

The LEAVE vote and racial abuse towards Black and Minority Ethnic communities across the UK: the impact on mental health

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Introduction

In the months and years before the June 2016 EU referendum, a significant number of Black and minority ethnic people as well non-Black and Minority Ethnic migrants to the UK were generally positive about the EU and viewed remaining in the EU as socially and economically beneficial. In a Black and Minority Ethnic group's quote from the Guardian newspaper at the time, 'It (the EU) is not a panacea and we understand there is a need to reform in some areas, but on the whole the EU is a positive thing and we don't want to leave future generations with a legacy of some kind of island utopia that does not exist'.¹ While ethnic minority communities were, in general, more likely to vote to remain, support for leaving was surprisingly high among some South Asian communities, especially in west London.²

In the months leading up to the June 2016 Referendum, the Leave campaign put considerable resources into targeting the ethnic minority population, arguing that by restricting migration from within the European Union, it would be easier for people to come from outside the EU. On EU Referendum day, many people from the Black and Minority Ethnic community did, in fact, vote to leave the EU.

In spite of its flaws, the EU has contributed a lot to the institutionalisation of equality policies in the UK, as in other member states by strengthening and expanding the legislation to counter sex and racial discrimination in the UK.³ Yet, in the weeks and months leading up to the EU Referendum in June 2016, a culture of extremism and intolerance became visible in political debate on the UK as before and since in other countries. Factors that contributed this included the depth of the impact of austerity in many of the areas of the UK, such as the North-East of England

where a majority of people voted to leave the EU, but also the use of social media. Both influenced the way in which minority populations were viewed by the majority population. In a wider context, there have been worrying signs of nationalist populist movements in Europe and globally that have attempted to raise hostility against immigrants and ethnic minorities, especially Muslims in Britain.^{4,5}

The EU and the changing nature of respecting human rights in Brexit Britain

After all the destruction and huge loss of life in World War II came a will to recreate European liberal democracies with respect for and promotion of human rights at the centre of countries and nation states. This was embodied in the European Convention of Human Rights⁶ that contains rights and freedoms under six inequality grounds: dignity; freedoms; equality; solidarity; citizens' rights; and justice. Within this framework, people of all backgrounds would have equal rights and expressed racial prejudice was subject to legal sanction as well as social opprobrium. In the UK, these principles were given legal traction in a wide range of documents under the influence of the EU (or previously the European Economic Community), such as the Race Relations Act of 1965, followed by the Racial and Religious Hatred Act, Civil Partnership Act for same-sex couples and Disability Equality Duty act and specific legislative actions targeting women, including shared parental leave, equal pay, anti-discrimination laws, funding for women-led projects and protection against harassment and human trafficking.

Twenty-one years ago, in 1997, a survey by the Policy Studies Institute found that around 13% of people of ethnic minority had been racially attacked

or racially insulted in the preceding year.⁷ Since then migration patterns and attitudes have changed. However, even as more people from ethnic minorities are now born in the UK, reports of harassment remained relatively stable until the EU Referendum campaign began in earnest in early 2016. In the aftermath of the UK referendum to leave the EU, it seems that mainstream media narratives have shifted towards 'rendering acceptable' rhetoric about immigration that would have previously been regarded as unacceptably racist, while continuing to be silent on how minority rights', including women's, Black and Minority Ethnic and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer people's rights will be protected after Brexit. In addition to this, such comments as described in the Independent newspaper 'F***ing foreigner, go back to your country'⁸ and the pseudo-legitimation of such behaviour have caused great disquiet in Black and Minority Ethnic communities across Britain.

This may have resulted in an increase in perceived alienation and associated fear in those communities. It is nevertheless important to point out the way that reporting and analysis of hate speech can be susceptible to reporting bias.

