Chapter title:

Shameful and Shameless: Projecting Triumph and Humiliation in the Brexit Era; A Psychosocial-Group Methodological Approach

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Abstract

This chapter explores data emerging from a series of reflective psychosocial group-based explorations of emotional experiences of 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' that were held in an English coastal town following the result of the Brexit referendum in 2016. We propose that the group method deployed in that project enabled an intimate insight into underlying structures of feeling constituting psychosocial and political life in the UK 2016-2018. Specifically, the work of the groups highlights powerful psychosocial dynamics related to a lack of emotional containment including prevalent expressions of 'shame' as theorised by James Gilligan (1996; 1999; 2003).We draw on these conceptualisations, and complementary psychoanalytic and cultural-philosophical accounts of shame and guilt (Akhtar, 2018; Benedict, 1946) further support our analytic approach. The chapter examines the ramifications of the winner/loser outcome structured into the referendum-as-political mechanism, one at risk of becoming firmly instituted in post-Brexit politics.

Keywords: shame, Brexit; psychosocial group method; political shame

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Researching the psychosocial dynamics of political shame

This chapter examines relationships between shame and politics through psychoanalytically informed reflections on a two-year project which took place in a town in the South Coast of England following the 2016 UK Brexit Referendum[i]. The team used a reflective psychosocial group research approach involving several small analytic groups meetings that were set up to explore what people thought and felt about Brexit between 2016-18. Here, we reflect on experiences and insights emerging from that project, including the emergence of shame in the group processes and in the 'dynamic administration' of the work (Behr 1994; Yates and MacRury 2021).

Part of our reflections draw on Gilligan's (1996, 1999, 2003) conceptualizations of shame and recognition. Taken alongside complementary psychoanalytic (Ayers 2014; Akhtar 2018; Erikson, 1950, 1968; Steiner 2011). and cultural-philosophical accounts of shame, guilt and recognition (Benedict 2005; Honneth 1996), we place our work with the groups within a psychosocial framing that links the micro engagements of small reflective group members to the wider context of politics, culture and society.

The discussion highlights object relations and psychoanalytic group work-based contributions in grasping the unconscious somatic aspects of shame (Sartre 1956; Mollon 1993; Akhtar 2018) and underlining shame's connections to recognition/disrupted recognition (Ayer

2014; Gilligan 2003; Honneth 1996;) and containment (Richards 2018). We identify political shame as a constitutive element across the dynamics of a post-Brexit-referendum political field.

Brexit: A national shudder.

The Brexit result was a shock. The referendum provoked disorientation across national, regional and international borders, within neighbourhoods and in institutions. Not only was the UK leaving Europe, but divisions between metropolitan and non-metropolitan, young and older, and across borders, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland internal and inter-group turmoil emerged post referendum. Dismayed rhetorical questioning at the time, “what were we thinking?” spawned actual questions: “What *were* we thinking, really?” Concurrently, the referendum enacted an assault on settled usages of pronouns “we”, “us” and “them”. Results disturbed felt meanings of belonging; in local communities, in the UK, across Europe. In so doing the vote tested the borders and boundaries of groups. Affiliations shifted uneasily, sometimes unconsciously. As a consequence, emotional responses played out, highlighted against background projections from frenzied political and media spheres.

Sartre captures shame as an unconscious and embodied: ‘an immediate shudder which runs through me from head to foot without any discursive preparation’ (Sartre 1956:536). Our discussion explores Brexit as such a ‘shudder’ in the UK body politic, a contorted ‘body’ suddenly exposed as vulnerable, highlighting core fault lines. A ‘body’ too, at the same time, in parts, bullish and prideful. O’Toole (2018) underscores the visceral character of such Brexit contortions through metaphors of self-harm, dominance. submission and ‘sadopopulism’ in the ‘politics of pain’. We suggest shame plays a powerful and continuing role in a collective Brexit unease associated with these dynamics.

Brexit and the UK: An unravelling large group

In the years leading up to Brexit, the intense polarisation of political culture was not strongly visible and as Sobolewska and Ford (2020) argue, voting unleashed emergent 'tribes', simultaneously unravelling deep identifications; remixing others. For instance, left-leaning Leavers made common cause with UKIP, a right-wing populist party, thereby incorporating an alliance between quasi-aristocratic super-rich elites and some middle-, working-, and under-class fractions. Zadie Smith (2016) quickly noticed 'we' and 'us', tied in knots of shame and shaming after the result, across cities and nationwide[ii].

