

Business as usual like never before! Continuity, rupture and anxiety management in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum campaign

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Abstract

Ontological security-seeking has traditionally been considered to rest upon the stability and continuity of core auto-biographical narratives and everyday routines. ‘Critical situations’ which fundamentally destabilise these foundations of ontological security have thus hitherto carried a negative valence. Constitutional referenda proposing a radical re-organisation of collective political identities and daily life, therefore, are intriguing. A source of severe consternation for some, for others, potential change is positive, even thrilling. This article investigates this puzzling contrast, drawing on Ontological Security Studies’ (OSS) recent recentring of Existentialist thought and debates exploring the heterogenous potential of anxiety, and utilising the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and the strategies for anxiety management embedded in the pro-independence ‘Yes’ campaign. Through analysis of dominant discourses grounding the argument for independence, findings demonstrate the simultaneous deployment of contradictory anxiety management strategies: independence was framed as a pathway to escape the instability and uncertainty of the status quo; as a pathway to continuity; *and* as a chance to embrace anxiety, to relish the opportunity and excitement of change. This article thus contributes to the prevailing critique of OSS’ over-privileging of stability and continuity in ontological security-seeking, yet problematises ‘either/or’ approaches to understanding anxiety management in critical situations and beyond.

Keywords

anxiety, constitutional referendums, critical situations, existentialism, ontological security, Scottish independence

Introduction

Ontological security-seeking has been conventionally understood to rest upon the stability and continuity of core auto-biographical narratives and everyday routines. ‘Critical situations’ which fundamentally destabilise and rupture these twin pillars of ontological

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security have thus hitherto carried a negative valence. Constitutional referenda proposing a radical re-organisation of collective political identities and daily life, therefore, are intriguing. While a source of major consternation for many, for many others, and cutting against foundational understandings of ontological security, the opportunity is welcome, even thrilling. This article investigates this puzzling contrast, drawing on Ontological Security Studies' (OSS) recent recentring of Existentialist thought and debates centred on the heterogenous potential of existential anxiety, and focussing on the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and the strategies for anxiety management embedded in the pro-independence 'Yes' campaign.

The apparent contradictory role of anxiety as an inhibitor and driver of behavioural change has generated calls to investigate the phenomenon empirically at the individual and collective levels (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020: 248; see also Krickel-Choi, 2022), something the Scottish case is neatly suited to support. Following the voluntary dissolution of the independent English and Scottish Parliaments in 1707, the resultant United Kingdom (UK) has existed as one of the most successful, stable political unions for over three centuries. However, following a growth in Scottish political nationalism in the latter half of the 20th century and a reinstating of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, a strong, albeit minority, national secessionist movement blossomed, a rarity in a mature democracy in which there is 'no manifest oppression' (Keating and McEwan, 2017: 1). After surprise results in the 2011 Scottish elections provided the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) with a parliamentary majority – despite the Scottish electoral system being designed to prevent these forming – a referendum on Scotland leaving the UK was unexpectedly enabled. The referendum threw open the concrete potential to radically rupture both the macro-political environment and everyday routines and identities of citizens living in Scotland (and indeed of those across the wider UK), with the campaign elevating into public discourse fundamental questions about what Scotland and its people are, could be and should be. Despite the perceived fundamentally destabilising nature of this 'situation', intriguingly, *support for independence was approximately 50% higher after the campaign* (see Henderson et al., 2022). Despite the eventual 45%–55% vote against independence, appetite for separation remains firm, pro-independence parties (SNP and Scottish Green Party) have performed strongly in every election following 2014, the SNP has remained in government since 2007 and long-term polling trends demonstrate that support for Yes is solid, and even that the gap between Yes and No is narrowing post-Brexit (What Scotland Thinks, 2023). These features, alongside the generational differences in support for independence, with younger voters more in favour, mean that a future poll on independence is being characterised as when not if. In sum, the issue of Scottish independence remains central to Scottish politics and while of clear import for Scotland, the path Scotland walks has major consequences for the UK, Europe and, through potential impacts on NATO,¹ beyond.

Analysis spans January 2013 to September 2014, focussing on Scottish Government publications and interventions of leading figures in the SNP, as the dominant force in the official Yes campaign. With anxiety management foundational to ontological security-seeking – where anxiety is understood as a nebulous affective state, a hazy unease at the potential destabilisation of core systems of meaning (see Browning and Joenniemi, 2017; Giddens, 1991) – four of Browning's (2018a: 338–340) anxiety

management ‘mechanisms’ (auto-biographical narratives, routines, vicarious identification and fear-based Othering) are deployed as an analytical framework to guide the discourse analysis. These, however, are buttressed by an explicit integration of Existentialist insights on the dual potential of anxiety as exciting, enticing and foundational to human freedom.²

Deploying this framework, and utilising the Yes campaign’s ‘two futures’ framing device to organise the empirical material, the analysis of central discourses grounding the argument for independence demonstrates the *simultaneous* deployment of anxiety management strategies that, at first glance, appear contradictory. Independence was framed as: a pathway to escape the instability and uncertainty of the status quo; as a pathway to continuity and stability; *and* as a chance to embrace anxiety, to relish the opportunity and excitement of change. Taken as a whole, ‘business as usual like never before’ is, arguably, an apt description of overarching independence discourses.

