



Belonging

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Summary and highlights

This report focuses on the theme of 'belonging' in 21st century Britain. The notion of belonging, or social identity, is a central aspect of how we define who we are. We consider ourselves to be individuals but it is our membership of particular groups that is most important in constructing a sense of identity. Social identity is a fundamental aspect of what it is to be human.

In Britain today there is public debate suggesting that we are losing this essential sense of belonging – that globalization, for example, far from bringing people closer together, is actually moving us apart. We hear that our neighbourhoods are becoming evermore impersonal and anonymous and that we no longer have a sense of place. But is this really the case? Are we losing our sense of belonging, or are we simply finding new ways to locate ourselves in a changing society? This report seeks an answer.

On one level, belonging is certainly changing. While in the past a sense of belonging was more rigidly defined in terms of the traditional markers of social identity such as class or religion, people are now far more able to choose the categories to which they belong. We are now able to select from a wide range of groups, communities, brands and lifestyles those with which we wish to align ourselves and which, in turn, shape our social identities. At the same time we may, or may not, remain rooted in our families or in the place in which we were born.

The 'landscape' of belonging may have changed – with much greater opportunity these days to opt in and opt out of various groups – but we still want the same things from membership of these groups. We have timeless needs for social bonding, loyalty, security and acceptance. These have been with us since the Stone Age and throughout our history we have created social networks and groupings to serve these ends. So what does this landscape look like today? Is it that much different from that of the past?

To explore this fundamental aspect of human life the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) has employed a number of research methods. First, a detailed literature review provided the background for two in-depth focus groups with 8-10 people in each, representing a broad cross-section of demographic groups. The material from these groups was subsequently used to design national poll questions that were distributed by YouGov to 2,209 nationally representative participants across the country.

Through these methods, SIRC's research has identified six key social identities in which people most frequently anchor their sense of belonging today:

1. Family. Despite public debate about the decline of the family in modern society, family remains the most important focus of belonging. Of respondents in the national poll, 88% chose family as the key marker of belonging. The ways in which families are structured has certainly changed in recent decades, but family remains the most important category of human social organisation.

2. Friendship. While the close proximity of a large extended family would have provided a structure for social support in the past, this function is now filled, at least in part, by an increasingly diverse and multilayered network of friendships. Increased geographic mobility and interconnectedness through new digital technologies allow us to connect with people in new ways. In the poll, 65% of respondents saw friendships as being an essential part of their sense of belonging.

3. Lifestyle choices. In developing friendships and social networks we are also defining the kinds of lifestyle that we want to lead and the types of social capital – the social status, shared values, and cultural practices – that go with it. We make choices about the kinds of activities that we are interested in, the kinds of products that we buy and the associations that these involve. Importantly, we also make lifestyle choices by choosing not to consume certain products or engage in certain types of activity. What we do not do is as important to our sense of belonging as that in which we actively choose to engage. For many participants in the project, thinking about lifestyle choices revealed a far more entrenched sense of brand and group loyalty than they had initially expected or were prepared to admit.

4. Nationality. Advocates of cultural globalization point to the fact that national identity is on the decline. As the world becomes more connected it is increasingly common for people to pass through the borders of individual countries, both physically and virtually. While there is certainly a greater awareness of the flexibility of national identities, and the possibility of shedding one in exchange for another, there still remains a strong tie between individuals and the nationalities with which they are born. People may question what exactly it means to be 'British' or 'English' in the 21st century, but this is by no means the same as rejecting the idea of being British altogether. Over a third of all people claim their national identity as a major factor in defining belonging.

5. Professional identity. In a society where our social status is to a great extent measured by the work we do and, perhaps more importantly, the money we earn, it is little surprise that professional identity is an important locus of belonging for both men and women. It is, after all, often the first characteristic that people offer up when introducing themselves to others. While occupational mobility has certainly increased for many people, and 're-skilling' is a normal part of modern-day professional life, we remain tied to the social significance of what we do for a living. Our sense of belonging in this context is greater than the affinity we feel with members of our extended families.

6. Team spirit and shared interests. For men, the football or other sporting team that they support provides a stronger sense of belonging than religion, social class, ethnic background or political affiliations. The clubs they belong to are also important sources of social identity. Both men and women view the hobbies and interests that they share with others as an important source of identity. For women, this sense of belonging is as strong as that associated with their nationality.

The kinds of social changes that have taken place in recent years are evidenced by the fact that these categories rank higher than other more traditional foci of belonging, such as class, religion, or place of origin. Only 13% of people, for example, feel a sense of belonging to the community in which they were born. The main body of this report looks at where these changes have taken place and explores how we are incorporating both new and more traditional notions of belonging into our patterns of social interaction.

Research sample and methods

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the study. Initially, a detailed literature review was conducted to identify emergent themes and debates related to the idea of belonging and social identity. Two focus groups were then convened in SIRC's studio. This is equipped with remotely controlled video cameras and sound recording equipment to provide detailed material for subsequent coding and analysis. Both groups comprised between eight and ten participants, selected to provide a cross-section of ages, genders and social class categories.

Coding and analysis of the transcripts of the focus group discussions was undertaken in order to frame questions for inclusion in a national poll. This was conducted online by YouGov between the 13th and 16th of April 2007. The sample consisted of 2,209 nationally representative participants.

The subsequent data analysis, illustrated with appropriate extracts from the focus groups transcripts, is detailed in the following section of this report.

Introduction

The idea of belonging is central to our understanding of how people give meaning to their lives. Our sense of identity is founded on social interactions that show our belonging to particular communities through shared beliefs, values, or practices. The choices that we make, from our religious views, to the friends that we acquire, to the cars that we drive, even to the insurance that we buy, serve to position us as part of the groups, networks and communities that make up human society. The following SIRC report takes a detailed look at how we map out a sense of belonging in 21st-century society. Have we lost our sense of belonging, or are we simply finding new ways of defining who we are?

Individuals in society

In modern society it makes sense to think of humans as individuals – after all, we have individual bodies, individual minds, and individual goals and ambitions. But in very important ways, being human is not about being an individual at all – it is about belonging to a particular group of individuals. At a very basic level, who we are is defined by the social networks and communities to which we belong. When asked to describe ourselves, we reply by talking about our relationships to people and places – as sons, mothers, husbands, or friends; as members of nations, ethnic groups, or neighbourhoods; as employees; as consumers of certain brands and the lifestyles that go with them. Through membership within these groups we make statements about the kinds of people, beliefs and values that we want to be associated with and, ultimately, the kinds of people we are.

These beliefs and values can be made explicit, as in the case of religious groups or political parties, or they can be embedded in the activities and practices that characterise the group. Political parties, for example, make concrete, public statements about the moral and social codes of their members. There is, on the other hand, no written manifesto to dictate the beliefs and values shared by groups of friends, yet we are implicitly aware of the rules and codes that define how we interact with them. When these rules and codes are broken, we make equally important distinctions about where we do not belong. Defining who we are not is often just as important as defining who we are. In subtle and complex ways, our lives as individuals only become meaningful through our associations with others.

Different ways of belonging

Developing a sense of belonging is an ongoing process that involves membership in, or exclusion from, a wide variety of different groups during the course of our lives. The relative importance that we place on our membership within particular groups – family, say, in comparison with belonging to the local gym – says a lot about the kinds of identities that we create for ourselves. In addition, the importance of belonging to particular groups changes over time. As we join and leave different social networks and groups, we reposition ourselves in

relation to others, developing new connections and discarding others in a continuous process of social interaction and integration.

Belonging in the 21st century

While the need to belong is a basic aspect of being human, the ways in which we satisfy this need have changed significantly over time. The development of industrial society raised fears that we were losing our sense of community – that the faceless, anonymous sprawl of the world's cities was depriving us of the basic need to feel as though we are part of something bigger than our selves. The early French sociologist Emile Durkheim explained the fears about this social condition with the term 'anomie' (literally 'without law') – the idea that modern life had shed the sense of shared values and standards and that this would lead to the erosion of civil society. The work of contemporary sociologists such as Anthony Giddens on the other hand stresses that modern social conditions now provide individuals with more freedom to design and mould their place in society.

Main conceptual framework: building/mapping belonging

This research begins from the balanced perspective that contemporary ideas of belonging involve both global and local means of social interaction. While new forms of belonging are emerging in the globalized world, we remain closely tied to the social exchanges that characterise our local lives. The social, cultural, political and economic changes that have taken place during the past century present us with new ways of belonging to social groups and networks that transcend physical and virtual boundaries and yet, while we live our lives in a world that is connected globally, we exist physically in local spaces – our living rooms, our desks and our cars all represent points of departure from which we connect with the wider social world.

Our modern sense of belonging is characterised by a move away from 'traditional' social categories. Distinctions such as class, race, and nationality are still important markers of identity, but the boundaries of what these distinctions actually describe are becoming increasingly blurred. Recent social research suggests that 'traditional' categories of belonging are now less easily defined as distinct groups into which people neatly fit. Instead, we are increasingly obliged to *choose* the groups, values and beliefs with which we want to identify ourselves. As our social interactions become more complex and intertwined, we develop new ways of solving old problems.

In this sense, the relative decline of 'traditional' forms of belonging and the emergence of new global social networks requires multiple ideas of belonging. We have become increasingly comfortable with the notion of 'code switching', or employing a variety of social tools to adjust to the different social and cultural worlds of the 21st century – from social networking online, to immigration, to cheap international holidays.

There are also new ways of distinguishing ourselves from others. New forms of social and economic inequality serve to divide social groups, while the global, post-9/11 politics of terrorism and immigration play an important part in framing our sense of belonging to both nations, people and ideas.

Key questions

This combination of global and local forms of belonging raises important questions about how we define who we are in modern society. This report seeks to unravel some of these questions:

- What values and beliefs are important in forming ideas of belonging today?
- Are traditional markers of belonging such as class and community becoming less important?
- How are such markers reflected in the 'hierarchy' of groups to which we belong?
- What leads us to leave some groups, and join others?
- In an increasingly diverse and digitised world, are we becoming more individualistic and detached from human interactions?
- Are new modes of belonging simply providing novel ways of fulfilling essential human social needs?
- Or are the new ways in which we interact fundamentally altering what it means to be a 'social' being?

Main findings

"I would say my life is going in kind of cycles ... I would say life will take me back to where I started ... but I don't know."

At the beginning of each focus group participants were asked to introduce themselves to the rest of the group. In each case the categories that were presented said something important about each person's sense of belonging. Some mentioned nationality, others said where they were from. Others listed jobs while some described themselves as husbands or wives. These introductions provided a valuable glimpse into the hierarchy of social groups that were significant in each person's perception of his or her own identity.

