

RESEARCH PAPER:

“Brexit, Birmingham, belonging and home: the experience of secondary migrant Somali families and the dirty work of boundary maintenance”

ABSTRACT

Purpose:

This article investigates the impact of the Brexit referendum on feelings of belonging and home among secondary migrant Somali families in the city of Birmingham. Here, the Brexit referendum is understood through the analytical framework of the politics of belonging in that it functioned as a political mechanism that demarcated who was able to belong and who was not.

Design:

This research was qualitatively designed, comprising 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews that utilised a whole family methodological approach. In doing so, this article considers how the referendum challenged notions of citizenship as also community and individual identities.

Findings:

For the families engaged, they experienced the referendum as a mechanism that immediately conveyed notions of ‘Otherness’ and ‘foreign-ness’ onto them thereby creating anxiety, uncertainty and instability. This article argues that the emotional components of belonging were also challenged to the extent that feelings of security, safety and ‘home’ became rendered meaningless through the disempowering impact of the referendum via the removal of autonomy and choice in the bonds that exist between people and places.

Originality:

This article generates new knowledge about the impact of the Brexit referendum. As a ‘one-off’ event, this research provides new insights into the political, social and cultural impacts of the vote. It considers a minority group that is seen to be hard to reach and thereby under-researched.

Keywords: Brexit; Somali families, Birmingham, belonging; home; migration

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore how the Brexit referendum vote in June 2016 had an immediate impact on experiences of belonging and home among Somali heritage families living in Birmingham; families that had arrived in the city as a consequence of ‘onward’ or ‘secondary’ migration, those who moved to Britain after having obtained full citizenship status in another European Union member state. Here, the Brexit referendum is understood through the analytical framework provided by Yuval-Davis’ theories relating to the politics of belonging whereby the referendum can be seen to be a political mechanism and subsequent process catalysing a political turn that shaped and informed collective understandings and notions about who was able to belong and who was not. In doing so, this article sets out the findings from new empirical research that shows how the Brexit referendum functioned to demarcate the ‘us’ from the ‘them’ in terms of notions of citizenship but more importantly in terms of community and individual identities. For those Somali families engaged in this project, they experienced the referendum as a mechanism that immediately conveyed notions of ‘Otherness’ and ‘foreign-ness’ and thereby instability onto what were previously stable and largely unquestioned notions of home and belonging. This article therefore argues that the emotional components of belonging were challenged where feelings of security, safety and home became rendered meaningless through the disempowering impact of the

referendum via the removal of autonomy and choice in the bonds that exist between people and places.

Analytical Framework

In some ways, belonging would appear to be self-explanatory. Isakjee (2013) disagrees however, stating that it is rather more complex and contested due to it being subjective and open to fluidity. At its simplest, the scholarly canon defines belonging as that which seeks to connect identity to space, typically embodying an emotional bond between individual and place (Inalhan & Finch 2004, 121-123; Guiliani and Feldman, 1993). Those such as Antonsich (2010, 647-648) have sought to offer greater clarity through setting out a five-fold typology of constituent, albeit still fluid, factors: auto-biographical, relational, cultural, economic and legal. While useful, Antonsich fails to incorporate the emotional; a factor Ignatieff (2006) argues is essential in making us feel safe and thereby at 'home'. Accordingly, 'home' does not necessarily constitute a physical structure or space (Moore, 2000) not least because as those such as Mallett (2004) have put forward, physical spaces can be where women in particular experience violence, oppression or persecution. More recently, Boccagni (2017) has defined home as a relationship between person and place; a culturally and normatively-oriented experience based on what can only be seen to be tentative attribution of notions that include security and familiarity as also a level of control over others. For the purpose of this article, Isakjee's (2013) linking of belonging and home are pertinent. For him, home is important in that it is likely to be where people have an imagined and psychologically felt sense of belonging. As he goes on, while this has the very real potential to be whimsical or even idealist, both - home and belonging - are informed and shaped by that emotional bond referred to previously and

which becomes so integral to understanding how people interpret and convey their own sense of belonging.

