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Advancing the embedding framework: using longitudinal methods to revisit French highly skilled migrants in the context of Brexit

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ABSTRACT

There has been exponential growth in research about the impact of Brexit on the plans and projects of EU migrants in the UK. Much research focuses on highly visible migrants, such as the Poles. By focusing on French highly skilled migrants in London, our paper offers the perspectives of those who, prior to the referendum, were relatively invisible and largely absent from anti-immigration discourses. In so doing, we consider how the shock of Brexit exposed but also threatened the previously taken for granted privileges enjoyed by this capital-rich migrant population. Moreover, our longitudinal data, gathered through repeated interviews over seven years (2011–2018), enables analysis of how participants' experiences and evaluations of life and work in the UK changed, over time, in response to Brexit. In analysing these longitudinal qualitative data from an under-researched migrant group, this paper also aims to advance our concept of embedding, in its differentiation across political, economic and relational domains, to understand change over time. Specifically, this paper advances understanding of how processes of embedding, both in their reflexive and tacit forms, frame the complex and nuanced ways in which our French highly skilled participants have experienced, made sense of, and responded to, Brexit.

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Introduction

There is considerable interest in how the UK's exit from the EU (Brexit) will impact on migration, especially as ending EU free movement was a key rationale for the Brexit project (Virdee and McGeever 2018). Much has been written about how Brexit may shape the migration trajectories of EU migrants in the UK (e.g. Tyrrell et al. 2019; Markova and King 2021; Sredanovic 2021; Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021). While much research focuses on highly visible migrants, such as Poles, who featured prominently in Brexit debates (Rzepnikowska 2019; Duda-Mikulin 2020; Fanning, Kloc-Nowak, and Lesińska 2021), our paper offers a different perspective by turning to the

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experiences of a relatively invisible and privileged group; highly skilled French migrants in London. Based on repeated interviews, over more than seven years (2011–2018), we examine how their experiences and evaluations of life and work in the UK changed, over time, in response to Brexit.

In making sense of our longitudinal data, we apply our conceptual lens of embedding (Ryan and Mulholland 2015). Established concepts such as integration, despite recent efforts at rehabilitation, continue to be framed by highly politicised interpretations and applications (Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore 2018; Spencer and Charsley 2021). We introduced the concept of embedding in 2015 as a new way to understand multi-dimensional, dynamic and differentiated processes of migrant belonging, identifications and attachments in particular places and over time. Now, in the context of Brexit, this paper advances our conceptualisation of differentiated embedding by suggesting its usefulness in analysing migrants' nuanced and complex reactions to socio-economic and political transformations.

Moreover, the particular context of Brexit enables us to explore specific dimensions of embedding in new ways. Specifically, we add the previously unexplored domain of political embedding to those of economic and relational embedding and, in so doing, we propose a further dimension of differentiation, namely that associated with an axis of reflexive-tacit embedding.

We propose this advanced conceptualisation as uniquely able to make sense of the profound *shock* of the Brexit outcome for our participants. Arising from follow-up interviews, we note how participants' past embedding trajectories were entirely underpinned by a set of EU-membership rights that were so taken-for-granted as to have become fully visible to them only at the point of their loss (via the Referendum). As such, Brexit can be understood as a moment of revelation; an 'unsettling event' (Kilkey and Ryan 2021). Brexit triggered an unravelling not only of the volitional and reflexive dimensions of our participants' embedding trajectories in London, but also of their tacit, taken-for-granted, almost unconscious, dimensions. Thus, not only did the differentiated scale and form of their embedding trajectories come to light but processes of dis-embedding or indeed re-embedding were also triggered.

We begin by situating our paper in the emerging body of Brexit and migration literature. We then move on to present our concept of differentiated embedding. Next, we summarise our longitudinal method. Then we explore participants' embedding practices, and the impact of Brexit, across differential but interconnected domains (political, economic and relational). We conclude by highlighting the contribution of this paper conceptually, methodologically and empirically.

Researching the impact of Brexit on EU migrants in the UK

Recent years have seen a proliferation of publications about the impact of Brexit on EU migrants resident in the UK (e.g. Botterill, McCollum, and Tyrrell 2019; Tyrrell et al. 2019; Guma and Dafydd Jones 2019; Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Duda-Mikulin 2020). Researchers have studied anti-immigrant hostility (Rzepnikowska 2019) and associated feelings of unbelonging (Ranta and Nancheva 2019). The ways in which Brexit will shape migration trajectories, including return migration, onward mobility or indeed planned settlement in the UK, has also been a subject of recent research (Markova

and King 2021; Sredanovic 2021; Giralt 2020; Lulle, Moroşanu, and King 2018). While much research has focused on migrants from post-2004 accession countries, especially Poland, there is emerging research on migrants from what is called 'old Europe', the long term members of the EU (Brahic and Lallement 2020; Zontini and Genova 2022; Godin and Sigona 2021). Our paper seeks to contribute to the emerging body of work on how Brexit is impacting the experiences, feelings and trajectories of migrants who, until recently, enjoyed relative invisibility in the UK. Migrants from 'old EU' countries such as France, have lived in cities like London for many decades in quite considerable numbers (Huc-Hepher 2021) but rarely featured in any anti-immigration rhetoric.

