

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Goldsmiths, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 21, Sociology		
Title of case study: BrExpats: informing political understandings of what Brexit means for British citizens resident in European Union member states		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: June 2017-January 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Michaela Benson (MB) Professor Karen O'Reilly (KoR)	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Reader in Sociology (MB); Professorial Research Fellow (KoR)	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2013-present (MB); 2017-2019 (KoR)
Period when the claimed impact occurred: June 2017-present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Dr Benson and Professor O'Reilly's ESRC-funded research with British citizens living and working in other EU member states has ensured that the rights and concerns of this, often misrepresented, population are made visible and their future needs are considered in the progress towards the final BREXIT arrangements. In examining how Brexit impacted on the lives of an estimated 1.2 million British citizens, Benson and O'Reilly's research has informed the political understandings of grassroots advocacy groups and civil society organisations campaigning for the rights of this population; it has been cited as an expert source in UK parliamentary briefings about Brexit and citizens' rights; and used to advise UK government departments about future needs and support requirements for this population.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Britain is widely portrayed as an immigrant nation. However, in the present day the rate of British emigration is one of the highest in the world. Benson and O'Reilly are world leading scholars on Britain's emigrant population whose foundational research draws on two longitudinal ethnographical research projects with British citizens in France and Spain conducted over 18 years (Benson) and 25 years (O'Reilly) and reinstates emigration as a significant contemporary social phenomenon.</p> <p>In 2017, Benson and O'Reilly were awarded funding through the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Brexit priority scheme for the research project: BrExpats: Freedom of Movement, Citizenship and Brexit in the lives of British Citizens living in the EU-27. The project examined the impact of Brexit for the estimated 1.2 million British citizens living in the EU-27, whose rights to live and work in the EU—previously guaranteed through their EU citizenship—were renegotiated as part of the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement between the UK Government and EU Commission. In pursuing new longitudinal qualitative research with British citizens living across the EU—including in-depth case studies with populations in France, Spain and Ireland; an internet-mediated Citizens Panel constituting 200 British citizens living across Europe and collaboration with Migration Policy Institute Europe, a leading global institution in migration policy, Benson and O'Reilly identified three key issues:</p>		
(1) Misconceptions, stereotypes and missing evidence		

Benson and O'Reilly's research identified that there was limited public and political understandings of this population and what Brexit would mean for their lives [G1]. This was the result of a significant evidence gap about the shape and size of the British population living in the EU-27. As Benson and O'Reilly highlight, this had led to unreliable and inaccurate statistics that regularly underestimated the numbers of British citizens living in the EU paired with a reductive caricature of a demographically diverse population (gin-swilling old colonials in the French countryside or working-class little Englanders living on the Spanish coast) [R2, R6]. Connectedly, they became aware of the partial knowledge about British migration to EU member states which saw them as predominantly retired, contra the fact that nearly 80% of British citizens are of working age and below. Benson and O'Reilly's research showed that the general public seemed largely unaware of how the EU Freedom of Movement Directives had brought EU citizens to live and work in the UK had also supported the settlement of UK citizens across the EU. Providing evidence to address these misconceptions, Benson and O'Reilly [G1, R5] argued that this evidence gap created a significant barrier to generating public support and political concern for the future rights of these British citizens over the course of the Brexit negotiations.

(2) The lived experience of Brexit

Benson and O'Reilly's findings [G1] highlighted how the period from the Referendum to Brexit (31 January 2020) was one characterised by protracted uncertainty among British citizens living in the EU. The future legal status of British citizens living in the EU hung in the balance throughout this period, at the mercy of the relationship between the UK and EU, but also impacted by political instability within the UK. Benson and O'Reilly documented the range of emotional and material impacts this gave rise to. They demonstrated that Brexit was unevenly experienced by British citizens living in the EU and identified how the impacts and outcomes of Brexit and their responses, actions and practices to mitigate its impact on their lives were shaped by; (a) the social location of individuals in relation to axes of inequality—including, inter alia, age, gender, race, disability, class and (b) local and national contexts, in consequence of variations in how the residence and/or migration of British citizens were administered in these locations before and after the Referendum [G1, R5]. The analysis bore witness to how the material impacts of Brexit for British citizens living in France exacerbated existing and generated new vulnerabilities, class, age, gender, and disability significant within this [R1]; how for British People of Colour living across the EU27, Brexit was experienced as a continuation of longer personal and family experiences of institutional, structural and everyday racism in Britain and Europe [R3]; and how younger British citizens experienced Brexit as caught up in the broader precarity and insecurities that had characterised their adult lives [G1].

