

## **Divergence or Convergence: Social distance in contemporary lives**

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26<sup>th</sup> June 2015

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This paper is funded by the 'Is Britain Pulling Apart?' project, led by Prof. Paul S. Lambert, as part of the ESRC Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (SDAI) Phase 1.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, there have been several popular accounts of increasing social divides within the UK, with a growing gap between the elite and the masses (Peston 2008; Dorling 2011a; Hutton 2011; Jones 2011). Similarly, popular accounts of inequality have bemoaned the lack of social activity between policy-makers and the masses, viewing the absence of particular groups within their social networks as partially responsible for social policies which enhance, rather than tackle, social divides (Dorling 2011; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Putnam 2000).

Such accounts, however, are largely prepositioned upon evidence of growing social distance in outcomes, rather than actual declining levels of social interactions between disparate groupings. In this paper, we utilise large-scale secondary surveys to explore rates of social interaction between social groups to explore the presence of social divides. Thus, we explore whether contemporary Britain is truly pulling apart into two, or more, societies.

## **Social divisions in contemporary UK**

There are many popular accounts of the social distance between groups in the contemporary UK, with conflicting accounts of how that dichotomy is drawn, for instance, between the masses and bankers (Hutton 2011), social elites (Peston 2008; Jones 2014) or the working classes (Jones 2011; Tyler 2013; McKenzie 2015), or even between the north and south (Dorling 2011b). Such accounts often overstate the concept of homophily, that people generally like people who are alike them (McPherson et al., 2001), implying that social interactions are solely created within a particular social world. Dorling (2014; 35) argues that 99% of people who attended state schools have no friends from private schools in adulthood, seemingly based upon data of whom people's best friend is rather than the wealth of social ties individuals hold. Jones (2011; 74-76) describes the educational and employment history of David Cameron, arguing that he has probably never had a personal conversation with someone from a different background, ignoring instances of disadvantaged children attaining places at Oxford University or the many different occupations he worked alongside at Carlton Television. Accounts which claim to discuss social interaction distance often base this upon inequalities of outcomes rather than distribution of social ties (for example, Dorling 2011a; Jones 2011; Peston 2008).

Such debates often gain leverage as they reinforce arguments which sound both plausible and appealing to sociologists, that social divisions are becoming greater and, therefore, stronger policies are required. The literature on social connections in the UK often portrays interactions between different social groups, such as educational expansion (Blanden and Machin 2004) and social mobility (Friedman 2014; Friedman et al. 2015) showing a tendency for individuals to hold different positions to their own parents and siblings. Similarly, studies of social interaction by occupation are able to produce robust schemes of social advantage, albeit including many cases which demonstrate a large difference in occupational attainment within couples (Lambert and Bihagen 2014; Stewart et al. 1980; Bottero 2005). Indeed, the sound bite that the UK is 'sleepwalking into segregation' by

Commission for Racial Equity chief Sir Trevor Phillips (2005) still predominates over the diligent academic rebuttal of those ideas by Finney and Simpson (2008) and other research teams (Farley and Blackman 2014; Jivrar 2012).

The homophily principal has often been described as one of social science's most robust findings (Kossinets and Watts, 2009). Homophily describes the process where an individual has a shared characteristic with their friends (McPherson et al. 2001) and is observed across numerous aspects of our identity, include education level (Skopek et al., 2010), ethnicity (Mollica et al., 2003), religion (Sherkat, 2004) and occupational position (Kalmijn, 1991). This is often due to the concept of propinquity, or the opportunity for social ties to be constructed. If people form friendships during education, in the workplace, in voluntary organisations or through religious attendance, it is unsurprising that they share common characteristics. Similarly, people living in the same geographical parts of an urban area might be segregated according to socio-economic and socio-cultural norms (Dorling, 2011a) which place similar but unconnected individuals nearby. Indeed, the presence of homophily could be thought of as indicating whether particular characteristics are important rather than existing as a definition of how relationships are formed (Smith et al., 2014).

