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Reflexive Practice in Live Sociology: Lessons from researching Brexit in the lives of British Citizens living in the EU-27

Abstract

This paper brings reflexivity into conversation with debates about positionality and live sociology to argue for reflexivity to be reimagined as an enduring *practice* that is collaborative, responsible, iterative, engaged, agile, and creative. We elaborate our argument with reference to examples and contemplations drawn from our experiences researching what Brexit means for Britons living in the EU27 for the *BrExpats* research project, which was informed from the outset by reflexive practice. We outline three (of a number of) potential strategies for engaging in reflexive practice: reflexive positioning, reflexive navigating, and reflexive interpreting or sense-making. We acknowledge that these are not separate actions in practice but are conceptually distinguishable aspects of an ongoing reflexive practice, informed by our understanding of the cognitive relationship between reflexivity and practice theory.

Introduction

This paper contributes to a longstanding tradition that understands the research process as a *social* process, with reflexivity — ‘examining how the researcher and intersubjective elements impinge on, and even transform, research’ (Finlay, 2002: 210) — a vital and central dimension of its practice (see also Lumsden, 2013). Pairing this with live sociology, our contribution explicitly responds to Finlay’s (2002) call to consider how researchers *do reflexivity*, drawing on our recent experiences of researching Brexit in the lives of British citizens living in the EU-27 for the *BrExpats* research project.¹ Our argument builds on well-developed understandings of reflexivity and positionality that orient these as concerns about power; how it is made in and through the research encounter and how it shapes knowledge production, while scaling up these concerns to account for the broader set of relationships at the heart of our research.

In a context in which more attention is being paid to making visible the practice of social research as a *process*, a concomitant focus on reflexivity in action also becomes possible, organised around questions about what this does to the research encounter and the production

of knowledge. In this paper we make the case for a set of strategies that we define as reflexive practice. We focus on three of several potential strategies that together inform reflexive practice: positioning, navigating, and interpreting. Crucially, these strategies are conceptually distinguishable but not discrete in practice. First, reflexive practice involves a consciousness of our own relationships to the focus of research, to our participants, and to the knowledge production we are engaged in. Put another way, reflexive practice concerns a sense of our positionality and *positioning*. Second, reflexive practice involves *navigating* our way as the research proceeds and thereby actively learning from a reflexive approach. Third, a reflexive practice informed by practice theory also acknowledges the reflexivity and positionality of the human individuals and groups with whom we undertake research, and an understanding that our *interpreting* of the social world itself, on a broader scale and encompassing a longer time perspective, is made through and informed by reflexive practice.

We illustrate our arguments with close reflections on our practice as it unfolded through the *BrExpats* research, with the research process understood as extending through time from inception to dissemination, through the relationships formed and maintained, and through social transformations. Designed as a live sociology project on an undeniably lively topic, this project bore witness to the far-reaching consequences of Britain's exit from the European Union for British citizens living in the EU-27. This 1.2 million-strong population is a lesser-known story of Brexit; the loss of EU citizenship for British citizens that accompanies Britain's withdrawal from the EU changes the (legal) terms and conditions of their residence in member states, and was taken into consideration along with the circumstances of their counterparts — EU citizens living in the UK — in Phase One (Citizens' Rights) of the Brexit negotiations. Over two and half years, the research documented their attempts to accommodate changing circumstances and situations on an almost daily basis, as active agents in the Brexit process. We found ourselves required to keep our fingers on the pulse as the Brexit process ebbed and flowed, as our longitudinal relationships with our participants persevered and faltered, and as our research produced outputs and impacts. This drew our attention to reflexivity as an engaged and engaging, continual live practice.

The case for reflexive practice

Reflexivity seems to be, once again, having its moment in sociology and related disciplines, with new book length works recently published that repackage the central debates for new audiences, and offer extended reviews of the epistemological, methodological and ethical