Voting, as something one did, now framed new political identities. One *became* a "Leaver" or a "Remainer", not to mention abstainers (Payne 2016). These powerful tags disturbed prevailing political ontologies [iii] (Hay 2009), troubling our ways of *being* in political and civic frames. Guilt and shame circled Leavers' and Remainers' righteousness and indignations, their triumphs and humiliations.

Socio-cultural contexts: Shame and the Brexit headlines

Since the Referendum, the press, TV and digital news outlets mobilized characteristically 'split' narratives; victims and perpetrators, heroes and villains, pariahs and high priests, "in" and "out" groupings linked to Brexit positions. "Shame" punctuated press headlines ushering commentaries – from all perspectives (Cook 2019; Delaney 2019; Hinsliff 2019; Musson et al 2019; Lawson 2017; Lyons and Proctor 2019; Maidment 2020). For example, some decried the *lack* of shame and its usefulness in holding politicians to account (Hinsliff, 2019), others documented the shame expressed by remainers following the referendum (Higgins, 2018), and Boris Johnson received cries of 'shame on you' as he was heckled on the street, in the Remain stronghold of London (BBC, 2016), whilst others expressed 'shame' at the way the post Brexit negotiations had been handled (Cook, 2019).

Meanwhile, commentators' historical perspectives drew connections, from The Reformation to World War II (Kettle 2017). Reflections sought to stabilize the chaotic day-by-day flow of news. Jordison (2017) articulated links between Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* and the Brexit-situation. Behr (2017) echoed several analyses evoking Dunkirk[iv], linking the "national shame" of WWII 's retreat from Europe to both Brexit and to Britain's joining the EEC in 1973 adding "that emotion still burns." Martial metaphors, the narrative of victory against the odds alongside nationalistic triumphalism underscored a winner-loser ethos around Brexit.

Such stories kept 'shame' prominent in a mediatized Brexit experience (Thimm et al 2014). 24-hour reporting channelled and amplified 'shame' and 'shamelessness' through the news cycles, and social media (Kasabova 2017:109-110) energized Brexit shame. Brexit negotiations took shape and a correspondent to *The Independent* asked: "Oh How many more deeds, events and British politicians are going to shame us?" (Bateman 2016).

Overall, the result opened bewildering prospects, hard to take in. Individuals and groups struggled to share psychosocial difficulties, regardless of affiliations (Orbach 2016). Indeed, the very meaning and act of sharing: opinions, feelings, ideas, and even spaces, felt more challenging (Vanolo 2020). The murder of the MP Jo Cox on 16 June, on the eve of the Referendum anticipated in a grim fashion the aggression that was to follow as MPs and journalists were abused for their views on Brexit in the years that followed. Inhibitions in social communication foreshadowed geopolitical blockages, to trade and to flows of people. Ali Smith (2016:112) phrased it, "the end of dialogue".

Envisioning shame: Being, belonging and containment

Seeing and being seen (Steiner 2011), hiding and exhibiting, churn at the root of shame. Nakedness, exposure, loss of bodily control, constitute primary experiential formations, and

early unconscious forms of embodied shame live on later in more elaborated forms (Akhtar 2018:76). Gilligan (1996, 1999, 2003) highlights the centrality of respect and recognition (and their absences) in the etiology of shame. Vision stands prominent within shame's sensorium (see Erikson 1950: 253; Morrison 1989: 30)

Echoing Gilligan's focus on vision, we share the emphasis of object relations approaches, notably as derived from Winnicott (1971) on the dynamics of seeing and being seen (Ayer 2014; Steiner 2011). This conjunction offers a complementary theoretical current in psychoanalytic thinking (Winnicott 1971; Ayer 2014). Gilligan's relationship to psychoanalysis informs several insights and conceptions, including via Heinz Kohut and Erik Erikson (Gilligan 2001: 42 & 2003: 1159) and his sense that

> psychotherapy and psychoanalysis are such deep forms of respect for human beings and human dignity. They involve, indeed they consist of, paying full attention to another human being (Gilligan 2001:175).

For object relations psychoanalysis, as in Gilligan's formulations, an absence or distortion of recognition can induce shame. Feelings of being looked away *from*, or of being stared *at*, seen *as*, but not properly *seen*, especially if systemic, can lead to developmental pathologies (Winnicott 1971). Closely related processes tie such dynamics to *attachment* and primary development (Bowlby 1983) with shame often linked to belonging/not-belonging in a group. By extension, the face becomes pivotal in exchanges of recognition, as well as taking a prominent role in the discourse of shame, not least in metaphors of *saving or losing face* (Benedict 1945).

