

# Dialogue With Difference: Meta-Representations in Political Dialogue and Their Role in Constructing the ‘Other’

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## Abstract

When faced with the aftermath of a divisive political event, how do citizens make sense of the political opinions of those who voted differently to them? Drawing on the Social Representations Approach (SRA) and its emphasis on communication as a medium through which meaning making occurs, we utilize dialogical analysis of focus group data (N = 36) collected after the UK’s referendum on leaving the EU. We focus on how voters engage with the perspective of the other in an intragroup dialogue setting. In doing so, this paper aims to explore the role of meta-representations, or ‘what we think other people think’, in contexts of contested political issues. We show the value of considering how meta-representations function to delegitimize different political views and vote choices, and by implication serve an important role in socially representing the ‘other’, constructing and reproducing intergroup boundaries. This process is achieved through drawing on semantic barriers, communicative tools that play a crucial role in safeguarding one’s own beliefs from the threat of alterity.

## Keywords

dialogue, meta-representations, semantic barriers, Brexit, intergroup communication

## Non-Technical Summary

### Background

In 2016, after the UK voted to leave the European Union (Brexit) there was increasing discussion of how the referendum had polarised society and created new social and political divides between those who voted Remain and those who voted Leave.

### Why was this study done?

In the context of this aftermath, our study aimed to examine how citizens make sense of the political opinions of those who votes differently to them.

### What did the researchers do and find?

This study analysed group discussions among Leave voters and Remain voters separately, examining how they make sense of the reasons and arguments behind the ‘opposite sides’ vote. We focus in particular on the extent to which these discussions engage with reasons and arguments in an open way, and how the potentially threatening nature of alternative perspectives is handled through a variety of communicative actions, including avoiding and delegitimising alternative perspectives. We find that political opinions become anchored in personal experiences or traits, explaining away differences as inherently natural



and other voters as inherently limited in having the ‘right’ knowledge. This process in turn justifies participants inability to accept and acknowledge alternative points of view on Brexit.

### What do these findings mean?

The findings are important for considering how discussions around political issues can perpetuate, rather than alleviate, political divides by anchoring the political in the personal, and making it seem as if holding a political opinion is an outcome of being a certain kind of person (with specific experiences). This can both limit people’s ability to explore alternative opinions (and adopt them) as well as continue to further cleavages between groups by making their boundaries seem natural, and unbridgeable.

A focus on one’s knowledge, thoughts and beliefs of others and its impact on the self, has become increasingly common in social psychology. Research on “meta” psychological processes, including identification and stereotyping (Fowler & Gasiorek, 2020; Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2011) illustrate how the world we live in is inherently social, and that this sociality permeates the thoughts and talk of individuals (Aveling et al., 2015). This focus on how relevant others permeate and make our psychology social raises a puzzle however for research on political phenomena. Namely, while we are living in increasingly diverse societies, the ability of dialogue to bridge social and political differences is becoming increasingly questioned (Wells et al., 2017) and there seems to be a higher cost for participating in discussions with people who are positioned as outside of our political ingroup (Settle & Carlson, 2019). What is it about these encounters that becomes so uncomfortable for individuals? When we do encounter alternative perspectives that are at odds with ours, how do we make sense of them, and deal with their potentially threatening nature?

In order to explore these questions, the present study draws on an in-depth dialogical analysis of focus group data with participants ( $N = 36$ ) who voted either Remain or Leave in the 2016 UK Referendum to leave the European Union. We examine the collaborative efforts through which meta-representations are constructed, negotiated and used to define who ‘others’ are, who ‘we’ are, and the boundaries between us. Additionally, we examine the role of semantic barriers (rhetorical devices used to avoid, delegitimize or limit the impact of alternative knowledge) in enabling people to talk about potentially threatening perspectives and how these become either transformative or undermined.

## Using Social Representations Theory as a Lens for Political Sense-Making

Social representation theory (SRT; Moscovici, 2001) offers a theoretical framework for understanding how knowledge is socially constructed, contested and reproduced. Crucial to the work of Moscovici was the argument against the hierarchical ordering of knowledge, where primitive/irrational and religious beliefs were gradually replaced by more superior forms of knowledge stemming from scientific discoveries and rational ways of thinking. Instead, Moscovici argued that these ways of thinking produced different forms of knowledge that serve different purposes in society. As such, SRT emphasizes the need to move away from an analytic focus on which meaning is right or wrong, and to instead focus on its symbolic function “and its power to construct what is real to a group of people” (Jovchelovitch, 2001, p. 176). As Howarth (2006) has argued, we need to push this theoretical focus on meaning-making further, to consider how thinking societies become arguing societies (Billig, 1988), where cooperation and conflict co-exist, and where social representation compete in their claims to reality and to either maintaining or transforming the social order. This focus on socially *representing*, as an active process (i.e., Gibson, 2012), begins to address common critiques of the theory from discursive and rhetorical psychologists. We take this challenge on board to examine “what social representations do in social and political relations” (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005, p. 448). In particular we ask, how do voters *represent* the political arguments of those who voted differently to them and how are these representations used to avoid, delegitimize or limit the impact of alternative knowledge?

Meaning-making, and the construction of socially shared knowledge, is not only a process that creates new content, but one that binds people together within a shared worldview and functions to defend this worldview against alternatives (Duveen, 2001). This process takes place through dialogue, giving communication a central role in both

the development of, and interaction between, social representations. Elcheroth and colleagues (2011) propose the Social Representation Approach (SRA), as a framework that extends the explanatory power of SRT by incorporating broader insights from social psychological literature, including that of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The authors propose four key tenants of the approach. These are 1) social representations are shared knowledge, 2) social representations are shaped by meta-representations, 3) social representations are enacted communication and 4) social representations are world-making assumptions. This framework allows us to more closely account for the relationship between identities and representations, as well as the role of communication in developing these relationships, making it suitable for research within social and political psychology (Howarth et al., 2014; O'Dwyer, 2020).