debates traced by earlier generations (e.g. Dean, 2017; Lumsden, 2019; May and Perry, 2017). Importantly, these works further Finlay's (2002) call to demystify how reflexivity can be done in practice, and emphasise the roles of process, time, and change. Our conceptual development of *reflexive practice* expands and concretises the sometimes nebulous and lifeless notion of reflexivity, emphasising its scientific underpinnings in practice theory, locating it within a methodological framework of live sociology, and supplementing this with ideas on positionality to argue for reflexivity as a collaborative, iterative, and creative practice.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully rehearse the debates around reflexivity, we briefly draw out key points that inform our conceptualisation of reflexive practice. First, reflexivity involves an awareness that social researchers are inevitably entangled in networks and relationships, and the co-creation of the social world they aim to study (May and Perry, 2017). This implies that social science proceeds by including ourselves as researchers and as human agents in the ongoing interpretation of the practices of social life. It considers how access was achieved, through what means or levels of support, who funded the research, what control we have over it and what happens to the results. As argued by those concerned with the way power operates in the production of knowledge through empirical research (e.g. Skeggs, 2001; Finlay, 2002; Gunaratnam, 2003), the aim is not to present a value-neutral account, but to achieve nuanced, rich, and meaningful interpretations of the social world and our place in it. We invoke an 'analysis of the interactional politics of research' (Oakley, 2016: 197), including addressing gender, class and ethnicity, and how these shape power relations. In other words, reflexivity requires subjecting to critical and ongoing scrutiny the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and to consider how—in a variety of ways—this shapes the knowledge produced by the research. This should be accompanied, following Bourdieu (2003), by 'participant objectivation', the process of questioning our own unconscious biases or prejudices. This has led us to become more participatory or collaborative in our work than formerly, involving people as participants (rather than as subjects or informants) as we proceed towards the production of meaningful interpretations.

Second, reflexivity is an ongoing process of *acting reflexively*, tied to how we navigate our research (see May and Perry, 2017). This involves being engaged, carefully and thoughtfully, in the process. It is not enough simply to outline positionality by writing one's autobiography at the outset of the project, which some responses to reflexivity have tended to do (cf. Okely and Callaway, 1992). To leave it at that is to undermine how positionality, as produced

through relationships, continues to shape research and the production of knowledge. Further, as we shall see, the contemporary landscape of sociological research requires that we are reflexive in relation to a broader set of relationships that shape the research beyond the research encounter and into wider engagements.

This signals the circularity of reflexive practice; it is dialogical rather than linear, not simply reflecting but reflecting and doing (O'Reilly, 2012a). It involves an agile, iterative, dynamic, creative, and temporal approach to research, in which one's practices are reflected upon, developed, and changed over time (O'Reilly, 2012a: 523). It involves learning as we go along, adapting and developing research through communication between members of research teams, with participants, and in the context of wider social transformations. This may entail a return to ethics committees, funders or participants, or involve introspection — to clarify, enrich, alter, shape or otherwise progress the research.

Finally, reflexive practice involves an awareness that the social world, and therefore social research itself, are made through reflexive practice. This means acknowledging the circularity of reflexive practice and how positioning, navigating, and interpreting are variously caught up with, and inform, one another. In what follows, we highlight how we have put reflexive practice to work in our research on the Brexit negotiations and how these have been lived and experienced by British citizens resident in the EU27, and how such practice has continued to inform and shape our interpretations.

About the project

BrExpats was one of 25 projects supported by the Brexit Priority Grant Scheme run by UK in a Changing Europe ThinkTank (UKiCE) and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The original call for applications specified that: 'grant holders will be expected to undertake stakeholder and public engagement activity *throughout the grant's duration*' (ESRC 2017: 1; emphasis added).

The central ambition of the project was to explore how Britons living and working in European Union Member States experienced Brexit, and how they navigated and negotiated the various challenges that it presented for them and their lives over a sustained period of time. From the outset it was designed around a practice theory approach (O'Reilly, 2012b; Benson and

O'Reilly, 2018). Practice theory (e.g. Schatzki, 2005; Shove et al., 2012; Stones et al., 2018) sees social life in terms of a perpetual interacting of social structures (institutions, laws, policies, norms) with the activities (or actions) of human agents in the practical living out of their daily lives. This is a model for understanding social life that recognises that why and how people do what they do is at once historical, institutional and individual; that is, their actions are both shaped by and shape human society. Adopting such an approach to understanding Brexit and its effects and outcomes takes seriously time and space. It sees Brexit as an ongoing process that influences the everyday practices of individuals and communities, while also giving rise to new formations as policies change and practices emerge in response.

