

Professor Laura Cram and Dr Adam Moore

Perceptions of fairness

Isabella: This is Forward Thinking, I'm Isabella Melking.

Traditionally, politics has been about compromise. Being part of a shared community, whether local, national, or international, has been about negotiation, reciprocity, and trust.

How can territorial identity influence, and perhaps even distort, perceptions of fairness?

Perceptions of intergroup (un)fairness and of being "left behind," for example, provided much of the momentum behind the UK Brexit decision. Here to discuss are Professor of European Politics Laura Cram and Director of the Neuropolitics Research Lab and Lecturer in Psychology Dr Adam Moore, both from the University of Edinburgh.

Both are interested in political psychology and Laura's research also looks at European identity and how insights from psychology can help to explain political behaviour, whilst Adam's interests lie with judgement and decision making.

Laura and Adam are currently working on a project looking at citizen's expectations on Brexit outcomes.

Adam: Hi. I'm Dr Adam Moore; I'm a lecturer of psychology at the University of Edinburgh.

Laura: And I'm Professor Laura Cram; I'm professor of European politics and the director of the Neuropolitics research lab at Edinburgh University.

Adam: So we were chatting a little bit before the podcast started recording, reliving the years back when we first met about six years ago and I thought it was a really interesting story about how it all came together about three years ago when you formed the Neuropolitics Institute; which I'm very privileged to be a part of – and how a lot of people had been talking for years about the need to combine methods from different fields to answer – to ask and to answer really difficult questions. Tell us a little bit about how you got started with that, what brought you to Edinburgh to do it.

Laura: Yeah, I'd been studying European identity for a long time now. That was really my background; studying European policy process and how it related to people attaching either to the European Union or to their own more local level or to the national level and for years it had been increasingly niggling with me that it was really, really hard to get past the ships that pass in the night in the literature. So the one set of people who would still very much argue that this was about cost-benefit analysis and that you would become attached to the level of government that provided the most for you, whether that was security of economic and the other lot that would argue well no identity is really something qualitatively different, that it's really about emotions and it's much more a much more effective process. But with our methods it was really, really hard to get at that. So in cross-sectional surveys, focus groups, asking people to express or tell us how they feel about things was never really satisfactorily getting at what was happening under the hood and that's what I wanted to do. So when I came to Edinburgh I was hugely lucky that the principal very kindly agreed to give me half my time to retrain in neuropsychology and in some of the methods of neuroimaging and I got to hunt down people like you and say will you come and work with me on this kind of thing. And gradually that's just become a really lovely process of using elements of psychology, cognitive neuroscience and political science and bringing them together so we can piece together some of the parts of that puzzle.

Adam: Yeah. So it's been a really interesting experience for me because, like you said, being a psychologist and coming into the conversation with political scientists and with people who study public policy and various other aspects, the sort of social demography of this. It really was sort of obvious to me that after I got a little bit more familiar with the language, that different groups were having functionally the same conversation about reason versus emotion debates and where does identity come from and is it all in or partly in and can you have different identities or do you just have one core identity and that sort of thing and diffusion of methods that we use in our politics lab has really been eye-opening because it lets us ask and answer these questions in different ways. Do you find yourself when you're designing this research, as we move forward, do you find yourself leaning on some of these methods more than others or does it vary as a function of exactly what you're trying to get at?

Laura: Yeah I think it does vary little bit according to the questions that we're asking. We've certainly found that the psychological methods have been really important in framing some of the theories. But also a lot of the work that's come out of things like neuroeconomics, where they had used elements of cognitive neuroscience and tests that we'd use. And we've also found we've really had a growing connection with informatics and with social computational science because lots of the methods are combining across and some of the things we can get out of big data givers, different lenses on these processes too. So yeah, it's really very nice to be able to look at a question and then go well which of these tools might help us to come at this best.

Adam: So what are some of the big questions you see the Neuropolitics Institute going after from here?

