



BREXIT BRITS ABROAD

Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast **Episode 34: Doing a very public sociology about Brexit**

First broadcast Friday 16th November 2018.

About the episode

This episode brings the project team together again to talk through the experience of doing a sociological research on Brexit while the withdrawal process is unfolding. They reflect on what it is like to do sociology on a topic that is so highly politicised, political and where the stakes are constantly shifting. They talk through their relationship and responsibilities to the people taking part in the research, people for whom this has real life impact. And talk through the challenges of balancing being responsive, engaging with multiple publics, and being attentive to the themes emerging from a large bedrock of original empirical research. In laying bare their experiences, they offer unprecedented insights into the doing of social research on a live and lively issue.

This is the second of three episodes that consider what the project might offer in extending understandings of some of the challenges of doing social research.

You can download this episode of the podcast at <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep034-doing-a-very-public-sociology-project-about-brexit>

Transcript

MB Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. I'm Dr Michaela Benson, a reader in sociology at Goldsmith's University of London and the research lead for a UK in a Changing Europe funded project that's all about what Brexit means for British citizens living in the EU 27. Over the coming weeks and months you'll be hearing me in conversation with the rest of the team, with Karen O'Reilly, Catherine Collins and Chantelle Lewis.

Chantelle In this podcast we want to talk about what it's like to do and work on a research project on a topic like Brexit that is happening right now. What is it like to do sociology that is so highly politicised, that so many people have an opinion about, and that affects so many people as well. I mean for me it's felt like you're always sort of on the back foot, there's always something that we could be writing about, there's always something that we should be talking about, there's always a group that we should be focusing on. It's a very different type of research process doing something this live and we feel like, we've felt like quite a lot of the time that it's been really important that

we reflect on this because, I think even you said it Karen in your years of teaching and studying sociology that you've never worked on a project that was this politicised, I think you did say that for me.

Karen I've never worked on a project that's so politicised and also that people feel so strongly about, but also that's changing as we speak and every single day and just as we readjust to one new set of circumstances there's another one round the corner so I think you've posed that absolutely right.

MB I think there's another side of this as well because it's not just that the topic's always moving, this is a really congested issue. What I meant by that was that everybody feels that they've got something to say about it, and there're lots of people piling in quite literally to explain this and to comment on it.

Karen Although while I think of it I'm going to say we are having trouble to get people who voted leave to talk to us enough, so we might get onto that a bit later.

MB I think I was thinking about the commentators and the academics, and the organisations not necessarily the people that we would be looking to speak to.

Chantelle I actually want to do a bit of a self-critique now. Thinking about what I just said about this topic, obviously it's political so when I say politicised I don't necessarily mean that in a negative way, I basically mean about how much the topic affects so many people, and to that extent it is political.

MB It's political within the framework of people's lives, so that's how people experience it, it's political and social. But it's also an incredibly, and we have to be honest, it's a divisive issue and so that then translates into it being highly politicised for individuals as well for the people that we've been speaking to. I think though the important, well one thing that we might want to talk about specifically though is what that actually means for the doing of sociological research on a project like this, because I think that's, that's really been a substantial challenge that I'm not entirely sure I have completely, well I don't think we could have completely anticipated that right from the outset, because quite simply, and I know I've said this privately to people before but when we designed the project, when Karen and I sat down to write our funding application, a year and a half ago ...

Karen Seems like ages ago.

MB Article 50 had not actually been set in motion yet, and so our timeline, when I look at it, is so fictional because we had to make it up and doesn't actually have any resemblance at all for what happened or what's been happening.

Karen Can you remember that early on, that you said there're three, I can't remember what the words were ...

MB Different phases of the negotiations.

Karen Three things that we had to get over and the movement, citizens' rights and free movement was one of the first of three issues that had to be dealt with before we could move and we said to each other our project might all be done and dusted very early because we really naively thought that maybe this issue was going to be dealt with, and resolved in the early stages, it's still not resolved.

MB Yes, so obviously some of that stuff about citizens' rights has been written into the withdrawal agreement but at the same time still there are so many things unresolved and we are recording this a week before European Council meeting in October, where who knows, maybe that'll bring out some more resolution.

Chantelle What I found really difficult is how much the uncertainty has basically followed our research process and from the beginning when we've spoken to people, the people that we're still speaking to now, we have no more information for them than we did about a year ago, so that means that that sort of level of responsibility, it's been quite difficult I think as researchers and I know there's been really difficult moments throughout the last 12 months in British politics which have had an effect on the people that we're talking to, I mean with regards to migration you've got things like the Windrush scandal, like although they seem completely different to Brexit, when I was interviewing British people of colour in Europe they were saying well look what's happening to our grandparents, they can do what they want, they can get rid of us when they want. And that sort of moment which seems so detached from what we're doing is all part of the same thing, does that make sense?