Individual identities are multi-faceted and, therefore, the relationship between forms of homophily should be considered. However, many studies of homophily explore a particular characteristic rather looking at the influence net of other forms of connection (i.e., Skopek et al., 2010; Mollica et al., 2003; Sherkat, 2004; Kalmijn, 1991). Thus, evidence of social closure around particular positions often struggle to differentiate between process of propinquity and processes of social closure. Skvoretz (2013) proposes a method for differentiating between attraction and repulsion modules, but applies this to single characteristics such as ethnicity, religion and educational attainment rather than comparing between groups. Brashears (2008) studied homophily across age, education, religion and gender, concluding that men have more diverse networks than women. Through understanding the effect of homophily net of that produced by other characteristics, the relative strength of each type of assortative mixing could be analysed.

Although the identification of homophily is ubiquitous, not all social ties are created in such a way. Social connections could be thought of as developing in two ways. Firstly, through happenchance meetings which lack social structure, such as happening to have been seated together on a train journey, be stranded at a taxi rank or accessing the only sports facilities in town. Secondly, connections can occur due to processes of social structure, such as holding a shared interest, attending the same event or being located in the same area. For these connections, we would anticipate identifiable forms of social structure to be observed, whilst for the first kind of introduction we would anticipate a lack of structure. Thus, there should be a layer of structure (homophilic ties) based upon a random layer of disorder (non-homophilic ties). Given that we would typically imagine the random layer to be evenly distributed, this means we would expect to observe the social structure stand out when analysing connections overall. This would be akin to placing an inch of snow in a car park and continuing to observe the number and type of vehicles parked. In

reality, many of the happenchance connections are themselves based upon forms of structure, for instance through similar people choosing similar activities or geographical settings.

Similarly, categories of network, or catnets (White 1992), can predict the likelihood of social connections being made. An example of this theory would be the likelihood of two random undergraduates at an institution knowing each other. We might suspect they are more likely to meet if on the same course, if living in the same halls or a member of the same student society. Similarly, we would expect them to be more likely to meet the more overlapping categories of network they hold (i.e., a student is more likely to know someone on their course if they are in their halls than knowing other colleagues). This concept could be applied to homophily, with a suggestion that the more forms of similarity people have the more likely they are to associate.

Many popular accounts of contemporary UK present social divides group individuals by socio-economic position and attribute a unified socio-political position to that grouping (Jones 2011; Dorling 2011a; Tyler 2013). Class dealignment theory argues that individuals are becoming less likely to vote according to their socio-economic position (Evans and Tilley, 2011), thus individuals are becoming more individualised within their identities. An often-cited argument is that as social differences increase between groups, policymakers become less likely to listen to the views of the less advantaged population (Putnam 1974; Dorling 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). However, the correlation between socio-economic and socio-political position is not necessarily strongly bound. Indeed, socio-political position could be thought of in two ways, encompassing the range of attitudes an individual holds and the range of attitudes they consume. Social connectivity between individuals can be increased if both share a common position due to the transitivity of homophily (Grannovetter 1973).

In this paper, we explore the relationship between social position, attitudes held and attitudes consumed to explore the scale of differences in the contemporary UK to explore whether a growing social divide exists. Hypothesis one is that Britain is, indeed, pulling apart, with high levels of structured connections which are increasing over time. This will be explored using log-linear methods which appropriate how much of the distribution of ties are randomly placed and the degree to which they are structured. Hypothesis two is that particular instances of shared identity are increasing over time, such as people more likely to be connected if they share multiple forms of homophily and an increase in socio-political and socio-economic identities.

## **Methods**

We have used data on heterosexual cohabiting couples from wave 3 (2010/11) of Understanding Society (UKHLS) (University of Essex et al. 2013) to ascertain patterns of homogamy within the UK. Couples have been selected as they offer analysis of perhaps the most bonded relationship many people hold. Individuals were coded into each of the three variables of study, the distributions of which are shown in table 1.

### *Education*

A three-level education variable controls for patterns based around attainment as a measure of social stratification.

### *Attitudes*

Political party supported is used as a measure of social attitudes. UKHLS codes were condensed into seven groupings, omitting Northern Irish respondents, combining Welsh and Scottish nationalist parties and combining the smaller right-wing parties. A composition category was created of people with no political preference or who supported an independent or non-mainstream party.

