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## **Research Relationalities and Shifting Sensitivities: Doing ethnographic research about Brexit and everyday family relationships**

**Katherine Davies and Adam Carter**

### ***Introduction***

When completing the ethics application for our research, which explores the ways Brexit is experienced by families in the UK, we ticked the box indicating that the research 'involves potentially highly sensitive topics' - 'political opinion' being one on the list of topics requiring special consideration and extra scrutiny. Indeed, politics is often assumed to be a 'risky' subject. As one of our participants put it when explaining why she prefers not to discuss politics with her family; 'there's three things you never, ever discuss round a dinner party, and it's politics, religion and money. And if you avoid those three subjects, everything's fine.' Brexit, and the political turbulence that has surrounded it, can certainly be an emotive topic. The nature of the referendum campaigns and the extent of political upheaval that followed has caused considerable anxiety (Hervey 2019). Media tropes about Britain as a nation divided by Brexit, with personal relationships said to be destroyed by rifts between so-called Remainers and Leavers, have added to the sense that Brexit is indeed a 'sensitive' and 'emotive' topic. While it is possible to see that, following Lee's (1993) identification of criteria that render a topic 'sensitive', politics could be construed as a 'private' issue that people may find stressful to discuss, this is certainly not a universal sentiment. Indeed, 'sensitivity' is difficult to define and others have pointed to the contextual nature of sensitivity (Powell et al 2018). Buckle et al's (2010) research identifies dissonance between the definitions of Research Ethics Boards and the experiences of research participants in defining 'sensitivity' and 'vulnerability' in research. Neal (2020) describes similar ambivalence in ticking the 'sensitive topic' box in her own research on race and ethnicity, questioning whether race is a political, rather than a sensitive topic and troubling the conflation of the two. In this paper, we ask how the sensitivities and emotions tied up with Brexit politics manifest when researching this topic and how they intertwine with the various research relationships involved.

Our research seeks to explore how families are living with Brexit and investigates how Brexit is affecting their everyday lives and relationships. Funded first through a British Academy/Leverhulme small research grant<sup>i</sup> and later through the ESRC's Governance After Brexit programme<sup>ii</sup>, the current phase of the research 'follows' a diverse selection of families for a year as they live their everyday lives in 'Brexit Britain'. Though each family was recruited to the project at slightly different times, for most of our participants their year of engagement with the research began sometime after the 2016 referendum in which Britain voted to leave the EU, with Theresa May as Prime Minister promising that 'Brexit means Brexit'. Since then our participants have been living their everyday lives alongside an exhausting succession of political events: campaigns for and against a second referendum; the selection of Boris Johnson as Leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister in July 2019; two general elections; the proroguing of parliament; 'Brexit day' itself on 31st January 2020; and now, in June 2020, as the last of our participants move towards the end of their year's engagement, a worldwide coronavirus pandemic and various phases of lockdown. We could never have predicted quite what a tumultuous year this would be when we ticked the 'highly sensitive' box on our ethics application. Our research utilises a range of ethnographically-inspired methods including individual and group interviewing, hanging out, diary keeping and participant-produced videos of television watching in the style of the UK's Channel Four 'Gogglebox' television programme.<sup>iii</sup> We have moved from predominantly face-to-face contact to online and telephone interviews in response to the

onset of social distancing in the UK in March 2020. We also took a networked approach to the research meaning that family and friends of initial participants also took part in interviews, kept diaries, and invited us into their homes to discuss latest developments in life and politics.

Our work emphasises the relational and embedded nature of politics. The act of voting in an election or referendum is itself an individual, private undertaking, yet voting decisions, and politics more broadly, are deeply relational and are embedded in time and place. This means that the sensitivities of researching politics as it is lived and experienced in people's personal lives are not static. In this piece, we take the opportunity to reflect upon our experiences of researching Brexit and everyday family life. The process of conducting this research has been imbued with relationships: those formed between us and our participants; relationships between our participants; our relationships with our own family and friends; and relationships with academic and public audiences. Negotiating these webs of relationships poses significant challenges given the emotive nature of the question of Brexit and the ways it has unfolded over the last few years. Sparrman (2014, in Powell et al 2018) argues that it is the multiple relationships involved in research that render a topic 'sensitive'. By focusing on some of the relational forms at the heart of our research and the emotions, tensions and experiences we navigated whilst doing the fieldwork, we emphasise the embedded nature of research about politics, troubling a static labelling of research about people's experiences of politics as 'sensitive' or 'emotive'.