Containment and recognition

The idea of “containment” provides a psychoanalytic concept that incorporates recognition, attachment and the intersubjective processes of projection and identification at the heart of psychoanalytic accounts of psychosocial development. “Containment” captures the multiple ways in which we are “held” , emotionally in transitions between ‘inner’ worlds and experiences and the external world.

As Richards puts it, containment ‘holds us together…psychically, by our internal capacities for self-integration, and by any confirmations of our selfhood and identity that we find in the external world” (Richards 2018: 1). However, psychosocial containment (and its vicissitudes) expands into institutional and wider systemic and cultural experiences, so that, “containing experiences can also be available in our dealings with organisations of various sorts and in our consumption of culture” (Richards 2018:1). Political-cultural life offers one such domain.

Apprehensions of Brexit as a national-level drama of dynamic disturbances in psychosocial and cultural containment (Richards 2018), disturbances in large group experiences of seeing and being seen (Steiner 2011) recognition and non-recognition (Benjamin 2017; Gilligan 2003; Honneth 1994), linked to “ontological insecurity” (Browning 2018), attachment and separation anxieties (Esquerro 2020; Erikson 1950), provides a loose but capacious underpinning for our developing approach here. For Remainers, the lack of containment in the aftermath of Brexit was linked to the loss of Europe as a holding environment (with all its cultural and historical and political implications); for Leavers, the risk of breaking away from Europe also constituted a disturbance of sorts because alongside the fantasies of liberation and the pleasures of winning the vote, there was also the shame of their democratic opinions being delegitimated and shamed by political, cultural, academic and media elites.

Exploring Brexit in groups: a method

At local, national and international levels groups were reforming and fragmenting. We wondered if working with some small groups might offer insight into our turbulent political experiences; a micro address to a macro crisis. We tapped an intuition. Groups can hold difficult feelings, including shame, indirectly, wordlessly, or via acting out. Shame is an elusive object for research, characteristically hidden, unspeakable; tough to grasp through questionnaires, interviews or focus groups.

This sense suggested developing a group analytic approach to Brexit, exploring unconscious dynamics of the kind small group working can open up. Working in this way might crystalize feelings current within the disorientation of collective-group relations disrupted by the Brexit vote, to open up space for reflection and research[v].

The group conductor [vi] convened a series of extended small group-based explorations of emotional experiences of 'Leavers' and 'Remainers'. The conductor' supported by a small team, ran two groups of the same participants who met three times each, with between five and eight participants in recurrent sessions, and two further sessions containing different participants during a period (2016-2018). These groups coincided with the abrupt beginnings of political processes designed to end the UK's formal relationship within the European Union,[vii] a split often likened to a 'divorce' to signal the depth of traumatic feeling. The project resonated with an emotionally intense political period where the UK Prime Minister David Cameron resigned and was succeeded by Theresa May, who as PM was plunged into the drama of ongoing Brexit negotiations where the language of 'hard' versus 'soft' Brexit dominated. There followed a general election that left the government weakened, with wider protests on the street and in social media divided along Leave versus Remain lines. This febrile and polarised political atmosphere provided an important context for our project which consciously and unconsciously resonated to these passions and concerns.

Group Process: a core preoccupation

This was not a clinical project, but in keeping with the tradition of group analysis[viii] the work explored Brexit experiences, to learn from them. In contrast to focus groups where discursive content is analysed after the event, psychosocial group analytic methods pay closer attention to group dynamics as they occur "in the room" and to the unconscious processes "beneath the surface" (Clarke 2018), for instance, difficulties and resistances encountered in organizing group sessions and the research process.

Such details are treated as not incidental. Instead, they constitute 'data' and 'intelligence' referencing 'unconscious communication' as in some kinds of systemic working (Armstrong 2018; Trainor 2019), actively bracketed *in* to the research process. Such observations constitute pertinent data for reflection and hypothesizing. The dynamic formation of conversations as significant as their contents[ix].