In line with Elcheroth and colleagues (2011), we agree that how we orient towards social representations depends on how we associate these with existing social groups. Social categories become positions from which we understand and make sense of new knowledge. These social categories are in turn situated within a system of power relations that either affords people more, or less, access to defining and contesting social reality. Gillespie and Cornish (2010) show how interactions become constrained by identity positions by examining how hierarchies within a relationship (Leader v. Follower) afford some speakers greater legitimacy to assert their views, and how this can ultimately constrain cooperation. As such, engagement with new knowledge and different points of view through dialogue can be experienced as threatening and become resisted. In other words, if disagreement has the potential to threaten the binding that occurs when individuals collaboratively produce social knowledge, then it needs to be handled gently. SRA allows us to consider how this alternative knowledge is developed and positioned vis-à-vis the self through considering not only social representations, but also their interdependent counterpart – meta-representations.

## Meta-Representations: What We Think Other People Think and Why It Matters

Gillespie (2008) describes meta-representations (p. 381) as over-simplified caricatures, or 'straw-men', imagined ideas allocated to others that become crucial for dialogue between social actors. In simple terms, meta-representations are what we think other people think, about a particular event or object. 'Other people' here can refer to those individuals we consider part of our groups (and so what we believe the norm is for 'us'), those who we consider to sit outside of our groups, whose representations we interpret from the standpoint of various identities (Brasil & Cabecinhas, 2019) or to more abstracted notions of the general public (Mahendran, 2018; O'Dwyer, 2020). While shared knowledge binds individuals into communities as active members that co-construct meaning, which is essential for defining an 'us', meta-representations in turn allows 'us' to be situated in a broader world of multiple social categories (Duveen et al., 1990). There is an added dialogical layer to social representations captured in the concept of meta-meta-representations which refers to 'what we think about other's knowledge of us' (Elcheroth et al., 2011). Through these concepts, a SRA illuminates how our awareness of what 'we' think becomes defined and shaped in relation to what we think 'other people' think.

Gillespie (2008) argues that 'semantic barriers' serve this precise function within communicative processes. Taking a more active approach in the study of social representations, semantic barriers offer a conceptual (and empirical) approach for considering how different types of social knowledge are engaged with, and resisted. As such, semantic barriers enable people to talk about a different point of view, without feeling threatened by it. For example, labelling those who are perceived to hold alternative views as 'crazy' allows us to dismiss their point of view as illegitimate and irrational. Gillespie (2020) categorizes semantic barriers according to three layers: avoiding, delegitimizing and limiting, each of which is drawn on if the previous level is breached. Firstly, we can *avoid* encounters with different points of views by making particular topics taboo. The second layer refers to *delegitimization* (through stigma for example) which entails acknowledging the existence of alternative views but dismissing them as irrelevant or incorrect. Lastly, if the 'other' perspective is not dismissed, we can *limit* the impact of acknowledged alternatives by either isolating them as 'one-offs' or rationalizing the status quo (Gillespie, 2020).

Semantic barriers can be thought of as mechanisms that allow for the boundaries between self and other to be managed and reinforced, and offer a framework through which to understand how to examine the function of meta-representations in dialogue (Nicholson, 2016; Sammut & Sartawi, 2012). It is important here to keep in mind that what we would consider opposites (i.e., moral/immoral) are not mutually exclusive, but mutually interdependent

(Marková, 2003). Similarly, the representations that ‘we’ hold only make sense in relation to the ‘other’ representations ‘out there’. Therefore, by focusing our analysis on examining how people engage with, and make sense of, those who voted differently to them in the context of Brexit, we are also able to understand how they are framing and articulating their own vote, and in doing so, potentially justifying it as the ‘right’ vote.

### Political Sense-Making and Meta-Representations After Brexit

Examining meta-representations in the aftermath of a contested vote such as Brexit allows us to more fully appreciate how shared knowledge constructed around a new event interlinks with the process of socially categorizing ourselves and others according to this phenomenon. We follow other researchers in considering Brexit an opportunity for studying ‘emergent’ phenomena (Andreouli et al., 2019) and their construction through communicative practices. We consider a SRA suitable for this challenge as it allows for an examination of the active processes through which emergent phenomena are collectively given meaning through dialogue, and how this process of meaning-making in turn functions to support different political projects.

Academic research on Brexit has highlighted the polarizing and divisive nature of the vote and identified the key demographics of each ‘side’ (with older, racially White, less educated and working class voters being more likely to vote Leave; Goodwin & Heath, 2016). There has also been a focus on identifying the ‘who’ behind the Brexit vote, considering the psychological qualities and traits that motivated individuals to vote Leave or Remain, including levels of prejudice, political trust and anti-immigration sentiments (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018; Golec de Zavala et al., 2017; Macdougall et al., 2020).

Of particular interest to us however is not the focus on *who* voted to remain or leave the EU, but rather *how* the public itself has made sense of this emergent form. Research addressing this question has illustrated how discussions on the vote have tended to reproduce hierarchies of knowledge, positioning one’s own vote as rational and the ‘other’ as being guided by irrationality and emotionality (Andreouli et al., 2020; Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018). This highlights how a context of emergence becomes a battle ground where multiple representations compete in their claims to shape the future social order. In other words, in the aftermath of Brexit where new social categories (‘Remainer’ and ‘Leaver’) emerged, the public played a key role, and indeed held a big stake, in defining the meaning of these categories and in delineating the boundaries between them. There are important implications to this process. For example, in examining meta-representations on political participation, O’Dwyer (2020) shows that perceptions of the public as fractured and divided seem to fuel a desire to take individual, rather than collective, action, to separate oneself from the seemingly irrational or ill-informed public. We continue to build on this literature to illustrate further the potential of a SRA in illuminating how relevant others (both similar and different) permeate our thoughts and make our psychology inherently social in contexts of emergent politics.

## Method

The current study was conducted almost a year after the UK-EU referendum (which took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, 2016) which resulted in a majority (52%) vote favoring a UK exit from the European Union (EU).