Another factor missing from Antonsich's typology is that of the political. For Yuval-Davis (2006) this is problematic given the clear interconnectedness that exists between the emotional and political. As she explains, this is because that interconnectedness is important in helping to understand how political mechanisms and processes threaten the emotional bonds that exist thereby making individuals – or at least some - feel less secure (Yuval-Davis 2006:202). In identifying this interconnectedness, Yuval-Davis refers to it as the 'politics of belonging' (Yuval-Davis 2006; Yuval-Davis et al 2005). For her, political actors, mechanisms and processes have the potential to function in a multiplicity of ways to construct boundaries between different identities and identity groups. Crowley (1996:13) goes further however in his analysis in that he argues that the true function of these actors, mechanisms and processes is that they do the 'dirty work of boundary maintenance': functioning to differentiate and demarcate. For Clarke (2003) this supports the constructions of order about who 'we' are and, through processes of stigmatisation, marginalisation and intolerance, who 'we' are not: differentiating and demarcating 'us' from 'them'.

For Yuval-Davis (2006:205), the dirty work of the politics of belonging also determines whether specific groups and individuals can stand inside or outside the imaginary boundaries that confer legitimacy upon notions of belonging. In a political context, so too does this confer legitimacy on notions of citizenship as also the status and entitlements that are associable (Yuval-Davis, 2011). If, as is argued here, the Brexit referendum is a political mechanism that functioned within the framework of the politics of belonging – that it constructed or maintained boundaries that conferred legitimacy on

who was and was not able to belong - then it must be shown that the referendum went beyond offering people the opportunity to vote either for or against membership of the European Union. More importantly, the referendum must be seen to have functioned to demarcate those with different identities, associations and affiliations as a means of differentiating ‘them’ from ‘us’. In the context of this article therefore, the politics of belonging provides an appropriate analytical framework through which the impact and function of the Brexit referendum vote can be explored.

Fieldwork and Methodology

This study is part of larger project exploring the impact of the Brexit referendum on notions of home and belonging among a number of different minority communities including those in the United Kingdom (UK) and British citizens in France and Spain. The findings here draw on a series of interviews conducted with Somali families which had a history of secondary migration to the UK and were living in the city of Birmingham. The sampling approach was necessarily non-probabilistic and purposive. Simply put, the study set out what needed to be known which in turn determined who needed to be identified (Bernard 2002, Lewis & Sheppard 2006). Identification began with contacting known individuals and organisations from whom a number of other potential respondents were referred. On making contact with them, researchers sought to confirm suitability and assess their willingness to be interviewed as a family. It is important to stress that the study sought to refrain from imposing presumptive or normative constraints on what respondents understood a family to mean. In this respect, Whall’s (1993) definition was used whereby a family is a self-identified group of two or more members who may or may not be related by bloodlines or law but for whom association is characterised by

special terms. This was important because the study was concerned with what Germain (1994) refers to as understandings and meanings that emerge out of ‘family paradigms’, the shared and implicit views families hold about themselves and the social world they inhabit and which are duly shaped and informed by collective yet unique histories, values and experiences. This study therefore actively sought to understand families as being more than a set of individuals and more than the sum of its individual members (Åstedt-Kurki et al, 2001).

Respondent families were required to be interviewed together within two months of the referendum. Eight families were interviewed in their own homes, the other two in public locations at their own request. The interviews were undertaken with the knowledge that family interviews can be dominated by individual informants (Gilliss, 1991). In response, mechanisms were put in place that included targeted questions to those who were not involved as a means of ensuring the family was the informant rather than individuals (Åstedt-Kurki et al, 2001). It was important that a whole family method was approached in that the study sought to investigate both individual and collective understandings about identities, emotions, belonging and ‘home’. It was also necessary to try and capture different histories and experiences as also different journeys and stories. It was also crucial to investigate the emotional bonds that underpin notions of home and belonging. Given these are typically experienced through familial and kinship networks, a whole family approach would be extremely valuable.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were preferred in that they provide opportunities for free-flowing yet focused discussions to be had through which feelings and reactions about ‘sensitive’ topics can be had (Renzetti and Lee, 1993). During the interviews, families were asked about: experiences of life and work in Birmingham prior

and post the referendum vote; reasons for settling in Birmingham in particular the characteristics that drew them to the city; what ‘home’ meant and where they saw this to be. Respondents were also asked about how their feelings might have changed. From ten interviews undertaken, 25 respondents participated in the study. Ranging from the age of 16 through to 43, 12 of those interviewed were female, 13 male. All except one of the respondents were of Somali heritage. One respondent was a Polish citizen that had married a Somali heritage woman after moving to Birmingham. In terms of being secondary migrants, four respondents were citizens of the Netherlands, three Swedish, three Norwegian, two Finnish, one Belgian and one Danish. All others were British citizens of Somali heritage except the Polish respondent referred to previously.

