and apply a more specific understanding of 'context' than many social psychologists have done (Scuzzarello, 2012).

A 'political opportunity structure' (POS) refers to the institutional and discursive variables of the political environment which change individuals' or groups' expectations for success or failure in attaining their goals (Tarrow, 1994). Variables of a political environment are opportunity structures only if they are subjectively perceived as providing an opportunity for a group to mobilise and achieve an established goal (McAdam; Tarrow & Tilly, 2001).

Drawing upon this understanding of the relationship between POSs and collective behaviour, research in ethnic relations demonstrates that institutional and discursive structures of opportunities shape which social identities are expressed by migrants and minorities in the public domain (Koopmans & Statham, 1999; Koopmans et al., 2005; Statham et al, 2005; Odmalm, 2005). By facilitating or constraining access to the policy process and legitimating public discourses a 'political opportunity structure favours some collective actors, some expressions of collective identities, and some types of demands over others' (Koopmans, 2004, p.451). For instance, the opportunities for migrants to naturalise and to exercise political rights such as voting yield higher levels of identification with the polity in which they live (Odmalm, 2005) and they affect political mobilisation (Koopmans et al., 2005). In Switzerland, where migrants are offered few opportunities to access the policy processes and to acquire Swiss nationality, they are not likely to develop a sense of identification with the Swiss polity (Koopmans et al., 2005). As both groups studied in this

research are afforded the right to vote and stand in local election, it is significant to analyse if and for what reasons they make use of this opportunity.

Opportunities are also likely to influence how migrants define themselves collectively in relation to other groups (Koopmans et al., 2005, p.18). Narratives about minority groups as problematic and undeserving, or as hard-working and supportive may reach high visibility, resonance and legitimacy in the public sphere when endorsed by policy actors and by the media. Negative descriptions may affect the attempt to positively differentiate one's group from others and may shape how they relate to other groups. Given the significance of the political contextual factors in favouring the expressions of some social identities over others, it is important to analyse the relationships between the social identities expressed by migrants and the discursive and institutional structures of opportunities in which they live and operate.

## **Research design**

The empirical study is divided into two parts. First, I analyse Ealing's institutional and discursive structures of opportunities relevant to the field of ethnic relations and which are significant for migrants' identification and engagement in Ealing. Specifically, I analyse (1) the available mechanisms of political participation adopted by the municipality; (2) the discursive constructions about migrants' integration produced by institutions through official statements; and (3) the discursive constructions produced by policy actors which locate Somalis and post-enlargement Poles in relation to Ealing's socio-political environment. The data consists of the Council's official policy documents and public statements on integration and cultural diversity. In order to gain a deeper contextual understanding, I have also interviewed ten key policy actors working in the field of ethnic relations in the borough.

To analyse processes of social identity construction I have conducted 41 semi-structured interviews with Somalis and post-enlargement Poles living in Ealing<sup>2</sup>. Both groups have access to significant political rights as either British citizens or as European citizens<sup>3</sup>. The opportunity to be part of the political community in Ealing could affect their social identity and they might identify themselves as being ‘citizens’ of the borough (Koopmans et al., 2005). Their different ethnic and religious backgrounds may play a role in their subjective perception of social identity. The characteristics of the interview sample are summarised in Table 1.

**TABLE 1 about here**

I recruited participants through language schools, ethnic/national associations, places of faith, and through snowballing. The majority of the Polish sample is between 30 and 39 years old, reflecting the demographic profile of the post-accession Polish community in the UK. Most of the participants of Somali background are young (between 20 and 29 years old), possibly a consequence of snowballing. To balance this, and to ensure that the data would include both Somalis who grew up in Somalia and those who spent most of their lives in the UK, I recruited older participants as well. The gender ratio is balanced for the Somali group. However, women are overrepresented among the interviewed Poles. This bias was again a consequence of snowball sampling, and it has been taken into consideration in the analysis. Given the large number of Somalis and post-enlargement Poles resident in Ealing, the sample does not aim to reach representativity of the larger population. However, their responses are

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<sup>2</sup> Half of the interviews were conducted in English by the author and half were carried out by research assistants in Somali and Polish. The interviews were conducted between December 2011 and May 2012 as part of a larger project funded by the Swedish Research Council (ref. no.VR2011-1166) and the Krapperup Trust (ref. no. KR2012-0019).

<sup>3</sup> All apart three Somali interviewees were citizens of an EU country and have therefore access to voting rights at local elections.



informative in as far as the subjective perceptions of the meaning of group membership are concerned.