MB It's all just political context, Brexit's not really the only thing that's happening in a lot of people's lives and I think that that is very important to highlight. I think you also touched on something else that I've been thinking for a while, the last few weeks particularly, that I feel like I'm caught in some kind of holding pattern at the moment where, yeah something might happen next week something might not happen next week but I feel that that's what comes across when I speak to people, so I was in France last week and there's a certain degree to which people have become resigned to living in uncertainty rather than being shocked that they live in uncertainty, which is what I think we were registering very early on.

Karen Yeah and that's just triggered in my mind something else that is really relevant to us talking about doing a live project, that we've almost been through these emotions with people and of course the emotions have changed. You know we're researching a moving object, so our very early interviews were very much about shock and fear and, you know, real serious concerns about the future and we reflected that in the reports we wrote at the time, and then we did go through a phase we were talking to people and a lot of them did feel more reassured, so for a while there as a group we were sort of thinking well things have calmed down and maybe things aren't so disruptive for people, there have always still been certain people for whom the unforeseen nature of what might happen in the future about various things is still absolutely painful and real but you know a lot of people have settled down and it's really interesting now then we moved into, as you say this sort of acceptance of not knowing.

Chantelle I feel like, and I don't know how you guys feel but more recently I would say that earlier on this year the people that I spoke to had gone from the shock and become much more towards this acceptance, but I feel like now more recently the people that I've spoken to as we get closer to the deadline for the negotiations, people are stressed again now, that's what comes across to me, really recently people to me seem like they're not OK again, which is understandable.

MB I think that it's really, that description of always feeling on the back foot is something that I really relate to and I think it's really important to register within the context of thinking about what a project on Brexit looks like, and what a project on any political issue, any live political issue, I mean let's be honest the law is being rewritten currently and has been being rewritten ever since Article 50 essentially, and a project that attends to that also requires that we keep up

with things, but things are changing a lot faster than it's humanly possible to keep up with I would say, while at the same time not changing that much within the context of people's lives. But we're always expected to know that information and part of the ethical responsibility that we set out with was to provide information to people, that's part of the design of the project, wasn't just about us going in and going oh look at us we're social researchers we've come to talk to you about how do you feel about Brexit, which we do do, but at the same time there is an ethical responsibility written into the project to be up to date so that we can then communicate with people when they say to us, which happens, I mean somebody wrote to me yesterday about whether they should get Irish citizenship, to be able to say to people actually we can't advise you but we know that this is the current state of affairs, which has actually been remarkably tricky.

Chantelle If you had to give any advice or recommendations on the best way to go about qualitative research on such a live topic, what would you tell people to be attentive to?

MB I've learned a lot in the last, since we've been running this project, and part of it has been learning not to let the issue make you run. I feel sometimes like because something happens in the negotiation that I have to be responsive to it or that the project has to be responsive to it in some way and that we have to do something. And sometimes that's been really important, the times that it's been really important I think are when we rang, when we ran the are you reassured exercise, and I think that was a really important thing to do but sometimes you miss your moment as well by waiting to be responsive, and I think it's important to have a little bit of responsiveness built into the project and flexibility to be responsive so that you can communicate findings from the research that are appropriate at that moment in time. But I do also think that you have to have a plan about what it is that you want to communicate through the project and what you think is politically important, because actually some of the things that we can communicate are being communicated by other people already, so what do we offer that's different, so keeping an eye on that and holding that in balance with the need on occasion to be responsive I think is really important. And I've certainly slowed down a lot in responding in that way because we could be doing something every day if we wanted to, but then that might get lost in the melee I suppose. I'm not sure whether I'm being very clear.

Karen You are being very clear and I think what's coming out for me and also from being involved in the project is that it's been constant hasn't it, constant monitoring, constant reflection, we've done this each time but as time's gone on we've had to learn that that's what we need to do, to just put the brakes on and just stop and say what do we need to do now about this and it's been a real learning process hasn't it, and quite exhausting for you I think Michaela?

MB Yes quite exhausting. The important thing about this is that it's quite a high adrenaline project, and that is not usual in qualitative research. This is not really the way that most qualitative research that I have done previously I should say has actually been organised, because there's often a much more, it's a much quieter process because you're not dealing in a topic that's so politically live.