Similarly, we paid attention to the process and experience of group leadership and its effects on the experience of the group itself (Sharp 1994; Behr 1994). Group experience intersects with the conscious aspects of communication and the wider social context, or "social matrix" (Hopper 2014). "Matrix" captures a core conception in psychoanalytic work across levels of psychosocial experience. Earl Hopper considers several such dynamics including times when "traumatic events and processes within the contextual foundation matrix of the group are imported and then enacted" (Hopper 2014: 92). From a related perspective, Figlio and Richards (2003) write about how "the containing matrix of the external world in turn resonates with the internal world of the subject" (2003: 425). Finally, Ogden (1986: 180n) intuits "it seems to me that 'matrix' is a particularly apt word to describe the silently active containing space in which psychological and bodily experience occur".

We suggest that disturbances to the group's containing matrices can precipitate feelings such as shame that might reflect wider cultural-systemic sentiment. This felt especially relevant in apprehending shame (Scott 2011), an element tacit, hidden, unsaid in relations with and to groups, an affect encountered experientially within the group process and by the conductor via field notes and post-group reflections.

Working with the Brexit groups

We have chosen to focus on brief observations linked to several of these group 'process' areas. First, we explore the challenge of gaining participants to form groups as the project began. Second, we reflect on unexpected issues expressed around meeting arrangements and establishing a place for the groups to meet. Third, we explore the significance of an emergent split between Leaver and Remainer participants in the groups. Finally, we consider reflections from the conductor, about trust, leadership, competence and divided loyalties. We then consider themes linked to shame emerging from the group work.

1. Inviting groups

It was difficult to recruit participants. Paradoxically, everybody was talking about Brexit, but nobody wanted to talk about Brexit.

> *It]…has been difficult in terms of recruiting members.. maintaining the group and acting as the conductor. Some of these difficulties have reflected the wider political matrix of Brexit Britain, including the reluctance of leavers to join the group and the defensive behavior of some of those we finally managed to recruit.*
>
> [Conductor's field notes]

Partly, a “refuge” from a Brexit din, groups promised safe and rare spaces to talk; to reflect, justify, and share thoughts. The team hoped meeting in this way offered participants counterpoints to fractious community, familial and news environments. Some respondents commented that intergenerational fights about Brexit loomed large for them. Others talked of the splits in their families and friend groups, often, to identify Brexit becoming a taboo area. One participant, a young woman relayed, that her family members

> “*...find they are unable to speak about how they voted, because they voted to leave. But they've been drawn into something – a thing that they are deeply uncomfortable for that actually hurts long held left wing beliefs that they felt really passionate about, and actually now feel that something horrible has taken place that they can't even talk about...[Brexit has]been hijacked and taken away from them.*

As the work proceeded, reluctance from participants in the groups indicated the extent to which Brexit conversations posed a “risk”, notwithstanding benign intents to offer a listening space.

2. Territory

We noticed recurrent irritations, especially from Leave members, about questions of space. Communications directed to the conductor raised concerns about the suitability of the venue and complaints about the temperature of the room. Members become preoccupied with car-parking arrangements and timings of the groups. Later, there was nervousness about the content of the consent form. The team recorded group members’ dissatisfaction with the seating and the arrangement of chairs.

The prevalence of such process data led us to feel that these concerns signalled deeper anxieties. The substantive focus of the group, Brexit, was itself a matter of territory and

belonging. Convenience suggested that the University was a suitable setting the groups. We had not acknowledged the extent to which the University was *not* a neutral space. Although the region was pro Brexit, it was understood that the university, and indeed all universities in the UK, were 'strongholds' for remain positions.

These connotations seemed to induce, for some Leaver participants, a feeling of "not belonging" and the threat of being shamed in this unwelcoming territory. Others mobilized a kind of counter-shame, adopting a demanding and overdetermined performance in inhabiting the space, seeking to adjust group timings, complaining about car park arrangements. Protests went beyond practical questions of access.

3. Shame and the intergroup: splits and impasses

Despite the intention to bring Leavers and Remainers together, it soon became clear that divisive feelings stirred up by the Brexit campaign, had not dissipated. The sentiment "I can come, but not if I am meeting *them*" gathered momentum. This felt especially true amongst the Leavers. In private correspondence to the research team these participants voiced concerns that they might be objectified as 'thick' or 'racist' by those who voted to remain. The shame, as they saw it, lurking in (mis)recognition of racism, the risk of being attacked prompted withdrawal. The conductor had picked up, that *"the leavers regularly refer to the political metropolitan elite and see themselves as the underdog in that respect". [Conductor's notes]*

