

# Let's talk about Brexit: Intra-organizational communication, citizenship status, procedural justice and job insecurity in a context of potential immigration threat

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## *Abstract*

In this study we investigate the degree to which procedural justice and Brexit related intra-organizational communication interact with UK-citizenship status in alleviating/fostering job-insecurity. Intra-organizational communication is often negatively associated with job insecurity (Keim, Landis, Pierce and Earnest, 2014), especially in contexts of turmoil and uncertainty; we suggest that this association will depend upon citizenship status and whether employees work in a procedurally just organization. In a survey of 682 employees, we measured the degree to which organizations are perceived to communicate about Brexit, procedural justice, and job insecurity. We found a three-way interaction between procedural justice, citizenship status, and Brexit communication when predicting job insecurity. When experiencing low levels of procedural justice, employees were more responsive to Brexit communication. For non-UK citizens in low justice conditions, Brexit communication was associated with lower job insecurity; for UK citizens in the same lower justice conditions, Brexit communication was associated with higher job insecurity. These effects were less pronounced for employees who perceived their employer to be more procedurally just. The study highlights that procedurally just work environments can help ensure that employees do not respond negatively to organizational attempts at open communication when faced with uncertain contexts.

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**Keywords:** Brexit; Job Insecurity; Immigrant; Citizenship Status; Job Uncertainty; Procedural Justice

## *Introduction*

The current study explores the role of employee perceptions of organizational communication and procedural justice in buffering job insecurity among workers employed in the UK following the Brexit referendum and a year before the proposed initial “Brexit” date (29 March 2019). The context of Brexit will affect both macro-economic context of employment and features of the labour market that contextualise employment for all employees in the UK. As Sverke and Hellgren (2002) and Shoss (2017) proposed in their reviews, extra-organizational labour market and macro-economic conditions

can play a key role in influencing employee perceptions of job insecurity within (and across) organizations.

In this paper, we investigate perceptions and attitudes of workers who have originated from the UK, workers from the EU, and other international workers based in the UK. In this unique Brexit context, EU workers who did not have UK citizenship suddenly faced a situation of extreme uncertainty around their right to both work and reside in the UK. This increased uncertainty around whether certain classes of workers would be welcome in the job market, is likely to be associated with increased job insecurity for those who are most likely impacted by the uncertain context. Job insecurity is generally a negative experience for employees as it is highly likely to foster mental distress (Shoss, 2017), and increased negative attitudes and behaviours (Sverke, Hellgren and Naswall, 2002). Recent meta analyses have confirmed that job insecurity is related to more negative psychological and physical health, lower work performance, and greater intention to leave the organization (see Cheng & Chang, 2008; Jiang & Lavayse, 2018). Importantly, the potential impact of Brexit may have affected all employees based in the UK, either of EU origin or otherwise, due to the fundamental uncertainty around the future political and macro-economic situation. Thus, the period in which we ran the study, involved an employment context where all employees working in the UK may have faced increased job insecurity; but where some groups were more likely to be affected than others.

We propose a model to uncover mechanisms that influence job insecurity linked to organizational communication, citizenship status, and procedural justice in the Brexit context. As Brexit creates an environment of uncertainty about the future, perceptions of job insecurity are likely to be heightened; and we propose that organizational processes linked to Brexit related communication and procedural justice play a key role in determining employee reactions to this context. For the purposes of this study, we define organizational (Brexit) communication as “open and supportive intra-organizational communication to employees which is linked to the Brexit environment and context”. We consider organizational communication to be an important factor that will determine how employees respond to the uncertainties around Brexit. Key to our argument is the interaction between organizational

communication and procedural justice in determining feelings of job (in)security in the Brexit context. In line with Folger and Cropanzano (1998), we define procedural justice as perceptions of fairness of the mechanisms and process of decision making in organizations. As a large body of research shows, employee responses to contexts and organizational activities can be determined by the degree to which their organization is considered to act in a procedurally just manner (e.g., Colquit, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, and Ng, 2001); as fairness heuristic theorists argue such perceptions are of heightened importance in times of uncertainty and change (Lind and van den Bos, 2002). In the current study we suggest that employee perceptions of communication in the context of procedural justice perceptions will interact in determining how employees respond to the potential threat of the Brexit related uncertainty. That is, we test the novel proposition that the effects of organizational communication on job insecurity, will vary depending on the extent to which employees perceive their organization to be procedurally fair.

### **Organizational communication and job insecurity**

Organizational communication is a key organizational strategy likely to mitigate uncertain contexts that employees are faced with. For example, Schweiger and Denisi (1991) showed how important communication is at helping to reduce employee uncertainty and negative work outcomes in a merger context. Similarly, Bordia, Hunt, Paulsen, Tourish, and DiFonzo (2004) showed links between organizational communication, uncertainty, and employees' sense of control in a context of downsizing and job threat. A key reason why uncertain environments can lead to insecurity is that these environments induce employees to feel less control over their environment (Vander Elst, De Cuyper, Baillien, and De Witte, 2010). Situations of uncertainty can foster vagueness about the future, which can threaten feelings of self-control (Vander Elst et al., 2010). Organizational communication can mitigate this and help to give a greater sense of control by reducing an element of the vagueness associated with higher uncertainty (Vander Elst et al., 2010). This, in turn, can help reduce feelings of job insecurity (Bordia et al., 2004; Kramer Dougherty and Pierce, 2004). The negative relationship between intra-organizational communication and job insecurity has been demonstrated in many studies, and confirmed in meta-analyses (Keim, Landis, Pierce, and Earnest, 2014). Literature

focussing on organizational communication highlights the idea that internal organizational communication can take many forms. Specifically, it can be multi-directional (e.g., it can be directed at employees, customers or investors), multi-faceted (the content can be simple or complex), and that there are many models and processes that one can draw on when understanding organizational communication (Miller, 2012). In the current study when we refer to Brexit communication or organizational communication we are referring to formal, internally employee targeted communication efforts made by the organization to share information and plans involving its response as an organization to Brexit.

Organizational communication is generally expected to lead to positive outcomes (see Shoss, 2017). However, theories linked to uncertainty raise some complexities around whether communication will necessarily lead to a reduction in uncertainty (see Bradac, 2001 for a discussion of different theories linked to uncertainty management). For example, problematic integration theory (Babrow, 1992) discusses how the provision of information and communication can lead to an increase in uncertainty in some circumstances, especially if the information that is communicated leads to perceptions of an increased likelihood of a negative outcome occurring. This suggests that communication may increase uncertainty for some groups of people while reducing uncertainty for others; depending, that is, on whether the receiver perceives the situation as threatening in the first instance. Thus, the effectiveness of communication in uncertain contexts might vary across different groups receiving the message, and this variation may depend on whether the message itself makes uncertainty more (or less) salient. We suggest that Brexit related intra-organizational communication will have a differential impact on different groups of employees, and that this impact will vary depending on whether employees perceive the context as higher or lower in uncertainty (with communication being more effective in the former case). In the Brexit context, citizenship status is clearly an important determinant of whether employees will be at higher risk of feeling directly impacted by uncertainty.