It is important to acknowledge that the findings here are drawn from a small-scale qualitative study. While small-scale studies are a growing component of social science research, some argue that the small number of respondents typically involved in these studies mean that they have limited acceptability and generalisability on the basis that only sizeable samples offer validity (Flick, 2002). While so, it is important to note Polit & Beck’s (2010) view that qualitative generalisability is somewhat utopian. Consequently, Marshall (1996) and Morse (1998) are right to stress the misapprehension of arguments underpinning most of the criticism directed towards small-scale qualitative studies namely that generalisability is not the sole measure of good research. For Crouch and Mackenzie (2006), the true value of small-scale qualitative studies is that they penetrate what they describe as the realities of social life that exist beyond and indeed behind, normative appearances and manifested meanings. Through these studies, the researcher is able to establish and facilitate extremely close relationships with respondents as a means of enhancing what Crouch and Mackenzie (2006) refer to as fine-

grained and in-depth inquiry in settings that are natural and normal. The small-scale qualitative study here is entirely appropriate therefore given that it elucidates understanding and improves knowledge about a very specific situation in a somewhat unique socio-political setting.

Research Findings

Identities, belonging and home

Only a small number of scholarly studies have considered the experience of Somali families. Most tend to focus on different countries (Engebrigtsen 2007; Hearst et al., 2012; Heger Boyle and Ali, 2009; Ramsden and Taket, 2013) with only a few considering Somali families in the UK (Ibrahim and Koshen, 2007). From wider studies, what is known is that since 2000 an estimated 20,000 Somalis have arrived in Britain as a result of secondary migration, a significant number of whom settled in Birmingham (van Liempt, 2011a). Primarily from the Netherlands, Somalis in the UK have arrived from a number of different European member states as the sample here illustrates. While the drivers for secondary migration among Somali migrants are diverse, many saw the UK as being more tolerant of religious and cultural difference especially of Muslims in the urban spaces (Evans-Pritchard, 2004; van Liempt, 2011b). This was evident in our study with respondents speaking about this being essential for their family: “Our plan, mine and the children’s father, we decided to move here because culturally, religiously it is better for our family...The way we think life should be...”. As they added, “...It is not as racist, even though there are obviously racist [individuals] but it is not shown as outwardly in the UK”.

What was recurrent was how important family was in terms of identifying Birmingham as home. Respondents routinely spoke about the draw of familial connections:

...we was just thinking that we have to move here because of the family that live here...when I lived in Denmark for examples, I didn't have any family. Here now, my mom lives in Nechells, my older sister in Alum Rock and my younger sister lives in Nechells

Aside from family ties and kinship networks, other factors specific to Birmingham contributed to feelings of being at home. These included how Somalis had organised themselves as distinct 'community', had established organisations that sought to address their cultural, theological and political and had begun to advocate locally and nationally on community-specific issues. For some, making Birmingham their home had enhanced their sense of being Somali:

...when we moved to Small Heath there was such a big community of Somalis here...in fact, I did not speak Somali before I came to the UK. So it was very difficult for me in that sense. All of a sudden you have to learn about your culture...

For others, there was an additional important factor: that living in Birmingham with so many Somalis would mitigate against 'Westernisation'. One younger respondent explained how this was somewhat inadvertent. Explaining how when living in the Netherlands she actively disassociated herself from her Somali heritage due to the fact that "everybody else was so Dutch...", when she came to Birmingham she "...was forced to hang out with a lot of Somali girls my age and because we all came from similar backgrounds, all came from European countries and had the same experiences...my

Somali identity became stronger”. It is interesting how for her at least, this also made her ‘Britishness’ stronger.