When we reconnected with our participants in 2018, two years after the referendum, their sense of shock remained palpable, and many expressed profound feelings of loss and anger. Aurélie conceded that she had simply 'never expected it! [a majority vote to leave the EU]'. Sharing her sense of loss, Noemi described the Brexit outcome as being 'like the end of a love story'. Capturing the emotional impact of the referendum outcome, Simone accounted for how there 'was a profound sadness in the early days, which was replaced by … fury (yes!)'. These reactions are similar to those observed elsewhere in the Brexit literature, especially among migrants from 'old EU' countries (Godin and Sigona 2021; Zontini and Genova 2022).

EU migrants in the UK, far from being a homogeneous group, may be positioned quite differently in relation to Brexit (Godin and Sigona 2021). In their comparative analysis of how Bulgarian and Italian migrants in the UK have responded to Brexit, Zontini and Genova refer to a 'hierarchy of privilege' (2022, 14). Middle-class Italians, as 'old' Europeans, were more likely than Bulgarians to perceive Brexit and their loss of rights as 'unquestionably unjust' (14). By contrast, more recently arrived and 'newer' Europeans such as Bulgarians but also Poles, Latvians and Slovak migrants (see Lulle et al. 2019), had collective memories of migration prior to EU mobility rights and hence were less likely to have taken-for-granted such entitlements (Zontini and Genova 2022).

For our French participants, the rights and opportunities automatically granted via the UK's EU membership, conjoined with the intersectional privileges they enjoyed as Western European, white, professional, and relatively affluent economic actors, had previously granted them a particular duality of 'invisibility' and 'benign visibility'. By 'invisible', we mean that the intersectional privileges of our highly skilled migrants enabled them to evade the pathologised status of 'immigrant', as this has been constructed within a racialised and ethnocratic anti-immigration politics in the UK (Giralt 2020; Brahic and Lallement 2020). Moreover, as French migrants, they had benefited from a 'benign visibility', by which we mean that within the context of London's cosmopolitanism at least, the French 'presence' (neighbourhoods, retail, popular cultural activities and media representations) enjoyed a certain Francophile appreciation of 'all things French' (Wellington 2019). Brexit abruptly and unwelcomingly thrust our participants centre stage in a deeply contested 'politics of immigration', newly and publicly positioning them as 'immigrants of an unwelcome kind'; as Giralt (2020) notes, they have acquired 'migrantness'.

Drawing on our concept of embedding, this paper explores how the referendum outcome made shockingly visible to our participants the largely taken-for-granted, tacitly assumed certainties on which their embedding trajectories had unproblematically rested in the past. The referendum outcome served as a catalyst for previously unrequired

reflections on the nature and pre-conditions of their embedding trajectories to date (and going forward), as these were now revealed as fragile and contingent rather than certain. Thus, the shock of Brexit, was a direct product of the tacit, taken-for-granted, nature of their previous embedding trajectories and the ways in which these become forced into the light of reflexive sense-making only at the moment of their loss.

Our paper aims to contribute to the Brexit literature in three key ways. Firstly, building on our established research with highly skilled French migrants in London enables us to offer new insights into how this relatively invisible and privileged group is reacting to current events. Secondly, while much of the recent body of Brexit research involves data collected either immediately before or after the 2016 referendum, our longitudinal research, involving repeat interviews with our French participants, over more than seven years, starting in 2011, uniquely positions us to analyse their experiences and evaluations of life and work in the UK long before Brexit, as well as how these perspectives have changed since the referendum. Thirdly, drawing on this body of longitudinal data, our paper aims to advance differentiated embedding, as explained in the next section.

Differentiated embedding

We introduced the concept of embedding in 2015 as a way of capturing the complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional processes of belonging and attachments over time. We were initially inspired by Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness which has proven to be influential over the last four decades. Whilst Granovetter's focused on the relationship between economic behaviour, culture and systems of social relations (1985), his work has been influential among migration researchers (Korinek, Entwisle, and Jampaklay 2005; Koelet, Van Mol, and De Valk 2017; Palmberger 2017). Whilst mindful of Granovetter's own emphasis on the dynamic qualities of embedding, we considered the word 'embeddedness' itself, and its application within the migration literature, tended to imply a static, achieved state. Our research with migrants, conducted both separately (Ryan et al. 2008, 2009) and together (Ryan and Mulholland 2014a, 2015), suggested a process that was more dynamic and even reversible over time.

Emphasising complexity and dynamism, we coined the term 'embedding' to more fully capture its dynamic, processual and 'effortful' nature. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of effort (1986), we highlighted how attachment and belonging require work, time, energy and commitment to maintain. We drew on the work of Korinek, Entwisle, and Jampaklay (2005) and Hite (2005) in advancing the idea of differentiated embedding, highlighting the variable levels, forms and effects of embedding across diverse contexts (work, family, neighbourhoods etc) and over time.

