Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. I'm Dr Michaela Benson, the research lead for a UK in a changing Europe funded project all about what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU 27 and a reader in sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London.

You might have noticed that this episode has been a little longer in coming than normal. We seem to have fallen out of our fortnightly routine, at least with this episode and the last, and the reason for that is that I took a much-needed holiday. I had a real break from the internet, I turned it off for ten days, and subsequently from Brexit which I realise is a real luxury, but was also a real necessity for me. And that's given me a little bit of time to think about the project and what we've achieved as well as what else I think we need to do, and in today's episode I'm going to rewind a little bit and go back to thinking about how we might understand the motivations that British citizens who live in the EU 27 have had for making that decision in the first place, the decision to migrate, so what has prompted the migration, thinking about this both in terms of their individual circumstances and the choices that they make and their freedom to choose, while also locating that within broader structural considerations and material conditions.

But before I start to talk to you a little bit about that and the rationale behind doing it, I just wanted to give a little bit of news about the project. Just because
I've been away doesn't mean that the project hasn't been ongoing. As you know, I have an excellent team of people working with me, and I think what's particularly notable that's come out in the last week is two pieces of writing. The first piece was written by Professor Karen O'Reilly and that was about recent statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics about how many UK citizens live in the EU 26. They've excluded Ireland from this for reasons that they explain in their reports. What she was concerned about, and what we've been concerned about at the project team, has been the disappearing British abroad. Every time new statistics are released, these numbers seem to reduce and there are various reasons why that might be the case, but I'm not going to go into them here. And her concern was to point out that these statistics are political or rather statistics have power. We know how obsessed the media are with statistics for example, and in circulating ever-reducing numbers of British citizens living in the UK, what it does is it influences public opinion to believe that this is not a population that matters. If the numbers are so small then why does this matter. And that's what she intended when she wrote that statistics are political. This was republished in the Independent which we were really happy about, and resulted in a conversation between her and the Office for National Statistics earlier this week, where they concluded that it was really really difficult to enumerate British populations living in the EU, for various reasons.

The other piece of writing was published last week on the LSE Brexit blog and that was a piece written by Chantelle Lewis, Chantelle as you know has been working on the project, particularly to look at the case of British people of colour who've chosen to live in the EU 27 and to look at their experiences and to make sure that their experiences are part of the conversation about what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU 27. And this is the latest piece that she's written in which she reflects on how these populations are regularly asked no, where are you really from, when they say to people that they're British. This is important in terms of remembering that Britishness as a category, Britishness as a way of identifying, is often assumed to be very very white to the exclusion of these people of colour, and this is the case back in the UK, as much as it's the case in various other European countries. So she's pointing to the constant processes of racialisation to which these British people of colour living in the EU 27 are subjected, along of course with other people of colour in those countries where they've settled. So I really urge you to have a look at both of those pieces. They are on our website now in our findings, and any thoughts are gratefully appreciated. But now I'll start talking through why I think it's important that we attend to and think about how we communicate the motivations of UK citizens who have settled in the EU 27.

Today's episode is inspired by some conversations that I've been having over the last few days, that have made me think that it's really timely to rewind a little bit. What do I mean by that? I think it's really important that we restart the conversation and think about what we know about British populations abroad, and particularly today I want to focus on what we know about the motivations of British people who've chosen to live in the European Union, and by European Union I mean the EU 27, so outside of the UK. And I'll be following this up in the next few weeks with a blog or something equivalent, and I thought I would use this as an
opportunity to work through this, to think about how to communicate the complexity of decision-making, of migration decision-making, and what this can tell us about these British populations. My feeling is that in opening up this discussion of motivations, and in making visible how as academics we think about migration motivations, we might be able to further develop that conversation about who the British are abroad, and this is in part inspired by the fact that we know that nearly 80% of UK citizens who live in the EU 27 are of working age and under, and yet in the academic literature, in public discourse, even in, as we've shown through our discussion of how British populations living abroad are represented in UK Parliament, there seems to be a real deficit in understanding. So as I said, I'm going to go back and I'm going to reflect on migration decision-making. And how I'm going to approach this is through presenting some accounts that might run counter to what people expect when they think about British populations who live abroad. And these will be drawn from my research in France, historically, and the research that I've been doing for the Brexit Brits Abroad project, but I hope that they resonate across other populations of British citizens living elsewhere in the EU, and in fact the conversations that I've had over the last couple of days would suggest that that might be the case. So I'm going to look at how motivations for migrating are situated within what we'd refer to as sociologists as particular structural and material conditions, so it's not just that people make choices, those choices are framed by any number of other factors. So how do we make that decision to migrate into a reality, or what are the things that prompt people to even think about migrating in the first place? So bringing together the idea to migrate or the aspiration to migrate with the act of migration. It's really important to remember that even when migration is presented positively in terms of opportunities, there are often a combination of factors that come together to make it happen, and this is as much the case for migrants from the UK as for any other migrant population. And part of this is because so much of that public debate is framed around considerations drawn from policy and drawn from understanding problems with the labour market or with the welfare state, so our understandings of migration more generally are really overly simplistic, to the detriment of broader understandings of what migration does both for the individuals who undertake it but also for the communities and societies to which they migrate. Interestingly, when we look at the academic research on British populations who have chosen to live abroad, this is then less likely to be understood through the lenses that we're so familiar with from public debate on migration. So there's relatively less research on the labour market integration of British populations living abroad, so I'm going to start with something that I think's really important to remember.