#### ***Citizenship status determining the outcome of communication in a Brexit context***

At the time of this study (March 2018), the UK government had yet to set out its policies relating to the employment prospects of EU workers based in the UK who did not have formal citizenship status.

Moreover, because of the history of EU policies of freedom of movement, many EU employees may not have UK citizenship. Therefore, it is highly likely that employees in the UK would vary in the degree to which they feel threatened by the uncertain Brexit situation, depending on whether they had UK citizenship status at the time of the study. Specifically, employees in the UK who did not have citizenship status are likely to have been (naturally) in a situation of higher uncertainty. Indeed, this group of employees were faced with uncertainty about whether they would be allowed to continue working (or living) in the UK after Brexit. This differential impact is not uncommon and much research has explored the unique experiences of migrant workers; for example, migrants have higher job insecurity and lower quality of working life (e.g. Moyce and Scheneker, 2018; Jiang, Wang, Guo, and Gollan, 2017), and are often found in sectors and occupations that involve higher levels of contingent/non-permanent contracts with less favourable work conditions (Eurofound, 2007). Importantly, those employees working in the UK without citizenship will be more likely to face higher states of uncertainty around the potential impact of Brexit due to their more vulnerable status. In addition to this, at the time of the study, the government plans around allowing EU citizens (without UK citizenship) to remain living and working in the UK were still not clear. Some commitments were made by the UK government to allowing “settled status” for EU citizens two months after the period of this study, however at the time of the study no commitments had been made. Thus the uncertainties around Brexit for the non-UK citizens were potentially significant (in terms of freedom to both live and work in the UK) and very real. In contrast, we would expect employees with UK citizenship to be in a situation of less relative uncertainty regarding the potential threat that Brexit may bring for their employment. Thus, the context of the current study naturally has two groups or conditions that should fundamentally vary on the degree of uncertainty they face - UK citizens *versus* non-UK citizens.

Given that organizational communication reduces job insecurity by improving perceptions of certainty and control (Vander Elst, et al., 2010), it is possible that, in the Brexit context, communication would benefit EU workers without UK citizenship the most. Indeed, those without citizenship are likely to be in a situation of lower control over their futures because of Brexit. However, as problematic integration theory would suggest, communication can in some instances increase uncertainty and

negative reactions as it can heighten the salience and the probability of a negative outcome. Whilst existing research and theory focuses on the idea that more intra-organizational communication helps alleviate job insecurity by potentially reducing uncertainty, it is likely that more communication about an uncertain context can also lead to increased insecurity (for some groups). As at the time of the study the state and implications of Brexit were unknown, intra-organizational communication about Brexit could well have increased the salience of the potential negative impact of Brexit for whom uncertainty was naturally lower. UK citizens are likely to be less confronted with job related uncertainty as their citizenship status puts them in a more secure position. However, Brexit-related intra-organizational communication may raise the spectre of their job potentially being under threat. Thus, in this context we expect UK citizenship status to moderate the relationship between communication and job insecurity:

*Hypothesis 1: Citizenship status will moderate the relationship between Brexit communication and job insecurity: such that we would expect a negative relationship between communication and job insecurity with those that do not have citizenship status; with those that have UK citizenship status, we would expect a positive relationship between communication and job insecurity.*

### **Justice as a boundary condition for the influence of communication on job insecurity depending upon citizenship status**

Given the potential threat of Brexit, and the unavoidable uncertainty surrounding it, theory suggests that it is likely that employees' perceptions of fairness in the organization will have implications for how employees respond. Justice theorists (e.g. Lind and van den Bos, 2002) have argued that in times of uncertainty and change, the degree to which an employer acts with justice, in particular procedural justice, will be of particular importance in determining responses to the context. A key feature of the work environment suggested as having an important effect on job insecurity in the context of uncertainty, change and turmoil, is the notion of procedural justice. Researchers have theorised

(Shoss, 2017) and found evidence for (Jiang and Lavaysee, 2018) employee perceptions of justice being a potential predictor or correlate of job insecurity. The theories and research point to an expectation that we would find a negative relationship between procedural justice and job insecurity in the context of Brexit. The perception of fair treatment and justice in organizations helps to reduce potential negative responses from employees when faced with change, uncertainty, and turmoil (Konovsky, 2000; Lind, 2001). Lind (2001) argued that in contexts of change and turmoil, fairness judgments become more salient than usual, thus, employees' responses to variation in fairness perceptions will be greater in uncertain contexts. Mishra and Spreitzer (1998), proposed that employees who perceive their organization to act with procedural fairness will be less likely to respond negatively in contexts of change (e.g., downsizing and job loss) because they are more likely to appraise the potential stressful context as being less of a threat in those fair environments. Furthermore, Konovsky (2000) argued that fairness perceptions give us information linked to trust in circumstances of uncertainty and can potentially act as a proxy for trust in our organization, which in turn may reduce perceptions of uncertainty. Recent research in a merger context showed how justice perceptions can influence - and be influenced by - perceptions of trust in times of uncertainty (Kaltainen, Lipponen, and Holtz, 2017). Thus, justice can be considered an important moderating factor influencing how employees respond to uncertain contexts. In the Brexit context of this study, we argue that the differential impact of communication on perceptions of job insecurity will be most pronounced where procedural justice is perceived to be low. Indeed, in such environments, employees should be more attuned to messages because they may be less sure of how the organization will deal with Brexit (or any other threatening context). When procedural justice is perceived to be high, employees are naturally more likely to trust the organization in managing through a highly uncertain context, and thus will be less reliant on *extra* specific communications about the Brexit context. We expect this to be dependent on another determinant of uncertainty in the Brexit context – citizenship – as detailed earlier.

