

The Psychological Impact of Brexit on Europeans living in the UK

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When thinking about the psychological impact of Brexit on Europeans living in the UK, I bring two main perspectives to the discussion. The first is a professional one as a Social Psychologist. That means I'm interested in how people relate to one another and influence each other as individuals and more especially as groups, whether we're talking about small friendship groups, shared interest groups, political groups, right up to the level of the nation state. One issue that's been a particular focus of my work over the years is identity, our sense of who and what we are as individuals and as groups. That question is very relevant to the other perspective that I bring to our discussion. As an Irish citizen who's lived in England for over 30 years, I have a personal stake in this evening's topic and, I'm sure like many of you, I've been watching the Brexit drama unfold with interest, incredulity and deep concern.

The main ideas that I draw upon in making sense of the implications of Brexit for Europeans living in the UK come from work that was initiated by a social psychologist who was also a member of that group. Henri Tajfel (1919-1982) grew up in Poland, moved to France to study and then to live, and finally settled in the UK. Shaped by his war-time experiences, Tajfel worked with others to develop what's called social identity theory.

Social identity is that part of a person's understanding of self that comes from their membership of social groups and from the value and emotional significance attached to those group memberships. The idea is that we identify with social groups of which we're members. We see these groups as our 'ingroups', seeing the members of these groups as 'our people'. We're motivated to see these groups as in some way better than other groups. That gives us a feeling of self-esteem and distinctiveness. It's a way of marking ourselves out as different in a positive sense. Those other groups that we compare ourselves against, groups that are 'not us' and that we see as somehow less than 'our people' are termed 'outgroups'. So we have groups that we identify with, that we value and that give us a sense of who we are – our ingroups – and groups that we distance ourselves from in a psychological, social or physical sense, groups that are 'not us' – our outgroups. These are some basic concepts from social identity theory that can help us understand the issues that we're addressing tonight.

This division of the social world into 'us' and 'them' seems pretty fundamental to how we operate as social beings. I'm sure we can all recognise its operation across our lives, right

from childhood when we had ideas about who was in ‘our gang’ and who wasn’t, through adolescence and into adulthood. Outgroups are important in defining who we are because they embody who we are not. For example, if you were to explore the social identity of traditional Celtic fans, part of their sense of who they are is about not being Rangers fans. That division of the social world can be a cause of conflict but it’s important to stress that it doesn’t have to be. It all depends on whether people in positions of power and influence try to work constructively with that ‘us and them’ tendency or whether they try to heighten it and make use of it to entrench division and stoke conflict for political ends. Although there’s a large and complex literature on social identity theory, I’m sure you can see why it’s my first port of call in thinking about Brexit.

So where does that leave non-British Europeans living in the UK in the time of Brexit? I think what’s been called into question is our sense of where we belong in this country and indeed whether we belong. Living as non-British Europeans in the UK, we have a range of commitments to this country and a range of identifications with Britain and Britishness.

Those may well have changed over time. A fairly standard pattern is that many of us will have come here initially for instrumental reasons – to get access to jobs and other opportunities that may not have been available in our home countries. That certainly was the case for me when I came here from a moribund Ireland in the late 1980s. Like many incomers, I never meant to stay here. The plan was to establish myself and then return home. Britain, British people and Britishness were categories and groups that held some relevance for who I was but they were backdrops to my core national identity as an Irish person in Britain.

However, over time, we made connections and established a life here as we built families and careers. For many of us, these were more than instrumental connections: we were drawn into and made active contributions to British communities and institutions. This is a standard pattern among some immigrant people. Over time, our identities become hybrid as we are drawn into identifying more and more with Britain, British people and Britishness. Our evaluations of those categories and groups may develop, become more sophisticated and become part of how we think of ourselves – our social identities. Britain, Britishness and British people become parts of our ingroup, even if that’s in a qualified or context-specific way. We may become more aware of that at particular times: for instance, at the time of the London Olympics in 2012. Our identities as Irish or Danish or Swedish or Norwegian people

don't disappear. Instead their importance and salience change in terms of how we see ourselves and perhaps in terms of how others see us too.

