

# British Academy Review

UNDERSTANDING PEOPLES, CULTURES, SOCIETIES — PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE



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# DOMINIC ABRAMS

... on understanding group dynamics, and what holds societies together



Dominic Abrams is Professor of Social Psychology, and Director of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes, at the University of Kent. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2013, and is the Academy's Vice-President (Social Sciences).

**Was there anything about your home background that made it inevitable that you would study psychology?**

Far from it! My parents were social scientists but primarily working in history, sociology and education. They were quite critical of psycho-dynamic theory and behaviourism, both of which were influential at the time when I was a teenager. I became interested in psychology because *New Society*, which landed on the doorstep once a week, had a psychology column which I found intriguing.

**You did a psychology degree at Manchester University. Then, for your masters and doctorate, you moved into social psychology.**

I became fascinated with what makes people into social creatures. What are the defining attributes that make us human? I recognised

that relationships between people are fundamental to everything.

When I graduated I was also interested in becoming either a school teacher, or a musician, and it was rather accidental that I pursued the path I did. I was set to take up teacher training in Manchester, but Tony Manstead,<sup>1</sup> my supervisor at Manchester, had encouraged me to apply to the London School of Economics' Masters degree in social psychology. In the summer of 1979 I was building stages and fences at the Cambridge Folk Festival, and was summoned to the director's caravan to receive a phone call. It was from Bram Oppenheim, who said LSE had an ESRC studentship but had to know whether I'd take it immediately as it was just two hours before ESRC's notification deadline. So during that 10-minute call I changed my entire career plan. At LSE, Professor Hilde Himmelweit introduced me to a much wider vision of social psychology than most students would experience these days, exploring its relationship to social science as a whole, and the larger questions of what society is and how it works.

1. Professor Antony Manstead, now of Cardiff University, was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2011.





At the height of the Civil Rights movement, while his father Philip was on sabbatical at the University of Chicago in 1966, Dominic Abrams (top right) attended the Kozminsky Elementary School, an inspiring experience which may have stimulated his subsequent interest in intergroup relations, diversity and social inclusion.

I worked initially with Paul Harris at LSE on children's perspective taking and group membership, which led me to wonder how children develop a social identity – how they begin to understand that they are members of social groups and not just individuals. Subsequently I joined the newly established Social Psychology Research Unit, led by Geoffrey Stephenson at the University of Kent, and was supervised by Kevin Durkin and then Rupert Brown on intergroup relations and prejudice, an area in which the UK was at the forefront of research in social psychology. That's where my enthusiasm for linking social and developmental psychology to societal level issues was consolidated.

**How has psychology evolved since you started working in it in the early 1980s?**

It has certainly transformed in terms of the available methods, its scale and scope. It has become ever more detailed, scientific and rigorous.

Psychology has also begun to look much more outside of the laboratory, and to take the real social world, and what people do in it, as

its reference for the interesting questions and problems. There is something a bit peculiar about studying human behaviour in the laboratory, because it's not a place where most people spend most of their time. I think increasingly the question is: can we understand some basic processes and mechanisms that are involved in human behaviour which, outside the laboratory, can help us to explain how and why people do things, and where their emotions, preferences and relationships lead them? Trying to make that cross-connection between theories and real-world problems is intriguing, and sometimes the strength of that connection is very gratifying.

I think psychology as a whole is still rather on an island, so I'm always keen to encourage interest in connecting it to other social sciences and the humanities.

**Your areas of interest have been social identity, intergroup relations, social inclusion and exclusion. And you have researched across a wide range of areas, including age, gender and health. Across all your projects, what has been the starting point? Is it**

**the methodology, and then looking for ways to apply that? Or is it a social problem, and then looking for the right methodology?**

It's mostly the social problem. I would always say: use the methodology that will give you the most insight that your own expertise can offer. Methodologically I'm quite eclectic and enjoy ranging from large-scale social surveys, to laboratory experiments, to interviews, to looking at archival data. As long as it's rigorous and helps you answer the question, the method is almost immaterial. Ideally, a combination of types of methods would be used. That may be a slightly unusual for a social psychologist. In the United States, social psychologists tend to stick to one set of methods, but in Europe and the UK it's more common to find people working in a more multi-level and multi-faceted way, so that there's greater engagement with the social context in pursuing the research questions.

