

Context

This project investigates the evidence for long-term declines in the social significance of traditional identities (e.g. those based on social class, political partisanship, religion and the British nation), and whether these identities have been supplanted by newer identities based on education, age-groups, gender, or life-style. The possible decline of group identities has important policy implications. A declining sense of national identity has been linked to reduced support for the welfare state, reduced willingness to help fellow citizens, and reduced sense of civic duty, for example, while declining party identification has been linked to lower rates of turnout in elections.

Key Findings

- There is no 'crisis of British identity'. There is long-term decline in the proportion of people who think of themselves as British and in the strength of this identity, but the majority of Britons continue to have dual identities (e.g. feeling both British and Welsh or British and Scottish).
- Ethnic minorities demonstrate similar levels of attachment to Britain as their white peers. Just like the Scottish and Welsh, ethnic minorities typically have dual rather than exclusive identities. Young black Caribbeans express weaker senses of belonging.
- Most people continue to describe themselves as 'middle' or 'working' class. But class belonging now has little influence on attitudes and behaviour.
- There has been a major change in the gendered basis of class identity. Forty years ago women derived their class identity from their partner's occupational position. This pattern of 'male dominance' has largely disappeared.
- Class and religious identities continue to be inherited from parents. The inheritance of party identities (especially Labour) is considerably weaker than previously. Voters seem increasingly 'free to choose', with implications for turnout and electoral volatility.
- Religious identity is the identity that has declined most *and* the identity which is most consequential for social attitudes. We see big declines in the proportion of adults who belong to a church but also that church membership strongly impacts on social attitudes.
- Group belonging tends to be stronger for smaller groups (e.g. environmental and anti-war movements) than for larger groups (e.g. social class or the nation). Newer group identities may be smaller in membership but show higher levels of attachment.
- Highest levels of attachment are found in groups such as young people, graduates, feminists, ethnic minorities, and Scots. These now appear to be the most salient social identities in British society.

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Highlights of the Research

When exploring identity change over time, it is important to distinguish between the incidence of identities – the proportion of people willing to describe themselves in a particular way – and the strength of those identities – how strongly people feel attached to their group. We focused on changes in national, class, party and religious identities, and also investigated some ‘newer’ social identities.

National Identity

The sense of belonging to the ‘imagined community’ of one’s country can be an important source of national cohesion. Nationality can become a basis of mutual obligations and social solidarity: people may feel obligations to fellow nationals (e.g. to provide for them in their old age) not felt towards members of other nations. We traced trends in national identity in Wales and Scotland from the 1970s to 2006, and in England from 1992 to 2006, and trends in pride in Britain from 1980 to 2003. Overall:

- There was some shift in the late 20th century away from a British identity towards separate Scottish or English (and perhaps Welsh) identities.
- The great majority of the population continues to subscribe to one of the four national identities (English, Scottish, Welsh and British) and most have ‘dual’ identities.
- The great majority continue to feel either very or fairly proud of Britain and to feel very or fairly attached although there has been some decline over time.
- There is a small but growing minority who do not subscribe to any of the four national identities of Great Britain.

The main driver of a feeling of attachment to Britain is age, with younger people feeling less belonging. Much of the decline in pride and attachment seems generational in character, with younger generations who feel a lower sense of attachment



gradually replacing older generations. People socialized in earlier periods, e.g. World War Two, feel a stronger sense of identification whereas those socialized more recently, e.g. post EU, express weaker attachment.

Controlling for age, we found no evidence that Muslims or people of Pakistani heritage were less attached to Britain than other religions or ethnic groups. Ethnic minorities show clear evidence of ‘dual’ rather than ‘exclusive’ identities. They tend to feel a strong sense of belonging to their own ethnic groups, but this does not exclude a sense of dual identity as, say, Indian and British, analogous to the dual identities of British and Scottish or British and Welsh. ‘Exclusive’ ethnic minority identities are actually less common than exclusive Scottish or Welsh identities.

