

“I was just in shock”:

Identity work by European skilled migrants following the Brexit referendum

ABSTRACT

This study examines how skilled EU migrants living in the UK respond to and cope with the results of the Brexit referendum in terms of their identities. Our study identifies four distinctive reaction patterns among EU migrants depending on the degree to which they interpreted the Brexit vote as a threat to their identity, and the number of national affiliations they held. We refer to these as EU Patriots, Local Cosmopolitans, Home Country Patriots, and Global Citizens. Each of these distinctive reaction patterns involves different forms of identity work and agency in skilled migrants’ professional and personal spheres. Our study provides insights into the way in which identity impacts migrants and expatriates, as well as to the interplay between contextual constraints and agency in the face of identity threats.

Keywords: Identity work, EU skilled migrants, Brexit, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the increased integration of the global economy and labour markets has promoted greater international mobility of skilled migrants in various professions, including healthcare, academia, science, and engineering across the world (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Cantwell & Taylor, 2013; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Iredale, 2001). While largely beneficial to the individuals, organizations, and countries involved (Brimm, 2018), the more recent growth of nationalism and protectionism in many parts of the world has in many cases rendered the migration experience more problematic and complex (Quassoli and Dimitriadis, 2019).

The European Union (EU) has long encouraged international ‘mobility’ of its citizens by simplifying the process of moving and settling within the EU member states. From a legal perspective, EU citizens who move to another EU country have not been considered ‘migrants’—as this term is generally reserved for arrivals from outside the EU. Questions of identity and belonging of intra-EU migrants has thus not generally attracted significant scholarly interest in the field of migration studies (Ranta & Nancheva, 2019). However, deciding to move to another country can have implications for how individuals perceive their national identity(s) as well as supra-national identities such as “European” (Cocorullo & Pisacane, 2017). While some EU citizens may move to a new EU country with the intention of remaining permanently, others might consider themselves short term expatriates rather than migrants, with unclear implications for their individual identities.

Identity-related issues related to migration may be particularly critical in cases where core aspects of one identity come under threat. The 2016 Brexit referendum result represented a rare moment in which the fundamental rights of many EU citizens to reside in the UK appeared to be threatened. In this paper, we examine the impact of this vote and its aftermath on how EU skilled migrants resident in the UK view their identities and the coping

strategies they have developed to deal with these political developments. Drawing on a grounded theory study of 31 EU citizens residing in the UK at the time of the referendum, we identified four broad response patterns depending on two key dimensions: 1) number of national identity affiliations, and 2) the degree to which the referendum result was perceived as an identity-level threat. We develop theoretical implications for the fields of migration and self-initiated expatriate studies, as well as for the field of identity at the individual and national levels.

Skilled migrants and self-initiated expatriates

European skilled migrants include individuals with international work or education experience and at least one university degree (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012), who work abroad. In general, skilled migrants have been found to be good cultural brokers (Peterson, 2010), facilitators for knowledge sharing and innovation (Haas, 2006), brokers for export transactions (Ellis, 2000) and promoters of international growth (Prashantham & Dhanaraj, 2010). Compared to individuals rooted in one national context, individuals with multiple national affiliations have been shown to display greater cognitive flexibility, adaptive capacity and relational understanding (Brimm, 2018).

The term “migrant” is often used to refer to individuals from ethnicities with stronger ethnic stereotypes who can experience discrimination, exclusion, and structural barriers in their careers (Berry & Bell, 2011). However, certain skilled migrants have been described in the literature as “self-initiated expatriates” (SIEs). SIEs are internationally mobile individuals who have chosen to move on their own initiative (i.e. rather than through an organizationally-assigned expatriation) to another country for an indefinite duration (Al-Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Jokinen et al., 2008; Cerdin & Pargneux, 2010, Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010; Shaffer et al., 2012, Zikic, Bonache, & Cerdin, 2010). The status ‘self-initiated’ signals a degree of agentic power as they ‘take advantage of the employment opportunities available in

the global economy with a shortage of skilled workers' (Tharenou, 2008: 183). (Zikic (2015) and Cerdin and Selmer (2014) propose that while migrants usually seek to stay permanently in the host country, SIEs largely envisage a more temporary stint in their new country. Furthermore, migrants may be motivated to a larger extent than SIEs by non-career considerations (Cerdin, Dine, & Brewster, 2014).

Other scholars make less of a distinction between SIEs, qualified immigrants, and skilled migrants (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Andresen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld, & Dickmann, 2014). While migrants have been portrayed in some studies as 'second class expatriates', Andersen and colleagues (2014) conclude that the term 'migrant' is general and includes assigned expatriates and SIEs. Ultimately, skilled migrants and SIEs are able to make choices and have agentic powers as both groups have proven to be able to successfully leave their home country and begin a new life and careers in a new country. In this paper, we will use the term 'skilled migrants', defined as individuals possessing university degrees or extensive work experience in professional fields and working and living not in their home country.

Identity

Skilled migrants are nested within a number of various social identities, related to factors such as their profession, gender and their national affiliations. At the individual level, identity can be defined as an "inner sense of sameness and continuity of character" (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Despite their apparent stability, personal identities can also be somewhat fluid and evolve over time through social interaction and reflection (Beech, 2008; Alvesson, 2010). An individual's personal identity focuses both on unique attributes and self-descriptions drawn from one's own biography (Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010), but is also informed by roles, relationships, and memberships of broader groups (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1985).