If, as we propose, open communication linked to Brexit can help reduce uncertainty and job insecurity for employees without UK citizenship status and have the opposite effect for those who do have UK

citizenship status, we would also expect the relationship and importance of communication at influencing job insecurity perceptions to interact with procedural justice. Where justice perceptions are lowest, and employees do not have citizenship status, we would expect these employees to show a stronger negative relationship between communication and job insecurity, or put differently, we would expect them to benefit more from communication, than employees in other interactive combinations of citizenship status and justice perceptions. In other words, what we suggest is that greater communication should be most useful in the low justice higher uncertainty condition but only amongst non-UK citizens (who face double threat derived of the Brexit context). In turn, for those who do have citizenship, if we expect communication to have, *paradoxically*, a negative impact on insecurity as the communication makes the potential for uncertainty associated with Brexit salient (where it may not have been otherwise). This effect is likely to be at its most pronounced in situations where the organization is not perceived to act in a procedurally just manner, that is, when employees generally do not trust the organization to act in a fair way. In such a situation there would be a risk of arbitrary managerial responses and decision making. Thus,

*Hypothesis 2: Justice perceptions will interact with citizenship status to moderate the relationship between Brexit Communication and job insecurity. Specifically, in conditions of low procedural justice, those without UK citizenship will demonstrate a stronger negative relationship between communication and job insecurity than in other conditions and those with citizenship status will demonstrate a stronger positive relationship between communication and job insecurity than in other conditions*

In sum, we propose a moderation model in the form of a three-way interaction (see Figure 1). In the context of impending/looming contextual threat, Brexit related intra-organizational communication should help to improve subjective job security for non-UK citizens, but it should be associated with lower job-security for UK-citizens. These effects should be less pronounced in a higher procedural justice condition, where the risk of arbitrary managerial decision-making, and organizational distrust are lower, and the uncertainty conditions are being buffered, and in which employees should have to



be less reliant on specific communication to understand where their organization stands on a given issue.

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Figure 1 about here  
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## ***Method***

### *Sample and Procedures*

Participants were recruited via Prolific - a online crowd source platform (see Gleibs, 2017 and Porter, Outlaw, Gale and Cho, 2019 for a discussion of the use of crowdsourcing platforms/ Panel Data in academic research). The service provides access to more than 25,000 participants from around the globe; these participants receive a reward for completing surveys. We selected participants who worked full-time (as a main job) and were based in the UK. One of the benefits of this service is that it enables researchers to access employees in jobs across many walks of life working in many different organizations; in our sample there were hundreds of different job roles indicated by participants (e.g., “train driver”, “plumber”, “planning manager”, “customer service advisor”, “designer”). Another advantage of this service is that we were able to recruit participants from all around the UK; in total participants were based in 143 different towns across the UK. We recruited participants who were born in the UK (400 participants), who were born within the EU but outside the UK (400), and participants who were originally from outside the EU (100) as a comparator condition. After removing participants who failed to either complete the whole survey or who failed an attention check, the final sample included 352 full-time employees who were born in the UK, 243 who were born in Europe but outside the UK and 87 were born outside of Europe. In total 341 indicated that they had UK citizenship, 41 dual citizenship (including UK) and 300 indicated that they did not have UK citizenship. Of the respondents, 314 either indicated that they did not vote or did not respond to the question of whether they voted in the Brexit referendum, 267 indicated that they voted to “remain” and 103 indicated that they voted to “leave”.

## **Measures:**

### *Independent Variables:*

*Procedural Justice:* The procedural justice measure included five statements based on items from Colquit's (2001) scale, presented following an "in your organization..." statement: these were: "employees are able to express their views and feelings"; "general procedures decisions are made consistent across the workforce"; "are generally free of bias"; "procedures are based on accurate information" and "procedures are fair and just". A 1-to-5 strongly disagree to strongly agree response scale was presented with each statement.

*Brexit Communication:* For this measure we asked six questions about participant perceptions of the degree to which their employer had openly communicated to employees regarding Brexit. The items were drawn from informational and interactional communication related justice measures (e.g. Shapiro Buttner and Barry, 1994, Colquit 2001) and also included items linked to sharing information and involving employees in planning associated with Brexit. Participants were asked "To what extent has your employer"... followed by the following 6 statements: "...communicated the details of its plans in response to Brexit in a timely manner?"; "seemed to tailor its communication linked to Brexit to individuals' specific needs?"; "shared information about plans on dealing with Brexit?"; "tried to address your personal concerns regarding the implications of Brexit?"; "given employees as much information as possible regarding its plans in response to Brexit?"; and "involved employees in its planning in response to Brexit?". The questions were linked to a 6 item "Not at all" to "To a very great extent" response item scale.

*Citizenship Status:* Participants were asked to indicate their citizen status: "UK citizen"; "Dual citizenship – UK citizen + another"; "Not UK citizen. Other". For the analyses a binary variable was created with 0 indicating "No-UK citizenship" and 1 indicating "UK citizenship" (which included single and dual citizenship).

### *Dependent Variable:*

*Job Insecurity:* Four items were included to measure job insecurity based on De Witte's (2000) scale: "Chances are, I will soon lose my job"; "I am sure I can keep my job" (recoded); "I feel insecure about the future of my job"; "I think I might lose my job in the near future". A 1-to-5 strongly disagree to strongly agree response scale was presented with each statement.

### *Controls:*

*Country of origin:* Participants were asked what their country of birth was. These answers were then coded into 3 categories: UK, EU, or International origin. Dummy variables were created for these three categories.

*Brexit Referendum Vote:* Participants were asked whether they voted in the referendum and if so whether they voted leave or remain, this was included on the basis that if the participants voted in the referendum, this may well have an influence both on how they interpret and perceive Brexit related organizational communication and the degree to which they see Brexit as being a potential threat to their jobs. Thus we deemed this important to control for in the analyses. Three dummy variables were constructed specifying either a) "No vote", b) vote "Remain" and c) Vote "leave". If no response was given/declared with the voting question these participants were included with the "No vote" category.

Participants were also asked to indicate their *Age* and *Gender* to include as controls.

### *Analytic approach*

We followed a two-step process (outlined in Anderson and Gerbing, 1988); the first involved testing the validity of the measures using confirmatory factor analyses and reliability analyses before creating mean composites from the scale items. These mean composites were then utilised in descriptive analyses (see Table 1) and then subsequently to test the hypothesised moderated model.