In line with the respondents in the national poll, the participants in the focus groups tended to present their social identities in quite traditional terms. For most, family and friends were key to developing a strong sense of belonging, followed by national identities and professional identities. Although expressed less explicitly in some cases, the choice of a particular lifestyle – participating in certain activities, buying certain brands, and interacting with the kinds of people who share these tastes – were also highly significant in determining a sense of belonging.

Other more traditional markers of belonging such as class, religion and place of local origin did not figure as highly in people's understanding of where they belong in society. Rather than claiming membership of these kinds of larger, traditional social groups, many participants emphasised the feeling of transition. While certain traditional foci of belonging remain very important there is a greater degree of flexibility in how we negotiate our connection to particular social groups. As one focus group participant put it:

"It just all seems to be bound up with this idea of transition. I mean you said earlier that people used to stay in small communities and weren't very mobile ... they didn't have such a transition and now we do. And we do have these transitions and sometimes they go astray ... for other people you spend a time in your twenties not belonging, and then by your early thirties, you know, you've worked out a new place to belong to."

The idea of transition is an important aspect of looking at belonging as a flexible and changing process. Instead of thinking about belonging in terms of one group, or one specific place, it is now far more common for people to incorporate multiple social identities or a sense of belonging to a number of different groups and places at any one time in the course of their lives. Only 14% of poll participants agreed that they felt a strong sense of belonging to one particular social group, as opposed to 34% who said that their sense of belonging had changed significantly during the course of their lives. One aspect of this transition, then, is greater social freedom – we are able to join and leave certain social groups more easily than in the past. On the other hand, this suggests a greater sense of uncertainty – having more freedom can also involve being uprooted and unanchored. Yet for all social identities there remains the

need to distinguish the characteristics of the group by defining what it is not, even if the divisions are quite artificial. As a focus group participant suggested:

"... I mean if you're doing some sort of varsity match you spend what, seven or eight months being told how different you are from these other people and how you have to beat these other people, but there are no other people who are more like you than them."

Making the decision to leave a group involves crossing the 'gulf' of belonging and such an act may involve social sanctions. In this sense it is possible to measure the importance of belonging to a certain group by the severity of the social alienation involved in leaving – from marriages, to sororities, to gym membership.

The family

Belonging in perspective: the benefits of marrying your cousins

Anthropologists have long been preoccupied with understanding belonging through the kinship networks, or family ties, that bind the different members of 'traditional' or so-called 'tribal' communities. In order to distinguish one group from another they sought to determine who was related to whom, and how.

In groups as varied as Australian Aborigines and indigenous communities in North America, anthropologists found that family or kinship was the principal way people talked about belonging – they claimed ancestry from the same real or mythical beings. Group identity was thus based on a notion of consanguinity and history – sharing the same blood, literally or figuratively, with members of a kin group that stretched back over generations to distant but unifying creation myths. These communities would then determine their relationships with other communities, at least in part, through ties of marriage and childbirth.

Notions of marriage and family are among some of the most basic and fundamental means that we use to distinguish between belonging to one group and not another. Drawing the boundaries of who it is acceptable to marry and reproduce with figures central in defining the relationships between different communities, as well as defining the basic structure of a family group. Social restrictions upon who one can marry serve to reinforce the relationships between different social groups, while marriage taboos or incest remain severe social transgressions in all societies.

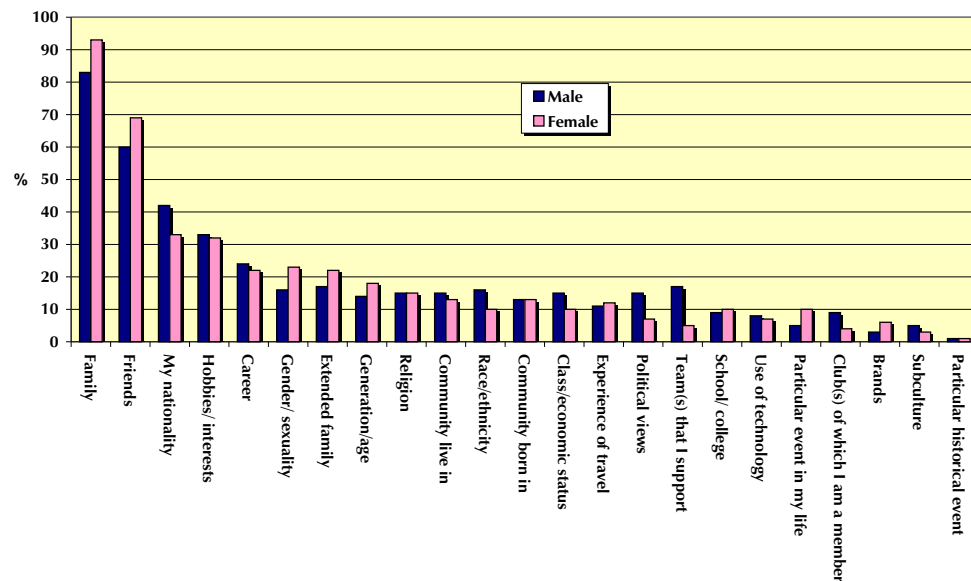
How the boundaries of 'incest' or 'family' are defined does, of course, vary greatly from one community to another. While in England today it is generally seen as socially and morally questionable (although perfectly legal) to marry one's first cousin, in other cultures, including certain communities in Pakistan (and subsequently now in the UK), this would be a completely acceptable, and even socially and economically disadvantageous act.

The continuing importance of family today

While there are fewer social restrictions placed on who can marry whom in contemporary Western society, for the vast majority of people marriage remains a tacit affirmation of their belonging within an established social group. In the UK, for example, according to the Office of National Statistics 98% of people marry someone of their own ethnicity. This does not of course make us all racists, nor does it suggest that people are necessarily similar simply because they are from the same ethnic group. But it does imply that people are still heavily influenced by the rules and norms of the social groups in which they are born grow up and to which they retain a strong sense of belonging. Swapping women may also seem like a rather outdated means of establishing a sense of belonging between groups, but vestiges of such exchanges are still evident in contemporary Western society.

In the national poll 67% of participants agreed with the statement that family is just as important to our sense of belonging now as it has been in the past. An overwhelming 88% of people suggested that their immediate family was one of the most important groups defining a sense of identity and belonging, as shown in Figure 1, while 69% agreed that they would find it difficult to be without their immediate family.

Figure 1. Who or what provides a sense of identity and belonging?



These figures would seem to suggest that despite the supposed 'anomie' of an increasingly anonymous, global society, we remain connected at a local level through one of the most elemental forms of social belonging. This was also very evident in the focus group discussions.

"My main identity is always my family and my children and I often think I'd love to stay at home and look after them and not work ... that's definitely my priority and always would be ... my parents, my brother, my cousins and my uncles, my aunties ... they're the people I would go to in an emergency, even though I've got loads of really close friends. They're still my rock."

Family, then, remains one of the most important ways in which we think about belonging. But what we mean by family differs widely depending on the social and cultural context. There is little doubt that family structures and relationships have changed significantly over the past 50 years. In the UK, current rates of divorce are almost five times higher than those of 1961 and over a quarter of families are single-parent units. The average ages at which people marry and have children have also risen significantly while the size of families has been reduced, with more family members living further away from one another.

These kinds of demographic shifts have caused changes in the relationships between parents, children and other family members. The family remains an important focus of belonging but how people belong within their families has changed markedly. In the case of parents and children, 'traditional' relations are being replaced by more openly-negotiated interactions. The sociologist Alan Prout argues that the fragmentation of new family structures, multiple career paths, and the cultural experiences of the 'Baby Boomer' generation have sparked a shift away from the idea that adults have 'complete' or 'finished' identities. As a result, parents and children are developing new relationships that foster a sense of belonging based more on openness and 'friendship' than may have been the case for previous generations. People are also arriving at the 'benchmarks' of adulthood – purchasing a house, getting married, having children – at a later stage. This has effects on their sense of belonging with both their parents as well as within their own families.

"I have a very different relationship with my children you know, we're more friends – it's different."

So, new changes in wider society are clearly affecting how parents interact with their children in the home. For some participants in our research family represented a form of constraint, particularly when traditional family structures remained in place but the family members themselves were adapting to new social conditions. As focus group participant commented:

"... with my family I felt like, I love them to pieces, but they kept saying I wasn't normal and I kept on asking all these questions and you know, life there was very simple and my way of thinking is not necessarily complicated but I want to know, I'm curious, and that's why I felt like 'I can not wait to get out of here!'"

Another participant agreed about traditional family structures:

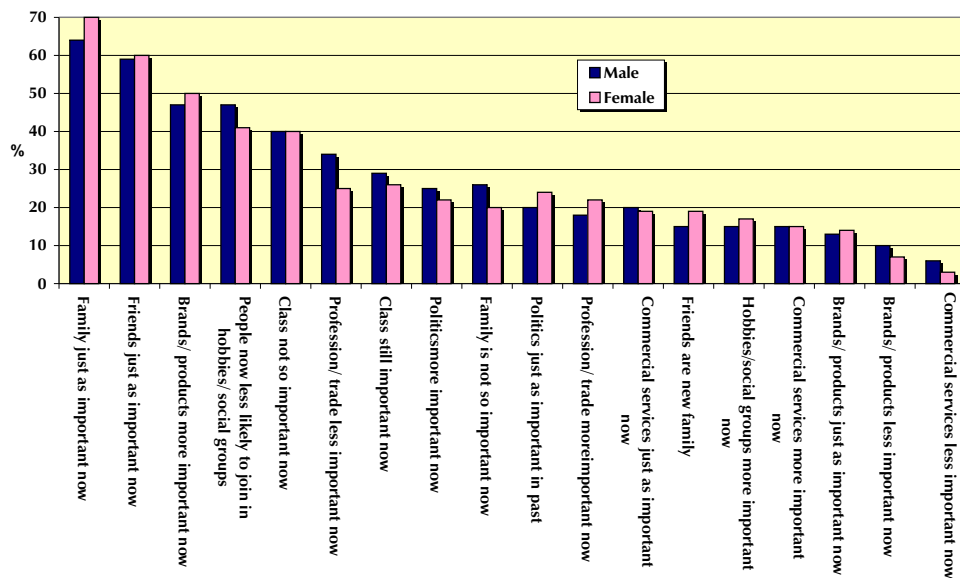
"I think (the traditional idea of) family is an outdated ... I think it's the old adage – you can choose your friends and not your family. I think family can really screw you up."

Friendship

"Identity comes from our friends; it's my circle of immediate friends. Quite often you join groups and you make really, really good friends, and so that's part of your identity as well ..."