### ***Relationships with participants***

We anticipated that we would encounter challenges researching across political difference. We were hyper-aware that our political status as 'Remainers' would be easily read by participants, recruited through door-knocking (see Davies 2011), community groups and leafleting. We worried about how this would affect our ability to engage with participants with a range of views about Brexit. Despite the overwhelming media narrative in the UK suggesting the presence of major rifts between Remainers and Leavers, and contrary to our expectations that this might be the most sensitive issue to navigate in our research encounters, this was often not the only, or most significant, point of difference between us and our participants. Indeed, we have found many points of difference with participants who also voted Remain - over the Labour party's opposition strategy, over Theresa May's 'resilience', over the electoral viability of the Liberal Democrats, over immigration policy, over whether Boris Johnson is funny or not. We had assumed that the Leaver/Remainer difference was the one we had to be most wary about, yet inevitably our research relationships were much more complex.

The very first interview Adam conducted for the project was with someone who had given the impression, when we met her in a community cafe, that she was pro-Remain. In the interview, it soon became clear that this participant had not actually voted in the referendum and believed many of the points that underlined much of the Leave campaign, but had still come to the judgement that Brexit was now the wrong way to go. It was a quick corrective to our early assumptions, revealing the hastily assembled political 'identities' of Remain and Leaver as more unstable than often assumed. It was also in this first interview that it became clear that Brexit was indeed a 'sensitive' research topic, but not necessarily because of the strength of feeling about Leave versus Remain debates. Brexit had become incredibly emotive as anxieties around Brexit politics and the potential 'outcomes' of Brexit had entangled and intertwined with this participant's other personal concerns - around health and illness, housing, employment and the personal histories of her family relationships.

Of course, doing ethnographic research in this longitudinal way meant that we were able to get to know our participants and observe how sensitivities surrounding the political climate, as well as the other more personal circumstances that participants were navigating, changed over time. We were able to tread carefully when discussing issues that had been upsetting before and 'backed off' when previously 'safe' points of discussion became unexpectedly sensitive. For example, Basil and Beth are a couple with a young child who were initially keen to conduct a 'Gogglebox' session. They planned to film themselves watching some political satire comedy shows, as well as some news programmes, together. In the process of setting a firm date and making final arrangements, however, the couple pulled out. Basil is a French EU national and in our early interviews and encounters with him, it became clear that the subject of 'settled status'<sup>iv</sup> was a potentially prickly one. He was delaying his application for as long as possible as he opposed the idea of putting his rights, as he put it, in 'the hands of some people in government which I don't trust'. At the point we were planning the Gogglebox session, Basil had applied for and received his settled status. He explained how worrying about his status had become a 'big shadow' and the making of this heavy decision, which went against his political principles, also coincided with the particularly tumultuous events surrounding the prorogation of the UK parliament. This also affected Beth: 'my Brexit-y feelings have taken a bit of a turn over the last week or two...it all feels hugely personal suddenly and I'm watching any news with despondency that feels a bit intimate for a research project in all honesty'. The evolving of the political landscape in the UK and the ways they interwove with Basil's own circumstances had turned the 'fun' Gogglebox session we had planned into a much more sensitive and emotionally risky prospect.

We also found that, as our data began to reveal something of the tenacity of relationships to survive political differences, so our research relationships came to echo this. We began to regularly exchange small acts of care with participants at key moments in the development of Brexit politics on the national stage, for example when parliament was prorogued in September 2019, following the Conservative party victory in the December 2019 General Election and on the day the UK officially 'left' the EU in January 2020. Several participants sent us messages at these moments. Fiona, a Remain voter, realising that we were likely to share her sentiment regarding the Conservative Party's 'Get Brexit Done' victory in the 2019 General Election, sent us a text message of a screenshot of a funny Facebook status. It said: "Dear Britain, I fucking hate you. From Britain x". Similarly, on the day the Withdrawal Bill came into effect in January 2020 (dubbed 'Brexit Day'), Jessica employed humour to reach out to us sending a series of WhatsApp messages which sarcastically said, 'Happy Freedom From The Shackles of Europe Day!' and 'there are actually fireworks going off here'. Importantly, we also received messages of support at these times from participants who held different views. Again on Brexit Day, Leave-voting Diedre sent us an email regarding her sense of relief about Britain finally leaving the EU. She signed the email off by writing: 'I feel like I should be asking – how are you feeling?' Thus, as our relationships with our participants evolved, it became easier for us to address these emotionally difficult political moments and differences.

