Empathy an Impossible Task?
Engaging With Groups in a Troubling Brexit Landscape

Brexit here, there and everywhere

This paper examines fraught and fragmented dynamics within the 'public conversation' about Brexit.[1] The work draws on a series of experiential groups [2] specifically dedicated to exploring feelings connected to Brexit, to 'leaving' and 'remaining' and to the relations, real and imagined, between Leavers and Remainers from their points of view. It reflects on a project undertaken within 2016-2019, which set out to explore the potential of empathy to emerge in those groups and how the failure – or seeming impossibility of empathy to emerge was linked both to the wider psychosocial matrix of that political moment that resonated with the transferential feelings that occurred whilst conducting the research.

The research project began almost by accident when as part of a university public engagement event, we held a group workshop with members from the local town on the topic of emotion and political leadership. The result of the Brexit vote had just been announced, and that soon became the focus of discussion. In contrast to the wider acrimonious tone of the national Brexit debate, the mood of that first workshop was one of openness and a willingness to hear views from the other side and it felt exciting to host a discussion where meaningful communication could take place. We decided to continue that conversation through an ongoing series of experiential reflective groups to work through the meanings of

the referendum in a town on the south coast of England that had voted to leave. However, as we discuss, bringing the two sides together in one room proved difficult - reflecting the wider UK Brexit mood with its seemingly intractable political positions of either 'leave' or remain'.

In the weeks that followed, we noticed that Brexit was 'everywhere', in the news, seeping into conversations on almost any topic, or later, actively suppressed; it became too incendiary, too tiring. The temptation to project Brexit-unease felt intense. Brexit readily became the responsibility of *others*; floundering politicians ('get it done', 'make it stop') out *there,* in London or Brussels. Or Brexit found other '*theres'* in dynamics of projected blame – 'it's the northerners', 'the elites', 'the young', 'the old', 'the revenge of the left-behinds'. Scottish voices were present throughout the Brexit campaign in their advocacy for staying in the EU, but in 2016 the UK government, the British Press and much of the English Public failed to register the significance of Brexit for citizens in Northern Ireland who like Scotland voted to remain. But Brexit was also *here*; local, immediate, interior, amongst us, and now. An effort to grasp these phenomena continued to provide some motive for this research, a wish to better comprehend the immanent, floating but ill-defined feelings associated with 'Brexit.' Living in a pro-Brexit seaside town, as we discovered, connected us to a region, and a seaside edge. We hypothesized, that 'here', despite the relative invisibility of manifest politics (compared, say, to London), might pose, in condensed form, many of the tensions identified in more global-spanning accounts of the present period (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2015; Goodhart, 2017).

There has been much written about Brexit from a range of perspectives: geo-humanities (Closs Stephens, 2019); politics (Eatwell, Roger and Goodwin, 2018) and economic history (O'Rourke, 2019). Here, we seek to keep some of the intimacies of Brexit-experience to the fore. Our use of a close, observational approach draws on a psychodynamic

tradition attentive to focused but open and multi-layered experiences in groups (Miller, 1993; Hollway, 2016) in efforts to engage with feeling-as-data (Armstrong, 2018).

Listening to the Brexit conversation

We remain convinced that, notwithstanding exhaustive media coverage and intense reflective commentary since 2016, elements of experiences of Brexit sit recalcitrantly 'beneath the surface' (Clarke et al, 2009). This conviction deepened beyond the Brexit referendum, and throughout the 2016-2019 period. Now, as Brexit continues to take shape in the form of finalized legislation and enactment following the 2019 UK general election, the significance of public feeling generated within a pre-Brexit period will continue to play out. So, the orientation to 'beneath the surface' and experiential dynamics of the Brexit debate offers a distinctive addition in the wider and ongoing reflective debates around Brexit.

We want, here, to underline an alternative way of 'listening to' politics. Following the referendum, Brexit continued to disturb more traditional patterns and alignments in everyday political thinking, acting and talking – challenging, too, some academic and journalistic forms of analysis, not least beleaguered pollsters (Sturgis et al, 2016). This disturbance threatened to up-end the very foundations of the UK by destabilising the Union and its settlements, and in Ireland fears about undermining the Good Friday Agreement came to the fore. This sense of disturbance to the social communication that undergird the Brexit period opened up space for renewed kinds of attention to political *experience*. In response, this paper rests on a depth-oriented research approach that is able to capture and contextualize affects, thought and feeling associated with contemporary political atmospheres.

Working with small groups preserves the intimacy that we think necessary in exploring these new experiences, but retains a wider relevance. We recall a maxim articulated by Eric Miller: 'Society is present in the group; society and the group are present in the

individual' (Miller, 1993: 272). OPUS's [3] 'Listening Post' approach [4] provided another point of reference for us, a recognition of the capacity for groups to generate thinking and insight at a psychosocial level (Miller, 1985; OPUS 2018; 2019).[5] So, while the scale of the groups is relatively modest (eight groups, in one hour-long sessions), we maintain that despite the difficulties of getting leavers and remainers to talk to one another, the work and the words of the groups within the frame of some reflections offered here is nonetheless of value. The work enables insight into the 'here and now' experiences and hidden dynamics within this complex political phase of Brexit.

Brexit and a problem of empathy

Taken from a distance, we might say that Brexit posed a challenge to some fundamental assumptions about how we relate to one another in the everyday – preoccupations at the core of psychosocial work (Clarke et al 2018). Brexit shook up social dynamics: belonging / not belonging; inside/ outside / us / them. One emotional capacity we associated with these dynamics was *empathy.* Klein (1946), Winnicott (1971) and Bion (1961) have, in different ways, discussed empathy in terms of the movement of affect between self and other as between mother and child, and which is later enacted in other relationships, including the transference relationship between the analyst and analysand. Ogden (1993: 227) captures this link:

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[3] Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society.
[4] Miller (1985) proposes that groups, reflected upon and experienced as both process and content can capture 'some small new insights' (1985: 278) into the social 'microcosm' – this work has developed into a wider OPUS (2018, 2019) project under the heading 'Listening Post'(Dartington (2000).
[5] The Listening post reports in 2017, 2018 and 2019 demonstrate widespread preoccupation with Brexit and the analytic links between everyday experiences and wider psychodynamics (OPUS 2018, 2019).

