The implications of Brexit for dimensions of belonging among British-born white residents in England

Background and Aims

Societal, political and media discourses surrounding migration and 'race' have attracted much attention and debate since the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union in the referendum vote on 23rd June 2016. The referendum result has been widely regarded as revealing the UK to be a divided society in terms of attitudes towards a variety of issues, including migration and notions of ethnic, racial and national belonging. The vote further evidenced extremely polarised and entrenched political geographies. Both Scotland and Northern Ireland, for example, convincingly voted to remain (BBC News 2016a). Place and geography therefore play crucial roles in understanding the referendum outcome. Moreover, those with an income of less than £1,200 per month, alongside those with no formal qualifications, were significantly more likely to vote leave (BBC News 2016b). Class is therefore an important category of analysis (Skeggs 2004) which played a significant role in the 'Brexit' vote. This PhD will consider to what extent England still conceives of itself as 'United', through addressing the how we should live with difference in the post-referendum context. The proposed research is thus important, timely and worthwhile; dealing with highly current issues arising from England's specific socio-political context which have not yet been adequately considered. It seeks to generate understandings of today's conditions of belonging, whiteness and the nation in contemporary England within the devolved British nation.

The overarching aim of this PhD is to explore the implications of the Brexit vote on notions of belonging and identity in England. Ideas concerning 'whiteness', 'nation'

and 'multiculture' will all be interrogated. This focus will be enabled through the application of the following research questions:

1) How does the Brexit vote enhance theoretical and conceptual understandings of the category of whiteness?

2) What role do ideas concerning the nation, race, class, ethnicity and culture play in articulations of belonging in post-referendum England?

3) In what ways does the neighbourhood dimension of place inform people's sense of ethnic, racial and national belonging?

4) How relevant is the concept of multiculture in the post-referendum context?

A concern for the 'nation' was present in the Brexit debates, highlighted by the 'Vote Leave' campaign's appeals for voters to 'take back control' of British borders in order to protect the nation's integrity (Vote Leave 2016). The power of rhetoric surrounding the supposed threats posed to the nation by migrants is revealed by one recent survey respondent's fear of 'immigrants flooding into the country' (Hobolt and Wratil 2016, para. 6). Multicultural policies are importantly linked to these issues. Lentin and Titley (2011) have offered a far-reaching critique of such approaches, arguing that they merely displace older discussions surrounding race with the notion of 'culture'. Opinions towards the concept of multiculture will be explored during the research in order to question how this links to senses of belonging and identity.

The decision to focus the PhD on the British-born white population has been reached for a number of reasons. Firstly, they were the group most likely to vote for Brexit; with fifty three percent doing so compared to only twenty seven percent of the black population (Lambert 2016). Furthermore, they are the only group to view the cultural impact of migration negatively (Casey 2016, Runnymede 2016). The recent Casey

review into opportunity and integration (2016) reported widespread government failings in its approach to community cohesion. In response to the report, the Runnymede Trust (2016) has recommended that integration and community cohesion policies must focus on whole geographical areas. The current practice of focusing such policies on specific minority-ethnic populations provokes the marginalisation of white Britons. Understanding this group's resentment to such issues is of increasing importance in light of the Brexit vote.

Literature Review

Nations have been conceived of as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991), thereby drawing attention to the fact that it is our shared ideas of belonging and identity which help to constitute national boundaries. Ideas surrounding what it means to be 'white' overlap importantly with representations of 'nation' (Condor and Fenton 2012, Garner 2012, Gilroy 1987). Parekh (2000) has stated that 'Britishness … has systematic, largely unspoken, racial connotations' (p.38). This assessment is supported by the work of Pitcher (2009) who persuasively argues that Britain endorses an ideology of multicultural nationalism, which sets racialised limits on national belonging. Those who are not white, Anglophone and Christian are largely excluded (Wells and Watson 2005). It has further been argued that the arrangement of English class relations differentiates English identities in comparison to others in Europe (Aughey 2012). This PhD seeks to explore the borders of inclusion and exclusion in post-referendum England, building on Bauman's (2004) argument that questions of national identity arise in times of crisis.

Solomos (2003) has noted British immigration policy's long-standing practice of coding racialised preferences. A number of migrant groups, both historically and

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contemporarily, have been considered 'not quite white' (Garner 2004). The twenty first century has witnessed the racialisation of ostensibly white eastern Europeans (Fox et al 2012). This has meant that they often have not been able to draw on the presumed cultural capital associated with whiteness, thereby highlighting that whiteness is a contradictory and mutable category (Burrell 2009, Byrne 2006, Frankenberg 1997, Nayak 2007). The arguments of Reeve (2008) that Polish migrants are viewed positively by Britons, and of Bonnet (2000) that a white identity is claimed by all those of European heritage in Britain, are therefore somewhat misplaced. White eastern European migrants are also the targets of xenoracism (Cole 2015), which serves to fuel anti-migrant discourse. This PhD will assess the role of such discourses in informing people's racialised sense of belonging.

