A dialogical approach to navigating cultural heritage and self-identification: narrative accounts of UK-born young adults from immigrant backgrounds

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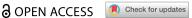
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ABSTRACT

According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2021, 28.8% of births in England and Wales were to non-UK-born mothers, reflecting a steady rise from 25.5% a decade earlier, and 16.5% in 2001. This paper uses Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and narrative methodology to analyse two narratives from a broader study involving 15 British-born immigrant-background young adults (ages 18–29) living in the UK. It illuminates the complex interplay of self and other in the intersubjective shaping of cultural identity during young adulthood—a pivotal yet understudied period rich with potential for autonomy and self-definition. Utilising a multimethod narrative approach, including journaling, interviews, and co-analysis, the study highlights the co-constructed nature of the participants' narratives, integrating insights from both the researcher and the participants. This method fosters participant agency, aligning with Bakhtin's concept of self-authoring, while encouraging renarration and reflection on the constraints and freedoms inherent in their interactional and subjective self-identifications. By extending dialogic theory to ethical and agentic actions and zooming in on young adults' dialogic relations with human others, time, and privilege, this paper demonstrates how identity emerges as a shared yet unique process—one that neither passively succumbs to dominant cultural narratives nor is shaped independently of the sociopolitical context. The findings offer fresh insights into the nature of identification as storied against—and in dialogue with—the discursive backdrop of the multicultural UK and draw attention to the need for more nuanced research and policies supporting the growing cohort of UK-born and UK-based young adults with migratory backgrounds.

Introduction

In the UK, alignment with Britain's national story has been viewed as an indicator of community cohesion and the success of the multicultural project (Platt, 2014). Conversely, 'strong ethnic identities' and values that seem conflicting with the cultural ethos of the majority have been portrayed as barriers to social integration (Nandi & Platt, 2015). The recent surge in migrant mobility across nation-state borders related to EU expansion, refugee movements, and globalised markets has enriched the UK's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic landscapes (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022b, 2022c). This shift has provoked a reactionary rise in ethnonationalism advocating for national purity and stringent immigration laws (Solomos, 2022), sentiments that gained traction in the debates surrounding Brexit and continue to surface in impactful ways as was the case, for example, during the August 2024 anti-immigration riots (Allen, 2024). Brexit also fanned the flames of an exclusionary white nation fantasy, ostracising not only the newcomers but also UK-born individuals with migratory backgrounds (Finlay et al., 2019). It is within this environment, that nearly 30% of births in England and Wales in 2021 were to non-UK-born individuals (ONS, 2022a), a marked increase from 11–15% in the nineties, the birth decade of the young adults

central to the study presented here (ONS, 2019). The impact of nationalist fervour and post-Brexit policies on future demographics remains uncertain, however, what is apparent is that cultural diversity and migratory heritages will continue to play a part in narrating the yet-to-be-written chapters of Britain's multicultural story.

In this evolving sociocultural landscape, young adults from immigrant backgrounds construct their autobiographical narratives in dialogue with broader 'master narratives' of UK's identity. These dominant discourses significantly influence how young people navigate their cultural heritage and formulate their self-identifications but, in turn, they are also co-authored by those navigating them. Identity, thus, emerges as a dialogical process, shaped by and shaping wider sociocultural forces. This paper, oscillating between 'capital-D' and 'small-d' approaches to the role of discourse in identity formation (Bamberg et al., 2011), examines this reciprocal dynamic of institutionalised Discourses—national narratives, migration policies, and public debates—informing identity construction, while also analysing how everyday discursive practices rooted in relations with families, social networks, tradition, and heritage shape personal senses of self. By integrating both levels, through the lens of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, the study reveals how identity is co-constructed through an ongoing interplay between social structures and individual agency.

The paper begins with an overview of approaches to the study and theorisation of identities in the migration context to shine light at the unique value that Bakhtin's dialogism can offer to support a nuanced exploration of young adults' identities as relational and discursive processes. Next, the study's iterative narrative methodology is discussed with specific attention paid to acknowledging the research process as a form of dialogue within discourse. This is followed by two narratives of British-born young adults of immigrant backgrounds, Sierra and Lee,[1] underscoring their active, dialogical, and conscious role in authoring their social realities and identities. Thanks to the study's innovative methodology and the paper's focus on specific and pertinent, yet underresearched, dialogic partners (e.g. time, privilege), the presented findings offer fresh insights into the relational and interactional nature of identification as storied by immigrant-background young adults against—and in dialogue with—the discursive backdrop of the multicultural UK.

Young adults, identity, and cultural heritage

Identities and narratives, intertwined with socially available practices and hegemonic discourses, cannot be studied in isolation or merely correlated with other social characteristics. They are inherently linked to the intersubjective realities in which they are constructed, communicated, and re-articulated (Anthias, 2002). As Wetherell (2008) argues, the self—along with its character, identity, beliefs, and motives—is constructed and performed through psycho-discursive practices that are collective and intersubjective, transcending the binary of self versus context. The transnational lens has been widely adopted in migration research to examine the dynamic and agentic ways young individuals with migratory backgrounds negotiate multiple identities across diverse social contexts (Levitt, 2009; Reynolds & Zontini, 2016). This perspective challenges traditional models that fixate identity by illuminating social networks—and ideas, practices, and heritages shared and transformed within them—and fostering understandings of community and collective identity beyond national boundaries and single localities (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). However, even within transnationalism, identities are often still interpreted as grounded in group membership, communities, or social organisation. Where this link between the collective and the individual needed to be destabilised, the intersectional lens has proven useful in challenging assumptions of homogeneity, revealing the multiple and, indeed, intersecting tensions, inequalities, and privileges that ascription and access to specific material and symbolic spaces may mean for lived outcomes (Crenshaw, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2011). This multilocational approach to identification has been successfully applied to research on children of immigrants and cultural heritage (Mirza, 2013; Scandone, 2022; Werbner, 2013). Like intersectionality, the concept of hybridity, which subverts imposed hierarchies of difference (Calgar, 1997), has gained traction in research on immigrant-background individuals' identities. Yet, it is often mentioned in passing rather than used as a source of theoretical grounding (e.g. Bhambra, 2022; Mau, 2014). Likely due to its roots in postcolonial thought (Alexander, 2010), cultural hybridity has been

applied mainly to explorations of diasporic and racial identities (Ademolu, 2021; Saini, 2022; Tate, 2005; Werbner, 2004), potentially neglecting its relevance to inquiries into newer migratory movements and identities of those born in contexts different from those of their parents, also in cases when it does not pertain to race.

