A LARGER US

We're poised between two futures.

One's the breakdown scenario. Climate chaos, extinction, scarcity, inequality, tribalism, collapse.

This paper's about how we get to the other one: the breakthrough scenario.

A future of safety, restoration, and flourishing, for us and for the world.

Whether we make it there depends primarily on what goes on inside our minds.

Whether we're able to manage our mental and emotional states, at a moment of extraordinary turbulence.

Whether we reach for the right stories to explain what's happening at this moment in history.

Whether enough of us see ourselves as part of a Larger Us instead of a them-and-us, or just an atomised "I".

Our future depends, in other words, on collective psychology.

Summary

This paper – a report on the findings of the first phase of the Collective Psychology Project, which launched in October 2018 – is about why we need collective psychology, what it might look like, and how we start developing it in practice.

Part One of the paper explores how tribalism and them-and-us thinking is on the rise all over the world, presenting a clear danger not only to the health of our democracies, but also to our ability to respond to the defining challenges of our moment in history, above all climate change and mass extinction.

It argues that while conventional explanations for this polarisation usually look at political, economic, or cultural drivers, what's often missed is the underlying psychological dynamics at play, and especially our increasing levels of anxiety and the contagious nature of threat perception in politics.

More broadly, it argues that the inner and outer crises we face are closely linked. We used to think depression and anxiety were just about brain chemistry; now, we're realising that in many ways they're a response to how we live. Meanwhile, we're starting to recognise that democracy can only work if enough of us can stay self-aware, feel empathy for each other, and share a sense of common identity.

At present, these internal and external crises are amplifying and reinforcing each other – implying the need to reverse the dynamic. Healing the world depends on healing ourselves and each other; and this process of healing can't run its course without tackling real world harms and injustices.

Part Two of the paper argues that in practice, there are three key psychological transitions we need to make.

- **From fight-or-flight to self-awareness.** When fear and anxiety become central to politics, polarisation is the result. So we need to be able to manage our states so that we can choose how to react to events instead of sliding into triggered fight-or-flight responses.

- **From powerlessness to agency.** Feelings of powerlessness – in our lives at home and at work, in communities, in politics – make us unhappy, and prevent us from tackling real world injustices that undermine mental health. So we need to build agency in our lives, and the ability to organise to shape our collective future.

- **From disconnection to belonging.** Our epidemic of loneliness isn't just disastrous for health. It also undermines empathy and makes us vulnerable to extremism. So we need to feel like we belong to a larger collective, but one that's radically inclusive, rather than defined in terms of in-group versus out-group.

All three transitions, the paper argues, are relevant at both individual *and* collective level, both for psychological wellbeing *and* for the health of our democracies and our ability to shape a future that we actually want.

Part Two concludes by asking whose job it is to help us build our capacities in these three areas. It argues that religions have historically been key hubs for the practice of collective psychology, but that as religion has retreated – at first from the public sphere, and then increasingly from our lives – a vacuum has opened up. As a result, all of us need to think seriously about how to fill the gaps that the retreat of religion has left behind, especially in the areas of self-awareness, agency, and belonging.

Part Three of the paper, finally, sets out some ideas for how to start the ball rolling on building our collective psychology capacities up, focusing in particular on three immediate areas of work:

1. **Building community and telling the story.** First, we need to build connections among people working at the cusp of inner and outer change who want to be part of an emerging ecosystem of ideas, innovation, and support. And we also need to build profile and set an agenda around why and how we should think of ourselves as part of a Larger Us.

2. **Mapping the ground.** To avoid reinventing the wheel and make sure we build on what's working, we need to map out what's already happening on each of the three key transitions towards self-awareness, agency, and belonging – in the process, identifying gaps, synergies, and opportunities.

3. **Making small bets.** Lastly, despite the work of early pioneers this is still an embryonic field, and we don't yet know which interventions can make the biggest difference. So we need to create platforms to support rapid cycles of experimentation, failure, and learning.

Part Three of the paper includes concrete proposals for a second phase of work on the Collective Psychology Project, with an overarching focus on shifting to a collaborative, crowdsourced approach that can learn fast as it seeks out ideas that have the potential to go to scale.