Alongside the wider politics within which the project took place and the framing of the research through practice theory, we want to draw attention here to our considerations of how the project was positioned in relation to the ongoing politics of social research. Sociologists have long documented how methods that were once their distinctive contribution in the project of making sense of the world have been deployed instrumentally to generate seemingly infinite data in the service of power (Savage and Burrows 2007). This is a process in which methods have become decoupled from the critical evaluation and ethical judgement integral to the sociological craft, further accelerated by the 'frenzied rhythm' of the audit-led research environment (Back and Puwar 2012).

From the heightened politics around Brexit to the contemporary politics of social research, we were concerned about the potential for research on Brexit — undoubtedly a 'hot' political topic — to lose its critical and analytical focus in the rush to generate knowledge, including through the funders' requirement to undertake impact-generating activities from the get-go. We managed this central tension in the research by embracing Les Back and Nirmal Puwar's (2012) call to live sociology; that is, for sociologists to re-imagine and reclaim the (social) researcher's craft in the context of broader political contexts. This approach calls for us to respond to conditions of rapid change and ongoing contingencies, to inspire 'creative, public and novel modes of doing imaginative and critical sociological research' (Back and Puwar, 2012:1; see also Back, 2007). This includes making use of the affordances offered by new platforms and technologies in the conduct and communication of social research, and disturbing linear and static understandings of the research process to call for an agile, contingent, and collaborative reflexive practice.

The project was ambitious, longitudinal and extensive, employing multiple research strategies and methods. We integrated digital methods and public engagement in an iterative and agile methodology that drew on multiple engagements including face to face interviews, participant observations, email conversations, and other internet-mediated research. The longitudinal and agile features found us regularly returning to participants, via diverse media of communication, to discuss and learn with them about how Brexit as a process continues to shape their lives. We included an internet-mediated Citizens' Panel of 200 people living across Europe, who not only contributed their personal stories but also continued to engage with us, sharing their experiences, thoughts, and visual data. We included two longitudinal case studies, informed by an ethnographic approach, and building on our previous research in rural France (Benson, 2011) and southern Spain (O'Reilly, 2000; 2017a). The project included analysis of how UK citizens living in European Union member states were represented in the Brexit negotiations, politics, and the media. Further, we worked collaboratively with participants to produce evidence that could be used to engage with policy by practitioners, civil servants, experts and organisations responsible for supporting the rights and entitlements of these populations.

In total over 600 people took part in the qualitative parts of the project, while a further 1,500 took part in our online surveys. Our research was also designed to provide informed commentary from the outset, bearing witness to the lived experience of Brexit as it unfolded. This included a multimedia strategy to communicate critical insights from the research through reports, blog posts, fortnightly podcasts and short animations (<https://brexitbritsabroad.org>). Disseminated through both professional and personal networks, these outputs offered the opportunity for our participants, as members of the general public, to read, listen, reflect, and comment on our work. This complex multi-method, live sociology project thus involved a team of researchers working reflexively and collaboratively to make sense of a constantly shifting phenomenon.²

While it is difficult to communicate the fully iterative framing of the project, our intention above is to highlight how the project was designed to embrace the reflexive nature of Brexit as a process, rather than to reflect on a static event or sets of experiences. That is to say, the effects of Brexit for these British citizens migrating within Europe were unwinding continuously, over time, in response to developments on the ground, and shaped by the past as well as by existing social arrangements. This was a challenge—not least because of the changing timetable of Brexit which meant that the project end date shifted three times—but it helped that we

combined diverse methods, that we spent time learning about places as well as people, and that our research took a processual and historical approach, rather than aiming to provide a snapshot. This was the perspective that highlighted for us the need for reflexivity, similarly, to be an ongoing (processual, historical, active) reflexive practice.

Reflexive Positioning

The first reflexive practice strategy we feature here is reflexive positioning. This implies that social science proceeds by including ourselves both as researchers and human agents within our ongoing interpretation of the practices of social life. Clearly, as a starting point, this involved exploring the conditions over which we had little or no control, that shaped research in given ways, as aspects of positionality. But *positioning* goes further than mere static reflection, and our discussion necessarily entails exploring how positions shape, and/or have been shaped, by engagement in a project.

We illustrate our argument for reflexive positioning as practice with two examples, first outlining some relevant personal characteristics that became meaningful as our research progressed, and then examining how our political position in relation to Brexit shaped our positioning in relation to our participants. This draws attention to the power relations that informed and shaped the project, as well as our ethical and moral stance as truthful, honest and open researchers who nevertheless have individual opinions and positions.