In order to generate data that allowed for an analysis of how meta-representations are elicited and used in intra-group dialogue on a contested political issue, we approached the topic using focus groups. Marková et al. (2007) describes focus groups as a ‘thinking society in miniature’, within which knowledge can be dialogically shared, developed and maintained. While this method is often treated as a group interview, focusing on content (Wilkinson, 1999), focus groups also present an opportunity to explore social interaction, which has long been neglected (Carey & Smith, 1994). As our aim was to examine both how meta-representations are articulated, and how they are used, our study required a focus on both content and process.

## Participants

Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 36 participants (21 females and 15 males, age range from 22 to 78,  $M = 39$ ). Three of the groups included Leave voters ( $N = 16$ ) and three Remain voters ( $N = 20$ ). Participants were recruited from two key locations: Leave participants were from Rugby, a majority Leave area (57% voted Leave), Remain participants were from London, a majority Remain area (60% voted Remain; [The Electoral Commission, 2016](#)). Recruitment involved handing out flyers in both cities, putting up posters in public places, posting advertisements on Facebook and contacting individuals in each location to aid in recruiting potential participants. Participants were invited to take part in a study to discuss the vote and the reasons people voted differently. [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the participant demographics. Overall, the demographics of the two groups were similar to the demographic profiles identified in previous research on Remain and Leave voters ([Goodwin & Heath, 2016](#)). Of interest to note is the age composition of Focus Group 1 (Leave voters), where three of the participants were significantly younger than the rest. Given the debate about the role of age in the Brexit vote ([MacFarland & Owen, 2016](#)), this provided an interesting context within which these differences were discussed (see Results section).

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Number	Gender	Age	Race	Education	Occupation
<b>FG1 – Leave</b>					
1	Female	51	White	Higher	Self-employed
2	Male	22	White	Further	Mechanic
3	Male	23	White	Further	Builder
4	Male	74	White	Higher	Retired engineer
5	Male	22	White	Secondary	Property surveyor
6	Male	74	White	Secondary	Retired steel erector
<b>FG2 – Leave</b>					
1	Female	74	White	Secondary	GP Receptionist
2	Male	76	White	Secondary	Retired coach driver
3	Male	78	White	Further	Retired project engineer
4	Female	71	White	Secondary	Retired midwife
5	Female	49	White	Further	School business manager
6	Female	71	White	Secondary	Retired retail manager
<b>FG3 – Leave</b>					
1	Male	37	Mixed (White and Black Caribbean)	Higher	Mental health and resilience trainer
2	Female	47	White	Further	Belief change therapist
3	Female	53	White	Further	Care support worker
4	Male	23	White	Higher	Teacher training
<b>FG4 – Remain</b>					
1	Female	20	White	Higher	Marketing
2	Male	27	Mixed (White and Black Caribbean)	Higher	Housing association officer
3	Female	24	White	Higher	Publishing / Marketing
4	Female	29	White	Higher	Student
5	Female	24	White	Higher	Press officer
6	Female	34	White	Higher	Associate consultant

Number	Gender	Age	Race	Education	Occupation
<b>FG5 – Remain</b>					
1	Female	23	Mixed (White and Black Caribbean)	Higher	Midwife
2	Female	24	White	Higher	Market researcher
3	Male	24	White	Higher	Registered nurse
4	Female	24	White	Higher	Accountant
5	Male	24	White	Higher	Recruiter
6	Male	29	White	Higher	Freelance designer
7	Female	32	White	Higher	Marketing assistant
8	Female	24	White	Higher	Retail assistant
<b>FG6 – Remain</b>					
1	Male	53	White	Higher	Accountant
2	Female	41	Mixed	Higher	Translator
3	Female	54	White	Higher	Social worker
4	Male	24	White	Higher	Student
5	Female	23	White	Higher	Management consultant
6	Female	30	White	Higher	Teacher

## Procedure

Focus groups were conducted between April and June of 2017. Before data collection, participants completed a consent form and a short online survey collecting demographic information. Focus groups took place in ‘natural’ settings chosen by the participants including their homes and pubs/restaurants and lasted between 61 and 82 minutes ( $M = 70$ ). A topic guide composed of seven open-ended questions guided the data collection. The topic guide moved from discussing their reasons for voting for/against Brexit, why people might have voted differently, their reasons behind their vote and how valid these might have been, to how they think other voters might make sense of their vote and their reasons behind it. Due to the complex phrasing of meta-representations through questions, and echoed in feedback from an initial pilot study, it was considered useful to display the questions on the table in order to aid information-processing. At the end, participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to ask questions.

## Dialogical Analysis

There are different approaches towards how to conduct a dialogical analysis of qualitative data (Linell, 2009; Marková et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2011). These have emerged from different readings of work on dialogism and dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1981; Mead, 1934). The specific approach followed in the present paper draws on the work of Marková and colleagues. Their approach to dialogical analysis provides an avenue for capturing how social representations (of self and other) are collaboratively constructed and provide insight on how to examine different kinds of interactions and positionings that individuals bring to a topic, from the concrete interactions between speakers, to the broader interactions between ways of thinking (Marková et al., 2007). This approach enables an in-depth analysis of the relationship between representing, categorising and legitimising forms of knowledge.

The focus groups were transcribed verbatim, all identifying information was anonymised and pseudonyms given to participants. Analysis took place in stages to capture both the meaning of meta-representations and their use and function in intragroup dialogue on Brexit. In particular we drew on the work of Gillespie and colleagues (Aveling et al., 2015; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010) which develops a step-by-step approach focused on examining the data through selecting the representations attributed to self and other, as well as considering how the self reacts to the representations attributed to others and the impact this has on self-construction. The first stage of analysis was to capture all instances of meta-representations, i.e., when respondents discussed the reasons why other people voted differently to them. Often these were found when participants engaged in imaginary dialogue or referred to what ‘they’ (i.e., ‘others’) think, believe or feel. The meta-representations were thematically coded, to be able to ascertain whether there were trends in how others’ point of view was framed. Second, we revisited this smaller sample of data to examine how the self

articulated and reacted to the representations attributed to others. Here we looked in particular at how semantic barriers were used. Table 2 below illustrates the semantic barriers identified in the data, including an explanation of each.