So I started to do research with British populations in the Lot, a rural area in south-west France, in 2002 and the framing of that research was ethnographic, and what I mean by that is I spent a year living in France. I lived in France between December 2003 and September 2004 and I returned in 2005 for a few months to follow up on the research. And the significance of living there at that time was that I was able, over the course of the accumulated year that I spent in this rural area, to meet with people, not only to interview them but to return to
them time and time again to take part in their everyday lives and to really understand, through being there, what their lives were like, what their priorities were, but also get to know them better, build up rapport – this is a really important thing when we’re talking about qualitative research, is how you build up trust with the people that you’re working with in order to really get into quite intimate details about their life, so over the course of that period of time I was able to get beyond the superficial explanations that people often present when you first speak with them about why they moved, the type of information that a survey would be well equipped to collect or if you were to do a very structured interview you might collect. And into conversations that were a little bit more free-ranging that allowed them to direct the conversation a little more. And what I realised about six months in was that the original stories that people had given me about their decision to move has far more detail after six months than they’d had at the outset. And this is why I said before, you know, we have to be careful because even when people present their migration positively, there's often a range of situations, often a range of factors behind that, that might not be immediately visible. After about six months I started to realise that there was a little bit of a trend in the stories I was hearing as more information was supplied through these repeated meetings with people, and there were a couple of things that really stood out to me, and I should say if you want to find out more about who the people were I was talking to, you can consult my paper 'The Context and Trajectory of Lifestyle Migration', which is free to download and I’ve put a link on the website so you can follow this through.

But suffice it to say this was a population that was far more diverse than just being retirees. And just to give a little bit more texture to that, one of the predominant stories that was coming out, particularly among populations, you know people who were in their 40s and maybe 50s who’d found themselves living in France, sometimes with young families, was a story about how they had been made redundant. Now in their initial framings they might talk very positively about how they took early retirement, but as we started to talk more and more I realised that there were processes of severance that had gone on behind that, particularly for people who’d worked in the public sector, so in the civil service or as teachers and various other public sector workers. So something that had been potentially quite a significant change to their life had been reframed positively as an opportunity, as providing the momentum to bring about migration. I think this is really important. There were all sorts of other factors too that were worth bearing in mind, even among the retirees, you'd find quite high levels of second marriage for example and also potentially quite difficult family circumstances back in the UK that people had felt that moving to France might help them escape from, so that's certainly something to bear in mind, those personal circumstances but also, going back to the case of redundancy, thinking about what kinds of economic transformation were ongoing in the UK at the time that they left.

And going back to France to do the research for Brexit Brits Abroad, those stories are coming out again, and I’d just like to read you a quotation from an interview that I did with one woman in her 40s about how she ended up in France, and again this story about migration. What she says is I don’t understand, there were no jobs for us in the UK, we had to feed three kids, we weren’t going to go on benefits.
We moved to where the jobs are and we've been totally legal, totally proactive, and yet now we're told oh you left, you shouldn't have a say, you shouldn't have a vote, you're traitors.

I think this is really really important to bear in mind that somebody who's worked with British populations living in France for 15 years, I know that this is a far more widespread story than we might think at first sight. So I just want to encourage that understanding of thinking about what looked like personal circumstances, redundancy looks like a personal circumstance, but it's actually intimately related to wider economic transformation in the UK. So it's not surprising that in times of recession, actually we find that larger numbers of British people are choosing to leave the UK. But we might also think about other political transformations and how migration interplays with political transformation, or emigration rather. I think it's entirely unsurprising, and I've said this right from the outset of the project, that when there is major economic transformation and major political transformation people emigrate, that Brexit might also shape emigration in particular ways, so it may be that Brexit becomes part of that context within which people are making decisions to leave and certainly we started to see that a little bit through the research, with people choosing to leave now knowing that they will be moving with particular conditions at this point in time that may not be available to them later. Of course there are other factors that play into that, in terms of whether people need to be moving for jobs or whether they're in a position where they can find jobs when they arrive. There are also situations around absolutely what type of economic position people are in, in terms of having property capital for example, which might be one of the things that facilitates migration. So I hope I'm already starting to build up what is a much more complex understanding of the factors that support British migration, or emigration, more generally.