Multiculturalism represents a policy approach to managing diverse migration settlement. Alexander (2013) is misplaced in restricting his analysis of such policies to the management of migrants from Islamic nations. As noted above, there is also a prevalence of anger among white Britons at rising levels of migrants from within the EU. A tentative exploration of the literature reveals that many policy-makers and academics view multiculturalism to be in a state of crisis (Joppke 2004, Lentin 2005, Wieviorka 1998) due to its failure to secure social cohesion and integration – which have been emphasised as key goals since 2001. Furthermore, the white working class have been accused of rejecting the concept of multiculture due to their supposed inability to adapt to globalised life (Lawler 2012, Skeggs 2004). This PhD will continue to question the applicability of multicultural policies by interrogating opinions towards to concept of multiculture in different neighbourhoods. This will help to further sociological understandings of these issues in the wake of the Brexit vote, thus producing findings with relevance for policy and practice.

Whiteness is a discourse of power as well as a racialised identity (Ware 1992, Ware and Back 2002). Much of the literature to date exploring whiteness has tended to focus on its invisibility to white people (Du Bois 1996 [1903], Dyer 1997). Gallagher's (1997) study with American college students has, however, challenged this. Gallagher (1997) found that perceived threats to white privileges served to lift the largely veiled nature of white identities. This PhD will explore the extent to which this is evident in post-referendum ideas concerning ethnic, racial and national belonging. A sociological insight can allow us to examine how a fear that the integrity of the nation, and that whiteness as a position of structural advantage and privilege (Frankenberg 1993), were under threat from migrants acted as catalysts behind the leave vote. There are gaps in our knowledge regarding the white population's anxieties surrounding migration and threats to national and local identities, as the role of resentment has been largely neglected in sociological studies (Ware 2008). Furthermore, little research has looked at how the neighbourhood dimension of place influences these fears. The proposed study will address these gaps; exploring the issues in England's unique contemporary context.

Impact

This PhD will aid understandings of why white English people supported Brexit alongside contributing more widely to literature on nation, multiculture and critical studies of whiteness. The proposed study is interdisciplinary as it encompasses, in addition to sociology and politics, urban geography and urban studies. There are important contemporary debates in these fields surrounding national identity and the configuration and interaction of diverse populations. This is pertinent to the current topic as a number of cities had very high 'remain' majorities in the referendum, thus

highlighting place-based divergences. This PhD will make a unique contribution to empirical data and knowledge by identifying emerging formations of whiteness and nationalism which have yet to be explored in post-referendum England. It will critically assess the relevance of theories of whiteness to understanding the Brexit vote, thereby crucially extending this body of literature in Britain which lags somewhat behind the United States (Garner 2012, Ware and Back 2002). The new sociological understanding generated by this will have policy and practice implications for how to foster cohesion and belonging in an established diverse multicultural society.

Methodology

Having established the overarching motivation for conducting research concerning this topic, it is necessary to reflect upon how this can be appropriately achieved. A qualitative mixed methods framework will be adopted, enabling a reflexive and inductive study design. In-depth interviews will be conducted with white British-born individuals. These will seek to produce rich understandings of respondents' perceptions on the themes of belonging and how this links to whiteness, nation, race and multiculture. This will enable the relevant data to be gathered in order to answer the study's research questions. Participants will be recruited through postal invitations. Observations of the meetings of relevant local organisations will also be undertaken once access has been negotiated. One such line of inquiry is Sheffield city council's cohesion strategy. This aims to produce an inclusive, harmonious, and equitable environment amid diversity (Sheffield City Council 2015). Assessing what is currently being done to address how we live with difference will enable the study to fully appreciate how ideas concerning whiteness, nation, and multiculture are perceived as linking to the concept of belonging. The PhD will firstly generate new sociological

understandings and, secondly, use these findings to inform improved policy and practice.

Sheffield provides a highly appropriate setting for the study. The city closely reflected the nationwide EU referendum results (BBC News 2016a). Moreover, Sheffield is mixed yet segregated. The Sheffield Fairness Commission (2015) reported that while over thirty percent of Sheffield's population live in areas that lie within the twenty percent most deprived in the country, other areas of the city fall within the least deprived twenty percent (p.11).

The study aims to interview twenty to thirty participants, split between residents from two dissimilar neighbourhoods – Southey and Nether Edge. Southey has a white British majority of 92.6% (UK Census Data 2011a). 39.9% of the ward's population have no qualifications (UK Census Data 2011a). This stands in contrast to Nether Edge where over half the population hold a level four or above qualification (UK Census Data 2011b). Nether Edge is a more socioeconomically and ethnically diverse neighbourhood, with white Britons comprising only 70.1% of the population (UK Census Data 2011b). Studying these two wards will facilitate a neighbourhood level place-based comparison of the perspectives of white residents based on factors such as class, exposure to ethnic diversity, age and gender.

Ethical issues are extremely important when conducting social research. Appropriate sections of the University of Sheffield's 'Research Ethics: General Principles and Statements' (2015) will be adhered to during the study. Written informed consent will be gained from individuals prior to the interviews taking place, and participants will remain anonymous. All data will be stored securely.

Timetable

Year One	*Months 1-6*	Literature review Negotiate access to meetings
	Months 7-12	Literature review Prepare for interviews; contact potential interviewees Observation of meetings
Year Two	*Months 13-18*	Conduct interviews Transcribe interviews Observation of meetings
	Months 19-24	Analyse data from interviews and observations Update literature review
Year Three	*Month 25-30*	Revisit literature review Data analysis Write up
	Months 31-36	Write up

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