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Conference paper

Collective victimhood in populist media about Brexit: rage against the machine?

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Collective victimhood in populist media about Brexit: Rage against the machine?

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Abstract

This paper outlines an ongoing qualitative study in social psychology, with a pilot study completed and the main study currently at the data analysis stage. We examine how collective and competitive victimhood are invoked in populist rhetoric and media coverage of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (Brexit). Brexit has been portrayed by its proponents as a project on behalf of ordinary British people against an out-of-touch liberal elite and a malevolent European Union (EU), with the opposing campaign to remain in the EU commonly characterised as an alarmist "project fear" (see Bartholomew, 2017; Durrheim et al., 2018; Forsyth, 2016; Malik, 2018). This populist idea of ordinary people as victims of manipulative and mendacious elites seems to relate to social-psychological work on collective and competitive victimhood (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Noor et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2012; Vollhardt et al., 2014). According to this account, victimhood can be used as political capital to justify grievances and intergroup conflict. Research on this topic has mostly used quantitative methods, but first attempts have been made to use qualitative methods to show rhetorical functions of collective and competitive victimhood (McNeill et al., 2017). Building on these theoretical and methodological foundations, we use thematic analysis and discourse analysis to show how victimhood is mobilised in British media to garner support for Brexit, and how this connects with concepts such as collective relative deprivation (e.g. Abrams & Grant, 2012; Runciman, 1966) and relative gratification (Dambrun et al., 2006; Guimond & Dambrun, 2002; Jetten et al., 2015). In doing so, we contribute to a social-psychological perspective on Brexit, develop further the concepts of collective and competitive victimhood, and connect the micro-level of language used in the media sphere to the macro-level of populist movements in democratic societies.

Background

The referendum of 23 June 2016, in which a narrow but decisive majority of British voters supported the departure of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU), was momentous for the political landscape in the UK and Europe (Geoghegan, 2016). The UK's withdrawal from the EU, commonly known as Brexit, has had very substantial consequences in political, economic and cultural terms, many of which are still developing. There are also important psychological and social consequences, for example concerning the sense of belonging among EU citizens who live in the UK (Bueltmann & Bulat, 2021; Foxwell et al., 2021; Racz, 2020; Tyrell et al., 2018) and among UK citizens who live in the EU (Benson, 2020; Benson & O'Reilly, 2020), experiences of racism among EU citizens in the UK (Rzepnikowska, 2019), and intergroup relations between "Leavers" and "Remainers" – that is, those who support and those who oppose Brexit (Hanel & Wolf, 2020).

Consequently, much interdisciplinary attention has been given to the referendum and the campaign that preceded it. Although the difficult history of the UK-EU relationship has certainly played a part (Curtice, 2016), these analyses have considered the influential role of right-wing populism from the start. Anti-immigration and anti-establishment sentiments appeared to combine (Hobolt, 2016). People seemed more likely to support Brexit when they believed levels of immigration to the UK to be too high and, simultaneously, had low levels of trust in politicians (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018). The UK Independence Party (UKIP), which played a major role in the Leave campaign, was characterised by opposition to immigration, to the EU, and also to the political establishment (Hayton, 2016). And one of the most striking images of the Leave campaign, the infamous "Breaking point" poster, played on racism and anti-immigration attitudes together with the message that the EU had failed "us", the British people (Durrheim et al., 2018).

This points towards a sense of being collectively under threat – from immigration, from the EU, and from the ostensibly pro-EU political establishment in the UK at the time – being involved in support for Brexit. This notion is corroborated by findings of a theme of "Europe as a threat" in a focus group study conducted in England prior to the referendum (Andreouli, 2019). Meanwhile, a quantitative study with British participants (Golec de Zavala et al., 2017) found that support for Leave was predicted by perceived threat by immigrants (which, in turn, was predicted by collective narcissism, social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism, and mediated their effects on support for the referendum result). Similarly, voting intentions and behaviour were found to be predicted among British respondents by

perceived threat from European immigrants, which in turn was predicted by political conservatism and a view of the world as a dangerous place (Van de Vyver et al., 2018). In addition to common measures of realistic and symbolic threat perceived by British participants as emanating from Muslim immigrants to the UK, even the belief in an Islamic conspiracy (measured by items such as “There is an ongoing attempt to Islamise and Arabise Europe, thereby weakening Europe’s existing culture and values”) was found to predict the intention to vote Leave (Swami et al., 2018). In sum, there seems to be ample evidence that a sense of threat contributed to Brexit.