Laura: We're very, very interested always in the neuropolitics of identity. How does our identity shape the way that people behave and act. We've built on that. So we've gone from a core in working in that area to looking at things like one of the projects you're working with us on how the way we frame and understand information, 'fake news', the way that we give trust to the information that we've got is related in part to the social groups, the social identities of those who present that information to us or to the group that we ourselves see ourselves part of, how does that effect how we even take on board that information or whether we decide to share it with other people. So that kind of whole neuropolitics of communication is really, really important to us and more generally the neuropolitics of public policy. So what we've been finding out about identities, political behaviours, the way that we communicate information; what would that help to tell us about how people are making decisions in practise, what influences a policy maker when they're making a decision but also what influences our recipient of policies. So us when we get those policies; what influences whether we think they're fair or unfair or whether we think the policy makers understand us in any way at all.

Adam: Right. The extent to which we participate or co-operate with it.

Laura: From your perspective, one of the things that we do here is that we use experimental games that you've been really expert on and that's been part of our collaboration. So what would you say was the main contribution of these kind of methods from your perspective? What is it that they give to the public?

Adam: So I think there's something that they give to scientists that we expected and also something that they give us that we never expected but that we increasingly make use of. So what they give us

that we expected is simplicity and predictability. One of the reasons why – one of the ways that science works is by taking really complicated problems and breaking it apart into the simplest solvable pieces and then trying to assemble the solutions back together again to be sure that the answer scales up to real world issues. This is how we do medical research, it's how we do technological research, it's how we do psychological and public policy research. And so by using these, what we call experimental games, which are now used in neuropolitics, behavioural economics, psychology and neuroeconomics. We basically get people to interact with each other in these sort of very simple interactions that follow a simple set of rules. Probably the simplest one is the dictator game where we have two players and we give them a sum of money and one of the players gets to decide how they're gonna split it. So they can either share it with the other person or keep it all for themselves and the other person doesn't get to do anything. And we call that a game because in a sense you're playing for money, real money or sometimes you play for other things but it's a game in the sense that we can model it with game theories. That's a branch of mathematics that tells us exactly what the strategies on offer are and how people should be responding to them if they're being rational. That was the reason people first started using these experimental games because they were mathematically very simple to analyse and we can make very simple sorts of predictions about how people should be acting if they're being rational (according to some definition of rationality) and then you could very sort of starkly see when people didn't do that. And so it allowed us to get a sort of handle or a wedge into behaviour that could scale up potentially into a real world scenario. So that dictator game that I've used as an example may seem trivial and simple but there are a lot of cases in politics and in daily life where you have the decision to make about how you're gonna share resources whether that's time or attention or money or access to government institutions and so on with other people and they don't really have any recourse – at least not directly, they can't do much about the decision that you make because you are in a position of power and they are not. And so studying the way people make those decisions seemed an obvious thing. It was something people were interested in from multiple different fields.

I think what we got out of that that we never expected was how seriously people take those interactions with other people. So we expected that we would give people these very simple games and they would treat them like games. What we got was; people would come into the lab and they would behave in ways that were wildly different from what the mathematical analyses said people should do but they were behaving in these different ways because they took so seriously the person sitting across the table from them. It wasn't about the fact that they weren't playing for much money or they were in a lab and it wasn't very realistic and it doesn't have much to do with their real life. There was a real person on the other side and so they interacted with that person in a normal human way. And so these games became really incredibly valuable to the scientific community because despite the fact that they seem a little bit silly, people take them very, very seriously because people take other people seriously most of the time.

Laura: So for our research that we've just published in Political Psychology, we used the ultimatum game and we tried to link that with this question about identity. So what would you say was the main thing that came out of that that was interesting?