If you have feedback on the ideas on this paper, are interested in getting involved in the next phase of the Project's work, or would like to stay up to date on future Project developments, then please visit us at www.collectivepsychology.org, follow us on Twitter at @Collective_Psyc, or get in touch at hello@collectivepsychology.org.

Politics,
Meet Psychology

Things Fall Apart

It's 100 years since WB Yeats wrote, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold … The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity".

He might have been talking about today. All over the world, we're succumbing to polarisation, tribalism, sectarianism, and them-and-us thinking, as our sense of common ground, common identity, and common purpose erodes.

In one country after another, voter turnout is declining. Authoritarianism is rising. Space for civil society is shrinking. Wherever we look – the UK, US, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Hungary, Poland, Austria, Greece, Russia, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey, the Philippines, Tanzania – populists are increasing their vote share or seizing power.

Polarisation can be a helpful part of democratic life, if it shines light on problems that have gone ignored for too long.

But when it goes to extremes – as we see now, with authoritarian populism at its highest level since the 1930s – the risk is that it destroys the trust and institutions we all rely on, and creates the conditions for demagogues to flourish.

We're in a vicious circle

As our common ground breaks down, it prevents us from responding to some of the toughest and most urgent shared challenges we've ever faced. Challenges which we can *only* solve if we come together.

> **"**
>
> **Instead of addressing real world issues, we're using precious political bandwidth to manage polarisation itself."**

Take climate change. Solving it means transforming our whole economy overnight. Something we can only do if that transformation is owned by the whole of society. But that's not happening.

Instead of addressing real world issues, we're using precious political bandwidth to manage polarisation itself: the parliamentary stalemates, congressional shutdowns, gesture politics, and culture wars.

And the worse the real world issues get, the more disillusioned with politics we'll become, the more polarisation will widen, and the less capacity we'll have to respond.

It's a vicious circle that could destroy us – unless we work out how to find a way towards common ground and common purpose.

How did we get here?

Why have these divides exploded so forcefully in recent years, and in so many places?

It's a big question, and one that's explored more fully in *Rebuilding Common Ground*, a paper by the Collective Psychology Project for New York University that's out later this year. But the short version goes like this.

Partly because of political factors. We've come to see politicians as corrupt, remote, unaccountable, self-serving, and ineffective – and to perceive ourselves as lacking power to influence the political process.

Partly because of money. Above all how many of us feel that our prospects are worse than they used to be, or that we're doing less well than others.

And partly because of culture. Tensions over refugees, immigration, identity politics, and political correctness; tensions between metropolitan centres and left-behind heartlands; tensions between very different sets of values and worldviews.

But underneath all three sets of factors is a psychological bedrock that political analysts often miss. And it starts with how we perceive these political, economic and cultural factors as threats.

It's the threat perception

It's not hard to see how traumatic stress creates political polarisation in places like Israel and Palestine or Pakistan. But what about countries like the US or UK? Voters may be furious, but most of us aren't traumatised in the strict medical sense.

> **Anxiety can be collective as well as individual, and about perceived cultural, as well as physical or emotional, threats."**

What we are, though, is anxious. Like traumatic stress, anxiety is all about threat perception: it's defined by "overestimation of danger and underestimation of ability to cope".

And while it's is often about personal pressures – health, finances, relationships, self-worth – anxiety can be *collective* as well as individual, and about perceived cultural, as well as physical or emotional, threats.

Polling data charts the rise of threat perception in politics. In the US, one of the best predictors of support for Trump in 2016 was agreement that "the American way of life is threatened". In the UK in the same year, over half of people felt that "Britain sometimes feels like a foreign country and this makes me feel uncomfortable".

There's good evidence that some people are predisposed to see diversity of values as threatening, especially when political trust falters, and that when that sense of threat is activated, these people can suddenly tip towards authoritarianism.

And once threat perception starts to take root in politics, it's contagious. Plenty

of liberals woke up the day after the Brexit referendum or the 2016 US election feeling like they, too, were living in a foreign country.

