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Post-Brexit Britain: Identity, Polarisation and Democratic Resilience - An Interdisciplinary Analysis through Applied Psychology and Sociology

Psychological processes cannot adequately explain political behaviour without sociology, and sociology cannot adequately explain contemporary political change without psychology.

Keywords: Brexit; applied psychology; sociology; social identity; political polarisation; national identity; democratic resilience; social cohesion; political communication; Black British communities.

Author:

Husain Akhtar
Coordinator, Harrow Monitoring Group
Former Councillor, London Borough of Harrow
Former Inspector of Schools, Ofsted

[Contact](#)

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The paper is structured as follows:

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Abstract

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union represents a significant constitutional and sociopolitical transformation whose consequences extend beyond institutional change into questions of identity, belonging and social cohesion. While Brexit has been widely examined through economic, constitutional and legal perspectives, its psychological and sociological dimensions require further interdisciplinary analysis.

This paper examines how applied psychology and sociology contribute to understanding post-Brexit Britain by exploring the interaction between individual cognition, collective identity and wider social structures. Drawing upon social identity theory, political psychology, media sociology and research on democratic resilience, it argues that political polarisation, contested national identities and changing perceptions of belonging cannot be understood solely as individual attitudes or isolated political developments. Rather, they emerge through the interaction between psychological processes of identity formation, uncertainty management and social categorisation, and sociological processes involving institutions, inequalities, cultural narratives and political communication.

Particular attention is given to Brexit identity politics, affective polarisation, online political hostility, debates concerning migration and citizenship, exclusionary nationalist narratives, and the conditions required for sustaining social cohesion within a diverse democracy. The paper distinguishes between legitimate democratic disagreement, civic forms of national identity and exclusionary political movements, arguing that analytical precision is essential when examining contemporary political conflict.

The analysis concludes that democratic resilience depends not upon eliminating disagreement but upon strengthening the social and institutional conditions that allow disagreement to occur within a framework of mutual recognition, equality of citizenship and inclusive civic belonging.

Author's Note

This paper has emerged from sustained engagement with socio-political institutions, local communities, policy environments and civic practices, including through the work of Harrow Monitoring Group. These experiences have informed an interest in how political developments influence public discourse, perceptions of identity, belonging and community relations.

The observations informing this analysis are not presented as empirical findings in themselves. Rather, they provide a rationale for examining wider social developments through established theoretical frameworks in applied psychology and sociology. The purpose of this paper is therefore analytical: to explore how individual cognition, collective identity and structural conditions interact in shaping contemporary social and political behaviour in post-Brexit Britain.

Particular attention is given to social identity, political polarisation, national belonging, media influence, exclusionary narratives and the conditions required to sustain social cohesion within an increasingly diverse society.

I am grateful to Donovan Reuben, community activist and former social services practitioner in Brent, for sharing insights into how some members of Black British communities may experience tensions between formal citizenship and feelings of social acceptance. These perspectives have contributed to the broader consideration of belonging, identity and community integration explored within this paper.

Husain Akhtar

Coordinator

Harrow Monitoring Group

also, former Councillor, London Borough of Harrow, and former Inspector of Schools, Ofsted

Introduction

1. Applied psychology and sociology as complementary approaches

Applied psychology refers to the systematic application of psychological theory, empirical research and evidence-based methods to address practical human problems. It examines how perception, cognition, emotion, motivation, personality and decision-making influence behaviour across real-world contexts, including health, education, organisations, criminal justice and political life (Schultz & Schultz, 2016).

Unlike approaches concerned primarily with explaining psychological processes in controlled settings, applied psychology seeks to understand how individuals interpret experiences, respond to social environments and make decisions within complex circumstances. In political and social contexts, it provides insight into how people construct meaning, respond to uncertainty and develop attachments to social identities.

Sociology examines the organisation of society, including institutions, cultural systems, social relationships, inequalities and collective behaviour. Classical sociological perspectives emphasised that individual actions are shaped by wider social forces. Durkheim's concept of social facts highlighted the influence of collective structures upon individual behaviour, while Weber demonstrated the importance of understanding the meanings individuals attach to social action (Durkheim, 1982; Weber, 1978).