(3) The Withdrawal Agreement: implications and implementation

A project survey demonstrated that despite the agreements reached in the conclusion of the citizen's rights negotiations, the research participants did not feel reassured about their futures. Interviews with EU member state officials also revealed that even once the citizens' rights agreements were in place, EU member states were unclear about how they would implement them. Following the release of the draft Withdrawal Agreement (March 2018), which outlined the agreements reached about citizens' rights, Benson and O'Reilly argued that there was an urgent need for EU member states to develop route maps providing clarity to British citizens—and those responsible for administering their status—explaining what they needed to do to secure their future rights to live and work in respective EU member states [R5]. They also highlighted how British citizens living in the EU had fallen between the gaps in the reciprocal framing of the negotiations [R4]. For example, those taking part in the research had been left feeling that they

were ‘nobody’s responsibility but their own’ and that neither political actors in the UK or EU were really attending to their future rights [R4]. As Benson and O’Reilly highlighted, even after the UK left the EU on 31st January 2020, it still remained unclear how some member states—France and Spain among them—were planning to implement these agreements [G1].

These findings have been shared via 4 BrExpats project reports; *Brexit and the British in France* (ES/R000875/1, Benson, 2020); *What does Brexit mean for UK citizens living in the EU27? Talking citizens’ rights with UK citizens across the EU27*, (Benson, O’Reilly, Collins, 2018); *What does Freedom of Movement mean to British citizens living in the EU27? Freedom, mobility and the experience of loss* (Collins, O’Reilly, 2018); *What does Brexit mean for UK citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with 18-35 year old UK citizens in southern Spain*. Project Report: ES/R000875/1 (Danby, O’Reilly, 2018) and via the [Brexit Brits Abroad Website](#) and Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast (2017-20).

3. References to the research

- [R1] Benson, M. 2020. Brexit and the classed politics of bordering: the British in France and European belongings, *Sociology* 54(3): 501-517 [<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519885300>] [Submitted to REF2]
- [R2] Benson, M. 2018. [Contrary to popular assumption, most Britons living in the EU27 aren’t retirees](#), LSE Brexit Blog [Full text available online/on request]
- [R3] Benson, M. and Lewis, C. 2019. Brexit, British People of Colour in the EU-27 and everyday racism in Britain and Europe, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42(13): 2211-2228 [<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1599134>] [Submitted to REF2]
- [R4] Benson, M. and O’Reilly, K. 2020. [British citizens in Europe left navigating the \(Brexit\) swamp, UK in a Changing Europe](#) [Full text available online/on request]
- [R5] Benton, M., Ahad, A., Benson, M., Collins, K., McCarthy, H. and O’Reilly, K. 2018. [Next Steps: Implementing a Brexit Deal for UK Citizens Living in the EU-27](#). Brussels: MPI Europe. [
- [R6] O’Reilly, K. 2017. [Far more Britons live in Europe than Government Statistics Suggest](#). *The Conversation*, 16 May 2018 [Full text available online/on request]

*All outputs listed above draw on research conducted as part of major ESRC grant:

[G1] Benson, M [PI] & O’Reilly, K 2017-2020, *BrExpats; freedom of movement, citizenship and Brexit in the lives of British citizens living in the EU27*, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC): EU in a Changing Europe, Brexit Priority Grant ES/R000875/1 £281,942

4. Details of the impact

Benson and O’Reilly’s research about Brexit and British citizens living in the EU-27 has contributed to how parliamentarians and policy-makers in the UK understand the needs of British citizens living in the EU-27; influenced the work of grassroots advocacy group *British in Europe*, the Civil Society Organisation *New Europeans* and has been used within a portfolio of evidence compiled by the European Citizens Action Service; informed the programming and content of the first national exhibition on emigration from Britain past and present; and resulted in the Office for National Statistics issuing a clarification about statistics relating to British citizens living in the EU.

Contributing to how parliamentarians and policy-makers in the UK understand the needs of British citizens living in the EU-27

Benson and O'Reilly's research [R5] highlighting the lack of clarity about what British citizens living in the EU should do to regularise their status and preparedness of EU member states to implement the Withdrawal Agreement was cited as evidence within the House of Commons Exiting the European Union Committee Reports on the Progress of the UK's negotiation on EU withdrawal [S1] (HC1060; p. 11). On the basis of this, on 16 May 2018 the Home Secretary wrote to Guy Verhofstadt MEP, The European Parliament's Brexit Coordinator, calling for reassurances that member states were putting in place practical arrangements in preparation for implementing the Withdrawal Agreement for UK nationals in the EU.

A later report [S2] (HC1439; p. 13 & 16) draws on this research to reiterate the need for clarity, and highlights that in his response to the letter from the Home Secretary, Guy Verhofstadt MEP stressed that he had approached member states to inform the Brexit Steering Group of their progress with these preparations. Further, this later report draws on evidence presented through the research [R5] about the challenges British citizens living in the EU face in demonstrating residence due to variations in extant processes for registering residence across EU member states and related challenges in supplying documentary proof of date of entry (p. 13). On the basis of this evidence, the report [S2] recommended once again that the UK Government seek urgent clarification from the EU-27 as to their preparations to regularise the status of UK citizens on their territory and called for EU Member States to communicate and disseminate this information as soon as possible.