## Results

### *Measurement Model*

We ran a Confirmatory Factor Analyses testing our main measurement model with our three sets of multi-item scales; loading 15 items onto 3 separate latent factors (4 job insecurity; 6 Brexit communication; 5 Procedural Justice items). This model fit the data well (Chi-square=308.86, df=87,  $\chi^2/df=3.55$ , RMSEA=0.061, SRMR=0.030, CFI=0.974, TLI=0.968), significantly better ( $p<0.001$  in all cases) than either a single conglomerated model (Chi-square=6519.275, df=90, RMSEA=0.324, SRMR=0.319, CFI=0.240, TLI=0.114) or three two-factor models that combined two sets of items in turn whilst leaving one set of items as a separate factor. These comparator models involved: a) the justice and insecurity items as one factor (Chi-square=2154.06, df=89, RMSEA=0.184, SRMR=0.179, CFI=0.756, TLI=0.712); b) the insecurity and communication items as one factor (Chi-square=4719.795, df=89, RMSEA=0.276, SRMR=0.281, CFI=0.453, TLI=0.355); and c) the justice and communication items as one factor (Chi-square=2155.68, df=89, RMSEA=0.185, SRMR=0.172, CFI=0.756, TLI=0.712). The three-factor measurement model showed good loadings on each factor: loadings ranged from 0.764-0.914 with the job insecurity measures; 0.843-0.925 with the Brexit communication measure and 0.659-0.871 with the procedural justice measure. Thus the 3-factor model cleanly separated the 3 sets of items, which justified the creation of mean composites with these measure as a second stage of a two-stage modelling process.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Table 1 and Table 2 present correlations, reliability coefficients, means and standard deviations for and between the study's focal variables. The focal variable of the study, Job Insecurity, showed a negative relationship with procedural justice ( $r=-0.229$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and citizenship status ( $r=-0.189$ ,  $p<0.001$ , see below for the means across the citizenship categories), however job insecurity did not show a significant direct correlation with Brexit communication ( $r=0.002$ ,  $p>0.05$ ) though interactions between communication, citizenship, justice and job insecurity will be tested in the regressions reported below. When comparing non-UK citizens and those with UK citizen status, no significant

differences were found on organizational Brexit communication levels ( $\bar{x}=2.055$ ;  $\bar{x}=2.044$ ,  $t(680)=0.112, p=0.911$ ). However, those without UK citizen status showed significantly lower justice perceptions than those with UK citizenship status ( $\bar{x}=3.362$ ;  $\bar{x}=3.56$ ,  $t(680)=-2.835, p=0.004$ ); non-UK citizens versus those with UK *citizenship* however showed higher levels of job insecurity ( $\bar{x}=2.986$ ;  $\bar{x}=2.602$ ,  $t(680)=5.015, p<0.001$ ). When comparing UK versus EU and International origin participants, no significant differences were found on organizational Brexit communication levels (UK  $\bar{x}=2.036$ ; EU  $\bar{x}=2.041$ , International  $\bar{x}=2.013$ ,  $f(2,679)=0.190, p=0.827$ ). However, when comparing these three groups there was a significant difference in job insecurity ( $f(2,679)=13.038, p<0.001$ ); UK showed significantly lower levels (UK  $\bar{x}=2.583$ ) compared to those of International origin ( $\bar{x}=2.974$ ) and EU origin ( $\bar{x}=2.970$ ) these were significant with Tukey comparisons ( $p<0.001$  and  $p=0.003$  respectively). With justice perceptions, there were also significant differences across the three groups (UK  $\bar{x}=3.557$ ; EU  $\bar{x}=3.430$ , International  $\bar{x}=3.264$ ,  $f(2,679)=0.190, p=0.827$ ); however only the UK and International groups were significantly different with Tukey comparisons ( $p=0.022$ ). When comparing Remain voters with Leave voters and those who either did not vote or did not declare their vote, no significant differences were found on organizational Brexit communication (Remain  $\bar{x}=2.140$ ; Leave  $\bar{x}=1.995$ , No vote/not declared  $\bar{x}=1.990$ ,  $f(2,679)=1.125, p=0.325$ ) nor with justice perceptions (Remain  $\bar{x}=3.554$ ; Leave  $\bar{x}=3.520$ , No vote/not declared  $\bar{x}=3.392$ ,  $f(2,679)=2.363, p=0.095$ ). However when comparing Remain voters with Leave voters and non-voters/non-declared, Leave voters showed significantly lower levels of job insecurity than the other two groups (Leave  $\bar{x}=2.153$ , Remain  $\bar{x}=2.850$ ; No vote/not declared  $\bar{x}=2.907$ ,  $f(2,679)=24.557, p<0.001$ ). The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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Insert Table 1 Here:

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### *Model testing*

#### *Predicting Job Insecurity:*

Three regression models (see table 3) were tested with job insecurity as the dependent variable in each case. The first model included the 6 control variables as predictors; these were: age, gender, EU origin, international origin, vote remain (UK origin and no-vote/not declared were reference categories). This first model was significant ( $f(6,675)=11.24, p<0.001$ ) and accounted for 9.1 % of the variance in job insecurity ( $R^2=0.091$ ). Both EU and international origin (with UK origin as a reference category) were significantly positively related to job insecurity ( $\beta=0.356, p=0.001$  and  $\beta=0.376, p=0.005$  respectively) and those who voted leave were less insecure ( $\beta=-0.511, p<0.001$ ). The remaining controls did not reach significance. The second model, which in addition included the three key independent variables involved in the study's hypotheses (Brexit communication, citizenship status, procedural justice) was also significant ( $f(9,672)=11.935, p<0.001$ ), the inclusion of the three additional variables significantly improved the model ( $R^2 \text{ change}=0.047, p<0.001$  for this addition). Of these new variables procedural justice was significant ( $\beta=-.244, p<0.001$ ), where those who reported higher levels of procedural justice showed lower job insecurity. Interestingly neither the citizenship status nor the Brexit communication showed any significant direct relationships with job insecurity ( $\beta=0.187, p=0.354$  and  $\beta=0.042, p=0.157$  respectively), however the higher order interactions between these variables are tested in the next model. Adding the 2-and 3-way interaction terms between these constructs significantly added to the model ( $R^2 \text{ change}=0.014, p=0.024$  for the change). In this final model the procedural justice main effect remains significant ( $\beta=-0.410, p=0.001$ ), the communication and citizenship variables become significant ( $\beta=-0.463, p=0.024$  and  $\beta=-1.305, p=0.023$  respectively). Of the 2-way interaction terms, the communication X citizen status ( $\beta=0.781, p=0.006$ ) and communication X justice ( $\beta=0.117, p=0.033$ ) interaction terms are significant. The positive beta for the communication and citizenship status interaction supports Hypothesis 1, showing a positive (rather than negative) relationship between communication and insecurity with UK citizens.

Importantly the higher order three-way interaction between Brexit communication perceptions, citizenship status and procedural justice is significant ( $\beta = -0.171$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ). These results support both Hypotheses 1 and 2. Although the non-significance of the main effect of Brexit communication in model 2 suggests that as a main effect communication is not related to job insecurity, when the interaction terms are included this does become significant. Importantly, as the highest-order three-way interaction is significant, this explains why there is no direct effect of Brexit communication on job insecurity; the relationship between these two variables is contingent upon the levels of both procedural justice and citizenship status.