We turned to geographers to understand the spatial aspects of migrant attachments and belongings (e.g. Hess 2004; Rishbeth and Powell 2013). Places in which migrants are embedding are not static, but rather are continually made and re-made, including by migrants themselves. Researchers need to understand how people negotiate their sense of belonging in these changing places (May and Muir 2015; Rishbeth and Powell 2013). Highlighting the multi-sited nature of embedding, we also attended to whether and how migrants invest energy, commitment and time in maintaining a sense of belonging and attachment to the people and places in their origin country, and other countries

where relatives and friends may be scattered. In our formulation of embedding, we challenged teleological assumptions, recognising instead that embedding trajectories are inherently uncertain (Trąbka 2019). Agency interacts with socially-determined opportunity structures (immigration status, employment, language skills, place of work and residence, shared interests and mutualities) in framing migrants' chances, or motivations, to form new ties, senses of belonging and place-attachments (Ryan 2018).

Therefore, in migration research, we define embedding as dynamic and contingent social practices through which migrants develop, maintain or withdraw relations and attachments both in and across time and space. Rather than an achieved, static state, embedding is inherently processual. Moreover, it is multi-speed, multi-depth and multi-directional, such that migrants may experience differentiated embedding, and indeed disembedding, in particular aspects of their lives, e.g. citizenship status, employment, housing, local networks and transnational connections, etc.

Embedding as a concept is particularly useful for understanding the simultaneously intended and unintended consequences of social practice. Thus, embedding practices are informed by purposive, agentic (hence reflexive) strategies, but also unconsciously through what we call 'tacit embedding', whereby migrants may develop links and begin to put down roots almost without planning or realising they are doing so. We propose tacit embedding here to account for scenarios in which belongings and attachments form in ways that are largely taken-for-granted by those involved. In some cases, this may be where migrants enjoy access to rights/entitlements/privileges that, despite their role as the absolute underpinning of embedding trajectories, from the outset have a quality of certainty, and hence presumption. In other cases, the taken-for-grantedness of belongings and identifications may form over time as the unforeseen and unreflexive outcome of embedding practices.

Of course, embedding occurs within an opportunity structure framed by the materiality of particular contexts. Structures and institutions, such as the labour market and immigration regulations, may facilitate or limit migrant embedding. Furthermore, interactions within these contexts, shaped by intersections of ethnicity, class, gender, religion, etc. also influence motivations, opportunities and obstacles for embedding. Embedding trajectories are framed at the intersection of multiple differentiations and inequalities. As such, differentiated embedding trajectories should be considered essentially unstable; as spatially and temporally dynamic. By connecting an intersectional lens to the concept of embedding, we can link variable opportunity structures to differentiated embedding practices and trajectories. Such an intersectional lens is key to how we might understand the similarities but also the differences in the experiences of various migrant constituencies.

Methods

Our initial data were collected for a study on highly skilled French migrants working in London's business and financial sector (2010–2012). A total of 40 participants took part in the study; 19 men and 21 women, most aged between 35 and 44, and having arrived in the UK in the early 2000s. 26 were married, 5 co-habiting and 9 single, and 28 were parents (for details see Ryan and Mulholland 2014a). A snowballing technique was used to recruit participants, with purposive sampling to ensure a sufficient range of

key demographic categories: gender, family status and length of residence in London. The first wave of interviews (2010–2011) focused on migration trajectories and motivations, accessing the labour market, negotiating identity and belonging as well processes of networking both in terms of making business connections (Mulholland and Ryan 2014) and through social activities, especially around family life (Ryan and Mulholland 2014b). In an attempt to collect richer data on particular themes, in 2012 we re-interviewed a sample of our participants (resulting in 14 second-round interviews). All interviews were conducted in English.[1]

While many worked in the financial sector, others worked in areas aligned to, but not directly, within finance, such as law, recruitment, research and training. Moreover, although some had senior, highly paid roles, others were in earlier, more junior career stages. Hence, while describing our participants as 'highly skilled migrants', we note that not all of them enjoyed high status, well-paid jobs.

Following the 2016 Brexit referendum, we wondered what had become of our participants and how their attitudes towards living and working in London may have changed after the vote to leave the EU. Early in 2018 we reconnected with participants using the asynchronous interview technique.[2] The method of using e-mail for interviewing (asynchronous interviewing – Meho 2006) has been growing in popularity in recent years (Fritz and Vandermause 2018). This is not only a cheap method for those with no research funding to support travel or transcription, but it is a method that also allows participants time to reflect on their responses (Burns 2010). The method is not without its challenges, such as a low response rate and challenges in establishing rapport (Meho 2006). Moreover, there are ethical issues in emailing people out of the blue, akin to cold calling (Burns 2010). While mindful of this ethical consideration in re-connecting after many years, we felt assured by our previous good rapport established by face-to-face interviews. This was borne out by the positive reactions we received as many participants emailed to say it was nice to hear from us again and they were glad of the opportunity to share their thoughts about Brexit. Indeed, the 17 people who responded to the email gave detailed and thoughtful responses with some participants writing several pages of text. Of the 17 participants who provided responses to our asynchronous interviews, 8 had participated in all 3 rounds of interviewing.