### *Consumption*

Preferred outlet of news consumption is used as a measure of attitudes broadcast to respondents. Individuals are coded by their main way of accessing news, which is grouped into seven newspaper categories, two internet categories (search engines or other websites), two types of commercial television and the BBC (whether online, television or radio). Newspapers were sometimes grouped if sharing similar profiles on other characteristics and had particularly small sample sizes, hence the Daily Star is merged with the Sun and the Financial Times with the Times. The Daily Record is merged with the Mirror, whereas other distinctive Scottish papers without an English counterpart are coded as 'regional papers'. Where individuals have named newspaper website as their main source, the newspaper is coded. This categorisation reflects the type of messages the respondents are consuming, rather than the medium through which they access that news.

Each individual was placed into an 'identity' which reflects each of these forms of personality. The most common identity for husbands was graduates voting Labour getting news from the BBC; for wives it was non-graduates with the same attitudes and consumption (due to sample sizes). Valid data on each variable was obtained for 10,510 couples. However, as many of the types of identity obtained were fairly small (i.e., Green voting Daily Express readers) we omitted any which contained fewer than five males and fewer than five females. This dropped just 5.3% of all couples, providing a dataset of 9,948 couples. These were contained with 145 different identities (from a possible 294 configurations). These combinations, along with contextual information, can be seen in Appendix 1.

Previous UK surveys have never contained detailed information on news consumption, providing analysis merely of favourite newspaper (if any). This is, perhaps, due to the rise of the internet in recent years making non-newspaper consumption more focussed. Thus, it is impossible to provide detailed analyses of longitudinal change. However, data has been compared to the first wave of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) (University of Essex 2010) using the same educational and attitudes criteria but limiting analysis to newspapers. 62 identities contained sufficient sample sizes at each time-point studied. Longitudinal analysis is also constructed through splitting respondents into age cohorts. Due largely to issues of same size, we refer to younger couples as those who are both 51 or younger (thus, generally born from 1960) and older couples as those where one partner is at least 52 and the other is at least 42 (generally, one born pre-1960 and the other born anytime pre-1970). This provides a relatively even split between cases, which protects sample sizes, dropping fewer than 1% of cases (i.e., couples with one person over 51 and another under 41) for that analysis.

## Levels of homogamy

Husbands and wives were placed into the three characteristics, which had between 3 and 14 categories and differing distributions within them. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the males and females within the data. The smallest group for education (no qualifications) contained 14% of men and 11% of women, compared to 1% and 2% for the smallest political group (other right – such as UKIP and BNP) and 0.3% and 0.4% for news consumption (the Independent). Thus, some combinations of characteristics are more likely to be created than others. This is reflected in the most common identities, which contains people supporting Labour, Conservative or no party and news consumed from the BBC or commercial TV stations such as ITV/STV.

		Males	Females
Education	Degree	39%	37%
	School/further education	48%	52%
	No qualifications	14%	11%
Politics	Conservatives	26%	29%
	Labour	32%	34%
	Lib Dem	8%	6%
	SNP/Plaid Cymru	3%	4%
	Right (other)	1%	2%
	Green	3%	2%
	No affiliation	28%	23%
News	BBC	57%	57%
	Sky	6%	6%
	Commercial TV	16%	12%
	Regional paper	2%	2%
	Guardian	2%	2%
	Daily Mail	4%	4%
	Telegraph	2%	2%
	Times/Financial Times	2%	2%
	Sun/Star	2%	4%
	Daily Express	1%	1%
	Independent	0.3%	0.4%
	Mirror/Record	1%	1%
	Search engine	4%	5%
Other website	1%	2%	

Table 1: Distribution of individuals by characteristic (UKHLS wave 3)

Table 2 shows the levels of homophily observed in the data. For each of the three characteristics studied homophily exists in other half of cases. For each duality of two characteristics complete homophily is observed in around one-third of cases. Moreover, in 61% of cases at least two characteristics are shared and in 19% of cases all three are shared. Complete diversity amongst partners is only observed in 7% of cases. Thus, at the most simplistic level it could be argued that the UK observes levels of homophily across characteristics and couples generally lack diversity. However, homogamy would be expected on these characteristics as they are likely to be shaped by the social

processes which bring partners together. Whilst there is largely little difference, homogamy appears to always be higher for the older cohort, albeit it at small margins.