To visualise this interaction, we ran the interaction model again without the controls (which would otherwise influence how high the slopes fall on job insecurity) and the three-way interaction is shown on Figure 2. To confirm, with this model the key 2 and 3-way interactions are significant (communication X Citizen status  $\beta = 0.837$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ; communication X justice  $\beta = 0.122$ ,  $p = 0.029$ ; Brexit communication X citizenship status X procedural justice  $\beta = 0.185$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). As Figure 2 demonstrates, as hypothesised, the relationship between Brexit communication perceptions and job insecurity is contingent upon the level of both justice perceptions and citizen status. With regard to the simple slopes, a negative relationship exists ( $\beta = -0.168$ ,  $p = 0.030$ ) between Brexit communication and job insecurity for non-UK citizens who perceive low levels (-1SD) of justice in their organization (the most uncertain/exposed condition) and this is significantly more negative than all other conditions (thus supporting Hypotheses 3). The results of the slope difference tests comparing the non-citizenship-low justice condition against other conditions are as follows:  $t = 2.609$ ,  $p = 0.009$  comparing this condition with the UK citizenship-High justice (+1SD) condition;  $t = 3.283$ ,  $p = 0.001$  against the UK citizenship-low justice condition; and,  $t = 2.112$ ,  $p = 0.035$  against the non-citizenship-High justice condition. As predicted, the UK citizenship-low justice condition shows a significant positive slope between Brexit communication and insecurity ( $\beta = 0.196$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ) suggesting that insecurity increases with more communication about Brexit for UK citizens who work in organizations that have low levels (-1SD) of procedural justice. The two high-justice (+1SD) conditions did not show significant slopes. This supports our Hypotheses 2.

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## ***Discussion***

At the time of the current study, employees in the UK were in a position where the future of Britain's membership of the EU and the existing relaxed EU-UK labour market boundaries with freedom of movement was under threat. The UK government policy linked to the need to obtain work visas and conditions where non-UK citizens could continue working in the UK was 'in limbo'. Moreover, the UK's whole policy regarding economic union and relaxed EU-UK economic borders was under review. In some ways this was a particular context of labour market and macro-economic uncertainty as "Brexit" is quite unique; in other ways policy changes restricting freedom of movement, work and immigration were also being questioned in other parts of the world at the same time (including the USA, Pierce, Bolten and Selee, 2018, and across the EU, Ruhs and Palme, 2018). In this context, we predicted that citizenship status and perceived justice would determine the relationship between organizational communication and job insecurity; this prediction was supported. Shoss' (2017) model included national/macro-economic conditions, organizational communication, and organizational fairness as potential factors influencing job insecurity. We showed that these conditions, and the precarious nature of a lack of citizenship, play a role in helping to explain possible Brexit insecurity reactions.

We explored whether open employer communication linked to the Brexit context were associated with higher or lower job insecurity. Although organizational communication has been associated with lower uncertainty and job insecurity (Bordia et al 2004; Vander Elst et al., 2010), we showed that the degree to which organizational communication is associated with reduced job insecurity in the workforce, depends upon a combination of specific conditions. Specifically, the relationship between organizational communication and job insecurity depends upon the heightened



or reduced uncertainty context of having UK citizenship (or not) combined with whether the employees' organization is considered to act with fair and just procedures. Specifically, employees who did not have citizenship status and perceived low procedural justice were particularly sensitive to the absence or presence of open communication. With this doubly uncertain group, more communication was associated with lower job insecurity. This supports previous research (Vander Elst et al 2010) showing that organizational communication reduces feelings of lack of control. Key here was the finding that more Brexit-related intra-organizational communication was associated with higher job insecurity with UK citizens in the absence of a procedurally just organizational environment. This shows how open communication in an uncertain environment can have markedly different impact on different employee groups who are in varied conditions of potential uncertainty.

#### *Justice perceptions and conditions of heightened threat or uncertainty*

As mentioned in our theoretical build up to Hypotheses 2, a key organizational contextual contingency that is expected to determine the effects of Brexit related communication in alleviating the potential for insecurity amongst employees experiencing uncertainty, is the degree to which employees believe that their organization generally acts in a procedurally just manner. In posing this argument we drew on arguments presented by Lind (2002), Konovsky (2000), and also those associated with fairness heuristic theory (see Lind and van den Boss, 2002). In particular, the argument that in situations of change or threat and uncertainty, employees are more attentive to whether their organization acts in a fair and just way, and that in these situations of uncertainty employees will be particularly sensitive and/or reactive to the presence or absence of perceived procedural fairness.

In our study, we found that the presence or absence of procedural justice is a key condition linked to greater or lesser levels of salience in response to organizational communication; in tandem with higher or lower conditions of uncertainty (UK citizenship versus non-citizenship). This supports the theoretical arguments presented that the absence of justice will heighten the salience and importance of communication in fostering positive or negative effects across varied contexts of lower or relatively higher uncertainty and control. In the absence of perceived procedural fairness, the utility of more

organizational communication in the Brexit context will be the highest in the situation of higher uncertainty or control; namely with those who do not have citizenship status. Importantly, the current study, and heightened context of macro-economic and labour market uncertainty of Brexit with those who do not have UK citizenship provides a unique opportunity to test some of the propositions associated with the importance of justice and communication in natural and specific variations of uncertainty condition.

*The impact of communication on job insecurity with UK and non-UK citizens in the absence of justice perceptions*

We found support for the predicted three-way interaction (Hypotheses 2), by showing that the negative relationship between communication and job insecurity was at its strongest in the most precarious position with non-UK citizens in conditions of low justice. We also found a positive relationship between communication and job insecurity with UK citizens where justice perceptions were low. From an organizational perspective, this finding is potentially troubling as it challenges the intra-organizational communication as a default strategy that purportedly leads to positive outcomes. There could be several possible explanations for the finding that more Brexit communication is associated with heightened job insecurity for the relatively more certain condition of those with citizenship status. It is possible that the apparent negative effects of communication in job insecurity for UK citizens might have been driven by threats to social identity (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988). According to social identity theory, individuals are motivated to make their group achieve and maintain positive distinctiveness from other relevant groups, either symbolically or in terms of material resources (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It may be that Brexit targeted communication: 1) have made different social categories based on origin more salient, and; 2) could have led UK citizens to believe that their organization may more concerned about the “other” group (EU citizens) in detriment of their own group (UK citizens), which in turn may have led to a feeling of identity related threat. However, this possible explanation may not hold up because if any group will bear the brunt of Brexit, it is not likely to be those with UK citizenship. Therefore, the explanation for this negative relationship is likely to be due to a different mechanism. A more

plausible explanation (that we hypothesized) is that UK citizens begin to think there may be something to worry about if their organization is talking about Brexit more; with this group, Brexit related communication would stimulate concerns about a possible threat that may not have been there previously.