Social psychology has well-established theories to make sense of group-level threat and its consequences, mostly based on social identity (Reicher, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and integrated threat theory (Stephan et al., 2005; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Relatively recently, the concepts of collective and competitive victimhood have received increased attention (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Noor et al., 2017; Vollhardt, 2020). These ideas are important because a shared sense of collective victimhood – in other words, a widely accepted notion that the ingroup has been victimised – can be a powerful reason for collective action and mobilisation as well as a source of social and political capital. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the victim role is powerful because it allows the group to claim the moral high ground, can be used to reduce guilt for the hostile acts of ingroup members, may attract help from third parties, can serve as an argument to strengthen group boundaries, identification and cohesion, and might even be used to justify some kind of retaliation (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008). Therefore, groups in conflict with each other may strive to claim that the ingroup is the “real” victim or has been victimised more – a phenomenon called competitive victimhood, which has been shown to relate negatively to intergroup trust, forgiveness and reconciliation (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008; Noor et al., 2012, 2015). This work has mostly used quantitative survey methods, with few exceptions including an investigation of victimhood discourses in focus groups in Northern Ireland (McNeill et al., 2017). Although the work on competitive victimhood was inspired by work on violent intergroup conflict, some manifestations of collective victimhood also appear in non-violent intergroup conflict (Jasini et al., 2017).

Victimhood is claimed even by dominant groups, when their status seems to be under threat and group leaders seize the opportunity to position themselves as champions who can restore the group to its rightful place (Reicher & Ulusahin, 2020). Populist leaders have used narratives of victimhood to mobilise support (Taş, 2022). This description appears to fit the Leave campaign leading to Brexit, with threats claimed to be emanating from uncontrolled immigration and the EU who is to blame for it (see Durrheim et al., 2018), as well as an out-of-touch liberal elite acting politically against the will of the people (Bartholomew, 2017; Forsyth, 2016; Malik,

2018). Specifically on the topic of Brexit, a recent paper from political science (Maronitis, 2021) discusses how the campaign of the “Brexit Party” (the successor of UKIP after the referendum) used arguments about victimhood on behalf of the post-industrial working class. So, although the British mainstream is culturally dominant, members may claim disadvantaged status in examples of competitive victimhood. This is reminiscent of the ideas of relative deprivation, where a group presents itself as disadvantaged (Abrams & Grant, 2012; Runciman, 1966) and relative gratification, where the group presents itself as being at risk of losing the privileges it purportedly deserves (Dambrun et al., 2006; Guimond & Dambrun, 2002; Jetten et al., 2015).

Having experienced the campaign pointing towards these threats, claiming victim status for ordinary British people, and presenting Brexit as a solution and possible victory over these adversaries, we decided to study more systematically how collective and competitive victimhood were invoked in populist rhetoric in Brexit-related media. We chose to focus on text already in the public domain, both for ethical reasons and because it seemed more appropriate to examine these political statements in the context in which they were originally made – especially considering the political influence of the British mass media (see Gavin, 2018; Reeves et al., 2016). Online newspaper articles and reader comments have been used previously to examine arguments about contentious topics such as anthropogenic climate change using discourse analysis and thematic analysis (Jaspal et al., 2013; Woods et al., 2018). We took a similar approach, detailed below.