Some Leave voters had mobilized Brexit as a blunt instrument, wishing to counter shames derived from injurious exclusions characteristic of neoliberal Britain. The shock result now bestowed some "accent of reality" (Schutz 1945) upon these votes and the various underlying motivations driving "Leave" to an unexpected victory; "winning" tied, now, for some, to new (unconscious) anxieties about the consequences of attacking and defeating a powerful status quo. A risk of shame lay in being "exposed" in a protest vote, a cry for help

(the shame of dependent vulnerability), or in an act of political rage (the shame of loss of control of emotion). Smith describes a "disenfranchised working class", many of whom had "chosen to be flagrantly, shamelessly wrong" (Smith 2016: 7), though we may add that many middle class and affluent voters also supported the Leave agenda (Sobolewska and Ford 2020), including some who participated on our research.

A feeling within Remain groups included expressing *relief at not mixing with the Leavers*: "things don't have to get too 'emotional'" [if we don't meet] adding "It feels safer without leavers". The result had evoked some feelings of shame-by-association amongst the Remain group, identifying the "stupid nationalism of the Brits":

> I think what worries me more now is more that kind of change of tone that's around about foreigners and it's this kind of xenophobia and this sense of you know we're British …sense of nationalism which I find very unsettling.

Complexity and some acrimony followed: 'Remainers' stood, ashamed of, and shaming both 'them' (Leavers) and 'us' (Britain/The EU). The shame-by-association, of being part of a national decision that connoted racism, was hard to bear.

Some other of the Remainers *did* wish to meet their Leave counterparts. An amalgam of guilt and shame surfaced in respect of having underestimated the level of grievance driving the Leave vote. Remainers were confident (on the 'home' territory of the campus) in the prospect of discussing Brexit with Leavers. This included, however, a wish to compartmentalize repudiated and disavowed feelings of racist xenophobia. Paradoxically, the wish to meet with Leavers included an effort to underline their distance from shameful feelings split off and projected into the Leave group. Remainers' appetite to meet Leavers seemed to include a wish for opportunities to re-confirm *distinction* from Leavers, a (separating) line in

the sand, splitting mobilized unconsciously in defence against feelings of loss of an ideal UK as a collective host to "convivial multiculturalism" (Gilroy 2005)

The groups were fascinated with each other, but in practical terms, the ambition to bring together people from the different sides into dialogue via the group method felt, now, impossible and the groups continued to convene separately. The conductor felt helpless to overcome this division and this split-compromise formation instituted in the work represented a bid to sustain the project. It was hard not to collude in this arrangement to avoid facing up to differences or engaging in potential conflicts.

Reflective work led to the observation that a lack of trust on the part of the participants included an attack on the capacity of the conductor as in a curiosity about the professional status of the conductor herself. Could she be trusted to contain difficult and destructive feelings within the group and sustain a space to hold and face up to the shame or even shamelessness of different members? A lack of trust was projected into the conductor and the team that manifested in feelings of incompetence.

4. Leadership

The group wished to test boundaries of time and space and the leadership of the conductor. The conductor's own feelings and experiences form crucial data in this approach. Field notes signal some key tensions and feelings of shame in the work.

> *This group has felt a precarious, even a dangerous experience – and this danger relates to my own antipathy towards the leave position and a fear that the leavers would find out – and leave the group! So, the notion of leave has been all-pervading within this group... [Conductor's field notes]*

From a group analytic perspective, feeling is not 'a one-way street' (Benjamin 2006). Transference dynamics may exist in both sides – between the researcher and the researched. Such feelings include the shame that was sometimes experienced by the conductor in relation to the project. This included unease from the concealment of her own feelings about Brexit when engaging with research participants.

> *Throughout my time with the group I have been concerned that they might find me out and identify me in the same way – as an elite Remainer - and in truth - I have found much of what they said difficult to hear…I've often felt guilty that I have somehow acted in bad faith with this group and even a sense of shame that I have that I've allowed certain views to go unchallenged. [Conductor's field notes]*

The theme of the lack of good leadership emerged alongside these projections. This tension indexed the depth and extents of Brexit impasses, and the fear of shame associated with them. A parallel process came to mind: the wider impasse emerging in the then Prime Minister Theresa May's ultimately failed effort to progress a Brexit deal with the EU. Concurrently, May was preparing her "Chequers Deal", (HM Government: 2018). Cook's (2019) headline captures the mood: 'Theresa May has lied, manipulated, sneered and shamed us all'.

