

'More unites us than divides us' say researchers

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Credit: Francisco Farias Jr/public domain

A new study suggests that diverse groups around the world share more in

common in terms of their beliefs and values than polarised reporting too often suggests.

It finds that people tend to grossly overestimate the difference between groups, helping to create a divisive narrative of 'us and them'. This narrative, they suggest, has been perpetuated by many commentators and seized upon by certain politicians to sow divisions.

At a time when conflict and debate surrounding Brexit continues unabated in the UK, the work helps to answer important questions about [public perceptions](#) towards people from other nations and backgrounds.

Whilst the issue of free movement of people came under intense debate during the referendum campaign—and there was broad consensus that the referendum result reflected widespread concerns—the research suggests that talk of deep-divisions in society may be overblown.

Published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the study drew on data from over 60 countries and 140,000 people. Psychologists at the University of Bath looked at people's moral beliefs and attitudes including people's values surrounding equality.

As part of it, the researchers developed a new approach to analyse how similar or different groups were, and then applied this method to different groups of people split by nationality, religion, age, gender, income, and education level. Although the study was global, the authors suggest their findings are directly relevant to Britain and other EU nations.

The research reveals people tend to overestimate differences between groups yet by instead highlighting the more common similarities, attitudes become more positive.

Findings show that of the people studied, their attitudes and values on issues ranging from crime and security to moral beliefs were remarkably in tune—for instance, on average, 95% of responses given by women were mirrored by men, and 80% of responses of individuals from one nation were mirrored by those from another.

Revealingly, they find that the values of British and Polish people are also much more similar than people often believe. Across a host of social values, including security, loyalty, success and broadmindedness, this shows that there is far more overlap between these two groups in reality than people often perceive. People's perception of difference between these groups is around 70%, whereas the reality is only 12%.

The authors behind the study hope the findings can reassure members of the public fearful of an ever-more divided society, and they hope the findings pave the way for academics and commentators to re-think how they talk about social cohesion.

Lead researcher, Dr. Paul Hanel from Bath's Department of Psychology explains: "Our findings suggest that groups of people are much more similar than people—including researchers—might often believe. This is because whereas others look for differences, we focus explicitly on similarities—and here there is lots that unites us.

"There is an important message for politicians, fellow academics and media commentators. When we talk about the reality, over people's perceptions or prejudices, and instead highlight the similarities we see, we will bolster social cohesion too."

Co-author Professor Greg Maio, Head of the Department of Psychology, adds: "Social scientists often focus on relatively small differences between groups. This work shows that highlighting these differences at the expense of noting much larger similarities leads people to

misinterpret findings and may exacerbate prejudices. We hope future work will show that the more balanced approach to describing research findings is useful for addressing the growing polarisation, arrogance and often closed-minded interpretations in modern debate."

Dr. Hanel is now working on a follow-up project in which he tests the similarities in values, attitudes, and British identity between Leave and Remain voters from the Brexit referendum.

More information: Paul H. P. Hanel et al, A new way to look at the data: Similarities between groups of people are large and important., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000154](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000154)

Provided by University of Bath

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