Our general research question was about how writers used the notions of collective or competitive victimhood to make arguments about Brexit. We hope to contribute to academic analyses of Brexit by applying the social-psychological perspective of collective and competitive victimhood to our investigation of the news media (as Maronitis, 2021, has done with the Brexit Party campaign), and thereby also to contribute to knowledge of collective victimhood by offering a qualitative study linking it to an important real-world topic. Several smaller-scale student projects served as pilot or “satellite” studies for the main study, which is currently at the data analysis stage.

Methodological approach

Since all data were in the public domain and intended to be widely read, the most important decision in terms of research ethics concerned the authors’ names. Our research questions did not require any knowledge of authors’ identities or personal backgrounds, so we examined only what they had written.

All studies used the Lexis Nexis database of newspapers as well as standard online search engines and the web sites of relevant publications to identify textual data for inclusion in a database. We chose articles that commented in some way on Brexit and the EU-UK relationship because purely factual news articles (for example about the value of the pound sterling) would be unsuitable to answer the research question about how collective and competitive victimhood are used in arguments.

Each study used a somewhat different set of search terms and constraints (see below) to find suitable articles. Texts found by these search terms were included in the data set only if they rhetorically invoked collective victimhood explicitly or implicitly. The principle was to include a source where the idea of being victimised (or the threat of being victimised) at group level was used to make a rhetorical point. The group level was important here because of the focus on collective, rather than individual, victimhood. Sometimes the group was a national group (e.g. the UK, England), sometimes a side in the Brexit debate (Leavers or Remainers), sometimes a more diffuse group defined in contradistinction to the group allegedly responsible for the victimisation (e.g. “ordinary people” as opposed to “experts” or “the elite”). These initial decisions inevitably involved a degree of subjective judgement, but were necessary because search terms alone would have missed common subtleties in language use and yielded an inferior data set. For example, an article talking about people becoming a victim of crime would explicitly mention the idea of victimhood, but be irrelevant to the research question; whereas an article about the country being treated badly would be clearly relevant without spelling out victimhood.

The main study covered articles from British newspapers with nationwide readership and generally considered to belong to the political right or centre-right: The Sun, The Daily Express, The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Mail, and their respective Sunday editions. The time frame included the year 2015 and the year 2016 until the end of June, about a week after the referendum. The search terms of the main study included “Brexit, Victimhood in Brexit, UK and EU Brexit, reasons why UK wants to leave the EU”. Only articles of 200 words or more were considered. After the initial decisions about inclusion explained above, an overview spreadsheet was created and included information such as the title of the article, the URL of its online version, and an example quotation where the idea of victimhood is involved. All researchers had access to this spreadsheet, but each of the student projects chose a different focus and used additional search strategies (see below).

Procedures for data analysis included thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore the kinds of context in which collective or competitive victimhood were invoked, and the kinds of

points made by authors using this rhetorical feature. One of the student projects also used a discourse analysis approach (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to examine how specific examples constructed victimhood and the social relationships involved. The main study is taking a similar approach and is currently in the process of data analysis.

Student project 1: News articles and Facebook

The first study was a BSc project by Andrew Layton (known as Andrew Pearce at the time), supervised by Dennis Nigbur. This study examined newspaper and social media (Facebook) comments in two time frames: from February to June 2016, matching the time between the announcement of the referendum and the referendum itself, and from June 2017 to November 2018, during which details of the withdrawal agreement were widely discussed. The key words “Brexit, leave, sovereignty, immigration, elite, unelected” were used to include the populist rhetoric seen prior to the referendum vote. Articles that passed the first decision about inclusion were examined in four ways: Terms that constructed the narrative were highlighted, interpretive repertoires were elucidated, their functions for the issue or the speaker were identified, and the discursive devices used were highlighted.

The analysis identified a recurring set of terms used in pre-vote articles to construct a narrative of independence and control, where sovereignty was referred to as under threat from the controlling forces of the EU. The function is to place EU officials as aggressors and legitimise positioning them as untrustworthy and often describing them as unelected. Another set of terms concerned the use of scare tactics, such as scaremongering or “Project Fear”. A third pre-vote discourse focused on an uncaring or arrogant elite, positioned against the people by holding back the historic Empire from returning in spirit.