Empathy is a psychological process (as well as a form of object-relatedness) that occurs within the context of a dialectic of being and not-being the other. Within this context, (Winnicott would say, 'within potential space'), one plays with the idea of being the other while knowing that one is not.

In the Brexit context of splits and disarray, 'empathy' became prominent in the vocabularies of political reflection. This is evident in surface discourse, notable, for instance in analysis of searches related to Brexit, in which empathy was identified via Google Trends (2015-20). That 'trend' itself speaks of a search for connection, to an uncertainty about ongoing dispositions, ours and others', for exercising this fundamental capacity. Part of the experience here included pressure mounting against the maintenance of an empathic relation to others, to different kinds of 'foreignness' in respect of Brexit.

However, empathy felt at times like an impossible task in the contexts of everyday navigation of the febrile discourses running through Brexit politicking. As a character in Ali Smith's (2016) Brexit novel, *Autumn* observes: 'It has become a time of people saying stuff to each other and none of it actually ever becoming dialogue. It is the end of dialogue' (Smith 2016: 112). Our approach set out to explore this arresting but somewhat pessimistic conclusion.

Poles apart: splitting and the political landscape

For the UK, Brexit has condensed and amplified toxic and divisive aspects of psychosocial and political dynamics which are also evident in Europe, the US and more widely [6].

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[6] E.g. the US election of Donald Trump in 2016, and in a series of right-wing populist surges – e.g. around Italy's Matteo Salvini, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, the Vox party in Spain, the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats (SD), and Erdogan in Turkey to name a few. Such political developments formalize and

Emerging political dynamics share, with varying emphases, an assertion of divisions across the cultural and socio-economic divides, that constitutes explicitly an attack on liberal values, notably around multiculturalism and immigration. A seeming defensiveness in the face of the feelings and experiences of those on the 'other side' is also present on both sides of the experienced 'divide'. (Hochschild, 2016).

What unites the responses to the Brexit referendum was an upsurge in anxiety and the projection of feeling. Anxious communications are not unusual in political and cultural life. However, Brexit seemed unique in underlining the extent to which the taken-for-granted containing intuitions, processes and categories seemed to recede, becoming now explicitly insufficient in giving shape or form to, or solace from, the distress evoked in the sudden change to the political landscape. From an object relations psychosocial perspective (Bion, 1962; Richards, 2018), the ambivalent feelings on the part of many about the relationship between EU and Brexit are linked to a loss of faith in the institutions that once provided support and a sense of emotional containment, Containment serves here, conceptually, to capture the experience of being held and made sense of in the space of the group.

Method – a psychosocial process-led reflective group approach

We set up a series of groups in order to explore feelings emerging around the referendum result. We deployed a psychosocial, group-analytic approach to see if space might emerge to enable reflection and dialogue against the backdrop of an increasingly polarized political

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mainstream the rise of populist ethno-nationalist forces mostly associated with the far-right - fueled by globalization, the precarity of living conditions and the growth of inequality (Bonikowski, et al, 2018).

culture (Crociani-Windland, 2019). The feeling that 'empathy' might emerge in the spaces of dialogue we sought to create, offered a spur, part of a reparative wish to counter some of the confusion we apprehended internally and in the wider political realm. However, as we discovered, that wish for reparation proved difficult to enact.

As in the initial group encounter, the aim was to hold groups that included *both* Remainers and Leavers to create a potential space for dialogue to emerge, but this proved impossible, as the Leavers were reluctant to meet with Remainers, and so instead, we set up two separate groups.[7] We might conjecture that here, even in the institution of the groups, there was some defensive anxiety governing boundaries dividing groups. These ambivalent feelings resonated with the wider psychosocial and political matrix of Brexit, in which both sides of the debate were unable to communicate or, to paraphrase Hochschild (2016: 5), breach the 'walls of empathy'. The ambivalence of the research participants became entangled with the wider splits and projections of society which influenced and shaped the processes of the research itself.

The wider structures of feeling (Williams, 1961) that we have identified in relation to containment resonated throughout the administrative process of setting up the reflective groups. Feelings of trust were tested from the outset as individuals were contacted and, as some stated in email correspondence, they were reluctant to take part because of the 'stigma' of 'voting leave' and they wanted to avoid hostility from Remainers who might see them as 'racist' and foolish. At the same time, a lack of trust was present in the research process – as for example when contacting potential participants in known Leave communities. Here, a lack of trust about those 'in charge' was expressed in relation to concerns about the organization of the project with reference to parking spaces and complaints about missing

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[7] Each group was made up of up to 8 men and women who met on three occasions. Membership was self-selecting, and including some 'snowball' recruitment. Membership of the groups was governed by their disposition towards Brexit – with no intent to representative sampling in terms of demographics etc.

emails regarding the location of groups. Once the group met, some members worried about the temperature of the room, and the mood seemed tense as they took time to read and sign their research consent forms. So, from the outset, we perceived a greater air of skepticism and distrust about the research project from Leavers. However, as we discuss below, this defensiveness was also present in the research team. For example, the conductor [8] wondered whether she should reveal her own position as a Remainer, but was concerned that they might find it off-putting and 'leave'.