It's not hard to see how such dynamics can swiftly lead to two incandescent camps at either end of the political spectrum and what More in Common calls an 'exhausted majority' in the centre, despairing at the ugliness of politics.

Inner and outer: two sides of the same coin

We usually think of issues in the world – climate breakdown, mass extinction, hyper inequality, struggles to heal long legacies of racism and discrimination – in a different category from mental health issues.

Like the fact that we're drowning in epidemics of depression, anxiety, addiction, suicide, and self-harm, especially among the young. Or that in the UK, mental health problems are now the single biggest category of NHS spending, virtually all of it focused on crisis management, not prevention.

But they're not separate. Increasingly, they look like two sides of the same coin.

> **Right now, our internal and external crises are reinforcing and amplifying each other."**

We used to think depression and anxiety were just about brain chemistry, for example. Now, though, we're realising that they have deep roots in the ways our culture fails to meet psychological needs for many – and perhaps most – of us.

Meanwhile, the lesson of Cambridge Analytica is that democracy only works if enough of us can manage our mental and emotional states. If we can't, then we're wide open to manipulation by unseen actors who can nudge us to see the world in them-and-us terms just at the moments it matters most.

Right now, our internal and external crises are reinforcing and amplifying each other – creating a situation full of risk, that could go catastrophically wrong.

To reverse it, we need to recognise that fixing the world means healing ourselves and each other, and that this process of healing can't run its course unless we also tackle real world harms and injustices, given the effect they have on our individual and collective psychological wellbeing.
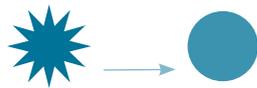
So what would that involve?

2

Imagining a Collective Psychology

Three transitions

In conversations during the first phase of the Project, three key transitions have consistently come up as key elements of collective psychology.

From fight-or-flight to self-awareness

When fear and anxiety become central to politics, polarisation is the result. So we need to be able to manage our states so that we can choose how to react to events instead of sliding into triggered fight-or-flight responses.
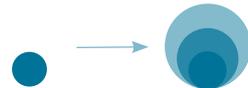
From powerlessness to agency

Feelings of powerlessness – at home, at work, in communities, in politics – make us unhappy, and prevent us from tackling real world injustices that undermine mental health. So we need to build agency in our lives, and the ability to organise to shape our collective future.

From disconnection to belonging

Our epidemic of loneliness isn't just disastrous for health: it undermines empathy and makes us vulnerable to extremism. So we need to feel like we belong to a larger collective, but one that's radically inclusive, not defined in terms of in-group versus out-group.

If we can build our capacities in these three areas, then we won't just be happier. We'll live in healthier democracies, better able to face 21st century challenges. And we'll have a *much* stronger shot at a breakthrough rather than breakdown future.

From fight-or-flight to self-awareness
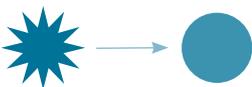
Our politics right now is 'triggered'. It comes from a place of chronic anxiety, hyper-vigilance, and threat perception that ripples easily through our collective digital central nervous system.

As we're discovering, this provides the perfect environment for tribalism. Populists on both right and left understand this perfectly, and so deliberately seek to press these buttons, as with Steve Bannon's careful timing of Trump's Muslim ban to maximise liberal outrage.

Terrorists use a similar playbook: consciously setting out to cause outrage, so as to provoke actions that will increase polarisation and thereby amplify their support – an approach used so successfully by Al Qaeda that Osama bin Laden once observed that "it seems as if we and the White House are on the same team shooting at the United States' own goal".

Our media environment doesn't help. Mainstream media has become steadily more sensationalist as it fights for its life, creating uneasy symbioses with media-savvy insurgents like Trump or Farage. Partisan news sources like Fox

and Breitbart are flourishing. Social media platforms use powerful algorithms to push viewers towards content that maximises 'engagement' by fanning fear and outrage.

The good news, though, is that there's no shortage of techniques that we can use to train ourselves in how to manage our mental and emotional states, and allow us to make conscious choices about how to react rather than snap into instinctive, defensive reactions.