At a rudimentary level, we can describe characteristics that socially position us. Karen is white, in her early sixties, half-English / half-Irish, from a working-class background. Although a professor now, she was a non-traditional student, first attending university at age 30, after working as a nursery nurse. Michaela has both white British and Asian heritage, is in her late thirties, and from a middle-class background. Unlike many of our participants, both researchers had the right to vote in the 'Brexit Referendum'.³ Both voted for Britain to remain in the EU. Both have extensive experience of doing research with British citizens who live in the EU; for Karen, 25+ years in Spain, and for Michaela 17 years in France. While our social and political positions (on Brexit) undoubtedly resulted in (mis)alignments with some of those taking part in the research, our approach to positionality is one that recognises how this is made in the research encounter, shaping the production of knowledge in the process (see for example Skeggs 2001; Gunaratnam 2003). This takes our claim to reflexivity beyond the claim to

privileged knowledge through research on the basis of similarities between the researcher and the researched, to one that was attentive instead to what both alignment and difference might do to the research encounter and knowledge production.

We begin by looking more deeply at our positioning in relation to Brexit through two illustrative accounts. When those participating or engaging with the research asked about our position on Brexit, we would respond honestly about how we had voted and why; and this common topic of conversation shaped the research encounter in a variety of ways.

Michaela's account

In preparation for fieldwork in France, I contacted previous research respondents. Many responded by email, but Susan and Trevor telephoned me to congratulate me on my career success since seeing them last, and to invite me to visit in their home in the Lot.⁴ Now in their early 80s, having lived in the Lot since 1989 they had not been able to vote in the Referendum. As I drove along the winding roads, I recalled conversations with them in the early 2000s, where Susan had stressed that she was first and foremost an Englishwoman. I had a feeling the conversation was going to be interesting.

After welcoming me, Trevor asked if I was worried about Brexit. I admitted to being shocked, and Susan agreed. But as I opened up more, explaining that I had never known a world where Britain was not part of the EU, the difference in our positions became clear. Susan offered an alternative narrative, one she had previously offered to her granddaughters. 'They're devastated that we're out and I said no don't be like that, you've got to have hope and Britain's a great country!' Her views on Brexit were presented maternalistically and in a conciliatory tone, indicated in the way her imperialist views about England and Brexit were paired with a genuine interest in me and my life. As such, my age and gender were significant for how I was positioned by her in the research encounter.

In another interview, Jack, who had voted Leave in the Referendum read my credentials as an academic as a signal that I would support Britain remaining in the EU. He complained that it was no longer possible for him to talk about Brexit with other Britons living in the area, although they still socialised together. Then he provocatively performed his position on the ills of the European Union, describing how the EU had

enabled Albanian migrants to undercut the wages of those working within the UK's building industry. I struggled to control myself, snapping in response that Albania was not in the EU and that the UK government had actively recruited foreign labour in a variety of sectors. He carried on, seemingly unperturbed by my outburst.

Karen's account

I interviewed a man, Joe, who was staunchly pro-Brexit and who was even returning to live in the UK after 25 years in Spain because he was so optimistic for the future post Brexit. He was a tall, verbose, articulate man who had previously worked as a journalist. I admit I felt small and intimidated by him, but I did not want to argue, merely to listen and to learn. After the conversation I started to feel anxious that perhaps I had been so quiet it had come across as agreement or consensus. Maybe I had encouraged him and maybe I had even led him to believe I was in favour of Brexit. This would be unethical, a lie by omission, but more than that I could be found out. Listening back gave me some reassurance; rather than affirming his position, I had remained silent. But the experience caused me to reflect carefully on how I approached future conversations, and how my gender had affected my positioning.

Joe's mobile number had been passed to me by a mutual friend and we had arranged a meeting at his home. Given I did not know the man, I asked my husband Trevor to accompany me and to wait in the car. But Joe had appeared surly when he answered the door and so I asked my husband to come in with me. He has done this before in similar situations and he usually sits quietly in the background only joining in where it feels comfortable or natural. As this interview progressed it became apparent that no matter how clear Trevor made it that I was asking the questions, Joe continued to direct his responses to Trevor. A rapport built up between Joe and Trevor extending to the point where he took Trevor to his garage to show him his bicycle. All in all, this was a bizarre and uncomfortable situation; the gendered dynamics of the encounter all too prominent. In terms of reflexive positioning, rather than continue to resist this, I decided that it was more productive to allow the conversation to progress on Joe's (gendered) terms, with occasional prompts to direct the conversation.