**Table 2**

*Semantic Barriers: Types, Definitions and Examples (Adapted From Gillespie, 2008, 2020)*

Semantic barrier	Definition	Example
<b>Avoiding alternative</b> Prohibited thought	Negatively sanctioned thoughts, mark the alternative as dangerous	<b>C:</b> <i>But, you didn't wanna be Leave. Especially because everybody that I know, apart from my Uncle who was Leave, has based it purely on racism.</i>
<b>Delegitimizing alternative</b> Stigma	Presenting those who hold the alternative in such a derogatory way (crazy / stupid) that it is easy to dismiss their representation.	<p><b>H:</b> <i>It was really funny, but it also was totally like, you know, yeah, people don't really know what they're voting for, yeah, they're just voting to leave Swindon. You know, it's funny but it's actually like, well.</i></p> <p><b>E:</b> <i>But it was like Cornwall the next morning that basically said, 'Yeah, but we'll still get all our funding, won't we, that we've been promised?' It's like, no.</i></p> <p><b>D:</b> <i>No.</i></p> <p><b>E:</b> <i>'Oh! How does that work, then?' You just voted out.</i></p> <p><b>D:</b> <i>Apparently the most Googled words after the referendum was 'What is the European Union?'</i></p> <p><b>F:</b> <i>Yeah, I read that, yeah. There was a huge spike in people actually doing the research post-fact.</i></p>
Undermining the motive	Attacking the motives of those who support the representation or the 'other' seen as embodying it.	<p><b>P:</b> <i>I think, yeah, immigration is a big thing because it was very much on people's minds at the time and this seemed like a way of making Britain just Britain again, blah, blah, even though it doesn't directly impact it. But I think that was definitely a big factor for leave.</i></p> <p><b>H:</b> <i>It's the, was it, people coming in from Syria on boats and stuff, that all happened kind of around that time and I think that made people think...</i></p> <p><b>B:</b> <i>"Stop those European Syrians."</i> <i>[Laughter]</i></p>
Attribution of ignorance	Presenting the perspective of others as rooted in erroneous knowledge, as misconceived and in need of correction, thus stripping it of legitimate grounds.	<b>T:</b> <i>[Discussing young voters] But, when you're at school everything is propaganda from say, teachers, the government, put down your throat, at university etc. You've got no life experience so do you have any reason for what you have to say?</i>
Transfer of meaning	Transfer emotions and meanings from well-established (and negative) concept or group to new object of representation	<b>A:</b> <i>What blew my mind was the fact that so many kids, I say kids, but people of age to vote who actually were Remain.</i>

Semantic barrier	Definition	Example
<b>Limiting (impact of) alternative</b> Rigid Opposition	Meta-representation as being essentially different from the main representation	<i>Rigid opposition between young/old; rational/irrational thinking; educated/uneducated; weakness/strength (see discussion).</i>
Separation	Allows for the elaboration of the alternative by separating it from the main representation, it ceases to be a threat to the core idea	
Bracketing	Bracketing it off apart from reality; 'claims to be able to'; so-called; makes core taken-for-granted and puts alternatives into question, policing boundaries of what is real	<b>A:</b> <i>Have you read the Daily Mail? Cos apparently we're all brain dead and we didn't understand it!</i>  <b>T:</b> <i>Yeah, apparently we didn't understand it. We're all racist and brain dead.</i>

We coded for multiple elements of a dialogical analysis which are exemplified in Table 3. For example, we coded for how participants positioned themselves and others (as a voter, as a grandparent, as an experienced person), who they were addressing with their speech (focus group participants, Remainers, the general public) as well as communicative tropes, including examples, analogies, jokes or challenges, which functioned as rhetorical tools for engaging with, and potentially dismissing, alternative points of view. While the richness of a dialogical analysis can be seen in Table 3, for purposes of clarity not all elements are included in the presentation of the analysis, instead we focus on unpacking prevalent meta-representations and how these were communicated about in the group.

**Table 3**

*Components of a Dialogical Analysis*

Component	Examples
<i>Topics</i>	How it was before; World Wars; Politicians; Voting through history – who should be allowed to vote; Leave debate; voter maturity
<i>Positioning and Addressivity</i>	<b>Positioning:</b> Older voters with experience; Leave voters who've done research; who knows husband's gaps in knowledge. <b>Addressivity:</b> In towards the group; challenging Remainers; challenging the government
<i>Voice</i>	<b>Virtual:</b> Grandchild; Leave voter appreciating argument; parent and child; media; young person that doesn't know much; Remainder who doesn't understand democracy; Remainder who believed EU is democratic; EU MEP authority figure; disgruntled Remainder; family member; stubborn Remainder
<i>Communicative Tropes</i>	<b>Examples:</b> Grandchildren not taught about WWs; young people can't answer quiz show questions on WWs; Husband lack of understanding, Mum's son who's 'only 22'. <b>Analogies:</b> Elders of the tribe; Remainers generalise: Remainers think Leave 'like' Hitler; I have a Jamaican mum, so Remainers have got me wrong; Dad's factory went down and he blames Brexit; <b>Jokes:</b> "Old farts like us"; not caring about Grandchildren; A&E 'Remoaner' <b>Challenges:</b> Jasper – 'Age-ist'; Ronald – 'Should everyone be allowed to vote (in general)', Anna – 'Shouldn't have been given the ref vote'
<i>Implicit/Explicit Meaning</i>	<b>Explicit:</b> Remainers know less than us <b>Implicit:</b> We know more than Remainers
<i>Semantic barriers</i>	<b>Transference of meaning:</b> Young Remainers; Socialist Remainers; Left-wing Remainers; Corporate Remainers. <b>Undermining motive:</b> Young Remain voted because of parents; young people doing what teachers want; Remain for holiday home; <b>Stigma:</b> Uneducated; Young people more susceptible to media manipulation; Young people don't know what they're doing



## Analysis

In order to address the complex nature of how meta-representations are elicited and used in dialogue, we divide the analysis into two parts: first we analyze the Leave focus groups, and then the Remain focus groups. We have limited our analysis to a smaller sample of longer quotes to illustrate the collaborative ways in which meta-representations are constructed and managed in dialogue. The quotes selected capture the dialogues most relevant on a theoretical level, showing the interplay between meaning-making, meta-representations, semantic barriers and what is achieved by using them in a political discussion. As the participants' accounts will show, intragroup dialogue tended to position self and other in a mutually dependent manner, alongside two key dimensions: rational-emotional and strong-weak.