The analysis of the participants' narratives relies on an interpretative approach (Hammack, 2011) of how people see themselves as members of a group, and how they view their relation to others and to the political environment in which they live. In order to assess this, each participant was asked questions about three specific social relations:

1. *Relationship to the political institutional framework.* Access to political rights and voting rights in particular, has a positive effect on people's sense of belonging to the political community. Hence, participants were asked about their use of the mechanisms of political participation provided by Ealing Council and their perceptions of opportunities for gaining influence in the local political environment.
2. *Relationship to other communities.* SIT assumes that positive or negative value connotations can only be derived through comparison with other relevant social groups. In order to assess these elements of social comparison, the participants were asked about their interactions with other communities resident in Ealing (English white and other minorities) as well as their attitudes to them. This allows me to understand which aspects of the Somalis' and post-enlargement Poles' social identities were protected by positively valuing their distinctiveness and which aspects were instead redefined to achieve positive identification.
3. *Relationship to the own group.* In order to understand how Somalis and post-enlargement Poles locate themselves in relation to others who share the same nationality but not necessarily similar life experiences, participants were asked about their perceptions of internal group strengths, the valence of group membership, and their perception of competition within the group.

## **Ealing's political and discursive environments**

With a population of 339.300 inhabitants (as of 2011), Ealing is among the largest boroughs of London (UK). Ealing has experienced a large influx of migrants since the 1950s, mainly from the Indian Subcontinent, which has resulted in the settlement of significant Indian and Pakistani minorities. Today, 51% of Ealing's residents is non-white, and the Asian/Asian British group is the largest minority (29.6%) (ONS, 2011). Following the enlargement of the EU in 2004, the already established Polish community increased significantly. The 2011 Census shows that there are 21.500 Polish citizens living in Ealing (ONS, 2011). Somalis arrived in Ealing in large numbers in the early 1990s following the civil war. Recent estimates consider that between 11.000 and 15.000 Somalis live in the borough (Cole & Robinson, 2003).

Ealing is characterised by significant socioeconomic cleavages and urban segregation. The western wards are characterised by higher benefit claims rates and unemployment rates than other parts of the borough, and the wards of Southall Broadway and Southall Green rank 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> poorest of the 633 wards in London (as of 2007). These are also the wards with the highest percentage of non-white residents. In comparison, the central wards have an average household income of £38.000 per annum<sup>4</sup> and most residents are white British (Ealing Council, 2008).

Ealing Council, in line with the British policy framework concerning migrants and minorities, has facilitated the organization and political participation for ethnic and racial minorities and has backed this with help of national anti-discrimination legislation. This 'race relations' approach is paralleled by a culturally pluralist conception of citizenship which sought to retain diversity among minorities living in Ealing by allowing its residents to follow a variety of cultural patterns.

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<sup>4</sup>The average household income in London is £33.000 per annum (2011).

In the 1980s the Labour party successfully co-opted a large proportion of migrants from the Subcontinent. This led to an increased representation of Indian Sikhs in the council, whose demands involved housing and education rather than ethno-religious claims (Dancygier, 2010). The strong political representation of these groups in the Council has led to the perception of differential treatment among communities, as confirmed in Ealing's Community Cohesion Strategy and by policy actors,

The feeling within some communities is that certain groups get preferential treatment such as BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] groups, migrants and asylum seekers. While this is not the case, this perception can have a large impact on how communities interact with one another (Ealing Council, 2007, p. 28)

POL1<sup>5</sup>: Because of that strong core of Southall politicians there is a feeling sometimes that extra resources are being pushed towards Southall. <sup>6</sup>

Interviewer: in terms of housing, regeneration...?

POL1: funding for stuff, yes, for regeneration for example. Which is understandable in many ways, as Southall has enormous needs.

In order to address this, the Council has increased the number of opportunities to get involved in service design and delivery through consultation with residents and the third sector. For instance, in 2008 it introduced the ward forums, regularly held meetings where residents can petition their councillors. This exists alongside traditional mechanisms of political participation such as voting and volunteering.

Following national policies on community cohesion and integration, Ealing adopted a Community Cohesion and Integration Strategy in 2006. It emphasises equality and stresses the importance of creating a shared vision for the borough (Ealing Council, 2007, p.6). In

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<sup>5</sup> In order to guarantee the full anonymity of the policy-makers and practitioners I have interviewed, I have labelled each interview with this group of participants as "POL" followed by the numerical order of appearance in this article.