This article thus sharpens our understanding of ontological security-seeking in critical moments, with the potential for Existentialist-aligned approaches to anxiety helping to explain apparent confounding enthusiasm for rupture and uncertainty, and thus contributing to the prevailing critique of OSS’ previous over-privileging of stability and continuity in ontological security-seeking. Yet, in parallel, through the simultaneous emphasis on stability and certainty, the findings problematise ‘either/or’ approaches to understanding anxiety management and demonstrate that the packaging of major change (like secession), and the anxiety management that follows, is unfixed and, ultimately, what actors make of it. In addition, empirically, the article helps clarify the role of ontological (in)security and the strategies of anxiety management in the context of the 2014 pro-independence campaign.³ This article therefore provides a fresh understanding of the campaign dynamics, supporting better comprehension of contemporary and future Scottish independence politics, and thus Scottish–UK politics more broadly, while also being instructive for scholars focusing on sub-state actors globally, particularly those containing powerful secessionist movements/parties.

The remainder of the article proceeds in four sequential steps. The theoretical framework of ontological (in)security acts as the point of departure, with the methodology and analytical framework following. The main analysis proceeds next, before being bookended with a conclusion which teases out the main implications and contributions.

Theoretical framework: ontological (in)security

OSS has, in approximately two decades, had a profound impact on the discipline of International Relations (IR), providing novel insights into a plethora of enduring questions at the heart of the discipline (for brief summaries see Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017; for seminal statements, see Huysmans, 1998; Kinnvall, 2004; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). Predominantly through the work of Giddens (1991), who built upon the work of the terms’ originator, the psychologist R.D. Laing, IR scholars have demonstrated that, in addition to physical security of the body, actors – whether individuals, groups or states – also seek and require ontological security, that is, ‘security as being’. More precisely, ontological security captures security ‘of the self, the subjective sense of who one is,

which enables and motivates action and choice' (Mitzen, 2006: 344) and entails an 'ability to sustain a narrative and answer questions about doing, acting, and being' (Rumelili, 2015: 58).

At bedrock, the process of ontological security-seeking, or avoiding ontological insecurity and existential anxiety, depending on one's preference, is posited to principally rest on two interconnected phenomena: the maintenance of stable, consistent auto-biographical narratives and the routinisation of everyday practices. Major disruptions to auto-biographical narratives and everyday routines, therefore, have typically been viewed as undermining ontological security(-seeking; Berenskötter, 2020; Rumelili, 2020). 'Critical situations' are such major disruptions, that is, 'circumstances of radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind which affect substantial numbers of individuals, situations that threaten or destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines' (Giddens, 1984: 61). Critical situations thus elevate 'fundamental questions to the level of discursive consciousness' (Ejdus, 2018: 884) and 'are constructed into fundamental moments in time requiring a choice about response' (Croft, 2012: 223). Critical situations, therefore, are principally understood as troublesome for ontological security.

This conclusion chimes with broader, prevailing notions in the field of OSS that change and anxiety constitute a problem for ontological security, while stability and certainty constitute the opposite. Indeed, the literature thus far has overwhelmingly focused on examples where change and anxiety appear to invoke a desire for certainty to enhance ontological security (Berenskötter, 2020). However, these assumptions have been increasingly challenged through a deeper engagement with, first, how stability and change relate to ontological security, and second, the nature of anxiety as a concept, particularly through an engagement with Existentialist thought.

Starting with stability and change, the core insight is banal, yet vital: change is natural, constant and thus unavoidable. As such, 'at its core, ontological security also requires flexibility and adaptability' (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017: 44) alongside 'openness and the ability to cope with change' (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017: 32; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020). In other words, far from inevitably reducing perceptions of ontological security, it is how change is conceptualised, engaged and addressed that is pertinent: change is what actors make of it.

The possibility for multifinality with regard to change is also instructive for engaging the concept of anxiety and its role in ontological (in)security processes. Here, the distinction between fear and anxiety is pertinent. For Giddens (1991: 43), 'Fear is a response to a specific threat and therefore has a definite object'. Anxiety, in contrast, is a 'generalised state of emotions of the individual', thus absent a specific object and centring instead on 'perceived threats to the integrity of the security system of the individual' (Giddens, 1991: 44–45). Understood as an unease 'that one's established systems of meaning [core to security of the self] might be destabilized' anxiety may evoke 'considerable feelings of disorientation' (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017: 38). However, as Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020: 241) state,

[u]nlike fear, which resolves in the two 'security' behaviors of fight or flight, anxiety is characterized by multifinality, admitting to a range of emotions [beyond disorientation and other negative affective states], including excitement and anticipation, and a variety of

behaviors, from compulsive repetition, to acting out, to paralysis, to entrepreneurship. (see also Rumelili, 2020)

The potential for anxiety to also be associated with positive, welcome emotions is particularly evident in Existentialist thought, of which ontological security scholarship has increasingly engaged productively through excavations of the existential foundations of ontological security embedded in Laing but absent in Giddens (see Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 2020; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020). Kierkegaard (1980 [1844]), for example, conceives anxiety poetically, as ‘freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility’. More plainly, anxiety is the awareness of our capacity to choose and thus an awareness of the ‘infinite of possibilities open to human beings’ (Berenskötter, 2020: 227). In this reading, anxiety, far from connoting a problem, is inextricably tied to freedom. That said – and of import for this article – there is a recognition that this freedom and the awareness of the possibility of possibilities can become overwhelming or ‘dizzying’. Heidegger (1996) is even more forthright: unreflexively bracketing out anxiety, rigidly clinging to and ‘plodding along’ (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017: 43–44) with routines, is designated an ‘inauthentic’ and suboptimal form of being. For Heidegger, meaningful, fulfilling, ‘authentic’ life, on the other hand, is dependent on inviting anxiety in, reflexively negotiating one’s biographies and routines and engaging fundamental questions about the good life and how one gets there (see also Inwood, 2000).⁴ Thus anxiety, and realisation of the possibility of possibility in which it arises, need not be conceived of as a problem a priori, and indeed can instead be perceived as a fundamental part of one’s humanity, fundamental to meaningful, resolute existence.