Beyond family, friendship constitutes another essential way in which a sense of belonging is cultivated in society. While only 17% of poll participants went as far as to say that 'friends are the new family', 60% agreed that friendship is one of the most important ways of defining belonging, second only to the family, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Respondents' agreement with questions about sense of belonging, by gender



Our friends constitute groups within which we shape our identities outside of 'received' groups such as those of birth and marriage. We are born into certain kinds of structural relationships with members of our families but our friendships present a far more complex network of relationships that are governed by a range of unspoken, implicit social codes. After all, the idea of 'friendship' itself is quite difficult to pin down. What does 'friendship' actually entail? How many different kinds of 'friend' can one have? How easy is it to break the social bonds of different friendships?

To begin with, it is important to recognise that the Western notion of friendship, however loosely defined, is not a universal way of thinking about how we relate to people who are not biologically related to us. The individualistic notion of identity prevalent in the West suggests that friendship is essentially a bond that exists between individuals – that it is a private, intimate bond between two people. In other cultural contexts, friendship may be

considered primarily as a shared sense of belonging between wider social groups. The idea of individual friendship is secondary to a collective notion of amity between different communities. Indeed, despite the assumption that friendship is a random, voluntary bond between individuals in Western society, it is still only a partial truth that we 'choose' our friends. Our choices of friendships are dictated, at least to some extent, by our relative position in much larger social categories – from gender, race, and social class, to the kinds of work that we do and the places where we live. It is impossible to understand how we create our friendships without considering the wider social groups to which we belong.

At the same time, one may argue that new social conditions are in fact changing the significance of friendship as a social bond and that this, in turn, is changing the ways in which we make friends. While certain ethnic communities retain strong ties through traditional, extended family structures, Britain is no longer characterised predominantly by large families that remain settled in one geographical area. As a result, networks of friends have become increasingly important as a means of constructing a sense of belonging that in some cases rivals the importance of family.

In the absence of family close at hand, friendship groups become a central focus of identity, particularly for people who have not started families of their own. This is significant considering that the average ages for marriage and childbirth have increased substantially – the number of single women aged 18-49 in Britain increased from 18% to 38% between 1979 and 2002. As one focus group participant commented:

"I think the friends that I have make the community. I think friends are much more important. They're the ones that are there [for you]. It's a social thing ... the extended family has gone and so your friends become the extended family."

Greater geographical and social mobility also mean that people are capable of developing a larger number of friendships across a wider range of social contexts. From activities such as attending university, finding employment in a different town, or meeting people online, our friendship networks are becoming wider, more diversified and more complex. While this involves more choice, it also suggests a greater sense of uncertainty.

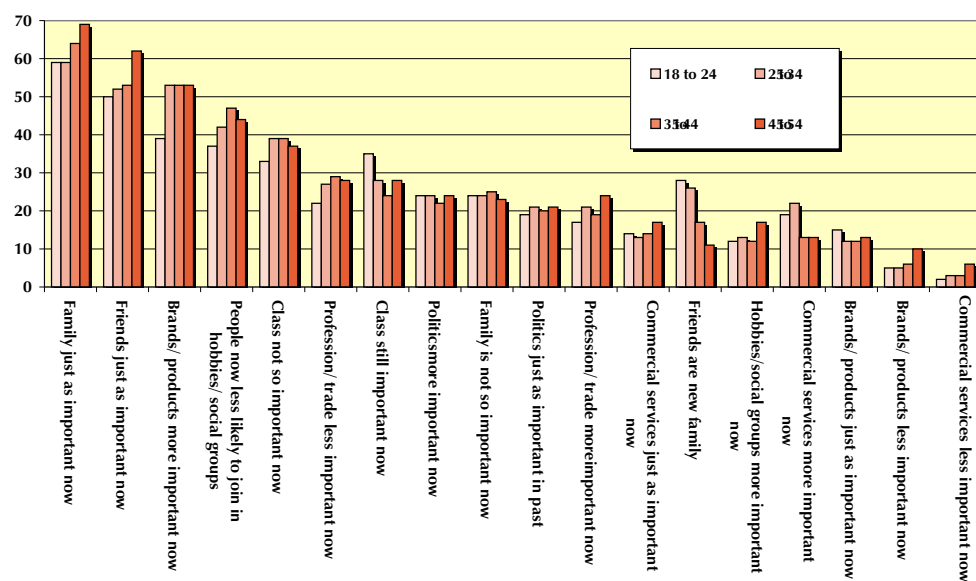
One focus group participant provided an interesting example of how belonging and friendship can be changed by different social and cultural contexts. His experience of growing up and developing friendships as a boy in China were directly affected by broader social and historical shifts in the country. Increased geographic and social mobility meant that the nature of his friendships had changed dramatically since early childhood:

"My close friends are all classmates. Before going to university study was very intense, we spent a lot of time to study, but at the same time there are some very close friends like brothers. You know in China there is a one-child only policy so in my childhood there were not many kids (to) play with me. After I went to university the atmosphere become more flexible and I made a lot of

friends and some friends are very close up until now ... I think it is like my arm or my leg – I could not live without either. It's a very close friendship."

The experiences of this person were strongly shaped by his cultural context but the role that his age and specific generation have played should also not be underestimated. Our poll results clearly show this. As shown in Figure 3, compared with those aged 45 to 54 over twice as many respondents from the 18-to-24 age group believed that 'friends are the new family' – a result that clearly expresses how much the role of friends has changed over the past decades in Western society.

Figure 3. Respondents' agreement with questions about sense of belonging, by age

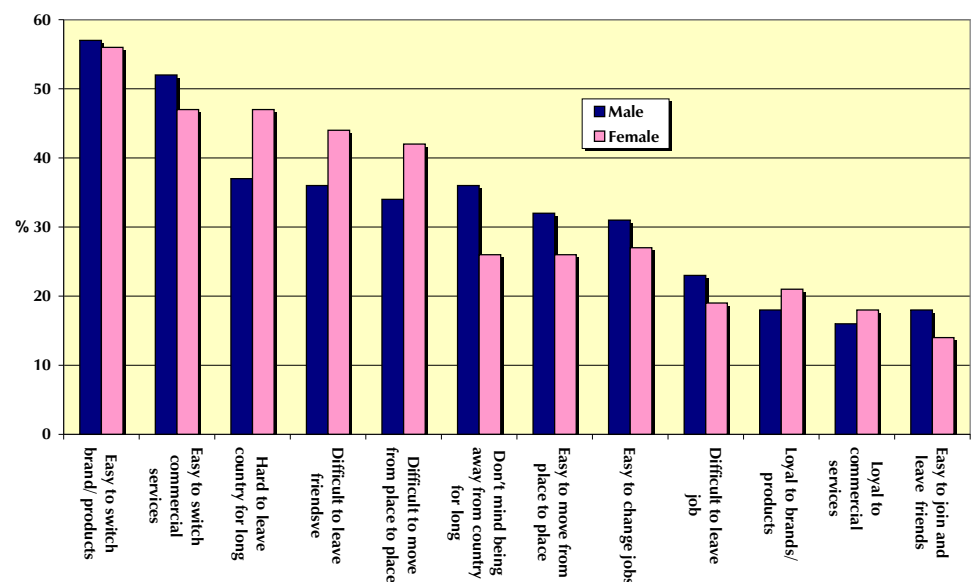


This difference is understandable given the lifestyles of young people and 'emerging adults' in first decade of the 21st century. This is an age of social and lifestyle experimentation in which the responsibilities normally associated with adulthood – leaving home, starting on a career, getting married and having children – are being increasingly delayed. It is during this process of extended transition that friendship networks play a central role in helping young people to decide, in a world which has a wider range of possibilities but also increased uncertainties, who they really are and where they are going in life.

Belonging to a place

Alongside social interactions, physical space is a fundamental marker of belonging, both in 'traditional' communities and in modern nation states. Of the national poll participants, for example, 37% agreed that national identity still remains an important marker of belonging (as shown in Figure 1 above). As we can see from Figure 4 over 40% of poll respondents also felt that leaving one's country for long would have the greatest impact on their sense of belonging, with 40% being reluctant to leave their local communities. A further 30% said that they would find it difficult just to move from one place to another. There is, perhaps, no clearer division between groups than that of belonging to a specific territorial place, be this a particular valley or stretch of jungle, a house or street, the 'ends' of a football stadium or the whole of the British Isles.

Figure 4. Ease or difficulty of change



Family, community, and national histories are intricately woven into the physical landscapes in which they exist. In 'traditional' societies, this sense of belonging has often been tied to the practicalities of existing in a particular physical space – alongside the political boundaries of other neighbouring communities, the physical limits within which a group is capable of travelling or growing food are likely to define the limits of what they call 'home' or, indeed, what they consider to be 'the world'. This is, of course, no longer the case for most if not all existing traditional communities. Even the most remote areas of the world are now inevitably connected in some way or another to the vast social, economic and political networks that globalization has created for the 21st century.

Just as the ever-increasing interconnectedness of the world has changed both 'traditional' and 'modern' ways of life, globalization has also had a very significant impact on how we think about belonging in physical space. The advance of globally connected digital technology and the globalization of economic and cultural exchange has allowed people to move beyond the idea of communities – whether these consist of streets, housing estates or entire countries – as 'bounded' physical spaces that exist outside of the rest of the world, as if in an impermeable bubble.

The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has used the term 'deterritorialisation' to describe how the objects, ideas and exchanges that we use to define culture have become detached from physical places. When we travel around the world, or when we send and receive cultural information across the globe through email, SMS, or by watching television, we are no longer anchored in our physical environment as was once the case. Culture in this sense is fluid, and moves backwards and forwards between national boundaries. This raises interesting questions about our relationship with the nation states in which we 'belong'. In a globalized world, do we still see ourselves as English, or British? What do we actually have in common with other English and British people? Is 'Britishness' an 'imagined' sense of shared belonging?

Some would argue that the globalization of culture has made us more cosmopolitan. In other words, we have developed a new set of cultural tools – ways of interacting with the world that help shape how we perceive and relate to it – that allow us to feel as if we belong in a wide variety of different cultural settings. This means that we can shift between different kinds of belonging – to different groups of friends, communities, or even away from national identities altogether – depending on where in the world we are and with whom we are interacting at a given moment. Our focus group participants agreed with this perspective:

"But I think once you move somewhere and you form relationships there and you live for a certain length of time your country of origin becomes slightly less important, not for everybody but for a lot of people I think it does."

Another participant had a similar experience of living a more transient lifestyle away from her place of national origin:

"I'm not close to my family either and we never lived in England very much, we travelled, my dad was in the Army, we moved every two years."