<sup>6</sup> Southall is traditionally a Labour stronghold and most Councillors are of Indian Sikh background.

order to do so, the Council aims to facilitate ‘interaction between people of different communities. This can be implemented through local arts/sport and cultural events, festivals and outreach work within the community’ (2007, p.31) but also through the creation of ‘public spaces [that] can be a bridge between communities’ (2007, p.34). Despite this, grass-roots practitioners would describe Ealing as a non-integrated borough. Minority communities live their lives separated from each other,

If you look at the integration of people in terms of safety, much more respect, people are going to the carnival and all of that you can see [cohesion]. But if you go to the moral issues, if you want to see people getting along together then it’s not there. (POL2)

Socioeconomic factors as well as historical ones seem to hinder integration between communities. Another practitioner points out that Ealing has historically been divided into what she calls ‘a series of towns’, implying that there have always been cleavages between the wards:

Ealing isn’t a cohesive entity even without its mixed population, because it’s made up of a series of towns that have different individual identities. (POL3)

Policy actors depict Somalis and Poles who live in Ealing in different ways. Somalis are among the most deprived groups in Ealing, as confirmed by grass-root practitioners,

For these [Somali] families there are social factors that are hindering the quality of the community cohesion, they are struggling with bills, they can’t get a [refugee] status from the Home Office and if you don’t have a status, that impacts on their housing, welfare and it’s a circle. (POL2)

This was confirmed by a policy officer,

I think there are some [groups] that slipped under the radar. At the moment the Somali community has sort of drifted in the last 5-10 years and the population is

steadily growing, and we are becoming more aware of the issues that this community face in the areas where they are based. (POL4)

Furthermore, according to a senior police officer (POL5), the lack of clear role models and community representatives constitutes a problem as a natural bridge between the authorities and the Somali community cannot be established. This group's at times uncertain legal status, together with issues of unemployment, lower educational attainment, as well as language barriers are factors that contribute to their socioeconomic deprivation.

The interviewees present a very different perception of Polish migrants. It is largely seen as a non-problematic community,

Generally [the influx of post-enlargement Poles] has been very good. There have been some tensions between...some communities... between the Polish community and other communities around issues of drinking and things like that where there's a kind of cultural clash. But generally, it has been quite positive, certainly from an economic perspective: a lot of Polish people coming over got involved in different trades that have been in the decline for English people. (POL4)

Ealing's policy actors seem to see Polish migrants as hard-working and an asset for the borough. This is consistent with the findings of research showing that, in general, British society has positive attitudes towards Polish migrants (Eade et al., 2006). The interviewee also points at issues of alcohol abuse. A senior police officer confirms that the police deals with an increased number of drunk-related offences which involve Polish men (POL5). However, this is not perceived to be as an issue requiring special attention.

### **Being a Pole or a Somali**

In this section, I identify the main stories the participants use to define their social group by analysing their narratives about their national and religious identities and about their understanding of their group's key strengths. The analysis reveals specific self-categories,

which are however by no means static or unchallenged. The social identities presented below are subject to different interpretations and contestation depending on e.g. the participants' age or gender, as I will show in the remainder of the article.

The Somali participants predominantly identify as Muslims,

I'd say I'm Somali second and Muslim first. (Somali man, 40-49 years old)

Most participants follow the Islamic precepts, their children attend Quranic Friday-schools and they go to the mosque regularly. Islam is a more meaningful source of social identity than the category referring to their nationality,

The fact that I'm Somali and Muslim are meshed into one. In some ways though I'd rather see myself as Muslim first and Somali second because what it means to be Somali is constantly changing. [...] being a Muslim is pretty static. (Somali woman, 20-29 years old)

Faith assumes an important role in defining young Somalis' social identity. Those who talked about their national identities (Somali and British) and their religious identity, ranked them quite clearly,

I think for me I'm Muslim first, second thing I'm Somali and third thing I'm British. Because Somali is my origin, my origin is more important than my citizenship. My faith and my belief is Islam, my origins are Somali and my citizenship is British. (Somali man, 20-29 years old)

The findings seem to support the claim that the religious basis of Islamic belief makes it a prior form of national or cultural allegiance and social identity (Statham et al., 2005). Religious identity seems also to assume a particular connotation among young participants. Religious categories offer a more stable, 'static', framework for their social identity than national ones. Rather than a response to possible hostility against Islam, the significance of

faith seems to reflect their need to affirm a stable identity in the context of British multiculturalism. Islam also provides a secure sense of self in relation to their homeland which is imagined, but seldom really experienced.