Contemporary sociology incorporates diverse perspectives, including structural, interactionist, feminist and critical approaches, to examine how institutions and social conditions influence opportunities, identities and patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Giddens & Sutton, 2021).

2. The interdisciplinary relationship

Although psychology and sociology have traditionally developed distinct analytical approaches, contemporary social research increasingly recognises that individual behaviour and social structures are mutually connected.

Psychological processes do not occur independently of social context. Perceptions of threat, belonging, fairness and identity are influenced by family, community, institutions, media environments and historical experience. Equally, social institutions operate through individuals whose beliefs, decisions and interactions reproduce or challenge existing social arrangements.

Consequently, complex political phenomena cannot be adequately explained through either individual psychology or social structure alone. Questions concerning populism, democratic participation, political polarisation and collective identity require analysis of both the psychological mechanisms through which individuals interpret events and the sociological conditions within which those interpretations develop (Jost, 2020).

This interdisciplinary perspective provides the analytical foundation for examining post-Brexit Britain.

Definitions and core conceptual frameworks

Social identity and collective belonging

3. Social Identity Theory

One of the most influential frameworks connecting psychology and sociology is Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The theory proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership of social groups, including nationality, ethnicity, religion, occupation and political affiliation.

Group identities provide individuals with belonging, meaning and psychological security. However, they may also create distinctions between groups perceived as belonging to “us” and those viewed as belonging to “them”. Under particular social conditions, these distinctions can influence attitudes, political preferences and perceptions of social difference.

Importantly, Social Identity Theory does not suggest that group identification inevitably produces prejudice or conflict. Shared identities can encourage solidarity, cooperation and collective action. The significance of the theory lies in explaining how identity becomes politically important when groups perceive uncertainty, threat or competition.

4. From social identity to political identity

The relevance of Social Identity Theory to post-Brexit Britain lies not simply in the existence of political disagreement, but in the transformation of political preference into social identity.

Following the 2016 referendum, the categories of “Leave” and “Remain” developed meanings that extended beyond a single constitutional decision. They became associated with broader questions concerning national identity, sovereignty, immigration, economic security, cultural values and perceptions of social change.

Political disagreement therefore became increasingly connected to personal identity. For some individuals, opposing political views were interpreted not merely as alternative policy preferences but as challenges to values, belonging and social recognition.

Sociology explains how these identities became embedded through political organisations, media narratives, geographical divisions and social networks. Psychology explains why such identities can become emotionally significant and resistant to compromise.

5. Political psychology, uncertainty and decision-making

Political decisions are rarely formed through purely rational evaluation of information. Applied psychology demonstrates that human judgement is influenced by cognitive shortcuts, emotional responses, prior beliefs and motivated reasoning (Kahneman, 2011; Kunda, 1990).

During periods of uncertainty, individuals may seek information that confirms existing beliefs while discounting contradictory evidence. These processes are normal aspects of human cognition rather than characteristics of any particular political group.

Their significance within democratic societies lies in understanding why political communication based upon identity, emotion or perceived threat may exert considerable influence, particularly when individuals experience uncertainty or reduced trust in institutions.

6. Structural conditions and political meaning

Psychological processes, however, do not develop in isolation. Political attitudes emerge within social environments shaped by economic conditions, regional inequalities, migration patterns, educational opportunities, institutional trust and cultural narratives.

For this reason, post-Brexit political behaviour cannot be reduced either to individual attitudes or to structural disadvantage alone. Individuals interpret social change through their personal experiences, while those experiences are themselves shaped by wider social conditions.

The interaction between psychological processes and sociological structures provides the basis for analysing Brexit, polarisation and changing forms of belonging in contemporary Britain.

Having established the conceptual relationship between applied psychology and sociology, the discussion now considers how these perspectives illuminate Britain's post-Brexit political transformation.

Brexit and political transformation

7. Brexit as a social and identity-based transformation

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union represented not only a constitutional change but also a significant moment of social and political reorganisation. Although Brexit debates frequently focused on sovereignty, trade and immigration policy, the referendum also became associated with deeper questions concerning national identity, social status and perceptions of belonging.

