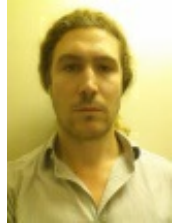


# In the debate about Britishness, it is important to distinguish between two different types of social cohesion

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When discussing Britishness and cohesion it is important to distinguish between two different types of social cohesion, institutional and associational, that often get conflated in public discourse, writes [Ben Richards](#). This can prevent conceptual ambiguities from being used to shift without justification from a discussion of liberal principles to one of English cultural assimilation.



Public discourse on Britishness and cohesion spans a wide range of issues that are often not clearly defined. The notion of community cohesion first gained currency in policy debates following the disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001, where it emerged as a new focus of race relations policy by problematising Asian communities for not integrating into the 'mainstream'. Multiculturalism was seen as detrimental to national unity, with community cohesion the solution, as [summarised by David Cameron](#) in 2007:

*"[the] doctrine of multiculturalism has undermined our nation's sense of cohesiveness because it emphasises what divides us rather than what brings us together".*

Part of the recent discourse has focused on illiberal practices of minority groups, with Cameron arguing that groups will be scrutinised to ensure they promote democracy and equality, and cracking down on practices such as female genital mutilation and [forced marriages](#). The debate, however, can also quickly turn towards claiming that minority communities are problematic because of failing to speak English and subscribe to British cultural traits. Cameron clearly had minority ethnic groups in mind when he argued:

*"So as we think about how to bring our country together, let's not pretend there are simple, quick solutions. And let's not pretend we can bully people into feeling British. We have to inspire them. The things that divide us are not the differences in our faith or colour."*

Leaving aside the fact that surveys consistently suggest people of non-white backgrounds are more likely to identify as British than 'White British' people, there is an issue here with the vague nature of the concept of cohesion, and related expressions such as 'what unites us', and 'bringing our country together'.

Some of these ambiguities can be resolved if one distinguishes between two types of social cohesion. 'Institutional cohesion' refers to the relationships between individuals and public institutions, particularly with regard to the ways in which individuals have a say in influencing these institutions, and the ways in which individuals can gain access to the services they provide. A 'cohesive society' in this sense, then, refers to a society in which individuals feel public institutions are legitimate and can represent them, and where all individuals are able to access the services these institutions provide on an equal basis. This type of cohesion refers more to a contractual relationship between the individual and society's institutions than any particular cultural traits.

'Associational cohesion', by contrast, refers to relationships *between* individuals in a society and to the ways in which individuals feel a sense of belonging as part of that society. A 'cohesive society' in this sense, then, refers to a society where individuals interact with each other, are engaged in civic activities with other members, feel strong senses of belonging to the society and their locality, and feel they have much in common with other members. This

type of cohesion refers to cultural traits and cultural similarities between individuals.

Having a state that is institutionally cohesive might be thought of as an essentially liberal idea whereby citizens put aside their pre-political attachments and show a commitment to a particular set of institutions and democratic processes, and a commitment to the ability for all to access them on an equal basis. The 'cohesion' refers to the *same* commitment and the *same* access to these institutions and processes of all citizens. After this point, there is a common framework of institutions and democratic processes through which differences – of culture, values or identity – can be contested.

Associational cohesion, by contrast, may be seen to imply a quite different type of 'sameness' upon which cohesion is based. It does not simply imply a commitment to an essentially liberal framework, but actually of sameness of values, culture or identities themselves. Thought about in this way, for an area to be institutionally cohesive it is not necessary that people share values (aside from universal democratic liberal ones); but for an area to have associational cohesion it may well be necessary.

The issue about what is meant by 'shared values' is an important one, given the recent [policy focus](#) on persuading newcomers to adopt [British values](#). Many of the specific values espoused by, for instance, [the Cantle Report](#) were simply universal liberal values, and it is not clear what is specifically British about them. In other aspects of policy on community cohesion and immigration, however, the tone is rather different, with a focus on the perceived failure of minority communities to integrate, and the implication that ethnic minorities should assimilate into the majority culture.

Distinguishing between 'institutional' and 'associational' types of cohesion is one way to move away from such ambiguities and their very different implications, and could prevent the ambiguity from being used to shift without justification from a discussion of liberal values to one of English cultural assimilation.

When David Cameron speaks of '[muscular liberalism](#)', therefore, what precisely is he referring to? In what sense does Cameron's policy attempt to make our society more cohesive? Cameron argued that "a genuinely liberal country" promotes: freedom of speech; freedom of worship; democracy; the rule of law; and equal rights regardless of race, sex or sexuality. In short, universalistic liberal values. But then Cameron went on to suggest promoting this liberal country also meant ensuring "immigrants speak the language of their new home ... [and] ensuring that people are educated in elements of a common culture and curriculum." Objections to FGM and forced marriages can be made on universalistic liberal grounds. But requirements to speak the English language and learn certain cultural traits have assimilatory implications. Distinguishing between two types of cohesion can go some way towards resolving this ambiguity.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: Flickr/Feral78*

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