Hence, a key strength of our work is its longitudinal dimension. We have interviewed many of these participants on several occasions, using both face-to-face and asynchronous methods, over a period of 7 years. Rather than asking participants to recall, retrospectively, how they felt before the referendum, our longitudinal data allowed us to track their changing attitudes and plans over time. Thus, we have rich data on their attitudes to living in the UK, their sense of belonging, career progression and migration trajectories long before the Brexit referendum as well as in the years that followed. Re-interviewing participants over time 'enables accounts to be collected as biographically transformative experiences are lived through and/ or reflected upon and narrated' (Miller 2015, 293). This raises what Julie McLeod (2003) calls 'perspectivism' as participants and researchers are able to reflect on changing perspectives over time. Therefore, longitudinal data allows us 'to gain insight into underlying biographical and social processes at play' (Thomson 2007, 577).

In the following sections, drawing on these longitudinal data, we apply our concept of embedding, differentiated along political, economic and social lines, to analyse their

reactions to Brexit, the impact upon their sense of belonging in London/UK and their evolving plans for the future.

Political embedding

As Brexit was at its heart political, a 're-bordering' in the relationship between the UK and the EU (Godin and Sigona 2021), we will commence with a consideration of political embedding. Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz (2021) have pointed to the lack of attention given to socio-political dimensions within the embedding literature. Political (dis)embedding is concerned with the ways in which migrants themselves (reflexively and tacitly) construct meanings of, and relationships to, 'the political' as these inform a sense of belonging, attachment and identification. This would include, amongst other things, migrants' political attitudes and participations (including citizenship). But migrants' political (dis)embedding also takes place in a context set by political opportunity structures associated with the political cultures, politics of immigration and citizenship and integration regimes of the places to which they are connected. Here we will focus on the impact of Brexit on our participants' political (dis)embedding, exploring how they experienced and responded to, the loss of the embedding profile they once had.

In 2011, for our participants, the prospect that the British polity would be given the opportunity, and exercise the choice, to leave the EU was unthinkable. Then, our participants gave voice to much faith in the security of their belonging. This sense of security came in part from the assumption that the opportunities and benefits associated with EU membership (rights of mobility, employment, access to public services) would continue to speak to the minds, if not always the hearts, of the UK polity; in short to their interests. But the depth of our participants' largely tacitly-grounded sense of 'trust' in the security of their embedding also grew out of their evaluation of the political culture of their host society at the time. Our participants had talked liberally about the culture and practice of cosmopolitan inclusion that they had experienced in their lives in London. Claudine reflected, 'you can actually be a foreigner in London but you will feel at home … London in a word is very open'. Our participants' accounts of their lives in London then lacked any recognition of the systemic and everyday 'borderings' (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018) faced by many (often racialised) migrants and settled minorities. Our participants' experiences here appeared to reflect those of the EU14 migrants studied by Godin and Sigona (2021), experiences of welcome and acceptance. We see here how 'perceptions and responses of EU nationals to Brexit have been substantially shaped by their social statuses' (Godin and Sigona 2021, 3), as migrants with a range of intersectional privileges (as citizens of 'old' EU member states, affluent and white). Brexit changed all that; 'suddenly England felt like little Britain and totally narrow minded' (Irène).

A striking feature of our data from the 2011 interviews had been a remarkable level of disinterest in taking-up UK citizenship. The UK's EU membership had granted them social and economic rights sufficiently equivalent to those of UK citizens to allow them to realise their desired thresholds of embedding. As such, citizenship, and for that matter other forms of political participations, were rendered somewhat redundant as means to establishing security. As such, none of our participants had applied for citizenship, and many had not even considered it. As Noemi (who left the UK as an outcome

of Brexit) shared in 2018, reflecting back on her past self, 'I was planning to do nothing re: citizenship, and to keep living in the UK pretty much forever, as my French passport used to be enough'. Reflecting the 'defensive' and 'protective' citizenship narratives of Godin and Sigona's (2021) EU citizens in the UK, Noemi went on to say, 'this changed immediately after the vote and I started to consider citizenship to protect my family'.

In reconnecting with our participants in 2018, the often-tacit assumptions underpinning our participants' past embedding appeared shattered. Given the timing and purpose of our 2018 interviews, our data were replete with judgments on both the outcome, and the legitimacy, of the Brexit referendum as a political event, within a broader sense of outright shock. With just one exception, the Referendum outcome was widely condemned as politically irrational, and even as illegitimate. Sigolène expressed her dismay at the British electorate's 'lack of pragmatism (until then, I thought, a remarkable virtue of the British people)'. Damien condemned the irrational terms of the Brexit debate, denouncing 'the narrow span of the debate', and the 'level of ignorance' enabled and declared; 'I could not believe what I was hearing: all these lies, fantasies. It was like watching the 'Monty Pythons'. 'Challenging the Referendum's legitimacy, Sigolène insisted, 'it should have never been a choice of the public as it is too much of a complex scenario'.