Even within these new frameworks, identities are sometimes interpreted in binary terms—such as micro or macro, individual or social, local or global—with hyphenations offering only a limited level of complexity (Blommaert & De Fina, 2017). This paper's objective of exploring storied identities of immigrant-background young adults, promises to create space for certainty and agency, while acknowledging confusion, ongoing exploration and the inability to define oneself, something perhaps less available through frameworks focused on outcomes (even if only momentary) of the identity formation process. The concept of dialogically constructed identity, highlighting interrelationality and Bakhtinian principles, while occasionally used as an analytical cornerstone in studies of immigrant-background individuals' identities (e.g. Kim, 2023), has been underutilised in examining the spectrum of parental cultural heritage embedded within dialogic networks of not only human 'others'. Despite evidence suggesting that young adulthood—characterised by ambiguity, in-betweenness, and a growing independence in self-definition—is pivotal in identity formation (Landberg et al., 2018), qualitative research exploring how British-born immigrant-background young adults navigate cultural heritage and self-identifications remains limited. When considering identity as a process constituted through social interaction rather than a pre-existing entity, language becomes crucial, as it sits at the heart of most social practices. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism, which emphasises the relational and multivocal nature of identity, has influenced the study of identity as a narrative project, where 'the other' is always present in self-construction. Narrative identity approaches, popularised through the narrative turn, provide insight into how people construct a sense of self through stories that reflect personal, social, and cultural dimensions (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011).

Parental cultural heritage's role in shaping British-born immigrant-background young adults' identities has been afforded some research attention in conjunction with, for example, linguistic heritages (Gruszczyńska-Thompson, 2024; Jaspal & Coyle, 2010), religiosity (Kapinga et al., 2023), and traditional celebrations and cultural events (Bhambra, 2022). These outputs, however, tend to rely on isolated communicative events and emphasise specific elements of cultural heritage and their relevance to identification, overlooking the unique cultural ecosystems that—with innovative methods—can be dynamically storied and made sense of in dialogue across multiple modes of expression. My review highlights the need for research that transcends fixed cultural group attachments and assumptions of origin and homogeneity, showcasing how young immigrant-background individuals choose and feel compelled to identify. Through Bakhtin's dialogism, this paper interrogates the intricate relationship between cultural heritage, self-identification, and collective identity. It posits that while this relationship may be perceived as complex and ambiguous, young adults can exercise agency in defining themselves and finding belonging with others. The next section situates Bakhtin's dialogism alongside the concepts of parental cultural heritage, identification, and agency, establishing a theoretical framework for an in-depth analysis of two narratives of immigrant-background young adults' dialogical realties. Ultimately, this theoretical lens views the self and its relationship with parental cultural heritage as an ongoing project, continually authored and re-authored through social, internal, and discursive dialogues. The broader aim here is to depict how cultural heritages, processes of identification and misidentification, and group belonging intertwine in migration contexts, and how immigrant-descent youth can exercise agency in engaging with, resisting, and reshaping dominant 'master narratives' within a multicultural society.

Dialogism, parental cultural heritage, and agency

This paper defines parental cultural heritage as practices, characteristics, and objects reflecting parents' cultural backgrounds and upbringing and what they impart—consciously or unconsciously—to their children. This encompasses physical characteristics (e.g. skin colour, facial features, hair), values and beliefs (e.g. religiosity, family roles), and practices (e.g. celebrations, language, dress, dating), and can be inherited through adoption (i.e. the child embraces the element of cultural heritage), expectation (the child might decide not to continue certain elements, but is aware that the family expects them to), or

imposition (natural or agreed discontinuation might occur, but a cultural identity or practice are imposed on an individual within a social context). The term also includes the embodied, performed, and lived aspects of 'race', 'ethnicity', and 'culture' as social constructs and modes of representation (Hall, 1997). Heritage itself is mutable, serving as a symbol for transmission of meaning, yet open to reinterpretation and resignification by others. As such, I argue, it does not always reflect an identification. Identification is relational, encapsulating the process of identifying with and through the other (Bhabha, 1990), and is influenced by one's material and symbolic milieu. This paper will explore young people's narratives by zooming in on the dialogic relations that shape their realities to examine the potential disjuncture between practices (*doing*) and identity (*being*). It will highlight individuals' agency in navigating this in-between space and their relationality to the self, the other, and the discourse.

In the shared space of existence, individuals engage in perpetual dialogue with others and their environment. This paper employs Bakhtin's dialogism to interrogate and conceptualise the construction of self-identification *in relation to* parental cultural heritage *in dialogue with* multiple—tangible and abstract—others, i.e. dialogic partners (e.g. parents, time, privilege, strangers). Bakhtin's dialogism transcends mere conversation to include manifold dialogues that intertwine the utterance, the reply, and the intricate relationship binding the two (Bakhtin, 1981). As Holquist (2002, p. 36) suggests, '[i]t is the relation that is most important of the three, for without it the other two would have no meaning … nothing is anything in itself'. Dialogism's focus on the 'in between' and 'in progress' aspects of identification lands itself well to this paper's objective to demonstrate identity as ever-emerging through the intersubjective process of cultural heritage navigation, rather than attempt to define it. Young adults' responsiveness—in dialogue—towards parental cultural heritage will be presented not as isolated but rather as embedded in power dynamics, privilege, and marginality, influenced by specific social, cultural, ecological, and temporal conditions of the intersubjective exchange (i.e. who is asking, in what context, what beliefs and expectations they bring into this dialogue etc.). Bakhtin's self does not independently constitute itself, but it does author itself relationally, gaining an 'excess of seeing' from its 'outsidedness' (de Peuter, 1998). Through this dialogic process, the individual perceives themselves as an intersubjective actor, realising that the self is not a fixed entity but a compilation of re-interpretations, reshaped with every interaction in varying contexts (Bakhtin, 1990). Similarly, parental cultural heritage is continually reordered and retold within this back-and-forth between the self and its contextualised version.