The emphasis on religion also seems to be related to Britain's socio-political context,

There is a strong Muslim community here, recognised by the government. That's quite important [...] there's no contradiction, the law of this country accepts Muslims as a community of the British society. That's what I think attracts many Somalis to Britain... tolerance and acceptance. There is something called 'British Muslims' which is just normal here. (Somali man, 40-49 years old)

The British discursive structure of opportunities enables people to feel British and Muslims at the same time, with no apparent tension between the two categories. The 'race relations' model adopted in the UK to deal with ethnic diversity, while not extending group rights to minority religions, seems to have allowed Muslims the freedom to express and practice their faith. Ealing, which has a Muslim population higher than the London average, may constitute a particularly favourable environment in which Somalis can express their religious identity. The role of the opportunities available to the participants to express their belief is underlined by the interviewees who previously lived elsewhere in Europe. Talking about her experience of living in France, a woman describes the prejudiced attitudes she faced there because she was wearing a *Jilbab*<sup>7</sup>. In Ealing she has not met the same attitudes and she comfortably wears traditional Somali clothing. This is consistent with research by Valentine and colleagues (2010) who find that Somalis living in Denmark see the UK as 'the land of opportunities' where one can practice Islam freely because the state does not impinge in the family-life as much as in Scandinavia.

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<sup>7</sup> A *jilbab* is a long cloak worn over the body often worn in Somalia.

The majority of the Somali participants endorse an understanding of Somalis being a very supportive group,

[Somalis] are tight as a community and they help each other because they are not an individualistic community. (Somali man, 30-39 years old)

There are very few people who are left on their own to deal with things so there is always a big extended family to help you with things (Somali woman, 30-39 years old)

As Somalis have been uprooted from their homeland and family members are either dispersed or dead, they express the importance of belonging to a tight-knit group who can help newcomers to find their way in the British system. However, this cohesiveness is not always positively perceived. Some young interviewees say that it creates a system of control,

I don't want to move to the west [of London from south London]. I know I'm working [in Ealing] but I don't... I wouldn't want to live here because... I don't know... I want get out of it, get out from here. It's nice to see other [Somali] people around me [...] but... here it's too much for me, too many people who know your business... it's too closed. (Somali woman, 20-29 years old)

Not conforming to the community's social rules would penalise young Somalis by giving them a bad reputation, as put by one young man,

In the Somali culture, if someone sees you going to a club, if an older man or woman and sometimes even the younger ones see you, they'll call your house and say ' I saw X going to a club. It's not good, it's not good' [...] if people know you for these things, people won't respect you, you'll lose a lot of reputation. (Somali man, 20-29 years old)

The large Somali community in Ealing, which is concentrated in a few wards within the borough, is perceived by some as providing solidarity and support. However, it is also a



regulating community which can control and exclude those who do not conform to the predominant understanding of 'proper' Somali behaviour. Young Somalis are left with the options of either negotiating this system of control and regulation, by for example living in areas less densely populated by Somalis, or alienating themselves from the community. This system of regulation does not only affect young people, however. As we will see later, it is used as a distancing device between young British Somalis and other European Somalis.

The Polish participants endorse mainly to two narratives which characterise post-enlargement Poles as a group. The first one depicts them as hard-working,

[The key strength of the Polish community is] hard working personality in some people's case.... We have it in the genes I believe, the fact that we are hard working.

(Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

This narrative could have been shaped by the British discursive context which depicts Poles as having a strong work ethic echoed by policy actors in Ealing, and as threatening British workers' employment opportunities – an opinion recently voiced by the British Prime Minister Cameron and by the leader of the opposition, Mr. Miliband. By emphasising the positive side of this ascribed characteristic of Polish workers, the participants could be seeking to confirm high subjective status and a positive social identity, vis-à-vis the British public opinion about Poles.

The second narrative about post-enlargement Poles' social identity emphasises faith,

[The key strengths of the Polish community is] mainly the church, [...] maybe Christmas and Easter, the fact that we celebrate it so much... key strengths... maybe

more the Catholic side of it. (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

The social category referring to Catholicism is particularly salient for those who regularly attend mass at Our Lady Mother of the Church in Ealing<sup>8</sup>. The church provides a space where they can practice their faith and where they can find support,

I go to the Polish church in Ealing [...] it's great that we have a Polish church here, that we know that Polish people are there [...] there are also some friends [who attend the church], Polish friends which are really nice and have the same mind-set as mine. Because otherwise it wouldn't be easy to cope with things, with the hard things in this country. (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

Other participants seem to have a different perspective about the meaning of being Catholic. They use narratives referring to faith as support for their national identity,

Even this church, people go there and for them it is... I don't know, maybe it reminds them of Poland, where on Sunday everybody goes to church together. And after the church they stay, go together for a coffee and a polish doughnut. (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

Catholic symbols and rituals, particularly around Christmas and Easter, are used to boost their national Polish identity (Ryan, 2010). Some participants are more cautious about the benefits of attending the Polish church,

I don't go to the Polish church. Last time I went with my child to the English church. Why? Because when you go to this Polish church everybody is looking at you, checking you out up and down, who is wearing what, how much money they spent on it, which car they drive etc. As if it wasn't a church but something like...For me this is not normal. That's why I turned away from there. (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

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<sup>8</sup> The Our Lady Mother of the Church in Ealing Broadway is known as 'the Polish church'. The Marian Fathers (all Polish) hold seven masses in Polish each Sunday, three masses each weekday and five on Fridays and holy days, indicating the large size of the congregation.

