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# Banal Nationalism for Babies: The Early Transmission of National Habitus to Children in the Family

*Florence Delmotte and Sophie Duchesne*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about an encounter, or rather a hub of encounters. The hub is a research project on the transmission of feelings of belonging to young children within their family (hereafter referred to by its French

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acronym ETPAF<sup>1</sup>). In our research we try to understand how children learn in their familial everyday life to engage with the politics they are told they belong to. We have a particular interest in how young children are socialised into a world divided into nations. A qualitative survey was conducted with a sample of 30 families living in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region (France), each comprising at least one five- to six-year-old child.

As researchers we came to this project with different theoretical and methodological assumptions. To start with, our perspectives on nationalism are fuelled by our respective readings of two authors, Norbert Elias and Michael Billig, who do not appear to have been particularly acquainted with each other's writings. So we arranged their meeting. As for us, we do not make use of the theory the same ways and we tend to formulate hypotheses nourished by our different sources of inspiration which do not perfectly overlap. Therefore, working on the empirical implementation of our theoretical canvas has been an invaluable opportunity to bridge various conceptions of research design. As in all encounters, it is a story of enriching our perspectives by the diversity and unexpectedness of what we are not used to thinking about.

At the same time, it is a story of struggling to actually build something that holds together even though the builders have been socialised in different ways. At any rate, they are moments of translation, which require that all parts of the encounter clarify what they have come up with and make room for what has been brought by others. This chapter is the result of this collegiate work of translation. It first sets up the theoretical dialogue that Elias and Billig never really had on nationalism and children in their writings. A pity, we argue, because they offer approaches that are mainly compatible and complementary, so we have made them talk to each other and, ultimately, to us. Then we expose what we have made, and make (since this is work in progress) of these theoretical inputs for the survey ETPAF.

<sup>1</sup>It stands for *Enquête sur la Transmission Précoce des Appartenances au sein de la Famille* (Survey on the Early Transmission of Belongings Within the Family). <https://www.centre-miledurkheim.fr/projets-de-recherche/etpaf/>. This project was conceived by Sophie Duchesne and Maylis Ferry, who designed the fieldwork. It was carried out by them as well as Louisa McDonald and Morgane Dirion. Florence Delmotte and Sophie Duchesne are currently analysing the data. Maylis Ferry contributed an initial version of this chapter, and we would like to thank her for that.

## ON NATIONALISM TAUGHT TO CHILDREN: WHEN ELIAS MEETS BILLIG

Nationalism, which we could define loosely (for now) as how people assume that they both ‘belong’ to a nation and are socialised to a nationalised world, is a shared interest of Elias and Billig. Actually, nationalism has a special place in their respective works. Both Elias and Billig were personally affected by the horror of nationalism throughout the twentieth century: Elias as a German Jew was very directly affected by the two World Wars where his parents did not survive, his mother being murdered in the Holocaust. Billig, a social psychologist (born in 1947), came from a London Jewish family. Thus, they both had an acute sensibility to nationalism’s harmful potential, even when looking at some of its most benign forms. What distinguishes the study of nationalism in Elias’s work is that he attempted to explain the roots of its historical formation. It hence requires sharpened analytical tools to understand it with some distance as this is the only way to escape the affects attached to any particular position in a social figuration. As for Billig, he is no specialist of nationalism: when working on how people in England talked of the royal family at the beginning of the 1990s (Billig, 1992), he was struck by the nationalist aspects of their discourses. He developed an original perspective on nationalism because it is not so much a study of how people speak (or don’t) about nationalism than an analysis of what constantly reminds them in public discourses to be nationalists.

Their work is also original as it swims against the tide of what was written about nationalism since the 1980s (see Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Thiesse, 1999, 2005), another point of similarity between Billig and Elias. At a time when social scientists were predominantly announcing the twilight of nationalism and the coming of a globalised world (Hobsbawm, 1992), Billig argues that we are so wrapped up in nationalist representations of who we are, individually and collectively, that we are no longer capable of imagining a world without nations. Sometime earlier, in the 1980s, Elias (2010) insisted on the tenacity of national habitus and feelings even in a globalised world. Another important factor that distinguishes Elias and Billig’s approaches to nationalism from mainstream perspectives on the subject is that they both understand nationalism in a broader sense than its violent manifestations. They emphasise that soft forms of attachment to one’s nation (often referred to as ‘belonging’ or ‘patriotism’) are no different by nature from exclusive ones that nourish

wars. More than that, Billig claims that it is because patriotism exists, unnoticed and uncensored, that exclusive and expansionist nationalism keeps prospering. As for Elias, he suggests that there is at least some continuity between these different forms. Their arguments, however, are built on different kinds of observation in their respective writings, leading to theoretical propositions that do not completely overlap. In the next sections we discuss how Elias's concept of national habitus complements Billig's views on banal nationalism.

### *Banal Nationalism*

While most of the existing work on nationalism in the 1980s and early 1990s focused on the part it played in the genesis of nations, Billig investigates in *Banal Nationalism* how it is daily reproduced (Billig, 1995; Duchesne, 2019). Nationalism here is referred to as the idea that the world is 'naturally' divided into nations. Billig argues that there needs to be a shift from the historians' debate on the origins of nations: although the modernists have convincingly demonstrated that nationalism was invented by the elites that rose from the industrial revolution, the question that remains unanswered is how nationalism has managed to outlive its specific historical context.