Like change then, anxiety, as part of the human condition, cannot be conquered or avoided, only managed (Krickel-Choi, 2022). As a result, there can be ‘no perfect state of ontological security – anxiety always threatens to break through’, meaning that rather than a ‘security of being’, a quality individuals can have, ontological security is better conceived of as a ‘security of becoming’ (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020: 246). It follows then, that not all engagement of anxiety is the same. As such, anxiety management can be utilised in the pursuit of conservative and authoritarian politics or progressive, even radical politics (Rumelili, 2020; see Berenskötter, 2020; Rossdale, 2015; Solomon, 2018). Thus, there is the potential for ‘[d]ifferently constituted narratives and routines to bracket anxiety in different ways – some might rigidly hold other ideas out of mind while others might more readily allow for managing uncertainty, novelty, and the unexpected’ (Mitzen, 2018: 397). What is underexplored, and that this article unpacks, is that, as approaches to anxiety management are not pre-determined or fixed, these two processes may also overlap and play out simultaneously.

In sum, these insights help shift OSS beyond its previous over-privileging of stability and, crucially, enable the lens of ontological (in)security to be utilised novel ways. In addition, it suggests that ‘either/or’ approaches to anxiety management are inadequate, with the potential for both ‘negative’ (rigidly clinging to routines and identities, etc.) and ‘positive’ (reflexively embracing change, etc.) strategies to percolate simultaneously.⁵ It is to the framework to investigate this potential, that the next section turns.

Methodology and analytical framework

Grounding the case

The few studies exploring separatism through the lens of ontological security demonstrate complex ontological (in)security dynamics within ‘parent’ and secessionist states (e.g. Ejodus, 2018; Grzybowski, 2022). However, national secessionist movements are rarely found in mature democracies in which there is ‘no manifest oppression’ (Keating and McEwan, 2017: 1). While a handful of these cases exist (e.g. Scotland, Catalonia, Quebec, Flanders), the Scottish referendum is ‘most unusual’ (Keating and McEwan, 2017). Formal independence referendums have been held in Quebec (1980, 1995), yet absent full clarity on the status and recognition of a ‘Yes’ vote by the Canadian Federal Government, while Catalanian ‘referendums’ have been held (2014, 2017) lacking recognition by the Spanish state (Henderson et al., 2022). Thus, the Scottish case ‘stands out as a unique case of an agreed referendum on an agreed question and long period of intensive debate’ (Keating and McEwan, 2017: 1).

Having existed for centuries as two independent kingdoms – despite the Union of the Crowns in 1603 bringing both countries under the rule of one royal family – in 1707, and for myriad contested reasons (Whatley, 2014), the Scottish parliament voted itself out of existence and a new parliament of the United Kingdom of England and Scotland was formed. While metrics of success are always arguable, following Union, centuries of war, conflict and deeply adversarial identity formations were largely dissolved, with peace between the two countries reigning for over 250 years. Yet, despite the 1707 Act of Union abolishing the Scottish parliament, it ‘left intact much of Scottish civil society, including the famous trinity of law, education, and church’ (Keating and McEwan, 2017: 5). Scotland thus maintained a distinct identity and structures for identity (re)production, including through participation, *as Scottish*, in the endeavours of the Union. Scottish identity within the context of its closest neighbour is thus complex. While competition and differentiation with England often form a key plank (McCrone, 2001), Scottishness and Britishness have in modern and late-modern history been predominantly viewed and lived as highly compatible (Devine, 2012; Whatley, 2014). For most of the last few centuries, Scottish identity was not grounded in opposition to UK membership and British Empire – rather the outsized contribution of Scots to the success of each body was a core element of Scottish identity (Devine, 2012).

However, there has been significant change over the course of the latter half of the 20th century. Scottish *political* nationalism, although existing prior, principally emerged as a major force in the 1960s (Jackson, 2020). Despite a 1979 referendum on devolution failing, it succeeded following a second referendum held in 1997, where after a near 300-year hiatus, the Scottish Parliament was reinstated.⁶ This process of devolution solidified and intensified a distinct Scottish politics, creating a platform for a growth in public support for Scottish independence, culminating in the 2014 referendum. The holding of this referendum relied on the SNP achieving an overall majority (69/129 seats) in the 2011 Scottish Elections. This result – and the resultant referendum – was highly unexpected, as the Scottish electoral system was designed to prevent parliamentary majorities. Crucially, despite SNP electoral success, support for their core policy, independence,

remained a minority position, with approximately 30% supporting secession in 2011 (Wells, 2011), a proportion that held constant until the final few weeks of the campaign, with some No-to-Yes switching alongside the more significant moves of ‘undecideds’ to Yes (Henderson et al., 2022; Liñeira et al., 2017).