National identity

Does the 'global village' really define our sense of belonging to the extent that national identity ceases to play any focal role in our lives? The British Attitudes Survey shows that the proportion of people in Britain who feel best described by the term 'British' fell from 52% in 1996 to 44% in 2005, suggesting a decline in the significance of 'Britishness' as a marker of belonging. At the same time, this also shows that a very substantial proportion of people in Britain still consider national identity to be most important in their definition of identity – not to

mention the importance that is placed on other kinds of national identity – Welsh, Irish, Scottish, or English identity.

As one focus group participant remarked:

"Coming from a small country like Northern Ireland you feel a real sense of belonging as well so when ever you travel abroad and you meet someone from Northern Ireland its like you've met, you know, George Best [group laughing] you just want to hug them."

While it is certainly true that we have become more aware of our belonging to wider global and international communities, it would seem that national identities and the political beliefs that go with them still remain very important markers of belonging. This is particularly prevalent in countries where a very strong, explicit sense of nationalism underpins the political ideology of the state. One participant said:

"I think for me it's politics, I want to do something for my country, that's why I study abroad ... I have a very strong feeling to belong to my country."

Even for those who do not ally themselves with the politics of their place of origin, national identity can be important, particularly when away from home. After all, it is when we leave our own country that our national identity becomes significant – being a New Zealander in New Zealand is nothing special, but it has an altogether different resonance in an overseas context

"(People see) me first as a New Zealander, someone totally different so they just put me in a little box ... All they're seeing ... is a New Zealander. That actually makes me feel quite good 'cause then I don't have to explain any other things that go on in my life."

Nationalism is, of course, a major issue within the context of the post-9/11 'War on Terror' which has led many people to embrace or shun ideas of national belonging, depending on their political perspective on the issues involved.

Belonging on a smaller scale

For many people, while national identity remains important, it is also peripheral to other ideas about social identity and belonging. In the absence of any significant international political crises (such as the Second World War or the July 7th 2005 bombings) or an international sporting event (such as the World Cup) it could be argued that British national identity does not come into daily use very often. For most, a wider sense of regional or community belonging is far more tangible. People today are far more likely to move from place to another than in the past to follow job opportunities or to pursue higher education. The very significant rise in university attendance over the past 40 years has also provided opportunities for many to travel to different towns and cities to study and, in the process, to meet new people and forge different geographic paths for the future.

This level of geographical mobility is not, however, limited to students and young people and it helps to explain why the town or city in which people were born ranks low down the scale of important contributors to their sense of belonging. As we saw earlier in Figure 1 only 13% of respondents felt that their original home community gave them a strong sense of identity – well below, for example, being with others who shared the same interests or hobbies.

In year preceding the 2001 census, 6.7 million people had changed addresses in Britain – about 1 in 9 of the population. In many cases, the distances they had moved were relatively small – under 10 kilometres. For 20% of within-UK migrants, however, the distances were 50 kilometres or greater and having moved once, people are also increasingly more likely to move again. Those that move substantial distances are similarly more likely to move the farthest in the future. Over a decade or so, then, a very substantial proportion of the population will have shifted from one place to another and, in many cases, some considerable distance away from their place of birth.

These patterns of internal migration vary over time according to economic conditions and changes in the structure of industry and related social factors. The decline in manufacturing and mining industries, for example, led to a substantial exodus of people from regions in the North East of England and elsewhere. Between 1970 and 2000 the South of England experienced net gain through migration from other areas of the UK of 31,000 people per year.

This does not necessarily mean, however, that a sense of local community is no longer important to contemporary ideas of belonging. Instead, it is more likely that people feel a sense of belonging in the place where they live now rather than where they were born. These places may change during the course of one's life but during each stage a sense of local community still remains important.

Speaking about a relatively short experience of living in Spain, for example, one focus group participant said:

"I want there to be somewhere that I know quite well and I know the bars and I know the restaurants ... other people start talking about it saying, 'Have you been there?' and I say, 'Yes, that's my place!' I've just kind of created this little world for myself."

Back in England, other participants described an intense kind of community belonging in smaller, more rural areas:

"We have a huge community spirit in our street, I mean everybody seems to know each other and everyone spends a lot of time with each other."

"(Sometimes) the sense of belonging is so strong that you don't want to sacrifice that. I think that's very true of where I was brought up, it's sort of a village. I think there's a massive sense of belonging there, not just in the road but also in the whole village, especially with this new sort of green ethos that's taking over."

Outsiders

Geographic mobility on a wider scale also means that immigration into the UK has changed considerably in recent years. The ability of people to move within the EU has caused new social and economic circumstances that can either test traditional notions of belonging or revitalise a sense of group identity in the face of a new and unfamiliar 'other'. One participant described how this is taking place in smaller villages in his native Northern Ireland:

"I know in Northern Ireland obviously there's huge problems between Roman Catholics and Protestants but there's now huge issues arising in very small villages and communities with people from Eastern Europe who have come in to take work ... I mean it's very sad, it's very small and everyone knows each other and it's just foreign people coming in and ... well, it's been like this for hundreds of years they've had to go elsewhere to get work and people have said well this is how we've settled in other places, you know. It's a major, major issue in the sense of belonging there that becomes really strong within that community ... you've got two communities essentially because you've got the local people and the people that have come in."

It would seem, then, that for some the idea of close-knit community provides a comforting sense of stability and belonging, while for others it can come to represent a constraining force, or a closed community resistant to change. One participant described her home village as a place with what she saw as an almost suffocating sense of community and tradition:

"I come from a tiny, tiny village and as far as I can remember I always thought what the hell am I doing here? I'm just not meant to be here, what's going on. Everybody is the same as everybody else, and knows everybody's life, or non-life."

Another participant made an interesting comment about the feeling of belonging that comes with being away from one's place of origin. While she had no particular allegiances to the region, one young woman used her Cornish identity in other contexts as a means to distinguish herself from others and, perhaps, to align herself with an imagined notion of what being 'Cornish' entails:

"I'm very patriotic about Cornwall too ... when I'm not there."

Race/ethnicity

Similar to the values implicit in national identity, race and ethnicity have become very strong markers of individual and group identity. While ethnicity is only a major source of identity and belonging for the British population as whole, as we saw in Figure 1, for those of Caribbean, Asian and other ethnic origins it is seen as a defining characteristic by 60%. Yet, strange though it might sound, ethnic identities (and the cultural attributes associated with them) are rarely fixed entities, nor are they necessarily exclusive. People may choose to identify themselves with one or more ethnic, racial or sociocultural groups and a person's own ethnic identity may in fact change to varying degrees depending on the specific circumstances or contexts. Such dynamic and 'fluid' traits allow for individuals to respond to personal and societal changes over time, and create the ability to build a sense of belonging and feel at home across a number of particular societies, communities, families or social groups.

Following the social and political changes experienced by Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War, various states adopted policies of multiculturalism to deal with the shifts in national demographics. Such policies, however, received criticism from many scholars for their tendency to reduce peoples and cultures to singular, defined entities – the assumption often being that every member of a particular group relates to that group in a the same way. While some leaders believed that assimilation of new groups of peoples into British society was a positive step towards social cohesion and integration, many others felt that such an action led citizens to view national (and minority) culture as fixed and static, encouraging people to conform to a mythical and homogenous view of culture

This, some argue, has actually succeeded in creating more polarised communities. Much of the present debate over what constitutes 'Britishness' stems from specific interpretations of who does or does not 'belong' – regardless of their citizenship status – in British society. The underlying presumption in such discussions is that there is a critical divide in society between an 'us' and a 'them'.

In Britain, while some citizens claim to not belong to any singular community, many others – both from minority as well as majority groups – see themselves as integral parts of communities whose borders extend much farther than those of the British Isles. Given these changes in society, it may be more helpful to think of ideas of belonging and citizenship less as fixed entities and more as 'multi-layered' and British society itself as having entered a period of 'super-diversity' – one of unprecedented complexity and heterogeneity.

Belonging online

It is hardly groundbreaking news that the Internet has changed the world as we know it. Through online technology we can instantaneously locate information about nearly any topic imaginable, purchase goods to be delivered to our doorsteps within hours. We can now also work online – telecommuting – from almost anywhere in the world. But the Internet has not just made life easier, more efficient and more productive for us. It has also changed the way we interact with one another – spawning entirely new societies, communities and families to which we now belong and in which we are spending an increasingly large amount of our waking hours.

The mass media have long had the power to create large communities of people – viewers, listeners and readers – ever since books and national newspapers were distributed across countries and continents, helping to organize and unite otherwise geographically-disjointed and diverse communities. Today, the presence of technologically-enabled groups and communities extends to a vast range of online activities including virtual social groups, online dating sites, chat rooms, newsgroups, RSS feeds and podcasts, social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Friendster and aSmallWorld and virtual worlds sites such as Warcraft and Second Life. Through such platforms, we are enabled to create identities that may faithfully represent or markedly diverge from our 'true' identities. For many of us, these new means of communication and interaction represent entirely new ways of engaging with other members of society, as one focus group participant said:

"I think the internet is a big thing now in terms of belonging. You know, people have got Messenger and Hotmail – in fact even Hotmail is a bit old now. It's all about instant communication within groups like MySpace ... Yeah, a sense of belonging through interactive media now that wasn't there before, not even so much when we were younger"

For younger generations who have been raised with these new media such online social time may occupy a significant portion of their days or nights, about which one mother in our focus groups was rather worried :

"I mean my kids have a really strong social life yet MySpace is the thing that they spend all their time between midnight and 4am it seems to me ... when they should be sleeping."

All this novelty, however, does not mean that older members of society , for whom the Internet is very much a 'new' technology, have not taken to these new opportunities for human interaction. The Internet has also opened up new possibilities for older generations to exchange ideas and share long-standing interests with different groups of people:

"I belong to several internet forums and chat rooms for tortoises ... You would not believe how committed tortoise people are."

The development of such online communities has also raised important issues regarding how we present ourselves to others. There can be marked differences in how we present ourselves to the outside world in an online environment because we are much more in control of the variables by which we are perceived by others. As online users we identify ourselves via self-invented monikers or 'handles' and the profiles we ascribe to ourselves may bear little relation to our real-world identities. When you visit someone's homepage or read their online biography, for example, what you are actually seeing is their presentation of themselves as they want to be seen in that situation.

This 'invisible' nature of online interaction has other effects on our role as individuals in a group. In the private setting of a virtual community or Internet chat room, there is less incentive to adhere to social rules and mores than in the outside, physical world. There is simply less at risk for those who break such rules. If a member is kicked out of an online community that person can almost always return under a different, anonymous name, forging a new identity behind which they can continue to engage in group interaction.