While respondents routinely saw themselves as British, it was Birmingham where respondents identified as ‘home’. As one respondent put it, they felt “very happy to live in Birmingham”. Another explained how “when I go abroad and I go on holiday I always look forward to coming back. I can't wait to go back. At home is Birmingham for me”. When asked what made Birmingham ‘home’, Ignatieff’s (2006) understanding of an emotional bond was apparent. For some, that emotional bond was overshadowed by pragmatism however:

You don't have to take a train to do something, eat a nice dinner or something. Everything is right here. You don't have to go into the city centre or travel to a family further away...The kids are having fun as well because they get to play outside whenever the weather is good. We don't have to travel to the park. They can walk or cycle there which is brilliant

Accordingly, the recognition of Birmingham as ‘home’ was informed by shared life experiences. This was evident when one respondent spoke about how they felt at home because “My university education was here, my college was here, the latter part of my secondary education was here. My postgraduate I did here. I feel I am very accustomed to living here”. Some spoke about Birmingham with the idealism acknowledged by Isakjee (2013): “I couldn’t have any more in the world...I am happy that I am living here”. Birmingham as both geographical and cultural space was therefore seen to be home on the basis of familial and kinship networks, community and religious infrastructure, cultural and linguistic commonality, and a wide range of relevant services and facilities

through which transnational networks, memories and common histories could be maintained and indeed, continued.

For some, the very fact that Birmingham was already home to a highly diverse and significantly sized Muslim population was enough for many to call it home:

It was a little difficult bit at the beginning because you do not know people and so forth but then once you instil yourself... especially the neighbourhood that we live in, it is very multi-diverse so you do not feel that you are an outsider. And if anything, Birmingham has a very large Muslim population so you feel that you are at home

All of this was captured in a quite straightforward way by another respondent who stated how Birmingham “is comfortable and safe”. Interestingly, that respondent said almost word for word what a number of scholars have put forward as being the simplest articulation of ‘home’ in that it is somewhere comfortable, familiar and where individuals can be ‘really me’ (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Relph, 1976; Rowles, 1983; Seman, 1979).

Individual, familial and community responses to the referendum

The study illustrated how the initial response of many respondents was as immediate as it was one of shock and surprise. This was akin to the widespread response within the personal networks of the author’s themselves and so was far from exceptional:

I was shocked because I never thought it would actually happen. I was not worried; I was not worried at all. I thought it will not happen. I didn't think it was something...I thought the majority of people would vote against it so we would be fine

Likewise another participant:

[I was] very surprised. I remember just a day before they were going to do the counting I was telling my husband ‘Oh, don't worry about it! There is no way they are going to get out!’ It seemed so impossible. The next morning when he read the results we were like ‘What!?’ Why in the world would they decide such a thing? Not just at the level of my own interests but it just doesn't seem to be in the interest of the UK for them to exit the EU

For two families however, the immediacy of the impact was far more pronounced. For one, their sister immediately left the UK having decided to move back to the where they first applied for citizenship. For the other, they explained how “two months after Brexit [my sister] moved to Sweden”. For the family, this had significant ramifications: “my sister was the reason why we moved here. She has been here since the year before me, two years before...My mom came here on holiday and assessed things and said ‘you are right.’ So my sister was the reason”. Because her sister had been so settled in the city, the decision to leave made it all the more distressing for the respondent and her family.

For most, the immediate impact of the referendum was uncertainty about what they would be required to do next and where they might need to go: significantly changing how they felt immediately after the referendum to how they felt before. The comments of one respondent captured the sentiment of many:

I was scared. Definitely. Because I did start a new life here and I thought ‘Oh my god, do I have to start again?’ I am already settled and I am tired of moving around to be honest at this stage of my life

For another:

Brexit made a lot of people unsettled. Because for the longest time they were settled or comfortable, nobody in their wildest mind thought that was going to

happen...It was a drastic shift. So when that happened...even myself, I thought ‘oh my god, what is going to happen to me?’