#### *Banal Nationalism as Flagging*

The answer Billig proposes to this puzzling question is that we are constantly reminded that the world is divided into nations and that, in order to be someone, one must be a nationalist. He calls these reminder systems 'flagging'. In the streets we walk, the news we read or watch, the food and objects we buy, the entertainment we consume, there are flags—be they actual national flags or symbolic (such as a 'buy British' flashy sticker on a portion of strawberries). A striking example of this is the weather forecast. It is almost systematically presented to us within national borders. This setting is particularly absurd for Billig: the weather is meaningful in itself only on a global scale (contrary to what French news said after Chernobyl, clouds do not stop at borders) and to individuals on a very local level (we want to know how to dress and what we can or cannot do outside the place we live in).

#### *Banal Nationalism as a Limitation of Our Political Imagination*

There is so much of this flagging that it is hardly conceivable that we do not notice it. And yet most of the time we do not, which is one of the

reasons why Billig calls this nationalism ‘banal’. In *Banal Nationalism*, Billig argues that it is because we are so exposed to this flagging that nations, and with them the very idea that the world is naturally broken up into separate nations, are so unescapable. In a way, these reminders also act as the gravediggers of all the other ways in which we could politically imagine the world we live in, our place and the place of other human beings within it. Our political imagination is thus confined to a national setting. And we are socially constrained in this way.

In *Freudian Repression*, Billig (1999) proposed a typology of repressed thoughts. Critically discussing Freud’s theories on the unconscious, he argues that there are at least two types of repression: pre-conscious ones and unconscious ones. In the second type, we silence thoughts because of the social costs associated with their revelation; we avoid them because they are taboo and breaking taboos comes at a price. In the first case, however, we do not talk about things because there is no need to utter them: they are expected to be part of a shared (and indisputable) frame of understanding we can unconsciously (and comfortably) rely on when interacting. For Billig, banal nationalism, or the nationalised canvas within which we understand the world, is therefore the archetypal form of pre-conscious repression. This implies two things. First, the constant nationalist flagging we are exposed to indeed makes nationalism the only available language for us to think and talk (for Billig argues we think in talking) about the world and our place within it. Second, there are other ways of thinking that we could have invested in if only we had not *learnt* to remove them from our political imagination. Billig insists on this point: repression is fundamentally social rather than cognitive. The feeling of being part of a world divided into nations is acquired and maintained through language which is fundamentally social: it is not a mental process, but a rhetorical one (Billig, 1996, 2009). For Billig, the best way to grasp this is to look at children when they are in the process of acquiring their skills of repression. They regularly make slips of the tongue and people around them remind them that there is no need to argue the obvious (pre-conscious repression) or that it is untactful to speak about taboos (unconscious repression). However, here again, as in *Banal Nationalism*, the argument is not based on empirical observations of how people talk (or do not talk) about the nation; it is rather a theoretical proposition illustrating his discussion of Freudian categories.

#### *Banal Nationalism as an International Ideology*

The scarcity of argumentative resources we have on the subject at our disposal living in a nationalised world makes it difficult to imagine it

differently, let alone contest its national pervasiveness. This is what makes Billig emphasise that nationalism is an ideology (Billig, 2022). Like other ideologies (Billig, 1991) we can recognise them as social representations that ‘make the contingent world appear “natural”’ (Billig, 1995: 183). And since there is no alternative to this ‘natural’ representation we must simply accept them this way. In the family of ideologies, nationalism is deemed particularly overarching for Billig: other ideologies coexist with repertoires of arguments which allow us to contest them, however powerful their grip may be (he gives the example of liberalism), but nationalism has conquered the entire world. Except from Antarctica, the globe is covered by nation-states. And ‘if the globe is covered by nation-states, then so will it be filled with discourses, representations and habits of thought which reproduce the nation-state as the accepted, and generally desired, form of community today’ (Billig, 1995: 182).

### *Banal Nationalism as a Problem*

The very fact that nationalism is a ‘winner-takes-it-all’ type of ideology makes it a particularly serious problem in Billig’s eyes. His development of a rhetorical approach to psychology emphasised that human thinking is never one-dimensional: for every representation we hold true, there are (partially) contradicting other ones that are accessible. Thinking is the rhetorical process by which we elaborate ideas with a plurality of representations that do not all point in the same direction. An example of this is Billig’s analysis of categorisation. Some highly influential experimental psychologists (Turner et al., 1987) have suggested that human beings are bound to categorise, because cutting up reality in small comprehensible pieces, even though it involves ‘distortion and simplification’ (Billig, 1985: 81), is the only way we can grasp it.

For human beings, categorisation has been very effective, presented in countless manuals as a ‘natural’ and inescapable outcome of the development of human brains. There will always be prejudices. However, Billig (1985: 82) argues that it is important to ‘seek[ing] a way out of the depressing dilemma’ that if humans categorise, so they particularise, which leads to a questioning of the accuracy of our categories. For Billig, it is very important to bear in mind that we can do both because we should not renounce the richness and plurality of human thinking (Billig, 1996). Acknowledging a one-sided version of reality as the sole and natural one sometimes leads—as is the case for categorisation and nationalism—to politically disastrous situations.

In a similar way, nationalism is problematic and dangerous. One of the key arguments of *Banal Nationalism* (Billig called it ‘banal’ in reference to Hannah Arendt’s book on the Banality of Evil, 1963) is that there is no difference in nature between what Billig calls nationalism (its banal version, the simple belief in the natural character of the division of the world into nations of solidarity with one’s compatriots, sometimes referred to as ‘patriotism’, which appears to many as a gentle, normal and positive way of being attached to the national community we belong to) and what is usually understood by ‘nationalism’, that is extreme-right movements or separatist movements. He argues that there is rather a continuum between unnoticed, accepted patriotism and vindictive forms of nationalism. Moreover, the latter exists because the former does: violent versions of nationalism are nurtured by the banal nationalism we all tend to accept.