It is fair to say that the conductor attracted both positive and negative projections. Potential concerns that she might distort or fail to properly listen to their version of the Brexit narrative mirrored the wider Brexit conversation and may have put some off some Leavers from joining, as was the prospect of entering the university space which was associated in the mind of the public with Remain sentiment. The gender of the conductor (a woman) may also have shaped the dynamics of the transference through the symbolism of the ideal or disappointing mother thereby mirroring wider concerns about the then Prime Minister Theresa May, who as a Remainer was also unable to bring the different sides together.

Such fantasies and dilemmas were recorded in the reflective journal fieldnote entries that were written up after each group by the conductor straight after the sessions. Later, these provided 'countertransferential intelligence' (Armstrong, 2018) as we worked to make sense of experiential aspects of the groups, which included anxieties and projections of the conductor. A flavour of those notes can be found in this extract, written up in the fieldnotes after the final Remain group:

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[8] This is not a clinical study, but in focusing on the resonance of unconscious fantasies within the groups and their organization, we found it useful to borrow clinical terms such as 'conductor', to our own research group practice (see Foulkes, 1948).

There is a mood of depression and loss in the room and perhaps a negative transference onto me as the facilitator of the group, of failing them in their wish to have own feelings understood by the other side. Might they see this as a failure of my own empathy since I haven't been able to arrange it? I am aware that following the initial disappointment of not bringing the groups together, I may have experienced some sense of relief that I didn't have to manage any conflicts that may have emerged. Perhaps I didn't try hard enough as I was using this group of like-minded remainers to work through my own feelings of grief about the loss of the Brexit vote.

Coding dynamics and themes

As it developed, the approaches guiding this work foregrounded experience and shared reflection. This has meant capturing qualitative differences in *what* the groups said, but also *how* they communicated. We coded the transcribed group-conversations using NVivo 12, noting and reviewing emergent themes. Because the conversations were open, often quickly traversing thoughts and feeling, the vast array of topics across both groups became unwieldy.

However, with some reflection and analysis, it was possible to cluster six themes and areas of preoccupation. These themes locate the groups' talk within the dominant psychodynamics which we found within the group processes. This resembled a familiar kind of thematic analysis, but also, these themes reference and capture more basic underlying preoccupations, anxieties and fantasies made manifest in the groups' discussions and within our evolving interpretations and experiences of the Leavers and Remainers. Necessarily, themes cross over and intersect, but as a way to help navigate the ideations and feeling states running through the groups, this approach to a thematic analysis has assisted in capturing and making (some) sense of the varieties of contents and modes of expression running through the groups.

Themes and areas of preoccupation

1. Territory, boundaries and borders

Characteristic topics coded to this theme:
Land, nation, we-ness,
Immigration & disavowal ('I'm not racist but')
Empire, commonwealth
Managing borders
International scope, what it's like abroad
Histories & the national story
Economic migration
Immigration management
Global conflict/threat
British industriousness, protestant work ethic

We formed the first theme around aspects of 'space/place', sometimes linked to nation in the Brexit conversation, but also linking to broader preoccupations about a sense of *territory, borders and boundaries*. This theme evokes the groups' and researchers' more primitive feeling states concerning habitation, boundary and space with 'leave' and 'remain' thinking structured by a variety of 'inside' versus 'outside' metaphors. This work links, practically and unconsciously, to redrawing 'maps' and drawing lines; in the Irish Sea, between Scotland and England, around continental and political Europe etc. Anxieties and desires linked to splitting and/or connecting spaces underpinned this theme.

2. Meta-analytical reflection and critique

Characteristic topics coded to this theme:
Understanding others' positions (difficulty of)
Transport metaphors
The vote dichotomy in/out
Framing the result
Not knowing, uncertainty
Not being able to talk about it
Hypothesising, explaining
Difficulties of facing middle and/or extreme positions

Media and misinformation, fake news
Experiencing complexity and compromise in dialogue

A second theme captured the different groups' propensity to 'talk about talk.' We have summed this up as *meta-analytical reflection and critique,* and we noticed the ways that groups found different occasions to 'step back' from the immediate feeling, here and now. We constituted this theme from a variety of comments that we considered to be instances of meta-analytical reflection and critique. This included rehearsing press or social media-led debates, and creative efforts to verbalize states of mind or concerns – analogies and metaphors for Brexit (similes: transport/cliff edges/broken bridges etc) where we noticed the effortfulness of the groups in making sense of their feelings.

3. *Self-identities and differences*

Characteristic topics coded to this theme:
Religion
Relations to Remainers
Relations to EU
Haves and have nots
Race and ethnicity
National identity
Other identities and differences
Generational differences
Education, distinction
Group conflict
Common sense or its absence

The groups often provoked reflections on 'identity' and shifts in identity highlighted by Brexit. The new 'them and us' relationship of Leavers and Remainer –was often in mind in the groups' contexts. But there was also the recurrent preoccupation with the ramifications of certain anticipated changes: 'I won't be European', 'I feel like a stranger', 'I feel victimised/ recognised now'. The pronounced-ness of belonging/not belonging seemed alive across the groups, with Brexit creating new lines drawn around the self-constraining or defining,

welcoming, rejecting - generating renewed expressivity about 'who I am/who they are' in the groups.

4. Emotion

Characteristic topics coded to this theme:
Winning, triumph
Sadness
Order v chaos
Excitement
Painful connections to others
Anxiousness (general)
Hope
Anger
Loss (general)

Here, we clustered the expressive feeling communicated in the groups – the preponderance of a variety of present-feeling emotionality, sometimes direct, and palpable, but also implicit, displaced into regressed image repertoires and narratives. Notably groups could shift from anger, to mournfulness, to triumphalist expression quite rapidly, sometimes moving on into other themes: intellectualisation or specific rivalries, or nostalgic melancholic musing, or assertive counter-dependencies. In a way, this confirms the emotional disturbance of Brexit when faced head on. In the group situation Brexit can become or feel volatile and at times, a flavour of grievance enters the room. Avoiding some of these feelings became part of the groups' work.