The possibility for simultaneity, dialogic co-production, and perhaps even synchronicity, between the self and the other is where agency emerges—not merely from power relations but as an agentic position (Tate, 2005). Bakhtin's dialogic perspective aids the analysis of young adults' ethical and agentic actions as contingent, singular, and creative, instead of focusing on what is reproduced under the guise of institutionalised structures and discourse. At the same time, what cannot be overemphasised in the theory of dialogic cultural heritage negotiation proposed here is the context of social injustice and hegemony within which these agentic processes occur. The theoretical capacity of an individual to articulate culture, identity, and norms in a reshaped form is not synonymous with the practical ease of altering social structures, particularly for those marginalised by dominant discourse. Bakhtin does not romanticise agency as a privilege that the self is awarded, instead, he emphasises one's responsibility to remain answerable throughout one's life, framing it as an opportunity as well as a duty-bound destiny (Holquist, 2002). The response in an answerable act is 'never just a reflection … of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable … But something created is always created out of something given' (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 119–20). The self and agency are thus perpetually forged in this dual act of addressivity and answerability. As further discussed in this paper and supported by other scholars (Tate, 2007; Creese & Blackledge, 2020), individuals can and do navigate an array of potential answers and, while acting in response to what is 'given', they claim authorship over their selves and exercise agency over the understanding of their unique social locations. As they do so, they find themselves reflecting (on) past dialogic encounters under the conditions of a new dialogic relation. The upcoming section of this paper accounts for the particularities of sharing and co-authoring narrative through a research project.

Data and methods

The evidence in this paper originates from a broader study of fifteen British-born immigrant-background young adults (18–29 years old) living in the UK and their relationships with parental cultural heritage (Gruszczyńska-Thompson, 2023), as approved by the Durham University Ethics Committee (EDU-2019 -12-09T20:09:08-mvrq65). All participating individuals provided informed written consent before engaging in the project and were given opportunities to reaffirm their consent throughout the different stages of the study. Written consent was given by the participants to have their stories shared in research publications with their awareness that some identifiable information might be disclosed. To facilitate the sharing of narrative accounts, participants were prompted to individually and in their own time journal or audio-record their reflections on the topics of belonging, culture, language, family relations, and adulthood, leading to the creation of interview questions tailored to their individual narratives. Following the interviews and subsequent transcription, a dual analysis, 'co-analysis', was undertaken, blending insight from both the researcher and the participant. In this process, participants were asked to listen to the recorded interview and provide margin annotations to expand on what was shared in the conversation, how their lived experiences were articulated, and what was perhaps omitted. These annotations will be presented in brackets and marked in italics in the upcoming narrative excerpts. My part of the co-analysis consisted of line-by-line 'action coding' (Charmaz, 2014), identifying irregularities, and noting vocal expressions (e.g. pitch, tone), in order to detect narrative elements that warranted further exploration or clarification (Riessman, 2012). Once the independent analyses were complete, each participant was invited to a co-analysis meeting, where we compared and discussed mine and his/her analyses in collaborative dialogue. This layered analytical approach, inspired by narrative analysis (Arvay, 2003) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), where the participants retain significant involvement in the analysis, not only offers them a multitude of expressive avenues for evoking their emic perspective but also promotes ownership and agency over their stories, aligning with Bakhtin's notion of authorship and self-definition. In preparation of this paper, I employed additional narrative analysis techniques (e.g. identifying the core narrative, relying on larger story excerpts, focusing on the co-produced nature of the narrative and the role of the researcher and the other) which led to a more nuanced understanding of Sierra's and Lee's experiences as individuals existing in relation to others, whose evolving stories are situated within a broader continuum of lived experience (Riessman, 2012). By incorporating the participants' voices in the analysis, the proposed methodological design aligns with decolonial and critical approaches that transcend the traditional subject-object relationship in knowledge production, promoting the inclusion of diverse voices and supporting hybridity and fluidity in accounting for the social condition (Denscombe, 2025; Omodan, 2025; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

Bakhtin recognises a value in formulating stories about the self that have a—even if only seeming—beginning and an end, and stresses narrativity, despite its inherent incoherences, as an agentic response to the inability to fully account for oneself. The dialogic framework stresses the open-ended dialogue as 'the single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 292, original emphasis). It sees authoring oneself as a way of challenging and translating discursive positionings and producing alternative self-positioning in talk, reflection, and dialogic relations (Tate, 2007). This dialogic co-authorship, facilitated by the employed methods, creates space for participants' agency in the process of accounting for the personal, cultural, and 'master' narratives that shape their realities. This method further encourages reflexivity in data collection and analysis, building on the understanding that the narratives participants share and the subsequent conclusions drawn by the researcher are formulated based on autobiographical memories constructing a story within a specific interactional context (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011). Each instance of sharing and renarrating within the research project was inevitably guided by rhetorical goals purposely or unconsciously introduced to the narrative by the participant or the researcher, leading to a dialogically *crafted* account of navigating cultural heritage and formulating identity. While an interrogation of how autobiographical memories were selected by the participants in this specific exchange is beyond the scope of this research, the readers are encouraged to consider the research process as one of the dialogic partners playing an active role in the co-authoring of participants' accounts. In this context, the researcher's positionality plays an active role in shaping the interaction. As a non-UK-born immigrant-background

young adult myself, I may have provided a different kind of dialogic space, encouraging participants to open up about certain aspects of their experiences differently than they might have with a researcher from a different background. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the research setting and the knowledge that this interaction was for academic purposes likely influenced participants' selective openness, shaped by their own rhetorical goals and levels of comfort. The narratives presented in this paper inevitably contain traces of the listener's voice and expectations about what would be considered meaningful or rational within an academic framework (De Fina, 2019). This leads to the question of how much of the narrative is 'co-authored' by the researcher, who not only facilitates the conversation but also plays a critical role at different stages of the process: as an interlocutor, an analyst, and ultimately, as the one who writes up the findings. While participants' accounts reflect their own lived experiences, the research setting undoubtedly shapes how these stories are told, remembered, and constructed, reinforcing the fluidity and co-authored nature of narrative identity and qualitative research.