> **We invest almost nothing in preventive strategies to help us be resilient citizens"**

Anxiety and hyper-vigilance can be addressed through mindfulness-based stress reduction; cognitive behaviour therapy; relaxation therapy, or even Stoicism. We can learn to overcome cognitive biases that distort our view of the world, many of which play important roles in political polarisation – like confirmation bias, selective perception, or in-group bias. And we can reduce the polarising impact of news media by learning how to change our 'media diet'.

There are also valuable examples of real world initiatives to start rolling these interventions out at scale. Meditation apps like Headspace and Calm have exploded in popularity. Platforms like Openmind and IC Thinking offer training to help people to overcome cognitive biases and avoid seeing the world in black and white. Peacebuilding initiatives like Cure Violence use approaches grounded in epidemiology to interdict epidemics of rage and revenge at the root.

But overall, we invest almost nothing in preventive strategies to help us be resilient citizens who can consciously decide how to respond even when we're anxious or afraid – despite the fact that this matters *hugely* for the health of our democracies. That needs to change if we want to inoculate our societies against potentially much worse polarisation in the future.

From powerlessness to agency

Second, there are our feelings of powerlessness. In our lives and relationships; in work, from zero hours contracts to salaried jobs; in our communities, as libraries, banks, post offices, and parks disappear; in politics, on Brexit, inequality, or whether we go to war; and in our futures, as poll after poll shows pessimism rising inexorably.

Feelings like these cause serious mental harm, with long term experiences of feeling powerless nearly trebling the risk of anxiety and depression. And they have a direct impact on political polarisation, with feelings of powerlessness strongly associated with authoritarian beliefs.

As with self-awareness, though, we can change all this if we want to, and build more of a sense of agency in our lives, both individually and collectively. In our own lives, we can learn how to build self-esteem and confidence; how to identify a sense of purpose and pursue it; and how to have challenging conversations at work or at home.

There's much we can do to build a sense of agency in what we do collectively, too. When we take part in refugee welcome initiatives, start a food bank, or vol-

unteer for a befriending initiative, we see how much difference we can make in the world, and we create new connections that bridge gaps in experience and perspective.

And of course, we can learn to organise, and to tackle political grievances that might otherwise drive support for extremism. Trainings like Campaign Bootcamp, NEON, or Advocacy Academy are widely recognised as state of the art, for instance – albeit also highly resource-intensive, and hence only available to people who are, or are becoming, professional campaigners.

Yet experience from successful mass mobilisations – the 2016 Bernie campaign, Momentum, Avaaz – suggests deep appetite for new forms of activism. So there's real potential to create new resources, both on and off line, that can train ordinary people on how to build their power – everything from how to win a local campaign to how to build a political movement – while also teaching self-awareness, self-care, and bridge-building across political divides. Organisations like Citizens UK, The Alternative, Act Build Change, or the Social Change Agency already do a lot. There's a lot more to do.

From disconnection to belonging

Third and finally, we face an epidemic of disconnection – from loneliness to status anxiety over the esteem of our peers, a form of threat perception that we know increases when inequality is high. The public health toll of such feelings is huge: research suggests loneliness is as harmful as smoking, and worse than obesity.

It matters for politics, too. Seventy years after Hannah Arendt noted that "loneliness is the common ground of terror", there's clear evidence to connect loneliness with vulnerability to radicalisation. We also know that loneliness undermines our sense of empathy and makes us more self-centred – which then makes us even more lonely.

> **There's clear evidence to connect loneliness with vulnerability to radicalisation."**

At a bigger scale, entire communities may wonder if they belong or are valued, whether minorities, immigrants, "deplorables", "chavs", or "citizens of nowhere". Such feelings can powerfully amplify political polarisation, especially given social 'sorting' whereby we learn, work with, befriend, and marry people with similar backgrounds.

And ultimately, the challenges we face mean we need to find ways of nurturing a sense of belonging that leads us to identify with a Larger Us that includes all of the world's nations and peoples, all of the earth's species, and generations as yet unborn.