Our participants were thrust into a necessarily reflexive evaluation of their loss, and specifically their loss of a sense of home. Participants were now re-positioned on the wrong side of a border demarcating the 'legitimate' from the 'illegitimate', the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' (Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021); those who could, from those who could not, 'feel at home'. Damien (a self-declared Anglophile in 2011) now felt that 'the UK had become a foreign land'. Damien questioned 'if … [he was] … still an anglophile … '. Aurélie reflected on her changed sentiments toward the British electorate, 'I really resent what happened, and the 52% of voters … I like the UK and London a lot, I just don't want to be part of it if I am not welcome'. In short, the referendum outcome had shattered the 'invisibility'/'benign visibility' duality that had characterised our participants' lives in London, re-bordering them as both hyper-visible and 'unwanted' immigrants; 'un-making' them as citizens (D'Angelo and Kofman 2018).

This re-bordering brought (the fear of) unwelcome attentions. Similarly, Damien expressed how he felt 'treated as an 'alien' with secondary-class rights. I also feared having to face any idiot starting any random hatred rant at the EU and foreigners … Even being located in a pro-EU constituency in London, you never know who you going to meet'. Collette recounted; 'for the first time since 2000 I got asked by a man I didn't know in the queue at the post office when I was going home. I told him with a smile England was my home'.

Such experiences triggered a sense of resentment, given past and present contributions; 'I have the right to live here and have been an exemplary citizen, paying my taxes (a lot of them), never claiming any benefits, serving various communities through volunteering etc'. Our participants expressed what Godin and Sigona (2021) have referred to as a 'counter-narrative of deservingness' (14), where the migrant group's accumulated national contributions, and the unfairness of the act of re-bordering, become mobilised to discredit the UK as 'un-deserving'.

As was the case for many of Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz's (2021) EU citizens in Scotland, Brexit compelled our participants to confront the new implications of their 'thin portable

EU citizenship' (Fanning et al. 2021), in a dramatically changed legal context. In 2018, most respondents had not secured 'permanent residence' or 'settled status'. This delay, or prevarication, was largely accounted for in terms of the obstacles to securing settled status and the uncertainties of the immediate future, though allied to a resignation that settled status might be necessary in due course. As Chantal stated,

> I haven't applied for UK residency, it is such a gruelling bureaucratic process, and one hears such horror stories, plus with all the uncertainties of what exactly is going to be required from EU citizens to be allowed to stay. I'd rather wait and see.

In terms of citizenship, only two of our 17 responders had secured citizenship (Charles and Irène) post-referendum. Irène, who was married to a British man, had considered citizenship to be an urgent requirement as a guarantee of being able to maintain 'normal lives'. Whilst she did not see herself being 'forced out', the erosion 'little by little' of her rights was a concern; she feared a kind of incremental dis-embedding. In actual fact, Irene's experience of securing citizenship, which we conceptualise as a form of 're-embedding' in this context, had been fraught with failure and upset. Her initial application was rejected but she was successful on the second attempt. Charles talked of citizenship as a vehicle to participate in 'the big decisions'; 'we want, need and will cast our voice anytime the UK has an election as important as Brexit, where we were not invited to vote in 2016 although highly impacted'. Charles was the only participant in 2011 to talk of the importance of exercising what political rights were granted to him in the UK via the UK's EU membership (voting in local elections). The Referendum had been a lesson for Charles in the participative importance of securing full membership of the UK polity. Brexit had had the effect of requiring our participants to re-embed, and beyond the point of their 2011 status, if they were to re-establish any sense of security in the UK.

Those who did specify their intentions, either had 'no plans' to acquire citizenship, refused to take up citizenship as a matter of principle, or confronted the issue of securing 'settled status' and/or citizenship, from a vantage point of anger, resentment or frustration at the prospect of needing to formalise a security in embedding that had previously been granted as a fact of EU membership. Reflecting the rendition of the UK as 'undeserving' (Godin and Sigona 2021), some of our participants expressed a sense of alienation from the idea of further embedding in a place that had rejected them; 'this was not about being allowed to stay, this was about wanting to stay. I lost that will the day after the referendum' (Noemi). Embedding is effortful, and dependent to some degree on will. Whatever our participants' response to Brexit, almost all them had lost some level of 'will to embed'. Even those for whom citizenship constituted a means to re-embed, the context of their future embedding will necessarily be built on new reflexivities, and will never again have quite the same tacit foundations.

Economic embedding

A defining feature of our first round of interviews, and discussed in several papers at that time (Ryan and Mulholland 2014a), was how participants emphasised the specificity of London in terms of opportunity, meritocracy and career escalation. Damien who had previously worked in Luxembourg asserted:

> because I am working in financial services and London is one of the capitals of finance in the world, with New York, and so it's the capital of Europe anyway, so for me it was a logical step to come over here.