Research examining voting patterns indicates that Brexit preferences reflected multiple interacting factors, including educational attainment, age, geographical location, economic experience, occupational status, attitudes towards immigration and levels of political trust (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). These factors should not be interpreted as determining individual choices; rather, they shaped the social environments within which political attitudes developed.

Applied psychology helps explain how individuals interpreted these conditions. Perceptions of economic insecurity, cultural change or declining recognition may influence how people evaluate political alternatives. Sociology complements this by examining how such perceptions emerge within wider contexts of regional inequality, institutional change and competing narratives concerning Britain's place in the world.

Brexit therefore provides an important case study of the interaction between individual meaning-making and collective social transformation.

8. From political disagreement to affective polarisation

Political disagreement is a normal and necessary feature of democratic life. However, post-Brexit Britain illustrates how political differences can become increasingly connected to emotional responses towards opposing groups.

Affective polarisation refers not simply to disagreement over policies but to the development of negative feelings towards those perceived as belonging to an opposing political identity. When political categories become closely connected to personal values and social belonging, disagreement may be interpreted as evidence of moral difference rather than alternative judgement.

Applied psychology explains this process through mechanisms including social categorisation, identity protection and motivated reasoning. Individuals may defend political identities because those identities provide meaning, belonging and psychological security.

Sociology demonstrates that these processes are strengthened when political identities become embedded within wider social networks, geographical communities, media environments and institutional structures.

The significance of Brexit is therefore not only that citizens disagreed about a political decision, but that the referendum contributed to the formation of durable social identities around competing interpretations of Britain's future.

9. Polarisation, uncertainty and social trust

Periods of political and social uncertainty often increase the importance of collective identity. When individuals experience rapid social change, they may seek explanations that provide coherence, stability and a sense of belonging.

Research in political psychology suggests that uncertainty can increase the appeal of narratives offering clear distinctions between groups, particularly where such narratives identify sources of threat or responsibility (Jost, 2020; Stenner, 2005). However, the presence of uncertainty does not automatically lead to intolerance or exclusion. Individual responses vary according to personal experience, education, social networks and institutional confidence.

Sociologically, this variation highlights the importance of social context. Communities characterised by strong civic networks, meaningful participation and institutional trust are generally better positioned to manage disagreement and social change.

Consequently, polarisation should not be understood solely as a failure of individual reasoning. It reflects the interaction between psychological processes and the social environments in which political meanings are created and communicated.

10. Political identity and the changing meaning of belonging

The post-Brexit period has also intensified debates concerning who belongs within the national community and how belonging is defined.

National identity is not a fixed characteristic but a social construction shaped through history, institutions, education, political narratives and cultural practices (Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995). Different understandings of British identity may coexist, including civic, cultural and constitutional interpretations.

For some citizens, Brexit represented an assertion of national autonomy and democratic control. For others, it represented a narrowing of political identity and concern about the future of an open and diverse society.

An interdisciplinary approach recognises that these perspectives cannot be understood solely as rational policy preferences or solely as emotional reactions. They represent competing interpretations of social membership, political legitimacy and collective purpose.

This distinction is important because democratic societies must accommodate disagreement about national identity while maintaining equal citizenship and social inclusion.

Political communication, media ecology and online hostility

11. Political communication and the construction of meaning

Political communication plays a central role in shaping how citizens interpret social change. Political messages do not merely transmit information; they provide frameworks through which events are understood, evaluated and connected to broader questions of identity and belonging.

Applied psychology demonstrates that individuals do not process political information as detached observers. Judgements are influenced by prior beliefs, emotional responses, perceived threats and social identities. Issues framed around security, fairness, loss or collective identity often generate stronger responses than abstract policy arguments because they connect directly with personal values and group membership (Kahneman, 2011).

This does not mean that citizens are incapable of rational political judgement. Rather, it highlights that political reasoning involves both analytical evaluation and psychological processes through which individuals interpret the significance of events.

Sociology extends this analysis by examining how political meanings are produced within wider cultural and institutional contexts. Political actors, media organisations and social movements compete to define problems, identify causes and propose solutions. These competing narratives influence not only what citizens think about, but also how they understand the significance of political issues.

12. Media environments and the organisation of public debate

The contemporary media environment has transformed the relationship between political communication and public participation. Traditional media institutions, online news platforms and social media networks now operate alongside one another, creating a complex information environment.

