A Time for Action: Perceptions of European workers in the UK and British workers in Continental Europe during Covid-19 at the time of Brexit

- Key words: The resistant self: work, identity work and wellbeing reconsidered

This paper details a project which collected the voices of European and British citizens living in the precarity of Covid-19 and Brexit. We aimed to explore the challenges they faced in both their employment and day to day lives. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, there are increasing calls for new approaches to government and local policies which unleash the benefits that migrants, refugees and asylum seekers bring. It is recognised that affective/identity dimensions are susceptible to socio-economic and political shifts (Zontini and Genova, 2022). Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees tend, for a variety of reasons, to be less successful in host country labour markets than natives. There has been increased interest in the experience of migrants in the UK and Europe. Although literature has given attention to a variety of topics from enablers and barriers to integration in the labour market at policy level, scant attention has been given to the stories of migrants, their sense of identity, their role and agency in shaping their life and policy (D'Angelo et al., 2021). The lives of British citizens in Europe and EU citizens in the UK are becoming more precarious and challenging after Brexit and Covid-19. We explored their challenges, in both their employment and in their everyday lives. Our narrative account of self provides an ongoing stream of sense-making (Brown, 2006) into which they fit their selective perceptions of new experiences (Sims, 2005). To do this we conducted an audio survey with open ended questions with 26 EU and British citizens.

The data was collected via an audio survey and was analysed, using a thematic approach and NVIVO software. A strong theme throughout the data was a sense of belonging which comes from feeling a sense of association with a group. Belonging is about someone making a choice that they want to be included in a collective This choice is highly significant and central to understanding migrant decision making, attitudes, integration outcomes and the social identities that emerge or consolidate in the context of migration. Data analysis identified three patterns of belonging. The first pattern of belonging describes people who actively seek to sever existing links with their national community. The second includes people who actively seek to establish an identity that transcends specific national communities. This group includes people who clearly detach themselves from bounded belonging. A third, in between pattern of belonging acknowledges strong links with both national and host communities. The people in this group identify strongly with both home and host community and have created links with both. Our work concurs with other authors (see McCollum, 2020) in finding that Brexit has compelled migrants to regroup and rethink their sense of belonging with many affiliating towards a European, rights based conception of belonging. We found acts of disenfranchisement along national identity lines, which most suffer in relation to the issues of independence and belonging. We conclude by asking how we can maintain a sense of belonging and solidarity (Beck and Brook, 2020) both inside and outside working practices?

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