For example, in my first ever piece of research, Tony Manstead and I explored why musicians performing to an audience sometimes excel, and at other times (or other equally competent musicians) collapse in a heap and make terrible mistakes.<sup>2</sup> It was nearing Christmas, so we asked students to learn to play *Jingle Bells* on the xylophone with only a little or plenty of practice. Then we asked them to perform it in front of a two-person audience, or a microphone purportedly being relayed to a lecture theatre full of students, or a large mirror. It was terrific fun and it connected my interest in performing music with my interest in social psychology. Under-rehearsed people did particularly badly in the microphone condition, but well-rehearsed people did particularly well in the audience condition.

Related questions still interest me. How do audiences affect people's behaviour? And conversely how do people influence their audiences? What is the nature of social influence, and how does that work within groups? Having a connection between your basic research questions and the real world gives the research energy as well as breadth.

**What's the hook that attracts you to a particular problem?**

One hook is people jumping to conclusions about why things happen. The other one is investigating my own scepticism.

I think the most satisfying thing is to find yourself in conversation with someone who has a completely different perspective on the same problem, and to reach agreement about how best to figure out which of you might be right, and then

test that. It's the enjoyment of working with other people to answer a difficult question in a more complex and challenging way.

For example, the first book that I wrote with Michael Hogg, *Social Identifications*,<sup>3</sup> was written to create a bridge between European social psychology and its work on intergroup processes and social identity (shared group identity), and North American research on the way that people influence one another's decisions in groups (group dynamics and decision making). There was a lot of resistance at first. However, working with some of the top researchers in America and across Europe, we helped to create a space where the best insights from both traditions of research could be brought together.

Nowadays, research on social influence doesn't just look at, for example, whether Person A can persuade Person B, or whether a majority inside a group will affect a minority inside the group; it also takes into account the wider *intergroup* context. We might ask if it is easier for me to persuade you to do something when you and I both know that we're in competition with some other group who believe something else? I think that the social identity approach to understanding group processes is now widely accepted. And I get satisfaction from the sense that we've done something useful for everybody in the field.

One area that I have been interested in for a while is why people become included in or excluded from social groups. Part of the analysis is that, when someone's included or excluded, it's not just because of what they do, or how they fit with other members of that particular group, it's also the implications of that person's behaviour or attitudes in terms of how other groups might see them. For example, testing a developmental model of 'subjective group dynamics' in our work with children, Adam Rutland and I showed that by the age of 8 children's social perspective taking ability and their growing awareness of loyalty pressures meant they were more likely than younger children to regard it as unacceptable for an England football team supporter to praise German footballers in the World Cup, even if they were performing brilliantly. At best, peers should be grudging in their recognition of a competitor's strengths. It is the intergroup framing of these situations that plays an important role in exclusion.

This type of insight is very important for children at school, because their ability to understand these processes equips them to deal with different social pressures, and to understand

2. Bibliographical references for the research examples cited in this article can be found in the online version of this article, via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/publications/british-academy-review-no-32-spring-2018](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/publications/british-academy-review-no-32-spring-2018)

3. Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (1988).

how it is that they can be accepted as part of a variety of social groups, and how to navigate that complexity as they go through adolescence.

**Do insights from this and your other work have practical applications?**

It is useful for teachers to understand that, if a child is being left out, neglected, excluded or bullied, it's not necessarily to do with a particular bully or perpetrator, and not necessarily to do with the individual child and any weakness they have. It might be more because of the structure of the social situation, and the relationship between sub-groups in that context; the same child in a different context might be perfectly fine. It's about changing the way people think about problems when they see them.

Pieces of research like that become part of the knowledge stock. Sometimes you come up with a new technique which somebody might apply in a particular situation. But I think more generally the value of research is improving the general understanding of behaviour in particular contexts, be it education, health, or as consumers.