In addition to our relationships with our participants, the networked nature of our research meant we also needed to consider the nature of our participant's relationships with one another. An example of this came from our research relationships with Debbie and her mother Deirdre. Our research engagements with Debbie, a remain voter with liberal political views, revealed a clear difference of opinion between her and Deirdre over politics in general, including Brexit. Furthermore, whenever her mother came up in conversation, Debbie would hint at other difficulties in their relationship, particularly regarding communication, saying things were 'generally difficult...she's not a brilliant conversationalist'. When Debbie informed us that her mother was

interested in taking part in the project, Adam felt a sense of trepidation in meeting her, wondering whether it would be difficult to build rapport and establish common ground. The following extract from his field diary following his first meeting with Deirdre demonstrates his relief that his fears were unfounded:

*Well, that was a nice surprise! So nervous about that one, had built Deirdre up as a complete dragon in my head but it went pretty much as normal – she was lovely! Particularly felt like the chat got going once we'd talked about her work experience in IT, being a woman in a male-dominated world – obviously made her more 'well-rounded' in my perception beyond what I'd got from chatting to Debbie. The two of them are really similar, their demeanour and way of making their political points spookily alike - just on different sides of the political divide. It was actually a pleasure.*

This was an important lesson in understanding the complexities and partiality of our participants' relationships with one another when embarking on our own relationships with them. This networked approach to our research enabled us to gain different perspectives and served as a reminder that there are multiple stories that can be told about a relationship including those created in research encounters (Hepahy and Einarsdottir 2012). We also learned that we needed to manage these multiple stories with considerable care when meeting members of the same family. These sensitivities are of course dependent on the quality of the relationships between participants and we found that some participants were less willing to pass us onto relatives with whom the discussion of politics was particularly fraught. This was probably because they recognised and feared the potential for their family member's involvement to reveal or exacerbate existing fissures.

### ***Relationships with audiences***

The complex impact of Brexit politics has also revealed itself when navigating our relationships with some of the audiences for our research. There has been a sustained public interest in the project. We have been invited to contribute to numerous newspaper articles, radio shows and television programmes. It has been a great privilege to be able to communicate our research in this way and we have particularly enjoyed participating in radio phone-ins where listeners have responded by sharing their own experiences of negotiating their family relationships in 'Brexit Britain'. We have been struck however by the pressures we have felt to 'fit' our findings into the overarching media narrative about Brexit causing interpersonal conflicts and family divisions, where headlines such as The Telegraphs 'We nearly separated: meet the families at war over Brexit' (Spicer 2019) have been commonplace. For some time, we received almost daily requests from journalists and news media researchers asking us if we could find them a 'family at war' for a particular news segment - despite our research findings indicating that many families are employing a range of strategies to live with and manage their political differences. We came to see that balancing our desire and duty to engage with various publics about our research with the importance of delivering an accurate picture of our findings was to become an ongoing challenge.

Of course, these challenges were not static and the onset of Covid-19 and the dramatic changes it is making to everyday life in the UK, meant that Brexit disappeared from the public imagination somewhat – both in terms of media coverage and the conversations families were having across the UK. While fascinating for our research, this shift indicated changing understandings of what matters: family conflict over Brexit was no longer seen by journalists as such an engaging and dramatic story and, faced with the struggles and anxieties the families in our research began to experience around lockdown (including loneliness, childcare and 'homeschooling', worry about the health and wellbeing of relatives, financial difficulties and more) their arguments over Brexit began to seem, for a time,

less 'sensitive'. This reduction in the perceived sensitivity of Brexit was experienced by us as researchers, and we duly postponed various plans for using our findings to impact family mediation and counselling policies, figuring this was no-longer such an urgent problem, as well as to our participants themselves, who talked less about issues that had previously loomed large in their lives. Of course, things will change again and Brexit will likely return to the public consciousness – it has certainly not stopped progressing in Westminster. These experiences make clear that in addition to our perceptions of the 'sensitivities' involved in contributing to the discourse of 'divided families' said to be 'torn apart by Brexit'; what seems important, interesting and 'sensitive' to our various public audiences, including media researchers and journalists, changes and evolves over time and in unpredictable ways.