The Polish church is a circus. Some people say it's a fashion show or something. I don't go there often, it happened a few times. But it's a tragedy... (Polish man, 30-39 years old)

Similarly to the response given by the Somali participants, the existence of a close-knit community can be perceived positively by those who position themselves as part of it. The church provides its congregation with material and emotional support and it reinforces a sense of national belonging and cohesion among practicing Poles in Ealing. In contrast, those who position themselves outside this grouping find it to be constraining as it creates social pressure to conform to particular behaviour. The findings in this section indicate that the social categories 'post-enlargement Poles' or 'Somali' cannot be considered as being static and homogeneous. Rather, they are categories within which people position themselves while negotiating their individual sense of who they are and are therefore subject to variations.

### **Ealing's political institutional frameworks and belonging**

Both groups have access to voting rights at local elections, either as European citizens or because they have naturalised. This could affect positively their identification with Ealing's polity. However, my study shows that while most Somali participants use the existing mechanisms of political participation and identify as being part of Ealing's polity, only a minority of the Polish sample does so. None of the participants is aware of other forms of participation, such as the ward forums.

Most Polish participants have lived in London for at least seven years. They could therefore see themselves as part of the borough they live in and have an interest in participating in local elections. Instead, they are seldom engaged in local politics and elections. The reasons given for this are lack of interest and of time,

No [I never voted at local elections]. Why not? Because I'm not interested in it at all. I don't know who's doing what, I don't know anything about the political life. I

don't even know about it in Poland, so why should I know about it here? (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

I was going to [vote at local elections], but it was always during the time I was working. [...] so there was no chance for me to go and vote. (Polish man, 40-49 years old)

Generally, the Polish participants think that Poles' needs are met by the existing political system,

No, I don't mind [not having group representation]. If I had some issues that need solving I can equally well solve them with the English people, through the English institutions... so the special Polish [representation]...I don't really need it. (Polish man, 30-39 years old)

The few participants who speak favourably about increased Polish representation do not advocate the establishment of a separate body representing Poles. Rather, they would like to see more Polish councillors running for elections and therefore prefer using existing platforms to increase their representation.

The Somali participants respond very differently to questions of political participation. The majority believes it is important to vote at local elections,

[Voting] it's something I've done and something I'd do again. I believe in engaging with your community and making a difference. (Somali man, 30-39 years old)

Yes [I have voted] because this is the only way I can affect what kind of politicians come to power, those ones who can affect me as a citizen, and those political views I feel are necessary. (Somali woman, 20-29 years old)

Yes I did [vote], because I want to participate in where I live. And be part of it. (Somali woman, 40-49 years old)

Voting is more than just an obligation. The Somali interviewees seem to perceive participation in local elections as an important way to influence the Council and being ‘part of it’ as citizens. The fact that the majority of the interviewees are naturalised British citizens may affect this response. We need also to take in consideration Somalia’s context of crisis. Britain is often the first place in which they can exercise their political rights since they fled their homeland. As a young woman puts it,

Yes, [voting] it’s something I actively do. I’ve been exposed to politics and foreign affairs from a very young age. Being a refugee and my family living of the state the people we vote for are important. (Somali woman, 20-29 years old)

Among the participants, there is a perception that the Somali community’s needs in Ealing are not listed to. Some argue that Ealing Council is uninterested,

In Ealing from my experience [the council] has no interest in community groups. The Somali community really has no voice, no influence. [The election of one Somali councillor has had] no impact so far<sup>9</sup>. I mean, absolutely no impact at all. (Somali man, 40-49 years old)

Others emphasise that Somalis do not engage enough with Ealing’s polity,

There is something missing, yes, there is something missing from the Somali people. There are too many people and they are not engaged enough with the political system and the Council. (Somali man, 40-49 years old)

While the participants see themselves as citizens and therefore exercise their right to vote, they also see voting as a way to voice the Somali community’s needs in a formal platform. However, their political mobilisation is not as strong as it could be either because Somalis do

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<sup>9</sup> The first councillor of Somali background, Cllr. Abdullah Gulaid, won a seat for the Labour Party at 2010 local elections.

not seem to be fully engaged from mainstream society. This reflects the concerns of some policy actors in the borough.