Social identity theory focuses on the way in which these social groups influence individual identity (Tajfel, 1978), which includes cognitive but also affective or evaluative elements (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). The ‘in-groups’ with which individuals identify are then positively differentiated in comparison with out-groups on some valued dimension, and internalized in the individual (Turner 1982). Social identity theory recognizes that individuals have multiple identities, with certain becoming more or less salient and individual’s goals and core sense of self (Ashforth, 2001). An individual’s various social identities can be thought of as a unique hierarchy or as an intrapersonal network (Ramarajan, 2014), which as with any form of identity is broadly stable while to varying degrees evolving over time (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

For many skilled migrants, identity questions related to their nationality can become highly salient once the individual moves to another country. National identity can be highly complex and multidimensional (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), and the relative salience of an individual’s nationality can vary among individuals. For example, many migrants may lay claim to more than one national identity themselves, yet struggle to mobilize these and other facets of their multiple identities in day-to-day professional interactions. As a result, their work may lead them to experiment with the creation of provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999), or developing alternative narratives of self (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) to encompass various and changing sub-identities.

Kennedy (2008) notes for example that over time attachment to home country identity weakens. Goulahsen (2017: 158) describes the development process of identities as “a ground of negotiation, contestation, deconstruction and reconstruction” and proposes the concept of “transculturality”. Transculturality describes the identification of migrants’ identity process of negotiating, acquiring, and rearranging culture traits and feelings of belonging. However, events such as the Brexit referendum result in 2016 can unsettle foreigners’ status and rights

and can lead to a shift in their national identities (Botterill & Hancock, 2019; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2017), and even provoke some to consider returning to their home country (McCarthy, 2019), or even reinforcing the development of a stronger European identity (Ranta & Nancheva, 2019).

Responding to identity threats

Significant external events can trigger “identity threats”, defined as “experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity” (Petriglieri, 2011: 644). Given identity’s central importance in how we see ourselves, identity threats can trigger significant reactions, starting with “psychic pain, discomfort, anxiety, conflicts, and overall loss of self-esteem” (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013: 133). Recovering and coping with the loss of a desired identity can be an emotional process as much as it is a cognitive one, and if actors are unable to manage these emotions, they can become "stuck in" loss and exist in a "dysfunctional state" (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014; Obodaru, 2017).

Petriglieri (2011) proposes that individuals can respond to identity threats in one of two ways. First, the source of the threat can be targeted to protect the identity under threat. This can be done by either discrediting the validity of the threat, concealing the threatened identity, or trying to encourage this identity to be regarded more favourably. The second way of dealing with identity threats is through changing the threatened identity itself, what she refers to as “identity restructuring”. This can be done either through changing its importance, the meanings attributed to it, or ultimately by exiting the group associated with the identity. Responding to identity threats can thus involve “identity work”, that is, people’s engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identities (Brown, 2015; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). From a social identity theory perspective, identity work occurs through changing one's association with a collective or

changing the meanings that one associates with that collective (Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2018). Consistent with the broader ‘turn to work’ in the social sciences (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012: 224), identity work describes the way in which individuals locate themselves as social beings in an attempt to construct a coherent sense of self (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Identity work includes internal reactions to suggested external identities, such as ways in which individuals align their personal identities with collective identities (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008), while maintaining a sense of coherence and distinctiveness (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identity work is particularly necessary as individuals seek to maintain a sense of consistency in an ever-changing world (McAdams, 2006).

However, not all responses to major external events require identity work. Skilled migrants may engage in other forms of individual agency, defined as the “power and influence to affect changes in their lives and work as permitted and legitimated by their position in webs of social and economic relations” (Al Ariss et al., 2013: 1236). Skilled migrants already exercise agency when they pursue education in the host country (e.g. Liversage, 2009; Thondhlana, Madziva, & McGrath, 2016), extend their social networks to enhance their career (Das Gupta, Man, Mirchandani, & Ng, 2014; Winterheller & Hirt, 2017; Zikic et al., 2010), or persist in their job-hunting (Das Gupta et al., 2014; Harris, 2014). Some studies have also shown that agency of skilled migrants can be exercised by rejecting jobs or job offers or by withdrawing from the labour market and by leaving the host country all together (Al Ariss et al., 2013; Liversage, 2009; Riano, 2011; Van Laer & Janssens, 2017). Migrants that are younger, well educated, and highly skilled are seen to exercise particularly high degrees of agency (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014; Winterheller & Hirt, 2017), with many able to pursue boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

In this paper, we explore the research question: How do skilled EU migrants living in the UK appraise and respond to the Brexit referendum result in terms of their identities? Beyond Brexit, this question is of general interest as it gives us an empirically grounded deeper understanding of the various response patterns individuals revert to when core aspects of their identities come under potential threat. Additionally, our study will enable us to identify common patterns and differences among reactions to identity threats and identify differentiating factors that account for these different responses.

METHODS

Sample

Due to our focus on identity dynamics, belonging, and response patterns experienced by skilled EU migrants in the UK following Brexit, we sampled EU nationals with university degrees who had moved to the UK before the referendum in June 2016. We recruited participants from our network of acquaintances, and also used snowball sampling by asking at the end of each interview if our informant could suggest someone else who fit our sampling criteria to be interviewed.

In the end, we conducted interviews with 31 EU skilled migrants from 14 EU countries living and working in the UK at the time of the Brexit referendum. Our participants ranged in age from late twenties to mid-fifties, with 13 males and 18 females (see Table 1 for further information about our data sample). These EU citizens had lived in the UK between 3 and 25 years and had an average of four years working experience in the UK. Participants worked in a range of industries, including consultancy, banking and finance, public sector, health care, research institutes, and universities. At the conclusion of the study 26 of our informants continued to live in the UK, while five had left.

Data collection

As our research focus is largely phenomenon-driven and exploratory, cutting across a number of different theoretical perspectives, our approach to data collection and analysis draws on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We are seeking to study our participants' understandings of themselves as skilled migrants as well as of their changing social context in which questions of national identity have been pushed to the forefront. Grounded theory allows us to integrate contextual and personalized information on the lived experiences of migrants (Healy et al., 2011; Inal & Özkan, 2011).

