

A nation dividing? Some interpretations of the question

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We welcome Mohan's (2004) suggestion for a debate as to whether Britain is polarising socially and, if so, with what importance. Below we address his specific points but in short our response is that more work is required by more workers. There is a major problem with our response. Fewer and fewer researchers in UK geography departments and in the rest of social science more widely are in a position to carry out such work. The 2001 Census is more complex in structure than the last three censuses combined, but fewer and fewer social scientists have the skills needed to study it, let alone compare what this census reveals with the past. The debate over whether Britain is polarising or not has tended to take place in an information vacuum. The participants in the debate in human geography quote the work of a shrinking number of researchers who produce the initial findings, often misinterpreting those findings (Dorling and Shaw, 2002). Rarely now do social scientists undertake their own analysis of source data such as the census as part of their contribution to a debate. If there is to be a debate about whether there is overall polarisation, the extent to which it is occurring, and the importance of British society becoming more polarised, it needs to be based as much upon facts, as upon feelings.

John Mohan is in good company when he begins his response by stating that the majority of the indicators we measured showed reduced polarisation. George Davey-Smith also found time to compute that 52 indicators showed increased polarisation and 62 showed narrowing of polarisation.⁽¹⁾ Although George's and John's figures do not quite tally, we clearly should have realised that people like adding up indicators in this way. In the paper we argued that it is not the number of indicators that change in a particular direction which should be used to suggest whether the overall levels of polarisation by area are rising but the numbers of people involved. The last table in the paper recorded that for those measures that could be compared from 1971, 1981, 1991, to 2001, the numbers of people who would have to move to make every area similar rose from 9.9% to 10% to 12.1% to 13.3% of the population, respectively. It was on this basis that our title was chosen and that we emphasised the growth of polarisation in the 1990s as being of great importance. Something is happening out there that social scientists could not see without the census.

John's second point is that some aspects of this polarisation may be artefactual. The examples he gives do not affect those measures we were able to compare over all four censuses, but he is right that our simple measures will double count (which we acknowledged). John suggests that we might have taken greater care in our choice of

⁽¹⁾ Personal communication: e-mail sent on Thursday 18 December 2003, from G Davey-Smith, Professor of Clinical Epidemiology, Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol

indicators rather than include all those that we could measure. We had assumed that readers would prefer to see all the data, rather than a selection, so that they could come to their own conclusions. The example he gives of council housing becoming more spatially polarised partly because of large-scale transfers of stock is not an artifact. It actually happened and it happened disproportionately in those districts which had fewer council houses to begin with. Coupled with the uneven geography of right-to-buy sales this has resulted in Britain's council housing being more unevenly distributed than before. If John wishes to look into this in more detail he will find that in both 1991 and 2001 there were many thousands of tenants who believed they lived in a council house when in fact the entire stock of the district had been transferred to other owners. We are thus only measuring the tenure people believe themselves to live in. Censuses measure individuals' beliefs. Nevertheless, the fact that council housing has either been purchased by its occupants or transferred *most* in areas where there was least to begin with, means that that tenure group has polarised.

John's third point concerns the merits of the index of polarisation used. We used the simplest index we could, but he is correct that different indexes measure different things and most importantly that they are all influenced by changing group sizes. The fact that he finds that 63% (72/114) of the changes in polarisation have the opposite sign to the change in group size is hardly damning. If there were no relationship this proportion would be 50% (we are not sure if John realises the discrepancy is only 13%). However, he is right that there is a weak relationship. Groups which grow in size have a slight tendency to become more dispersed, but this tendency is far from universal (37% of groups do not behave in this way). One of the most important exceptions is people who have a university degree. They increased from 23.9% of the population to 31.5% between 1991 and 2001, but their degree of spatial polarisation rose despite this (table 5 of Dorling and Rees, 2003). Further inspection of the data shows that this rise was not a result of people with degrees living near university campuses but rather of acceleration in the conventional migration of university graduates to the South East of England upon graduating. Given that this group of people grew quickly in size but sorted themselves out in space even faster, to live nearer one another, it should not be taken for granted that other groups of the population which grow in size should necessarily become less geographically concentrated. Mohan suggests that it is hardly surprising that all the nine ethnic minority groups we compared had become less segregated given the growth in all these populations. Given that the majority of that growth was caused by higher than average rates of fertility (for most groups because they had a younger age structure) and given that those births occurred most in areas where each group was most concentrated initially, we would argue that to find overall dispersal is surprising and suggests high levels of out-migration from the initial areas of concentration. But John would have to look at the actual data rather than simply guess and comment on our paper to join in this debate most usefully.