### *National Habitus*

Elias’s process sociology seems to complement well the analysis of ‘banal nationalism’ by exploring questions that Billig neglects: why does flagging work so well on individuals? For those who want to study nationalism from an Eliasian perspective, ‘national habitus’ is the core concept. Briefly, national habitus is a particular kind of habitus, a part of every socialised individual, a layer of the ‘filo pastry’ of identities (Mennell, 1994) which has become a very important one from the nineteenth century (Delmotte, 2022). We find the concept of habitus at the beginning of Elias’s most well-known book, *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012a), in a discussion about the difference between ‘civilisation’ for French (and English) people, and ‘*Kultur*’ for Germans. From this book, Elias demonstrates that habitus has important historical, comparative and political dimensions. Habitus is not far from what Max Weber calls ‘habit’ or ‘second nature’. But it is processual, always transforming even when it seems fixed and unchanging. Habitus is ‘embodied social knowledge’ (Dunning & Mennell, 1996: ix) that concerns ways of representing the world (we, us, others, the environment) but also ways of experiencing it, of behaving, feeling and talking. Most of us have a familial habitus, a survival unit habitus and a professional habitus. In each case, habitus is what is more or less common to individuals in a group, even if they are not aware or especially ‘proud’ of it. And as each individual ‘belongs’ to several groups, each person adopts and develops several habitus. But one came to dominate at both an individual and collective level, which is the case for national habitus in a particular historical context.

The concept of national habitus is central in at least two of Elias's texts: *Studies on the Germans* (2013) and 'Changes in the "we-I" Balance' (1987), in *The Society of Individuals* (2010). In the first book, the concept is connected to the analysis and criticism of nationalism. One can also find such critical analysis in other texts, such as *Involvement and Detachment* (2007), partly written against the backdrop of the Cold War, and in Elias's autobiography and interviews (Elias, 2014). A main aim of *Studies on the Germans*, the last book Elias authorised before he died, is to understand and explain what happened in Germany that made Nazism, World War Two and the concentration camps possible. But it is not first and foremost a condemnation and even less a condemnation of the German people. It is a matter of understanding and explaining national habitus, the German one among other ones, in a comparative perspective. Elias writes:

It would be, I think, a rather nice task to write the 'biography' of a state society, for instance Germany. For just as in the development of an individual person the experiences of earlier times continue to have an effect in the present, so, too, do earlier experiences in the development of a nation. (Elias, 2013: 192)

The idea is that

[t]he fortunes of a nation become crystallised in institutions which are responsible for ensuring that the most different people of a society acquire the same characteristics, possess the same national habitus. The common language is an immediate example. But there are many others. (Elias, 2013: 23)

Therefore institutions need to be understood in the broadest sense. Schools and parliaments are connected with national habitus, but there are many other ones, less formal and more intimate.

#### *National Habitus, Democratisation and Paradoxes*

In 'Changes in the "we-I" Balance' (Elias, 2010), Elias suggests that national habitus became the main habitus that dominates in contemporary society over others, making groups of people feel that they 'belong'. Why? Because (modern) states and then nation-states progressively replaced tribes, clans, villages as survival units. How? First by wars, then by processes of democratisation, although lately and only in certain contexts. The following passage is very significant in this respect:

The emergence of the European states as we-units happened gradually and in stages. [...] Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries parts of the population, the peasants in the first place and then above all the industrial proletariat, were still excluded from the citizens' we-identity by the ruling classes, the bourgeoisie and nobility. [...] Only in conjunction with the parliamentary representation of all classes did all members of the state begin to perceive it more as a we-unit and less as a they-group. Only in the course of the two great wars of this century did the populations of more developed industrial states take on the character of nation states. Nation states, one might say, are born in wars and for wars. Here we find the explanation for why, among the various layers of we-identity, the state level of integration today carries special weight and a special emotional charge. (Elias, 2010: 185–186)

In this argument, Elias does not reduce (or rather 'elevate') national habitus to democracy. He only affirms it is quite recent and specific. He does not idealise it either. The particularity of the national habitus is its polysemy and ambiguity, its paradoxical character: it refers at the same time to long installed unconscious habits, to identity politics and to discourses and symbols. It is archaic and modern at the same time, partly based on rationality (on citizenship and nationality that confer rights) but still very emotional, with both an obvious collective dimension and a very individualistic one. Finally, national habitus continues to carry 'myths', which is in itself problematic: 'People do need myths, but not in order to arrange their social life. It is my conviction that people would live together better without myths', Elias says in an interview (2014: 115). Elsewhere, Elias points out the dangers of a nationalism with 'high fantasy content' (Elias, 2013: 236) but also that all nationalism refers to different forms of beliefs. From this point of view, National Socialism can be understood as an extreme but characteristic form (Elias, 2013: 238).

#### *National Habitus: Changes and Resistances*

Another aspect of habitus is its changing nature and its resistance to change. Indeed, the national habitus appears to be particularly resistant to change. In 'Changes in the "we-I" Balance' (2010), Elias focuses on the 'drag' effect of national habitus in the second half of the twentieth century. A majority of people, he observes, continue to feel 'attached' to the nation-state to which they 'belong', although the latter is no longer the effective unit of survival, given, above all, the invention of nuclear weapons and ecological risks that ignore all borders (Elias, 2010: 194–195).