We began by developing and pilot testing an initial semi-structured interview protocol that focused on informants' professional backgrounds, national identity affiliations and potential evolution of these over time. We further inquired into their reactions to the Brexit referendum and the political aftermath, including their responses and potential changes in national identification. As our project advanced, we added additional questions to our protocol in order to further explore emergent areas of theoretical interest. For example, some informants referred to some measures they have taken in their private or professional life after Boris Johnson became prime minister. We then integrated a question how they cope both personally and professionally with the Brexit to collect this information from all informants. The interviews were conducted between November 2018 and December 2019. One was conducted in person, with 30 conducted by video Skype. Each interview lasted between 40 and 105 minutes and all was recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

Our process of data analysis followed three main phases. In the first phase, we uploaded our interview transcripts into NVIVO software. Each member of the research team carefully read ten interview transcripts and independently generated a set of open codes. We then discussed our initial codes and developed a shared code dictionary, which we subsequently used to code the remaining interviews while continuing to add additional open

codes as necessary. Each interview transcript was independently coded by at least two members of the research team.

In our second phase, following Charmaz (2006), we used constant data comparison as we moved back and forth between emerging data codes and categories related to identities and response patterns. For example, we were able to discern connections between changes in national identity affiliation and reactions such as participating in protests or making plans to leave the UK. Early descriptions and constant comparisons of codes resulted in the merging or splitting of categories, until theoretical saturation was reached.

In a third phase, we grouped related categories into themes and drew out any relations and overarching patterns between them, consulting the literature on skilled migrants and identity as they appeared the most relevant to our analysis. For example, we came to see that the notion of ‘identity threat’ proved useful in helping us understand the variety of responses described by informants. Working back and forth between the themes and the relevant literatures, we were able to develop a four-quadrant theoretical framework that enables a richer understanding of the reactions and responses of UK-based EU citizens in the aftermath of Brexit.

FINDINGS

Our 31 informants all skilled EU migrants, but they represented a wide variety of national backgrounds. We initially were able to discern three broad group categories of EU citizens based on their national identities. The first group is defined by having grown up in their home country within the EU and then moved to the UK for either their education or to work. The second group lived and worked in up to seven different countries for each at least six months after finishing their secondary school in their home countries. A third group grew

up in an international family, lived in an international context most of their whole life and/or “away” from their “home country”.

All 31 informants stated that they were affected in some way by the result of the Brexit referendum, with the majority commenting extensively on how the vote result had impacted them on a personal and professional level. Comments ranged from how Brexit had triggered a soul-searching process of redefining their identity as well to a change of attitudes and behaviours in the professional (e.g. avoiding political conversations with co-workers, changing to more “international” or European employers or preparing to move abroad) or private sphere (e.g. cheering for whichever football team was playing England; withdrawing children from a British school to an international/national school) which were used as responses.

Nonetheless, we also noted that the magnitude and duration of the reaction to the Brexit vote and its political aftermath varied among the informants. We identified four different response patterns of EU migrants based on two key dimensions: 1) the degree to which they perceived the political events in the UK as a threat to aspects of their own *identity*, and 2) whether they reported single or multiple national identity affiliations. The four response patterns can be seen in Figure 1; additional support for these categories can be found in Table 2. Each pattern is associated with different ways of coping with the result of the Brexit referendum.

Insert Figure 1 here

Brexit represented a major threat to their identity for two groups, the “EU patriots” as also the “local cosmopolitans”, exemplified by the following citation:

“Because before that was just---we were just all Europeans. And now---It’s almost like a divorce. You know? It’s like your partner saying, “Oh, I don’t want to be with you anymore.” [...] It’s a good comparison, actually. Because also when you go through a breakup, you have to re-establish your identity. Because you are no longer part of a couple. You are single again. You know? So you have to re-establish your identity, and you have to frame it. And it has to change.” (#19, German, Edinburgh)

EU Patriots

The first response pattern group (consisting of nine interviewees), “EU Patriots”, reported a clear sense of rejection from the Brexit vote: *“And then Brexit happened. And I felt so insulted that my first reaction was, “So, if you don’t want me, I don’t want you back. I don’t need you.” (#16, Portuguese, London).* The realisation of considerable Euro scepticism gave rise to doubts if they still wanted to live in the UK. *“I mean, as you follow the debates, it’s a little depressing.... A fairly big portion of the UK population is so Euro-skeptic. And if they don’t want us to be here, then do we even want to be here?” (#14, Swedish, London).* The sense of personal rejection and hurt was closely connected to a sense of a potential change in their status in the UK from that of equal citizens enjoying unhindered freedom as movement, to that of any other third country migrant. For the EU patriots, this led to struggles at the level of identity, with significant consequences. *“So if they don’t appreciate my presence here, and now suddenly you have all these hurdles to overcome, then I better just go.” (#22, German, London).* Some informants clearly spelled out how appalled they were by the perspective to be treated “like a foreigner” in the future:

“With this Brexit thing, it’s almost like I don’t feel welcome anymore, so why would I bother staying? So working here and contributing and then still being treated like a foreigner or having, maybe, needing visa or something like that. No, it’s not going to happen. I just feel no.” (#19, German, Edinburgh).

The anticipated change of status of EU citizens was met with a lot of resentment:

“And I think on top of that, you know, there was this, a bit of like resentment that I felt like okay, if you make it so difficult for me to stay here, then you

know, I mean, I don't have to stay here. I can go somewhere else, basically.”
(#22, German, London).

EU patriots explicitly distanced themselves from Britain and any British affiliations they might have felt before as a result of the Brexit vote. As this interviewee explained:

“I think this Brexit thing has triggered---has led to a lot of insecurity about what is going to happen, which side are you on...you now have to take a side, I feel. Which, before, you didn't have to do. Because it was just like---it didn't really matter. But now you have to figure out which side you want to belong to.” (#19, German, Edinburgh).