People born overseas in a non-Commonwealth country or recently arrived in Britain tend to have a weaker sense of belonging. Among young people, Black Caribbeans and Black Africans are less likely to feel very strongly that they belong and around 20% have a relatively weak sense of belonging. This may have more important policy implications than the current media focus on Muslim minorities. Among young people born in Britain, the lack of attachment of Black Caribbeans is especially marked, reaching one third or more. This applies to the second generation even more than to the first, migrant generation.

Class Identity

As we move from an industrial to a post-industrial society, traditional social identities are thought to decline in social significance. Ulrich Beck claims modern society is ‘individualised’. Individuals no longer belong to social communities with distinctive ‘life-worlds’ but are ‘condemned to choose’ their own life-worlds outside the bounds of any particular community or group. The modern labour market, in conjunction with the modern welfare state, replacing communal provision through family and neighbourhood, dissolves the social foundations of class society and the nuclear family. In Beck’s well-known aphorism ‘community is dissolved in the acid bath of competition’. We charted trends in class identity from 1963 to 2005 to test these ideas.

- There has been little change in the proportion of people volunteering a class identity – only around half the population even in the 1960s. But most of the remainder do accept a class label when prompted.
- The balance between identifying as middle class compared to working class has changed. In 1964 for every person calling themselves middle class, there were 2.4 who said they were working class. Now that ratio is just 1:1.25.
- The decline in working class identity almost certainly reflects the changes in the shape of the ‘objective’ class structure. Even so, whereas sociologists typically find manual jobs have now declined to much less than 50% of the labour force, the proportion who identify as working class is still much greater than 50%.

The main drivers of subjective class identity continue to be own occupation and father’s occupation. Father’s occupation is almost as influential as own occupation, explaining why many more people self-define as working class than actually have working class jobs. Contrary to some predictions, there has not been any major ‘de-coupling’ of class identity from own and parent occupations. But there has been

a major de-coupling of women's class identity from their partner's occupation. In the 1960s and 1970s women tended to identify with the social class corresponding to husband's/partner's occupation giving little weight to their own occupation. This has been transformed, by 2005 women gave more weight to their own occupation. In this sense Beck is quite right to talk about individualization.

For neither men nor women does social class seem to be an especially salient group identity. People who feel a sense of class belonging differ little in their attitudes and values from those with only a nominal sense of class identity or none at all. In this sense class identification does not appear to be a powerful source of solidarity and shared values. But we found that even in the 1960s class identity was not an especially powerful source of shared values either.

Party Identification

As with class identities, people were traditionally socialized into political partisanship through the family. Party identification was largely 'given', remaining rather constant. Psychological attachments to a political party perform important functions. Voters who identify with a party will tend to adopt the views of 'their' party, showing greater political participation, with a strong link between strength of identification and election turnout. Declining party identification may be one of the root causes of the recent decline in turnout and a source of greater volatility and instability in electoral behaviour. Our findings confirm patterns from previous research.

- There has been a substantial decline in the proportion volunteering a party identity. Those with no party identity increased from 7% in 1964 to 17% in 2005.
- Among those who do give a party identity, there is a particularly marked decline in the number who identify strongly, which has fallen to half its earlier level. The major shift is from strong to weak identification.



Party identities continue to be inherited from family of origin, at least to some extent. But the strength of the inheritance, especially from fathers, has declined. In the 1960s party identities were much more likely to be inherited from fathers, now both parents tend to be equally important.

Religious Identities

Long-term decline in church membership has occurred in Western European countries such as Britain. Faith in Britain may be a matter of 'believing without belonging'. People may not attend church in the same numbers but may still think of themselves as religious. We found:

- There has been a major decline over time in membership of a religion. The proportion with 'nominal or no religion' increases from around 25% in 1964 to two-thirds in 2005. Within the group who do belong to a religion, the proportion attending church regularly has been falling. In 1964, around 75% attended, in 2005 only around 50% attended.
- These results parallel those for the decline of party identity, with a shift from the 'stronger' category to the 'weaker' category and an increase in the numbers with no religious identity.