These examples illustrate how reflexive positioning is at work within and beyond the interview encounter. Importantly, agreement is not the only grounds for rapport-building; confrontation and difference may also work productively to generate knowledge and understanding. There is nothing clear cut about the ability to interview people who hold different political opinions, or have different characteristics, even when it comes to a contentious issue such as Brexit, but our experience shows that people can respond openly when given respect without necessarily believing that the researcher shares their feelings. Trust and rapport may be built up even in the absence of political agreement, or similarity, but these are framed by the research encounter and the dynamics produced through social positioning, in the context of an enduring reflexive practice that is collaborative, responsible, iterative, engaged, and creative.

While we have focussed on examples taken from our conversations with Leave supporters and the various ways we managed different political opinions and social distance within the research encounter, we also want to stress here that proximity is also relevant in reflexive practice. The ground we shared with other Remain supporters, if too readily assumed, might have obscured views and understandings that we did not share. Further, there was a danger of reproducing the binary divisions that these positions are alleged to represent, by overlooking any common ground between Leave and Remain views on Brexit. The point of reflexive practice is to continually reflect on and adapt to our own positionality as we become aware of it: it is reflexive not reflective.

Reflexive Navigating

Reflexivity is an ongoing process that can introduce twists and turns into the research, adding a sense of navigating to what Finlay (2002) describes as ‘negotiating the swamp’. Above we intimated how our positioning informed our reflexive practice. We turn now to examine more closely the dynamic, flexible and agile aspects of reflexive practice; how working reflexively on a live and collaborative project entails constant and conscious changes, developments, and responses as our research and Brexit shapeshift in real time. Live sociology calls for us to rethink how we employ the sociological imagination in the public sphere (Back and Puwar, 2012; Gunaratnam and Back, 2014); reflexive practice extends this to the navigation of new opportunities and technologies, and to consideration of how communicating in ‘real time’ shapes the research and the production of knowledge. We remind readers that reflexivity should be an enduring practice that is collaborative, responsible, iterative, engaged, and creative.

Towards an inclusive understanding of the British in Europe

Our previous research with British citizens living abroad equipped us well to anticipate some of the challenges of trying to engage a broad cross-section of this population in the research. Both of us had spent long periods of time with our research participants in France and Spain prior to the *BrExpats* project. As such we had knowledge and expectations of places and people, and many pre-established contacts with whom to network. This was positive, enabling us to reach large numbers of participants quickly and easily, and to have numerous rich, deep and meaningful conversations with people we had sometimes known for years. It was essential, however, to pay close attention to who was *not* coming forward, and who we were not reaching through our existing contacts and relationships. Whether in signing up to the internet-mediated Citizens' Panel or volunteering for research in France and Spain, those who most readily came forwards were white and middle class. As we learned more about the relevant diversity of the population, and questioned our own positioning, we worked to navigate our sample, seeking ways of engaging British People of Colour, leave voters, younger working people, people with disabilities and UK nationals living in Ireland (see Benson and Lewis, 2019; Benson, 2019; Danby and O'Reilly, 2018). We also shifted the geographies of the research to reflect the knowledge that British citizens who have taken advantage of Freedom of Movement are a success story of European citizenship, integrated into local and European labour markets and dispersed throughout the EU27; research in France was extended to include Toulouse, and in Spain to include Granada. In this way, *navigating* inclusion in the research was directly related to our desire to communicate the diversity of this population, their life circumstances and migration, and the uneven outcomes of Brexit as we came to understand all these.

Live Sociology in real time

The project was high-profile, with a visible online and offline profile. This condition of the funding introduced its own challenges. In particular, the research had a continuous public face which meant dealing with a wide audience, and demanded a constant awareness of how to communicate our research to a variety of publics so that they might understand and engage with it. A first step was the production of research outputs that targeted diverse non-academic audiences, from parliamentarians and policy makers (see for example Benton et al., 2018), to the general public (including our participants). Our outputs from the fortnightly podcast series (<https://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com>), project website (<https://brexitbritsabroad.org>) and blog to articles for national and local newspapers, short animations, a research film, memes, guest blogposts, and short reports communicated key findings in real time. This meant acquiring new

skills including web design, writing non-fiction, and speaking for broadcast, editing to focus on key points, and pitching to the needs of a generalist audience. Developing pathways for the communication of these outputs involved navigating our way within existing and new networks, including Twitter and Instagram feeds, a Facebook Page, and an email newsletter.