In terms of identity, this raised the salience of their home country and their ‘European identity’, while lowering the salience of their identity as UK residents. Part of the dis-identification with Great Britain was expressed by the fact that many informants in this group were eligible to apply for a British passport and reported that they had contemplated about taking British citizenship before the Brexit vote. Yet, due to the Brexit vote which went against their strong identification with the European idea and the EU they felt that they could not identify with Britain anymore and hence would now not apply for a British passport.

“But it [getting a British passport] was always something that was in my mind, just because I knew that, you know, being in the UK for so many years, it's definitely a possibility. But I think now I wouldn't do it.” (#22, German, London).

The EU patriots is a group that most considered moving abroad: *“Well, at the moment, we are just waiting. But we are also kind of ready to take---ready to move, basically.”* (#18, Italian, London), or had already started a migration process to a new European country. Five informants had taken steps to move to another European country (e.g. France, the Netherlands, Switzerland) or outside of Europe (Rwanda). From our informants only one was in the process of moving to his home country but others have started to move or planned to other European countries – either having a pre-existing relation with the new host country or not. A return to the country of origin depended however also on the economic situation and labour market conditions of the home country. For example, Spain and Italy

were often perceived as less attractive by our informants but the informants from Spain, Portugal, and Italy considered not only their home countries but also other EU countries, such as France, Germany, Belgium, or the Netherlands as possible new host countries. For example, informant #22 from Germany who had done all her studies in the UK including a PhD decided to move to France after more than 15 years in the UK:

“I guess when the whole Brexit started, I didn’t really think that it would go through, to be honest. It came from so out of nowhere, for me, that until recently I really didn’t think it would happen. And then in April I was offered my new job in Paris. So you know, at that point I knew that I was leaving.” (#22, German, London).

In terms of career management and development of skilled EU migrants in the UK, this group are European citizens with a high degree of agency and ability to pursue a boundaryless career as expressed by the quote from informant #16, as a health care professional from Portugal put it *“So surely, I can take my valuable work and tax contribution to another country who wants me.”*

Local Cosmopolitans

The second group of informants (consisting of eight interviewees), the ‘local cosmopolitans’, managed a seemingly paradoxical balance: While disidentifying with the UK and in particular ‘little England’, they *narrowed the scope of their identity* to a particular city or region, i.e. London, Edinburgh, or Scotland, places that had not voted for Brexit and/or were perceived as cosmopolitan. *“I feel very connected to London, as a city, [...]to the opportunities. And I feel lucky to be here.”* (#4, Belgium, London). Local cosmopolitans reported how their local yet global identity had gained more importance after the Brexit vote:

“It [my identity] has evolved [...] depending on how like the political environment changes. Because at the moment with Brexit, I don’t necessarily want to be associated with being pro-British, because yeah, they have chosen Brexit and I don’t agree on that. [...] So this is why I call myself a Londoner, rather than kind of British citizen.” (#6, German, London).”

Their narratives often described London as the incarnation of a global cosmopolitan city clearly distinct from “the rest of Britain” or Scotland as being not England and continuing to be a viable place for them to live in the future. This included a clear appreciation of the opportunities London offered as a global city:

“I love what London has to offer. It’s open, it’s welcoming. Sometimes it’s difficult and tough. But I’m pretty sure that the career, my career, the opportunities, are only---were only possible in London. I don’t think it would have been possible in any other European cities.” (#4, Belgium, London).

While having a rather narrow focus on a city with informants often stating that they would “happily apply for a London passport”, they also described themselves at the same time as having a cosmopolitan world view.

The way professionals in this group responded to the Brexit vote varied: On the one hand, many reported that they had taken British citizenship. Yet this was seen as a purely instrumental and pragmatic act to ensure “*that I will continue to have the work options I used to enjoy before*” (#6, German, London). Informant #6 explained:

“I am acquiring it [British citizenship] because from a kind of like professional perspective, because I don’t want to be in the situation that I don’t have the right to work here. Because the UK is facing a difficult political future, and while they are negotiating at the moment the Brexit deal, it doesn’t provide me with any certainty how people who don’t have the British passport will be treated in the future. So it is basically kind of like just to secure ---like me securing my status quo.”

They were very frank to admit that they would never have applied for citizenship without the Brexit vote. “*Would I have gone for the British passport without Brexit looming over my head? I wouldn’t have done it. No, I wouldn’t have done it.*” (#6, German, London).

While local cosmopolitans counted in general on staying in London, narratives clearly surfaced how the Brexit vote had scarred their sense of identity. Informant #9, a French-

British citizen who had taken British citizenship *before* the Brexit vote explained how the vote had impacted him and triggered a shift in this identity:

“So I felt like I am still lucky to have a British passport and I’m happy I did it when I did it before it was a political choice.....I would say I am still going through a disconnect with the sense of British identity..... I felt more disenfranchised from the British, my British side, since Brexit..... While before I was quite happy to practically say, “I’m French and British.” I would now say more that “I am French, with a British passport.” Which is not the same.” (#9, French, London).

By securing citizenship and reinforcing their cosmopolitan lifestyle, surrounding themselves with like-minded people, this group was actively crafting a global city identity that could co-exist in spite of the overall environment had shifted to a more nationalistic environment.

“I think I’m much more connected to London than I’m connected to the rest of the country. [...] And my connection with this country is with this city. And I’m in the UK because I love what London has to offer. It’s open, it’s welcoming. [...] And my friends [...] share it, you know, it’s with London rather than with the country, at large.” (#4, Belgium, London).

Informants of this group were consciously living in a ‘cosmopolitan bubble’ which did not require them to make any changes in their professional life since their work environment continued to be very international and cosmopolitan.