Influencing and complementing the work of campaign groups, NGOs and CSOs

The research has impacted on the advocacy work of *British in Europe*, the grassroots organisation lobbying for the future rights of British citizens in the EU. As the co-chairs of British in Europe stress in their testimonial:

'... as a primarily grassroots citizens' group with very limited funding, and reacting to a changing and volatile situation since the UK EU Referendum, it was immensely helpful to have this as a reference point and to be able to draw on the research when relevant' [S3].

In the first instance, Benson's identification of mobility practices within the EU among younger British citizens navigating temporary and precarious labour markets [R2], resulted in a reframing of the organisation's presentation of the issues facing British citizens living in the EU and influenced the evidence they supplied to the Exiting the EU Committee [S3; S4]. The evidence Benson and O'Reilly produced to counter misconceptions about British citizens living in the EU [G1, R2, R4, R6] was also marshalled within the advocacy work of *British in Europe* [S3].

The research has also informed the work of *New Europeans*, a Civil Society Organisation which champions freedom of movement, non-discrimination and pan-European solidarities. Benson and O'Reilly's research [G1, R1, R4] has provided much-needed evidence to support their calls for the EU to offer a Green Card to safeguard the rights and status of Britons in Europe and EU citizens in the UK through their *Courage Calls* Manifesto and has informed *New Europeans* campaigning to keep this population on EU and UK political agendas in respect to citizens' rights, through their role in establishing the EU-UK Friendship Group in the European Parliament and APPG Citizens Rights in UK Parliament [S5].

The *European Citizen Action Service* cited Benson's research on France's mishandling of British citizens' applications for residence permits [R5] in a portfolio of 'Independent corroborating evidence of France's failure to comply with EU law'. Their complaint, which was submitted to the

European Commission, outlined the failure of the French municipal authorities to issue residence documents to EU citizens lawfully residing in France [S6].

Informing the programming and content of the first national exhibition on emigration

Benson and O'Reilly's research has informed the development of the Migration Museum's forthcoming *Departures* exhibition (Autumn 2020-Spring 2021) which focusses on British emigration over the last 400 years. Benson advised on the programming and content of the exhibition around contemporary British emigrations. As Head of Creative Content, Aditi Anand explains in her testimonial:

'Dr Benson's expertise has brought a contemporary perspective where a lot of the other work in the exhibition is historical, helping to draw out links between the past and present. She has enabled us to bring in more voices and stories from British citizens in Europe into the exhibition, helping to break down the stereotypes and misconceptions about Britain's contemporary emigrants. Our exhibition has certainly been richer and more nuanced as a result of this collaboration' [S7].

Prompting a clarification from the Office for National Statistics

O'Reilly's article [R6] originally published in *The Conversation* and reprinted in *The Independent*, (May 2018) highlighted the limitations of the methodology used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to estimate the numbers of British citizens living in the EU and prompted a response from the ONS. They issued a clarification printed as an addendum to the original article in *The Conversation* that explicitly acknowledged the limitations on these estimates:

'The one-off estimates ONS has published seek to quantify the expatriate population which holds no citizenship other than British and who are therefore most likely to be affected by the UK's decision to leave the EU. In their latest report, ONS didn't include British citizens living in Ireland because their rights under the Common Travel Area will continue after the UK has left the EU' [S8].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[S1] Report: House of Commons Exiting the European Union Committee, *The progress of the UK's negotiations on EU Withdrawal (March to May 2018)* [Fifth Report of the Session 2017-19. HC 1060](#); May, 2018, p. 11.

[S2] Report: House of Commons Exiting the European Union Committee Report, *The progress of the UK's negotiations on EU withdrawal: the rights of UK and EU citizens*, [Eighth Report of the Session 2017-19. HC 1439](#); July 2018, p. 13.

[S3] Written testimonial: British in Europe, Paris, 28th September 2020.

[S4] Report: Exiting the European Union Committee, *The progress of the UK's negotiations on EU withdrawal*, [HC 372](#), Wednesday 6 June 2018, Q1980 & Q1981.

[S5] Written testimonial: New Europeans Association Ltd, London, 16th September 2020.

[S6] Formal Complaint: EU Rights Clinic complaint to the European Commission concerning France's failure to comply with EU law, 'The failure of the French municipal authorities to issue residence documentation to EU citizens lawfully residing in France'; October 2018, p. 20, fn 49.

[S7] Written testimonial: Migration Museum, London, 18th September 2020.

[S8] Article: See addendum requested by the ONS and published at the end of Benson and O'Reilly's article, [Far more Britons live in Europe than Government Statistics Suggest](#). *The Conversation*, 16 May 2018 [see R6].