Elias then tries to explain the resistance of the development of a more ‘reality congruent’ habitus which would be based on a ‘sense of responsibility for imperilled humanity’ (Elias, 2010: 203) at the planetary level. The fact that the world remains divided into nations in a way that has remained almost unchanged for centuries—diplomacy and inter-state relations attest to this—is an important element to be taken into account (Elias, 2010: 205). This reality, and the evidence of the discourses and practices that accompany it, perpetuates a mode of identification with the political community based on the existence of an enemy or threatening other. Humanity has no enemy but itself and is threatened only by groups that are part of itself (Elias, 2010: 204). In the end, the sense of belonging to humanity could not fulfil the affective need of individuals in the same way as national belonging and the beliefs that are sustained by it.

That is why a shift beyond the national level (see Delmotte, 2012), if it should finally occur (for instance at the European level), would take time:

One has the impression that the solidity, the resistance, the deep-rootedness of the social habitus of individuals in a survival unit is greater the longer and more continuous the chain of generations within which a certain social habitus has been transmitted from parents to children. (Elias, 2010: 189)

In other words: ‘Habitus is congealed history, absorbed into our bodies’ (Kuypers, 2012). But national habitus can change (or might de-congeal):

The constraints of *habitus* are created by human beings. At one time in the past they were adjusted in all people to suit the integration level of the clan. [...] The we-image of human beings has changed; it can change again. Such changes do not take place overnight. They involve processes that often take many generations. (Elias, 2010: 204)

#### *National Habitus: Common and Particular/Diverse Features*

In *The Society of Individuals* (2010), Elias addresses national habitus in general, as a common feature (in a similar way as banal nationalism), and the diversity of particular national habitus:

A process sociological study, and a familiarity with the investigation of long-term processes, are needed to explain the differences of individual habitus in Latin America or Europe, Africa or Asia. But if we are looking for examples of the reality-congruence of the concept of habitus, we could hardly find a more cogent example than the persistent way in which the national habitus

of the European nation states impedes their closer political union. (Elias, 2010: 188)

Therefore, are some national habitus ‘worst’ or more dangerous than other ones? Although they all share some common features, Elias argues in *The Germans* that we can partly explain what happened in the middle of the twentieth century in Europe to particular features of a German national habitus that turned towards the past and sought revenge with a high fantasy content, deeply attached to an aristocratic code of honour (Elias, 2013). But as pointed out by Mennell and Dunning (1996), ‘[T]he concept of (national) habitus is “not in any way essentialist”; [...] habitus changes over time precisely because “the fortunes and experiences of a nation (or of its constituting groupings) continue to change and accumulate”’ (Preface, in Elias, 1996: ix).

To conclude this section, the first of the few ‘universals of human society’, the first ‘social constant’ is ‘humankind’s natural changeability’ (Elias, 2012b: 99 ff.). At least we are not condemned ‘by nature’ to nationalism. *Each* national habitus is subject to change, and what is more, the strength and features of national habitus *in general* are subject to change, which does not mean subject to ‘progress’. This is probably an important difference with Billig’s perspective on ‘banal’ nationalism. National habitus is not only made of discourse—they are not ideologies although nationalist discourses and practices inform them. As ‘embodied social knowledge’ that is actually learned, national habitus can change although not necessarily in a desirable direction. Habitus may strengthen rather than weaken, radicalise rather than moderate, depending on the historical context—for example, diverse ‘crises’ and the ‘moral panics’ they entail (Reicher, 2020)—and on the long development of each habitus.

## TOWARDS THE STUDY OF NATIONAL SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN IN FAMILIES

If there are similarities in the ways Elias and Billig deal with the issue of nationalism, their theoretical propositions do not necessarily point in the same direction. In some respect they are complementary but their potential integration also requires more articulation. Driven as he is by questions of long-term processual dynamics, Elias is far more sensitive to the socio-historical contingencies of specific survival units than Billig. Billig is more insistent on how a nationalist grammar has conquered the entire world, becoming the centre of a political imagination that has smothered

alternative ones. They also approach the problem of nationalism in a different way. Billig argues that there are no such things as individual inter-iorities that can be empirically investigated. Whereas Elias is interested in how the social habitus is internalised (embedded) within individuals and the way people identify themselves with the nation.

Putting into dialogue what Billig and Elias have written on nationalism also points to issues that have yet to be addressed. The cross-reading of the two authors reveals an area that requires further research, namely the transmission of nationalism to young children. The issue of childhood socialisation was already discussed in Elias's *On the Process of Civilisation*, at least in the first part on the civilising of manners, more specifically changes towards natural functions, and in the discussion of Erasmus's *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium* (Elias, 2012a: 134–141; 171–184). Later in *The Civilising of Parents*, Elias (2008) insists that a society is never composed only of adults and that they are never 'finished' in their development but change all their life. One cannot know and understand one's own society without studying children. This is especially the case in contemporary societies where parent–child relations and relations between generations have become more democratic with a reduction in the power-ratios between groups. In comparison with other societies or periods of time ('earlier stages'), children have relatively more autonomy and freedom. They are not small adults and now tend to be fully recognised in their identity as children (with their own personality and rights), but they have more responsibility and social 'pressure' on their behaviour and learning. Elias also emphasises that in today's societies, families more than ever have become the main place for the socialising of children (although not the only place), and for a longer period of their life. The processes of socialisation and individualisation of children in contemporary societies therefore take place at the same time and mainly in families.