Agenda-setting theory demonstrates that media organisations influence public debate by determining which issues receive sustained attention and how those issues are framed (McCombs, 2004). Media influence does not require direct persuasion; rather, repeated attention to particular themes can shape perceptions of which problems are considered socially important. By selecting certain issues for prominence and repeatedly presenting particular narratives, media systems can influence the interpretative environment within which citizens evaluate political and social developments.

Language itself also plays an important role in shaping political and social understanding. Terms such as “immigration”, “immigrant”, “revoking citizenship” and “deportation”, while referring to specific legal or social processes, may acquire broader symbolic meanings depending upon the narratives in which they are embedded. When repeatedly associated with themes of threat, insecurity, pressure on public services or cultural change, such terminology may influence how audiences interpret wider social issues and particular social groups. Conversely, when discussed through narratives of contribution, participation and social diversity, the same concepts may generate different associations concerning belonging and civic inclusion. From a sociological perspective, this illustrates how public discourse contributes to the construction of social meaning, while applied psychology examines how repeated framing influences perception, categorisation and attitudes towards social groups.

Digital communication has expanded democratic participation by allowing citizens, community organisations and political groups to engage directly in public discussion. However, these developments have also created new challenges. Personalised information environments may encourage selective exposure, where individuals increasingly encounter content consistent with existing beliefs.

Psychological research on confirmation bias demonstrates that people often seek and evaluate information in ways that reinforce prior assumptions (Nickerson, 1998). Sociologically, this contributes to the development of fragmented public spheres in which different groups may experience substantially different interpretations of social reality.

13. Online political hostility and the emotionalisation of debate

Social media platforms have altered not only the speed of political communication but also its emotional character. Online environments often reward content that generates strong reactions, increasing the visibility of messages expressed through anger, fear or moral condemnation.

Research on online political hostility demonstrates that abuse directed towards political figures may frequently intersect with broader debates concerning race, religion, gender and national identity. Such hostility should not be understood simply as individual disagreement; it can reflect wider social conflicts concerning belonging and representation.

Applied psychology helps explain how repeated exposure to identity-based messages may strengthen associations between individuals, groups and perceived threats. When political figures become symbolic representatives of broader social change, criticism may shift from policy evaluation towards identity-based judgement.

Sociology highlights how these processes are shaped by wider histories and structures, including debates concerning migration, multiculturalism, citizenship and institutional trust.

London case illustration: political accountability and symbolic targeting

14. Democratic criticism and identity-based contestation

London provides an illustrative example of the relationship between democratic accountability, political communication and symbolic representation.

As Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan has been subject to extensive criticism concerning policy areas including transport, housing, policing, environmental measures and local taxation. Such scrutiny represents an essential element of democratic governance and public accountability.

However, aspects of political commentary and online discourse have at times moved beyond policy criticism into broader identity-based narratives in which the individual politician becomes associated with wider debates concerning immigration, multiculturalism, religion and changing conceptions of British identity.

The analytical issue is therefore not whether criticism occurs, but how criticism is constructed and communicated. Democratic societies require robust debate, but they also require recognition of the difference between evaluating decisions and attributing collective characteristics or responsibility to wider communities.

15. Psychological and sociological dimensions of symbolic politics

From an applied psychological perspective, symbolic targeting occurs when individuals become associated with broader social categories or conflicts. Processes of social categorisation may encourage people to interpret political figures not only as individuals but as representatives of groups with which they are perceived to be connected.

Sociologically, this reflects the process through which public figures become symbolic sites of wider social struggles. Political disputes may therefore become vehicles through which deeper concerns about identity, social change and belonging are expressed.

This distinction is particularly important in diverse societies. Concerns about crime, migration, public services or political leadership can be legitimate subjects of democratic debate. However, when individual events are repeatedly interpreted through racial, religious or cultural assumptions, public discussion may move from accountability towards collective blame.

16. Responsible political communication and democratic resilience

The challenge for democratic societies is not to eliminate disagreement but to ensure that disagreement remains compatible with social trust and equal citizenship.