5. Dependency/ fear of dependency/ autonomy

Characteristic topics coded to this theme:
Subsidizing the EU as dependents
Brexit delays (waiting/separation)
Independence, freedom
EU Economic waste
Hatred of UK state
Faceless others
Ecological perspectives and politics
Food regulation

The overarching matters were related to what we might call the 'economic metabolism' of the EU and its relation to the UK. Groups expressed a mix of fear of dependence, a belief in good forms of dependency and health, but also, anxieties about loss of autonomy, and being overwhelmed or swamped. This line of thinking informed a prevalent set of fantasies, especially about food, which echoed a tabloidesque set of preoccupations stretching from 'straight bananas' to 'chlorinated chicken', but which, we felt, also referenced underlying feelings about the loss or perversion of nurture; the threat of a new toxicity in the body-politic, or, conversely a wish to 'purify' or purge. The dependency-autonomy dimension of the Brexit debate survives in elaborated forms in the political discourses of neoliberalism – which, in its populist variants celebrates independence. The underpinning anxiety, in this theme, might be seen as to do with *separation*.

6. Oedipal rivalry & authority

Characterisitic topics coded to this theme:
Politics and politicians
Nationalization and a dislike of it
Democracy deficits and assertion of
Dislike of bureaucracy
Brexit and economic power shifts
EU irrationality
EU fairplay/ unfair play
Sovereignty v subsidiary
Big business
Domination by elites
Benefits of the EU
Authorities and corruption

Here, we cluster preoccupations that foreground political-rivalrous aspects of the groups' expression. Engaging with formal discourses of the political-Brexit processes, groups challenge pro- and anti-, the various authorities or dominant groups and their representatives (broadly speaking paternal/parental figures and institutions). Groups express accord and affiliation in various ways sometimes, for instance supporting 'parliament' (e.g., sovereignty, or, conversely, parliamentary process) or the EU-institutions. Often accord is asserted as part of a fight against a rival (big business, Eurocratic elites), and in the name of an idealisation: 'democracy' or 'good government'. But, more often, the groups variously including a noticeable kind of 'protesting' tone that inflected some talk, or at other times, resignation – and we dubbed this *Oedipal*, marking the feeling that 'big' v 'small' / David Goliath/ paternal/child power-struggles seemed to underpin the states of mind and narrative-lines of thinking in the groups, or taking up a position between a loved and a hated 'parent'.

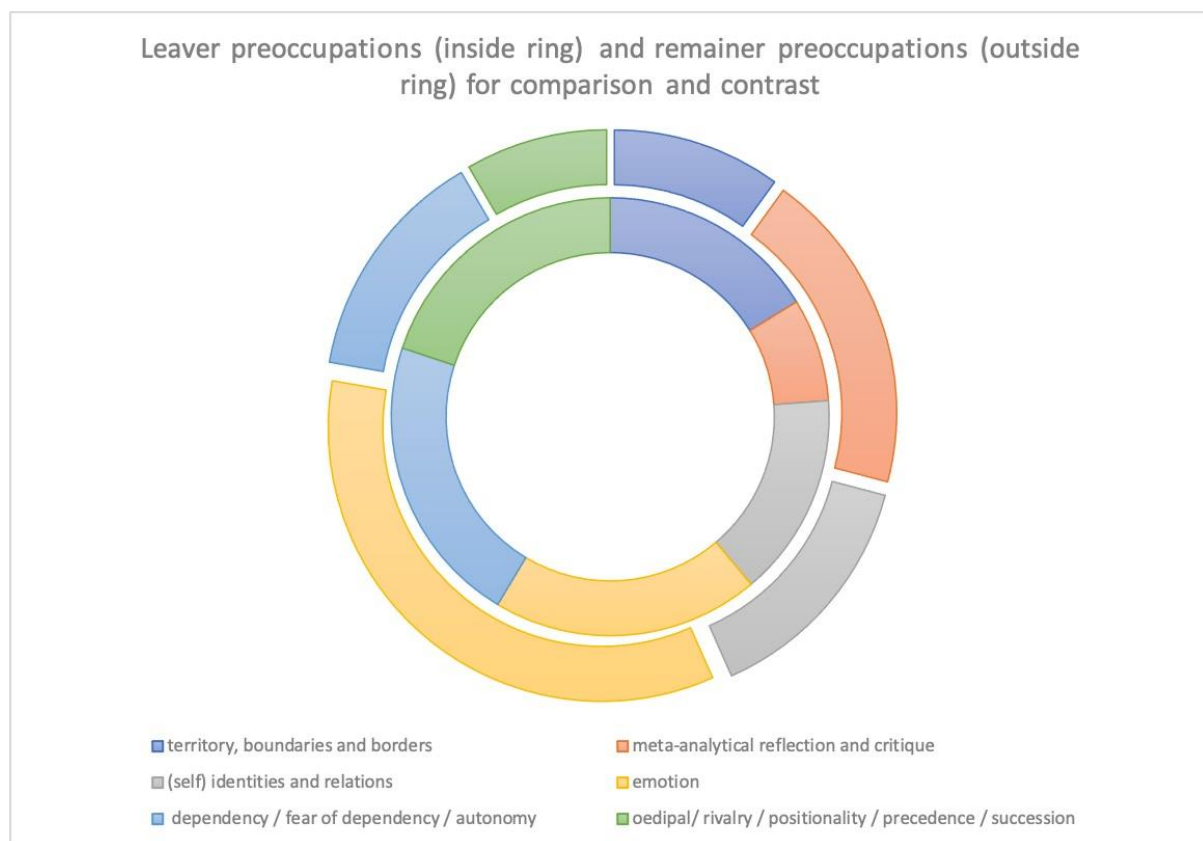**Leavers and Remainers: rendering differences**

We found then, that the six themes referenced elements of some more fundamental anxieties, be it separation, oedipal rivalries or the instabilities and constrictions governing spaces of belonging/not belonging, identity and disidentification. It is thus unsurprising that Brexit generated anxiety, and emotion in these groups, as well as flights into intellectualisation and simplification. Brexit touches deep instabilities which are hard, perhaps impossible, to contain.