While social media engagements make research accessible to a range of audiences, researchers must actively manage, or reflexively navigate, the reception of their work. The central concern of the project with how Brexit is affecting British people resulted in a much stronger response from Remainers than Leavers or Abstainers. Some of our earlier outputs faithfully communicated the profound sense of uncertainty and the emotional and material impacts of Brexit reported to us by our participants, but then some responses via social media and email correspondence suggested our reporting was unbalanced, inaccurate, or overly emotive. Our reflexive practice involved, first, being aware of this, and then navigating our way through it by inviting Leavers—or those less concerned about Brexit—to contribute their stories and comments and making efforts to include other voices. And, as time passed, we made attempts to draw attention to the fact that there are people who cannot simply be categorised as Leavers, Remainers, or Abstainers. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the majority of people we spoke to (including expert interviewees), are concerned about what Brexit means, whether this is framed in respect to their individual lives or for Britain and Europe more generally. The process of leaving the European Union is long, complex and emotive, and many people's reactions are similarly complex, profoundly felt, or ambivalent. As sociologists engaged in collaborative and responsible research we considered it incumbent on us to reflect the weight and diversity of responses.

Reassessing our positionality in relation to external stakeholders: the campaign groups

There were also relationships with external stakeholders that we had to navigate, including our funders, members of the general public, journalists, parliamentarians and policy makers (in the UK and EU), Migration Policy Institute Europe, our project partners, and also advocacy and campaign groups. We focus here on the process of reflexive navigating in our relationship with campaign groups.

A notable outcome of Brexit has been the political mobilisation and organisation of British citizens living in the EU27. Over the two and half years of the project, campaign groups (e.g. the British in Europe, Brexpaths Hear our Voice, Bremain in Spain) have emerged, developed,

grown, split, and gained influence and confidence, in a broader social movement concerned with Citizens' Rights and Brexit. Our research brought us into contact and conversation with many of these groups. While at times our interests converged, it is important to highlight that the research was never intended as a piece of participatory action research or advocacy. As such, our relationships with the campaign groups were yet another site for the navigation of reflexive practice.

From a very early stage, our conversations with the founders of the campaign groups focused on the challenges of generating public and political interest in their plight and we shared our expertise to inform their practices. Even as their rights are being transformed, negative stereotypes that reduce British citizens living in European Union member states to either white working-class pensioners living on the Spanish coast or colonialist expatriates sipping gin and tonic on their verandas continue to circulate and shape public and political imaginings of this population (O'Reilly and Benson, 2018). Our advice to the campaigners was to think about how they could challenge these head on by providing alternative narratives emphasising the diversity of this British population, 74% of whom Eurostat estimates are of working age and below.

However, this was also an uneasy relationship given that our interests were not perfectly aligned. When we released a policy report in April 2018 (Benton et al., 2018), we were sent a long and detailed email outlining one group's apprehensions about its contents. Our main concern when we were writing the report had been to put to rest the profound uncertainty our research participants were detailing, and so we focused on pushing member states to provide clear guidance to their British residents on what they were doing to implement the Withdrawal Agreement. The campaign group's concern, on the other hand, lay in highlighting the holes in the Citizens' Rights deal in the Withdrawal Agreement, which left many of the issues they were concerned about unresolved. As they explained, 'we think the draft agreement has more holes than a piece of French Emmental' (British in Europe, 2018).

At times we also identified those excluded by the campaign groups, whose voices were not coming to the fore in their arguments; how their steadfast focus on the legal terms of the negotiations overlooked those who had never been lawfully resident as EU citizens (with consequences for their lives), but also how these campaigns are framed in a way that excludes solidarities with others who have long-suffered from migration governance regimes (see also

Parnell-Berry 2018). Despite seeming to be on the same page as these advocates, drawing from in-depth research with British citizens living with Brexit and its impacts on their lives, rather than the close legal analysis that the campaign groups had engaged in, we often reached different conclusions.