### Leave Voters Focus Groups

When Leave voters were asked to make sense of why others voted Remain, they constructed meta-representations that delegitimized the Remain vote. The most prevalent themes of meta-representations across the focus groups were: 'Remainers lack knowledge and experience, 'Remainers want to be looked after by the EU' and 'Remainers are scared of change'. Consider the following Extract where James and Liam try to make sense of the reason why Remainers voted the way they did.

#### Extract 1: FG3

**James (37):** *So if you put something on everyone's door saying that if you vote to Leave, on the day after on the 24<sup>th</sup> or whatever, this is what's going to happen, Apocalypse. So I can understand for that reason, for a lot of people might believe that, 'it's in print so I believe it', that sort of thinking so I can again – that would – I can realise why a lot of people did, could not see through the BS [bullshit] which is, you know, we funded as well that BS.*

**Liam (23):** *And I do feel humans in general fear change, and I think, you know, it can be as simple as that as well, there's just a lot of fear around change and obviously this is a big change.*

The Extract exemplifies the meta-representation 'Remainers are scared of change'. By drawing on this meta-representation participants are actively engaging in the construction of the meaning of 'who' voted Remain, and what this decision says about 'them'. Rather than engage with the arguments for remaining, they focus on identifying the position that this perspective comes from. The continued use of the word 'might' ('people might believe', 'there might be') attempts to articulate meta-representations of the vote that are different to theirs, while simultaneously drawing on the semantic barrier of 'bracketing' to put this perspective into question, and the extent to which it is 'real'. In Table 2 we further see another example of bracketing which also highlights how meta-meta-representations were present in the dialogues. Here, Leave voters mockingly took on the perspective of Remainers on themselves (*'Yeah, apparently we didn't understand it. We're all racist and brain dead.'*). While meta-meta-representations were less common in the discussions, they did occur and they served to undermine the other. Communicative tropes such as sarcasm and jokes were common for blocking dialogue by making the alternative seem absurd, and therefore not in need of addressing (see examples for 'Stigma' and 'Undermining motive' in Table 2).

Additional semantic barriers include (subtle) stigma which presents those who believe in the 'fearmongering' as weak ('a lot of fear around change') and uncritical ('could not see through the BS'). This implicitly creates a juxtaposition between 'them', who voted emotionally, and 'us', who voted rationally, echoed in previous research on political talk around Brexit (Andreouli et al., 2019). This was present in other groups as well, where participants further tried to define 'who' holds these meta-representations and why.

1) The presented Extracts use pseudonyms and include participants' age in soft brackets.

**Extract 2: FG2**

**Amanda (71):** *A lot of the Remain vote was fear of the unknown. People didn't want change.*

**Karen (74):** *It's all they knew...*

**Amanda (71):** *And actually, it's all they'd known isn't it? That age group... You know, people generally don't like change. And this is a major change.*

**Paul (76):** *It was all lack of experience.*

**Jennifer (49):** *Yes...*

**Amanda (71):** *I think it was, erm, fear of the unknown.*

**Karen (74):** *And confidence! Confidence in what the country can do...*

**Bradley (78):** *I think youngsters know, and they're voting now when they're just 18 and 20's, doesn't know what it was like without the EU and Europe. They naturally think, when I talk to the younger parts of the family, they say "no granddad we'll be better off." And I'll say we weren't! We fought two world wars. But them in their schools, they're not taught about the two world wars anymore. It's taboo. They're not allowed to talk about it.*

This Extract shows the three most prevalent meta-representations at play: Remain voters as scared of change (Amanda), Remain voters as wanting to be looked after by the EU (Karen) and Remainers lack of knowledge and experience of the past (Bradley). Meta-representations become apparent in dialogue, both indirectly ('People didn't want change') and directly, via virtual voice and addressing distant others (family members not present; "they say 'no granddad, we'll be better off'"). Participants draw on multiple semantic barriers to deligitimize these meta-representations. Firstly, the 'people' who voted Remain are quickly turned into 'that age group', as participants try to narrow down and define who these 'people' are by anchoring them in particular demographics, different to their own. This is followed by the use of the semantic barrier 'transference of meaning', where the group 'Remainer' is now understood through the meaning participants already have of 'youngsters'. The continued use of the words 'all' ('all they knew', 'all they'd known', 'all lack of experience') formulates an extreme-case argument where the semantic barrier 'attribution of ignorance' (Sammut & Sartawi, 2012) is used and applied to all Remainers (as young people).

By suggesting that Remain voters are missing vital information and life experience, Leave voters imply they are ignorant. In doing this, Leave voters assert their knowledgeable, reaffirming that they are in a position to make the correct political decision. Through this process, the meta-representation becomes rooted in biological ('they naturally think') rather than ideological or political differences. Consequently, because differences in opinion become rooted in 'natural' differences of age, the need to engage in political talk becomes somewhat superfluous, because there is nothing that can be changed. As Gillespie (2008) argues, meta-representations are often oversimplified representations constructed in ways that they become an inverse of what the speaker wants to say, either about the shared object or about themselves. We see this in the above Extract, where participants first articulate the meta-representation and then use semantic barriers to frame it as coming from the position of young and ignorant, which in turn allows them to position themselves as older and more knowledgeable. Interestingly, one of our focus groups included Leave voters of different generations, which brought this opposition to the surface and created a context where this attempt at anchoring perspectives in distinct social categories had implications for how 'informed' certain focus group participants were, despite having all made the same decision in the vote.