In contrast to our relationships with the media, we had presumed that our relationships with academic audiences would be the least 'sensitive' and most straightforward of those we would encounter. We have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to present our research to several UK academic departments and at international and national conferences. These discussions have been incredibly illuminating and we are grateful for the insightful comments made by our academic colleagues. These experiences have also made it clear that academics, themselves navigating their lives and relationships during the political upheaval that has characterised Brexit politics in the UK, can find the topic, and our data, challenging and sometimes even upsetting. These reactions are temporally and geographically embedded. Our research has been predominantly conducted in the North of England and includes accounts from people who voted to Remain, Leave, did not vote or have changed their minds. We know that attitudes to Brexit vary greatly in different geographical locations (Johnston et al 2018) and some academics were shocked and surprised to hear accounts from people with very different attitudes to themselves. This was not just about academics struggling with the views of people who voted differently to them - some academics reacted strongly to the stories of participants who had found it reasonably straight forward to 'agree to disagree' with family about Brexit or who were resigned to Brexit as an inevitability and wanted to 'get on with it'. These emotional responses by academics to our data were probably heightened by the purpose of our research, which is to understand how Brexit affects everyday lives and relationships. As such, we did not seek to unpick or critique the political views of our participants in our talks and presentations, but rather to indicate how they were *doing* family life in the shadow of Brexit politics. Reflecting on how he writes about research participants who hold racist views, Back says, 'I think...we have to allow the people about whom we write to be complex, frail, ethically ambiguous, contradictory and damaged' (2004: 209). In presenting participants' views in the wider context of the complexities of their relationships and personal lives, we realised such decisions about how we presented our participants would also affect our audiences. Timing was also significant here. Though it is important not to assume that all academic audiences are Remainers, many of the academics we have engaged with have alluded to their personal feelings of frustration, grief and despair about the Brexit vote and the prospect of Britain's departure from the EU. As with our participants themselves, there have been particular moments (the Conservative victory in the December 2019 General Election being most notable) where these feelings were particularly raw and where some members of our academic audiences struggled when confronted with data from people who felt very differently to themselves.

### ***Negotiating our political selves and relationships***

In the same ways that our academic audiences came to our data with their own 'Brexit baggage', so we too had to negotiate our political selves and relationships during the process of undertaking this research. We are both experienced qualitative researchers and are used to maintaining a particular

presentation of self in our relationships with our participants; listening actively, maintaining a relaxed and conversational rapport. Before embarking on this research, neither of us had researched specific political issues and we found that our presentation of self changed slightly in interviews when people expressed a lot of political views with which we disagreed. In her reflection on the experience of undertaking ethnographic research with far-right activists, Pilkington (2016) states that 'in establishing a relationship with people to whom one does not feel akin, the usual rapport-building techniques of demonstrating appreciation of respondents viewpoints are not available to the researcher since they seek to avoid the impression that they agree with those views (2016: 21-2). Our interview transcripts revealed that we were indeed quieter in interviews with participants who had very different views to our own – whilst we wanted to listen respectfully, we also did not want to give the impression that we agreed with something that we did not. We came to realise that we often found other points of connection and commonality in these situations, whether that be an agreed sense of exasperation with the increasingly chaotic goings-on in Westminster or something more personal such as Katherine's children or Adam's house move. Some people did ask us about our own opinions, usually towards the end of an encounter, once we had established rapport. These questions were not always about how we voted in the referendum, sometimes they were about how we thought Brexit was going, our views on the Labour Party's response or, more recently, our views on the government response to the Coronavirus pandemic. We were always happy to answer these questions and it was rarely awkward. There were times when we were more conflicted – usually when the views expressed by our participants were ones that we felt very opposed to and here we are reminded of Back and Solomos' (1993) reflection that the decision to attempt to adopt a 'value free' position in research exploring racist views ultimately compromised their 'anti racist' project. In the following extract from his field diary, Adam reflects upon his conversation with a participant who spent a lot of time talking about why she thought Brexit was a good idea, expressing views about immigration and crime that Adam found troubling:

*I wonder whether I should have challenged her views but I had to decide in the moment whether I was going to argue with this, or move on and change the subject. I opted for the latter – not least because the focus of the research is not actually on the interrogation of people's political views, but on how this impacts everyday family life - and asked whether she had expressed these views with any family members. I'm still unsure if I did the right thing.*

It is not possible to make rules about what to do in a scenario such as this. These decisions are situated in the research encounter and researchers have to follow their instincts and the nature of their relationship with their participant, as well as consider the aims and objectives of the research itself. In this case, we had made it clear to participants when seeking consent that the research was about how Brexit had affected their family relationships and that it did not matter what their opinion of Brexit was. It seemed unethical to 'change the rules' and start to challenge their political views. These decisions, along with those pertaining to the changing sensitivities experienced by participants outlined above, are part of the emotion work that Dickson-Swift et al (2009) point to amongst researchers working on 'sensitive topics'. In common with the researchers who took part in Dickson-Swift et al's study, we found ourselves constantly managing our presentation of self as we dealt with our own emotions as well as those of others.

Our own thoughts and feelings about Brexit have ebbed and flowed along with Brexit politics themselves and there have been times when we have felt fear or despair about the way things were going. We have always preserved space in our working relationship to discuss together how we are feeling about things. It has been interesting to also reflect upon how doing this research has changed the ways we discuss Brexit with our own friends and family. Adam has noticed how, seeing the intensity with which some of the participants he has been working with have engaged with political

argument, he has found himself newly motivated to involve himself with political debate in his personal relationships. Katherine, on the other hand, was struck by the care with which many participants broached the subject of Brexit and has found herself similarly being more thoughtful about if, when and how she broaches the subject with friends and family. Though our reactions to conducting this research have affected how we conduct ourselves in our personal relationships in different ways, it is important that we have both reflected on the practices of talking politics employed by our research participants and this has, in turn, affected our practices. Of course, this too changes over time and in different contexts and both of us have, like our participants, discussed Brexit much less during the Covid-19 lockdown and have avoided political debates with many of our friends and family at this time. It is after all harder to smooth a post-debate atmosphere during a weekly family Zoom quiz when it is not possible to give someone a subtle smile, a brief pat on the arm or make them a cup-of-tea as a gesture of goodwill.

### **Concluding thoughts**

This paper has discussed the complexities and challenges we have faced in navigating the relationships at the heart of our research about Brexit and everyday family life. In doing so we have demonstrated that Brexit can be a 'sensitive' topic to research. It can be highly emotive, bringing into being feelings of anger, fear and frustration, joy, power, shock as well as apathy, boredom and exasperation. However, we have demonstrated that these sensitivities are not static – they ebb and flow over time and in different places, in response to wider political atmospheres as well as to the more personal ups and downs of our lives and relationships. We have also indicated how it has not always been possible what aspects of the research will be sensitive and thus, research of this nature requires considerable emotion work on behalf of the researcher (Dickson-Swift et al 2009). It is impossible to understand how, why and when research topics might be emotive or 'sensitive' without reflecting on and seeking to understand the research relationships at their heart. These relationships are themselves imbued with power and it is important not to lose sight of the significance of class, gender and race/ethnicity here. Brexit has not been experienced equally by everyone and its effects will not be felt equally either. We get a sense of this when thinking about Basil's dilemma concerning his application for 'settled status' in the UK. More needs to be done to unpack the shifting sensitivities involved in researching across and within these relationships of power.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Talking Politics: Brexit, and everyday (inter)generational relationships' British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant 2017-2019

<sup>ii</sup> 'Brexit, Relationships and Everyday Family Life' ES/S006362/1 2019-2021

<sup>iii</sup> Gogglebox is a popular, light-hearted entertainment show where groups of family and friends are filmed in their homes reacting to a selection of television programmes (including drama series, news programmes, documentaries and films) that have been on UK television that week.

<sup>iv</sup> 'Settled status' is a scheme intended to protect some of the rights of EEA nationals whose right to reside in the UK will no longer apply after Britain withdraws from the EU.