In the family, though, the learning of a large range of 'self-restraints' (potty training, eating properly, how to behave correctly, to become polite, 'civil' or 'civilised') operates from very early childhood through relationships that remain rather unbalanced compared to other ones. Children are materially and emotionally highly dependent on other members of the family and especially their parents who protect, feed, learn and educate but first and foremost 'love' them. Elias highlights the concept of 'love and learning relationships' (see Gabriel, 2017), through which children learn at a very early age, and continuously throughout their development, to become attached to and identify with many other people. In this way

processes of children's socialisation and individualisation in the family (and particularly through parent–child relationships) may be linked to the transgenerational process of transmission of national belonging, habitus and banal nationalism. It then becomes a question of studying to what extent, how and why the building of oneself, the building of I-, we-, they-identities, crystallises more or less consciously around what children experience and define as 'French', for example, and what each child has learnt to love, hate, reject, respect, tolerate or suffer.

Our research is both interested in the way parents want to contribute to building the we–I identity of their children and what their educational practices reveal about their own process of identity construction and nationalism. With specific reference to the first aspect, Elias suggests that we should pay greatest attention to the strong interdependence between affective and learning dimensions, particularly in family relationships. In *The Symbol Theory* (2011), he further emphasises the importance of symbolic functions, which are learned, like imagining, remembering, forgetting and fantasizing, and of 'symbolic resources that frame and maintain the national habitus as an 'affective household of nations' (see Bucholz, 2020; Kuzmics & Axtmann, 2007).

As for Billig, in *Banal Nationalism*, he looks at the flagging we are exposed to rather than how we receive it or what we do with it. But in his work on repression, he suggests that childhood is the best empirical observatory for commonplaces that are so obviously consensual that no one bothers about speaking them out loud (Billig, 1999). Indeed, as children are learning to deem natural the division of the world into nationalities, they may talk about the nation (and the nationalised world) in explicit ways adults would not. However, Billig did not himself emphasise early socialisation as an element to be investigated in order to better understand the functioning of banal nationalism, but others did in reference to his work. For example, Katharine Throssell (2015), who approached banal nationalism as a process of socialisation so early that the mechanism for understanding the nation escapes us. It is buried deep in our memories, so that constant reminders of flagging work without noticing it. Jon Fox, one of Billig's most thoughtful critics, underlines the evidence problem of banal nationalism and suggests that we follow Throssell's path by investigating the nation at its edges, at the edge of our awareness of it (Fox, 2017). He proposes that we focus on the people who pass it on, the parents of young children.

## HOW DO PARENTS CONTRIBUTE TO THE REPRODUCTION OF NATIONAL HABITUS AND BANAL NATIONALISM? A SURVEY

The reflections we have just presented on the articulation of the thoughts of Norbert Elias and Michael Billig on the persistence of nationalism today did not, as the method books would suggest, precede the implementation of the ETPAF project. They accompany it. More precisely, they come at the end of the exploratory survey, when we were trying to draw lessons and consolidate the research protocol. The two authors did inspire the project as a whole, but in a less elaborate way. Elias is the source of our interest in how a sense of nationhood is transmitted in early childhood. More precisely, we are pursuing the way in which Katharine Throssell drew on him to carry out her investigation in *Child and Nation* (Throssell, 2015). And it is indeed to Billig that we owe our desire to more fully understand—the better to combat—the omnipotence of nationalism today (Duchesne et al., 2018).

### *The Test System: Principles and Procedures*

ETPAF is a project driven initially by political inquires. We have translated Elias's and Billig's influences quite simply. To begin with, we chose to survey families with children aged five or six, that is to say young children who have not yet been strongly influenced by school, which is known to be a powerful transmitter of the nation, notably in France. Then we tried to develop a survey design that allowed us to reconstruct the way in which parents transmitted to young children their beliefs in the 'natural' character of the division of the world into nations. This design is based on three interviews per family during which two female social scientists interviewed parents as well as their five- to six-year-old child, most of the time in parallel. With the children, many exercises were designed, again following Throssell's (2018) example; what would become of this material was uncertain. The interviews with the parents also used numerous projective stimuli, open-ended forms of questioning which provide little structure to the answers and thus give the interviewees the space to express what is important to them (Duchesne & Ferry, 2021).



On the parents' side, the first interview is mainly aimed at getting to know the family by having them recount the child's genealogy and daily life. The knowledge acquired on this occasion is sociological, since the

data produced provides very detailed information on the social characteristics of the family, but is also personal. This sequence is the first in the system and sets the tone. By talking about their loved ones, their families and their own lives, the parents reveal a little about themselves. It is not uncommon for emotions to surface and even tears to flow at the mention of lost relatives. The way in which the interviewer accompanies the story and welcomes these emotions reflects the attention she gives to them and the quality of the listening that is necessary. The parents respond to this with the care they take with their story. This exchange establishes a relationship that will last for the duration of the investigation and is anchored in the trust that parents show towards the interviewer by offering their family's story.

The second interview focuses on the family's cultural practices, particularly those concerning the child, while the third focuses on the objective of the research, namely the parents' relationship to nationalism and its transmission. On this occasion, to conclude the exchanges with the family, the interviewer tries to explain to parents how banal nationalism works (for more details on this aspect of the survey, see Duchesne & Ferry, 2021). Finally, it should be noted that the parents and the child met once or twice during each interview to watch and comment on the content of different videos.