We draw these themes from the necessary muddle of thoughts and feelings constituting the groups' experiences and from our experiences of the groups, as well as in reflection on transcripts and our retrospection on the work. So, taking our qualitative data, we highlight some broad distinguishing features between the types of group (Leave v Remain),

with reference to the psychosocial themes identified above. At the same time, we want to reassert experiential nuance, and to acknowledge that the openness and flow of the group-at-work. The minutiae of feeling and thought that underlies thematically organised summaries remains paramount.

Our qualitative coding process supports this diagrammatic comparison of the two types of group (fig1).

Insert figure 1 here

Leaver preoccupations (inside ring) and remainer preoccupations (outside ring) for comparison and contrast

- territory, boundaries and borders
- meta-analytical reflection and critique
- (self) identities and relations
- emotion
- dependency / fear of dependency / autonomy
- oedipal/ rivalry / positionality / precedence / succession

Discussion: Leavers' and Remainers' group preoccupations

Territory, boundaries and borders

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A topical Brexit preoccupation for the groups brought together ideas about borders and national territory. Conversations alluded to versions of a 'the national story' and 'our land'. Discussions about immigration, 'good' and 'bad' immigrant workers, and the management of closed/open borders recurred across both groups Coding analyses triangulated with the conductor's feeling that immigration was often in mind, spoken and unspoken, in the groups and extending to direct and indirect identifications with experiences of feeling unwelcome or marginalised by the referendum result and ensuing Brexit-associated experiences. Leavers most often framed their Brexit thoughts in terms associated to the territorial-border theme.

Leaver groups would, however, often, specifically *disavow* immigration-related ideas; they said immigration was *not* a main reason for supporting Brexit, insistences made even while the conversations returned towards preoccupations concerning immigrants. We noticed in this theme a counter-narrative amongst Leavers seeking to remind of their *international* scope and understanding. Unwillingness to become cast as 'little Englanders' led group members to highlight experiences abroad; far flung work and leisure, anecdotal memories of 'Mongolia', 'Brazil', and 'Africa'. By invoking a familiarity with 'the other', the group highlighted one kind of cosmopolitan open-ness. These accounts evoked flavours of a nevertheless-colonial or ex-pat underpinning in the groups' thinking and anecdotes, which emerged adjacent to more hawkish commentary about immigration. Anecdotes seemed casually to provide negative exemplars; counterpoints to 'English civilization' and 'our' miscellaneous virtues.

Attributions of order versus chaos were projected onto images of borders, which made 'territorialism' feel like a core dynamic within the leaver groups. This feeling extended to leavers' presenting Europe, especially Southern Europe[9], as inefficient, even corrupt. These

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[9] There was not much discussion of Eastern Europe – although elsewhere in the Brexit debates this connection was a powerful one.

points supported a leavers' consensus here, reaffirming group-held justifications in respect of breaking from the EU, and (for them) affirming a version of 'good' Brexit.

We found ourselves anxious about the extent to which Leavers corresponded to the stereotypical images we carried in mind. The experience produced an open-but-closed feeling about the group, one that paralleled aspects of the Brexit debates and impasses, claims about wider-global horizons alongside a sense of tightening borders.

One thing sticks in mind: there was a nostalgia on the part of leavers for Roman roads, which seemed to speak for a kind of lost common-sense-directness. But now this foregone-imagined era, implying a history of links within and across Europe had become, paradoxically, effaced from Leavers' psychogeography of the contemporary continent – by the European Union. The Leavers cherished an ancient Europe including the Greeks and Romans.

This ancient-European world contrasted with frequent references to the pointlessness of recent capital projects, new bridges or infrastructures built by European Union funds. These served 'no purpose'. Imagery of (EU-funded) bridges that failed to meet across terrains, and incomplete networks of roads became emblems for the group, shorthand for European Union waste. Broken, fragmented and failed projects amplified an underlying fantasy of lost connection, and feelings of brokenness and unintelligibility in contemporary experience, feelings they had found hard to bear, and from which Brexit promised relief.

We wondered if these references to bridges touched on the groups' anxieties about connection/disconnecting in their contemporary lifeworlds; social infrastructure is here, taken up as an image repertoire registering unconscious anxieties about more pervasive failures in containment (Figlio and Richards, 2003; Richards, 2018). A loss of belonging is evoked in the loss of national icons, boundaries and even industries. The imagery of disconnection also seemed linked to a felt absence of empathic connections (Ofer, 2018; Polmear, 2018) evoked

via metaphoric allusions to destroyed bridges or corrupt commons, suggesting an interpretation discerning primitive feelings of disintegration.

Overall, from Leavers, there was a tendency to manage differences by splitting, (along the border, and in their distinctions from Remainers) evoking a feeling that boundaries should be clear, roads straight and complexity pushed through. Brexit, for these groups, had become associated with resurrecting a reassuring ideal evoked in terms of a (past) empire and a projected future; the promise of an EU-free opportunity to clear up complexity, including 'mess' at the border – a great and common-sensical *simplification* asserted in the face of a unintelligible or challenging complexity in social and international relations. These interests did not feel historical or empirical in their grounding, but, rather, mythic. Post imperial nostalgia for imagined regimes emerged, counterpoint to a recurrent skepticism about actual national government and politicians (of any stripe). So, Leaver groups found a 'radical' tone in an idiom partly underpinned by anti-authoritarian claims about freedom, carrying an affect evoked in the conception 'hatred of the state'.