For those who do have a strong attachment, religious identity remains a powerful source of moral values and attitudes e.g. on abortion or pre-marital sex. Religion continues as an influential normative reference group, albeit for a much reduced number.

'Newer' Identities

Attachment to 'newer' identities such as animal rights (9%), vegetarianism (4%) or the anti-war movement (8%) remains relatively modest, although almost 25% reported an environmentalist identity and 22% a football team supporter identity. But these newer identities are associated with a stronger sense of attachment to the group. Whereas only around 40% of people who identify with a social class, political party, the Church of England or the British nation feel commonality with fellow group members, for the newer groups these figures reach 50% or more. The most striking finding is that groups such as 'young person', 'graduate', 'feminist', Scots and ethnic minorities have quite high levels of subjective membership and high levels of attachment to the group with around 60% feeling commonality with fellow members. It is these groups that perhaps represent the most salient social group identities in Britain today.

Implications for Policy and Theory

Our findings support some aspects of Beck's individualization thesis, particularly claims about the decline of class as a social community and individualization within the family. But our analysis brings out the need to distinguish between the incidence of an identity and the social significance of that identity. The incidence of class identity has not declined a great deal, but it appears to be no longer an especially significant predictor of attitudes. Conversely the incidence of religious identity has declined, but it remains highly significant for a minority. 'Community is dissolved in the acid bath of competition' may be a brilliant one-liner, but reality is more complex.

While some trends are in the direction Beck proposes, it is not entirely clear that his explanation is correct. We find no evidence to suggest that de-regulation and marketization have 'forced' individuals to choose their

own biographies. Some trends (e.g. individualization within the family) clearly predate the introduction of the Thatcherite de-regulation and marketization in the 1980s, while others (e.g. the decoupling of class and party identity) come later in the New Labour era with probably quite different causes.

Concerns have been expressed about the effects of declining traditional identities, especially British identity, for social cohesion and social responsibility. People may feel less communal responsibility, be less willing to engage in voluntary work, and more inclined to 'free ride'. Some of these concerns are exaggerated. As Lord Goldsmith concluded in his recent Citizenship Review on the basis of our research – 'there is no crisis of British identity'. While there has undoubtedly been some decline, the speed of change is glacial. Moreover, while a sense of belonging to Britain

is associated with measures of civic duty, the association is relatively weak. A modest decline in British identity is unlikely on its own to have major implications for social cohesion.

Similarly, the declining significance of class identity is unlikely to have major implications (except perhaps for patterns of voting behaviour) since our research indicates that its past significance has perhaps been exaggerated. But the decline of attachment to political parties may well have important implications for turnout and for electoral volatility. The rise of newer social groupings may possibly have some implications for protest politics and alternative forms of political participation. This chimes with ideas about the rise of 'critical citizens'. But as environmentalism demonstrates, it should not be assumed that critical citizens will lack a sense of social responsibility.

Background to the Study

The project included modules of questions on the British Social Attitudes Survey and the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey for 2005. The modules consisted partly of items replicated from earlier surveys

in order to allow us to analyse changes over time, but also included some new items to measure the incidence and role of contemporary identities. By replicating questions from earlier

surveys we are able to chart trends spanning forty years. Qualitative research was used to help develop the items to measure these new identities and to investigate the mechanisms linking identities and actions.

Publications Include

Heath, A. F. and Roberts, J. (2008) *British Identity: Its Sources and Possible Implications for Civic Attitudes and Behaviour*. Research Report for Lord Goldsmith's Citizenship Review. www.justice.gov.uk/docs/british-identity.pdf

Heath, A. F., Martin, J. and Elgenius, G. (2007) Who do we think we are? The decline of traditional social identities. In A. Park et al (eds.) *British Social Attitudes: The 23rd Report – Perspectives on a Changing Society*. London: Sage.

Tilley, J. and Heath, A. (2007) The decline of British national pride. *British Journal of Sociology*, 58, 661-678.

Andersen, R., Min Y. and Heath, A. F. (2006) Class politics and political context in Britain, 1964-97: Have voters become more individualized? *European Sociological Review*, 22, 215-228.

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