Responsible political communication requires that serious issues, including crime, migration and public safety, are addressed through evidence-based discussion rather than through narratives that intensify fear or hostility towards particular communities.

Political leaders, media organisations and digital platforms all contribute to the quality of democratic debate. Strengthening democratic resilience therefore requires not only institutional accountability but also communication practices that encourage accuracy, proportionality and recognition of shared civic membership.

National identity, conservatism and exclusionary nationalism

17. National identity and competing visions of belonging

National identity represents one of the most significant ways through which individuals understand collective membership. Sociology has long demonstrated that nations are not simply geographical or administrative entities but communities constructed through shared histories, institutions, cultural practices and political narratives (Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995).

National identities are therefore dynamic rather than fixed. They evolve through changing social experiences, demographic developments and political debate. In Britain, questions of national identity have historically involved competing understandings of citizenship, constitutional tradition, multiculturalism, sovereignty and international engagement.

Brexit intensified these debates by providing a powerful symbolic context in which different interpretations of British identity became more visible. For some, Brexit represented democratic renewal and greater national autonomy. For others, it represented a narrowing of identity and concern about the consequences for openness, cooperation and diversity.

An interdisciplinary approach recognises that these positions cannot be explained solely as rational calculations or emotional reactions. They reflect different understandings of history, belonging and the relationship between national community and social change.

18. Civic identity and inclusive belonging

A central distinction within debates concerning nationalism is the difference between civic forms of national identity and exclusionary definitions of membership.

Civic understandings of national identity generally emphasise shared political institutions, participation, legal equality and common democratic principles. Within such frameworks, individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds may participate equally as members of the national community.

This distinction is particularly important in contemporary Britain, where citizenship increasingly involves negotiating diversity within a shared constitutional framework. Social cohesion does not require cultural uniformity; rather, it depends upon whether individuals experience institutions and communities as recognising their equal status.

From a psychological perspective, inclusive civic identities may provide a broader basis for belonging because they allow individuals to maintain multiple identities simultaneously. People may identify with local communities, cultural traditions, religious groups and national institutions without these identities necessarily being viewed as competing.

Conservatism and democratic political traditions

19. Understanding conservatism in political debate

Conservatism requires careful analytical treatment because it represents a broad democratic tradition rather than a single ideological position.

Historically, conservative thought has emphasised continuity, social stability, institutional inheritance, constitutional government and gradual reform (Scruton, 2017). Many conservative traditions support democratic institutions, civic responsibility and social order while accepting political pluralism and equality before the law.

Consequently, support for conservative policies, concerns about the pace of social change or preferences for stronger national institutions should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of intolerance or extremism.

Academic analysis requires maintaining this distinction. Conflating democratic conservatism with exclusionary political movements risks reducing complex political traditions into simplistic categories and undermines objective examination of contemporary political change.

20. Conditions associated with exclusionary nationalism

While national identity and conservatism can exist within democratic frameworks, exclusionary nationalism represents a different political process. It develops when belonging is defined through restrictive criteria that distinguish legitimate members of the nation from those portrayed as outsiders.

Political research identifies exclusionary nationalist movements through features including restrictive definitions of membership, hostility towards pluralism, opposition to perceived cultural change and, in some cases, authoritarian approaches to political organisation (Mudde, 2019).

Such movements often present complex social problems through simplified narratives. Economic insecurity, demographic change or declining trust in institutions may be interpreted not as outcomes of multiple interacting factors but as consequences of particular groups or external influences.

Applied psychology helps explain why such narratives may become persuasive. Under conditions of uncertainty, individuals may be attracted to explanations that provide clarity, certainty and a strong sense of collective identity.

However, psychological vulnerability alone does not explain political mobilisation. Sociology demonstrates that these narratives gain influence within specific historical and social conditions, including economic restructuring, declining institutional trust and changes in patterns of community life.

Radical-right mobilisation

21. Psychological and social pathways to mobilisation

Radicalisation rarely results from a single cause. Research suggests that participation in extremist movements emerges through interactions between personal experiences, social networks, political narratives and perceptions of grievance (Horgan, 2014).

Individuals may become receptive to radical narratives where they experience uncertainty, social isolation, perceived loss of status or distrust in institutions. Movements offering clear explanations and strong collective identities can provide a sense of purpose and belonging.