National borders were noticeably less of an overt preoccupation for the Remainers. Not unpredictably, the national border itself mattered less than the sense of a loss of connection *across* borders. This accompanied a sense of shifting personal identifications tied to the prospect of no longer being 'in' Europe, a sentiment expressed movingly by several respondents originating from or connected to Italy, Spain, Scandinavian countries and Germany. Imagery of cliff edges became evocative for this group, including discussion of pervasive media imagery of the White Cliffs, and falling over a cliff – a recurrent trope in Brexit commentaries and cartoons.

Metanalytic reflection and critique

Instead of territorial/spatially rich imagery, Remainer groups' anxieties most often came across in an identifiable tendency towards reflection and critique, a kind of intellectualization. Why had the unexpected Brexit result come about? Solving this riddle became a preoccupation. This included some reflection around theirs and others' misrecognition of the situation – shock at having been taken by surprise – and some reflection on not understanding or properly having recognized Leavers' motives, convictions and commitments.

Linked here we experienced Remainers' recurrent analytic examinations of the role of the media and misinformation in manipulating voters to choose 'leave'. This group was more analytical, but, also self-reflective. They became especially alert when discussing the difficulty of talking about Brexit themes in key settings. This included failures in communication (as in political and social media 'misinformation') and failures in empathy and understanding (including their own) across the divide created by the dichotomous voting structures of the referendum. Leavers were relatively less preoccupied with an analytical approach to the result and its aftermaths, focusing instead on what they perceived as the likelihood of their 'victory' being withheld, subverted. In different ways each constituency showed a difficulty believing in the reality of the result, mobilising distinct resources and defences in the effort to metabolise the transformation/catastrophe that Brexit represented for them.

(Self) Identities and relations

Preoccupation with soul searching and reflection crossed into discussion of identities and relationships. Identity became a far more prevalent issue for the Remainer groups than for the Leavers. While for Leavers there were allusions (mythic or otherwise) to a 'national story', the Remain groups members moved towards relating complexities and differences inherent in

personal narratives, especially where apprehending change and threat through Brexit's suddenly turbulent psychogeography.

In this vein, Remainers actively voiced their preoccupation with questions of identity and difference, notably of the changing relationships with EU nationals. The Remain groups shared stories of difference and complex identifications in ways that served as emblematic of the feeling that certain freedoms were under attack. We recorded a manifest press to narrate such experiences, sometimes personal, and to hear about Brexit in relation to identity changes: 'Who am I now?', 'I feel have become a foreigner', 'Can I call UK my 'home" anymore?' Whilst these became questions of territory for the leavers, they seemed like questions of self-identity expressed in the remain groups. The attribution of 'home' felt like a significant notation for complex feelings for both groups, 'home' as a territory to reclaim, and home as a locus so contain complex identifications and differences.

Emotion

It would be inaccurate to cast the Remainers as predominately prone to intellectualising, however. The Remain groups had a more elaborated discourse of emotional expressivity, but also brought more feeling into the experience in the groups. Group discussions explored their efforts to try to understand what had happened, and, also to share and name emotional states such as loss, sadness, anger. Remainers gave voice to an emotional experience of Brexit, the traumas of displacement and the shifting boundaries of belonging and un-belonging. They expressed, too, notably more anxiousness, anger and mourning for connections to others, including to Leavers – and a fear of future deep splits. The Remainers also carried a sense of sadness, a dislike of the winner-loser mentality that, for them, seemed to have dominated the Brexit conversation post-referendum.

Remainer groups' preoccupations were characterized by a capacity to critique and reflect upon their emotions in the manner of a referendum post mortem. This focus stood far more prominently for the Remain groups, pushing out discussion of territory, borders and boundaries and focusing far more on themes emerging from a consideration of the relationship to the EU, whether negative or positive. The Leave groups did not tend to name and discuss emotional experiences in the way that feelings of sadness, or loss, came to the fore in Remain groups. The Leave group offered some expressions of ambivalence in relation to the Remain position, largely predicated on feeling sorry for those on the other side (particularly the younger generation) who they saw as 'naïve' or 'brainwashed' by past EU-friendly orthodoxies.

Emotion, while present in the guise of both anxiety and some triumphalism around winning, was less prevalent for Leavers than concerns about dependency and boundary breaches. Where emotional tone did enter was in the discussion of the Leavers' recurrent sense of nostalgia for the past.

Both sets of groups talked of the split off parts of their families and friendship groups, either to express relief that the research groups provided space to talk, or, more often, to identify that Brexit had become something of a taboo area in certain domains of their experience – with elements of experience continuing as unspeakable, painful, and difficult to share. Overall, for Leavers, we found relatively less direct expression of emotional and intellectual-reflective mode, but the indirect sensibility was vivid to the conductor.

Autonomy, dependency and fear of dependency

A related set of prevalent anxieties, registered more primitively in emotional terms and analytically, when adopting a political idiom, came when Leavers gave voice in recurrent expressions framing the EU as an overwhelming and overweening (political) body. These feelings became couched at times in the language of independence and sovereignty.

Underpinning this talk lay a recalcitrantly counter-dependent stance, variously manifested. Leavers conveyed the feeling that, for them, various, indeed many, forms of dependence were risky and potentially dangerous; overwhelming, sucking up resources, or open to exploitation (freeloading, corruption, unfairness).