In the following sections, we explore the relationship between types of homogamy, to explore hidden patterns of diversity within couples. Two different methods were undertaken to analyse this data. LEM (Vermunt 1997) was used to create log linear models to ascertain the degree of homogamy structure identified and the relative influence of each type of similarity. Whilst log-linear models can ascertain the degree of structured connections and some elements of the type, they cannot easily identify which social groups commonly interact. Thus, UCINET (Borgatti et al. 2002) was used to analyse networks were constructed of identities which were disproportionately found within couples. Blockmodelling was used to produce categories of identities which shared similar traits to understand the construction of structured relationships.

	All	Younger	Older
Education	61%	64%	58%
News	55%	51%	59%
Politics	57%	53%	61%
.. education and news	34%	33%	34%
.. education and politics	35%	33%	36%
.. news and politics	32%	27%	36%
Any 2 categories	61%	59%	63%
All 3 categories	19%	18%	21%
No forms of homogamy	7%	8%	7%

Table 2: Levels of homophily by characteristics (UKHLS wave 3)

### Log-linear analysis

Levels of structure within a society can be ascertained using log-linear models. The frequencies of connections between the identities of male and female partners were converted into a matrix. Log linear approaches assess how well the described model describes the data. Table 3 provides a model for the UKHLS data. The first model assesses whether the model is entirely random with no evidence of structure. The dissimilarity index suggests we would need to move 50.9% of cases to achieve total independence. The subsequent models examine how well different configurations of homophily describe the data, with lower dissimilarity scores suggesting improved model fit. Model 8, which includes each of the three single-level forms of homophily, shows an improvement to only 26.3% of cases inaccurately described. Whilst model 10, which additionally includes the three double-level forms of homophily, has slightly stronger fit, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) is higher, suggesting that although the model is improved slightly this has been achieved at the expense of parsimony<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the most efficient model includes the three single forms of homophily. One interpretation of this would be that sharing a connection across one variable increases a couple's likelihood of forming, but having additional similarities above that proves no additional benefit.

<sup>1</sup> Adding a non-statistical significant variable to any model should improve levels of explanation, but may do so at the expense of having an efficient model. Parsimony, therefore, describes whether the observed additional explanation is beneficial for interpretation.

Model used, and its immobility parameters	L <sup>2</sup>	df	Δ	BIC
1. Independence model (excluding all controls)	19,966	20,736	.509	160,066
2. Education	17,441	20,733	.470	157,569
3. News consumption	15,848	20,722	.466	156,077
4. Politics	14,344	20,729	.408	154,509
5. Education*news consumption	15,766	20,698	.458	156,214
6. Education*politics	14,942	20,715	.410	155,236
7. News consumption* politics	13,761	20,667	.403	154,496
8. All three single-level homophily	8,270	20,712	.263	148,591
9. All three double-level homophily	12,515	20,608	.348	153,793
10. All single and double level homophily	8,048	20,584	.253	149,546

Table 3: Loglinear model of couples homophily, UKHLS wave 3

Of the three single level models, homogamy by politics provides the best model fit, but is a much weaker model than including the other two forms. Indeed, the distinction between the one- and two-level homophily themselves are relatively similar, with BIC ranging from 154,496 (news consumption by politics) to 157,569 (education). However, each composition form of homophily is holding relatively little explanation power, suggesting that the structure of homogamy is shaped by various social forces.

Analysis broken down by cohort (see table 4) supports this argument, with both age groups showing the most efficient models comprising the three single-level variables. Indeed, there is little evidence of any longitudinal change, with the dissimilarity index very similar for each model by age, and the slightly higher BIC statistics perhaps reflecting only the slightly larger sample sizes.