In the post-vote period, these discourses were rarer but otherwise similar, except that different targets were now identified as the victimisers. Rather than the “unelected” EU officials or the scaremongers of “Project Fear”, politicians ostensibly hindering the completion of Brexit became the enemy of ordinary people. There was an additional discourse: “Brexit means Brexit”. While this had limited inherent meaning and provides a clear example of systematic vagueness, it was used flexibly and with gravitas as a shorthand for the major issues already present in the pre-vote discourse: being in control of laws, immigration and trade without EU influence.

An additional analysis examined reader comments on the public Facebook pages of the most prominent news outlets identified in the data collection. Thematic analysis yielded themes of

terrorism being linked with immigration, Britain standing tall alone, and the EU controlling laws. Post-vote themes additionally included the **removal or silencing of dissent.**

“... the EU is hell bent on allowing more and more unknowns into Europe with bomb attacks becoming the norm”

“Its time to let the world see that we got that name because we are great, and will be greater without the EU.”

“our parliament will be nothing more than an EU department implementing their rules and laws. ... we’ll be shackled to and unelected group of faceless people”

“Get rid of remoaner traitors that are working against the national interest.”

Student project 2: Newspapers on Leave and Remain

The second study was an MSc project by Anesu Jemwa, supervised by Dennis Nigbur. This project used thematic analysis to explore newspaper articles and reader comments on the web pages of these newspapers. It included both right-wing and left-wing publications. Accordingly, the search terms for this study were a little wider than for the main study, including “Brexit victimhood, Brexit happiness, voters’ opinions on Brexit, virtue signalling Brexit, Brexit liberal elite, Brexit xenophobia, Brexit racism, Brexit culture war, toxic Brexit, Brexit oppression, Brexit cult, Brexit woke, Remoaner, and Remainers versus Leavers”. When searching for the news articles the researcher looked at articles published between 2015 and 2022 in the UK, to include some time before and after the referendum. After the initial decisions about inclusion in the data set, just 68 articles with clear relevance to the research question were retained. The thematic analysis focused on how the idea of collective victimhood featured in these articles. Five themes were identified:

“**Out of touch**” was about how voters felt victimised by political leaders and “liberal elites” who did not represent them. The roles of victim and perpetrator were clear, although the victimisation took different forms.

“these wide spread misconceptions are the result of a concentrated campaign by left-liberal political, media and cultural elites to depict British society the way they wish it to be rather than as it is.” (Daily Mail, 6 June 2022)

“**Weakness**” was partly about portraying the EU as a weak and failing institution, which would prevent the UK from prospering – for example, by stopping the UK from making its own trade

deals around the world. But British politicians, too, were accused of weakness by both the Leave and Remain camps: Those who voted to leave argued that what they voted for was not being achieved, and as result both the leaders and country were considered to be in a position of weakness. Those who voted to remain attributed the weakness to insufficient action being taken to avoid a worse situation for the country after Brexit.

“Mrs May’s deal fails to free us of EU trading rules and would keep us in a permanent Customs Union. It would create great uncertainty for British business and frustrate our ability to make trade deals across the world. Theresa May would split the Union... This contradicts her oft-stated intention to protect ‘our precious union’” (Daily Telegraph, 12 December 2018)

“Fear” covered fears expressed by both the Leave and Remain camps, founded in the anticipation of negative consequences if the UK remained in the EU or left the EU, respectively. In the example below, a pro-Brexit article mobilises fear of allegedly uncontrolled immigration:

“When British voters eventually cast their ballot in the In/Out referendum, the EU’s near-criminal failure to protect its 500million citizens from extremist killers will be one of the deciding factors” (The Sun, 23 March 2016)

“Control” referred to the leaders and people of the UK losing control of their country. Brexit was presented as way to take back this control. Among other examples, UK businesses were portrayed as being taken advantage of by the EU, and the British people as the victims of this injustice. Some articles also claimed that the UK was no longer in charge of its own culture because of EU interference. “Take back control”, one of the slogans of the Leave campaign, was thus a matter of regaining not only control, but also freedom.