Similarly, Charles stated that London 'was the most attractive place in Europe to make trading as a core business' (interviewed in 2011).

Taking advantage of Freedom of Movement rights, participants had often moved to London with short term or open plans to explore career opportunities. Colette moved to London more or less on a whim, without any pre-arranged job: 'I packed my bags … I took the Eurostar and I came to London. It took me three weeks to find a job in banking and then I have been here ever since' (Colette interviewed in 2011). Like many participants, Colette remarked on the opportunities for career escalation in London: 'I started working, and I was really motivated, I was learning fast, and they just gave me opportunities after opportunities'.

These sentiments were echoed by Céline who also worked in the financial sector: 'I love London, it gives a lot of opportunities … it was all on meritocracy and you work hard you get'. In contrast to the meritocracy of the UK, France was often described by participants as elitist and closed: 'If you don't know the right people and you haven't gone to the right school, it will stay with you for ever' (Aurélie).

However, that is not to suggest that establishing a career in London was entirely seamless and easy; not all were 'high flyers'. Odile described the challenges in navigating a new environment, especially setting up his own business: 'It took me a period of adjustments to integrate the way people think here'. While acknowledging the challenges he encountered, Odile was adamant that it was easier to build a business in London than in France. Echoing a remark made by Aurélie, he asserted: 'In France – WOW – don't even think about it, you have to be introduced, you have to know someone, you have to come from the same school'.

On the whole, our participants had realised their goals and were developing careers within their chosen professions in London, though with hard work and long hours in highly pressurised and competitive working environments (Mulholland and Ryan 2014). This could be described as economic embedding. Mindful of the specificities of the city of London, most intended to stay and had no definite plans to return to France or move on elsewhere: 'I don't know of any city in Europe … that has as much to offer as London … . I don't think I would have the life I have in London anywhere else in Europe' (Colette interviewed in 2011). Given this prior data, it is illuminating to consider how Brexit may have impacted on that embedding.

In terms of economic embedding, the timing of our post-Referendum interviews (the UK was still formally part of the EU) may account for the fact that some participants reported no impact at work. Charles's management consultancy had actually seen an increase in clients, though precisely as an outcome of the challenges associated with the post-Referendum context, 'It gave me a lot of new business, as I am a change management consultant and most of the PLC or international firms in the UK are struggling with the process and the consequences'.

But other participants had already observed 'uncertainty at work regarding the financial services going forward' (Claudine). As a result, some businesses were planning to leave London: 'With my husband now working for anonymised Bank, they may decide to relocate his job to Frankfurt … Many banks have been relocating' (Chantal).

Thus, in contrast to the positivity about the City of London professed in 2011–2012, by 2018 we see heightened concerns. Damien is a good case in point. In 2011, he had described London as 'the financial capital of Europe'. In 2018 he was less confident that London could retain that position: the 'City depends on the "EU financial passport". When they lose this edge, they will lose markets'. Damien's own work was beginning to suffer: 'After the Referendum, leads and prospects got colder and it was more difficult to get interested from potential clients'. Several participants indicated how the uncertainty of the post-Brexit economy might provoke their own economic dis-embedding. Having been optimistic about London as a good place to do business in 2012, by 2018 Odile was unsure about the future economic viability of his consultancy firm: 'if my clients leave the UK, I'll have to reconsider staying in the UK. One participant, Noemi, had been so concerned about the impact of Brexit that she had already left the UK and taken up a job in Holland.

The economic embedding that had seemed so secure in 2011–2012, appeared much more precarious in 2018 with some participants contemplating, or actually, dis-embedding from the UK labour market. However, one cannot look at (dis)embedding in any one sector in isolation. Inter-personal relationships with significant others often informed strategies for dis-embedding or indeed re-embedding.

Relational embedding

Relational embedding is key to migrants' sense of belonging, fulfilment and security. In our initial interviews, we had found quite varied levels of relational attachments in London (Ryan and Mulholland 2014b). In the 2011–2012 interviews, many participants underlined the importance of adapting to British society and were critical of French people who remained in their own bubble: 'there are too many French people, I think, in London who stay in their own bubble' (Colette) and were 'operating within a French ex-pat community' (Aurélie). As Céline asserted: 'If I really want to meet French people then I shouldn't really be here, I should be in France'.

As noted in our previous papers (Ryan and Mulholland 2014a, 2014b), because of the nature of their jobs, many participants had built up extensive networks of diverse business relationships. Being good at networking was often part of their jobs: 'I enjoy the networking and I enjoy working the room' (Irène). However, business networks were not necessarily friendship ties:

> In England there is an obvious difference between 'my colleague' and 'my friend'. You may work with people you never socialize with … It's quite difficult to socialize with these pure, 100% English … . (Charles interviewed in 2011)

Indeed, despite living in London for many years and establishing professional careers, associated with deep embedding in the labour market, most participants noted the challenge of making friends with English people. Chantal who had lived in west London with her family for over a decade stated that English friendships networks were 'closed ranks … And obviously you're out and you're not a part of it' (interviewed in 2011). The sense of network closure was echoed by Aurélie (interviewed in 2011), who worked in academia: 'English society is very closed … . Even at work I just find that English staff tend to keep with each other'.