The EU emerged here as a site of economic waste, whose apparent extravagance was perceived as a threat to the UK as a sovereign country and a drain on its resources. This issue was raised to a point where we were tempted to see it as obsessional in its recurrence in the coding. These Leaver anxieties echoed observations about fears of dependency expressed in an OPUS listening post, in more explicitly psychodynamic terms: 'Our annihilation anxiety makes us bite at the breast. If we get too close to mother (EU) we fear we will get annihilated' (OPUS 2019). The various political, social and economic dependencies on Europe and the anxiety about Europe as a dominating and identity-effacing institution were not such major preoccupation for the Remain groups, instead the largeness and the largesse of the EU represented opportunity and protection, of human and workers' rights, or for pleasure and exploration, 'city breaks' and cultural tourism.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the preponderance of conversations about the benefits of the EU amongst the Remainers were noticeably higher, although the Remain groups seemed capable, at times, of supporting thoughtful ambivalence about the EU. By contrast, it became difficult to find instances, within the Leave discourses, where groups sustained positive discussions about the EU, thereby preserving its role as a threat or a bad object in the mind of the group.

Oedipal rivalry / authority

A further and frequent preoccupation was with topics linked to power and domination, often voiced by Leavers. They located a feeling of being dominated by unaccountable elites,

or by political processes in a remote EU, but, also, in the UK. This referenced, especially, an ambivalence about national government, and nationalized industries (of the past, but, also framed as a future 'threat'). There was an underlying sentiment referencing a 'hatred of the state' (Richards, 2003: 133) as well as of 'faceless' bureaucrats in the EU. Suspiciousness extended to big businesses and corporate bureaucracies.

Leavers often voiced the idea of the EU as 'corrupt' and unlikely to 'play fair'. We noticed a difficulty in sustaining gratitude for infrastructural achievements and exchanges, which stamped out hints at successful EU projects in place in the UK. Again, the Leavers groups tended quickly to evoke counterpoints of 'corruption' or 'unfair' allocations of finance at the mention of new roads, or development projects. Distrust of authorities extended into the workings of the political system where there was recurrent splitting about different kinds of democracy, namely, parliamentary democracy as mendacious and untrustworthy (bad) and referendum-democracy as clear, simple, direct and good or 'real', echoing the rectitude of Roman roads.

This splitting provoked insistence on the democratic mandate identified in the referendum vote – asserted as a reassuring fact that 'they'[10] had to respect. Such assertions provoked fears, often mentioned, or a feeling of resignation in the Leave groups, that 'they' (Remainers, parliament, leaders on both sides of the political divide, and the EU) would eventually find ways to recant, reframe or undo the referendum result – a prize that might be taken away.

The overarching dynamics felt Oedipal, as if Brexit represented a-play-within-the-play of politics, the fantasised overcoming of a dominant paternal/parental object, putting the nation back in touch with youth, vigour and opportunity, but also threatening to deny and seize back

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[10] By which the Leavers tended to mean "Remainers", and, at times, others, including Brexit-supporting politicians seeking 'softer' forms of Brexit.

this just inheritance. A notable sub-discourse, here, was anxiety about conflicts between the different generations and this was often, concretely, a matter of disputes within families - with nieces, daughters, or sons. However, disputation did not extend into anything other than a reflection on Leavers' part that their generation had insights unavailable to other generations.

Overall, the predominant anxiety for leavers was connected to an underlying configuration connected perhaps to splitting, (along borders and territories) including a particular valorisation of autonomy/independence. For Remainers, the underpinning anxiety that emerged around the borders and territories theme was separation related, in keeping with the desire to remain that was the principal constitution of those groups. Remainers mixed intellectualised reflection with sadness and expressions of loss – frustration at not being able to process the outcome.

This process allowed us to distinguish how the groups differently experienced Brexit and the boundaries being redrawn: as points of connection and exchange and repair (Remainers) v borders as points of protection and defence (Leavers). We found that Leavers groups evoked an international relations paradigm familiar from the post-World War Two context. This framing remained surprisingly recurrent, with 'the Germans' seen as a dominant and threatening force, and Europe casually noted as an extension of a Germanic project connected to national rivalries. For Leavers, Brexit represented a generalised flight from domination by petty, irrational rules, or bullying elites. It promised an opportunity to escape from forced reliance on authorities who could not be trusted.

The Remain and Leave groups can both be characterized as holding a powerful quantum of unprocessed pain, include varieties of anger, frustration, loss, deprivation, and exclusion. This pain underpinned the arguments, rationalizations, and analyses constituting the meanings of 'Brexit' for each Group. Remainers, in different ways, experienced Brexit as an invasive 'bad object', some threat of castration or excommunication, a cutting off, not just from

Europe-as-continent, but from a containing European Community, as well as from their sense of belonging in the UK, regardless of where their citizenship lay.

Alternatively, for Leavers, 'Brexit' presented a promise, the imminent embodiment of an ideal object, typically, in the reconstitution of national identifications associated with past narratives, but in any case, some relief from, or casting off, the pains of contemporary complexity and disappointments that had compromised or jeopardized valued identifications with nation, and a particular sense of freedom. Brexit felt 'raw' in the group experience, both in what was said and in what was unspoken.

Reflexive analysis

This same unprocessed pain was also present in the conductor, who used the research project as a kind of third object through which to reconcile the 'doer /done to' dynamics (Benjamin, 2018) of Brexit and its divisions both internally and externally. The 'conductor' and initiator of this research had recently left London, a city that voted to Remain. She felt dismay at the Brexit result and also that a majority of people in her newly adopted home had chosen to break away from Europe[11]. The project presented an opportunity to work through those feelings, to repair that split by communicating with those who in the community who felt differently, thus enabling a greater sense of personal and political integration.