However, similar social conditions do not produce identical outcomes. Many individuals experiencing economic insecurity or social change do not adopt extremist views. This highlights the importance of agency, education, social relationships and democratic institutions.

22. The political use of grievance narratives

A significant feature of radical-right mobilisation is the transformation of complex social concerns into simplified narratives of threat and restoration.

Such narratives frequently suggest that a previously valued social order has been lost and that recovery requires excluding or limiting the influence of particular groups. Immigration, multiculturalism, international institutions or minority communities may become symbolic explanations for wider frustrations.

The sociological importance of these narratives lies not only in their content but also in their ability to create social boundaries. They define who is considered part of the national community and who is positioned outside it.

Applied psychology contributes by examining how threat perception, identity protection and emotional communication influence responses to such messages.

23. Analytical distinction between crime, migration and identity politics

Contemporary debates concerning crime, migration and social change require particular analytical care. Serious offences, including sexual violence, child exploitation and organised

criminal activity, demand effective investigation, appropriate punishment and support for victims regardless of the identity of perpetrators.

However, democratic societies face a challenge when individual criminal acts are repeatedly presented as evidence of the character or intentions of entire ethnic, religious or migrant communities.

The distinction between addressing criminal behaviour and constructing collective blame is therefore essential. Evidence-based policymaking requires attention to individual responsibility while avoiding narratives that undermine trust between communities.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, this distinction reflects the broader relationship between psychology and sociology: perceptions of threat influence individual attitudes, while political and social structures determine how those perceptions are communicated and acted upon.

Identity, belonging and social cohesion

24. Belonging as a lived social experience

Debates concerning identity and citizenship cannot be understood solely through political categories or institutional definitions. Belonging is also an everyday social experience shaped by recognition, participation, relationships and perceptions of acceptance.

Sociology distinguishes between formal membership of a society and the lived experience of inclusion within that society. Citizenship may provide legal rights and responsibilities, but feelings of belonging are influenced by interactions with institutions, communities and wider cultural narratives.

For individuals from minority ethnic communities, questions of belonging may involve the relationship between formal citizenship and experiences of recognition. A person may possess full legal membership of a country while simultaneously encountering questions about whether they are perceived, by others or by institutions, as fully belonging.

This distinction is particularly relevant in diverse societies such as Britain, where national identity continues to evolve through migration, demographic change and changing understandings of citizenship.

25. Black British experiences, recognition and belonging

The experiences of Black British communities provide an important perspective on the relationship between citizenship, identity and social recognition.

Many members of Caribbean, African and other Black communities have contributed significantly to British economic, cultural and civic life. However, experiences of racism, unequal treatment and questions concerning representation have also shaped some communities' relationships with public institutions and wider society.

From a sociological perspective, these experiences can be examined through concepts including racialisation, institutional trust, social exclusion and unequal access to social resources. These concepts do not suggest that all members of minority communities share identical experiences; rather, they provide analytical tools for understanding how historical and institutional processes may influence patterns of belonging.

Applied psychology contributes by examining how recognition, exclusion and perceived injustice affect identity formation, psychological wellbeing and relationships with wider society.

The relationship between citizenship and belonging is therefore not only a legal question but also a psychological and social one.

Historical experiences of citizenship: the Windrush generation

26. The Windrush generation and the distinction between legal status and belonging

The experiences of the Windrush generation provide an important historical context for understanding citizenship and belonging in modern Britain.

Between 1948 and the early 1970s, many individuals from Caribbean countries migrated to the United Kingdom, contributing significantly to post-war reconstruction, public services and economic life. Many arrived as British subjects with legal rights connected to their status within the British Commonwealth.

However, the later Windrush scandal revealed how administrative failures and aspects of immigration policy created profound uncertainty for some long-term residents regarding their legal status, access to employment, housing, healthcare and public services (Williams, 2020).

The significance of Windrush extends beyond administrative failure. Sociologically, it demonstrates that legal citizenship does not automatically guarantee social recognition. The experience of belonging depends upon whether individuals feel acknowledged, respected and treated as legitimate members of the national community.

27. Psychological dimensions of institutional trust and belonging

Applied psychology provides further insight into the consequences of uncertainty and perceived injustice.