Yet not all online interaction is of such a dubious nature. The Internet has also enabled us to stay in touch with friends and family, reconnecting with people we have grown distant from. Web sites such as Friends Reunited and Classmates.com have enabled us to reconnect with ex-schoolmates, extended family members and even estranged friends. Other social networking sites such as Facebook and Friendster reproduce pre-existing member-based groups such as university college or workplace communities. By facilitating more points of contact between people, they serve to strengthen and enhance real-world friendships and acquaintances as well as enabling and encouraging new interactions between people who have never met in person and may only 'know' each other online.

Other online communities – paid dating sites most notably – are predicated around the idea that members spend money to engage and interact with each other online in the hope that they will at some point meet each other in person 'offline'. Thus, the virtual world becomes an arena for forging acquaintances, relations and friends that can develop into 'real world' relationships, enabling – some would argue enhancing – traditional human social interaction.

On the other hand, many people have argued that the Internet and associated digital technologies have negatively affected face-to-face communications, weakening the long-standing social bonds between individuals. With all the time we are spending in front of our computers communicating virtually with other users and their computers, online activity may very well be displacing offline interaction. Whether such technologies will affect human interaction in the long-term still remains to be seen.

Class belonging

Human societies have always maintained a hierarchy among their members: rich/poor, strong/weak, leaders/followers – such classifications are universal. The notion of 'class' in early societies was originally meant to 'classify' people based on the type of job they held (i.e. manual labourer, landowner, tax man. etc.) and corresponded to the particular level of social prestige, economic means and access to political power which their job afforded. Social class was almost exclusively defined at birth and the societal role into which one was born (i.e. that which one's family occupied) would remain the same throughout one's lifetime. While this may still be the case in certain traditional cultures one's class in Western societies now corresponds more closely with one's own social achievements – including education, occupation and income.

Class has been a national obsession in Britain since the Victorian age when members of many ranks of society actively vied for a preferred social position, distancing themselves from lower classes and assuming affinity with the higher-ups – wearing nicer clothes, speaking with a more refined accent, marrying in order to attain a coveted title or building a country home in the image of the estates of the aristocracy. It used to be the case that the notion of being working class was associated with a desire to change society and had a degree of radicalism attached to it, a connotation that caused conservative members of society to avoid openly identifying themselves as working class. The middle class developed, in part, because many working people, while interested in self-improvement and social advancement, recognized and acknowledged, as the author Davenport suggests, the "narrow horizons available in working-class life, and the desire for a better material and cultural existence", and thus distanced themselves from the lower classes.

Championing a working-class identity based on cultural issues, rather than political considerations, emerged when the political left became more reluctant to connect with the more extreme aspirations of working citizens. Having a mortgage, going abroad on holiday and driving a car had all become emblematic of an individualistic sensibility, rather than a communal or socialist one.

As such, there is no longer a one-to-one relationship between the economic and social class a person occupies and the one with which they identify. Class identity is no longer bound to a distinctive set of values. Today, for example, identifying with the romantic ideal of living like the working class is associated with the rejection of ambition and success commonly associated with the rise of the nouveaux riches. Describing oneself as working class became a way of, as Neil Davenport puts it, "of snobbishly dismissing materialism" – a means of distancing oneself from societal centres of power and privilege. This explains why we occasionally see middle-class people affecting working-class backgrounds, values and 'authentic' ways of living, while at the same time remaining indignant about 'chav' culture for embodying all that is wrong with society today.

The 2007 report on British Social Attitudes (BSA) found that 37% of Brits consider themselves to be middle class, compared with 57% who identify

themselves as working class. Such figures would seem to make sense since the majority of people living in Britain are, in fact, working class. The technological boom that followed industrialization means that fewer people now work in traditionally industrial jobs, with many people having shifted to work in the service sector. But the BSA also noted that many people who were not economically or socially working class were still living working class lifestyles and aspiring to working class values. This stems from the fact that class identity is for many people very much tied to the identity they were raised with. Even if they have become upwardly mobile in adulthood. It also reflects the fact that while class is still a strong factor in belonging, it functions today in very different ways than it did several decades ago.

It is necessary, however, to put this sense of class consciousness in perspective. While we may evaluate ourselves and others in class terms, it is not the same as having an over-riding sense of class identity as such. In our national poll, only about 13% of respondents thought that class was a significant part of their sense of belonging, as we saw earlier in Figure 1. Class matters, but much less than our families and our friends.

Political identities

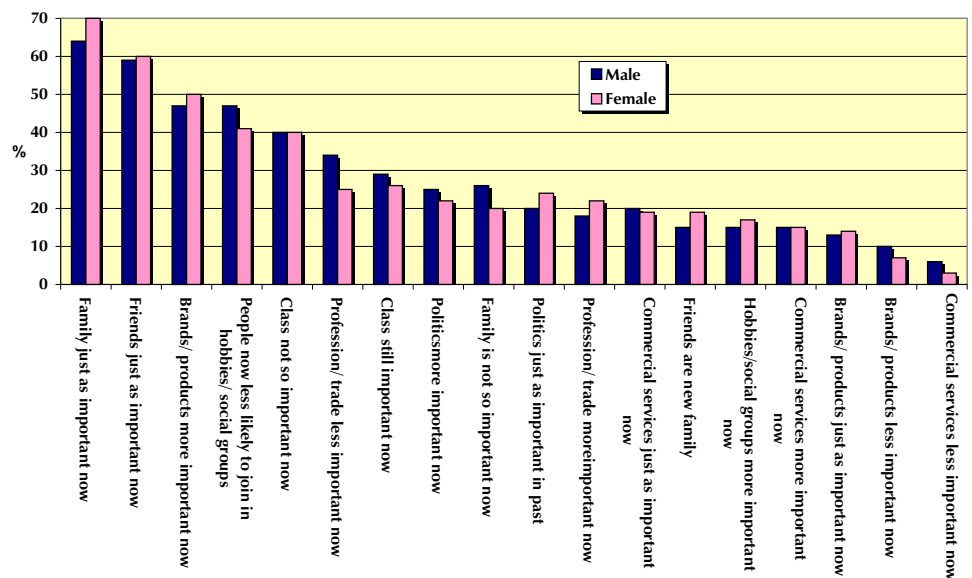
Political affiliations and organisations are at the core of some of the most important issues facing our world today and political identities now seem more important than ever. It is the case, however, recent research suggests that political participation in Britain is declining sharply. In the 1960s, 82% of people identified 'very' or 'fairly' strongly with a political party. The British Election Study survey in 2005 found that this had fallen to 51%..

What a difference 40 years can make. The politically-turbulent 1960s are now much romanticized as the era when politics played an integral role in the personal identity of many Europeans and North Americans, as one focus group participant illustrated:

"It's interesting, my son once said, (he's 33 now, this is when he was about 17 or 18 and he was becoming slightly politically active) and he said 'Oh you were so lucky, you grew up in the sixties when you had all those causes', and I said 'There are still as many causes, you know, have a look around you' ... there are people starving, there's oppression, there's slavery, there's lots of causes."

Our poll data, however, show that British people still feel that politics plays an equal if not more important role in society than in the past, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Opinions on changes in importance of groups and issues



The data on which Figure 5 is based are to do with opinions on a range of issues, on which we will provide further comment in later sections of this report. However, even if most people believe that, objectively, politics should remain important, it plays only a marginal role in identity formation for many people, as

we saw in Figure 1. In fact, responses to our polls showed that political views were about as important for people as the sport teams they support or where they go on holiday.

Conventional wisdom holds that political identities are passed on by the family to new members at an early age and remain more or less constant throughout life. This has become much less the case now. Today, voter turnout rates and political participation among younger generations is alarmingly poor. As one focus group participant explained:

"The younger generation from sort of 18 to 25 ... generally seem to think, well what's the point? I can vote but it doesn't seem to make any difference anyway, whereby the government of the day say that, well if you don't do this and you make a nuisance of yourself we'll just give you an ASBO or an Anti Social Behaviour Order ... the government themselves don't have a high regard for law or International Law and kids aren't stupid and they see the hypocrisy between the two. These days you've just got this sort of apathy towards voting and that sort of thing."

Studies have indicated that even when young people are interested in political matters and do support the democratic process, they remain highly critical of those in power. This may indeed have less to do with an apathetic view towards social issues, and more with a generalised scepticism about formal politics itself.

"I still think kids are less political now that they were, even 20 years ago ... I think there was more call for students to be into politics in those days, I think now it's just ... I think it was more a fashion thing almost, it was just expected."

"(For me) it started with the Civil Rights Movement when I was in the States when I was growing up and then there was Vietnam and there was lots of marches there and I was a student at that time and then I moved here and there was CND"

Even many older members of society, however, may feel increasingly lost and apathetic when it comes to political allegiances:

"I was very much a political animal actually for a long, long time and I think unfortunately I've become very disillusioned with what's been going on. I'm really proud to say that I was very heavily involved with the then Green Party before it ... well, it was then the Ecology Party before it then went on to being the Green Party and I very, very involved in that in London for a long, long time, then I moved over to another political party which has since been in power for quite a few years and I feel quite saddened in a sense that my politicalness has gone because I'm so lost with what is going on around me, that I'm so confused now that I don't know what to do, it's a great shame that that part of me as almost died really."

One reason for such uncertainty is the increased choice many of us have across many aspects of our lives today.

"I actually became quite active locally [with Greenpeace in New Zealand] on sort of getting involved in, lets get rid of this [nuclear testing], this is futile, it's

bloody ridiculous, and that was a personal choice, I didn't agree with everything some of these groups do ... never have, so now, I won't align myself with any particular group cause I believe I'm a free thinker ... if you align yourself too much with a particular group you will lose your sense of identity, that's my personal belief anyway."

"I think it's more difficult now as well because there are economic constraints now, I mean when I was growing up if you had a university degree no matter what it was you would pretty much be guaranteed a job and you would be all right. Well that isn't the case now and people do worry about what's going to happen to them in the future."

While a decline in national, party-based political affiliation may explain the reduced numbers of voter participation, many of us have taken a renewed interest in local, community politics. This preference for locally-based political action was much in evidence among several of our focus group respondents:

"And also if you have an issue to deal with ... like we had a nursery going to be proposed for the end of our road and nobody but nobody wanted it because it would mean that we would have cars sitting up and down our road and we all became nimbies and banded together and everybody got to know each other then ... and then street parties, we had a street party and that got everyone together which helped ... and then when once you know each other"

"I think there are pockets like that in any city actually, you know you here of streets that seem to bond really well and streets that don't and there's no reason as to why one bonds and as to why one doesn't cause the road I used to live before I moved in to where I am now was definitely like that"

"I think it's really weird how little things that aren't immediately obvious do bring the community together, you know, if your local shop comes under a new proprietor, that brings the village together or, you know, 5th November fireworks at the local pub ... something like Arts Week, you know everyone opens up their houses and it forces neighbours to talk."