Again, there's a lot we can do if we want to. The Cares Family has shown how social capital can be rebuilt even among hard-to-reach parts of the population like the elderly, while Participatory City is demonstrating how to build deep networks of friendship and belonging in places like Dagenham and Barking.
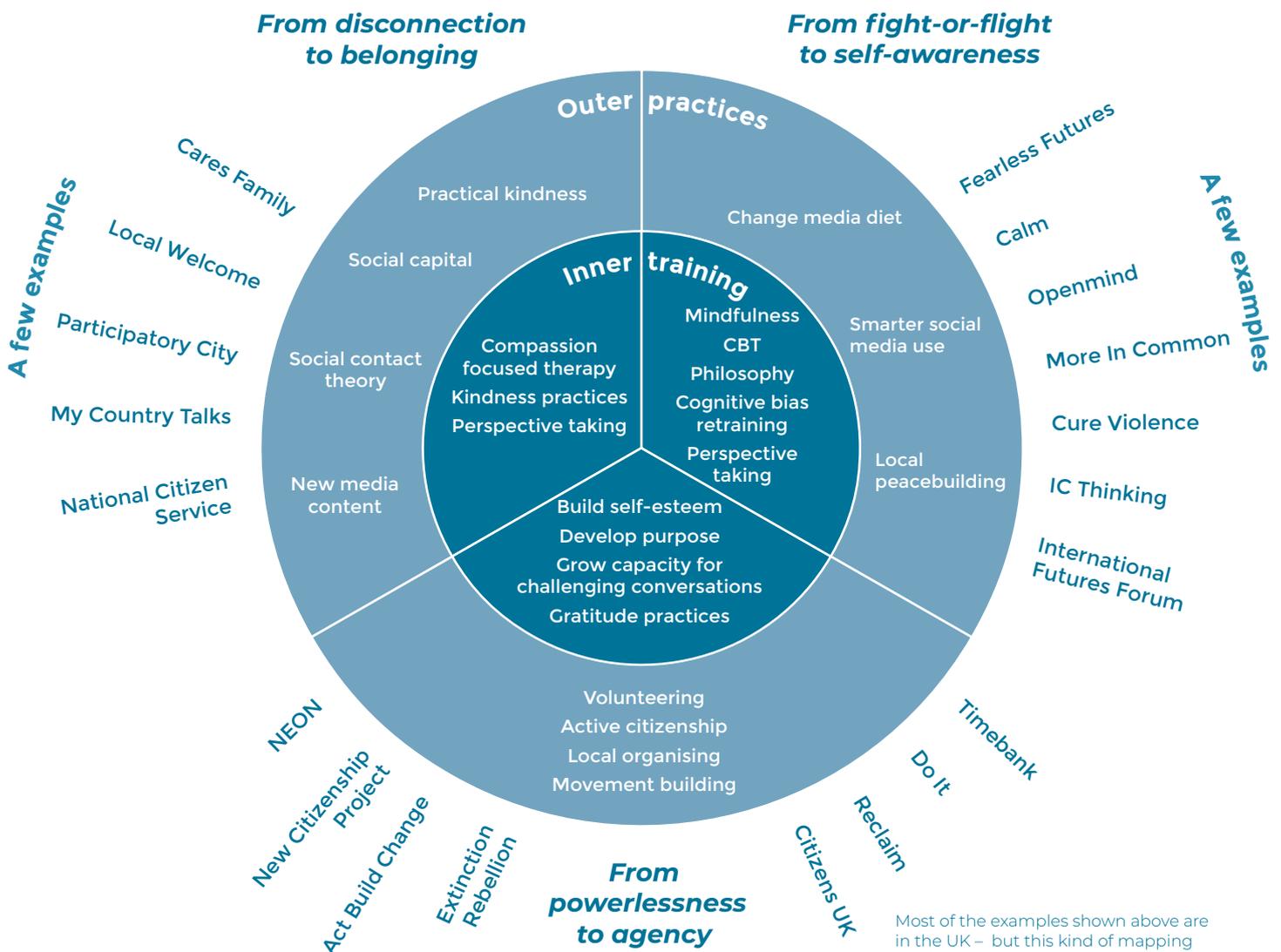
There are tried and tested ways of building belonging and shared identity across different communities, too. Social contact theory, for instance, has a rich library

of experience on how contact between majority and minority groups can – given the right conditions – reduce prejudice and increase empathy.