Given the challenge of entering English friendship networks, most participants tended to forge social ties with other migrants, a pattern noted also in studies with other migrants (Gill and Bialski 2011). Aurélie described her friendship network in London as 'very, very multicultural … one couple is Greek and another couple we meet regularly are Greek and German'. Damien had initially avoided French networks and tried to make English friends. However, after experiencing the challenge of entering English friendship networks, he too turned to other migrants and fellow French citizens for companionship in London. Even Irène, who was married to an English man and had children at a local school, often a route into local friendships (Ryan 2007), had few English friends. Interestingly, Irène explained that over time, especially since taking a career break and having children, she tended to seek out other French mothers to share child-based sociality (see Ryan and Mulholland 2014b).

Thus, while our earlier interviews noted deep economic embedding among participants, their relational embedding was far more differentiated. Despite aspirations for embedding in English sociality, most participants were embedding relationally with mainly French or other European migrants.

In our follow-up interviews in 2018, many participants talked about how Brexit impacted on personal relationships with colleagues, family and friends. Irène described how Brexit led to 'a lot of tears and arguments at home; it took its toll in many ways'. She emphasised the impact on her children: 'it creates a lot of uncertainty, not only for me but also for my children. My son tells everybody that it is not Brexit, but Brex-shit'.

Moreover, knowing some of her English in-laws voted for Brexit caused conflict and resentment, and some relational dis-embedding.

> my husband's family was divided with some young and old members voting to leave the EU to my disbelief and some voting to remain; I simply cannot get it out of my head who voted remain or leave and I think it will take a very long time for the feeling to go away; they all said to me personally that it did not apply to me as I was family, but of course it could not have felt more different. (Irène interviewed in 2018)

Beyond family, the unfolding context of Brexit sanctioned some anti-European and anti-French rhetoric within workplace networks. Damien reflected: 'I noticed this environment revealed some points of view and underlying sentiments … more French bashing, anti-South of Europe views seemed to be more easily expressed'. Some participants were shocked and hurt to find that colleagues had voted for Brexit: 'I know that some of my colleagues (British ones) have voted for Brexit, and it makes me sick' (Aurélie). For the first time, several participants felt stigmatised and marginalised (see also Zontini and Genova 2022). Irène described tensions at work: 'I suddenly realised what the Jews must have felt like in Germany in the 1930s; I kept a very low profile'.

A key implication of Brexit for our participants was its impact on future mobility and settlement trajectories. Mobility plans were forming in the broader context of significant others. As many participants had friendship networks made up largely of other migrants, the impact of Brexit rebounded through their close inter-personal relationships, with implications for their sense of relational dis-embedding; reinforcing uncertainty and insecurity. According to Celine, 'some friends have thought about moving out of the UK, back to their respective birth countries, however, so far no one has moved out'. Noemi, who had already dis-embedded and moved to Holland, stated that her 'friends

from the EU living in Britain shared (and still share) my fears, disgust, etc. after the referendum. They are all considering to move'.

Those with deep relational embedding, especially through family ties, showed strong commitments to stay in the UK, particularly those with British partners. Carinne insisted, 'I am settled in the UK and have no intention to leave'. Her dual nationality gave her the 'best of both worlds'. Colette, despite feeling 'somewhat uneasy' since the Referendum result, declared that she 'loved living and working' in the UK. In the process of 'getting married to an English man', and house hunting, Colette's multi-dimensional embedding was clearly serving to mitigate her sense of future insecurity: 'I still don't know what the future holds but I have decided to get on with my life … I have a more laissez faire attitude, what's the worst that can happen?' (Colette).

As argued earlier in the paper, embedding is differentiated across a range of domains but also within particular domains. This was clearly illustrated by Irène's differentiated relational embedding. Despite tensions with work colleagues and her Brexit-voting in-laws, she had strong family ties in the UK that reflected and reinforced her overall sense of embedding in the country:

> my life is in the UK and has been for nearly 30 years; I have lived here more than in France, have got 3 bilingual children who go to very British schools and my husband is British; we are not moving anywhere. (Irène)

Sigolène, also had no intention of leaving the UK despite her shock and unhappiness with Brexit. Being married to a British man and having bi-national children, she had not 'been worried at all about my future settlement as I will be living in the UK all my life … I would be more worried if my partner was not British'. But such ties might also be resented; 'I feel trapped currently by having children at school, but the reality is that when they are finished in 10 years' time, I will be free to leave' (Sigolène interviewed in 2018). Reflecting the role played by children in migrants' relational embedding and mobility decisions post-Brexit, Brigitte was considering moving from the UK, now that her adult children had left the country.