This shift towards more local, community-based and face-to-face interaction — the idea that we can make a difference one village at a time — is also evidenced among other types of communities, most notably in that of religious communities.

Religion

Church membership in Western Europe has been experiencing a rapid decline over the past several decades. In 1964, 74% of UK citizens claimed they belonged to a religion and attended regular religious services, compared to 31% in 2005. Even the survey questions themselves had to be changed accordingly over the years: the somewhat leading question "What is your religion?" from the 1960s questionnaire had to be changed in later surveys to "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?".

Religious affiliation has since been characterised as having shifted from strong, regular faith-based participation in organised church activities to 'believing without belonging'.

"I did this thing where I went to church every week and now I'm just totally against any sort of organised religion as such because I think it's too restrictive and now I'm a free thinker. I hope ... I embrace all aspects from all different things cause who knows who is right when you get to the other end."

The very notion of 'church' itself – a word which actually has three meanings, standing for the building, the parish and the wider religious community – is seen by many people as much more of a local, community activity rather than standing for participation in any one mass, organised religion:

"You mentioned religion and I see myself belonging to my Church, like Trinity on Third Street, but not as a particular religion as a whole but as a local thing."

Of course, even if we do not necessarily attend regular church services, we may still consider ourselves adherents to a particular faith. Research has shown, however, that among those who do claim a specific religious identity, there has been a marked decline in participation in regular religious-based activities.

The effect that such social developments has had on group affiliation and religious belonging is an interesting one. The obvious answer to why these changes have occurred is that members of various religious organisations have found other ways to express faith and spirituality other than simply by being an avowed member of any one Church. The question, however, is further complicated with the marked presence of 'Islamophobia' in many pockets of Europe – both a product of terrorism in the new millennium and the growth of religious fundamentalist organisations, coupled with more deeply rooted prejudices.

Despite this marked decline in faith and active involvement in religious activities we still, however, appear to link to the identity label of religion. In the 2001 UK census, 72% of people said that they were 'Christian'. Only 15.5% ticked the 'No religion' box. In contrast, a national poll conducted in 2005 found that only 35% of British people believed in any kind of God or supreme being, compared with 73% in the United States.

At first sight this seems very strange. On the one hand we are largely a nation of atheists. On the other we are overwhelmingly a land of Christians. What this illustrates very clearly, however, is our need to belong, at least in a passive way, to something that is so familiar to us from our early childhoods and school routines – the assemblies and hymn singing which still remain, although now in multi-faith and multi-cultural formats, across our educational system. While most of us no longer believe that there is a God, whether Christian, Buddhist Jewish or Islamic, we still cling to the 'badge' of organised religion in order to describe who we really are. This tells us a great deal about the strength of the need to belong.

Lifestyles

Brand Identities: how we spend our money

'Brand identity' and 'brand image' are terms we hear a lot about these days. They refer to the unique set of associations tied to a specific line of consumer products or services and represent the image that a given brand carries in the mind of current owners and potential consumers. It is important to remember that when we make any purchase we are not simply buying an object – we are buying into an idea. Through commercial products brands function as important symbols or 'agents' that represent sensibilities, affiliations and even entire social groups. We buy things not merely because we want or need that specific item but because we want to be associated with all the references implicit in that brand's identity. We want to become, in essence, a member of the community of owners of that brand – Mac users, Zara shoppers, Gucci wearers, etc.

A number of participants in the focus groups were reluctant to admit that their social identities were formed in part on the basis of the brands and services that they consumed. There was clear evidence that they felt that it might mark them out as 'fashion victims'. The relatively low ranking of brands and services in the national poll might also reflect this desire to be seen as 'rising above' such considerations. It was clear, however, that despite their reluctance initially to admit it, many participants had strong feelings about specific goods they bought and services to which they subscribed:

"A company that really does a good job – and I think because it has such a unified front from the advertisement, to the packaging, to the bill that you get – is Mac. I am a Mac user, Patrick's a Mac user. I know he is, and you know people who use a Mac too and you talk about how much you love your Macs and how great they are."

"Nike, I'm a fan of Nike. I like it because I play basketball a lot and I try a lot of shoes from a lot of companies and I find that Nike is best for me and I read a story of how Nike developed ... it's like one century ago a person made a shoe for sports ... I think it's basically defined by quality."

Note in the last extract the way in which brand choice is rationalised in terms of functional qualities. Throughout the focus groups and interviews participants resisted the idea that they bought particular items because of their image or lifestyle connotations, despite the fact that they saw such choices as forming part of their social identity and sense of belonging – a very 'British' kind of self presentation in itself perhaps. One participant in the focus groups consistently denied that 'labels' meant anything to her at all. At the end of the session another participant commented on how nice her leather jacket was. She smiled proudly in response. Quickly, however, she added:

"Oh yes, but I bought it in a charity shop – it was second hand and really quite cheap, and it's very comfortable."

Associations of a certain brand with quality (rather than the label itself) do not arise on their own. One does not buy a Ferrari simply because it goes fast. As the product design guru Guido Stompff argues, Converse Chuck Taylor trainers do not sell so well because they are comfortable to wear. Such success is the result of millions of dollars of market research and subsequent brand marketing and advertising.

As our focus groups discussions revealed, maintaining loyalty to a particular brand is for certain people a matter of being a customer for a long period of time. While many parts of our lives might be in flux – new jobs, families, etc. – the associations with the brands we buy and own can remain consistent for long periods of time.

"The fact that I'm with Lloyds has nothing to do with customer service or how nice they are to me or how easy the service is. It's just that I've been with them since I was 13 and I've probably lived in 25 houses since I was 13 and my Lloyds bank account is the only thing that's stayed the same so I feel this strange affinity with them. If I see my bank card and I see Lloyds I connect it with myself and it's got nothing to do with the quality of their service or their rates or anything."

"For me it comes down to people again. I mean I do Internet banking but I like going into my branch and seeing a person across the counter and all sorts of things on that level and just people being nice and friendly and helpful ... I was trying to install a wireless broadband a couple of weeks ago and did really well until step five when I completely packed up and I spent hours talking to some nice Kevin. I don't know why they always give themselves English names in Mumbai."

On the whole, our poll results show that it is predominately older generations (55+) that most highly regard quality, value for money and experience as the key factors in winning and maintaining service loyalty, as shown in Figure 6.

Belonging to a brand community, however, may have very little to do with the product itself. Our poll data, for example, also show that 18- to 24-year-olds were twice as likely as older generations to shift their loyalties from one brand to another depending on the current fashion or trend. They were also the age group that most considered the image portrayed by a brand or product to be important, as shown in Figure 7 below. Interestingly, gender seemed to account for little variation in both which services or products people purchase and long-term loyalty to given brands. The dissociation between a product and the image it conveys, however, has led some to become highly suspicious and critical of 'big business' and what it produces.

Figure 6. Loyalty to services

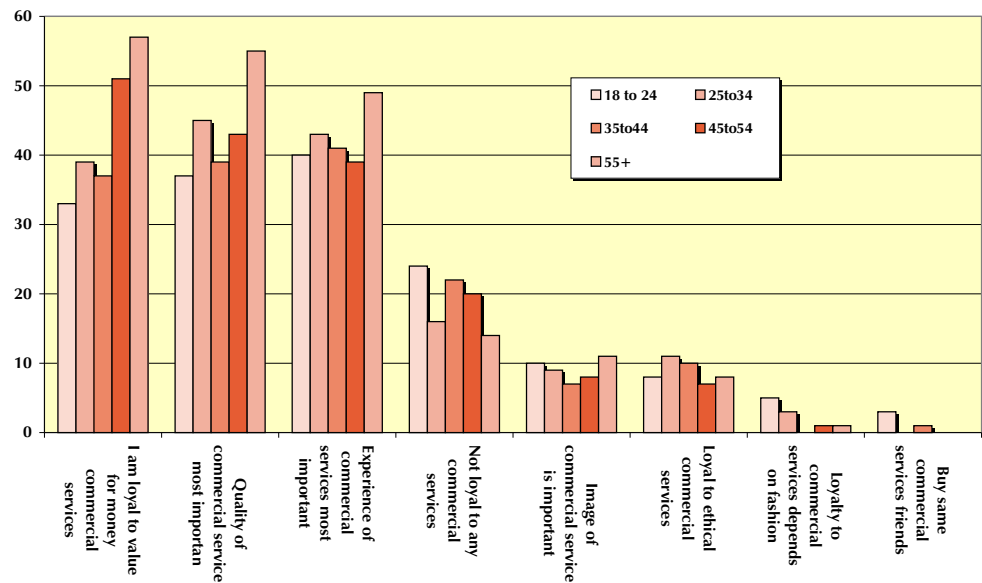
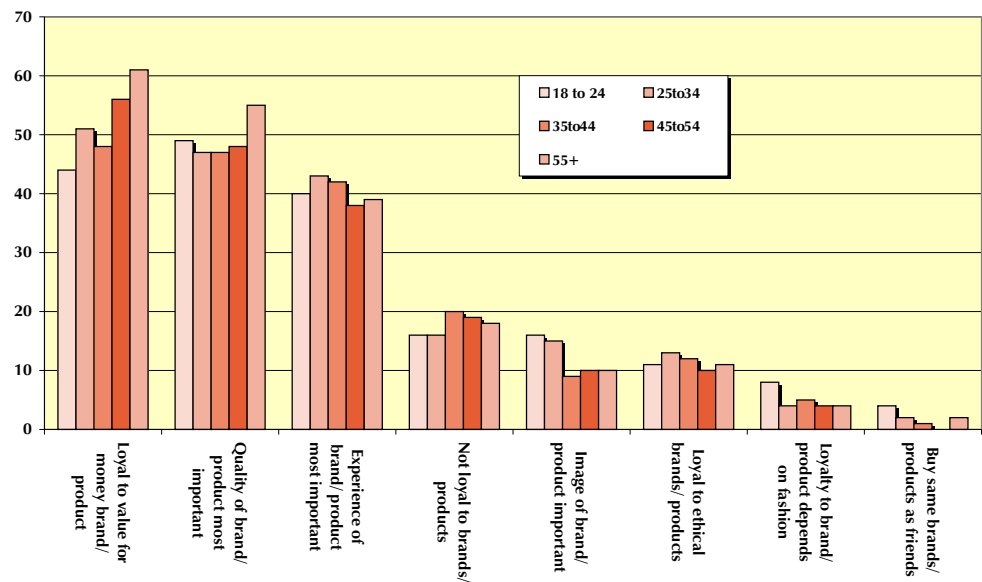


Figure 7. Loyalty to product brands



*"I suspect them, I mean I suspect my own company a lot of saying the right thing and trying to put over the right image and it's all image and there's no real foundation and that p****s me off."*

"There's been too many scandals, either in big business or in government and people have generally become suspicious of both."