Some similar lack of trust was alive in the groups. The conductor carried anxieties of holding a split system in mind – sustaining the project – and the tensions and conflicts informing the divided group. This balance of anger and the fear of exposure signalling itself in shame. Our groups, like the Brexit process under discussion were "opening Pandora's box" (Birchmore 2020) and finding shameful things within.

The Remain groups evoked shame associated with becoming decentered, becoming outsiders, displaced from a predominant political consensus; a loss, not just of political control on the Brexit issue itself but simultaneously a deeper loss of a feeling of being in control of *the political sphere*. There was shame of not feeling recognized as *right* or *good* in the eyes of a

(suddenly) authorized-instituted pro-Brexit cultural-political system, or, at least, by a powerful (and emboldened) part of that system.

It was difficult to maintain momentum in the work and participation. It was a feeling from the groups that they wanted the work to be over, or at least for it to find some tidy resolution. We noted fears within the Leave group throughout the research process that somehow the results would not be recognized, that Brexit and the recognition is seemed to signal - would indeed be taken away. Their success, as they saw it, might become compromised reduced to "Brexit in name only".

The legitimacy of the referendum became (and remains) a significant matter, in part because it shifted authority from parliamentary democratic forms of authorisation, towards the referendum – a populist form of "democracy" that, in practice, deauthorised parliamentary and other state authorities. As discussed earlier, this shift was experienced psychosocially as a loss of containment, which on different sides of the debate allowed the power dynamics of recognition, shame and shaming to take place. In the group work it felt as if Remainer groups might sometimes unconsciously withhold recognition from the constituencies they associated with the Leave vote. Conversely, Leavers' desire to enforce recognition of the result articulated a powerful assertion of the wish to be seen, a wish to be recognized in and by a political-institutional process.

Incrementally, this feeling fed an uncompromising stance within the groups, either to "erase" Brexit, or else, notably a manic wish to get it over and done with. In 2019, these feelings echoed the eventually successful Brexiteer-led Conservative party general election strategy built around the mantra "get Brexit done."

Shame by association: race and racism

Amongst the Remainers there was a sense of shame in having failed to protect or keep hold of, or to live up to something good. For the ideal of a "convivial multiculturalism" a "multi-culture, which is distinguished by some notable demands for hospitality, conviviality, tolerance, justice, and mutual care" (Gilroy 2005: 99) as a living socio-political principle in the national psyche. For Remainer advocates of this imagined conviviality, the Brexit defeat represented some loss of face, a testing of the authenticity of the idealism enshrined in this conception of the UK.

Some Leavers talked about the contamination of a "good" Brexit by the contagious associations, as they saw it, spilling into the Brexit they had intended, in the form of racism and anti-immigrant polices. Others talked about how "eventually" they (for example younger generations in their family who had voted Remain), would come to recognize the "good" Brexit, and the bravery of their Leave decision in time – occasionally mobilizing a nostalgic ideal of empire and global centrality for Great Britain.

Brexit, shame, polarization and breaking social bonds

Five years after the Brexit vote, we reflect on the peculiar, unresolved character of the emotional-political life of the period, and on identities forged and projected around the "leave" and "remain" groups, groups which could not tolerate meeting face-to-face. In retrospect, the group work generated a vivid-to-us micro instance of 'affective polarization' (Hobolt et al 2020; Angharad 2019) in turbulent times. Shame, and divisions across emergent and consolidating Brexit-boundaries and identification contributed to the dynamics at play in our small groups.

Splits in the body politic brings Scheff's (2000; 2014), work on shame and the social bond to mind, prompting the sense that Brexit, ostensibly an examination and test of the UK's relationships with the EU, became, also, a platform expressing anxieties associated with assorted broken bonds and failures of dependence/interdependence, trust/doubt and

recognition/reciprocity. Not all of these were directly, or even indirectly EU-related (see also Yates and MacRury 2021), but expressed a wider turbulence in experiences and political imagination across the culture.

Shame and fear of shame have become increasingly prevalent in concretizing narratives related to notions of the “winner-loser” society, or "casino capitalism" (Reiner et al 2000; Yates 2016: xiii; Yates 2019). Converging contemporary currents; hyper-individuation, hollowing-out and dis-embedding, all associated with macro-scale societal processes; “neoliberalisation” in turn expressed across multiple constitutive vectors including privatisation and de-nationalisation, globalisation, de-industrialisation, McDonaldization, Uberization, and financialization of everyday living. This inventory of disruption appears abstract. However, the pains marking everyday life feel immediate and concrete. Shame (and the threat of shame) is one source of such pain because,

> shame and threats to the social bond are interdependent aspects of the same reality. Shame is the emotional aspect of disconnection between persons (Scheff and Retzinger, 1991:27).