These were difficult differences — in purpose and in understanding — to navigate, and involved some engaging conversations and negotiations as part of our live sociology. The tricky terrain of managing expectations, the dilemmas of meaningful intervention in a context of political and legal turbulence, raised challenging questions for us about who we represent and in what ways. Reflexive practice is not only confined to the research encounters at the heart of data collection but must also be extended to considerations of how we navigate relationships with external stakeholders, from funders through to those who might benefit from the findings of our research (see also Lumsden, 2013). And as this example shows, we were learning all this and negotiating it both as a team and with those to whom we were disseminating our findings as our research proceeded.

As time has passed, our participants and others have asked for our research outputs and then started to use them. In other words, we have been some of the actors engaged in this social world that was being shaped over time and through practice; we have been affecting and being affected by our research in an ongoing reflexive sense. Our reflexive practice has thus involved a perspective that examines how life unfolds as practice over time; our interpretations have been complex and taken time to explain. We cannot give glib explanations, or off-the-cuff solutions. Politicians, journalists, campaigners and others with whom we attempt to communicate might find this difficult to accept. We also find it difficult. Navigating this particular ‘swamp’, we have been learning, and continue to learn, how to reduce complexity for some audiences. But it remains important to us to retain rigour and quality, and as sociologists this involves acknowledging the complex nature of the social world. Navigating these often-contradictory demands is part and parcel of our reflexive practice.

Reflexive Interpreting

A reflexive practice that has been informed and epistemologically conceived by practice theory acknowledges the reflexive nature of the lives of those with whom we undertake research, and that our *interpretations* of the social world are made through and informed by our engagement in these lives and our reflexive practice methodologically conceived. Thus, in this final section we introduce two sociological insights into the ongoing process related to Brexit: the impacts of protracted and prolonged uncertainty on the lives of British citizens living in European Union member states, along with their capabilities (or not) of limiting these, and the developing political mobilisation and visibility of the British in Europe. We will have much more to say about these (and other) findings from our work in future publications. We introduce them here to embrace Back's (2012: 21) challenge in relation to live sociology: "to find ways to represent such lives and objects that sustain rather than foreclose their vitality and ongoing life".

The impacts of protracted uncertainty

As an engaged and collaborative project, with people telling their stories anew as we went along, we witnessed people adapting their responses over time as they found ways to ameliorate, temporarily or more permanently, the impacts of protracted uncertainty on their lives. First, we heard stories of fear and panic with our participants feeling anxious about their right to remain, their access to health services, their voting rights, their access to pensions and other payments, recognition of their qualifications, whether they could be joined by family members, whether they would have the right to return to the UK in the future (Benson, 2017; O'Reilly, 2017b). The shock experienced by many of those taking part in the research on first encountering the effects of Brexit highlights the extent to which they had taken for granted their right to move, live and work in the European Union and their status as mobile citizens rather than migrants (Collins and O'Reilly, 2018; see also O'Reilly, 2012b). Later, we told stories of amelioration or adjustment as some among them learned, adapted and adjusted as part of the reflexive practice of their own lives, and in the light of some clarification of the legal rights of the British abroad, for example in the December agreement (Benson, Collins and O'Reilly, 2018; O'Reilly, 2018).

However, the issues often went deeper than the contingencies of day-to-day living. Our participants spoke to us of fundamental doubts or challenges to their sense of who they are, how they felt about their close friends, their home country, and their futures. These often invoked profound motifs around citizenship, nationality and belonging. In response to our survey, for example, when asked 'Can you say a few words about what Europe and the European Union mean to you?' we received numerous responses with the following tone:

Europe is a place to share cultures and commerce, to live and learn together. The home of my mother, my husband and my children ... Why can't it be my home too?

Being 56 years old I have "always" been a European (As far back as I can remember !) I feel that Brexit is taking my nationality away.

Like I'd lost the British identity I thought I had, and my European one that is being taken away.

These changing emotions—replete with contradictions and continuities—are undoubtedly a reflection of Brexit as a deeply unsettling, and constantly-changing, process for many British citizens living in the EU. It was similarly a deeply unsettling process for us, but it is our reflexive practice methodology, our engaged and committed, flexible and agile approach, that permitted insights into how the experience and impacts of Brexit have been so messily entangled with personal circumstances.

The developing political mobilisation of the British in Europe

The emergence of campaign groups drawn together around a shared sense of the rights of Britons living in the EU is a notable, ongoing, consequence of Brexit. This can be seen through the example of the British in Europe (<https://britishineurope.org>), a coalition that draws together other citizens' rights groups to campaign for the rights of UK nationals living in the EU27. It claims a membership of 35,000 citizens. Such mobilisation across Europe is unprecedented and has especially made visible the professional and highly skilled Britons living in Europe who rarely find their way into academic research (for notable exceptions, see Scott, 2004, 2006; Favell, 2008; Recchi, 2015).