A completely different type of work we did recently, for example, was looking at whether drivers switched off their engines when level-crossing barriers were down for several minutes. There is a fair amount of theory about why people behave in certain ways. But surprisingly it turned out that one of the things that works perfectly well is appealing to people just to think about themselves. We found that with a simple sign instructing 'When the barriers are down switch off your engine', only led about 25 per cent of people to bother doing so. When the sign instead says 'Think of yourself: When barriers are down switch off your engine', that jumps to 50 per cent. Three words make a big difference. Why is that? It's not something you would expect. It's because they use the mechanism of people monitoring what they think are the appropriate rules in a situation. If you're just sitting in your car, you may not even think about those rules. However, just being encouraged to think about them prompts people to change their behaviour.

I think that an important role for social research is to improve our understanding of general principles about how people use socially mediated information, how they relate to one another, and how the meanings that they share affect what they do. If a researcher wanted to do damage, it would be very possible to do so. We know a lot about causes of conflict – about how to make people more extreme, more hostile, angrier. But because we know those things, we also know a lot about how to make people more pro-social, more co-operative, more helpful, more constructive, to think in more imaginative

ways. Pursuing these positive outcomes is what motivates most researchers.

**Of course, all humans think that they are innately expert at social psychology – we all think we know what makes people tick.**

A lot of the assumptions that people make as being intuitively obvious turn out not to be, and part of the joy of doing research is understanding what's going on and why, and offering that alternative scenario to people when they're thinking about policies and strategies for dealing with social problems. It's an awareness that sometimes the strategy that seems obvious may not be any use at all, or may actually backfire.

For example, we did some research on the effect that drinking alcohol in a group has on people's ability to make judgements and decisions. Common understanding would be that when people in a group get drunk they become chaotic, wild and reckless. In fact, we found that people who have been drinking in a group tend to watch each other's backs: so if one person in the group starts making a mistake, somebody else in the group is likely to detect that and correct it. Somebody who's drunk on their own is unable to do that monitoring, and so they carry on making mistakes, or making more extreme and risky choices. So up to a certain level, drinking in groups is probably safer than drinking alone.

**Is there any one piece of research of yours which you think has been particularly influential?**

I hope there are quite a number, but I wouldn't presume to think of any particular piece of work that I've personally done in those terms. Rather, I think it is important to be part of a research trajectory, contributing to findings that allow people to look at things differently. I've had the privilege of working with inspiring mentors, colleagues and students. Many of our projects have had long legacies – helping to focus policy on behavioural norms at the start of the AIDS epidemic, establishing a benchmark of prejudice for the launch of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, cross national measurement of ageism working with AgeUK and the European Social Survey.

One example is work by my research group on something called age-based stereotype threat. This is a phenomenon where, if a stereotype about your group suggests that it is less competent in particular areas than other groups are, when a situation implies comparison between those groups you're likely to start underperforming. We have investigated this amongst older people in our own research and meta-analytically, and found that when they believe they are being compared with younger people, older people do perform





These three British Academy reports were launched at the House of Lords on 13 December 2017.

more poorly on cognitive tests. Stereotype threat can cause quite a significant deterioration. For example, it even affected older people's physical strength: when we gave them a hand dynamometer task, their strength was reduced by about 50 per cent. That sense of 'I might be old and frail' is itself enough for people to give up on things.

However, we've also found that older people who have closer inter-generational relationships don't seem to be so vulnerable to stereotype threat. Because they still feel a psychological connection across the generations, they don't necessarily categorise themselves as being older, and so aren't vulnerable to the stereotypes in the same way. And if you engage older people in tasks where they think they might have an advantage, for example in doing crossword puzzles, then the same stereotype can actually boost their performance.

These findings reveal subtle but important ways in which it is possible to start enabling people. We can set up situations so that people don't pitch themselves into social categories that have negative stereotypes, or we can use the positive attributes of those categories to help embolden people.

**You have been on the working group of a British Academy public policy project – “If you could do one thing...”: Local actions to promote social integration.<sup>4</sup> Can you tell us about that?**

One of the challenges that confronts social researchers is the level at which we should be applying our theories, our methods and our insights. There's always a temptation to try and answer everything on a very grand scale –

such as health policy. In fact, a lot of things that matter to people operate at a local level. It is important to ask what you can do at a local level to make use of the insights we have about how people live well together.