Adam: So the thing about the ultimatum game I think – that's most interesting about this is that, again because people take this very, very seriously when dealing with other people, the behaviour seems a lot closer to what you get out in the wild in a natural political environment. So the ultimatum game is very similar to the dictator game except in this case the second player has something they can do; they can either accept the offer or reject it and if they reject it nobody gets anything. So I as the proposer – the person who decides how to split the money, I have to take into

account that you have some push back and that not only can you accept what I propose but you can also punish me, cost me whatever we might be playing for and my share, if I'm not fair enough to you, if I don't take enough of your interest into account. And when we brought people into the lab they took that really seriously even though we weren't playing for life-altering sums of money – although research shows when you play for huge sums of money you know, sometimes in excess of what most people will earn in a month, it doesn't actually change the way that people play these games because that's how seriously they take them. I think what it really showed us was that the degree to which perceiving somebody else as being part of a different primary political identity or primary territorial identity really did alter whether or not they saw the offer as fair. Who was doing the offering mattered a lot to people and they weren't shy at all about making their decisions partly on the basis of that. As we know because they made different decisions depending on who was offering them functionally the same thing.

Laura: I thought that was really – that for me was really fascinating, that we knew objectively the amount was the same but the perception was that it was less fair if you thought it was somebody from the other group than if it came from somebody who you thought was of your same primary identity group.

Adam: Yeah.

Laura: And that's really fascinating; something that objectively was the same amount of money.

Adam: Yeah. But what I also got out of this was a slightly more subtle set of results, which was that while we expected more from other people we also expected more from our own group in certain ways. So people's behaviour wasn't just I'll take anything from someone who's like me and I'll reject anything you know, that's not fifty percent on the line from other people but rather that if you got an offer or a rejection of an offer from somebody who was part of your group, people tended to respond to that by having pretty high standards. So they didn't like the fact that something they were offering to somebody of their own group wasn't being accepted right away and it altered their behaviour in response to that in sort of interesting and subtle ways. Whereas the same sort of sometimes they would be accepted and sometimes they would be rejected by out-group or alternate identity people. So part of what we got out of seeing offers from alternate identity or out-group identity people was that where we set the threshold for 'fair' isn't just what they offer me but how they respond dynamically over time to the give and take of making offers and accepting or rejecting them. One of the things that I really got out of this that I didn't really know much about was the complexities of identity. I was wondering if you could say a little bit about that because that's really core to your area and all of your research.

Laura: Yeah and one of the things that we were very specifically looking at was quite a complicated identity where you've got multi levels and multi layers of identity. So it's easy in typical speak to say 'in-group' and 'out-group'. So the one who is part of your primary identity group and the one who isn't. But actually in real life it's not really like that and Scotland's a brilliant microcosm for testing this. Right now you're looking at a situation where we were doing part of this research in Edinburgh, so we had Scots participants but we had Scots participants who identify as Scots, we have Scots participants who identify as British and you've got Scots participants who identify as European. So that's a really complicated layer of identities in this multi-level system. So what we did hear that I thought was really interesting was we didn't set off just simple in-groups versus out-groups, were it was really quite potentially more obvious what the outcome might be but we looked at whether even in this really complicated environment where you know, you might see

somebody who saw themselves as being British as also being part of your identity group, even if primarily you might see yourself as Scottish or primarily you might see yourself as European, even then we still saw that your primary identity – whether you saw yourself as Scottish or whether you saw yourself as British or whether you saw yourself as European, had an effect on the way you perceived the offers and the way you behaved in relation to those offers.

Adam: Do you think that these layered, nuanced identities and the complex behaviour that we see arising out of this, do you think this gives us information that's applicable to having multiple, different interests in play. So – I mean typically when I tend to think of national level politicians, I tend to think of them as having some set of interests that's local to whoever elected them but also having a set of interests that's either shared by their party or shared by basically everybody who's being a responsible voter. So you know, we all want the country to be prosperous and we all want it to be safe, we all want it to be fair – under some definition of the word fair. Do you think that managing these sort of conflicting and competing interests is something we can learn about by studying layered identities?