It is perhaps unsurprising that this new political mobilisation has attracted interest among academics. As McClancy (2019) and Ferbrache (2019) have argued, the highly visible activism and campaigning of Britons living in Europe in these times are best understood as the enactment of citizenship in response to the removal of taken-for-granted rights through Brexit. And while, through their activities, they regularly ally with EU citizens living in the UK (British in Europe often release joint statements with The 3 Million, the most prominent campaign group fighting for citizens' rights for this population) such mobilisation might also

be seen as a site for the (re)making of Britishness in Europe. As we found in previous research, some members of this population would never previously have come forward to take part in research focussed on British citizens living in Europe, and would have rejected our requests for interviews (Benson, 2010: 141). Others, because their lives were so entangled in local economies, had social networks that were less likely to be organised around shared national identity. They became visible and vocal through Brexit, organising alongside their compatriots, where they might previously have actively shunned such networks and associations. As researchers, we have observed these contradictions in how they celebrate their Europeanness, and at times their disdain towards Britain, even though these are based entirely on a shared identity as British. Clearly this has been an ongoing process linked to Brexit, that has shaped, through its own reflexive practice, a British identity inflected with an understanding of its location in Europe.

All of this is set within a constant sense, documented throughout the research, that those taking part were uncertain about who to turn to and were left feeling that they were nobody's responsibility but their own (Benson 2020; O'Reilly 2020). While they recognised the accountability of the European parliament and member state governments, it was clear that they placed a greater weight of expectation and disappointment on the UK Government, which they characterised as systematically failing to act in their best interests. Against this background, it is unsurprising that people felt the need to mobilise, to find support through political activities, but also sought from an early stage to take matters into their own hands (Benson, 2017; O'Reilly, 2018).

Reflexive practice entails considering social life as a reflexive process and drawing interpretations that recognise this. The discontent that we register here became a constant over the course of the research; in other words, it characterised how these British citizens in the round experienced Brexit as a process and not a static event (nor a dead object, in Back's, 2012, terminology). The shape and focus of this discontent revealed ongoing efforts to find somewhere to appeal to, someone to represent them. Inadvertently perhaps, their dissatisfaction also makes clear their (self-)awareness of themselves as British.

Final thoughts

The reflexive practice engaged in as part of this project has given us a fresh perspective on time. Not only have we had to navigate our way through the research as engaged participants,

but also through the Brexit process itself. The ongoing turmoil translates into a lack of certainty over the future terms on which these Britons will be able to live their lives; it seeps into their everyday lives, their choices and plans for the future, and their sense of who they are.

From the point of view of the research this required a flexible and agile design, and an ethical stance both reactive and responsive to the changing landscape of Brexit. We changed the timings of research and the delivery of certain outputs in line with the changing Brexit timetable; our funding was extended and extended and extended so that we could feasibly deliver what we had promised. It also required a commitment and responsibility to those taking part in the research, to make sense of how Brexit as a social process, not an event or moment, has been experienced longitudinally and informed by history.

Brexit, funding, and the political contexts of our research had methodological implications for the design and delivery of this project. But beyond this particular case, the implications are relevant for all research. Importantly, reflexive practice is not something that stands alone, that can be easily reported on after the fact. It is integral to methodology and is an ongoing process that can introduce twists and turns through strategies such as positioning, navigating and interpreting. Beyond this, reflexive practice, as acknowledged by a host of scholars whose work has preceded ours, is informed by a more general theory of social life itself as ongoing and live practice. This is a model for understanding social life that recognises that why and how people do what they do is at once historical, institutional and individual, shaped by and shaping of human society, and our methodologies therefore need to be agile, flexible, engaged and engaging.

Notes

1. *BrExpats: freedom of movement, citizenship and Brexit in the lives of British citizens resident in the EU27* was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant Number ES/R000875/1) through the UK in a Changing Europe Initiative.
2. Members of the project team included Dr Katherine Collins, Chantelle Lewis and Michael Danby.
3. British citizens lose the right to vote in UK parliamentary elections after 15 years residence outside the UK.
4. All names that appear in the text are pseudonyms.

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