**Extract 3: FG1**

**Ronald (74):** *I think one of the problems is, it's an age thing. So old farts like us [Laughter] who remember what it was like before, are saying 'how can you possibly want to be here?'. And youngsters are probably just going along with the ride. You know... I don't know, I can't imagine why they would want to –*

**Ryan (23):** *At the minute, I think what they're thinking is that, there is a sense of stability in like, right now, and if we come out of it, there'll be a massive change.*

**Ronald (74):** *Does anyone know what the age groups are?*

**Ryan (23):** *At the minute, I think they think, fair enough, things aren't brilliant, but I think there's a sense of stability. If we come out of it, we lose everything. Well... not lose everything, but we've got to start all over again. Get our ties with someone else and do all that stuff again. Whereas –*

**Ronald (74):** *Yes, I think you're right. I think there's bound to be an element of people saying, 'I don't know what the future is, why change it?' There must have been an element of people that say, 'it must have been bad to go in in the first place, why, why do you want to [leave]'*

**Terry (74)/Ryan (23):** *Yeah, yeah*

**Ronald (74):** *whereas the really old farts are like 'well come on, it was good'*

**Jasper (22):** *Yeah that would, that would be age-a-tive, as you say, wouldn't it? That would be, the older generations will be saying, 'we knew what it was like before, let's go back to that'. As you say, the younger people, you know, us three, we don't fully understand it. I'm not going to protest that I was any, that I've got any great knowledge on it. I've got the reasons I voted out for [...] but erm, as Ryan just said, I think we need to start again, and if it's not working now then we need to start again.*

This is another example of two prevelant meta-representations including Remain voters lacking historical and personal experiences ('old farts like us remember what it was like before') and being scared of change ('I don't know what the future is, why change it'). Ryan and Jasper are in their early 20's, falling into 'that age group' (Extract 2) that voted Remain, but actually being Leave voters themselves. In contrast, Ronald and Terry are both older voters. The presence of Ryan and Jasper creates an interesting situation within which age comes to the surface, and the young-old opposition creates slight tensions for the younger participants. Across the interaction, participants draw on virtual voices but they attribute these to different positions. Ronald positions himself and Terry as knowledgeable ('who remember what it was like before') using history and experience as sources of legitimacy. Ronald's use of a virtual voice is attributed to the social category of younger people in general, who in the realm of politics are 'just going along for the ride'. Through the semantic barrier 'undermining the motive', Ronald dismisses young peoples' (and Remainers') representations of the vote as irrelevant, by making it seem as if young people did not actively think about the vote, nor have the lived experience to understand it. While this is later challenged by Ryan and Jasper, who defend their own position as rooted in 'reason' ('I've got the reasons I voted out'), and attempt to engage with the perspective of (young) Remain voters ('I think what they're thinking...'), they ultimately reproduce the 'youth is equal to ignorant' stigma voiced at the start of the Extract ('As you say, the younger people, us three, we don't fully understand it.').

Similarly to Extract 2, age becomes a position of greater authority, but in this Extract we see how it plays out in shaping what can be said, and by whom (Duveen, 2001; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). Ronald speaks in a more challenging and direct manner in comparison to Ryan who is more reserved and Jasper who even concedes to Ronald's point about younger generations (and by implication Remainers) being ignorant ('us three, we don't fully understand it'). Ronald uses jokes consistently ('old fart like us'), which diffuses tension between group members and promotes intragroup dialogue, but inadvertently blocks dialogue with the alternative point of view.

## Leave Voters: Summary

The patterns of dialogue often moved from introducing the meta-representation (the 'what'), then moving on to position it (the 'who') and ultimately attempting to make sense of it (the 'why'). As we have seen, the reasoning behind the political choice of Remain voters is explained as being driven by emotions (including fear of change or loss aversion), and by a lack of knowledge or experience (in relation to UK's history and the more recent changes perceived to be brought on by EU membership). In anchoring the meta-representation in the category of young people the 'why' is naturalized, and semantic barriers are utilized to delegitimize their beliefs (through attribution of ignorance, transfer of meaning and the stigma of 'youth'). Through constructing and negotiating these meta-representations the groups engaged in important boundary work, where the delegitimization of the perspective of the 'other' allowed for the creation of the 'ingroup' as more positive and informed, by virtue of being older and more experienced. Even when resistance to simplifications are attempted (i.e., Extract 3) these are cautiously presented to the group, and can at times continue to ultimately perpetuate dividing constructs. We see similar mechanisms at play in the Remain group discussions, but using the educated-uneducated opposition.

## Remain Voter Focus Groups

In making sense of the Leave vote, Remain voters drew on three key meta-representations: 'Leavers voted out of frustration', 'Leavers did not know about all the facts' and 'Leavers were manipulated by the media'. Mirroring the Leave voters, Remain voters also grounded the meta-representations of Leavers alongside interdependent pairs ignorant and knowledgeable, as well as weak and strong. However, a significant difference here was that Remain voters constructed the Leave vote as driven by misinformation and deception by media rather than a lack of experience, and as driven by anger (more than fear).

### Extract 4: FG5

**Emma (24):** *It was a lot of people letting off a lot of steam, but then it was all gonna be fine. And we'll all get over it, and the next day we'll be fine. And then, 'Oh. Well that didn't work.'*

**Serena (32):** *I think... I spoke to some people that said that it was more of a statement, definitely. A couple of people that didn't take it very seriously and actually voted to Leave, just to kind of be pissed off about it, but they didn't genuinely think it was going to happen. So they'd just be like, 'You know, I really hate David Cameron and I really hate the Conservative government, this is my way of saying up yours. It's not really gonna happen,' you know, and then being like, 'Oh shit, it actually did. I really didn't - I should have thought about this a lot more. It's not really what I want, it's just that I wanted to vent my frustration.'*

In the above exchange, meta-representations are elicited through the use of a virtual voice ('I wanted to vent my frustration') referenced from a previous conversation ('I spoke to some people'). The meta-representations attributed to Leave voters emphasize emotionality: 'Leavers voted out of frustration. This meta-representation is delegitimized primarily through 'undermining the motive' behind the Leave vote. By positioning Leave voters as emotionally driven ('letting off steam', 'pissed off'), the outgroup is constructed as politically immature ('didn't take it very seriously') and reckless ('I should have thought about this a lot more'), by implication making this alternative perspective invalid. This ironically positions Leave voters as regretful of their own vote ('It's not really what I wanted').