Several participants also associated certain brand rather negatively with certain type of consumer, particular those perceived as chic, vain or simply rich:

"I guess I see it more fully with people with money ... they're gonna eat there or they're gonna stay at that place and they're gonna have that car, they're gonna have the biggest buggy to push their children ... do you see what I mean? Whatever group they think they're belonging to ..."

This focus group participant seems to indicate that because she does not purchase high-priced or fashionable commodities, she does not play the 'brand game'. Other respondents were defiant in establishing a distinction between them and those who are 'brand-conscious':

"Wearing things like Calvin Klein or Zara or whatever ... I never understood why people want to do that, or a little Gucci handbag."

"I would no way go down that road of putting labels on myself ... Fair Trade is Fair Trade whereas Calvin Klein isn't."

This statement about Fair Trade versus Calvin Klein raises several interesting points. The participant suggests that by purchasing something whose marketed brand image is one of social responsibility and altruism, she is not playing the 'brand game'. In reality, however, the products with the Fair Trade label are just as much a brand as the underwear sold by Calvin Klein. When we hear that someone purchases exclusively Fair Trade products, we immediately have (generally positive) associations with that person. This parallel to the (generally negative) associations many people have when they hear of someone who would wear Dolce & Gabbana. If we choose to use Fair Trade products, we do so not just because we hope that we can give disadvantaged producers a 'better deal' but also, implicitly, because we want to be part of the group of other Fair Trade consumers – other like-minded people with whom we belong.

Later, when responding to a question about what sort of car she drives, the same participant retorted:

"A pick up truck ... I go for the oldest, the most battered, the worst of the kind. I actually feel like I'm going down not up ... I love the fact that I do not aspire to anything."

Again, the sense is that one falls into the brand trap only when purchasing expensive, high-class commodity items. But driving a pick-up truck and self-avowedly "not aspiring to anything" is still choosing to be seen in a certain light and to be associated with a certain type of image. In doing both, this woman is still making a statement about where she belongs and how she wants to be perceived by other members of her community. The difference is simply the particular message and image which the brand is attempting to convey.

Many people view brand awareness as a relatively modern phenomenon – a product of the rapid rise of consumerism over the past few decades and the unprecedented choices with which we are all now presented. It is also viewed, most notably by critics, as somehow very 'American' – part of our lifestyle habits that have been imported from across the Atlantic.

While it is true that brand consciousness may now be more widely spread throughout British society than in the past it is not, however, new in any sense. Anybody who doubts this should pay a visit to the Robert Opie Collection at the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising in London's Notting Hill. Here they will see that for 200 years we have been exposed to images of the refined lifestyles associated with products as varied as milk chocolate and tailored shirts. The messages have a common theme – in buying a particular product you are joining a group comprising discerning, adventurous, sensible, attractive or even simply 'nice' people. The purchase acts as your membership ticket.

All that has changed since Victorian days is that brand consciousness has become democratised. In the late 19th century only the privileged elite had access to the 'must-have' brands. These, frequently, had Royal Warrants, indicating that they were preferred by the King or Queen or at least by some very high ranking member of the Royal Family. It is hard to imagine a more powerful form of brand endorsement than that. And so, the Victorian gentry and aspiring wealthy middle classes bought their shirts from Gieves and their cigarettes were Dunhill, reinforcing and demonstrating to others their lofty positions in society.

Today, exactly the same process is at work except that now most, if not all, of us can play the same game. The Royal Warrant may be quite redundant but there is no shortage of other role models setting the trend for others to aspire to through purchase of the consumer products that they endorse or with which they are associated.

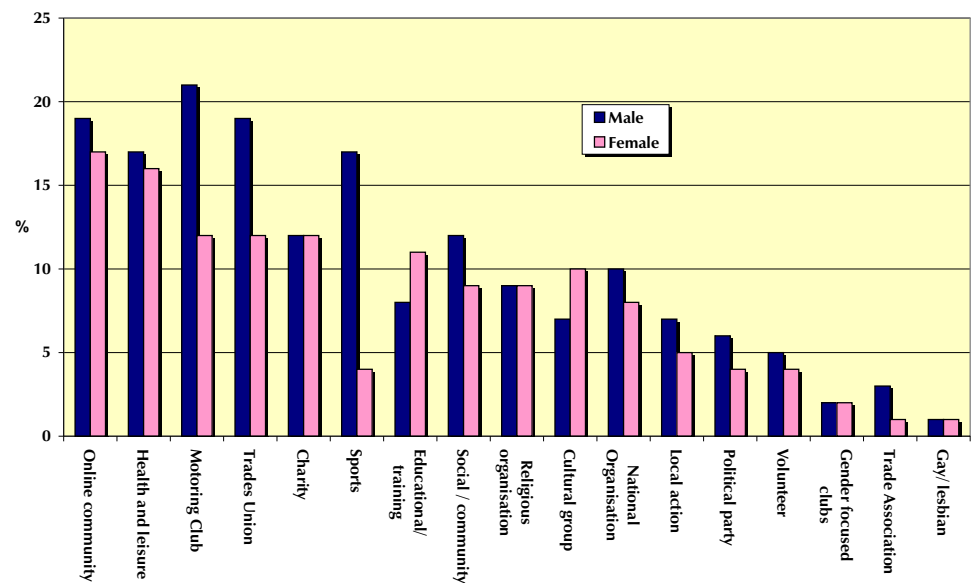
Lifestyles — Leisure Activities: how we spend our time

Just as the brands we buy and the services we use say a lot about what types of groups of people we choose to associate with, and where we want to belong, so do other aspects of the lifestyles we lead. Our poll results showed that after online communities¹, people were most likely to be member of, in order of importance, a health or leisure facility (17%), a motoring club (16%), a trades union (15%), a charity organization (12%), a sports association (10%) and a social club or community organisation (10%). These are illustrated in Figure 8 below.

In some of these cases, the differences between male and female were insignificant, while in others (i.e. sports or motoring clubs), the results showed a marked difference between the two genders. For many of us, the various types of organizations that we join serve as ways of putting down roots in new environments. For one participant in our focus groups, growing up as a boy in Slovakia involved modes of belonging that were strongly tied to association with (and participation in) specific sub-cultures:

1 Since the YouGov poll was conducted on-line, this may exaggerate the number of people who are members of on-line communities

Figure 8. Membership of groups and organisations



"In Slovakia there was this differentiation whether you liked more heavy metal music or Depeche Mode ... I don't know why but this was defining ... because if you said you liked this kind of music then people would ignore you because they would say you don't belong to us."

For other participants, joining a community group or club was a path into membership in the wider community that surrounded it

"When I first came to Oxford that's how I built my social life ... by joining a football team, a lot of my friendships started from joining a football team, really, so you get the double whammy. So I enjoyed the football and I enjoyed the friendships and the social side of it as well."

"That's like me as well. I joined the football club and met loads of people and you do feel this sense of, not during the match but afterwards it can be quite a bonding experience for no particular reason."

"I belong to a couple of clubs in Oxford and they sort of helped me along my way when I was kind of new to Oxford. I still play pool for Oxford so ... I joined a belly dancing club and the gym as well ... just random clubs that I found interesting but different ... I was not passionate about sport but I had a fixed idea on what I wanted to be and I had a strong will to follow that and for that reason I needed to be fit so I followed sports as kind of achieving what I started to create myself as a kind of dream of what I wanted to become ... It wasn't until I got to university that I found a sport that I just loved. I loved the sport itself, I loved the people in it and I loved the sense of belonging in that particular sport."

There is, again, a sense of timelessness about these patterns of membership and belonging. We have always created special interest groups in which we can experience a sense of social bonding with like-minded people. In some cases the need for this kind of affiliation may be stronger than the actual interest in the pursuit itself. Does one, for example, join a bee-keeping club because of a passionate interest in bees themselves, or because one likes and feels a synergy with other bee keepers?

It is because the need to belong drives membership of organisations, as much as the ostensible function of the organisations themselves, we observe that as membership of some groups falls, it rises in others. Such changes directly reflect shifts in the cultural Zeitgeist of the particular age. Today, two issues predominate contemporary lifestyles – concern for personal health and well-being and worries about the environment. As a result, we have witnessed major expansions in membership organisations to allow people to express their commitments in these areas and their sense of belonging with other people who share their philosophies of life. Private gym clubs, ranging from modest keep-fit hall to 'posers palaces' have sprung up in every urban area of the country. Aerobic and pilates sessions are now run in every municipal sports centre in the country. At the same time, membership of Greenpeace in Britain has risen from 30,000 in the 1980s to around a quarter of a million. Membership of the National Trust has increased ten-fold since the 1970s. Similar expansion is evident in the Wildlife Trusts, RSPB and Friends of the Earth.

Belonging, then, is not just an individual issue – it is also central feature of prevailing culture at any point in history. Patterns of membership allow us to define quite clearly the age in which we live. Today it is fit and green. In a decade or so it may be very different. One thing that will not change, however, is people's need to join *something*.

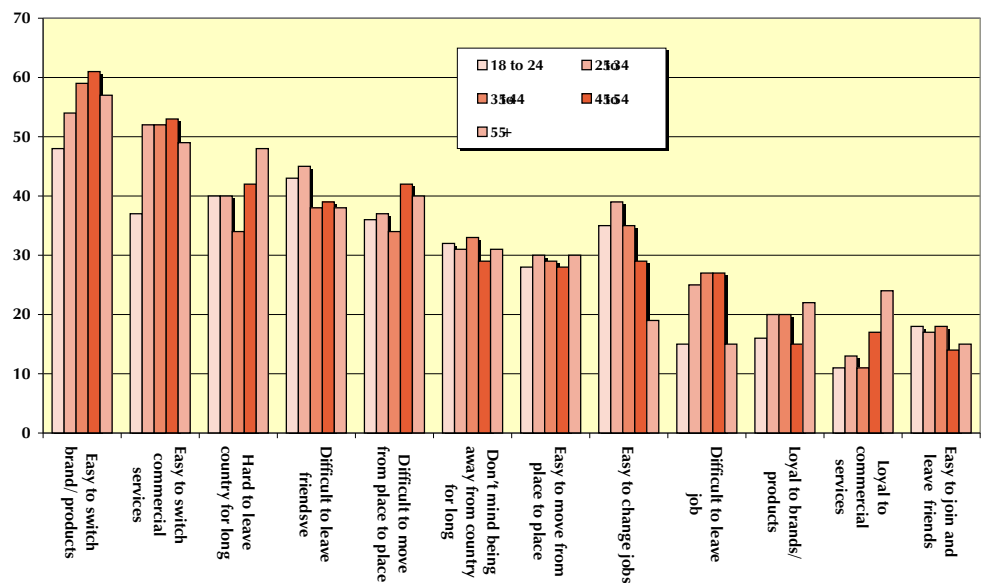
Professional Identities

These days, the question "Where do you work?" has in many ways become shorthand for "Who are you?" Similarly, "Where did you go to school?" may be a politically-correct way of masking the question "How smart or ambitious are you?" – in the same way that "Where do you hang out?" could be fishing for the answer to "How cool are you, really?"