Laura: Yeah. I think what it also gives us is a very, very particular insight into is the fact that values and amounts are not fixed. So when we are assuming somebody has a particular interest or something's particularly valuable to them – like just now we're talking about Brexit and we're talking about whether or not it's economically harmful or economically positive to have the process of leaving the European Union but the kind of research we're doing I think is a really good lens on that because what becomes clear is that exactly the same process is not perceived as having the same economic value or no it doesn't have the same – there's no fixed value, that value is actually shaped in part through your actual identity. So I think that reciprocal relationship is really one that's very, very intriguing and I think this does give some really nice insights into that.

Adam: Do you think that there's a positive take-home out of the work that we've done and how it related to what's going on right now?

Laura: I think what it helps us to do is at the very least to tease out some of the things that have seemed a bit counter-intuitive or that have been difficult to make sense of. And I think one of the things you're seeing is, for example, when you've got Theresa May at this very moment going off to the European capitals and seeking to strike a deal, you start to understand why a deal that appears to be plausible or valuable or acceptable from one set of lenses is perhaps less feasible or valuable from the other side and that very much that the kind of identity interest constructs that form your social identity, are lenses through which each one of these actors from these different national capitals is trying to weigh up the value of what's on offer. And I think even we can see that very close to home. We're based in Edinburgh, it's very, very clear that in Scotland the primary vote was to remain, whereas in the rest of the UK overall the vote was to leave and you start to see why you're also seeing territorial disputes in the way that the Brexit deal that's being negotiated by the Westminster politicians, by Theresa May in Europe is often being perceived quite differentially in the different parts of the UK and particularly we can see in Scotland there's been a lot of coverage questioning on that report. And I think some of our insights from our research are actually giving quite a good lens on that; why ostensibly the same deal is viewed very differently and it's partly viewed through those lenses of your collective identities.

Adam: One of the things that occurred to me in the aftermath, thinking about what these results might mean, is that these negotiations started off as negotiations typically do, where this side and that side said here's our starting position, here's what we want if we can have absolutely everything

in the world and pay nothing for it and then everybody recognises that that's a starting position and everybody starts negotiating from there. But what you don't typically tend to see is people on any given side setting out even explicitly for themselves privately; this is what I think is fair, before they start hearing offers. Because we think: "Oh, I'll know a fair offer when I see one." or kind of have a sense of it. But now looking at how people responded in our experiments, regardless of what our identities were, everybody responded in functionally in the same sort of ways. I realised that if I really, really wanted to commit to being fair, I would have to insulate myself to my own psychological reactions to who's doing the offering and how the offers are gradually laid out, by guaranteeing writing down on a piece of paper in advance; this is what I think a fair offer is and when I get their I'll except it because I know that now, when the moment comes, I probably won't see it as fair, even if in advance that would have been something I'd have been happy to go with.

Laura: Yeah, I think you're right. That dynamic perception of fairness is one of the most interesting things. And I think it's why partly we'd expect that even if we did exactly the same experiment in another country, there will be different dynamics but our expectation is that it would still be a dynamic understanding of fairness and it will be moderated by the effect of identity but the effect may not be the same everywhere -

Adam: Yeah.

Laura: - because it might very well depend on what your identity means to you.

Adam: Yeah and how under stress and how emphasised those identities are at the time you do the experiment. Yeah. There's a lot of really interesting work still to be done on this. It's always great talking to you Laura. It's always fun to chat about our work and look back and look forward again.

Laura: Yeah well, do you know what the best part of all of this is getting to work with smart people, ask lots of interesting questions and see what's the next project we can get ourselves involved in.

Adam: I could do with a little bit less of immediately relevant work. I think this has been – Everywhere I go, I keep seeing it now.

Isabella: If you want to know more about the topics discussed in this podcast, follow the links on the Forward Thinking blog at forwardthinking.ppls.ed.ac.uk
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