	Model used, and its immobility parameters	L <sup>2</sup>	df	Δ	BIC
Younger	1. Independence model (excluding all controls)	12,022	20,736	.483	101,092
	8. All three single-level homophily	5,078	20,712	.244	94,360
	9. All three double-level homophily	7,715	20,608	.329	97,915
	10. All single and double level homophily	4,958	20,584	.236	95,369
Older	1. Independence model (excluding all controls)	12,314	20,736	.485	102,957
	8. All three single-level homophily	5,314	20,712	.250	96.169
	9. All three double-level homophily	7,985	20,608	.333	99,758
	10. All single and double level homophily	5,155	20,584	.240	97.141

Table 4: Loglinear model of couples homophily by age, UKHLS wave 3

Thus, whilst there is evidence of homogamy in the contemporary UK, it appears there is great diversity within that homophily, as evidenced by the requirement for all one-level forms to produce an efficient model, and the lack of power for additional forms of similarity within homogamy. Similarly, there is little evidence of any longitudinal change, with the patterns being consistent across age-groups (unlike the simplistic models in table 2).

## Social network analysis



The results of the loglinear models inform us of the relative patterns of structure within homogamy, but are unable to produce typographies of commonly constructed combinations. Identities were regarded as nodes within a network, connecting if the combination occurred at least twice as often as expected<sup>2</sup> (Griffiths and Lambert 2012). This network can be seen in Figure 1. It forms a single component, albeit with 17 identities holding no ties, whether due to having a pattern of ties which was sufficiently random, or due to small sample sizes creating confidence intervals too large to be (such as 1603 – graduate Green voters who watch commercial TV).