We started by validating the feasibility of our survey scenario with a family of a colleague at the end of the first lockdown (spring–summer 2020) by checking that the questions and activities planned were well adapted to a five-year-old child and that the length of each session corresponded to our target of a two-hour interview per session. Then we took advantage of the loosening of Covid restrictions in July 2020 to test our survey design with three families unknown to us. The contact with each of these families was made indirectly, *via* a teacher known to one of our friends, and *via* a doctoral student from our laboratory (the Centre Emile Durkheim). They sent a small advertisement (see Picture 5.1) and the voluntary families contacted us by email or telephone. The compensation of 200 euros per family attempts to make possible the sociological representativeness of our sample. Participation in the survey is costly since it requires the equivalent of a day's work from the family (six hours of meetings and two preparation exercises). Without this financial incentive, we would have had little opportunity of meeting families with no particular interest in the university and the social sciences involved in our research.

One of the characteristics of our survey protocol is that we chose to use projective rather than ethnographic methods to collect our material.

 <p><b>Looking for parent(s) with child from 5 to 6 years old to participate in a survey!</b></p> <p>3 interview sessions of about 2 hours each, at home Compensation: 200 euros</p> 	<p><b>The <i>Enquête sur la Transmission Précoce des Appartenances au sein de la Famille (ETPAF)</i></b> is conducted at the Centre Emile Durkheim, a laboratory of the CNRS, Sciences Po and the University of Bordeaux. This research project aims to understand how feelings of belonging are constructed at different territorial levels, from the most local to the global. The survey is based on 5-6-year-old children, considered in their family context. It consists of three sessions of about 2 hours, where two researchers from the team come to the child's home in order to discuss and carry out activities with him or her, as well as with his or her parent(s). A compensation of 200 euros is offered given the investment that these three sessions represent.</p> <p>We are therefore looking for parents of a child aged 5 to 6 years old who are willing to participate in the survey. If you are interested, or know anyone who might be, please write to the project coordinator (contact details below). For more information about the survey, you can also visit our webpage: <a href="https://durkheim.u-bordeaux.fr/Organisation-de-la-recherche/Identifications/Projets-finances/ETPAF">https://durkheim.u-bordeaux.fr/Organisation-de-la-recherche/Identifications/Projets-finances/ETPAF</a></p>
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**Picture 5.1** Survey presentation flyer (translated from French into English)

Ethnographic surveys, which may seem to be the most appropriate way of understanding practices, are difficult to mobilise when working on objects that are obvious, ‘natural’, ‘without alternative’, as is the case with banal nationalism. In contrast, our research uses projective methods that aim to bring out ‘poorly’ controlled discourse in respondents about the division of humanity into political communities of belonging, encouraging them to react to various stimuli (images, short films, books, ‘vignettes’) (Lavabre, 2002). Another reason to prefer projective methods to ethnographic ones is that observation time is measured in years, something that the research funding of methods of surveys hardly allows us in the landscape of today’s political science and sociology. Also, Billig nor Elias fully investigates how individual relations to nationalism are articulated with other dimensions of their social life, for example their gender, class or race. And given the weight that such factors have on how children are growing up, we cannot just ignore them if we are to empirically investigate Elias’s understanding of national habitus or Billig’s persistence about the reproduction of nationalism. Therefore, in our project we aim to include as much as possible the social positions of the parents interviewed in order to reveal how it influences their relationships to the nation.

The general tone of the interviews is not very directive. We asked each family similar questions to find out what they thought of the materials we present to them, but most of the discussion consisted of follow-up questions based on their initial responses. Interviewing the parents together further limits the directive nature of the questioning, since the dynamics of the discussion are largely based on the way in which they themselves follow up our discussion. Interviewing a couple is already a form of collective interview and gives the interviewees more power to control the evolution of the discussion (Dolez, 2023; Duchesne, 2017; Kamberelis & Dimitriatis, 2014). The interviews with the parents were recorded from start to finish and the sessions with the parents are transcribed by a professional. Table 5.1 reproduces the scenario of the exploratory interviews we conducted.

Gender is also a dimension of the relationship to national belonging that we explored in our interviews. The hetero-parental composition of the test interviews led us to take an interest in this aspect because it would seem that even in families that are careful to avoid reproducing gendered behaviour, forms of unequal role attribution emerge in its transmission. Pride in sport competition is expressed by the father while the mother seems to display some of the permanent links with the family. These are, however, hypotheses hastily drawn from these interviews and fuelled by our readings on the entanglements between gender and nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997) which we seek to explore in the light of all the interviews.

### *Adjustments*

At the end of the exploratory phase, we proceeded to an evaluation of the overall study. The general economy of the protocol seemed to us very rich. First, the fact that we came to the family home three times, deepening the questioning as we went along, enabled us to establish a relationship of trust with our respondents and encouraged the parents to become increasingly involved as the sessions progressed. Second, it allowed us to observe changes in the ways in which our interviewees saw the meanings of our survey, changes that are themselves full of lessons about their ways of thinking about belonging. Finally, it allowed us to collect a variety of material throughout the three sessions, each of which has an overall thematic coherence.