But while such approaches have been used to ease community tensions in places with high levels of immigration, to welcome refugees, or to give 16 and 17 year olds the chance to spend time with others from different backgrounds, there has been much less experimentation on how it could bring people together across 'values tribes'. Here too, there is an open goal on rebuilding common ground.

And we're discovering ways of shifting our outlooks towards a global, long-term perspective, too. Astronauts have long reported the 'overview effect' shift in perspective that comes with seeing the earth from space, for example; increasingly, technology like VR is making this kind of shift – and the empathy it unlocks – accessible to all of us.

Overview: the three transitions

From disconnection to belonging

From fight-or-flight to self-awareness

A few examples

Cares Family
Local Welcome
Participatory City
My Country Talks
National Citizen Service

A few examples

Fearless Futures
Calm
Openmind
More In Common
Cure Violence
IC Thinking
International Futures Forum

Outer practices

Practical kindness
Social capital

Inner training

Compassion focused therapy
Kindness practices
Perspective taking

Social contact theory

New media content

Change media diet
Smarter social media use

Mindfulness
CBT
Philosophy
Cognitive bias retraining
Perspective taking

Local peacebuilding

Build self-esteem
Develop purpose
Grow capacity for challenging conversations
Gratitude practices

Volunteering
Active citizenship
Local organising
Movement building

NEON
New Citizenship Project
Act Build Change
Extinction Rebellion

Citizens UK
Reclaim
Do It
Timebank

From powerlessness to agency

Most of the examples shown above are in the UK – but this kind of mapping can be undertaken at any level from local to global, and in all kinds of different contexts and sectors, as we'll see in the next part of the paper.

Whose job is this stuff?

These, then, are three psychological transitions that we need to make, both individually and collectively. As we've seen, each is crucial for psychological wellbeing, and has a crucial collective dimension that plays out in the political realm:

- Our collective **self-awareness** will determine whether we can stay calm and reflective or slide into self-amplifying threat perception and polarisation.

- Our collective sense of **agency** will determine how much we are able to take control of creating a future that we actually want and that works for all of us.

- Our sense of **belonging**, and of whether we belong to a Larger Us or a them-and-us, will determine whether we come together or fall apart.

So whose job is it to help us to grow our capacities in these areas?

It's a hard question to answer, in particular because each of the three transitions sprawls across the line between our inner, psychological lives on one hand, and our outer, real world lives on the other – a line that the modern world tends to keep clearly demarcated.

"
One of our most important spaces for the practice of collective psychology has been eroding steadily, leaving a vacuum in its wake.

The obvious exception, of course, has historically been religion. At their best, religions offer a treasury of techniques for navigating and transforming our inner worlds: from meditation or prayer through to shared myths that provide entire societies with meaning, identity, and purpose.

At the same time, they also have a unique ability to reshape the outer world for the better, whether through practical compassion in everyday life or through the political movements rooted in faith communities that advocated for the abolition of slavery, civil rights in the United States, or the cancellation of developing world debt.

(And of course, the fact that religions transcend the divide between inner and outer can also make them uniquely powerful forces for division and harm if they become divorced from kindness – always the ultimate litmus test of faith or spirituality.)

But in modern times, the role of religion has changed in two key ways. First, religion has over recent centuries retreated steadily from the public sphere in the west and become seen as a purely private concern (a shift that Karen Armstrong argues is ground zero for the very modern phenomenon of fundamentalism). Second, more recently, religiosity itself has been in steep decline in most developed countries, especially among the young.

The result of these two epochal shifts is that, almost unnoticed, one of our most important spaces for the practice of collective psychology, over thousands of years, has been eroding steadily, leaving a vacuum in its wake.

This is not to argue that the solution to our current inner and outer crises is simply to reverse the two big shifts just described, which many people would see as undesirable and most would agree is unfeasible. But it does imply that we need to think seriously about how to fill the gaps that the retreat of religion has left behind, especially in the three key areas of self-awareness, agency, and belonging.

So where would we start to do that?

Everywhere.