Looking at local actions that could promote social integration seemed to me to be a fantastic opportunity. Being on the working group was fascinating, because we saw a huge array of really impressive evidence from all types of different approaches about how to go about this.

I was involved in a specific project, funded by the Arts Council England, to evaluate the work done by People United in a town called Newington, an area near Ramsgate in the south-east of England.<sup>5</sup> It has a 1950s housing estate, a fairly well-established population – mostly white – but it is a deprived community: people are generally employed in low-skilled jobs, and there are quite high levels of unemployment. It was a place that was rather disengaged, disconnected and had no real purpose. From our other work we had established that, when people engage in the arts, they are likely to start giving to others (volunteering or donating to charity). People United thought that they would use the arts as a vehicle to promote connection between people, to see if they could draw the whole community together and build a sense of direction. In a project called 'Best of Us', they attracted an array of local artists to engage different parts of the community. For example, there was a Best of Us festival, where members of the community celebrated what was best about Newington, and an 'Arts and Kindness' project,

4. The British Academy working group was chaired by Professor Anthony Heath FBA.

5. Julie Van de Vyver and Dominic Abrams, 'Community Connectedness Through the Arts', in *"If you could do one thing...": 10 local actions to promote social integration* (British Academy, 2017), pp. 58–67.

in which schoolchildren sought out stories of heroism, boldness, creativity, things that people have done for one another, and shared those through artistic outputs like composing songs.

Our role was to evaluate the impact of all this. We compared a school in Newington with a school in a control town. We also compared what was going on amongst adults in Newington with adults from a demographically matched town with no comparable arts activity. Our quantitative measures clearly showed that these arts activities did indeed promote better community engagement, more commitment to the community, improving things like empathy and sense of connection.

The most important thing about the project was that it created a set of groups in the community that became self-sustaining. It cemented relationships across generations, brought together sets of people who would never otherwise talk to one another, and made them aware of shared experiences. Once you are aware of shared meaning with another person, that's a psychological relationship which provides the basis for caring about the other person, even if that commitment is not terribly explicit. So then when something affects your community, you're more likely to want to do things that will help others within that community.

It builds on the idea that the way that people categorise themselves has a massive effect on how they behave and what they will commit to. For many people, the local level can be much more powerfully self-relevant than their profession or the country as a whole. Tailoring things to make sense in the local context can therefore be critical.

**The British Academy reports were launched at the House of Lords in December 2017.<sup>6</sup> Were they received well?**

They were received extremely well.

There are case studies dealing with ethnic, racial and linguistic integration. And the British Academy project has broadened out the question to say that all sorts of communities have all sorts of divides: sometimes they are just fragmented and do not have enough glue binding them together. Strategies for how we can hold ourselves together are illuminated incredibly well in these reports, pointing the way for communities, charities and local authorities to do things on the ground. The great thing is that it's not saying there is

only one way to tackle this problem. There are multiple approaches, some of which will better suit particular localities or contexts – and here we show a whole set of them that we know are likely to work well, for people to draw upon.

I think it's a very valuable piece of work. And, since publication of the reports in December, there has been more consultation and follow-up with government ahead of its forthcoming Integrated Communities Strategy. On 7 March 2018 the Academy held a workshop with the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, and the Government Social Research network, about this strategy and about practical data collection to inform the local picture of social integration.

We are trying to take forward what we've learned from all this research, and engage with policy-makers, heads of professions, and government departments, to bring it to their attention. It is part of a wider mission for the Academy – to do things that are both academically rigorous and of practical relevance and use to policy-makers. It's an exciting and ambitious project.

**This is just one strand of what the British Academy is developing into a broader framework of activities on 'Cohesive Societies'. What's the ambition here?**

The British Academy's Vice-Presidents started a conversation within the Academy about the critical issues that face society. We decided to focus on the problem of societal cohesion, one that is affecting not just the UK but the whole world.

From across the humanities and social sciences, people are addressing different issues, whether about globalisation, demographic change, climate change, embracing technological change, the nature of people's identities, or indeed contesting what identity is. All of these issues are bound up with how people connect with one another. In order to develop good strategies for sustaining a viable society, we have to understand how societies hold together.