“Well, I mean, the first thing is I have not really been in situations where I was directly confronted with people who are clearly against this kind of multi-cultural way of thinking. So most of the people I see, most of the people I interact with, are still very much in that kind of logic. So I’m not having to adapt in any way.” (#5, French,, London)

Since Brexit was perceived as an identity threat to them, informants of this group had developed private response patterns to come to terms with this new situation, such as venting their anger about the vote with likeminded friends (*“And I think talking with friends and saying, “It’s ridiculous, and Boris Johnson this, and Boris Johnson ---“ sort of helps with the*

tension a lot....”) (#12, German, London) or starting to cheer for whichever football team was playing England.

“What I’ve found lately is that I’m watching football and, despite the fact that England played against a team that I strictly don’t care about, I actually vied towards that team. [Laughter.] So I don’t have any sort of link to Croatia. Why would I care about Croatia? I find myself a huge support of Croatia all of a sudden. [Laughter.] I can become quite passionate about it. “Yes, they score. They deserve it.” getting back, getting even, is probably the way I feel it. And if I think about it. But I’m not thinking. It’s just that, that is the natural reaction. And even my son is like, “England is playing.” And I said, “Yes, who are they playing against?” And he tells me. And I go, “Good. They are going to beat them.”. (#2, Romanian, London).

Home Country Patriots

While generally expressing displeasure with the referendum result, the third group of informants (consisting of five interviewees), the ‘home country patriots’, did not interpret the Brexit result as something that would influence them at the level of their identities. They thus came to accept it more easily. As #17 explained,

“But I don’t think it is a personal hate to people of certain nationalities. I think it is a reaction to a situation, to a number of factors, institutional factors, or to the economy. But I don’t think, in my---and the reason I say to you that I don’t---it hasn’t affected my identity, because I can separate things. And I do not think that suddenly people here hate you because you are Spanish.” (#17, Spanish, London).

Firmly grounded in their home country identity, members of this group would express their worry about the Brexit vote in terms of what this meant for their future in the UK and the future of Britain’s economy. They did however neither feel any personal rejection or hurt nor the need to revert to a global identity.

“I mean, it doesn’t feel personal in the sense that--The only way it can feel personal is if you---in the terms of---to the extent that it’s about immigration. But to the extent that it’s about immigration, every time you talk to a leaver or someone who is anti-immigration, they always say, “Oh, you’re Danish. That’s fine. Because you’re not Eastern European or whatever. And equally, you have a job. So that’s fine. You’re paying your taxes and things.” (#24, Danish, London).

Informants of this group were often focusing on getting a particular professional or educational experience from the UK (*“I wasn’t thinking so much about why I wanted to come to England. It was more because I wanted to do that particular Master, #17, Spanish, London)* and then anticipated leaving to their home country again as informant #28 self-critically reflected,

“So to me I’m the worst kind of immigrant. Because I don’t want to integrate. I don’t really want to become Scottish. I just want to be here and live here, pay some taxes, that’s okay. But then leave.” (#28, Irish, Edinburgh).

Interestingly this group often referred to themselves as “migrants” and accepted this term to describe themselves even if they felt that society did *“not think of me as a migrant”* (#28, Irish, Edinburgh). Others recognised that they would stay because the job opportunities were much better in the UK than their home country.

“I moved to the UK because I want something more stable, which was not possible in Italy. And the stability was mainly the workplace and the salary and everything.” (#18, Italian, London)

Members of this group rarely applied a response pattern but if they did it was professional, e.g. changing from a British to a more European working context. Informant #18 reported,

“The majority of my colleagues voted for Brexit...I was just in shock, to be honest. Because I couldn’t actually believe that they were against something... So it was really strange. And for this reason, I decided to move within the UK.” (#18, Italian, London).

Global Citizens

Similar to the previous group, the fourth group of “global citizens” did not perceive the results of the Brexit referendum as a threat to their identity (consisting of nine interviewees). They clearly and proudly identified themselves as “global citizens” or

“citizens of the world”, sometimes commenting on the recent negative connotation of these terms and how this negative perception was simply a lack of understanding:

“When she [Theresa May] said, “Oh, citizens of the world are citizens of nowhere.” As if that was a bad thing. [...] And I thought, “How short-sighted.” I felt throughout history, diasporas have often been the people who brought innovations, who brought cultural influences, who kept things moving, who kept things dynamic. So I thought, you know, those citizens of the world, people who moved from one culture to the next, who speak multiple languages, are the ones able to pass on new ideas, new trading techniques, new innovations. So I thought citizens of the world actually had a very important role in human progress.” (#3, French, London).

Members of this group would express their worry about the Brexit vote in terms what this meant for future diversity and inclusion of Britain and the impact on the economy.

However, they experienced very little sense of personal rejection because they did not perceive themselves as migrants, either because they believed they could easily move to another country due to their professional context or they simply felt very little attachment to any national identity(s).

“Until Brexit, you really felt that you were a citizen of the world. You really felt that you were immersed in the most international and you know non-nationality specific---you know, again, this idea of fluidity. Of being surrounded by people who were just completely---you know, where nationality would not make sense and you could sort of define yourself, you know, from one context to another, as more of this or less of that.” (#7, French, London).

As a consequence, they did not feel any need to get a British passport:

“Like, “Would you want to be British?” And I was always like, “No.” Like, I just---I don’t---I love this place, but---first of all, I was in London, which I feel London like, is not representative of the UK. Like, it’s like a bubble. And it feels very international. I felt cosmopolitan, in that sense, but I didn’t feel British.” (#26, Swiss, London).