Where we are most in agreement with John is where he raises the question we brushed over in this initial analysis of 2001 Census data:

“What of the substantive meaning of the various aspects of polarisation, and their relative importance? Polarisation of some populations—or sections of the population—may be more important than others” (Mohan, 2004, page 366).

This is a question that has arisen again and again since publication of our paper. It has been raised by numerous journalists and on the BBC, by many academics, and by more than a dozen civil servants whose remit in central government is to reduce polarisation in Britain. What has been most interesting about this response is that it has revealed the paucity of information available to these people. Central government does not have a research unit which analyses and interprets the census data as they are

released. The press can just about cope with something as simple as a general election (only 650×3 numbers matter) but are in no position to look at the census data even though they, like everyone else, now have access to them. Academic papers analysing the census are in the pipeline but the few academics who look at the census tend to concentrate on their narrow areas of expertise. Thus there is huge unmet demand for an overview. The central question people appear to be asking is whether British society is becoming more polarised. But they, the civil servants, journalists, and academics like John, appear to have no clear idea of what they mean by polarisation.

The census is a complex dataset which reflects, albeit with delay, changes in society. In 1971 a question was asked on whether a household had access to hot running water. In 2001 John suggests that we could have emphasised the improvements that have occurred to housing amenities (concerning central heating, a luxury in 1971). That would be all too easy to do; but what matters most is that the living conditions people expect to be able to enjoy change over time. What people do not expect to occur is either for living conditions to worsen (for anyone) or for them to become more unequally distributed over time. Most importantly people do not expect children's life chances to be diverging nor, more generally, do they expect basic measures, such as life expectancy, to become more polarised between areas. Given this and the paucity of answers we have received to John's question we have a suggestion to make.

Government has a basic target on inequalities between areas that states that we should expect to see peoples' life expectancies between areas converge over time. This is a target it is hard to argue against. You would have to be a very brutal believer in the free market to think it acceptable that people in one area of the country should expect to live 5, 7, or 9 years less on average than in another area and that if those differences rose this was not necessarily a bad thing (if you do think such a thing, think about children's or babies' life chances and your heart is likely to soften!) It would be possible to take the government target on life expectancy and translate it into a series of weights to use to gauge the relative importance of different groups of the population polarising by area. The Longitudinal Study links each of the last four censuses to mortality data. Given this you could give each answer to each census question a degree of importance depending on how closely related it was to the risk of premature death. If you did this cleverly you could take into account all the other questions (in each of the censuses). You could then produce a measure of the extent to which we could expect life expectancies to converge or diverge in the future were the population to continue to polarise or become more spatially mixed as it is doing now.

This sounds simple, it would take a little work, it would not be possible until the 2001 linked data are available for analysis, but we can speculate as to what we would find. The ironic thing is that the aspect of polarisation which people appear to be least concerned about, polarisation by age, could well come to matter most. The 2001 Census showed that the country was dividing by age structure. Areas with many young people to start with were attracting more young people and, similarly, areas initially more dominated by the elderly, attracted more older people. These changes can occur only through differential migration (few people decide to be more or less than ten years older on successive census forms!) That differential migration appears to result in more healthy older 'survivors' moving to areas which already have the highest life expectancies and thus we can expect life expectancies in those areas to rise even faster in the future. In contrast, areas which are becoming relatively poorer are losing their better off young people faster than before and may mainly be retaining older people with fewer resources who can on aggregate be expected to die earlier. Polarisation in some

areas may be more important than in others, but not necessarily in those areas you might think. If you make value judgments on what you think matters you will get very different answers as compared with undertaking an analysis such as that just described.