In analysing the narratives of two young adults from immigrant backgrounds, Sierra and Lee, this paper employs a narrative approach not to merely *collect* data, *capture* narratives, or *record* self-identifications, but to explore identity articulation as a process, an ongoing conversation. As such, the aim is not to generalise, rather, this approach values the depth of insight into personal experiences, acknowledging that identity and cultural heritage are multifaceted, shaped through self-reflection and interaction. The study recognises that these narratives are specific to the participants' unique contexts and moments in their lives, offering a nuanced exploration rather than an exhaustive representation of identity formation among all UK-born immigrant-background youth. Both individuals' narratives discuss finding a level of content with how they navigate parental cultural heritage and identity, yet their stories diverge in the dialogic functions their parents play. Sierra actively engages in dialogue with her mother, shaping her cultural connection through direct interaction. Lee, conversely, reflects on his parents' influence not through direct dialogue but as pervasive figures shaping his story across time. Their accounts, examined concurrently, offer rich insights into the varied ways immigrant-background young adults may interpret and integrate their heritage into their ongoing self-narratives, influenced by, yet independent from, their familial legacies. The forthcoming sections will introduce Sierra and Lee using their self-identifications and drawing on the vocabulary they shared in the research process,[2] before proceeding to analyse their accounts with a thematic focus on, respectively, parenting and self-defining.

Sierra's account of parenting

Sierra is a British-born Chinese undergraduate in her late teens. She resides in a city in southern England where she attends a Russell Group university. She relocated from Essex where she was raised alongside her siblings by her parents: her mother, a Hong Kong migrant, and her father, of mainland Chinese descent from Vietnam. Sierra's parents worked most of their lives in Chinese takeaways. They communicate with each other in Cantonese, a language Sierra also understands and speaks. In her broader narrative shared in this project, Sierra touched on, among other topics, her experiences of racism, particularly in schools, her struggles with reconciling how she was parented, and her gratitude for the bonds formed with, who she describes as, her 'POC friends' (People of Colour). This section begins with a substantial excerpt from Sierra's journal, leading to a discussion of the interplay of different dialogues and actors involved in her experiencing and constitution of parenting. Focusing on 'dialogue with time' and 'dialogue with parents', the examination serves as a gateway to unpack the complexities and multivocalities of dialogic accounting. In the concluding paragraphs, I will locate agency and the process of parental cultural heritage (co-)navigating within this context of a thousand inescapable and simultaneous 'living dialogic threads' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276).

> JOURNAL: BELONGING AND CULTURE. The culture of my home life is Chinese (specifically Hong Kong Chinese). We eat rice for dinner at least three times a week … we speak Cantonese and English at home and the parenting is as strict as expected. They wanted us to study hard and do reasonably well at school so that we wouldn't have to do the jobs that they did, we couldn't go out and have fun with our friends often because it would inconvenience our working parents and whatever your parents say goes; if you chatted back or attempted to rebel, there would be punishment. The latter was particularly hard to deal with as a teenager; I

wanted to go to all of the … events I was invited to, but most of the time I had to decline as my parents couldn't take me there … If as punishment my parents decided to not let me go to something that they originally [agreed] to, it was humiliating having to explain to friends why because … I knew they didn't and couldn't understand why my supposed 'bad behaviour' would warrant such an exaggerated punishment, as they were not of a harsh-parenting culture. I barely understood it then. [My parents'] parenting style is unfair; it reflects their own childhood experiences and I think Chinese parenting [and] parenting from other Asian cultures (from what I've gathered from discussions with friends) causes and will continue to cause generational trauma, as our parents will treat us in the same harsh way their parents treated them … because they haven't fully confronted their pain and they have too much pride to explain the reasons for their actions.

JOURNAL: LANGUAGE AND FAMILY. Yes, the harsh parenting was and is a big part of my world, but they really do sacrifice everything for your comfort and happiness. They probably won't tell you their reasons for their actions but when it all comes out, you'll be blown away by how much they love you unconditionally, though they aren't fans of open affection so you just have to trust them and what they do for you. This kind of familial relationship is really common in Asian families, the whole 'I won't tell you that I love you, but it is the driving force of my life and I'll do everything in my power to protect you' thing. I think the feeling of appreciation for your immigrant parents is a thing that comes to you as you grow older and actually experience the hardships of adulthood, whilst keeping in mind that they did all of this in a country that wasn't their own and they may not have come to grips with the language yet, so it was even harder for them. I just wish they explained themselves as I was growing up so that I could appreciate their actions sooner.

Sierra in dialogue with and through time

Bakhtin (1981, p. 84) observes that 'time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history'. His insight, although centred on literary critique, resonates with the intricate temporal landscape Sierra confronts as she attempts to make sense of parenting. She recognises her parents' approach as emerging in dialogue or as a response to their past experiences ('it reflects their own childhood experiences') and broader historical narratives rooted in distinct cultural, ecological, and social relations ('it reflects … Chinese parenting as well as parenting from other Asian cultures') (Lim & Skinner, 2012). Importantly, she cannot remove her experiences from the context and space that she inhabits—the 'master narratives'—where most of her peers' relations with parents are built along dialogic lines that she—at least in her first journal entry—reports as absent from her familial interactions (e.g. fairness, open affection). Her perceptions of parenting practices and their unfair nature, therefore, are not just a product of the interpersonal relation between Sierra and her parents but are constituted in dialogue with and within the temporal and spatial conditions that she navigates, and other real (e.g. peers) and imagined (e.g. earlier generations) relationships, all laden with expectations of answerability. Moreover, Sierra shows an understanding that parenting decisions are not mere citationality of past methods. As she narrates her parents' intentions to depart from historical precedents and secure a better future for their children, she remarks their engagement in dialogue with the evolving scope of opportunities—be it educational or economic ones—as well as their location within the class system in the UK ('they wanted us to study hard … so that we wouldn't have to do the jobs that they did').