However, with the advent of the Brexit era, I think that has changed. First of all, we have become aware that some sectors of the British public are at best ambivalent about whether we are really legitimate members of their ingroup. That's a longstanding thing: the British have long been ambivalent about their status as Europeans. Just look at the title of this evening's discussion: 'The psychological impact of Brexit on Europeans living in the UK'. When I first saw that, I mischievously asked 'So that refers to all people living in the UK who aren't American, Asian, Australian, African or from Antarctica?' Of course it doesn't: it means 'non-British Europeans' because in this country 'British' is not always seen as a subset of the category of 'Europeans'.

In the Brexit era, Britishness as a category has become more tightly defined in the public mind. Think of the talk about 'taking back control' of immigration in the referendum campaign and the proliferation of social media messages about the need to stem the 'flood' of immigrants to this country. You could say that the category of 'Britishness' has become more ethnically, culturally and linguistically 'pure'. The range of people who belong in that ingroup has been more tightly defined in many parts of public discourse.

Those of us who are White, from Western European countries and who are long settled here may have been subject to what's called 'exceptionalism'. When we express dismay or distress at the practical implications of Brexit, such as the need to apply for settled status and justify our right to be here, we may be encounter assurances that the anti-immigrant rhetoric doesn't apply to us and sympathy that we've been caught up in it. 'We don't mean you' is a recurrent message. We become aware that, in the public mind, there is a hierarchy of non-British Europeans. White, Western European, settled, integrated people who speak English fluently are at the top of that hierarchy. Non-White people, Romanians, Bulgarians, Poles, other East European people, Europeans who tend to live together in certain areas, Europeans whose English isn't fluent are variously located lower down that hierarchy of outgroups, of those who are 'not us', who are devalued and whose welfare isn't really our concern. Having an array of devalued European outgroups to compare themselves against may give some British people a positive sense of their distinctiveness, a source of esteem and a sharper sense of who they are at a time of global uncertainty but at what cost?

What I've just described carries implications for those of us who are from other European countries, who live in the UK and who identify in some way with Britain, Britishness and the British people – those of us who have considered ourselves to be part of the national ingroup at least in some ways. Despite having lived here, despite having contributed to the country and despite any exceptionalising reassurances, we may feel that we are considered 'not us', 'the other', not really a part of the British ingroup or at least not without various caveats and qualifications. This may have come as a shock, potentially calling into question the assumptions that we'd made about where we belong, the validity of our commitments to this country and our sense of who we are.

Some years ago, a colleague and I interviewed young homeless people about their sense of identity. They talked of homelessness as meaning that they lacked a safe space for their psychological belongings. That came to mind as I thought about the implications of Brexit. Many of us have created homes in the UK in a material but also psychological sense: it's where we feel 'at home' and where we locate many of our life commitments. Some of us may have a sense of two homes: one sense of home in our countries of origin and another sense of home here in the UK. For many of us, the most important sense of home is here – a present, active home that we have created. So any sense that we are considered not to be a legitimate part of the narrowing British ingroup may cause us to re-appraise our sense of identity and may even lead to a sense of psychological homelessness.

Thankfully, there are enough of us and enough British allies to support ourselves in psychological, social and practical ways through this time of profound uncertainty and identity disruption. This is where our social groups and networks, both real-life and virtual, become particularly important. Is there hope for the future though? As I noted earlier, the present situation that I've described was never inevitable. I've been around long enough to remember the hope that social psychologists held following the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that accorded European citizenship to citizens of EU states. We imagined a future in which national identities could diminish in importance and that people in EU states would increasingly see themselves as EU citizens, as Europeans first and as Irish, British, French, German, Danish, etc. second – a high-level sense of ingroup that would stretch across national borders and unite disparate peoples. We were realistic about the limitations of that but we were nonetheless hopeful. Today that might seem to have been a remote, naive aspiration. Nonetheless, we know the value of trying to develop ingroup categories that can include rather than exclude and that people find credible and useful and can identify with. We

have a host of research that shows what needs to be in place if who counts as 'us' is to be expanded and if those categories are to have some cultural traction. In order for that to stand any chance of success, some major shifts are needed in the political sphere. We need to work creatively, with determination and not to lose hope.