After consulting and considerable discussion we've started by focusing on five themes under the heading Cohesive Societies.

The first focuses on the nature of *cultural memory and tradition*. What is the role of our understanding of our history, our cultural context, and the way that we talk about it?

**To develop good strategies for sustaining a viable society, we have to understand how societies hold together.**

6. Three British Academy reports were launched on 13 December 2017. Key lessons: "If you could do one thing...": *Local actions to promote social integration*. Essay collection: "If you could do one thing...": *10 local actions to promote social integration*. Case studies: "If you could do one thing...": *The integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers*. These reports can be found via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/if-you-could-do-one-thing-local](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/if-you-could-do-one-thing-local)

The second concerns the nature of the *social economy*? That's not just the financial economy in the way that people make their choices and invest their energy. The social economy is all about exchanges of all sorts involving skills, space, knowledge, access to networks and the social mediation of technologies and physical resources.

The next theme is about the meaning and mechanisms of the *social responsibilities* that people have to one another – understanding what we might need in terms of future legislation, versus what we might gain from more informal co-operative commitments and obligations that people have toward one another.

*Identity and belonging* is about how people define and defend their identities, and their shared identities with others. It is also how people contest one another's identities. A good example is the way that people who voted for Leave and for Remain in the EU referendum have arrived at some quite extreme stereotypes about one another.

The final theme is *care for the future*. This question is about the sustainability of society. How do we understand relationships between generations, and the nature of obligations across generations? How do we prepare for a society where there may be less work around, or there may be very different demographics, or climate change may affect us in ways we don't expect.

Cohesive Societies is intended to provide a framework – for capturing and enhancing work that is already being done across these five themes, and for enabling new work to be undertaken. It is an opportunity to connect up work across the Academy as a whole, to offer a more overarching structure to support a body of work that Fellows of the British Academy and Academy-supported researchers are already pursuing, and to continue to develop its potential.

### Why is societal cohesion such a problem now?

One reason is the rapidity and fluidity of the transfer of knowledge between people – whether it be real news, fake news, evidence, superstition. This global exchange is so rapid now that we can't expect societies to remain static – indeed, they're going to change at a faster rate than they have done in the past. We see the EU referendum, political changes across Europe and in the United States, growing levels of inequality between the super-rich and everybody else, the flow and interchange between and across cultures, within and between countries – all these shifts seem to be happening faster, more intensively and less predictably. It means

the problem of maintaining society, whether at the local, national or international level, is becoming more complex.

Social science now recognises that systems operate at different levels. That's the modern-day landscape that we face. Understanding each problem individually is only going to give us limited progress. We have to understand the connections, how they work, and how we can sustain productive, co-operative, effective relationships that support everybody. That's why I think this is a critical issue, and will continue to be so, for years to come.

### What are the intended fruits of the Cohesive Societies endeavour?

Over the last year, the steering group has first of all been identifying what is already being done around these five themes. It has been very gratifying to find out how many Academy grant-holders are doing work that relates to them.

And we have just set up a section of the Academy's website to embrace what the Academy itself has been doing that fits under the overarching heading of Cohesive Societies.<sup>7</sup> This includes work on: identity and belonging; social integration; the future of business in society; revolutions; governing England; the future of Europe; inequalities; faith; and immigration.

A number of events are already under way, including a workshop with NatCen on what survey research tells us about societal cohesion. With the help of Fellows and other experts we're also working out an array of other activities, such as a literature review to identify research gaps, scoping seminars with key organisations and individuals across the five themes, and informative breakfast briefing events.

In the longer-term, the steering group sees opportunities for publications, research projects and grants, and setting agendas for other research funders to pursue.

And we want it to help organise our thinking around policy advice and consultation, so that we are in a position to bring together a body of work from across the humanities and social sciences, to inform the work that we do with government and other agencies in thinking about future policies.

Adopting a broad framework such as Cohesive Societies is a new approach for the Academy, and we intend it to be intellectually and practically responsive and relevant as it develops.