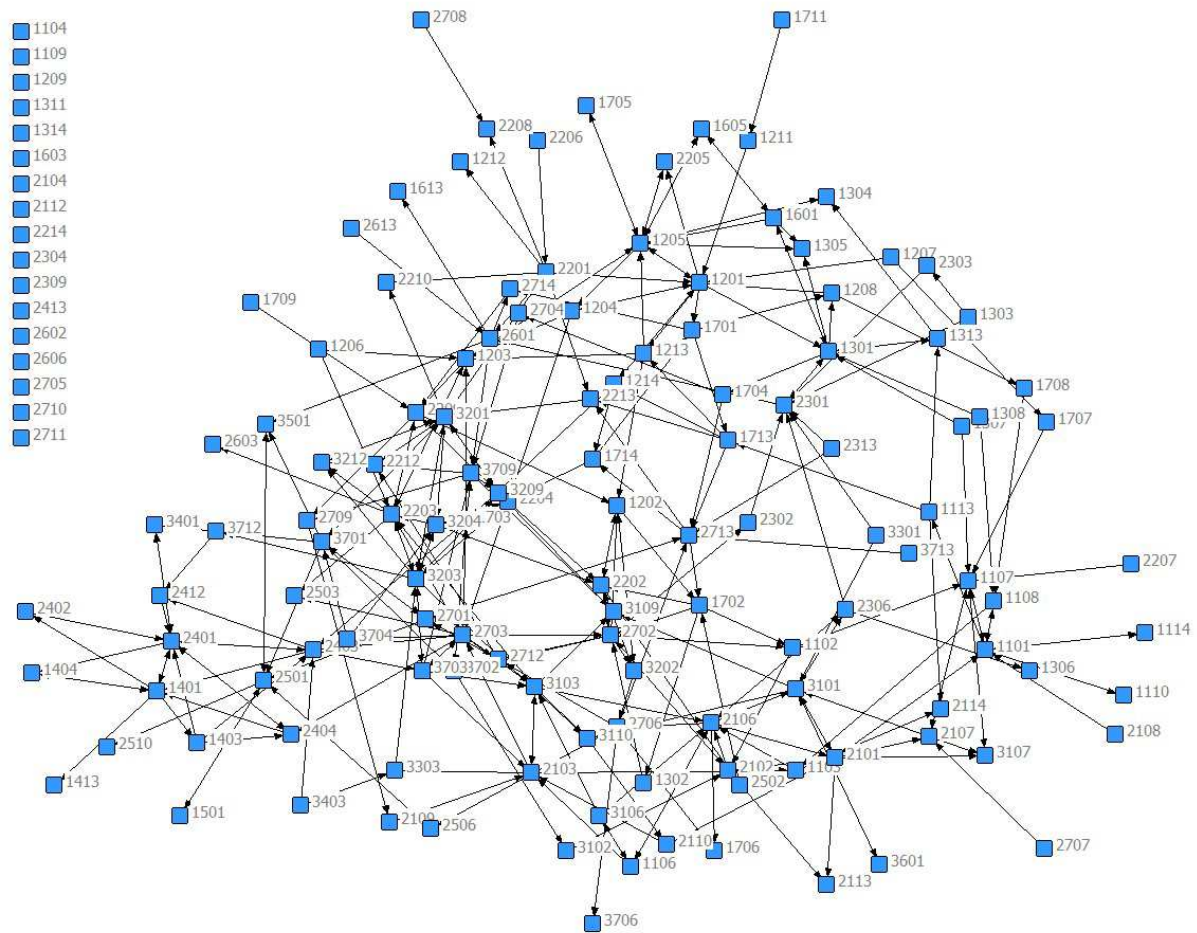


Figure 1: Identities occurring at least twice as expected: UKHLS wave 1 (see Appendix 1 for labels)

Blockmodelling arranges nodes according to those sharing similar positions and structures within the network. Thus, it can be thought of as a network variant of latent class analysis. The 145 identities were transformed into seven blocks, which comprise similar identities which share characteristics. These blocks do not necessarily link to each other, but identify certain structures which facilitate understanding how structured connections are created. The identities within each block are

<sup>2</sup> The lower value of a 95% confidence was used to ascertain if the combination occurred at least twice as expected. This provided a mechanism for removing ties occurring a small number of ties (i.e., a tie expected to be formed 0.4 times occurring once).

relatively varied, for instance with the first group obtained including all three educational categories, three attitudes and nine types of consumption. However, they can be broadly broken down as follows.

1. Tories - Conservative voters, with varied education and consumption patterns.
2. Intellectual left – Left wing voters, predominately Labour, with high education and consuming broadsheets (commonly the Guardian), the BBC or the internet
3. Isolates – these are the identities in the top right of Figure 1 who have no connections
4. Non-mainstream – Varied education levels, either no political interest or smaller right-wing groups (UKIP, BNP) and news derived passively from TV or search engines
5. Nationalists – this block, to the lower left of Figure 1, comprises those voting for nationalist parties, possibly due to geographical clustering being compared to national trends
6. Tabloids – News consumed from tabloid newspaper or commercial TV, with varied interests in politics, if any
7. Labour mass media – Labour/Green tabloid readers

None of these categories amply describe the identities within, but describe roughly the typography. For instance, Tories comprise 35 identities, of which seven vote Liberal Democrat, three have no political association and one each vote for Labour and the Green Party. Similarly, the non-mainstream block does contain some support for Labour and Liberal Democrats (Sky News viewers in each case). Hence, levels of heterogeneity within blocks is relatively small, and contain all three of the educational categories (aside from an absence of people without qualifications amongst the Intellectual Left). The composition of these blocks imply that UK homogeneity is multi-faceted, seemingly with one axis of political party supported and another of type of media consumed. It is apparent that no single form of connection is dominating the structure of interactions. Whilst there is apparently a distinction between Labour and Conservative voters, there are two blocks comprising low political interest and also two distinctive Labour/left-wing blocks. Hence, it appears the structure of relationships cuts across forms of homogeneity, producing structure consisting of multiple aspects of identities.

Blockmodelling allows the relationship between blocks to be analysed. There is, perhaps, evidence of social stratification evident within the block model, with the broadsheet and tabloid reading Labour supporters separated in the structure, each linked to those less interested in politics or current affairs, with ties from the broadsheet left to Conservatives and the tabloid left to Scottish/Welsh nationalists. It is plausible a dichotomy around educational level splits left-wing voters, with greater diversity than presented in our models observed within each of those categories. These models imply that although there is evidence that differing social groups can be identified from blockmodels, there is diversity within each and a range of attitudes harnessed and received within couples. Thus the structure inherent within structured homogeneity appears to be based around diversity rather than ingraining similarity of views.