What was interesting from engaging the families was how the referendum challenged their notion that Birmingham was ‘comfortable and safe’. Almost immediately after the referendum, feelings of instability became rather more widespread not least because of an insecurity about what the future might hold. For some, these were broad and far-reaching:

Even if I get my residency what will happen? I am working at the moment but in the future if I am sick or anything like that will I be allowed benefits or will there be some sort of cap...even though I have been paying my taxes here? Things like that. Housing as well is another issue...what if I become homeless, what will happen then? Will I have rights to housing or is that only for British people? I have been paying taxes into the system and I have been here for 14 years...It is things like that that worry me

The fact that this respondent questioned whether existing rights would now only be for ‘British people’ was extremely telling. While that same family had previously spoken openly about feeling at home in Birmingham, the impact of the referendum can be seen to have rendered that somewhat moot. To this extent it could be argued the referendum drew an imaginary line which ensured that second migrant Somalis no longer believed that they were eligible to stand inside that which conferred a sense or notion of belonging: something that was quite different to before the referendum. This was particularly overt in the comments of the respondent who previously spoke about how “when I go abroad and I go on holiday I always look forward to coming back”. When asked about how the

referendum outcome made her feel, she replied, "...this has forced me to think 'No, you are not British at all'".

The impact of the referendum conjured different emotions among different respondents. For a handful of the families, the referendum reawakened dormant fears about belonging to Britain and Birmingham:

I'm not lying to you, the longest time in the back of my mind I thought I was going to go back to Sweden. I don't know why that was. There was a feeling saying you're going to go back to Sweden. I do not know why. My family was getting really comfortable. So that was at the back of my mind, always

While there was little evidence to support this, both researchers felt that this was rather more a coping mechanism than a genuine or lingering fear. For others, there was a very real fear that the referendum would eventually mean that they would have to leave their 'home' and thereby break the emotional bond they had with Birmingham. Naturally, this came with a number of uncertainties and anxieties not least those relating to some of the reasons why some had originally moved to Birmingham. As one female respondent began, "I'm also worried about that when I go back to Holland how am I going to get used to society there?" But as she went on, a more pressing fear became clear:

...if I'm honest – and you can't see this on the recording - but my attire is quite conservative...I know in Holland there will be issues and I will not get employment. So I am worried from that aspect as well

Another explained how she felt that she would no longer be able to continue with her career as a special needs teacher if she had to return to the Netherlands. Essentially, both felt that the referendum had immediately cast doubt if not necessarily hindered their

career and employment opportunities. For them, this was in part because of the problems associated with being ‘Muslim’ away from Birmingham.

What next, where next?

The future choices that emerged as being available to the families can be threefold categorised. First, families had the option to return to the member state that had granted them citizenship. As one respondent rhetorically put it, “On a family level, the families look within themselves and say ‘what can we do?’” As they went on, “There have been a lot of families who have already moved back...whether that is Denmark, Holland, Sweden, Norway, they have moved back”. For them, moving ‘back’ was not an option but was something they also feared might be necessary. The decision to move back or not was also shown to have the potential for splitting families and therefore diminishing feelings of belonging and home. As one respondent explained, her 65 year old mother had reluctantly made the decision to return to Finland because she felt she would be too old to do so if she waited any longer. The sense of loss was readily apparent in how this was conveyed to us:

Before Brexit we were very happy with everything, we were settled. We were not thinking about anything...my mum was OK. But now everything has changed, that’s why she’s going back...we want mom to stay with us but it is very hard...I will miss her. I know it is very hard...

As the respondent explained to us, what was most upsetting was that her sister, sister’s husband and children had also decided to return with her mother thereby decimating her family network. For her, this meant that Birmingham would feel much less like ‘home’.

The second choice was to apply for residency or, if qualified, British citizenship both of which involved a number of complex procedures: “Oh no, are they going to kick us out now? Do we stay or are we going? Then we started thinking about citizenship because we would like to stay in the UK, we like life in Birmingham”. The act of applying for residency had become a necessity for the majority of respondents. While so, this was not something that was easy to accept given most respondents already considered that they were British. For the families, it was telling how they believed that the referendum had changed their status ‘overnight’; something that was extremely difficult for many to accept:

Our [plan] is applying for the residency. I just picked up the application form, a couple of days ago. Before, I never thought about that. Literally three or four years ago people were saying I should apply for the residency - what's the point?