Nuts and bolts

With the Edinburgh Agreement between the UK and Scottish governments on the legal permission and logistics of holding the referendum reached in October 2012, the analytical period spans January 2013, the year in which the campaign began in earnest, and September 2014, the month the vote was held. This article focuses predominantly on the official ‘Yes’ campaign, the umbrella organisation in support of independence. The SNP (at the time in majority government), was by far the largest component and dominated the campaign, in many ways symbolising ‘Yes’ (Thiec, 2015).⁷ Scottish Government publications and speeches by the then First Minister, Alex Salmond, and then Deputy First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, are utilised. These were accrued via Scottish Government online archives. Archival searches spanned January 2013–September 2014, using the keywords ‘independence/independent’, alongside targeted searches for influential documents/speeches cited and/or recommended in documents found through the initial search process and in secondary literature detailing the campaign. In total, 23 documents and 16 speeches were utilised. While this body of material is not exhaustive, as strategic agenda-setting documents, they contain the guiding, dominant frames for the central campaign.

Analytical framework

The focus of this article is on the mainstream Yes campaign, represented via the Scottish Government and key elites, and their engagement with modes of anxiety management. Importantly, due to the interconnected nature of individuals and the societal structures in which they are embedded, rather than solely aiming ‘to secure the coherence of the *self*’, actors also seek ‘coherence and stability of their broader social context’ (Pratt, 2017: 81; see also Browning, 2018a). To guide the analysis, I draw upon Browning (2018a: 338–340; see also Browning, 2018b), who, in exploring the impact of Brexit as a critical event, distils key insights from empirical studies of ontological security-seeking from across the field and offers six ‘mechanisms’ of anxiety (or ontological (in)security) management. Four ‘mechanisms’ are of import in this case.⁸

In brief, the first regards the generation of a stable, consistent self-identity narrative ‘that locates the self in a particular time and place and in regard to other significant identities and actors’ and provides ‘a cognitive framework through which everyday events, interactions and relationships can be comprehended, ordered and processed’, as ‘fractured, unclear or inconsistent biographical narratives may foster anxiety’ (Browning, 2018a: 339). Self-identity narratives thus ‘provide us with a necessary sense of orientation about *where* we come from and *where* we are, or could be, going’ (Berenskoetter, 2014: 269). Thus, and significant for this article, a key element of the narrative is *future-facing*. The second mechanism of anxiety management is simply the routinisation of everyday practices. The third regards vicarious identification with broader communities,

‘living through’ and internalising ‘the experiences and achievements of others as if they happened to oneself’ (Browning, 2018a: 339; see also Rosher, 2022). Pertinent here, at the level of the nation, this process can enhance self-esteem and generate a connection to events before birth and after death (Browning, 2018a). The fourth mechanism is to displace anxieties onto ‘tangible objects of fear that can be prepared for or countered in some way’, often entailing ‘sanctifying essentialised claims about self-identity’ while securitising enemy Others (Browning, 2018a: 339). While disentangling these mechanisms is helpful analytically, interconnection is rife. In addition to the four mechanisms, integration of Existentialist insights outlined above on the positively valenced potential of anxiety is utilised.

For clarity, although speaking of anxiety management strategies, I agree that this terminology can conjure a fanciful sense of ontological security-seeking being essentially rationally calculated and strategic, despite most anxiety management occurring reflexively and sub/un-consciously (Browning, 2018b: 348; Mitzen, 2018). That said, it is recognised that strategic engagement may be found in certain instances, for example, ‘states seeking to provide a clear narrative to their citizens about the nature of the situation the country finds itself in’ (Browning, 2018b: 348). With the Yes campaign seeking to convince an electoral majority to create a significant rupture, seceding from the UK and thus catalysing substantial change, analytically, anxiety management strategies are approached in this article as a strategic practice, regardless of whether actors are consciously aware of their function or not.

Discourse analysis, guided by the four-fold analytical framework, is conducted on the empirical material. Space dictates that a comprehensive account is not possible. Instead, in the following section, illustrative examples are selected to capture prevailing trends and themes central to the overarching puzzle.

‘Yearning for certainty with a penchant for curiosity?’ Anxiety management and ontological (in)security during the 2014 Scottish independence campaign

With Browning’s mechanisms, buttressed by Existentialist insights into anxiety, informing the analysis, the subsequent findings are organised below along a broad two-fold structure, mirroring the ‘two futures’ image that underpinned Scottish Government discourses and the wider Yes campaign. One future, where independence fails, here labelled ‘why we need a new approach’, and another where it succeeds, designated ‘what we can create’. Although the focus is on Yes, campaigns are inevitably crafted in dialogue with an opposition. While a full excavation of the ‘No’ side, Better Together (BT), is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that the BT campaign was predominantly negative, a perspective shared by voters on both sides (Henderson et al., 2022: 36–37). Self-described by BT’s Director of Communications as ‘project fear’, the campaign concentrated on the risks and unknowability of what a future with independence would entail, rather than innate benefits of continued Union (Keating and McEwan, 2017). It is therefore in this context that the ‘two futures’ were articulated by the Yes campaign.

Why we need a new approach

'Why we need a new approach' is a central launch-pad for discourses promoting independence, and indeed forms a recurring sub-heading in the Scottish Government's white paper, *Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland*, the defining document on the case for Scottish independence, with each thematic chapter departing from this phrase. This strand of discourse, and reversing core messages of BT, was concerned with framing the status quo negatively and the consequences of a 'No' vote being grim, continuing and exacerbating an unsatisfactory socio-political arrangement that undermines and is incompatible with Scottish identity and preferences for governing daily life. Three interlinked themes were key.