The different voting behaviour between the two groups may be symptomatic of their difference in status. Following Eisinger's (1973) inverted U-curve model, we can expect that Somalis are more likely to mobilise than Poles. The former are in a position of socioeconomic deprivation, they believe that Ealing Council is not responsive to their needs and, at the same time, they have access to formal representation. These factors, according to Eisinger's model, are likely to trigger the highest extent of protest – in this case through voting. Poles instead do not consider themselves deprived of political representation and their needs are broadly met by the existing political system. Following Eisinger's argument, they are therefore be less prone to mobilisation. Furthermore, Poland has seen a decline of voters' turnout in parliamentary elections since 1991 (Slomczynski & Shabad, 2011). Poles' voting dynamics in the UK may reflect the declining turnout at the voting ballots in Poland. These factors, which are tied to the POSs available in Ealing and which are mediated by homeland influences, could explain their limited political participation.

A social identity approach can add further insights to this. The Somali participants express a subjective sense of being a citizen of Ealing. In the borough they can express their faith freely and they feel entitled to mobilise because they are part of that community. Poles instead do not identify as citizens of Ealing and rather tend to emphasise their national or religious identities. Despite having a higher socioeconomic status than Somalis, the Polish interviewees do not seem to proactively participate in the civic life of the city. This finding partly goes against theories on socioeconomic differences and citizenship (e.g. Kymlicka & Norman, 1994). While socioeconomic status shapes people's opportunities of civic involvement, identification with the polity is an equally important factor in fostering

proactive citizenship behaviour. This becomes evident only if we place the concept of citizenship within this social psychological context.

### **Relationships with out-groups**

In everyday interactions, social identities are created through processes emphasising similarities and differentiation and involve the creation of boundaries between groups. In this section, I focus on how Poles and Somalis in Ealing define their social identities in relation to white Britons and with other migrant or minority groups<sup>10</sup>; which social comparisons are made relevant by the participants; and in what ways the comparisons affect self-evaluation.

In general, the Somali and Polish participants tend to have few close ties with white English people, although most of the interviewees work or study with them,

I have an English colleague but other than working together and being friendly at work we don't have any other relationship. (Somali woman, 30-39 years old)

[My colleagues] are mainly English. [...] they are friends from work. We spend time together at work. We rarely... we don't have any contact with each other after work. Everyone's got their own life. (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

Relationships with white Britons seem to be limited to relatively shallow forms of contact, due to different values or to the fact that the groups do not seem to share spaces where they can meet outside the working environment.

Participants were asked to compare their country with Britain. The Polish participants compared the two countries' educational level,

For me English people don't even know their own history. I work with an English man, a very cool guy. He didn't even know that there was Division 303 and 301 in

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<sup>10</sup> In the course of the interview, the participants were free to present which other minority/migrant group was significant for their sense of collective self.

Norfolk. 17.000 Polish soldiers and pilots died [there]... (Polish man, 40-49 years old)

There is a lower standard here when you compare a 10 years old child here and in Poland. (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

Somalis tend to argue that they have a stronger community spirit than English people, who are instead described as individualistic,

I think there is more of a disjoint in the UK. Back home there is more [of a] community feel. You're more likely to be engaged with your neighbours and with the activities of your neighbourhood. Here you're unlikely to know your neighbours, unless you make a concerted effort to get to know them but not necessarily even then. (Somali man, 30-39 years old)

Despite limited contacts, the participants from both groups have developed narratives about their in-group which contribute to the establishment of a positively valued distinctiveness in relation to white English people. Somalis are supportive and tight-knit, while the English are individualistic. Poles are better educated than their English counterparts. This confirms the assumption of SIT whereby a group can develop narratives about group characteristics which have a positively valued distinctiveness from the more powerful group (Tajfel, 1974). Somalis and post-enlargement Poles construct a sense of group-ness against the values and norms of the white English majority. Further research is needed to assess the extent to which such strategies of differentiation hold in different political environments, and which minority groups are used as means of social comparisons in other contexts.

In- and out-group distinctions are not as clear cut as it may appear. For example, Somalis who have recently left Somalia, like the woman quoted below, see British Somalis as more individualistic than people living in Somalia,



Here it's quite different because, you know, here [Somalis] they do their own things... they go to work, they go home, they don't go [to] each other's place. [...] They are learning [to behave] like the British people. (Somali woman, 20-29 years old)

This indicates that factors such as the number of years spent in the UK affect the participants' perception of their social identity, hence strengthening the argument that social identities are contested and negotiated by those who position themselves or are located within that social category.