When employees who are not directly at risk of job insecurity are targeted by organization communication about external uncertain macro-economic/labor market context they may question why their organization is communicating about the issue. Thus in some circumstances organizational communication may raise questions for employees that could have a detrimental impact on the degree to which they trust the organization and this may be associated with a heightened sense of insecurity. Bachmann, Gillespie and Priem (2015) point out that transparency can provide information to employees that reveals trustworthiness but it can also have the opposite effect. When attributing the reasons for increased levels of intra-organizational communication, *some* employees may perceive that increased attention to the topic is due to the management awareness of the real threat that Brexit poses for the organization. If employees were in a labor market group that was not obviously under immediate threat, more communication about the issue could have triggered a concern that there is something for them to worry about. It is plausible that with this group of employees, when attempting to make sense of the organization's communication, the employees may begin to question the organization's motives. In this case, the communication itself could well have backfired and led to a state of mistrust in the organization (De Cremer, 2016), increasing perceived job insecurity. These employees may react this way especially when they perceive that their organization does not generally act in a procedurally just manner, which may be associated with a lower sense of organizational trustworthiness and this may increase perceptions that their organization could act arbitrarily to Brexit. Thus, if their procedurally "unfair" organization starts to discuss Brexit, this may be a signal that there may be a real threat to their jobs. So, although the communication may be reassuring to those employees without citizenship (as job threat is already heightened and real for these employees), those with citizenship may only become aware of the threat to them with more communication.

As mentioned, Bradac (2001) discussed the role that communication can play at influencing or providing context for uncertainty. When exploring the various theories linked to uncertainty, communication is integral to many aspects of the fostering (or alleviation of) uncertainty. In accordance with meta-analytic findings and previous research, we found that more communication will help reduce uncertainty amongst non-UK citizen employees in the Brexit context (where justice perceptions are low). In contrast, more communication was associated with stronger job insecurity perceptions amongst UK employees (again where justice perceptions are low), in line with ideas discussed in Problematic Integration Theory (Babrow, 1992). More Brexit communication itself could have increased the probabilistic judgments that UK citizen employees make that Brexit is a threat (and increasing the negative evaluation of this threat). The information being communicated at this highly uncertain point in the Brexit negotiations may have been problematic to integrate into a probability-evaluation Brexit threat schema and this could have led to a negative response of heightened job insecurity. Ultimately, as various communication theorists have explored (e.g. Weick, 1995), processes of communication are complex and recipients of organizational communication play an active role in making sense of messages presented (Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren, 2009). Thus communication will by no means be expected to have a universally positive impact on all employees.

Importantly, as the findings show, more Brexit communication may have increased threat and negative evaluation of Brexit to UK citizens when they work for a company that does not tend to act with procedural fairness. This suggests that working for a company that risks acting arbitrarily to given external situations, having that organization communicate about that context is likely to create a perception of Brexit as a create potential threat. In contrast, non-UK citizens are more likely to already perceive Brexit as a real threat and their uncertainty schema may include a higher probability of a negative outcome. For non-UK employees, more communication should (as we theorize and predict) help reassure these employees, at least it would provide some evidence that their organization recognizes the uncertain situation (that is heightened for these employees) and that it is considering and planning in this context of looming Brexit threat.

### *Implications for theory and practice*

The key implication of the current study is that intra-organizational communication about Brexit in the early stage of the UK's withdrawal phase from the EU potentially had different impact on different groups of employees. Thus, this study shows that it is not the case that organizational communication *always* reduce perceptions of job insecurity. This finding has implications for theory and practice both. The intuitive expected positive impact of communication on employees will partly be dependent upon procedural justice environment and it may have different impact on different groups. This has important theoretical implications with regard to the idea that more organizational communication will lead to a positive outcome in uncertain contexts. The arguments that communication can help reduce uncertainty by adding a sense of control for employees (Vander Elst, 2010) and that more official communication should reduce uncertainty (Kramer, et al., 2004) along with job insecurity (Vander Elst, 2010) may only be supported in particular conditions where uncertainty is salient and heightened. It may be the case that in some circumstances the communication may heighten the sense of insecurity for some groups. This is an important qualification on arguments that have been presented regarding the expected positive impact on job insecurity that organizational communication should have.

From a management practice perspective these findings raise some interesting challenges. Although open communication strategies may be effective in helping (some) employees cope with macro-level uncertainty, they may at the same time trigger a negative reaction from other groups. Thus, it is essential that organizations target their communication strategies effectively in order to avoid potential backlash. Organizations must assess the needs of their employees and consider whether different groups might respond more or less positively to enhanced official communication. Although some groups might benefit from reassurance of open communication, others might react negatively. Critically, our findings are clear - as long as organizations enact fair and just procedures, the potential for communication to have a negative impact on employees is reduced. Thus, this study further supports research that demonstrates that the importance of procedural justice in policy making and implementation in organizations.

### *Limitations and further research*

Our sample was recruited using a crowdsourcing platform. To help ensure that the responses were as reliable as possible we included attention checks in the survey and excluded those participants who failed the checks. This approach to recruiting participants has been used across numerous studies to be legitimate sources of data (see Porter et al., 2019 for a recent review of such participant pools) and they allow us to reach employees from parts of the country that are geographically hard to reach and working populations with representative characteristics with different employments (e.g., Peer et al., 2017). Specifically, we have participants from over 140 different towns in the UK from hundreds of organizations and the employees are drawn from multiple different walks of life (white collar, blue collar, pink collar). We believe this was a strength of the methodology, as it allowed us to survey different employees without being tied to the specificities of particular organizational cultures, and thus, ensure variance in terms of different organizational strategy and procedural justice. However, it is possible that migrant workers have been experiencing different levels of threat according to their profession or background. For example, it is possible that certain occupations will be more likely to be “on demand” than others even after Brexit (e.g., Healthcare) which may have had a different impact on employees’ experiences of Brexit related uncertainty and the threat derived from that context. At the time of the study however, whether some jobs would be more or less threatened or protected was still uncertain. Indeed in the 3 years following the referendum this was never made clear by the UK government; thus how Brexit might impact different jobs was never made clear. It is worth mentioning here, that the study occurred even before the government had proposed a settled status scheme (which proposed to enable EU workers to apply for indefinite right to remain, had they lived in the UK for 5 years or more). These questions will be particularly interesting to explore in future research as Brexit unfolds and as we gain a better understanding of any potential differential treatment or any sort of advantage/ disadvantage of different categories of EU workers.