We have therefore retained the overall structure of the interviews with the parents—knowledge of the family, cultural activities and

**Table 5.1** Exploratory interview scenario

<i>Parent interview</i>	<i>Child maintenance</i>	<i>Duration (minutes)</i>
<i>First session: getting to know each other</i>		120
Presentations and collection of informed consents (in accordance with the European General Data Protection Regulation)		15
Family trees of both parents and presentation of their educational and professional background	• Family drawing of the child	25
• Commentary on the drawing the child has made and the selected photos		35
• Viewing of Disney's <i>It's a Small World</i> and <i>Titounis Kids</i>		
• Collection of the parents' and the child's impressions on these two contents		
– Questions about the child:	• Reading of <i>Mr. and Mrs.</i> that the child chooses among:	40
– Organisation of daily life;	– <i>Mr. and Mrs. in China</i> ;	
– Emotional environment;	– <i>Mr. and Mrs. in Scotland</i> ;	
– Family life habits;	– <i>Mr. and Mrs. in the United States</i> ;	
– Things that parents want to pass on to their children.	– <i>Mr. and Mrs. in Great Britain</i> .	
	• Reading of other books brought by the researchers.	
• Instructions for next time: with the help of the parents, the child should write a letter to an imaginary pen pal to make him/her want to come and visit.		5
• A voucher (60 euros) will be given.		
<i>Session Two: identifying cultural practices</i>		120
Opening the letter to the correspondent and commenting on it		5

*(continued)*

Table 5.1 (continued)

<i>Session Two: identifying cultural practices</i>		120
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questions about the cultural and artistic practices of the family and the child. Which practices are supervised, which are not (cartoons, books, food, sports, travel, artistic practices).</li> <li>• The parents comment on the <i>Mr. and Mrs.</i> book that the child had chosen in the previous session.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Association game: children are shown objects and cultural practices and asked which country they are from.</li> <li>• <i>Folklore Memory Game</i>: during the game, children are asked to describe the characters.</li> </ul>	40
Viewing of television extracts: <i>Tchoupi fait le marché</i> ; <i>Saturnin le pompier</i> ; <i>Asterix and Cleopatra</i> (subtitling of hieroglyphs).		20
Commentary on 3 ‘vignettes’:		45
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– It is necessary to hold for France: frictions during the 1998 World Cup;</li> <li>– Carmen does not know ‘chorizo’;</li> <li>– Children damage a flag of France one day after the 14/07 (national day).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggest that the child dress up or put on make-up with the colours blue-white-red.</li> <li>• Playing with the child in everyday situations.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher and the child return to the parents wearing red-white- and-blue make-up. We observe the parents’ reaction.</li> <li>• Instructions for next time: the child should write a letter in which he/she imagines what the pen pal’s ‘home’ looks like and asks questions to find out more before visiting.</li> <li>• Gift voucher (60 euros)</li> </ul>		10
<i>Third session: the relationship to belonging</i>		120
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opening of the letter and collective commentary.</li> <li>• Presentation of Maslow’s pyramid. The parents explain the principle to the child and if they do not know it, the researchers explain. Collective commentary of the pyramid.</li> <li>• <i>International Social Survey Programme</i> (ISSP) questionnaire: parents complete the questionnaire together on a single copy. <a href="http://www.issp-france.fr/enquete/identite-nationale-2013/">http://www.issp-france.fr/enquete/identite-nationale-2013/</a></li> <li>• Discussion around the thesis of banal nationalism. The child does what s/he wants during this time. Discussion support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Video clip on the Notre Dame de Paris Cathedral fire (15/04/2019);</li> <li>– Video clip of French president Emmanuel Macron speaking during the first lockdown (March 2020);</li> <li>– Image of a weather sequence on television.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Proposal to keep in touch and get feedback on our work</li> <li>• Thank you and a gift voucher (80 euros)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Activity based on the principle of the ‘Symbol task card’ that Katharine Throssell imagined for her thesis (the child has images containing various national symbols in the order of his or her preferences).</li> </ul>	30
		70

affiliations—but have changed some of the proposed activities. We eliminated what seemed to us to produce the ‘poorest’ discourse, namely the joint viewing of children’s videos, the reading of books in the ‘Mr. and Mrs.’ series and the writing of letters to the imaginary pen pal (see Table 5.1). In each case, these activities created a situation in which parents explicitly wanted their child to behave towards the interviewers in a way that would, if not honour them, at least respond effectively to what they expected. And the children resisted through silence. While the interviews between the interviewer and the child gave rise to some very interesting discussions, the parent–child interactions in front of the interviewers appeared of limited interest for the survey.

We have kept as video support only the excerpts presented in the third interview when the interviewer explained to parents how banal nationalism works. We also replaced the two exercises of writing a letter to an imaginary pen pal with a request to watch the film *Moana* (between the first and second interviews) and to read a book *The Wolf Who Wanted to Travel the World* (between the second and third interviews), two widely distributed cultural products for children. We wanted to conduct some activity between each interview in order to maintain the link between the family and the interviewers and to prolong the presence of the interviewers in the family between visits. However, we did not attend the viewing or reading with the family because of the artificial nature of the situation—see Guilluy (2018) for an account of the difficulty of watching people watching a film.

Instead, we chose to focus our investigation on what the child says about the film or reading during the next interview. We used the time freed up to extend the ‘vignette’ activity proposed to the parents. The vignette is a short story that is presented to the subjects of the survey so that they can comment on it. In our adjustments we proposed four vignettes, two in the second interview and two in the third one. They dealt with nationalism in sport (see below), with typical national food and what children should know about it, with the preference for national producers and with the use of a national language in the family and at school. Finally, we have kept the discussion conceived in a quasi ‘participative’ way around the thesis of banal nationalism. This allowed ourselves the possibility of changing the video extracts and other documents proposed to the parents from one interview to the next in order to adapt ourselves to current events and the evolution of our investigation.