As the fourth group felt little threat to their identity from the Brexit referendum, these informants did not engage in a lot of identity work or response patterns on the private or professional level. They reported avoiding conversations about Brexit especially because they did not want to be drawn into lengthy and possibly confrontational exchanges about Brexit:

“I must say, with the whole last two or three years of Brexit, then you begin the reverse. Because the minute that you reveal that you are a cosmopolitan person, then you are more or less putting yourself on one side or the other of the debate.” (#31, British-German, London).

Reflecting on the future many expressed the possibility to move again and explore different places: *“I’m not comfortable to move back. I think I would be more interested in exploring a place where I haven’t lived.” (#29, Czech, Edinburgh)*

DISCUSSION

We have explored the question how skilled EU migrants living in the UK respond to the identity threat posed by the Brexit referendum and its aftermath. Our study has identified four distinctively different reaction patterns based on whether the EU migrant perceived the Brexit vote as a personal rejection and identity threat, and on their number of national identity affiliations. Our work provides an empirical grounding of the described reactions to identity threat. We find some of Petriglieri (2011) categorisations with the global citizens as well as the rooted nationals who protect their identity under threat by discrediting the validity of the threat, persuading themselves that “nothing has changed”, at least to the degree that the vote did not constitute a personal rejection of themselves and hence the identity threat is less salient. As a consequence, these individuals engage in considerably less identity work. We also find a lot of evidence of “identity restructuring” (Petriglieri, 2011), yet not necessarily in the ways as predicted by Petriglieri. We find that EU patriots even *increased* the salience of their dominant, national and European identity. To cope with the growing sense that in the post-2016 environment their national identity was coming under threat, they came to identify with it even more contemplated taking more drastic actions such as leaving their UK life behind. This is in line with McCarthy (2019) who argues that due to the result of the Brexit referendum in 2016, uncertainty has been generated about the future for European migrants

who consider returning to the home country (McCarthy, 2019). Others, the local cosmopolitans, attempted to create a new identity category (e.g. “Londoners”) related to a small “exceptional and different” spot, which still lets them preserve their European and cosmopolitan identity. They respond and cope by persuading themselves that their London life can continue as it was with the professional sphere not really changed. They engage in identity work that on the one hand emphasizes the stability (i.e. London will always be a cosmopolitan city) and their perfect fit with this environment by stressing the salience of their cosmopolitan identity. On the other hand, they deal with the negative feelings of anger and frustration by reverting to coping mechanisms in their private sphere such as venting their anger and negative emotions about the vote in private circles of likeminded friends or “getting back at England” by supporting the opposite sports team.

Our study also strengthens the connection between the literature on social identity theory and migration. We noted that social identities associated with being a ‘migrant’ vs a ‘mobile EU citizen’ held very different meanings for our informants, and the aftermath of the referendum result led many to feel forcibly transferred from the latter to the former. Identifying oneself as a migrant would appear to involve a perceived acceptance of reduced agency and power (Berry & Bell, 2011), which was a form of identity work in which many of our informants were unwilling to engage. These informants either chose to either reinterpret themselves as residents of a cosmopolitan city and attack the source of the threat, or to look inwardly and reassess their commitment to the UK in favour of other national identities, despite the resultant loss of professional opportunities (Tharenou, 2008). Such outcomes might be considered unintended consequences of the referendum for political efforts to encourage the integration of skilled migrants into the UK, given that both of these reaction patterns involve physical or psychological distancing from the British national identity. Such

identity dynamics merit further examination by scholars in the areas of self-initiated expatriation and migration more broadly.

Beyond the identification of the four reaction patterns, our work also makes important contributions to the interplay between the environmental context in which identity threat is happening, identity work and agency. We demonstrate that the degree of agency individuals have to deal with identity threat is closely intertwined with the context and the contextual conditions that may provide them with additional options or impose constraints. For example, among the individuals that felt threatened in their identity by the Brexit vote, the local cosmopolitans and the EU patriots, we could see that responses to Brexit could shift depending on the specific contextual conditions individuals were facing: If a new attractive job offer from another European country came up individuals may decide to take it and leave the country because of the strength of their European identity. If they did not have such an option or if they were bound to the UK due to personal reasons (e.g. a big new mortgage or teenage children for whom it would be difficult to change schooling language) people may revert to adopting a local cosmopolitan identity, also as a coping mechanism to deal with the post Brexit vote situation. The context also played a decisive role in shaping the number of possible response patterns people could craft for themselves: The response pattern of the local cosmopolitans to concentrate on London and define their identity focused on this “exceptional place in the UK” was of course only possible because the context afforded such an “identity island” which allowed the local cosmopolitans to cope with Brexit the way they were doing. Future work may investigate how identity work and response patterns might play out in contexts offering less leeway to maintain - even in a microcosm - the old identity.

Finally, while the degree of individual agency that is surfaced in the different responses is interdependent with the context, our findings raise another interesting question that future work may address. As we have seen, not all informants saw the Brexit vote as an

identity threat and hence those who did not, felt much less need to engage in identity work. A question therefore worthwhile pursuing is if individuals can through their own agency shape their attitudes to change their interpretation of Brexit as a threat to their identity and as a consequence change the respective response patterns? Such a question calls for future research more longitudinal in nature. While our interviews were conducted between November 2018 and December 2019—a period of considerable evolution in the UK political life—our study’s design did not allow us to directly track whether any individuals radically shifted their interpretation of Brexit and hence changed response patterns. While some stated in the course of our interviews that their views on Brexit had changed since 2016, researchers might examine this phenomenon more directly in order to identify greater nuances in informants’ response patterns.

We further note that although we achieved theoretical saturation in this dataset, additional interviews may have provided additional insights into the role of demographic factors and professional histories that may be antecedents that may be linked to the degree to which individuals came to perceive Brexit to represent an identity-level threat, and thus to a particular response pattern. Future research might also further explore different identity-threat triggers and examine if the four response patterns we describe will be valid under comparable, yet different contexts.