There is nothing disingenuous or deceitful about asking such questions since answers to all of them provide key information about the sort of people we are and the types of people with whom we choose to be associated. It is, nevertheless, interesting to consider how closely we tend to associate our own personal and group identities with the professional and educational institutions and organisations we are part of.

Across generations there exist some significant variations in how we relate to our places of employment. SIRC's national poll shows that among the various age groups, those aged 18 to 24 found it nearly twice as easy to leave their jobs as older adults, as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Ease and difficulty of change



While this is, to some extent, due to the fact that such young adults will not have worked for long enough in any one job to set down roots, it is also reflective of the generational shifts in how work, employment and careers are perceived today. Those aged 55 and above found it equally as easy as the youngest age group to leave a place of employment, though this figure is largely due to the fact that many members of this generation will soon be hoping to retire anyway.

A number of focus group contributions pointed to the pivotal roles that school and university play in forming a sense of group identity and belonging:

"The majority of the child's waking time is actually spent at school, so the groups of people he's gonna associate most with, other than his mother and father, is the school teacher, the rest of the staff and the kids, so right from the word go they're mixing with a whole group of people they initially don't know and they drift into little groups and all sorts of stuff, be it all good or bad, and it's all down to the school system how those kids come out the other end."

"When my kids were at school I bonded really well with the school my kids went to and I put a lot of my energy and my time into the schools and a lot of the friendships in fact probably my best friends came from the time when my kids were at school and also their children and therefore I feel they belong and I belong with them... I suppose because most of the time in Oxford has been school oriented that's where I've belonged and bonded."

"Something that American universities do very well is they grab you and say this is your university, your allegiance is to this university, this is who you are and this is what you're about and like I was wearing my Tiger jersey around today and like I graduated five years ago. Universities in the States just grab you and say this is who you are and make you feel like you belong."

In terms of careers, many people develop a strong bond with their employers regardless of how big or small an institution it may be. In the focus group discussions about the senses of belonging we develop at work, one participant alluded to how such bonds develop:

"When I became part of it I got completely sucked in and do really feel a sense of identity but even more so because I think because I'm part of a team, you know. I manage the team and we have a name and I think there's really something in that, the fact that we have a specific name and that really does give us a sense of belonging."

Such an identity may arise from working for a specific company or organisation itself, as this participant expressed, or it might arise from simply being around co-workers with which one forms a very human bond:

"Sometimes if you don't enjoy your job even if you don't like it you do sort of have a sense of belonging there, you know, it is that sort of reality where you mean something to each person within your work environment."

In this case, it is the co-workers that can make a job tolerable – even if the work itself is not very enjoyable. Hopefully, though, we are able fit in and belong at places we want to be working, in positions we enjoy and with people we want to be around:

"It was more just that I wanted a sense of belonging and I wanted to do a job that I felt really passionate about and I liked what they believed in, I liked their values, their principles ... I like the idea of doing that type of work that wasn't for any gain or for any corporate gain. It was all for the good of other people, so I wanted to be part of that, I wanted to completely absorb myself and spend my

time and energy and also earn money from doing something that was completely focused on that."

"I've always felt I've belonged to work no matter what I've done because it's always been quite creative, whether it's a creative spirit and it's just evolved or ... I've just always felt part of it ... the people that I've worked with, the sort of environment I've worked in, no matter what aspect it's been you know, I'm just lucky that I've found something that I'm more passionate about than I ever have been but I've always felt that work was intrinsic in who I was."

Yet however much we might love our jobs, some of us have to become very adept at dissociating our work identities from our own personal identities:

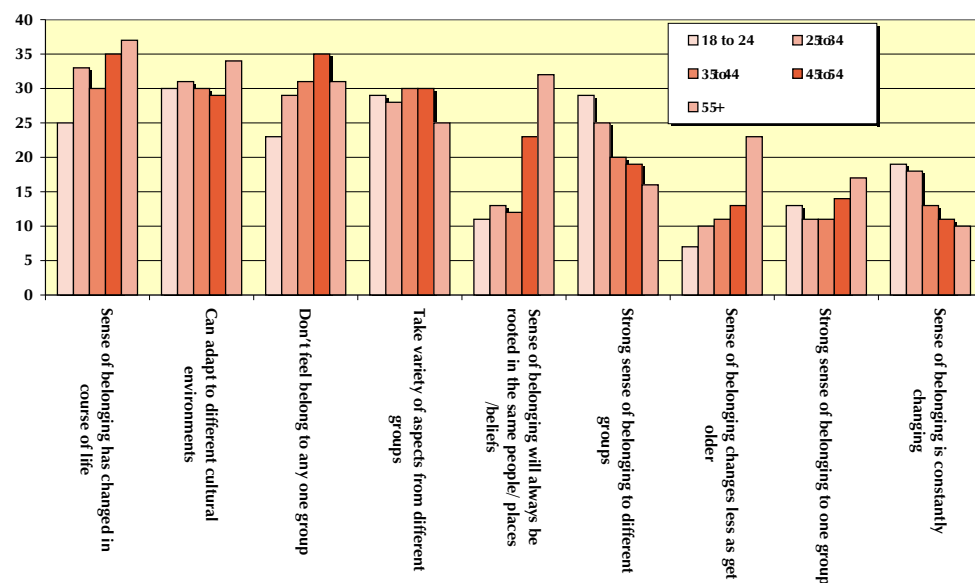
"Comfort zones ... I think it also depends on how much of your identity is tied up with your work and if not much of it is then it's much easier to switch. Yeah, I mean I had long careers and I never sort of knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. I just sort of found jobs and I did them well and I enjoyed them but none of the things that I did were a great part of my identity, you know. I always found that outside from where I worked."

Given that most of us will spend around 38% of our adult waking lives in a working environment, it stands to reason that a significant part of our identities will be influenced by our jobs and careers.

Other identities

Any number of other aspects of our lives – from gender and sexuality to age and language – play varying degrees of importance in fostering a sense of belonging. The social and cultural differences that exist between generations, for example, e.g.. Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, are greater now than they ever have been in the past and the notion of a generation has become an important means of delineating separate, distinct groups in society. The results from SIRC's national poll show that generation and age can greatly affect people's beliefs about their role in society and can change the categories of people to whom they feel affinity and loyalty. The generation of 18- to 24-year-olds, for example, most readily believes that their sense of belonging will always be rooted in the same people, places and beliefs. They also maintain a very strong sense of belonging to a variety of groups – significantly more so than other age groups, as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Changes in sources of belonging



While some might attribute these figures to naïveté and lack of life experience on the part of younger members of society, it must also be considered that distinct social and cultural changes over the past half-century have altered how people now interact with each other. Even if the most marked differences across all the poll results can be found between the youngest and the oldest generations, there is much more at play here than simply the differences between early and late stages in life.

Tied to the differences of chronological generations are those of geographic and political generations – groups of people who came of age during periods of great social change under varying regimes. Two focus group participants spoke about

how such changes affected how they differentiate themselves from earlier generations:

"I would think, yes, that we are kind of the last generation of those who were born in kind of old system, because my country in the old area where I was born in the nineties where there was a big transition so we were influenced by what was before and also accommodating changes, I see that the generation behind us are different so there is difficulty to connect with younger people in society at this time for me, I would say."

"China opened the country in 1978 and I was born in 1978, so I think I'm the first generation of the open door... I think I benefit a lot from the economic growth and also it's completely different, the former generation...the former generation they grew up like, communist so their critical point of view is different. Now people are more flexible, I think they are less belonging than the other generation."

Another characteristic that plays a crucial role in how society sees us and how we relate to others is that of gender. Aside from the basic sex differences between men and women, socially-constructed gender identities play a fundamental role in who we are and how we act in different areas of society. Our gender is such a deep-seated aspect of who we are that we sometimes forget its importance in our social identities:

"Didn't occur to me that I belonged to being female."

"Actually saying this when I went to India, Jesus, I did feel like I was a woman."

"I felt like that when I went to have the tyres changed on my car, thought I'd forgot to put my clothes on! [laughing]."

Equally important – and another aspect that we commonly take for granted – is language, another central aspect of who we are. As well as being the means by which we communicate our thoughts, our needs and our desires with the outside world, language is also among the most important carriers of group culture and identity. As part of a group, we adhere to specific rules and follow different patterns of behaviour but we may also make use of languages, dialects and modes of speaking which may be subtly or markedly different from how we interact with people in other contexts. In this sense, language serves first and foremost to establish one as a specific individual within a community:

"Do you find those of us who have foreign accents; Scottish, Irish and American, whatever ... do you find that's a barrier when you first move to a place? That people make assumptions about you because of your accent, I mean it certainly happens if you have an American accent ... people think you're rich and right wing and all sorts of things you know."

Language can also function as a line of demarcation between groups and sub-groups, serving to include and exclude members, such as was the case with these two women in the focus groups recounting their experiences outside of their home countries:

"I didn't want to live in a country where I could understand everything ... I found it really depressing here, I couldn't wait to leave, I have absolutely no affinity to England at all and rejected it whole heartedly, any sense of attachment I just didn't want it."

"I think for things like language it's interesting as well I mean cause people said when I retired – oh may as well go live abroad or something – and first of all I thought well all my friends are here, but I couldn't imagine living in a place where it was a second language, I mean obviously you get better at whatever that language is and after a time it feels more natural but I think that's a barrier."

The last word ...

... comes from one of our most insightful focus group participants

"Hmmm, I would say that the friendships I developed at primary school were dependent upon geography, i.e. kids that lived pretty close to where I was so that when you had to go home for a meal or something like that you could be there in no time. Two of those friendships still exist today and are very strong, very, very strong ... and when we went to middle school it was pretty much the same, geographical once again ... and then I went into the Navy into another grouping of people and you retain I think those groupings for life. I mean a classic example: I've just been home for my eldest daughter's wedding and when you look round the room and you look at how my daughter set the tables up. I could go, well, my friends are there, there are the people I knew when we were having kids, that's my mother and my brothers and my cousins or whatever, those people I don't know at all, they only know me through my daughter. So that was quite interesting how they worked out and I reckon that's where you could say your groupings lie."