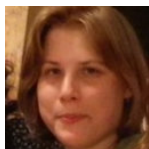# Defining British identity: is it about "values" or "proper behaviour"?

*What constitutes British identity? In this blog, **Ulrike G. Theuerkauf (UEA)** explains the relevance of "British values" in discussions about the further political, economic and social development of the UK after Brexit, and the manner in which "Britishness" is invoked as a concept of inclusion or exclusion in society.*

Brexit is something of a boom industry. Even before it has officially happened, the UK's departure from the European Union gives plenty to do to policy-makers involved at the core and peripheries of UK-EU negotiations, British (and other) media outlets covering the Brexit process, interest groups, comedians, academics and so on.

Highlighting yet another angle of the Brexit story contains a risk of contributing to "Brexit Fatigue Syndrome", a label for the perceived oversaturation of Brexit-related discussions introduced by The Independent not even a month after the EU referendum had taken place. Nonetheless, based on findings from a 2017 exploratory project consisting of 16 semi-structured interviews and participatory photography in Great Yarmouth, we[1] – a group of researchers from the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia (UEA) – believe that this is a risk worth taking. For there is one issue that stood out as central in our findings but remains highly ambiguous in the academic and policy-making discourse surrounding Brexit to date: the relevance of "British values" in discussions about the further political, economic and social development of the UK, and the manner in which "Britishness" is invoked as a concept of inclusion or exclusion.

So far, two main scholarly narratives seem to have been emerging that – in a not unproblematic conflation of possibly related but nonetheless distinct research questions – seek to explain both the outcome of the Brexit referendum and attitudes towards immigration in the UK: one centring on issues of economic, the other on issues of cultural development (Gidron and Hall 2017). In a nutshell, the former builds on the "left behind" argument and identifies (real or perceived, current or impending, economic, social and/or political) inequalities at the group level as key drivers of political attitudes (see e.g. Goodwin and Heath 2016). The latter, by contrast, focuses on issues of identity and values felt at the level of the individual, and regards them as separate from structural conditions such as economic inequalities (see e.g. Kaufmann 2016).

As Gidron and Hall (2017) and a long tradition of academics working on questions of social modernisation (see e.g. Inglehart and Norris 2016) have pointed out before us, it seems artificial at best and erroneous at worst to treat economic, cultural and political developments as self-contained processes, and to neglect interaction effects between structural conditions affecting the group level and values felt at the individual level. Without going too far down the rabbit hole of how group levels can be defined by national, regional, local, sex, age, education or other markers, something struck us during our own research in Great Yarmouth, which ranks in the 20% most deprived districts in England and the top five areas for Leave support in 2016: On the one hand, the vast majority of our interviewees who had come to live in Great Yarmouth as adult international migrants from Portugal, Poland and Slovakia[2] explained their personal experiences of anti-immigration views and action (both prior and subsequent to the 2016 referendum) as something to be expected for socio-economic reasons, such as lack of job opportunities, severe economic deprivation, lack of knowledge about different cultures due to the lack of opportunities to travel, and a related loss of hope. By contrast, most of our interviewees who had been born to British parents and lived in the UK for most of their lives explained the origins of anti-immigration and nationalist defensive views (be they their own or those that they have observed in others) with the perceived inability of immigrants to "do the right thing" and adapt to "British values".

This photo was taken as part of the participatory photography component of the research project (Partice Szubska 2017)

These findings open up a plethora of follow-up questions, not least what "British values" actually mean and how the discourse of "Britishness" is interpreted, used and invoked by different actors and in different spheres of political interaction, from everyday encounters at the individual level to formal government decisions at the national level. While politicians may define "British values" as a set of high-flying concepts such as democracy, rule of law or freedom of speech, our respondents in Great Yarmouth typically emphasised more immediately felt, practical interpretations of "proper British behaviour", such as when "doing the right thing" and adapting to British values is defined as parking in designated parking areas, not throwing rubbish onto the street and not standing outside cafes chatting loudly until late at night.

None of the aforementioned things are necessarily quintessential or exclusive to a British identity, but the fact that they are stated as identifiers of who does and who does not exhibit traits of a "foreigner" raises important questions about the content and political salience of "Britishness" across space and time. Values, culture and identity are famously ambiguous and malleable concepts, so that we need to ask how something as difficult to define as "British values" becomes a political justification for inclusion or exclusion; what role structural conditions play in shaping the content and everyday salience of British values and identity at the individual level; how this interplay of structural conditions and values shapes political behaviour; and how this behaviour contributes to feelings of security or insecurity of belonging among different identity groups in the UK.

With the UK's official departure from the EU only months away, these are fundamental questions that need to be asked more prominently as they are likely to shape the country's future social, political and economic trajectory.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

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[1] Dr Maria Abranches, Matthew Barwick, Marta da Silva Lopes, Dr Caitlin Scott, Dr Mark Tebboth, Dr Ulrike Theuerkauf and Dr Carole White.

[2] Some of whom have left the UK by now due to, as they told us, insecurities for their future and a perceived rise of anti-immigration views following the Brexit referendum.