Virtually every aspect of society can be looked at through a collective psychology lens. There's a huge amount that could be done to make local government or public services like healthcare more focused on collective psychological wellbeing, for example. Education will be especially important given the range of skills we need to learn (or relearn), with implications for everything from curricula to teacher training.

Or consider all the places and platforms where we share stories, values, and content with each other - from arts and culture to news and social media.

Or the role of our leaders and the behaviours they model in terms of how they listen, the language and narrative frames they use, or the decisions and actions they take.

Or what citizens are doing themselves, from global civil society organisations to local clubs, from Facebook to Snapchat, from vast political movements to meet-ups of a few people.

All of these spaces and institutions have the potential to be powerful engines of self-awareness, agency, and belonging. But understanding whether that potential is being harnessed requires us to look through a collective psychology lens – to explore what's already out there, to imagine what else we could do, and to understand why we need to do it.

What might it look like to begin that work? We turn to that question in the next and final section.

3

Next
Steps

The story so far

Let's recap where we've got to. We've seen that tribalism and them-and-us thinking is on the rise all over the world, presenting a clear danger not only to the health of our democracies, but also to our ability to react to the defining challenges of our moment in history, above all climate change and mass extinction.

We've looked at how conventional explanations for this polarisation usually focus on political, economic, or cultural drivers, but often overlook the underlying psychological dynamics at play, especially increasing levels of anxiety and the contagious nature of threat perception in politics.

More broadly, we've explored the idea that the inner and outer crises we face are two sides of the same coin, which currently reinforce and amplify each other – implying the need to reverse the dynamic, so that we recognise that fixing the world means healing ourselves and each other *and* that this process of healing can't run its course without tackling real world harms and injustices.

Then, in the last section, we looked at three key transitions we need to make that can help us to achieve this aim – from fight-or-flight to self-awareness; from powerlessness to agency; and from disconnection to belonging – exploring how all three are relevant at both individual *and* collective level, for both psychological wellbeing and for our ability to shape our shared future.

And we asked whose job it is to support these transitions, suggesting that the decline of religion as a key place for the practice of collective psychology implies the need to look across society at how and where we can fill the gaps that it has left behind.

Three areas for action

So how would we start the ball rolling? We're interested in three areas of work – all of them collective in nature, as we'll see:

1. Build community and tell the story

We need to build connections among people working at the cusp of inner and outer change who want to be part of an emerging ecosystem of ideas, innovation, and support – and also build profile and agenda around ideas like thinking of ourselves as part of a Larger Us.

2. Map the ground

To avoid reinventing the wheel and make sure we build on what's working, we need to map out what's already happening on each of the three key transitions – in the process, identifying gaps, synergies, lessons, and opportunities.

3. Make small bets

Despite the work of early pioneers , this is still an embryonic field, and we don't yet know which interventions can make the biggest difference. So we need to create platforms to support rapid cycles of experimentation, failure, and learning.

Build community and tell the story
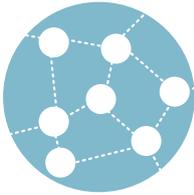
As we saw in the last part of the paper, there's already a broad canvas of people who are, in a galaxy of different ways, working at the cusp of inner and outer change – but who aren't yet connected to each other.

During the first phase of the Collective Psychology Project, from October 2018 to May 2019, we've run a range of convenings, including small dinners, a 3 day residential retreat, and a meetup in London.

We want to build on this foundation and help to catalyse and curate a community of practice that's both wider and deeper, and that serves its members by making connections, spreading ideas, and above all growing a sense of group identity that enables the emergence of partnerships and innovations.

Specifically, we're interested in:

• Creating a **Collective Psychology Network** that's aimed at practitioners working on inner and outer change – for instance in NGOs, government, academia, or philanthropies. We'd aim for an initial membership of 200–500 people, and run a mixture of larger meetups and smaller, more focused groups that would provide peer support to their members and provide a space for drilling down into more specific questions.

• A **Larger Us Network** that's bigger and more public facing, which would both run events to showcase big thinkers and new ideas in collective psychology, and potentially offer trainings – for instance on how to start and run local bridge-building groups similar to those currently emerging on many US university campuses.