Experiences of being questioned, excluded or insufficiently recognised by institutions may influence individuals' sense of security, trust and relationship with wider society. Where people

perceive a gap between formal citizenship and lived experience, this may affect feelings of inclusion and collective belonging.

The Windrush experience therefore illustrates the importance of considering both structural and psychological dimensions when examining social cohesion.

A society may possess inclusive legal frameworks while still facing challenges concerning trust, representation and recognition. Conversely, strong community relationships and civic participation can strengthen belonging even where historical inequalities remain.

Community integration, social cohesion and sociocultural diversity

28. Social cohesion in diverse societies

The interaction between political mobilisation and community-level outcomes is particularly visible through patterns of social integration, intergroup contact and civic participation.

From a sociological perspective, community integration depends upon the strength of networks connecting individuals across ethnic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic boundaries. Social cohesion is not achieved through the absence of difference but through the ability of diverse groups to participate within shared institutions, neighbourhoods and civic spaces.

Research on social capital demonstrates that communities with strong networks of trust and cooperation are generally better able to manage diversity and disagreement (Putnam, 2000; Forrest & Kearns, 2001).

29. Social categorisation and perceptions of difference

Applied psychology contributes to understanding how individuals interpret social diversity.

Social categorisation is a normal feature of human cognition, allowing individuals to organise complex social environments. However, under conditions of uncertainty, perceived threat or political mobilisation, social categories may become more rigid and emotionally significant.

When political narratives repeatedly emphasise divisions between insiders and outsiders, ordinary social differences may become increasingly politicised. Cultural, religious or ethnic diversity may then be interpreted not simply as a normal feature of modern Britain but as a symbolic issue connected to security, identity and belonging.

This does not mean that diversity itself creates division. Rather, it demonstrates how interpretations of diversity are shaped by psychological processes and social narratives.

30. Strengthening social cohesion

The implications for community cohesion are therefore significant.

Social cohesion does not deteriorate simply because societies contain diversity or because citizens hold different political views. Rather, cohesion depends upon whether institutions, communities and political discourse support meaningful interaction, mutual recognition and shared participation.

Where exclusionary narratives become more prominent, there is a risk that “bridging” forms of social capital weaken while “bonding” occurs increasingly within socially homogeneous groups.

The result may be reduced willingness to engage across difference, increased social distance and a more fragmented experience of community life.

However, diversity should not be understood as a problem requiring reduction or exclusion. Evidence from multicultural societies indicates that successful integration depends upon equality of opportunity, inclusive institutions, civic participation and a shared commitment to democratic values (Heath & Demireva, 2014; Modood, 2022).

Quality of life, democratic resilience and the way forward

31. Quality of life beyond economic measurement

The consequences of political and social transformation extend beyond electoral outcomes or constitutional arrangements. Quality of life includes not only material conditions but also psychological wellbeing, social relationships, security, belonging and confidence in public institutions.

Applied psychology examines quality of life through concepts including subjective wellbeing, resilience, mental health and perceived life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2018). Sociology extends this understanding by considering employment security, housing, education, healthcare, social mobility, community participation and access to social resources.

This broader perspective is particularly important in post-Brexit Britain because political uncertainty has interacted with existing social inequalities. Economic indicators alone cannot fully explain how individuals experience social change. Two communities may experience similar economic conditions yet respond differently depending upon levels of trust, social connection and perceived recognition.

Consequently, understanding quality of life requires attention to both objective circumstances and subjective experiences of belonging and security.

32. Political uncertainty, trust and psychological wellbeing

Periods of prolonged uncertainty may influence psychological wellbeing by increasing perceptions of instability and reducing confidence in institutions.

Applied psychology demonstrates that uncertainty can become a significant source of stress because individuals attempt to anticipate future risks and evaluate their ability to cope with change (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Political uncertainty concerning economic conditions, migration, constitutional arrangements or social change may therefore influence public attitudes even where individuals experience no immediate personal disadvantage.

At a collective level, sustained political conflict may also affect social trust. When citizens increasingly perceive political opponents as threats rather than fellow members of a democratic community, opportunities for cooperation become reduced.