The first is the 'democratic deficit' theme, where the dominant non-Scottish votes in UK elections have resulted in Scotland being 'ruled by Westminster governments with no majority in Scotland' for '34 of the 68 years since 1945' (Scottish Government, 2013c: 41). Implicit is that all these governments without Scottish majorities have been Conservative; a potent move in a context where the former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Conservative governments more broadly are 'abjected' (Ejdus, 2021) from the Scottish 'self' and play a key role as an enemy 'Other' in Scottish identity formations (Leith and Soule, 2011: 24). Following Browning (2018a: 339), as a 'tangible object of fear', Thatcherism, and Conservative Party rule more broadly, not only supports moves to sanctify an essentialised Scottish identity in exclusionary terms as 'not Tory' (despite approximately 15%–25% of Scottish voters supporting Conservatives in elections since devolution), but enabled independence to be framed as *the* way to effectively counter this threat (see Browning, 2018a: 339).

The second theme presents the socio-economic status quo as unstable and unjust. Growing inequality, increasing child poverty and privatisation of major services (often centring on the National Health Service (NHS)) are core pillars. This is tied to regressive tax and spend programmes, principally Conservative austerity packages launched in 2010, with the 'unjust' 'bedroom tax', which was particularly burdensome for those with disabilities, being used as the emblematic example (e.g. Salmond, 2013a; Scottish Government, 2013c) and forming a key symbolic role during the campaign to associate 'No' with (cruel) Conservative party politics (McEwan, 2017: 88–89).

The above two themes are interwoven with the third: that Scottish economic and public interests are under-prioritised and poorly served by the current 'dysfunctional' (Salmond, 2013b) political system, which favours London and the south-east of England, and only allows the Scottish Government to use its limited devolved powers to 'mitigate some of the worst excesses of Westminster incompetence and unfair policy' (Salmond, 2013a; see Scottish Government, 2013c). Relations with the European Union offer a typical example. A key attack line of opponents was to frame independence as jeopardising EU membership, arguing that Scotland would have to reapply to join the European Union as a new member, and that this would either be unsuccessful at worst, or lengthy at best, with myriad undesirable conditions attached. In response, a counter-securitising move (see Paterson and Karyotis, 2022) was made by the Yes campaign, where a potential referendum on exiting the European Union due to 'a rising influence' of 'Europhobia' at Westminster was re-positioned as 'the real threat to Scotland's place in Europe' (Salmond, 2014c).

Overall then, rejecting independence and securing the ‘status quo’ are not presented as a pathway to continuity, stability and ontological security. Rather, contrary to prevailing understandings of ontological security in critical situations, *maintaining* current political and economic routines is framed as unstable and to be feared. In other words, no change to the political system is presented as certainty of uncertainty and the jeopardising of core national and individual identities (e.g. being democratic, being a just society, being European) and their intertwined routines: something which, aligning with classic approaches to ontological security-seeking, is to be avoided.

What we can create

Turning to the second ‘future’, centring on what Scotland will/can look like should independence proceed, three themes were key: ‘assurances of broad continuity’, ‘assurances of better decision-making and outcomes’ and presenting ‘change as positive’. Each is addressed in turn.

Assurances of broad continuity. The ‘assurances of broad continuity’ theme was principally underpinned by the ‘six unions’ discourse, which was integral to the Scottish Government’s framing of the referendum. In short, Scotland was presented as belonging to six unions, with the independence vote impacting just one, the political Union of 1707 – portrayed as broken, as outlined above – with the five others being maintained: the Defence Union through NATO, the European Union, the Currency Union (Scotland would continue to use the pound, entering a currency union with the remaining UK), the Union of the Crowns of 1603 (thus maintaining the Queen as head of state) and the Social Union (the bonds of family, friendship and culture between the people of the British Isles; see Salmond, 2013b).

Assurances of broad continuity were built upon appeals to ‘common sense’ and expert authority, that campaign bluster pouring cold water on ‘X’, such as membership of the European Union or a currency union being established, would give way to interest-based decision-making (see Sturgeon, 2014a). While some of the framing emphasised negotiation and bilateralism, others centred assertive unilateralism:

‘WE’LL KEEP THE POUND. An independent Scotland will keep the pound. After all, it’s as much Scotland’s currency as it is the rest of the UK’s. Our proposal is for a formal currency union with the rest of the UK. This makes sense for the Scottish and UK economies. (Scottish Government, 2014)

Assurances on the currency union were particularly important, as it becomes a defining issue of the campaign and the centrepiece of BT’s ‘project fear’, with several leading figures, including the then UK Chancellor George Osborne, explicitly ruling out a currency agreement (Keating and McEwan, 2017: 21; Swan and Petersohn, 2017). Intriguingly, views on a potential currency agreement constitute one of the rare specific issues in which public opinion analyses have shown attitudes actually shifted during the campaign. But, somewhat counterintuitively based on the interventions from BT, voter certainty that there would be an agreement had *increased* by the end of the campaign

from 33% to 40% (Líñeira et al., 2017), hinting that the impact of discourses is far from straightforward.¹⁰

Beyond this ‘big picture’ continuity, there were commonplace assurances that routines of everyday life, so critical to ontological security-seeking, would remain stable, and that many familiar services, both major (like the NHS, the pension system) and minor (e.g. bank notes or the Driving and Vehicle Licencing Authority), would continue as normal (Scottish Government, 2013c).