“Robert Oxley, of Business for Britain, said: ‘A majority of businesses are unhappy with the EU status quo and want to see the UK take control back.’” (Daily Mirror, 17 September 2015)

“Mistreatment” was identified in both Leave- and Remain-supporting articles. The Leave side tended to portray Brexit as the result of their victimisation, whereas the Remain side regarded Brexit itself as the mistreatment – a matter of misleading voters.

“... Brexit has indeed mined a generation of scattered grievances and forged them into a single demand to leave the EU and that immigration was one of those grievances.” (The Guardian, 14 December 2020)

Student project 3: Mail Online

The third study was an MSc project by India Volkers Poile, supervised by Dennis Nigbur. This project focused specifically on articles published by the Mail Online, the online presence of the Daily Mail (a widely read and influential right-wing tabloid) during June 2016. The data set comprised articles and comment pieces containing an editorial position, and pertaining to Brexit and the themes surrounding Brexit reporting: the economy, immigration, national health service (NHS), foreign policy, education, welfare, crime and housing amongst others. The purpose was to explore how collective and competitive victimhood were mobilised by this pro-Leave outlet in the immediate context of the referendum. Thematic analysis resulted in three main themes, linked by the central idea that the ingroup is great, benign, and undeserving of victimisation by EU and UK elites and the threats that their policies create:

“The threat of immigration” captured claims that British people were under threat from immigration, crime imported to the UK through immigration, and a lack of control over national borders. This was extended to possible consequences far in the future, for example in a claim that the British countryside would be ruined by the need to build new housing for a population inflated by unchecked immigration, or even the projection that White English speakers would become a minority in Britain by the 2060s.

“What is certain is that if nothing is done to curb the numbers, Britain will cease to be recognisably British even sooner than officially recorded trends suggest” (Daily Mail, 2 June 2016 – 21 days before the referendum)

“A great Britain” was about positive characteristics of Britain or the UK, which were portrayed as threatened, diluted or stifled by EU membership. The British ingroup was presented as historically benign and morally beyond reproach, for example for being a champion of parliamentary democracy, human rights, and free trade. Elsewhere, this high status was mobilised towards a Leave vote, for example by claiming that Brexit would allow the UK to “fulfil our destiny as one of the world’s greatest trading nations”. The implication is that the EU is stopping the UK from achieving or exercising its greatness.

“A vote to leave would enable us to fulfil our destiny as one of the world’s greatest trading nations [...]. But there is nothing petty-minded about being proud of our traditions and history as a great seafaring country, with enterprise in our DNA, unafraid to reach out to Europe and beyond. [...] Our ancestors shed oceans of blood to uphold and defend this country’s right to govern itself, pass its own laws, raise its own taxes and — most pertinently — get rid of politicians when they abuse our trust” (Daily Mail, 21 June 2016 – 2 days before the referendum)

“We have less to be ashamed of than any other nation on Earth. We gave the world Parliamentary democracy, the industrial revolution, Magna Carta, human rights and free trade.” (Daily Mail, 24 June 2016 – 1 day after the referendum)

“**Championing the everyman**” revolved around the ideal that ordinary British people should come first, and pitted this purported ingroup against outgroup elites. There was also an anti-EU aspect to this, with EU leaders presented as the prototype of an elite outgroup. British and EU politicians were both accused of failing to understand democracy and acting against the will of the people. This was sometimes done in stark terms that foregrounded the notion of victimisation, for example describing the European Commission as a secretive, unelected body issuing diktats to override elected democracies.

“This is a magnificent day for Great Britain. We should celebrate our new freedom — and pay tribute to the countless ordinary Britons who showed so much more wisdom than the self-serving political and financial elites that for too long have ignored their anxieties and aspirations” (Daily Mail, 24 June 2016 – 1 day after the referendum)

Next steps

A comprehensive analysis of the main data set, as outlined above, will be conducted and written up. We have approached another potential research collaborator with extensive experience in analysing media sources.

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