Another potential limitation of the current study is that the survey is of a cross sectional nature which brings limitations in terms of the degree to which a reader should infer causality (Freedman, 2010) also

relationships in such studies are prone to problems of common method bias (Spector, 2004) prompting further caution when inferring causal relationships in the findings. However, because the analyses hinges on interactions which explore the communication-job insecurity relationship across different conditions within the sample, this problem is less likely to be a problem with the current paper. It is very unlikely that our three-way interaction result is due to problems of common method variance, especially as one of the measures used was a binary citizenship-or-not variable (which is unlikely to share variance with other factors due to a common method). In support of our study, we can draw on Evans (1985) who showed that researchers can be confident that the moderations actually exist in cross-sectional designs when significant interactions are found; also, Siemsen, Roth, and Oliveira (2010) demonstrated that where complex interactions are found (and are significant) in regression analyses, these are usually conservative estimates of relationships across different conditions explored in moderations. Therefore, whilst the authors recognize some of the limitations of cross-sectional designs, these limitations should not explain the interesting results found in the current study.

In this paper we investigated perceptions of formal intra-organizational Brexit-related communication directed toward employees. We acknowledge that other forms and types of communication are likely to take place within organizations, especially linked to Brexit. For example, it is likely that *informal* communications may have happened during this period between managers and employees which our measures may not have fully captured. Similarly, communications between employees themselves may have influenced their perceptions of how effectively their organization has communicated about Brexit plans, as well as their attitudes to work. Employees will have communicated amongst each other and rumours about the possible impact of Brexit are likely to have circulated amongst organizations (Michelson and Mouly, 2000; Noon and Delbridge, 1993), there may also be exposure to organizational conspiracy theories about Brexit which could have negative implications (Douglas & Leite, 2017). This highlights that the nature of communication is complex and dynamic, particularly when we consider a macro-level issue as Brexit. Nevertheless, this study has clearly showed that the way employees' *perceive* the extent to and quality to which their organizations communicate about Brexit potentially influences feelings of job insecurity, but only amongst those

employees who are already vulnerable to uncertainty and are working in what they see as unfair or unjust environments.

### *Conclusion*

Whilst Brexit may be seen as a unique historical event, there are many aspects of the context that can be considered relevant to other contexts. For example, a) organizational change contexts where uncertainty conditions become more salient and, b) other macro contexts where socio economic conditions exist which can impact the challenges faced by a large number of organizations and the workforce across a country. Furthermore, in the current era of political narrative across the globe, many country leaders are explicit in including anti-immigration policies as part of the intended manifestos. Examples include Brazil, the USA, the UK, Australia and also a number of other European countries such as Italy and Hungary. In certain cases (as with Brexit), employment law and work visa legislation are expected to change to make the inflow of migrant workers more restricted. Importantly, whilst Brexit is in some ways unique to the UK, the macro-level social and political context we see in the current study are not completely unique – especially those that are likely to shape employees' sense of job insecurity and attitudes. Given the fact that macro-level uncertainties impacting employees are not unusual, it is therefore important to understand the organizational processes that are likely to ameliorate or worsen the effects of external uncertainty on employees' attitudes to work and well-being under those turbulent conditions.

The key takeaway from the current study is that organizational communication strategies need to be carefully devised and targeted. Whilst open and transparent communication may be a boon to some, our data shows that they can also raise concerns in others. A novel finding was that communication has the most impact (for the better and the worse), in procedurally unfair work environments.

Specifically in the context of Brexit, while communication may benefit those who may be more at risk of experiencing uncertainty (non-UK citizens working in a procedural unfair environment), it may increase job insecurity for those for whom threat was not as salient (UK citizens). Importantly however, a procedurally just environment will also help to provide a route by which difficult and



complex intra-organizational communication about uncertain situations faced are less likely to have a negative impact on employees' job insecurity. Thus, ensuring a procedurally just work environment, particularly when external uncertainty is high, can help ensure that important messages can be communicated without the negative consequences of heightened job insecurity for some.

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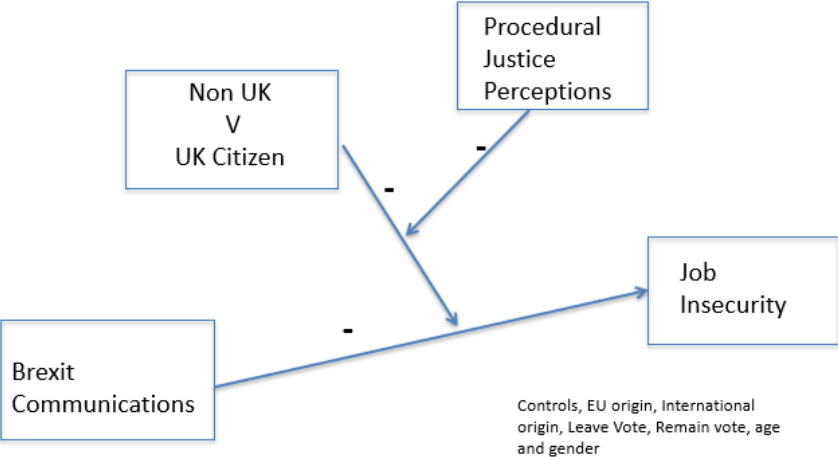
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**Figure 1: Procedural justice moderating the interaction between citizenship status and Brexit communication in its relationship with job insecurity**



**Table 1: Means, standard deviations, reliability and correlations of variables used in the analyses**

†	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	Mean	S.D.
1. Job Insecurity	<i>0.904</i>											2.77	1.01
2. Brexit Communication	.002	<i>0.959</i>										2.05	1.26
3. Proc' Justice	-.229***	.253***	<i>0.893</i>									3.47	0.92
4.Citizenship (0=N;1=Y)	-.189***	-.004	.108**									0.56	0.50
5.Age	.001	-.014	-.009	.225***								35.17	9.50
6.Gender (0=M;1=F)	.075*	-.125**	-.159***	-.057	-.033							0.62	0.49
7 EU Origin (0=N;1=Y)	.147***	-.005	-.036	-.704***	-.110**	.080*						0.36	0.48
8 International Origin (0=N;1=Y)	.077*	.024	-.087*	-.361***	-.143***	.002	-.284***					0.13	0.33
9 UK Origin (0=N;1=Y)	-.192***	-.011	.093*	.915***	.201***	-.077*	-.768***	-.395***				0.52	0.50
10 Remainder (0=N;1=Y)	.063	.057	.069	.506***	.102**	-.025	-.398***	-.134***	.471***			0.39	0.49
11 Leave Vote (0=N;1=Y)	-.258***	-.018	.021	.324***	.172***	-.040	-.262***	-.112**	.326***	-.336***		0.15	0.36
12 No vote/ withheld (0=N;1=Y)	.125**	-.043	-.082*	-.728***	-.223***	.053	.578***	.211***	-.695***	-.736***	-.390***	0.46	0.50