Finally, discourses on the Social Union, in particular, addressed issues of identity head on. As noted by Keating and McEwan (2017: 18),

[i]dentity appeals in the Scottish campaign did not . . . take the form of a stark division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as in some other cases . . . [instead] much attention was focused on social and economic policy and the likely effects on each constitutional option.

Despite the lack of sharply adversarial identity politics/ethnic nationalism and the dominance of utilitarian-materialist arguments, the ontological security lens helps guard against a downplaying of the paramount role of identity in the campaign, with status quo identities and everyday routines at the centre of citizens’ auto-biographical narratives being brought explicitly into debate, beyond the unthinking realm:

The social union unites all of the people of these islands. We are bound to the other nations of these islands by ties of history, culture and language; of trade, family and friendship. Those ties have endured for at least 1500 years . . . They do not depend on any Government. After independence they will continue and they will flourish. People will still change jobs and move from Dundee to Dublin, or from Manchester to Glasgow. We will still watch the X-Factor or Eastenders. People in England will still cheer Andy Murray, and people in Scotland will still support the Lions at rugby. (Salmond, 2013c)

Here the vicarious identification with historic inhabitants of the British Isles, juxtaposed with highly contemporary routines of the everyday, conveys a profound and sturdy continuity.

In sum, and somewhat contradicting the vision of the first ‘future’ where independence fails, the ‘assurances of broad continuity’ theme aimed to downplay the extent of changes induced through independence and, in keeping with traditional approaches to ontological security-seeking, concurrently downplays potential challenges to core auto-biographical narratives and routines. In a context where ‘it was routine for newspaper headlines to ask whether an independent Scotland could or would “survive”’ (Henderson et al., 2022: 93), this move is not insubstantial and underlines the extent to which the prospect of radical disjuncture and upheaval was elevated into societal consciousness.

Assurances of better decision-making and outcomes. The second strand of the ‘what we can create’ future centred on life getting better, with assurances of better decision-making and outcomes following independence. This rested upon two interlinked discourses, which are, naturally, tied to the above discourses in the first ‘future’ regarding the status quo as negative and Scottish interests being under-prioritised. The first centres on Scotland’s assets, with Scotland’s economic performance and potential (regarding wealth,

resources, human talent, etc.) repeatedly emphasised. These material-based arguments are combined with reassuring identity frames, ripe with invitations for vicarious identification:

Scotland is an ancient nation, renowned for the ingenuity and creativity of our people, the breathtaking beauty of our land and the brilliance of our scholars. Our national story has been shaped down the generations by values of compassion, equality, an unrivalled commitment to the empowerment of education, and a passion and curiosity for invention that has helped to shape the world around us. Scots have been at the forefront of the great moral, political and economic debates of our times as humanity has searched for progress in the modern age. It is in that spirit of progress that you will be asked on 18 September 2014, ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’ (Scottish Government, 2013c: 8)

These frames thus shift the discussion (deliberately – see Salmond, 2014a) not from whether Scotland *can* be successful if independent but whether it *should* be independent.

The second discourse moves beyond the conditions for better decision-making and outcomes, to the mechanism. Simply, the people who live and work in Scotland are argued to have the biggest stake in its success and thus decisions will likely improve:

With independence, the big choices that affect our lives will be taken by the people who care most about Scotland – those of us who live, work, run businesses and raise families here. We won’t get every decision right . . . But no-one else will do a better job of running our country than people in Scotland – because no-one else has a bigger stake in its success. (Scottish Government, 2014)

As in the example above, there is generally some form of a caveat that there is no universal protection against failures. Yet, there is a clear assurance that, on balance, decisions and outcomes will be much better, with the democratic deficit eradicated and policies and structures tailored precisely to Scotland’s needs, interests and values. Thus, while change is key to the ‘assurances of better decision-making and outcomes’ theme, it is not associated with anxiety and uncertainty regarding ‘*where* we come from and *where* we are, or could be, going’ (Berenskoetter, 2014: 269). Instead, independence-generated changes are framed as desirable, as a pathway to the greatest stability and as congruent with supporting core identities, once again aligning with classic understandings of ontological security-seeking.

Change as positive. In contrast to the so-called ‘project fear’ of BT, the Yes campaign strategy and indeed the wider Yes movement were to a much greater extent, despite the clear emphasis placed upon risks attached to the status quo, founded upon positivity (Macwhirter, 2014). In this context, the third and final theme centres on a discourse of ‘change as positive’.

Resting on the capacity and positivity of ‘choice’, this is inevitably interwoven with discourses criticising the status quo and assurance of better decision-making and outcomes. The repeated themes and precise subheadings throughout *Scotland’s Future* of ‘The choices open to us’, ‘The opportunities available to Scotland’ and ‘The Scotland we

can create' neatly capture the positive valence of 'change' in this context. Yet, there were supplementary, novel elements to this strand of discourse that are better captured through Existentialist insights.