Just in the week after the June 2016 EU Referendum, Demos analysis⁹ identified 2413 unique reported incidents from UK streets of hate speech and xenophobic abuse. DEMOS identified 13,236 tweets sent in the UK from 24 June to 1 July (the seven days after the 'Leave' result) with xenophobic or anti-immigrant attitudes. The study also found that Twitter was used as a platform for expressing solidarity with migrants and challenging racism – with 44,003 tweets sent during the same period under the #SafetyPin support hashtag. The UN expressed position was that recent hate crimes against minorities were at least in part related to the campaigning pre-Referendum.¹⁰ Specifically, the UN Committee on Eliminating Racial Discrimination said that the Brexit referendum campaign was marked by 'divisive, anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric', and that some politicians had 'created and entrenched prejudices, thereby emboldening individuals to carry out acts of intimidation and hate'.¹¹ This position was supported by The chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, David Isaac, said: 'There is no place for racism and hatred in a modern Britain and we share the UN's serious concerns about the recent spike in race-hate incidents'.

Migration and mental health issues in Black and Minority Ethnic communities

During the ongoing Brexit negotiations, the UK Conservative government has announced that the

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which became law in the UK in 2009 with the Lisbon treaty, will not be part of the domestic UK legislation after the exit of the UK from the EU. Any lack of protection and respect of minority groups' rights has implications for people's everyday life and particularly on their mental health. In a seminal study by Gilvarry et al.,¹² it was shown that Black and Minority Ethnic individuals do not experience significantly more life events than ethnically White patients. However, their perception of these events is clearly different and possibly more often attributed to racism. Schizophrenia rates are affected by perceived discrimination.¹³ Therefore schizophrenia rates in ethnic minority communities are subject to factors in the wider society of which Brexit is one.

It is likely that perceived discrimination combined with existing stigma towards mental illness in Black and Minority Ethnic communities may influence mortality rates in minority groups.¹⁴ In relation to this, there has been no systematic exploration of the mental health impact in Black and Minority Ethnic communities of the EU Referendum and its sequelae. Migration itself is associated with a spectrum of consequences for those who move to a new life. When individuals migrate from one nation state or culture to another, be it for temporary residence or permanent or for economic, political or educational purposes, there is every likelihood that an individual's cultural and ethnic identity will change, as described in detail by Bhugra in 2005.¹⁵

The degree of experienced change is determined by a number of factors: individual, kinship and societal factors, such as gender roles and gender role expectations. The degree to which they feel welcome is a major factor determining the success of acculturation and adaptation. The concept of acculturation helps to understand the migration experience. The processes of acculturation encourage the individual to develop an identity which makes such an individual reasonably comfortable across the two cultures.¹⁶ Persistent problems in cultural adaptation are associated with a higher risk for long-term mental health problems. Often those who assimilate (defined as being engaged in both their heritage culture and in the larger society) are better adapted than those who acculturate by orienting themselves predominantly to one or the other culture.¹⁷

The effects of pre-migration trauma, post-migration factors such as loss of social roles and confidants, changed attitudes, sociodemographic factors such as age, sex, education and economic status, and effects of cultural orientation, e.g. assimilation, separation, biculturalism and marginalisation, and acceptance from the host society all play a role in

the process of acculturation.¹⁸ Furthermore, spirituality and religiosity also contribute to the adaptive process.¹⁹ A variety of different factors influence the development of mental illness post migration, including racist violent attacks against Black and Minority Ethnic people in the aftermath of the EU Referendum. Women and young girls are especially at higher risk within traditionally male-dominated and hierarchical Black and Minority Ethnic communities as well as being vulnerable within British society as a whole.

Conclusion

Since the EU Referendum, the potential impacts of Brexit on Black and Minority Ethnic communities have been largely ignored in political and media discourse. The impact of Brexit on the mental health of Black and Minority Ethnic individuals is attested to by multiple individual reports of specific cases, specifically with regard to anxiety and depression. There are limited data on the actual scale of mental health problems in this community.

Within certain sections of society, overt racial abuse is sadly now *not* culture-dyscongruent. Specific studies are needed that systematically analyse the mental health consequences of Brexit on Black and Minority Ethnic people for the sake of the health of our communities and the social cohesion of Britain as a nation.

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