*Working with ‘vignettes’: A Foretaste*

There are many forms of vignettes with varying degrees of interaction (see Jenkins et al., 2010, for some examples). In the survey, we invited parents to respond to several vignettes by asking if the stories could happen in their family and if parents had any opinion about the situations and characters. Here is the vignette of the first of the stories told, called ‘The World Cup’:

*The story takes place a few years ago, at the time of the 1998 World Cup. It’s the day of the final and a family is gathered in the country to celebrate a series of birthdays. In the early afternoon, the atmosphere starts to warm up, the television is set up outside and the meal is prepared for the evening. The family comes from Pas-de-Calais, they are football fans. Only one of the sisters-in-law doesn’t like it. She suddenly realises that everyone is dressed in blue-white-red, including her two children (Caroline, 8, and Jean, 6). Their faces disappear under the national colours. At first, she tries to laugh it off and wants to convince her children that it’s better when not everyone supports the same team. When they don’t listen to her, she declares loud and clear that she is for Brazil. From that moment on, her children refuse to speak to her.*

In the interviews, ‘The World Cup’ generated a great deal of criticism of the sister-in-law, who is almost always seen as a killjoy and someone who likes to make troubles. The exercise provides a raw, unvarnished expression of the obvious legitimacy of national preference, clearly highlighted from the interview of Jeanne’s parents (January 2022):

Mother *This is about football. Well, she can tell me what she wants, but if I’m French and I want to support the French team, I support the French team. And um, it doesn’t shock me that a whole family of French people support the French team and don’t wear the Brazil jersey, um ... That’s it. Everyone should support their team. After that, to say that it’s good that we support other teams too, yes, of course. But in the end, if it had been a match....*

Father *Not for this match.*

Mother *I don’t know, Germany, Croatia for example, where everyone chooses sides, why not. But France–Brazil, erm, it’s normal that we support our country. After that, if she wants to support Brazil, she has the right to do so, but she shouldn’t have to. After that, um, the reaction of the children, maybe they saw her as a killjoy, too. We’re*

*having a party, we're all supporting the same team and then you come along and tell us we've got to support Brazil. No, I don't agree.*

Father *First of all, she's probably not at all. ... She doesn't like football, she probably doesn't give football any importance at all, but ... But we're showing that she doesn't seem to be attached to her nation. I mean, she chooses Brazil ... Like France doesn't matter to her. OK, let's say it's because it's football and she doesn't really care about football, but um, it's strange not to be patriotic for such an event. It's very strange.*

Beyond the example of Jeanne's parents, almost all of the parents in the 30 families were genuinely concerned about the sister-in-law's attitude, unable to imagine that anyone could not feel committed to their national team on World Cup night. They differ on the degree of disapproval, but not on the substance: her behaviour is inevitably dictated by the desire to disrupt the harmony of this family and national day, by the pleasure of making a fuss. However, the story allows us to discuss the universal preference for one's country's team. The interview then moves on to recall memories of that afternoon in 1998, which are still very vivid for most of the interviewees.

Originally, each story was written on the basis of real stories that happened to interviewees. The idea was to give a little something back to the parents, who had provided a great deal of their personal stories and thoughts. As we enter the final part of the last interview, where the interviewer tries to explain the theory of banal nationalism to the interviewees in order to get their reactions, the fact that the sister-in-law is part of the team (if not, most of the time, the interviewer herself) facilitates the change of tone, the transition from projective inquiry to the discussion of scientific arguments.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter we have argued that Elias and Billig share a common theoretical approach that does not separate the sense of belonging to the nation from nationalism. Belonging is not without a sense of superiority for oneself (Elias, 2007: 8), nor without the risk of violence towards the other. For both, nationalism begins with the fact of considering national anchorage as a more or less 'given identity', making the relationship to

‘one’s’ nation an indisputable primary dimension in one’s relationship to others. In our research, we have tried to identify how parents’ contradictory educational priorities are articulated, ways of conceiving the world that preclude more universalist forms of thinking, for example when parents say they want to open their children up to the world while inscribing them in their family and national habitus. Whereas they seek to value differences, parents more often than not find themselves confirming stereotypes that promote a hierarchy between nations. African countries, for example, are most often populated by animals, while European countries are full of celebrated buildings.

We explained how we designed a research project to give full empirical expression to this theoretical—which is politically not ‘neutral’—perspective. Our fieldwork is now complete. We have conducted thirty series of interviews with parents of five and six year olds, who are as sociologically and politically as diverse as possible, and we have now entered the analytical phase. In particular, we are analysing the notion of ‘preference’, which we see as the tipping point from a love of one’s own nation to the feeling that only (or almost only) the national destiny matters. By closely studying the words used by parents and interpreting their silences, hesitations and ambivalences, we try to show how they are caught up, in spite of themselves, in strong feelings of superiority (or aspirations to superiority) that are conveyed through national habitus and banal nationalism. Our aim is then to determine in a more precise way how Elias and Billig’s approaches can be used together to explain the intimate relation between collective discourses on the inseparability of belonging and nation, and those that defend the superiority of one nation over others.

A final aspect we wish to explore is the identification of some of the similarities and differences in the development of national habitus. Can we claim in this survey of nationalism in France to be dealing with some of the general features of banal nationalism? This claim generated a lively debate within our research team. In the course of our discussions, it appeared as a form of imperialist pretension, blind to the historicity of the French national habitus and its close connection with colonial domination. We therefore think it is important to integrate into our analysis of banal nationalism an understanding of imperialist and postcolonial nationalism. In doing so, we reintroduce the long view into our approach that emphasises generational processes of reproduction that French parents use to transmit ‘we’ forms of identity to their children. This perspective can pave the way for an even more ambitious and challenging comparative project.

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