The conclusion of constructing the 'other vote' this way is that it implicitly positions the ingroup as more rational and ultimately 'right'. In another group, this sense of being right was coupled with a sense of responsibility, and subsequent failure, to educate other voters into engaging critically with politics.

**Extract 5: FG6**

**Alexis (30):** *Yeah and it comes back round again to the Leave campaign, not being convincing, not having any solid ground or anything. It almost did people who did vote Leave a real injustice because by how they're, you know, propagating their vote. We're then assuming these people, and we only see them as racist and whatever, when they're not. And it's just not giving, the proper platform.*

**Helen (23):** *And also, there were so many people who could easily have been swayed, either way. [...] my boyfriend's housemate, just before the referendum, we asked her, "oh you know, what's your plans?". She was like, "oh I think I'm going to vote Leave, my parents are voting Leave and you know, what's the EU ever done for us? It's shit". And so, like, my boyfriend went and he wrote like, three pages, and put it under her door, as to all the reasons why the EU was good. Because he just really wanted her to like, know them. And anyway, she voted Leave and he was really upset, he was like "I could have done more to like educate her, it wasn't like she was completely stuck on Leave".*

In discussing the Leave vote and their reasons for it, Alexis articulates the meta-representation 'Leavers were manipulated by the media' while Helen reiterates the emotionality of their vote by drawing on the meta-representation of 'Leavers voted out of frustration'. Helen recounts an exchange between herself, her partner and his housemate prior to the vote. Through the use of reported speech, Helen depicts the Leave vote as driven by convenience ('my parents are voting Leave') rather than deliberate thought. This image allows the perspective of this Leave voter to be discredited through undermining the Leave voters motives by positioning them as 'easily swayed either way'. As with the meta-representations of Leavers, Remainers utilized the opposition of strength-weakness, but here to depict Leavers as victims of political propaganda ('It almost did people who voted Leave a real injustice'). Consequently, they deny Leavers any legitimacy in their opinions and voting choice because it was not based on the right information.

In turn, a sense of accountability and responsibility on the part of the ingroup to 'educate' and inform outgroup members is voiced, perpetuating a position of the ingroup as better suited to make informed decisions. As Marková et al. (2007, p. 66) argue, "focus group discussions are based partly upon explicit elements and partly upon implicit assumptions that form a taken-for-granted background for communication". In the case of Remain discussions, an educational divide formed the background for how the perspective of 'others' was anchored in a social position. Leave perspectives were commonly dismissed as ignorant and Leave voters perceived as uneducated, but where this was challenged with counterexamples, communicative tropes aimed at opening dialogue with alternative representations, we see how participants work to construct these as exceptions to the rule.

**Extract 6: FG5**

**Freddie (29):** *Yeah, I think it was a huge bit of a rebellion to all these people who are clearly very unhappy with their situation [...] And this is just a way that they felt that they could - even though it's potentially quite misinformed, it was them trying to evoke change.*

**Denise (23):** *Which you can sympathise with, right? It's definitely - just because it's misinformation, they don't fully understand the implication of what's going on. And even though there are issues with it, so.*

**Ben (24):** *We've got very informed friends, doctors and - who work in healthcare, who are very invested in the NHS but voted Leave. I'm not really sure why, specifically, this specific person [...]*

**Claire (24):** *Yeah, he definitely came across well informed, but he still wanted to vote Leave.*

**Ben (24):** *He was very well informed.*

**Claire (24):** *It's not all -*

**Ben (24):** *But I suppose that counteracts that. He is, as well as a doctor, he was an academic doing a PhD, so it's like both of those areas would be heavily affected and still felt strongly enough about it that he would vote Leave.*

**Hattie (24):** *I think age, as well. A lot of people over the age of 55, 60, who kind of knew what it was like before the EU voted to Leave.*

First, we see the meta-representations of Leave voters as voting out of frustration ('very unhappy with their situation') and as not knowing all the facts ('misinformation'). The semantic barrier attribution of ignorance is used to present the perspective of Leavers as illegitimate because it was based on erroneous knowledge. These meta-representations are countered by the introduction of an 'exception': informed and educated people ('but') who voted Leave. Here we see what Marková et al. (2007) refer to as the implicit assumptions enabling communication, where more educated people are assumed to have 'known better'. As a consequence, participants struggle to make sense of how an educated colleague can hold a different perspective ('I'm not really sure why') and use the semantic barrier 'bracketing' to question the reality of how informed this person really was ('he came across well informed') which itself is subsequently challenged by a more definitive statement ('he was very informed').

The seeming contradiction between the social category of a highly educated voter, whose life would be negatively affected by the vote ('both of those areas would be heavily affected') and the desire to vote Leave, is managed by an appeal to emotionality ('felt strongly'). Nevertheless, this creates an uncomfortable reality within the group context, where the opposites of ignorant-knowledgeable is broken down, and leads to a shift in conversation, where Hattie moves the conversation to focus on the role of age in defining the 'who' and 'why' of the Leave vote.

### Remain Voters: Summary

The key meta-representations attributed to the perspective of Leave voters centred on how their political decision-making was motivated by frustration and misguided knowledge and how Leave voters had been easily manipulated by the media. Through constructing and negotiating these meta-representations, these ingroups too engaged in important boundary work, where the delegitimization of the perspective of the 'other', through undermining their motive and reasons behind their vote, allowed Remain voters to reproduce the image of their 'losing' vote as more rational and knowledgeable. The continued use of the semantic barrier 'undermining the motive' functioned to construct the reasons of Leave voters as misdirected and not 'actually' about the vote itself (Extract 4: 'they didn't genuinely think it was going to happen'). Interestingly, we also see how the stigma of being part of a 'losing' group (Remain) is managed. By undermining the motive of Leavers, Remainers also emphasise their own (failed) responsibility towards ensuring Leave voters had the 'right' information. In other words, despite having lost the vote, the Remain voters are still able to construct their ingroup in a positive light. In this sense, participants claim some of the responsibility for the perceived 'failure' of Brexit while also redeeming their sense of legitimacy in being politically informed and knowledgeable.