Of course people, you know, as the example from the case that I read out, demonstrate people might be actively seeking opportunities elsewhere, and in moving the research to Toulouse I found more of that than I had expected, so actually thinking across the project we have a large number of university academics taking part in the research. And I think that that's unsurprising to some degree, it's unsurprising because this is a research project so it is likely to attract people who, well our networks are such that we know lots of UK citizen academics who might be living and working elsewhere so the news about the project travels through those networks. But it's also the case that, certainly at the level of university research, or academic research, that this is a labour market that has been relatively successful in becoming integrated across Europe, and I'm thinking particularly about the emergence of specialist research centres and units, specialist laboratories, all of those types of things, and that's definitely a story that comes out through several of our citizens panellists' accounts, and what this requires, as I've said elsewhere when I've been writing about British populations in Toulouse, is a population of university academics who are very highly mobile, particularly early career researchers, who may find that, you know that they jump from postdoctoral project to postdoctoral project and that might take them through several different countries.
I think that this is really important to think about what Brexit then means for the involvement of UK citizens who are academics across European labour market in academic research. People working in niche areas who've become more and more specialised over a period of time, and who have to go where the opportunities are, and those motivations then are about looking within a job market that is highly competitive, that is where opportunities are often available on an international level, but there are very few opportunities. I'm thinking about what this means in terms of these populations. Importantly, when we're thinking about those types of sectors that are highly integrated across the European scale, and what they require of the people that take up those jobs, we need to think about freedom of movement and as everybody listening probably knows, freedom of movement is still something that has to be negotiated in relation to those British populations. More precisely, it's to do with the ability to continue moving within the EU 27 because at the moment rights are ensured in the places within which people are currently resident, but we know less at this stage about continuous freedom of movement so the continued access to that right to move around the EU 27, to move and settle in the EU 27.

The final case that I want to raise is the case of dual national families. I think that there's a real tendency when we talk about British populations who live in the EU 27 to really reduce this down to the individual citizen, and I think that it's really important to remember that quite often migration decision-making is taking place within families. Now it's not that I want to say that this is decisions over family life are taken to the exclusion of other decisions, there are all sorts of decisions that come together in deciding to migrate, or in deciding to live in one place, because obviously in some cases this might be cases of family reunion rather than family migration. So one partner lives in one country, another partner lives in another, and a decision is taken at a point in time to reunite in one particular location. I should also say that that decision might not be a permanent decision, so it might be a decision that is for now because for now the best thing is for us to be here, and these are the reasons why, and those reasons might include the economic opportunities that are available to one or both partners, that might include issues around looking after more elderly members of family that might be required at that point in time, in one particular location. There might be decisions over where you want to raise and educate your children, and those are only three possible other factors that might go into that decision to live in one place rather than to live in another. So it's not really simply a case quite often of saying well, you've chosen to live abroad, if Brexit's going to impact on your life come back to Britain, because what about those relationships, what about the complexity of the decisions that went into people migrating in the first place, particularly around issues of family reunion and given that it's not entirely clear what Brexit might mean for British nationals who choose to move back to the UK and who want to bring third country national partners with them, i.e. people who were previously EU citizens? I think that it's entirely reasonable that we ask the question of why those dual nationals, those dual national families, are not being considered fully in their entirety or rather are not really being represented when we talk about British citizens who live abroad.
I hope that this has shown how those decisions, those motivations, are affected by a range of different factors that aren't just about individuals but are also about the shape of society, that are about changes in economies and politics as much as they are about people having the wherewithal to up sticks and move. This is where I hope I've started to show a little more of the sociology of British migration, of understanding that while we might want to talk about choice and we might want to talk about people having made a choice, if we neglect those broader factors we're reducing migration to something that can be easily explained, when in actual fact it can't be easily explained and entirely the problem with understanding what Brexit means for British populations abroad until now has lain in the fact that the understandings of British migration are so simplistic, the ones that are circulating publicly at least, or the ones that have traction publicly, that we can't really fully begin to comprehend the complex and likely diverse impacts that Brexit will have for these populations.

That's all for today. Thanks for listening.

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