This interplay of dialogues in Sierra's account is complex. In this dialogic unpacking of her experiences and 'trauma' (through giving an account of it in this research), she simultaneously acknowledges the difficulties and pain her parents have faced ('they haven't fully confronted their pain'). Her account suggests that these unhealed wounds from her parents' past (which potentially transcend into their present and future) have continued to also dialogically affect her and, as she reflected in the interview below, might be something that she will struggle to stop citationally reproduce as she becomes a parent herself:

Interviewer: You mentioned the kind of generational trauma that comes with this parenting. Do you think that it is something that you are carrying into adulthood?

Sierra: Yeah, um, *(hesitant here because it's a personal question, I had to think about what I want to say, having wondered about this question before)* I think I'm more aware of it than my previous generations *(more aware of the pain I could cause than my parents were)*. But then, I also think, isn't that what every generation thinks? That they're more aware of all the things than their parents or their grandparents? *(e.g., the trauma you've experienced and not wanting to repeat your parents' mistakes and inflicting the same trauma on your children, but*

as you're focusing on avoiding making the same mistakes, you inevitably make your own. It's hard for the parents as they may believe that they have tried their hardest in shielding you from all the harms in the world because they're trying not to repeat their parents' errors, but when they hurt their children in other ways, it is dismissed because it is 'not as bad' as what the parents experienced, so it is difficult for the children too.) I guess I just feel that if I were to become a parent in the future there would be some unknown thing, some ways, I would hurt my children that would be caused by what I'd experienced as a child *(accepting that some things might never change unless you potentially get help)*, and, I guess, it links back to values as well, for example, I'd say, loyalty is quite important to me, and so that could cause problems in my adult life, if it doesn't align with the values of other people, but, for now, I'd say I'm okay.

Even as Sierra becomes acutely aware of the trauma and pain that she might never rid of, she admits that as she 'grow[s] older and actually experience[s] the hardships of adulthood', she finds 'appreciation for [her] immigrant parents'. She just wishes they had shared more with her as she was growing up, helping her understand and value their actions sooner. Sierra recognises how time and transitioning between life stages alter her perception of her parents' approach. It is not that time heals, but I would argue that the time and experience that comes alongside it are essential for developing a self-reflexive outlook, allowing Sierra to dialogically situate the pain that she has suffered. Perhaps, contextualise it as co-experienced, not just something that is happening to her, that she needs to resist, but something that happens at an interplay of multivocal relations, some outside of her accountability, and many outside of her parents'. In her journal reflections, over time, Sierra's narrative transforms from a focus on trauma to one of regret over missed communicative opportunities—suggesting that silent understanding can also be a form of dialogue (Fivush, 2010). In the coming paragraphs, I will explore Sierra's dialogic relation with her parents, examining them in the context of a broader network of dialogic threads.

Sierra in dialogue with her parents

Sierra's summary of her attempts at questioning parents' decisions is stark: comply or face punishment. This dynamic threatens her narrative agency, silencing her as a dialogical partner (de Peuter, 1998). Yet, while silenced in direct discourse, Sierra engages in a multitude of peripheral dialogues, for example, with power, rules, and historical roots embedded in the 'harsh-parenting culture' and the treatment she endures. She might also be, although she does not mention it directly, in an internal dialogue with the self, potentially weighing the cost of speaking out against unfairness. All these dialogues form a context in which Sierra utters, 'whatever your parents say goes', but they also play a role in challenging and dialogically reframing the relational significance of this statement, allowing her to navigate and perhaps even transform the cultural narrative of obedience (Chuang et al., 2018).

In Bakhtin's (1981, pp. 293, 276) theory,

> language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's … it is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape.

Building on the idea that words and language carry relational and subjective weight in communication, I propose that silence, too, operates as a dialogic expression that is 'half someone else's' and open to interpretation within the interaction. Sierra's initial reflections suggest that she feels silenced and disconnected from dialogue with her parents as she fears punishment; her narrative shifts, however, in her second journal entry, to convey feelings of inclusion and care ('They probably won't tell … but when it all comes out, you'll be blown away by how much they love you unconditionally'). She reinterprets silence within this dialogic relationship as a sign of positive intent, as opposed to a restrictive practice; maybe even an element of familial co-experiencing and co-being. To better grasp Sierra's perception of parenting, it is crucial to go beyond situating her and her cultural heritage within the sociocultural conditions she was born into. Affection, love, and trust are dialogic forces within specific, named relations with very specific others (here, Sierra's parents), that, while constituted within a larger social context which inevitably affects them, can have a different, perhaps more personalised, effect on an individual. Even though often expressed silently, these forces shape Sierra's perceiving of other relations (e.g. with time, formulating her expectations and patience over time in response to a sense of love and trust she feels). I argue, therefore, that the nature of dialogic relations influences

individual responses to injustice. Addressing marginalisation imposed by dominant discourse and social norms necessitates a different kind of agency compared to that developed within more intimate relations with named others.

Sierra disclosed later in our interview that her appreciation for what remains unsaid also stemmed from verbal dialogue with her mother. Asked about the shift in her journal's initial narrative focused on the trauma inflicted by parenting (Belonging and Culture) to one of appreciation and understanding (Language and Family), Sierra said:

> *(feeling some very intense emotions)* Actually, there was a bit of a break between [the] two … entries … and, in that break … I got more clarity from a situation in the past from my parents, and … at the height of my emotions … it brought me a lot of appreciation for them, because it was a calm situation and … my mum explained the reasons for why she did something that she did. I just wish they'd tell us in the moment *(instead of just overreacting and shouting, but pride is a big thing in Asian cultures)* … But it's not in their personality to do that, and it's not in the culture of Hong Kong people to do that. You're meant to respect your elders, you're meant to just blindly follow whatever they tell you, and so they don't feel like they owe you an explanation.

Sierra did, however, ask for an explanation. This conversation that she had with her mother, as she later explained in the co-analysis meeting, was partly initiated in response to her journaling in this project, explicitly showing the dialogic role of the research task in co-authoring of her account:

> I was writing it and then, I was telling [my mum] what I was writing about and then she explained it, so, I think the research project acted as a kind of catalyst for it, but if the project wasn't there, the information probably would have come out at a later time … I guess this was kind of an excuse for me to bring up conversations like this.