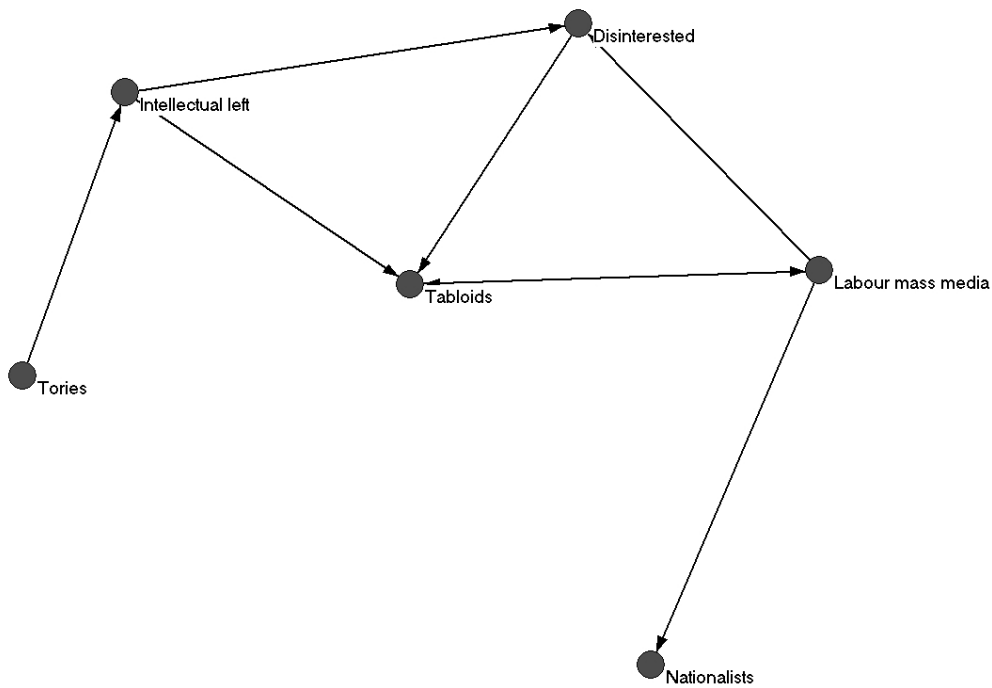


Figure 2: Blockmodel structures of identities, UKHLS wave 1 (>1% of ties between groups formed)

*Change over time*

Networks were generated for the older and younger cohorts at both time-points. Table 5 shows the characteristics of those networks. High levels of social structure, which would provide evidence of a fragmented society, would be characterised by a small number of isolates (identities which have no over-represented ties), a high number of ties in the network and a large number of components (communities of identities which link to each other, but not more widely).

For the UKHLS data, there are fewer isolates, ties and components, with those communities identified being small. Thus, it appears the social ties of couples under 51 are more widely dispersed than amongst older couples, which refutes the idea that the UK is increasingly become fragmented. By contrast, for the BHPS data, two decades earlier, although there were fewer isolates amongst the younger cohort, there were a greater number of ties leading to increased number and size of components, which suggested that the younger cohort were more likely to be socially divided.

	1991	1991	2010/11	2010/11
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	younger	older	younger	older
Isolates	17	22	57	37
Size of largest component	20	13	3	8
No. of ties	47	41	3	24
Components n>=2	8	6	2	6

Table 5: Networks broken down by age: BHPS wave 1 and UKHLS wave 3

Examining the pattern over time demonstrates that for younger couples, who are perhaps more likely to have connected in the intervening period, there is a clear pattern of less structure in social identities connecting, which can be interpreted as more diverse patterns of mating. For the older couples in each period, there is also evidence that social structure is declining. Given that there is a slight crossover between the younger BHPS (born during 1940-1975) and the older UKHLS (born pre-1960) couples, comparison can be made of the longitudinal effects for cohorts over time. As there is less evident of social structure at the later time-point for these groups, there is little evidence that couples become more alike (assimilation) as they age. Indeed, these networks suggest that, over time, our partners are becoming less similar to ourselves in terms of the combination of education, attitudes held and attitudes consumed, suggesting that our social circles are becoming more diverse.