Katie I just wanted to come in as well and ask about two aspects to the project, the first one being this live responsive adrenaline-fuelled aspect, but the other being the data itself which has been collected in how many hundreds of thousands of words now do you have?

MB I think that's a really important point.

Karen We don't count the words luckily.

MB Well I mean it's just to give people an idea, so from my research in France, which is just one element of the project, I now have 75 interview transcripts, which I obviously have to go through in detail. I also have 100,000 words of notes from being in France for four months. On top of that Katie you've been working with 194 people with collecting various different, you can say a little about that.

Katie Yes I've got a big database of all of these responses, qualitative and quantitative data from the panel from the beginning of the project, but the reason I brought that up is because I also wanted to register on this podcast that as well as the responsiveness and the live sociology there is a huge bedrock of data that's being collected carefully and stored and analysed.

MB Exactly.

Katie So it's balancing those two, two priorities.

MB And working with that data knowing how generous people have been in responding and taking part in the project, and always going back to that, as we develop our responses to things. I think we have been working very very closely with some of that data to produce a lot of the things that we have put forward, a lot of the things that are out in the public sphere. Behind our responses to what's happening with Brexit is this entire bedrock of data that we have carefully collected and that we've been working with for the last, well when did it start? June 2017? So yes.

Chantelle So how d'you think the relationship between doing a live research project connects with or relates to public sociology?

MB I think that it's really important to highlight that this project has been highly involved with constantly communicating and involving the public, and just give an example, you know an interview rarely stops when you turn off the tape, and that's not just the continued conversation that you have then and there in the room. It's a continued conversation when somebody writes to you because something's changed in their life, or when you write somebody a message which says I've just listened back to your interview, I've just gone through your transcript, I noticed this thing that I didn't pay as much attention to at the time but would you be able to elaborate a little bit more on that. And I'm just listening to what you're saying and it sounds like you mean this, is that what you meant, so there is a constant engagement of really trying to understand the meaning and significance of these events, of the things that are connected to those events as to how people understand themselves and their lives within the context of this moment, that demonstrate a kind of more publicly sensitive understanding of doing social research or doing sociology.

Karen I think actually there's quite a lot of misunderstandings about what public sociology means, so it's not just produce what other sociologists or other academics, and of course that is important but I think we've taken Michael Borroway's understanding of organic public sociology more seriously than that notion that he calls traditional public sociology, and by this, by always talking about how a public sociology is, as exactly as Michaela was saying, it's about engaging in conversation with the various publics that you're dealing with, and so you know for us we've engaged with the campaign groups,

had conversations with them, we've engaged with our participants, leavers and abstainers as much as we do remain voters. We did have someone who came to us and said you know I don't feel as if I'm as represented as I could be and so we invited this person to be on our citizens panel and he is now a member of our citizens panel and so he contributes, we've asked constantly for leave voters to come forward and we tried very hard to be conscious of you know what their position is, but in the end we've made a conscious decision to say overtly that we can't deny that overwhelmingly the respondents we've had, or the responses we've had from our participants, have been about the concerns that they're dealing with and the negotiations they're having to go through and the issues that are confronting them on a daily basis and we feel therefore in communication with our participants that that's what we are representing. If we had other information going the other way we would be happy to present that as well.

MB **And we're not dampening down that other information when it does come in. I think that that's the important thing to say because as we've discussed in a previous episode we are really really keen to, not necessarily equally weight all responses so just because there's a higher volume of responses that appear to say one thing doesn't mean that we're going to forget about the other responses, we're going to try and work across them, to think about what that tells us and what that reveals around the core questions of what Brexit means to these people within the context of their life.**

Chantelle Thank you Michaela, Karen and Katie, that was really interesting, summarising how difficult but interesting it can be working on such a live research project.

MB **You've been listening to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast, hosted by me, Dr Michaela Benson, and produced by Emma Houlton at art of podcast. The series is part of a UK in a Changing Europe funded research project, Brexit Brits Abroad, that's all about what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU 27. We're really keen to hear from you about the issues and concerns we address in the programme, so please do get in touch with any thoughts, queries and questions. You can find our contact details on our web page [brexitbritsabroad](#), or get in touch via social media, we're on Twitter @brexpatseu and we have a Facebook page Brexitbritsabroad. Finally, in case you're not already subscribed to the podcast, you can do so on both iTunes and Google podcasts. Thank you for listening, and I'll be back in a couple of weeks with the next episode.**