First, and cutting against prevailing assurances of broad continuity that defined most of the campaign, the significance of the choice and of the stakes – including the potential impact and change to the core pillars of ontological security, identity and routine – are emphasised clearly: 'Independence isn't just about using policy levers in a slightly different way from Westminster. It is about a fundamentally different view of the sort of country Scotland should be' (Sturgeon, 2014b; see also Scottish Government, 2013b). In addition to the consequences of the choice itself bringing significant change, the act of political participation to secure independence, as a 'once in a lifetime chance', is given similar momentousness:

On referendum day, all of the people of Scotland, not just for the first time in 300 years but the first time ever, will be truly democratically sovereign. Everyone will have an equal say in making the decision. And there will be a moment for everyone in Scotland, on referendum day, when they stand in the polling booth and take the future of their country into their own hands. (Salmond, 2014b)

These frames emphasise the opportunity to make history, and, in doing so, vicariously connect the individual act of voting – with all its mundane, routine elements – with the history of Scotland's ancient past and shaping of its future.

Second, and dovetailing with the above, there was a clear emphasis placed on choosing, and gaining the responsibility to choose, as thrilling and desirable, as independence was said to 'bring exciting opportunities to debate and decide' (Sturgeon, 2014a) and more fundamentally to 'put the people of Scotland in charge of our own destiny' (Scottish Government, 2013c: xi). Thus, excitement at the 'possibility of possibility', in a Kierkegaardian sense, is clearly conveyed.

Beyond choice as exciting, embracing responsibility of choice and the question of living a good life – chiming with Heideggerian notions of 'authentic' life, courageously inviting anxiety in and reflexively engaging identities and routines – is also apparent:

[creating a constitution] will provide us with a chance to reflect on the democracy and society we want to live in, the values that we most cherish. (Salmond, 2013c)

With independence, we can build the kind of country we want to be . . . Our generation has the opportunity to stop imagining and wondering and start building the better Scotland we all know is possible. This is our country. This is Scotland's future. It is time to seize that future with both hands. (Scottish Government, 2013c: xi)

And although there are nods towards difficulties, they are to be equally embraced: 'As an independent nation Scotland will also have to respond to new challenges. [But] This is not something that should be feared' (Scottish Government, 2013a). Importantly, however, there are complimentary rhetorical devices that emphasise certainty, even within these discourses that are centred on the excitement and positivity of change, as independence is

‘to take Scotland’s future into Scotland’s hands. To have faith in ourselves and our abilities. To be in charge of our own destiny with *the security that being in control of our lives brings*’ (Salmond, 2014a, emphasis added). This perhaps connects with Kierkegaard’s (1980 [1844]) reflection on the profound awareness of the possibility of possibilities having the potential to become overwhelming or ‘dizzying’. That is, despite the potential for excitement and the necessity of anxiety and choice for freedom, when environments are in flux, human’s seeking threads of stability – or actors strategically communicating threads of stability – is perhaps to be expected.¹¹

Overall, despite certain caveats, central discourses in the independence campaign evidently frame the scale of change, the capacity for change and the historic responsibility and challenges of choice in way that aligns with Existentialist approaches to anxiety, challenging previous understandings of anxiety management in critical moments. Therefore, returning to our point of departure and the radically differing responses to the referendum, the capacity for anxiety to conjure welcome emotions and be embraced provides a partial explanation. Yet, these Existentialist-aligned discourses were entangled with others that reflected traditional understandings of ontological security-seeking, where stability and continuity are king. This problematises ‘either/or’ approaches to understanding anxiety management, both as a strategic communicative practice and as a lived experience. Moreover, as a major change (like secession) can seemingly be packaged simultaneously as either momentous or a path to certainty and solidity of routines and identities, this underlines that change, and the anxiety management thereof, is, ultimately, what actors make of it.¹²

Conclusion

With ontological security-seeking traditionally understood to rest upon the stability and continuity of core auto-biographical narratives and everyday routines, ‘critical situations’ which radically shake these foundations have subsequently been perceived as damaging to ontological security. Constitutional referenda that offer to fundamentally re-organise collective political identities and daily life are thus somewhat curious phenomena, particularly in the unusual context of an advanced stable democracy. Although a source of major consternation for many, for many others, and raising questions for prevailing understandings of ontological security, the opportunity is welcome, even thrilling. Focussing on the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and the strategies for anxiety management embedded in the mainstream pro-independence ‘Yes’ campaign, this article investigated this puzzling contrast, made all the more intriguing by support for independence increasing by 50% *after* the severity of the stakes was brought into sharp focus through the campaign (see Henderson et al., 2022).

Utilising established frameworks of anxiety management via Browning (2018a, 2018b) alongside Existentialist insights into anxiety to extract its potential role as a positive, enticing force, the analysis demonstrated the *simultaneous* deployment of anxiety management strategies that appear contradictory. First, independence was presented as a pathway to escape the instability and uncertainty of the status quo, where rupture, contrary to traditional understandings of critical situations in OSS, is framed – in alignment with classic approaches to ontological security-seeking – as the means for greater

stability of core identities and associated routines. Second, and somewhat cutting against the above, independence was framed as involving much continuity and stability of socio-political structures and everyday life, with any changes that would result being assured to be positive. Hence, in their downplaying, change, rupture and uncertainty are again engaged in a manner reflecting traditional understandings in OSS, as problematic for ontological security. Finally, and again in contradictory fashion, independence is framed congruent with Existential insights, as an opportunity to embrace anxiety, to relish the opportunity and responsibility of what are presented as significant choices, to revel in the excitement of and shaping of major changes to how Scotland is government and how daily life is experienced.