Multiple Regression Quadratic Assignment Procedure (MR-QAP) can be thought of as a form of regression analysis in which the matrix of a social network is predicted by alternative types of tie amongst those nodes. A MR-QAP of the older network from the UKHLS is presented in table 6. Model one predicts the ties in the full UKHLS dataset, based upon matrices connecting identities if they share any of the composition characteristics which develop them (for instance, all identities sharing a common education characteristic exist as a tie in the 'education' network, whilst identities sharing characteristics for both education and news consumption are regarded as a tie in the 'education\*news' network). Placing all possible types of shared characteristics into the model produces a statistically significant model with an adjusted R<sup>2</sup> of .020. This module suggests that knowing two identities share an educational level statistically significantly increases their likelihood of being tied, and this is increased if also supporting the same political party. However, consuming the same type of news statistically significantly decreases the likelihood of a tie between the identities, with that decrease stronger if supporting the same political party.

	1 UKHLS	2 UKHLS Older	3 UKHLS Older
Education	.008	.002	
Politics	.019*	.004*	
News	-.030**	-.015	
Education*Politics	.119***	-.029	
Education*News	.011	.001	
Politics*News	-.022*	.014	
UKLHS younger			.180***
BHPS older			.177***
BHPS younger			.278***
N	20,880	3,782	3,782

Adjusted R2	.013	.00	.185
Probability	.000	.472	.000

Table 6: QAP models for older people, UKHLS and BHPS

Model 2 shows the same model but only for older couples. The model itself is not statistically significant and does not explain of the variance. Model 3 presents a model which uses the ties observed in the three other cohorts to predict the presence of a tie. This model is statistically significant, with a R2 of .19. Thus, knowing which identities have been created in other cohorts provides a stronger model than examining the presence of homogamy. As the coefficients displayed are standardised, it is possible to assess the relative importance of each cohort. The highest coefficient, of .28, is from the younger cohort in the BHPS (which, in some instances, will be the same cohort). The younger cohort from the UKHLS (same year) and older cohort from BHPS (same age) produce similar standardised coefficients of .18, implying that there are effects for both the year and the age of the couples, but continuity of relationships over time is more important. The finding that the same cohort network is the best predictor is not surprising – many of these couples will have been together since 1991, and some couples will be included in the first wave of the BHPS. More interesting is the lack of distinct between ageing and temporal effects; there is no evidence that changes across the life-course (assimilation) has a different strength than changes across time (selection).

### Conclusion

This paper refutes the argument that Britain is pulling apart, suggesting there is an increasing pattern of diversity amongst people’s social circles and also a decline in levels of associational mating. There is no evidence that the relationship between ‘structured’ and ‘unstructured’ connections are changing over time, whilst the proportion of ties explained in the log linear model is relatively low. There is no compelling evidence of any change over time, which refutes hypothesis one that Britain is pulling apart.

Similarly, there is no evidence to support hypothesis two, that there are heightened divisions within identities. Whilst holding one form of homophily is always important, having additional forms does not increase the likelihood of social ties being formed. There is evidence of a decline in the distinctive nature of the forms of homophily observed, with a move away from many ties which occur disproportionately to a more even spread across types of identity. Whilst there is evidence of a stratification divide within voters for the major UK parties, this demonstrates there are a diverse range of viewpoints and attitudes being communicated within people’s social networks.

Many popular accounts of sociology present the UK as increasingly divided and becoming polarised in terms of our social circles. This paper is the first to explore these trends using large-scale social surveys and we found no compelling arguments to justify these claims of increased social interaction distance. We have explored using homogamy not as an outcome, but as a research tool and demonstrate its potential to analyse social structure. One limitation of our findings is the lack of strong longitudinal processes. However, as detailed information of news consumption is included within every third wave of the UKHLS, this data will emerge over the coming years. Similarly, we

would like to add a national comparative component to this analysis, to enable us to understand whether these processes are unique to the UK or part of a wider social pattern within the Western world.

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