Sierra's agency is twofold; when seen in the context of Bakhtin's answerability, it manifests both as she is called to answer, through the nature of her participation in this research, and as she makes the other, her mother, answerable. She recognises her responsibility in dialogue with the research process and constructs an agentic response by deciding to further her understanding of her parents' choices in order to *author* her story:

> I'm usually quite conscious of how my life is different to other people's, but [writing the journal] made me think deeper about it … It was good and it brought out a lot of emotions as well *(some were negative, looking back on my upbringing was at times good, at times painful, and also rewarding as I understood it better and found peace with it)*.

'I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287). Sierra's exploration of parenting and parental cultural heritage more broadly is a process in which she dialogically authors her conscious self. Her agency shows through how she navigates this task of co-constructing and co-experiencing. It also manifests when she acknowledges she might need the help of the other to overcome generational trauma, as she reinterprets 'silent dialogue' through the newly formed layer of verbal communication with her mother, and finds peace with the emotion-laden story of her upbringing that she dialogically authors.

Lee's account of self-defining and being defined

Lee, born in the UK, is in his late twenties and is a postdoctoral researcher at a renowned university in southern England. He describes his nationality as British and considers himself ethnically Chinese. Having lived in various English cities and briefly in one of China's special administrative regions during childhood, he settled in southern England where he lives with his partner. Lee speaks Mandarin, his parents' first language, relatively well. His father is a professor, and his mother, now retired, previously worked in education and social care. In our broader discussions, Lee reflected on the tradition of filial piety, his relationship with his white partner, the obstacles to feeling a sense of belonging in China, and his encounters with racism in the UK. This section will delve into Lee's accounting for his sense of self, responsibility, and agency. The analysis below uses the ideas of 'dialogue with privilege' and 'dialogue with human others' to situate Lee's reflections on self-defining within the specific sociospatial and cognitive landscapes that he accesses. It, then, develops to acknowledge the multiplicity of other dialogues

operating simultaneously. To mirror the previous section, towards the end of my discussion, I will use these dialogic perspectives to elucidate how agency manifests in the processes of constituting and experiencing parental cultural heritage throughout Lee's narrative.

JOURNAL: INTRODUCTION. As is the case for many, my time at university…significantly changed my values and perception…and I started taking more of an active role in shaping my own ideas…These incredibly fortunate changes arose from new friendships (and to my surprise almost all white British, and very few Chinese) at [the university] and the only friend I kept in close contact with at school…Within their company, my thought processes appeared relatively inflexible, dogmatic, uncreative and uncontrolled…Fortunately, my friends showed me how to manage perfectionism, adapt my judgements and become more inquisitive for value in those things I had previously disrespected…Thanks to them, [the university] was for me the best experience of my life, and all aspects of my being improved in ways school-Lee would never have imagined.

INTERVIEW EXCERPT: I think I'm lucky insofar as I have been told to think about stuff all throughout my life. And the lifestyle that I have had is conducive towards that. So, for example, ethnicity differences are one of these things you notice. You can't help but notice that your skin *(slightly poetic choice of word, 'appearance' would have been more accurate, but I presume the conversation is loaded towards 'culture', 'ethnicity' etc. in my brain)* looks different to most of the people at school when you're young, and you probably don't care back then, I didn't anyway. And then, slowly as you think more about your own existence, you make friends with people who share similar feelings…and, with curiosity, you always come along to these kinds of ideas *(recognising differences in thoughts as originating from different areas of the world)*. Lots of my thinking has developed in these quite informal ways.

JOURNAL: BELONGING: My current understanding of 'belonging' derives from the consideration of shared identity; that is to say, one 'belongs' or feels they belong when they acknowledge an aspect of their identity they share with others. Additionally, I also believe that 'belonging' is facilitated by identifying contrasts and differences with other groups with which one doesn't belong…Nowadays, I do not strongly feel I belong to any of my obvious cultures/races (British or Chinese) – rather I identify myself amongst my closest friends and by what I do (i.e., scientist, climber, musician etc.). To my mind, this is the better way to establish one's identity. Nonetheless, I'm sure there are leftover identity traits; these influences are probably inescapable–a lot of my values and thoughts will still find roots in these two cultures…In England, I felt distinctly Chinese for most of my childhood, and in China, felt very English. The dysphoria was for me more pronounced in the latter; I would consider myself outwardly more English than Chinese, if I were forced to pick. Approaching my identity in this direction certainly facilitated making friends and generally living comfortably in the UK. I was also fortunate to live in a time when the East Asian ethnicity did/does not, to my experiences and opinions, experience as severe effects from structural/individual racism in the UK…I was fortunate to become more confident in my identity as I became older, especially at [university], and as I mentioned above the importance of belonging to a pre-defined culture holds very little sway to me. Thus, I now contentedly embrace the path of lesser resistance and do not feel the need to hide my 'Westernness' so much.

Lee in dialogue with human others

Lee's dialogues with human actors encourage revisiting, or further co-dialoguing, of his connection to broadly defined cultures, which—whether represented by collectives of people, values, beliefs, or practices—I also view as dialogic partners influencing the answerable act. He describes how considering himself 'outwardly more English than Chinese…facilitated making friends', in return, these friendships affected his thinking processes and shaped his open-ended approach to self-defining. Lee's narrative, as evidenced by his discussion of 'ethnicity', evolves to include awareness of the symbolic implications and weight of embodying certain traits and being perceived as belonging to specific collectivities (Mau, 2014). He co-navigates his existence, selfhood, and other dialogic relations—like those with life stage transitions and the university culture—in partnership with other human actors, the most prominent of which is his dialogic partnership with his friends. In those interactions with the specific and named others, Lee's views are challenged ('my friends showed me how to…adapt my judgements and become more inquisitive'), but still within a relation that he, I would suggest, feels rather comfortable navigating. It is the specific but nameless other, however, that 'disquiets' him and makes him rethink his self-definition against the other's presumed expectations, as he shared in our interview:

Once you think about identity…picking something that is something I enjoy [and] I find easier to associate myself with, then you can get rid of these feelings of ennui or…absurdism when you feel like you're going

into different places which don't fit *(the person)* … When people ask you 'Who are you? What do you think of yourself?' I just think, 'Well, I guess I'm Chinese, I guess I'm English, probably I'm more English than Chinese, I'm not a hundred per cent sure'. But then when people say, 'What do you do?' It's much easier, 'I'm a scientist, I live in [city redacted], I enjoy this, I enjoy that' … I think the only thing that disquiets me is when people sometimes remark on how good my English is or how nice my British accent is. These days that throws me off a little bit because it means a lot of things which are vaguely more complicated than this interaction may otherwise have been [laughs] … I feel like on some level I'm meant to be annoyed but I can't quite bring myself to be really annoyed, so I have this weird sense of disquiet when I just think, 'Oh, that's a sort of indi- cation that they were expecting something of me and they made a judgment based on my appearance, and now they're doing this sort of soft—I'm not going to call … I could call it—racism' *(it seems too prudish to not call it racism, given I've already preluded it as being 'soft')* … That's how human brains work, on the one hand, and then on the other, yes, maybe there's some systemic racism here, but I guess it doesn't trouble me so much.

Bakhtin (1990) differentiates the 'I-for-myself', the subjective perception of the self within the world and in flux ('the spirit'), from the 'I-for-others', which is more anchored (still only lightly and momentarily) in its self-definitions established through its relations with others. The 'outsidedness' of the other affords the subject an 'excess of seeing', an external perspective on the self that the 'I-for-myself' might lack, providing 'rhythm' to its existence and vision of itself (de Peuter, 1998). Lee reflects on this in narrating how he discerns his racialised I-for-others through dialogues with strangers who compliment his English. He does not accept, however, this reflection as constitutive of his I-for-myself, internally critiquing the racism in such comments and minimising them in his accounting ('That's how human brains work'). Over the project's course, initially, Lee only subtly references racism, before revealing, much later in the research process, more details of blatantly racist attacks that he had experienced. He does not allow the response of the other to dominate his self-narrative, and, at least in his reporting, upon consideration, turns this feeling of disquiet into understanding for the other. While minimising and justifying racism can be a symptom of embeddedness in a system that negates the voices of marginalised groups in favour of perpetuating historical dominance of 'the majority' (Johnson et al., 2021), the degree to which this might be influencing Lee's self-perception is not clear. As this analysis progresses, I will argue that Lee's agentic capacity to formulate and pursue his self-identifications should also be positioned in dialogue with spaces of privilege accessible to him.

Lee in dialogue with privilege

Lee attributes his inclination to deep thought and consideration to a nurturing environment where intel- lect and inquiry are valued and encouraged. Such conditions, bolstered by his parents' financial capital, and the education and credentials received at a private school, as he acknowledges below, likely paved his way to the prestigious university that he gets to attend and the experiences associated with this specific and influential sociospatial context. His exposure to diverse ideas and discussion-oriented peers stood out in this study, suggesting a distinctive milieu fostering Lee's dialogic and agentic exploration of identity and heritage (cf., Scandone, 2020). A setting that perhaps contributes to Lee's resilience and self-assured I-for-myself when in dialogue with less agreeable others, as he suggests in the interview and his co-analysis notes when further discussing his experiences of racism:

[P]eople would say that this is not ideal and they should improve themselves etc. *(1) I feel obliged to criticise this kind of interaction at least a bit, 2) I'm thinking specifically of the 'go educate yourself' movement, which I acknowledge but don't really find aesthetically pleasing),* to which I say, 'sure', but at the same time … I have an expectation that people … haven't thought about stuff as much as I have because, for whatever reason *(i.e., I'm lucky, and they're not, if they don't think as much as you or I, or they think about other things which I have not),* and that's fine, it's not ideal in many ways but it's fine. It's easy for me to say because … I'm still relatively privileged, right? … So, I think that's something worth bearing in mind from my point of view *(recognising that privilege gives me the ability to shrug off racist experiences a bit more easily)* … It helps that my parents are now actually quite wealthy indeed *(I did not consider myself privileged during my young childhood; my parents were frugal and saved a lot! My Dad was the sole source of income … it was enough for a family of four, but most friends seemed to have more toys etc.)* … But even back then, we always had enough to eat, and I was lucky enough to go to a private school *(through scholarships).* Many are less lucky, and I think they will feel the bite more, right? … [A]t the end of the day, I don't really want to think about differences, but it is an easy way to remind

myself what I am basically (These reflections lead ultimately towards issues I perceive in feminist, anti-racism, LGBTQ+ movements–these movements are necessary to allow individuals to self-identify with pride, but in doing so you must create barriers through differences. It's a very disconcerting paradox for me.). And I know I've written a lot about how I would like to disconnect all of identity, but I think I'm still trying to work out if it's technically impossible or technically possible but very difficult.

Lee constructs his narrative with a high level of awareness of his privilege and its emancipatory character. He understands the uniqueness of his position among a network of dialogic others (including, 'privilege' as the other) and considers these dialogic partners' influence on his self-defining. This Bakhtinian analysis moves beyond mere class and knowledge-based power dynamics or the intersections of social categories that could define Lee. His agency, I argue, is not solely derived from his privileged social positioning. Instead, the Bakhtinian lens illuminates Lee's existence as composed of multivocal dialogues and numerous invitations to be answerable and to respond; multiple locations in which one chooses one's response. Whether it is through being open to the specific friendships that challenge Lee's thinking and engage him in meaningful conversations, or through telling his story with some—even if never the same—beginning and an end, Lee does exert control over his narrative and identity, which might transcend what his privileged position affords him. And he does it in a way that is specific to his situation and his dialogically constructed cognitive and sociocultural context for self-defining. Finally, Lee's narrative, embracing Bakhtin's 'unique and unified event of being', suggests self-identification as both individualised and shared (Holloway & Kneale, 2000, p. 74). His identifications are built alongside a notion of belonging as both rooted in shared identity and 'facilitated by identifying contrasts and differences with other groups' (De Fina, 2006). His openness to reshaping his narrative accounting is not only apparent throughout his engagement in the research project, but also as he envisions and grapples with the potential rapture between collective identity and self-definition, assuming an agent position in the process of defining his self within the interstices of the shared social fabric (Hammack, 2008).