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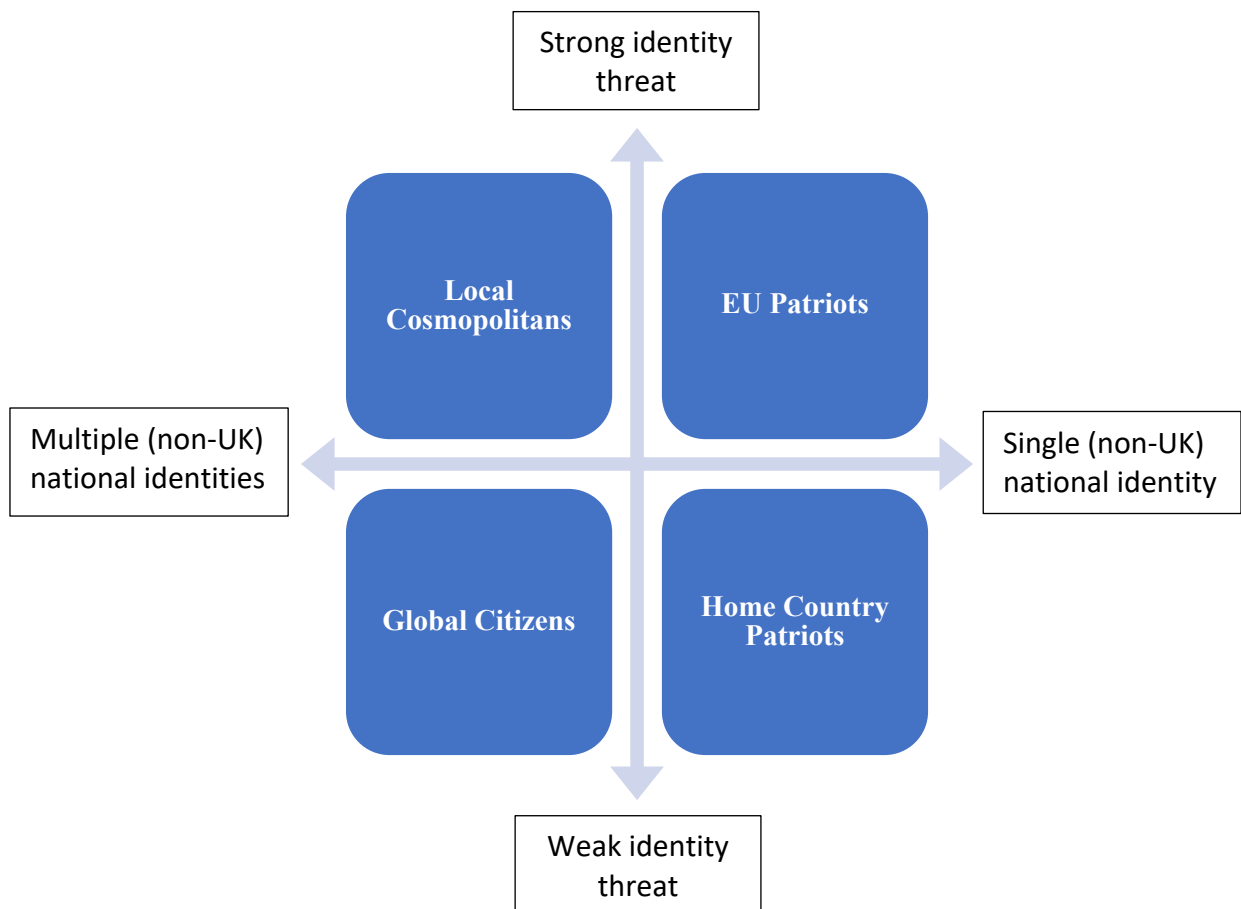
FIGURE 1: REACTION PATTERNS TO BREXIT BY EU CITIZENS IN THE UK

TABLE 1: Summary of interview data

<i>Informant</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>National Identity(s)</i>	<i>Countries Lived In</i>	<i>Profession</i>
#1	female	Italian	Italy, UK, France	Consultant
#2	female	Romania, UK	Czech Republic, US, UK	Academic
#3	male	French, Caribbean, UK	Brazil, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, UK	Consultant
#4	male	Belgium, Londoner	Belgium, UK	Public Relations
#5	female	French	US, UK, Italy	Academic
#6	female	German, London	UK, Germany	Banker
#7	female	French, American	South Pacific, Australia, US	Academic
#8	male	French	France	Banker
#9	male	French, British	France, Congo, Belgium, UK, US, China, Canada	HR Manager
#10	male	German	Germany, France, Singapore, UK	Coach
#11	male	Spanish, English, France	UK, France, Spain	Consultant
#12	female	German, UK	Germany, France, UK, US, Switzerland	Academic
#13	male	Dutch, Indian	Germany, US, Spain, Netherlands, UK, Ghana, Tanzania	Consultant
#14	male	Swedish, Venezuelan	Sweden, Spain, UK, Ireland	Entrepreneur
#15	male	Dutch, Indian, Londoner	Germany, Turkey, US, Spain, Netherlands, UK	Graphic Designer
#16	female	Portuguese, Londoner	UK, Portugal, US	Health Professional
#17	female	Spanish	UK, Spain	Economist
#18	female	Italian	UK, Italy	Economist
#19	female	German	Germany, UK, Russia, France, Luxembourg	Consultant
#20	male	British, Belgium	Belgium, UK, Luxembourg, Ghana	Consultant
#21	female	Italian	Italy, UK, US	Academic
#22	female	German	UK, Germany	Economist
#23	female	Austrian, Turkmenistan	Belgium, Austria, Ireland, UK, China, Hong Kong, Turkmenistan	Client Relations
#24	male	Danish	UK, Greece, Denmark, US	Economist
#25	female	Portugal	UK, Italy, Portugal	Office Manager
#26	female	Swiss, Italian	Swiss, Pakistan, France, UK, Rwanda	Consultant
#27	female	German	Germany, Netherlands, UK	Researcher
#28	female	Irish	Ireland, Australia, UK	Health Professional
#29	male	Czech	Czech Republic, UK	Software Tester
#30	male	German	Germany, UK, Italy	Program Director
#31	male	German, British	UK, Germany,	Marketing Executive