Further highlighting the life-course dimension of current and prospective embedding trajectories, the referendum result impacted on retirement plans. By the time of our follow-up interviews, some participants had been in the UK for over 20 years, and retirement was becoming a factor in future plans. Chantal's plans were made uncertain by Brexit, given her husband's potential transfer to a Frankfurt bank and her own ongoing employment in London. But beyond her working life, she no longer saw a future in the UK. Both she and her husband planned retirement in France: 'we've been unclear for a long time about where we wanted to retire … We are now … starting to make much more concrete plans towards settling back there one day, this one day feeling less foggy and distant than it used to'. Thus, highlighting the salience of spatial, as well as temporal dimensions of embedding, it is apparent that Brexit not only triggered a sense of dis-embedding from the UK but a planned re-embedding in France.

Concluding thoughts

This article aims to advance understandings of migrants' responses to Brexit in three key ways. Firstly, by exploring the experiences of an under-researched group of highly skilled

migrants from an old EU member state, France; secondly, by using longitudinal data to track their evolving attitudes and plans over many years; thirdly, by advancing our conceptual framework of differentiated embedding to analyse change over time.

As mentioned earlier, while much of the recent flurry of research on migration and Brexit is based upon post-accession migrants from Central and Eastern or Southern Europe, through our French participants we offer new insights from an under-researched migrant group. Moreover, adopting an intersectional lens, we consider how, unlike more recently arrived, marginalised, racialised or stigmatised EU migrants, our participants occupied advantageous positions not only in terms of class, professional status and whiteness, but also through long established and seemingly taken-for-granted rights and privileges as a largely invisible migrant population. Hence, our paper adds to understanding the diversity of EU migrants in the UK, their varied positionality and associated responses to Brexit.

Our analysis is further strengthened by our longitudinal data. Unlike many recent papers that present data collected immediately before or after the referendum, we draw on data collected over seven years. Our initial interviews (2011–2012) were not framed by Britain's impending departure from the EU; this prospect was not considered. Thus, we were able to analyse our participants' plans and aspirations based on the assumed certainty and stability of their rights as EU citizens in Britain. Following up those participants in 2018, two years after the referendum, during the transition process, allowed us to see their reactions to Brexit and how it was impacting upon their migration trajectories.

Working with these data has enabled us to advance our concept of embedding. When we first introduced the concept of embedding in 2015, further elaborated as differentiated embedding in 2018, we proposed its usefulness in understanding dynamic multi-layered, multi-dimensional processes of belonging and attachment across different domains of society over time. We were aware that embedding helped to explain change on the individual level, such as relational breakdown or redundancy, and the associated impact on migration plans. But Brexit has afforded us an opportunity to test the applicability of our concept in the context of a seismic shift on the socio-political level. While Brexit could trigger widespread dis-embedding, our analysis shows more nuanced and differentiated responses.

We wondered, and indeed were often asked at conference presentations, if embedding needed to be a deliberate strategy, consciously worked at through sustained effort, or whether there were some tacit aspects to migrants' embedding over time. This paper has sought to explore that question. The shock of Brexit brought to light the often tacit nature of participants' past embedding, though differentiated across domains.

It was in what we call the 'political domain', prior to Brexit, that we saw the greatest evidence of tacit embedding. Our original data (2011–2012) revealed the taken-for-grantedness of participants' rights and privileges as EU citizens. While sometimes critical of the EU project, they tended to assume the continued security of their rights to work, settle, leave and return, without legal obstacles or immigration barriers. None had taken any action to secure their position in the UK by applying for citizenship and saw no reason to ever do so. But Brexit rocked those taken-for-granted assumptions in respect of their rights and privileges. For those who wanted to stay or at least keep their options open, Brexit confronted them with the need for a conscious process of

deliberate political re-embedding through efforts to secure their status and rights to live and work in the UK. For others, who now planned to leave or had already left, it triggered dis-embedding and conscious re-embedding in France or elsewhere.

In contrast, in the economic and relational domains, the effort required to build careers and new inter-personal relationships in London (despite the intersectional privileges enjoyed by our participants) had clearly acted as a catalyst for greater levels of reflexivity in respect of their embedding practices. Our paper invites greater consideration not only of the duality of the tacit and reflexive dimensions of embedding, but also how these dimensions; might operate differently across different domains of embedding; interact with one another in particular contexts; and be transformed by the effects of 'unsettling events' such as Brexit.

Our paper points to areas for future research. It would be interesting to develop the intersectional lens and test our conceptual framework with other migrant groups (see Speed et al. 2021). Moreover, while recent work has applied embedding to UK contexts (Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021), it would be illuminating to explore differentiated embedding practices, opportunities and obstacles in other geographical locations. There is also scope for further research now that the Brexit transition phase is complete, to see how the post-Brexit context is continuing to shape embedding practices.

Notes

1. All participants, in all rounds of interviewing, signed informed consent forms having been provided with information sheets outlining the aims of the project, the methodology used, and the strategy deployed for participant confidentiality/anonymity, and data management.
2. All participants, in all rounds of interviewing, signed informed consent forms, having been provided with information sheets outlining the aims of the project, the methodology used, and the strategy deployed for participant confidentiality/anonymity and data management

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