Discussion and conclusion

This investigation into how British-born young adults of immigrant descent navigate their cultural heritage provides insight into the nuanced processes of self-identification , with its main contribution being the illustration of identity as a lived, relational, and dialogic process. Bakhtin's (1986) notion of the self as a dynamic, multivocal entity allows for a deeper exploration of identity and cultural heritage as both shared and unique, constructed through dialogues with human and sociopolitical 'others'. This paper's close study of two narratives illuminated how, through dialogic encounters with various 'others'—including temporal, familial, and societal elements—individuals like Sierra and Lee can respond to their historical and cultural representations, crafting a self-image that is neither fully determined by the past nor by how others have portrayed them (Hall, 1997). Sierra finds peace with her upbringing as she narrates her journey towards understanding her heritage, culminating in a reconciliatory discussion with her mother. Her acknowledgement that certain aspects may remain unchanged without external aid points to the value she sees in co-experiencing and co-constructing her relation with cultural heritage in dialogue with the human other. Lee's self-definition, as inferred from his narrative, relies on his independent, though prompted by the other, reflections. His identification is guided by intellectual and ideological dialogues, shaping his responses and perceptions within the social contexts that he occupies (i.e. conversations surrounding racism, social movements, philosophical ideas). It seems like—and I will not argue otherwise—it is within that internal dialogue that he can 'contentedly embrace the path of lesser resistance and do[es] not feel the need to hide' what he considers his cultural self-identification. Aligned with Bakhtin's theory, the paper argues that self-narration is inherently dialogic, shaped by interactions with others—both seen and unseen. It destabilises the assumption of cultural heritage as a fixed entity passed down unilaterally. Instead, findings suggest that young adults navigate inherited identities with agency, actively engaging with or reshaping the dominant narratives surrounding their cultural backgrounds. This is crucial for immigrant-background youth in the UK, who negotiate their self-identifications within and against the prevailing social narratives of race, belonging, and citizenship. However, while this research highlights the role of agency, it acknowledges limitations imposed by societal structures and dominant discourses. Although Bakhtin's framework allows for agency through negotiation, hegemonic

forces—such as racism and institutional power—can constrain individuals' ability to reshape their identity narratives. Both Sierra's and Lee's accounts reflect personal choices influenced by broader societal constraints, underscoring the importance of considering the sociopolitical landscape in which these narratives are formed.

After facilitating a nuanced exploration of the processes of self-identification and cultural heritage navigation through a Bakhtinian lens, the paper's second key contribution lies in its methodological approach. By using narrative methods and engaging participants in a reflexive process of self-narration, the study provided a rich, in-depth insight into how identity is storied and re-storied over time, in specific contexts, and using different modes of expression. This approach moves beyond traditional research methods that might seek to categorise or quantify identity and instead opens up space for participants' voices to resonate in their own terms. Moreover, the participants' involvement in the analytical process ensured that their perspectives were not merely collected but co-authored, adding an additional layer of dialogical complexity to the research. It is worth noting, however, that Sierra's and Lee's experiences are deeply personal and context-specific, shaped by their unique backgrounds, relationships, and environments. While the methodology aims to avoid assumptions about identity by not predefining ethnic, linguistic, or cultural affiliations, participants' responses may still be shaped by previous experiences of being questioned about their backgrounds, leading to socially desirable or rehearsed answers. Additionally, the influence of available linguistic repertoires and the co-production of knowledge between researcher and participants may have shaped their self-representations in ways that reflect broader discursive constraints. While their narratives offer valuable insights into how young adults with immigrant backgrounds may navigate their cultural heritage, these findings cannot be seen as representative of the experiences of all British-born young adults of immigrant descent.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates how Bakhtin's dialogism provides a powerful framework for understanding the complexities of identity among immigrant-background youth. It posits that identity is not a fixed or stable construct but an ongoing project, continually authored through a dialogue with the self, the family, and the larger sociopolitical environment. By extending Bakhtin's theory to encompass both ethical and agentic actions, this research illuminates how young adults are not passive recipients of cultural heritage but active participants in its reinterpretation and transformation. However, it also calls attention to the need for environments that nurture this agency, providing young people with the support and freedom to fully express and explore their complex cultural identities. Given the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the UK, where the proportion of the population identifying as 'English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British' has dropped from 87.5% in 2001 to 74.4% in 2021 (ONS, 2022b), institutions—including education, employment, law enforcement, and healthcare—play a critical role in shaping young adults' experiences of belonging and self-identification. While the exploratory nature of this study precludes the formulation of specific policy recommendations, it highlights the importance of institutional awareness and responsiveness to the ways immigrant-background youth navigate cultural heritage. Further research into how institutional structures affect self-identifications is essential to inform more inclusive policies that acknowledge and accommodate the diversity of these experiences, particularly in the context of rising hate crimes and societal marginalisation (Home Office, 2023). In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of research on identity formation among immigrant-background youth by offering fresh insights into how identity is co-authored through dialogic processes. It urges for a broader recognition of the sociopolitical forces that shape these narratives—especially the structural racism embedded in UK history (Shankley & Rhodes, 2020)—while also celebrating the resilience and agency of young adults as they navigate the intersections of culture, self, and society.

Notes

1. Names used in the paper are pseudonyms.
2. The study took place in 2020–2021 and the information shared here is accurate as of then.

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Anna Gruszczyńska-Thompson is a cross-disciplinary researcher interested in the sociology of culture and migration. Her work focuses on young adults from immigrant backgrounds and the processes of navigating cultural heritage and self-identification. Over the past few years, Anna held teaching and research positions at Durham University and the University of Glasgow. Currently, she engages with academia as an independent researcher while working at an international school in Switzerland as a DEIJ Coordinator and Director of Admissions.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this paper are not publicly shared to protect anonymity of the study participants. Anonymised fragments of the data might be available from the author upon reasonable request. No data will be shared without seeking further consent from the participants in question.

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