To give a further illustration, John suggests, when discussing the possible polarisation of prison populations as compared with young adults, that:

“There is polarisation in both cases but we might be more concerned about the first than the second. For example, if concentrating prisons in certain locations inhibited their inmates’ ability to maintain relationships and thus their reintegration back into the community, there would be legitimate grounds for concern; conversely, there are arguments on efficiency grounds that there can only be a limited number of universities and the expansion of higher education is almost certainly going to produce more polarisation of the young adult population” (Mohan, 2004, page 367).

You could think that, or you could argue something else. You could argue that locking up a higher proportion of our young men and women than almost anywhere else in Europe is simply stupid and it would be far more useful to work towards reducing the number of prisons we have rather than worry about their spatial distribution. You could argue that the English system of encouraging children to leave their home area to go to a university half way across the country perpetuates the disintegration of communities, weakens their relationships with friends and family back home, is inefficient (they need more housing), and perpetuates an elite system of higher education (and is not how much of the rest of Europe, including Scotland, runs its higher education system). You could thus argue the opposite to John. Or, you could agree on a form of polarisation you believe is unjust, differential life expectancies, and calculate to what extent the increased spatial concentrations of prisoners, ex-prisoners, students, and graduates contributes to that basic growing spatial fault line running through our society.

John’s final point that we may have overinterpreted some changes is well taken. The first release of the census data does not allow us to ascertain the motivations for increased segregation of the White labeled groups that we reported. In fact, had we calculated segregation between White and not White rather than between White and the population as a whole we would have found a slight fall by that measure. Conversely, had we calculated the index of isolation rather than an index of segregation we would have found that it had decreased by 2% for this group over time. Furthermore, had we calculated the index of isolation taking into account the effect of this group falling in size over time, that index rises by 4% over the 1990s (increased isolation). As should be obvious from these figures, we have looked into these particular trends in a little more depth since publishing the paper, but we are unable to answer the question we posed as to whether there was any possibility of ‘flight’ by Whites. Census data yet to be released on migration will help in constructing that answer. Census data coupled with data from the British Social Attitudes Surveys could help further. Our suspicion is that the vast majority of the changes in the White distribution we find have nothing to do with ‘flight’. We should point out that we did not argue that many migration decisions are “probably partially racially motivated”. We argued that academics should accept that a “degree” of migration decisions are “probably partially racially motivated”. To believe that none of the millions of migration decisions made in Britain every year is motivated at all on racial grounds would require enormous faith in universal levels of tolerance. We simply highlight that the initial results of a first analysis of the census data suggest that this is an area worth further investigation.

John ends by suggesting that we should have given fuller consideration and greater interpretation in our paper. The paper accepted for publication was 50 pages long,

contained 14 500 words (including tables), some 74 000 characters, and presented the publishers with a typesetting nightmare for the tables (which they overcame brilliantly). There are limits to how much space academic journals can give you. We published in this one paper almost as many numbers in our tables as John included in his fascinating book on this subject (Mohan, 1999). It seems a little unfair, given that, to ask that we provide more detail in a paper which was already so long. The journal did, however, allow us to include all the census cell numbers to allow others to replicate our analysis and improve on it as the more detailed data are released.

Some 5 billion census statistics are being released from the 2001 Census alone. If, in human geography only, say, five of us actually look at the numbers, that is a billion each we have to interpret. This would leave some 500 others to talk about what we find. Have a debate by all means, but please help with the analysis too. We are glad John has called for a debate and find his points very interesting. What worries us most is that so few others in the disciplines in which we work may also be interested, let alone be prepared to join in the work of analysis rather than simply interpretation. British society is changing rapidly; in the 1990s it changed dramatically. Some of those changes may be for the good, others bad; but you have to measure it, study it, and analyse it as well as talk about it.

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