TABLE 2: Other examples of identity threats and responses of informants

	<i>Identity threat</i>	<i>Responses</i>
Home country patriots	<p>“I think over the time, it’s probably a bit more of an understanding that it is nothing to do against the Spanish or Italians. It’s more a reaction to a situation. Probably lots of economic troubles.” (#17, coded as rationalising)</p> <p>“I don’t think there are people here that think of me when they think of the immigrant problem.” (#28, coded as rationalising, migration)</p> <p>“I don’t feel that they [the British] perceive me as an immigrant. I feel like I am one. But I don’t feel this” (#24 coded as migration)</p>	<p>“So I’m in a very good job. I wouldn’t be in as good a job in Ireland. So I’m here to get some experience to craft my profession. But I don’t plan on staying here. I plan on going home.” (#28, coded as Brexit and job, moving)</p> <p>“So there are some kind of barriers that might deter people from coming. But for the people that are here, I think it is more chances, than that they leave (#17, coded as moving, UK prospects, Brexit and job)</p> <p>[Applying for British citizenship] would only be if I decided to stay here for longer. Which might happen. [...] And so at some point we have to choose whether we want to stay in the UK or whether we want to move to Denmark (#24, coded as moving)</p> <p>“I always find that a really odd question, because why would I need British citizenship?” (#27, coded as decrease in UK identity)</p>
Global citizens	<p>To me it doesn’t matter. I’m more amused by the situation because honestly, I don’t care.” (#23, coded as personal reaction)</p> <p>I would not say it [Brexit] has changed how I identify as an individual, how I identify as a Londoner or as a European. I feel quite settled in all these different identities. It has revealed a lot on how other people in this nation feel about each other’s identities. So it’s been more of a revelation of other people than of myself. (#15, coded as rationalising)</p> <p>“I don’t really feel, on a cultural level, that London reflects the UK and the UK reflects London.” (#15, coded as London identity)</p>	<p>“I usually try to avoid those conversations, unless it is with individuals that I know quite well. So within the work environment, that was something I was avoiding except with like maybe two to three people. [Laughs.]...Because often, once you start talking about politics and you realize quickly that you have very fundamental views about certain things, then it can very quickly escalate. And that’s not something that you want to discuss with someone that you need to work with on a day-to-day basis, next to each other. And you need their help on certain things. So I just try to avoid that.” (#26, coded as venting and private coping strategy)</p>
EU patriots	<p>“And if they don’t want us to be here, then do we even want to be here?...I don’t know, sometimes you have those feelings. Like, you know, “Screw you guys.” [Laughter.] If you want to be like alone on your island, be it. Fine, be it.” (#25, coded as moving)</p>	<p>“I just started thinking like, “Well, I pay taxes there,” and I thought, “You know, I’m a good citizen. So why do people suddenly start questioning why I’m in the country?”.....And so I almost felt like, you know, when people started considering becoming British citizen, you</p>

	<p>“Since Brexit, I really feel this feeling of “I am European, and you are not European.” And “you” being British, of course. And not just because I feel like you don’t belong, but really it’s kind of a reaction to you guys, the British people, saying, “We don’t want to be in the EU and we don’t feel European.” So I have this counter reaction of, “Great. I agree.” (#13, coded as increase EU identity, moving)</p> <p>“After Brexit was announced, I became aware of my nationality and of my identity as an Italian more and more.....Because London allows you to be whoever you want to be. But at the same time, knowing that Brexit will happen shifted my attention towards my nationality more than ever. Because for the first time I felt not really racism, but a feeling of being not wanted, also based on my nationality. Which is something that I never experienced before.” (#18, coded as increase home country identity and EU identity)</p>	<p>know, gets the British citizenship, I almost felt like, “No, I’m not going to do this. So if they don’t appreciate my presence here, and now suddenly you have all these hurdles to overcome, then I better just go.” (#22, coded as decrease of UK identity, moving)</p> <p>“I have a choice. I mean, you know, I have an advantage because of my passport, in that sense. Because I can just go to any other European country. Or I can just go back to my home country. Which is also better.” (#19, coded as moving)</p> <p>“There is no way now that I’ll spend the rest of my life in London. It’s just---barring a massive political change, it’s just---And London is a bubble. I would rather be in Europe somewhere.” (#20, coded as moving)</p> <p>“I decided, “If you don’t want me, I can happily take my business somewhere else. And will be fine. I will still love you, London. And I’ll go away.” (#16, coded as moving)</p>
<p>Local cosmopolitans</p>	<p>“I do struggle to understand how I can be here and, on the other hand, not agree with the country trying to detach itself from, well Europe, in the first place, but I think more generally the reasons for the retreat from others, “but we are special.” (#2, coded as personal reaction, London, moving)</p> <p>“I feel much more a Londoner than a British person.” (#4, coded as London identity)</p>	<p>“But now, stuff like supporting England’s football team, which is what I used to love doing, I don’t really do anymore. I just have lost the interest, completely.” (#2, coded as personal reaction)</p> <p>“I see the fact that my son is here, and I thought, “All right. It’s a mess. I don’t know what would happen. Better have it and just be put.”.....But I don’t consider that I took it, the fact that I stay here. It was more like, “All right. That’s a safety net.” (#26, coded as personal reaction, London, moving).” (#2, coded as personal reaction)</p>