However, disagreement itself should not be regarded as harmful. Democratic societies require debate, criticism and competing viewpoints. The challenge lies in maintaining disagreement within a framework where political opponents remain recognised as legitimate participants in shared civic life.

Critical discussion

33. An interdisciplinary interpretation of post-Brexit Britain

The central argument of this paper is that post-Brexit social transformation cannot be adequately explained through a single disciplinary perspective.

Applied psychology contributes by explaining how individuals interpret uncertainty, construct identities, respond to perceived threats and develop attachments to political groups. Sociology contributes by demonstrating how these psychological processes are shaped by institutions, historical experiences, inequalities and cultural narratives.

Neither approach is sufficient alone.

A purely psychological explanation risks reducing political behaviour to individual attitudes while overlooking the social conditions that influence those attitudes. A purely sociological explanation risks underestimating the role of individual perception, emotion and decision-making.

The interaction between the two disciplines provides a more complete understanding of contemporary political change.

34. Beyond polarisation: the importance of responsible political communication

One of the principal challenges facing contemporary democracies concerns how serious social issues are discussed.

Issues such as sexual violence, child exploitation, organised crime, migration and public safety require serious institutional responses. Effective policing, appropriate legal processes and support for victims are essential regardless of the ethnicity, religion or nationality of those involved.

However, democratic societies face risks when individual incidents are repeatedly presented as evidence of the character or intentions of entire communities. The distinction between addressing criminal behaviour and constructing collective blame is therefore fundamental.

Responsible political communication does not require avoiding difficult conversations. Rather, it requires that public debate remains evidence-based, proportionate and consistent with principles of equality before the law.

Political leaders, media organisations and digital platforms have an important responsibility in ensuring that legitimate concerns are not transformed into narratives that weaken social trust.

35. Strengthening democratic resilience

The future resilience of British democracy will depend upon more than constitutional stability or economic recovery. It will require investment in the social and psychological foundations of democratic life.

Several priorities emerge from the interdisciplinary analysis developed in this paper:

First, strengthening institutional trust.

Public confidence depends upon institutions being experienced as fair, accountable and responsive. Trust is weakened when communities perceive exclusion, unequal treatment or lack of recognition.

Second, developing inclusive civic identity.

A diverse society requires forms of belonging that allow individuals to maintain cultural, religious and local identities while participating equally within shared democratic institutions.

Third, improving democratic communication.

Political debate should allow disagreement while resisting narratives that depend upon fear, misinformation or collective blame.

Fourth, supporting meaningful community participation.

Social cohesion develops through relationships and shared experiences. Local organisations, civic groups and community networks provide important spaces where individuals encounter difference through cooperation rather than political conflict.

Fifth, strengthening education and media literacy.

Citizens require the ability to evaluate information critically, understand competing perspectives and participate constructively in democratic discussion.

Conclusion

The interaction between applied psychology and sociology provides an essential framework for understanding the changing character of British society following Brexit.

Applied psychology explains the processes through which individuals construct political identities, interpret uncertainty and experience questions of belonging. Sociology demonstrates how these experiences are shaped by wider historical, institutional and cultural conditions that influence patterns of inclusion, inequality and collective behaviour.

Together, these disciplines reveal that communal polarisation, contested national identities, political mobilisation and changing perceptions of quality of life are interconnected aspects of broader social transformation rather than isolated political developments.

Post-Brexit Britain illustrates the continuous interaction between individual perceptions and collective structures. Political narratives influence identity, social conditions influence political attitudes, and institutional responses influence levels of trust and belonging.

The central challenge for contemporary Britain is therefore not the elimination of disagreement but the development of democratic conditions in which disagreement can occur without becoming permanent social division.

A resilient democracy requires the capacity to address legitimate concerns regarding crime, migration, identity and social change while maintaining equality of citizenship and respect for pluralism. Strengthening social trust, encouraging informed participation and creating inclusive forms of civic belonging are therefore essential to ensuring that diversity becomes a foundation for democratic strength rather than a source of enduring fragmentation.

The long-term health of British democracy will depend not simply upon resolving political disagreement, but upon sustaining the conditions in which disagreement can coexist with trust, equality of citizenship and a shared commitment to democratic pluralism.

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