This article thus sharpens our understanding of ontological security-seeking in critical moments, helping us understand mass support for rupture and change and thus contributing to the prevailing critique of OSS' previous over-privileging of stability and continuity in ontological security-seeking. Yet, crucially, 'either/or' approaches to understanding anxiety management are equally problematised. Instead, as the Scottish case demonstrates, complexity and messiness reign, with simultaneous engagement of change and uncertainty as negative, worrisome and something to be resisted/avoided, as well as something positive, exciting and to be embraced/sought. How change is packaged, and the approach to anxiety management which follows therefore, are undetermined. Centring the potential for simultaneity has the potential to thus enrich empirical analyses of anxiety management and ontological security-seeking across issue and context. Even 'radical' politics can perhaps demonstrate a simultaneous penchant for certainty (the certainty of capacity for constant radical reimagining and experimentation, for instance – see Rosedale, 2015), while more 'conservative' political projects are likely not immune to a penchant for, albeit somewhat more controlled, curiosity and change.¹³

Finally, the article helps clarify the role of ontological (in)security and strategies of anxiety management in the context of the 2014 pro-independence campaign, providing a fresh understanding of campaign dynamics and a valuable lens to comprehend differing responses to, and framings of, prospective changes from independence. Beyond supporting a better comprehension of contemporary and future Scottish independence politics, and thus Scottish–UK politics more broadly, these insights are valuable for scholars focusing on sub-state nationalism and secession globally.

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Notes

1. Scotland hosts the UK's only nuclear submarine base, Faslane. The SNP and Scottish Greens are committed to unilateral nuclear disarmament and removing the weapons from an independent Scotland. The UK's capacity to find and fund another site in timely fashion remains unclear.
2. On the increased engagement with existentialism and anxiety in International Relations, see Rumelili (2021) and Hom and O'Driscoll (2023).
3. To the author's knowledge, to date, no study has explored the role of anxiety management and ontological (in)security as it links to campaigning strategies during the referendum. Instead, rare extant work has focused on ontological (in)security experiences at the individual level (e.g. Botterill et al., 2016).
4. On the normative concerns regarding Heidegger's philosophy and proposed implications of his views on authenticity/inauthenticity, see Hom (2023). Taking this critique seriously, I draw upon these ideas loosely to showcase the dual role of anxiety – what one 'creates' when embracing life 'authentically' can span the full ethical spectrum (Rumelili, 2020).
5. For clarity, 'positive' and 'negative' here do not connote normative categories of 'good' and 'bad' and merely describe the affective response to proposed change.
6. The Scotland Act 1998 transferred numerous powers (including housing, health, education, social services and law and order) from Westminster to the Scottish Parliament. Other core areas remain reserved, including social security, immigration, defence and foreign policy.
7. The official opposition was the cross-party 'Better Together' campaign, a coalition of the three largest UK-wide parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats). For detailed mapping of the two campaigns, see Keating and McEwan (2017).
8. Browning's other two mechanisms, avoidance of condemnation/shame and cultivation of place/relationships as home, are not central to the analysis.
9. This phrase is borrowed from Berenskötter (2020: 288).
10. While intricately exploring the impacts of key discourses is beyond the scope of this article, the complexity highlighted by this example suggests that survey analysis exploring the relationship between messaging and ontological (in)security offers a promising pathway for future research.
11. Indeed, across the electorate, core Yes arguments (such as, the democratic deficit being eliminated by independence (59%) that Scotland's problems will be better understood in Edinburgh than Westminster (69%) and, more Existentialist in tone, that 'Scotland should be free to shape its own role in the world' (58%)) convinced significantly more than key No arguments. The exception, however, was that of uncertainty, with 'too many answered questions about what an independent Scotland would look like' (57%) being widely convincing (Henderson et al., 2022: 35) and the dominant reason for voting 'No' (Liñeira et al., 2017: 182).
12. As part of a wider project, key discourses from prominent, albeit minority, 'radical' organisations (e.g. Radical Independence Campaign, Common Weal) in the Yes campaign were analysed. While a full account is beyond the scope of this article, mirroring the mainstream Yes campaign, framing of the status quo as unstable and unjust remains at bedrock, while Existentialist-aligned excitement at change and having responsibility for choice is also central. Yet, much of the continuity that is presented as comforting by the mainstream (the NATO Defence Union, the Currency Union, etc.) is presented in negative terms, and messages which assure better decision-making and outcomes are absent, with an acceptance that things could

deteriorate. Thus, the anxiety management approach to uncertainty and change from the radical organisations is more in tune with contributions from Rossdale (2015) and Solomon (2018), rather than the simultaneous (and contradictory) approaches to anxiety management espoused in the mainstream Yes discourses demonstrated here. The disparity between the 'mainstream' and 'radical' components of Yes is instructive for society-level analyses of ontological (in)security, with empirically driven disaggregation of 'society' into key segments supporting nuanced understandings.

13. Indeed, 2 days before the referendum vote, in response to opinion polling showing Yes in the ascendancy, the leaders of the UK Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats parties made the now infamous 'Vow'. Published front page of the Scottish tabloid the *Daily Record*, in the style of mock parchment and antiquated font, the Vow promised 'extensive new powers': 'People want to see change. A No vote will deliver faster, safer and better change than separation' (Cameron et al., 2014). While a full exploration of BT's engagement with anxiety management is beyond the scope of this article, the 'Vow' reinforces the idea that gratuitous stability and rigidly following routines can be unappetising.

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