Some respondents were concerned about the number of applications being submitted and whether this would adversely impact their chances of success. Some also spoke about how the need to apply for citizenship had put their lives ‘on hold’. Others were concerned about how the application process may also have the potential to split families. One family spoke about how the husband had Finnish citizenship, the wife and eleven of their children had Danish equivalent despite six of them having been born in the UK. For the husband and wife, both of whom confirmed they were not entitled to permanent residence, there was a very real worry that the majority of their children would not be allowed to remain in the only country they had known since birth. Their fears were wholly pragmatic and were centred on the belief that their children would not be entitled to free healthcare or go to university here despite this unequivocally being ‘their’ country.

The final choice was borne out of helplessness as opposed individual or familial preference. Here, respondents spoke about how they would wait and see how the Brexit negotiations developed and then act accordingly. What became apparent was that any sense of belonging and home had been destroyed by the referendum through the removal of individual, familial and communal agency. It is important to understand why agency was rendered redundant: namely because the referendum was a political mechanism that functioned akin to Yuval-Davis' framing of the function of the politics of belonging. For her, this was because notions of belonging and home were superseded by the function of the mechanism. Consequently, the referendum symbolically demarcated 'us' from 'them' through performing the 'dirty work' of boundary maintenance referred to previously. Most interesting however is that one of the respondents seemed to inadvertently understand this and even deployed the language of Yuval-Davis' to explain what had happened and was indeed ongoing:

[Those voting leave] created that segregation. Because they created that line of segregation you are forced to make a choice. If you don't want me, I cannot come to you, I am forced to go back to where I started off from

'That line' demarcated or 'segregated' those who belonged and those who did not: those who were afforded political permission to continue to call Birmingham 'home' from those who could not; those who felt it was possible to belong from those who did not.

The most pertinent illustration of how the referendum functioned however was given the greatest clarity through the observations of one particular family. As stated previously, one of the families comprised a second migrant Somali woman holding Swedish citizenship and a Polish citizen that had converted to Islam. Having both arrived in Birmingham, the two married and subsequently had children. Having made

Birmingham their family 'home', the impact of the referendum threw their feelings of 'home' and belonging into disarray. Having asked themselves similar questions to other respondents including, "Do we have to apply for a visa? Can you still work here? Do you have to leave? Do you not have to leave? Everything was just leaving a question mark", the instability and uncertainty about home was clearly evident in their response. Explaining how she did not want to return to Sweden because that was not her home, the female respondent added: "...and what for my husband because he does not want to go back to Poland. If not Poland then what? You were wondering 'Where?' Especially for us because neither of us have a 'home-home'. So it's like, 'Okay, where next?'" Key to what was most pressing here can be understood through her use of the phrase 'home-home'. In referring to it in this way, she simultaneously expressed the tensions associated with their different individual journeys and histories with the decisions they had made in order to be able to choose their 'home', shaped and informed by their shared life as a married couple.

Conclusion

The politics of belonging therefore provides a useful analytical framework through which the function of the Brexit referendum as indeed its subsequent impact can be better understood. While it clearly drew the line that demarcated the 'us' from 'them' so too did it do the same as regards who could and could not continue to belong in a post-referendum Britain. Importantly, it did this with immediate effect. Here, the politics of belonging can not only be seen to be somewhat indiscriminate and immediate but so too uncaring and unsympathetic. In this respect, the referendum clearly functioned in doing the dirty work of boundary maintenance. Within the context of the political, there can be little doubt that

the referendum also functioned to confer legitimacy – and reciprocally, deny legitimacy - on who could and could not be seen to be a legitimate citizen (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Symbolically overruling the formal and legal conferment of citizenship and the rights associated with them, the referendum can be understood as a political mechanism that superseded with immediacy. This was not in any formal or legal sense but in a rather more pernicious way that instantaneously drew the lines that one respondent referred to as functioning to segregate. The referendum therefore functioned to demarcate second migrant Somali families – and various others – as no longer being able to be a part of who ‘we’ are thereby meaning that they could no longer belong nor feel at ‘home’. The line of course was far from real but as with notions of home and belonging being inherently founded upon the foundation of emotional bonds (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005:528) so it must be seen that the referendum embodied the emotional also. Political and tangible undoubtedly but so too emotional and experiential in that it changed how people felt about their sense of who they were, where they belonged to and their place in British society with immediate and lasting effect. To this extent, it might be suggested that this was the greatest achievement of the Brexit referendum in that it made those whom leavers felt did not belong feel exactly how they intended them to.

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