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001,

N=682

†Cronbach Alpha on the diagonal

**Table 2: Mean differences across the study's focal variable between citizenship status, UK versus EU origin and leave versus remain voters.**

	No UK Citizenship (N=300)	UK Citizenship (N=382)	UK Origin (N=352)	EU Origin (N=243)	International Origin (N=87)	Voted Remain (N=267)	Voted Leave (N=103)	Either no vote or not declared (N=314)
Brexit Communication	2.06	2.04	2.04	2.04	2.13	2.14	1.99	1.99
Procedural Justice	3.36†	3.56†	3.56†	3.43	3.26†	3.56	3.52	3.39
Job Insecurity	2.99†	2.60†	2.58† ††	2.97††	2.97†	2.85†	2.16† ††	2.91††

† †† = significantly different comparison (adjusted for family wise error rate where more than one comparison was conducted in the testing)

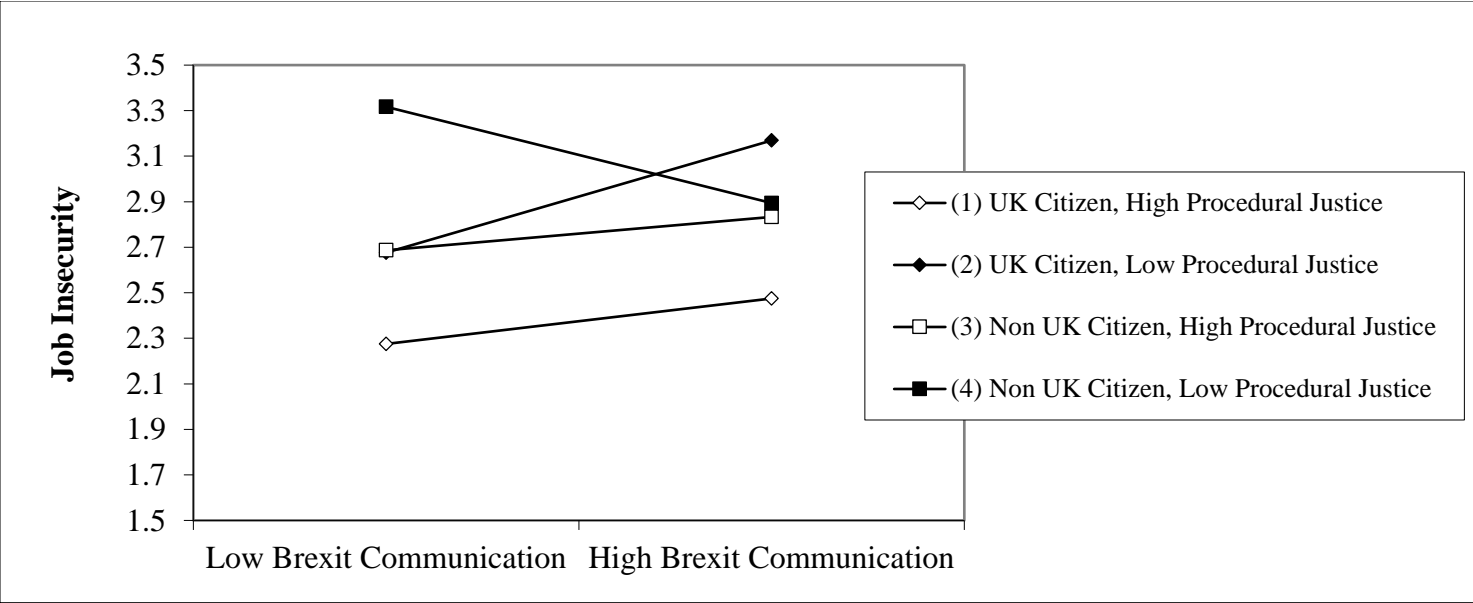


**Table 3: Regression models predicting job insecurity with demographic controls, main (and interactive) effects of Brexit communication, citizenship status and procedural justice perceptions**

	DV=Job Insecurity beta† (Standard Error) p-value	DV=Job Insecurity beta (Standard Error) p-value	DV=Job Insecurity beta (Standard Error) p-value
Age	0.007 (SE=0.004) p=0.101	0.006 (SE=0.004) p=0.126	0.006 (SE=0.004) p=0.126
Gender	0.121 (SE=0.077) p=0.113	0.066 (SE=0.076) p=0.387	0.071 (SE=0.076) p=0.351
EU origin	<b>0.356 (SE=0.111) p=0.001</b>	0.197 (SE=0.184) p=0.287	0.195 (SE=0.184) p=0.289
Int' origin	<b>0.376 (SE=0.133) p=0.005</b>	0.164 (SE=0.200) p=0.412	0.202 (SE=0.200) p=0.313
Voted Remain	0.167 (SE=0.107) p=0.121	0.211 (SE=0.110) p=0.056	<b>0.227 (SE=0.110) p=0.040</b>
Voted Leave	<b>-0.511 (SE=0.137) p=0.000</b>	<b>-0.474 (SE=0.138) p=0.001</b>	<b>-0.445 (SE=0.138) p=0.001</b>
Brexit Communication		0.042 (SE=0.030) p=0.157	<b>-0.463 (SE=0.205) p=0.024</b>
Citizenship		-0.178 (SE=0.192) p=0.354	<b>-1.305 (SE=0.575) p=0.023</b>
Procedural Justice		<b>-0.244 (SE=0.041) p=0.000</b>	<b>-0.410 (SE=0.118) p=0.001</b>
Comm's * Citizenship			<b>0.781 (SE=0.282) p=0.006</b>
Comm's * Proc' Just			<b>0.117 (SE=0.055) p=0.033</b>
Citizen' * Proc' Just'			0.226 (SE=0.150) p=0.132
Communication*Procedural Justice*Citizenship			<b>-0.171 (SE=0.073) p=0.019</b>
R2	<b>0.091 (p&lt;0.001)</b>	<b>0.138 (p&lt;0.001)</b>	<b>0.152 (p&lt;0.001)</b>
R2 change		<b>0.047 (p&lt;0.001)</b>	<b>0.014 (p=0.026)</b>
F(df reg, df res)	11.239(6,675)	11.935 (9,672)	9.204 (13,668)

†unstandardized coefficients with corresponding standard errors

**Figure 2: 3-way interaction plot of the relationship between Brexit communication, citizenship status, justice perceptions and job insecurity.**



†Note – plotted without controls to ensure the authentic representation of the values on the dependent variable