Young participants from both groups often befriend people from non-white minorities,

The thing is I don't gravitate towards English people. Not in a bad way, but my friends are from everywhere and most of them were born and raised here but aren't necessarily white Caucasian English people. (Somali woman, 20-29 years old)

Thanks to college [where she takes English classes] I now know not only Poles, but people from different backgrounds. (Polish woman, 20-29 years old)

Ealing's ethnic diversity partly explains this. No references is made by Somalis or Poles about the other group studied in this research, although they are aware of this comparative dimension. Instead, Somalis living in Southall compare themselves with the Asian community there. In particular, they refer to their political representation,

A lot of Asian communities are well represented [in the Council] but the Somali community is under-represented. [...] the Asian community has taken up the more important role in the [local] community while we don't get a chance (Somali woman, 20-29 years old)

Ealing has a lot of Asians. I think [the Asian community] is more affluent. [The system] is more suited for Asians than Somalis because they are already in, and as

an ethnic minority they have more stake [in it] and control than Somalis. It's a combination of things: there's more of them, they've been here for longer and they are more affluent. (Somali man, 20-29 years old).

This comparison points to the perception that the Asian community has better access to formal political platforms and resources than Somalis. This seems to indicate that access to formal political platforms and responsiveness to the community's needs are highly salient for the Somalis participants who therefore compare themselves to Asians, who have been able to secure a significant presence in Ealing's political arena. It is plausible to claim that the structure of opportunities available to the two groups has created a 'mobilisation of bias' (Solomos, 2003, p. 193) whereby Somalis – who have less social and economic capital to draw upon - are excluded from politics, whereas other groups, such as the Indian Sikh community in the borough, are organised into politics.

### **Relationships with in-group**

The perception of social unity is, according to a social identity approach, crucial for individuals to act as a group and promote their own positive social evaluation. However, boundaries defining group membership are drawn between those who share the same ascribed identity. How these boundaries are drawn depends on factors such as age and length of stay in the UK.

For young Somalis the most explicit dividing line is between British Somalis and Somalis living in other European countries, some of whom have moved to the UK. They are often described in derogatory ways,

We call them [Somalis from other European countries] Euro-trash [...] Especially the younger people, the ones who have been raised there, there is a huge disconnect between their understanding of the Somali identity and then the culture and identity that they've got. So there's this idea that they are Somali, they speak Somali,

broken as it may be, but completely don't conform to Somali religious and cultural values. So they drink, they party, they do as they please. [...] The Somalis here who do that are [doing it] more of a conscious rebellion against the culture in London, whereas the ones on the outside it's almost like complete naivety, like this is the norm. [...] Here everyone knows the unspoken rules, [...] whereas with the European Somalis it's more like they've never had the unspoken rules. They don't know what's right or wrong. [...] For [Somalis] here it takes a certain level of conscious action to behave that way and if it becomes an unconscious act then you're not thinking like a Somali. (Somali woman, 20-29 years old)

They [Somalis from other European countries] definitely behave differently [...] They're blasé about things. In Ealing, culture and religion define what you do, how you do it. I think it has a lot to do with British society allowing multiculturalism. In other European countries it's not like that [...] European Somalis are different, definitely more liberal. (Somali woman, 20-29 years old)

The first interviewee does not see European Somalis' behaviour such as partying as an attempt to negotiate their Somali and European identities. Similar behaviour by British Somalis is a legitimate reaction against the 'culture in London' which she, earlier in the interview, described as characterised by closeness and gossip. According to her, the 'Euro-trash' are so unaware about the deepest values and 'unwritten rules' of the Somali community that they are 'almost not Somali'. This view is echoed by the second interviewee, who describes European Somalis as 'liberal' and 'blasé'. Interestingly, she mentions the importance of Ealing's socio-political context in shaping Somalis' behaviour and social identity. As seen before, it creates a structure of opportunities whereby Somalis can enact their social identity as Muslims, but it also regulates their acceptable expressions of social identity.

The distinction between British Somalis and European Somalis is not endorsed by older participants. Instead, they see young British Somalis as not behaving according to Somali customs,

[Young British Somalis'] attitude is different from my attitude, the traditional way.

There's no question about it. (Somali man, 50-59 years old)

The youth behave the same way as to non-Muslims or the English. (Somali man, 60-69 years old)

The boundaries that are drawn within the social category of 'Somali' point to the inherent contested character of social identities. What it means to be Somali, and which other groups and values constitute meaningful means of comparison is the result of intersecting social factors and identifications. Young British Somalis position themselves vis-à-vis 'liberal' European Somalis, while they are not seen as acting as 'proper' Somalis by the older generation.

A generational difference is also expressed among Poles. The Polish participants distance themselves from the old generations of Polish migrants. They express either polite distance or outright dismissal of Poles who arrived to Britain after the second World War,

I have respect for them, but of course we don't have the same background. No matter how much respect we have [for them] they may not consider us as equals.