**You have mentioned the EU referendum a couple of times. You have recently published some work on why**

7. [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/cohesive-societies](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/cohesive-societies)



people might have voted the way they did, and you have posted a British Academy blog piece about it.<sup>8</sup>

People who were more anxious about immigration were more inclined to vote Leave than Remain. But why? Supported by a Small Research Grant from the British Academy, just before the referendum we surveyed 1,000 people in the south-east of England, where most people voted Leave, and 1,000 in Scotland, where more people voted Remain.

Commentators have pointed to factors such as age or education as predicting why people voted Leave. Demographics tell us part of the story, but social psychology tells a large part too. In both regions, we found that the same combination of factors was involved in voting to leave the EU: being concerned about immigration, but also not trusting UK politicians. People who felt that immigration was a problem (as Theresa May, then Home Secretary, kept reminding them it was), and who *also* felt that the government really couldn't be trusted, were most fearful about immigration. It was seen as a direct threat to themselves – to their jobs, their livelihood and maybe their way of life. They also felt disengaged from Europe, unable to identify themselves as feeling European. So a combination of uncertainty about immigration and lack of trust in politicians fed into the feeling of threat from immigration and disengagement from being European, and these predicted the decision to vote Leave rather than Remain.

Other research we have done has shown that terror attacks such as 7/7 didn't so much make extremists more extreme in their attitudes towards Muslims, but it made liberals less liberal. So it hardened up the centre rather than making extremists more extreme, and that's another way in which social change can happen, by dissolving the centre ground on opinion issues.

Very often people's sense of connection with a social group and where they belong is critical in moving them from one position to another on a particular issue. Whether it's a sense of being European, or whether it's a sense of there being a threat that has to be addressed, these things can be quite dynamic and can change quickly over time.

**This links back to your points about the speed of social change we are witnessing, with fluid perceptions of 'us' and 'them'.**

Historically the sense of who 'we' are and who 'they' are would for many people have been quite predictable and stable, their understanding developed through their community over a period of time.

However, psychologically, people are equipped to shift that definition of who 'we' are very quickly,

and from situation to situation. The world is now moving at a rate at which there are opportunities to become a new 'us' all the time. People can begin to redefine themselves, connect up with other sets of individuals and communities very quickly, and in ways that can be very valuable to them, but which also draw them to new behaviours, attitudes and views. We have to be equipped to deal with people's flexibility to recreate themselves as social entities – whether because they discover they're in a new set of relationships that hadn't existed before, or because they face new sources of competition, or they discover new social fault lines and different perspectives from their own – division around Brexit being a good example. The Cohesive Societies framework will help us to develop new insights into these dynamics.

**You are the British Academy's Vice-President for Social Sciences. In that capacity, what are your hopes for the future for the social science disciplines?**

It's a fascinating role, and I am enjoying it very much. Working with my fellow vice-presidents (most closely with Alan Bowman, Vice-President for Humanities) and the senior management team is a pleasure. In the last year or two, what has been particularly exciting has been the way that social sciences and the humanities in the Academy have begun to link more closely with each other, and we have been able to foster cross-disciplinary connections. I hope that we will continue to make progress in trying to soften and transcend disciplinary boundaries. Our collective role as brokers for the humanities and social sciences is absolutely critical.

And I'm keen that, as well as embracing differences of approach, method, principles and interests, we also identify some of the big common research questions and problems that we're all trying to address, and to pursue them together. Of course, we will still need to be responsive to specific research challenges as they arise within and across disciplines. But I see my role as facilitating the collective setting out of an agenda focusing on the long-term major research challenges and articulating why they require investment. I hope this will support the Academy to pursue its own research initiatives and also to facilitate other organisations to pursue the best research.

It has been very gratifying to involve Fellows of the British Academy in discussion and debate and encounter enthusiasm for these aims across subject areas in the humanities and social sciences. ■

Dominic Abrams was interviewed by James Rivington.

8. Dominic Abrams, Giovanni A. Travaglino and Anne Templeton, 'Could we have predicted Brexit?' (British Academy blog, 10 January 2018) [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/blog/could-we-have-predicted-brexit](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/blog/could-we-have-predicted-brexit)