The difficulties of this emotional work reflected the potential tensions of empathy as a mode of research in which the ambivalent feelings of the conductor which surfaced in the countertransference in both the administration and leadership of the groups themselves. Such ambivalence is not easily captured in traditional qualitative thematic research which depends on manifest content. But looking 'beneath the surface' and paying attention to the

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[11] Iain MacRury was not present for the initial stages of the project, but joined later and was present in two of the groups and contributed substantially to the analysis of the data and to the writing of this article.

psychodynamics of affect adds a further dimension to the analysis of empathy and its apparent absence within in the research project. As noted earlier, the project was initially inspired by a wish to repair the splits of Brexit - an impulse that links to Klein's (1935) theory of the depressive position. The desire to repair and 'make good' the damage of Brexit also underpins the notion of empathy as we have defined it in terms of denoting a capacity to sit with alterity, to move between different subject positions and feel compassion for the other. However, as Klein (1935) said, living with complexity and managing one's ambivalence in the face of difference is easier said than done. Moreover, denying that ambivalence leads to a mode of relating that is shaped by splitting and projection, and confused forms of counter transference.

As we discovered in the course of this research, and despite maintaining a reflexive awareness of such issues, similar problems emerged in the course of our own project when the impulse to bring the remain and leave groups together encountered resistance that was experienced as painful and exhausting. The splits between town and city, between leave and remain could not be reconciled through the search for empathy where clearly there was none. In the later stages of data analysis, we sometimes struggled to maintain what Jessica Benjamin (2018) conceptualizes as the third space of 'intersubjectivity' which acknowledges complexity and allows for a mode of relationality that eschews the 'doer/done to' dynamics of 'for or against' of 'us versus them' and of victim versus perpetrator. We came to recognise the tendency of the two groups to oscillate between positions of moderate and more immoderate position-taking, in relation to Brexit, and taking up a stance as either being the victim of forces beyond one's control or of being the perpetrator who has inflicted harm upon the other. The difficulties for the conductor and the research team of maintaining empathic connection in relation to the groups without aligning with this split way of viewing the world remained a challenge throughout.

Feeling our way through a Brexit landscape

In this article we have explored the seeming impossible task of researching empathy against the increasingly fraught and divisive psycho-political backdrop of Brexit. Empathy is a contested term and for some is bound up with misrecognition and also misplaced projections onto the other (Braddock, 2018, Pedwell, 2014). And yet, from the outset the wish to work with others and repair the splits that had emerged seemed worthwhile and echoed the work of other community-based projects such as those promoted following the murder of the British MP Jo Cox at the height of the Brexit campaign in 2016 [12]. From an object relations perspective, empathy points to a fluidity of communication between self and other, an ability to sit with difference and a capacity to articulate and hold middle positions, to think into, or 'play with' other positions (Ogden, 1993: 227).

However, as we have seen, throughout the research process we found that the work of empathy as we have defined it was often elusive – both in the setting up and organization of the project and within the work of the groups themselves. For example, in group discussions, whenever members constructed empathic 'bridges' (Ofer, 2018), conceptually, across boundaries, there soon opened the prospect or the actuality of some intervention that would re-establish separateness – the reassertion of 'them and us', or 'good and bad'. It was as if the groups could not make or sustain a 'middle' or an interim space, as if the work of empathy was likely to become undercut by more primitive and pulling identifications with bad or ideal objects, for instance, into the rightness or virtue of one's position, as opposed to the 'seduced', 'self-interested-ness' of some other perspective.

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[12] The Hope Not Hate organisation, set up in 2004 'to provide a positive antidote to the politics of hate', which was endorsed by the Widower of MP Jo Cox following her murder: https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/about-us/ 'The Great Get Together' provides a further example of such campaigns in the UK which has support across political parties: https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/ggt

So, an overarching experience of the groups was that Brexit produced an emotional environment offering security at the extremes and a flight from the messiness of empathic recognition of different positions. The seeming impossibility of Leavers and Remainers coming together in one group was echoed in the ways that groups flipped away from imperfect settlements and compromise formations, constituting a retreat or withdrawal from the middle and its muddle. Beyond this, one can identify the dynamic whereby the middle was projected out of the group, to be left, unspoken, or with a conductor whose job it would be to process the complexity of the Brexit task. One conjecture might be that the conductor was, at moments, left 'holding' the projected-out middle, carried at times as confusion, pain and guilt; the difficulties on the part of groups to think empathically was closely bound up in that process where 'working through' or creative forms of empathic relation to the other seemed unavailable.

Our groups succumbed to the tendency to project outwards, rather than think about the meanings and ramifications of how key dilemmas such as 'leaving and remaining' occlude the uncertainty and pains linked to change. The dilemmatic structure (leave v remain) instituted an overarching script that amplified and encapsulated thinking and feeling. Our groups remained defensively inhabiting this script, long after the votes were cast. Today, the reparative work of grief and working through, which first spurred the motivation for this project remains an important task and yet remains elusive. As one journalist recently put it: 'Brexit is a machine to generate perpetual grievance' (Behr, 2021). As we have argued, one reason for this is that the very structure of the referendum led to the failures that we have described. This, we suggest, speaks directly to the vicissitudes of empathy that continue to trouble the wider Brexit and UK political landscape.

Conflict of interest statement

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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(8,656 words)

TITLE

Empathy An impossible Task? Engaging with Groups in a Troubling Brexit Landscape

ABSTRACT

The Brexit referendum produced a tumultuous reminder of the emotional-affective dimensions of political life in the UK. This article attends to affective dimensions in political experience, and the fantasies and identifications that shape engagement within the shifting landscapes of politics and the structures of feeling that underpin them. The article reflects on a project undertaken 2016-2019 in which we convened eight groups of 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' with an explicit questioning of the place and possibility of 'empathy' in the small spaces of a widening political fray. Through detailed thematic analysis of the group experiences and discourses, including personal-reflective accounts from the group conductor, we discuss 'clusters of preoccupation' characteristic of these groups and the impossibility of researching empathy within the turbulent psycho-political mood of a Brexit landscape.