[...] Actually I don't have much to do with the old generation. (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

I must say that among these people, elderly people, I feel more discriminated against...they discriminate against me more than the people on the street [...] I have this impression that they do not like us, [...] These elderly people, these men and women are stuck-up, unpleasant. (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

The old [generation] have been here for many, many years. They are already dying here... they still have this communist mentality in my opinion... (Polish man, 40-49 years old)

Post-enlargement Poles distance themselves from the old generations by using emotionally laden labels such as 'stuck up' and 'unpleasant'. They construct a narrative about the post-war generation as static and belonging to a political system now gone (they are 'communist'). These narratives work as distancing devices between the two generations of Polish migrants and contribute to develop a positively valued social identity among post-enlargement Poles.

The Polish participants also draw a boundary between themselves and 'the drunken Pole'. Many note that, through the experience of migration, they had been confronted by negative stereotypes about Poles and alcohol abuse. The participants find themselves in the position of having to articulate narratives that refute such widespread stereotypical views about Polish people's behaviour,

Sometimes, when you are somewhere and [...] there are Polish people sitting and drinking beer, swearing at other people passing by so half of Ealing can hear, somewhere somehow you feel ashamed. You think 'shit, what are they doing? Why are we from the same country?'... [...] I am not ashamed that I am Polish. I am ashamed that they are Polish! (Polish woman, 30-39 years old)

When I'm abroad I'm representing Poland, so I'm trying to do my best to show other people that we are not alcoholics. So I don't drink at all. (Polish woman, 20-29 years old)

The interviewees dissociate themselves from other Poles' loud and drunken behaviour and feel ashamed about having something in common with them. One of the reasons why several of the respondents are upset about this kind of behaviour is because they feel that it confirms the stereotypical perception of Poles among British society,

Of course [Poles] drink, when they drink they puke and shit themselves, then they steal... that's the way [English people] see the Polish people. (Polish man, 30-39 years old)

The narratives creating a boundary between properly behaving Poles and drunken Poles illustrate what Tajfel and Turner (1979) call 'social change', i.e. strategies that aim at changing the group's negative image. They also show how a particular socio-political discursive environment can shape expressions of social identity among people.

In this section I have shown that what it means to be 'Somali' or 'Pole' varies across generations and across smaller groupings within each population. The participants adopt strategies of differentiation between themselves and others who fail, in their eyes, to conform to their interpretation of what it means to be a 'true' Somali or a 'good' Pole. Which narratives will prevail and gain most visibility in the public domain is necessarily a question of normative and material power. Further research could investigate the effects of such distinctiveness on the establishment of social networks in each community.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that social identities should be understood as contested and mediated by group members' subjective experiences. They are also embedded in specific socio-political contexts and their public expression is influenced by this. In doing so, I have brought together two bodies of research which have so far been developed separately: a political opportunity structure approach and a social identity approach. The study, an analysis of Somalis' and Poles' stories about their social identity, showed how two migrant groups' sense of belonging is mediated by the institutional and discursive opportunities provided by the local political environment in which they live and operate. Narrative analysis shed light onto the everyday negotiations and contestations of apparently uniform interpretations of

social identity thus moving away from static interpretations of social identity and group relations.

My first finding confirmed the significance of religious identity versus other expressions of social identities tied to e.g. nationality. The expression of this identity was facilitated by the opportunities available in the UK, something particularly relevant for the Muslim group. Religious communities were also described as creating a system of control and potential exclusion by participants in both groups.

Secondly, the results indicated significant variations in people's understandings of their social identity depending on *inter alia* age and length of stay in the UK. These variations were expressed through e.g. derogatory and emotionally-laden descriptions of European Somalis and of Polish migrants who left Poland during the communist period.

The most significant difference between the groups concerned their sense of belonging to the UK and Ealing in particular. Somalis tended to participate in the city's civic life, assessed through participation in local elections, while Poles positioned themselves at its margins. The groups' different socioeconomic status and the perceived opportunities available to them to successfully attain their goals (e.g. voice their needs) can partly explain this finding. However, the different dynamics of participation can also be explained with reference to social identity. Somalis expressed a stronger subjective sense of being a citizen of Ealing than Poles did, and participate in the city's civic life accordingly.

The findings suggest the need for an integrated model of social identity which takes into account the mediating role of individual narratives and of the political environment. Such model is needed in order to better understand processes of social identity formation as cognitive, emotional, and political phenomena.

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<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Sex</i>		<i>Age group</i>				
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>20-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60-70</i>
Somalis	23	12	11	10	3	8	1	1
Poles	18	4	14	5	9	3	1	0

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the interview sample