## Discussion

*How do we make sense of the political opinions of those who voted differently to us?*

The current paper has aimed to answer this question by examining the collaborative efforts through which meta-representations are constructed, negotiated and used to define who 'others' are, who 'we' are, and the boundaries between us. By taking a Social Representations Approach (SRA) and focusing on the role of communication in producing and reproducing meta-representations by anchoring them in social categories, our analysis makes two contributions. Firstly, we show the value of considering how meta-representations function to delegitimize different political views and vote choices, and by implication serve an important role in constructing and reproducing intergroup boundaries. Secondly, we illustrate the methodological and theoretical usefulness of examining semantic barriers within a SRA for understanding how intragroup dialogue on intergroup differences can become managed and justified, and how dialogue is blocked from leading to transformative engagement.

In the realm of political talk between citizens, knowledge is developed and maintained dialogically (Mahendran, 2018). By analysing each set of focus groups separately we were able to consider both what was unique within each group, as well as where there might be similarities. We found that the nature and form of meta-representations tended to be similar in both groups, where meta-representations were constructed in ways that stigmatized and undermined

the motive of the other (Gillespie, 2008, 2020). An image of the other was collaboratively developed and maintained as participants contributed unique life experiences and capitalized on shared social knowledge. We identified two dimensions along which the knowledge attributed to self and other became aligned: representations rooted in ignorance or knowledge, and in weakness or strength. These were not opposites, but rather mutually dependent dimensions, which could only make sense in relation to one another, and as such, became aligned with self and other in significant ways.

These dialogically negotiated meta-representations became non-threatening to the beliefs (and positions) of the self through the use of diverse sets of semantic barriers (Gillespie, 2008; Nicholson, 2016) and communicative tropes (e.g. examples, analogies, jokes and challenges) (Marková et al., 2007). Semantic barriers were used to block dialogue *between* groups' perspectives resulting in a biased intragroup evolution of meta-perspectives. We found that discussions of political opinions functioned to further political divides by anchoring the political in the personal, and making it seem as if holding a political opinion was an outcome of being a certain kind of person (with specific experiences). This both limited people's ability to explore alternative opinions (and adopt them) and exacerbated cleavages between groups by making their boundaries seem natural and unbridgeable. In other words, by engaging with meta-representations the participants were able to define what the alternative perspectives 'out there' were, and in turn, through the use of semantic barriers, they delegitimized not only the perspectives, but also the people who held them.

A key consequence of semantic barriers is that they function to limit opportunities for learning (Gillespie, 2020). As Duveen (2001) has argued, the identities we hold can constrain both how knowledge is produced, but also how it becomes challenged and changed. Positioning 'our' knowledge as hierarchically superior limits openness to learning and being transformed by the knowledge of others. Instead, dialogue with difference was engaged with not in order to understand, but in order to delegitimize or change the other. As such, the transformative potential of dialogue were placed on the other, and not on the self, through the use of semantic barriers. Thus, we see Moscovici's (2001) criticism of the hierarchization of knowledge being reproduced in lay discourse, on politics, where 'their' emotional/irrational knowledge needs to be replaced by 'our' more superior form of knowledge stemming from rational thought. Considering different political opinions as horizontally positioned on a continuum, rather than vertical positioned in a hierarchy, could enable genuine political dialogue. This might be one way through which the threat of alterity could be diminished and openness to difference promoted. Methodologically, identifying semantic barriers as they are articulated in dialogue can enable us to also think about what tools we need to challenge the anchoring of negative social representations into social categories.

A SRA focused on the action-oriented nature of dialogue provides us with a richer understanding of not just the *what*, but also the *how* of meaning making and its connection with social categories, identity dynamics and intergroup relations. By incorporating semantic barriers into SRA, we echo discursive scholars in suggesting that language is not only a tool through which we can illuminate social relations and social projects, but it is also a projective process – it aims not only to represent how people see the social world but also how this view might be used to support projects that take it in different directions. We can consider emergent phenomena (Andreouli et al., 2019) such as Brexit as moments of potentiality where alternative perspectives are not yet anchored in clear social categories and where the hierarchical order of perspectives has yet to take place. This can create a space for considering how to build semantic bridges, which problematises the positioning of knowledge as better or worse, and instead, tries to understand the horizontal nature of meaning-making.

The functional aspects of social and meta-representations embedded in, and visible through, discourse, contribute to our understanding of political opinions and polarization. In addressing, and delegitimizing meta-representations, political talk of difference does not foster inclusivity or openness to being transformed, but rather serves to persuasively reproduce and maintain hierarchies of social relations.

Two limitations should be mentioned. First, the focus groups brought together people who voted similarly, removing the potential for 'real-time' engagement with difference through dialogue. Instead of creating a space for intergroup contact, our focus was on intragroup dialogue on a contested political issue. This, we believe, better reflects how, and to whom, people speak about political issues in their everyday lives. However, future research could consider bringing the perspectives in dialogue in context, using focus groups with participants holding different political opinions. Secondly, the interviews were conducted almost a year after Brexit, meaning that the perspectives on the vote had sedimented

more strongly. Ideally, to capture the meaning when it first emerges in the public discourse (Moscovici, 2001), we would have collected the data shortly after the vote. Future research on emergent phenomena should consider the importance of temporal proximity to a key event.

In summary, the findings have implications for how we build and maintain positive intergroup relations in times of divisive politics. Namely, if rather than alleviating group differences, talking about politics in intragroup setting, and in particular, talking about the voting intentions of those who voted differently, serves to perpetuate group differences, where does this leave the ability to engage in genuine public dialogue? A SRA that more explicitly articulates the consequences of meta-representations for engaging with alternative points of view can allow us to consider how group differences become constructed and engaged with through semantic barriers. It also offers opportunities for social and political psychologists to consider if, when and how transformative engagement becomes possible.

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