Brexit represented stages in a longer and more deep-rooted assault on core psychosocial capacities of the “social bond” that are linked to processes of relational connection, recognition and reciprocity. This dynamic is captured by Figlio and Richards (2003) in their conception of disruptions in “the containing matrix of the social”. Brexit offered an opportunity to act out, on a national level, such a crisis, of social bonds, of containment, recognitions and attachments. Our groups played out parallel disturbances in this ‘group matrix’ on a micro scale, but hinting at the profundity of splits and the likely difficulty of repair in the body politic in the aftermaths of the Brexit results. As one French speaking, member of the Remain group said with reference to an encounter from a stranger at a local rail station:

The woman said to me: ‘Oh, you have a lot of suitcases with you! Are you leaving us?”

Another participant in this group said:

> …my son at school, he faced a little bit of ‘go back to your country’ … just worrying…especially after hearing the news and media, about some Polish have been abused….

As shown here, shame and shaming, in their connections to violence was not always indirect or metaphorical (Walby 2020; Hester 2021; Abranches et al 2020). Gilligan’s observations linking shame and violence (Gilligan 2003; 1999; 1996) resonate with our exploration, with real and cultural violence, micro- and macro-aggressions towards immigrants a backdrop to Brexit; shame acted out in ugly scenes at the borderlines of a split society.

The failures in containment enacted in our group processes, and the feelings of shame associated with this communicative failure indexes a broader attack on the deliberative function in political life. That attack is sharpened by populist rhetoric and leadership styles, and amplified in the winner-loser, casino politics of the moment. This marks failures to sustain, or a flight from, the “thirdness” of a containing perspective to moderate them/us and victim/perpetrator dynamics (Benjamin 2017). We see a dynamic described by Figlio and Richards (2003: 422) which

> creates pressure to reduce the complex matrix of society to a polarity between victim and perpetrator. It reduces the complex matrix of society to a schism between damaged objects and a tyrannical structure that offers protection against depressive anxiety.

COVID-19 suspended, dampened and displaced some resentments associated with Brexit. But the sense of political disintegration and failures of containment enacted in our groups feel, still, prophetic in their anticipations of a continuing period of political disarray. Shame, and the violence it can threaten and provoke when uncontained, unthought, unacknowledged, will provide a continuing penumbra, shadowing institutional political life and everyday political feeling. Attentiveness to shame and its vicissitudes should stand as a significant component in reflections on politics in the UK. It may be that reflective group projects such as our own, provide containing spaces through which to work through the affective politics of shame and (mis)recognition.

Nonetheless, Gilligan's (2003) prison-based observations about the connections between shame and violence are salutary as we emerge from locked-down Britain. "Affective polarization" (Hobolt et al 2020) along borderlines drawn in the Brexit campaign and in its aftermath, present dynamics at risk of becoming firmly instituted in post-Brexit political culture.

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[ii] "Nation" has also shifted, with the fragile settlements linking England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in further complex and painful disarray, now longstanding (O'Toole 2018).

[iii] Hay suggests this complex term, 'political ontology' includes considering: "What is the polity made of? What are its constituents and how do they hang together?" (Hay 2009: 81).

[iv] Christopher Nolan's (1917) film *Dunkirk,* alongside Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour* (2017) marked cinematic interventions within a Brexit culture preoccupied with martial themes and inviting (specious) analogies between WWII and the UK's political-economic withdrawal from the EU.

[v] See also Yates and MacRury (2021).

[vi] Some group approaches liken the group leadership to the reciprocal musical attunement needed in leading an orchestra. In this tradition, the group facilitator is referred to as the 'Conductor'.

[vii] O'Toole (2018) dubs this phase, *Three Years in Hell*.

[viii] This process-led approach has some roots in clinical group analysis pioneered by the psychoanalyst S. H. Foulkes (1948) who is linked to the Institute of Group Analysis and also the British Human Relations tradition of group analysis pioneered by Wilfred Bion (1963), and practiced in the Tavistock tradition.

[ix] To aid analysis we transcribed and reviewed emergent themes in the data, see also (Yates and MacRury 2021).