And we also want to help bring news from the emerging field of collective psychology, and tell the story of why we need collective psychology, what we're learning about how to do it, and why ultimately *all* of us are practitioners of this new discipline whether we know it or not.

Map the ground

Our next task, before we begin piloting any new interventions, is to map out which organisations and networks are already doing what in the collective psychology space, and in particular on each of the three transitions identified in the last section.

The kind of exercise we're imagining is *not* a sequence of interviews followed by a report that writes the findings up. We're interested in something far more participatory and collaborative: an approach that brings together relevant players to do the mapping themselves, so that both the process *and* the outcome help to build awareness of how much more we could do. We want to:

• Invite our mapmakers to explore and celebrate how what they're *already* doing creates resilience, power, and belonging

- Explore the effectiveness of different intervention models uncovered during the mapping process

- Map what's not working, or how and where unintended consequences arise, to support a First Do No Harm approach

- Identify gaps and opportunities – both to inform the mapmakers themselves, and to target future prototyping work for maximum impact

- Build community, creating new bandwidth for learning and collaboration, while capturing insights to inform future prototyping and innovation.

In practical terms, the process for delivering these aims might look something like this:

1. **Define a subject area focus** – which could be geographic (e.g. city, neighbourhood, country), thematic (e.g. issue-based, or specific to a cultural group or sector), or institutional (e.g. looking at a specific organisation).

2. **Map the ecosystem** – through two parallel processes of (a) small groups that meet biweekly for two months and (b) a one week residency involving 50–100 participants.

3. **Share the maps** – bring together the participants from both sets of processes to share knowledge and critically compare their experiences.

4. **Sketch future activity** – participants would use the maps generated to generate new concepts or adapt existing ones to help enhance the collective psychology of their communities.

The process would also be designed to be repeatable, allowing it to be replicated in different contexts for different communities, and including facilitated p2p training in order to build in potential for the approach to scale.

In concrete terms, we're interested in running three pilots:

- One or two in specific places (potentially Leeds and Bristol), built around 5 day residencies with working sessions and informal drop-ins;

- One looking at a sector (potentially UK campaigning organisations and movements working on climate change); and

- And one looking at the international level (potentially working with the United Nations to feed into its 75th anniversary in 2020).

Make small bets

Collective psychology is a very new field – and a long way from being ready to coalesce around a small number of high-impact interventions that are ready to be taken to scale.

Instead, it's at a stage where it makes more sense to make lots of small bets, expecting most of them to fail, but with valuable lessons from each failure – and the potential for a few experiments to win big.

While those of us involved in the Project so far already have some ideas for small bets that we think could be worth exploring, the bigger question at this stage is how to enable lots of small bets to be made, and to ensure that learnings from them are shared quickly with the community just outlined.

With that in mind, we're interested in creating an innovation platform to help collective psychology entrepreneurs who want to try out small ideas that could potentially go to scale further down the line. Specifically, this could involve support in three areas:

- First, an **organisation** that can both provide an affiliation to independent researchers and offer infrastructure for receiving grant funding from philanthropies that may not be able to fund individuals (e.g. by creating a Community Interest Company)

- Second, through offering **help and advice** on projects – through feedback, connection with peers or mentors working in relevant areas, and maximising shared learning across projects in an ecosystem approach

- Third, potentially through **funding**. Small bets will often be below realistic funding thresholds for many large philanthropies starting to look at political polarisation. At the same time, the fact that collective psychology is a new field implies the need for a huge range of expertise.

So we're interested in using the Collective Psychology Network outlined above to crowdsource funding decisions and help focus work on areas that have highest potential, while also offering large funders a way of disaggregating larger scale funding into much smaller micro-grants.

Conclusion

At its core, collective psychology is about deepening our empathy with each other, building our sense of common purpose, and identifying with a 'Larger Us' – one that includes all 7 billion of the world's people, plus other species and future generations – rather than a them-and-us, or an atomised 'I'.

These aren't just short term, tactical goals; in many ways, they're the next step in our evolution. The whole story arc of human history is about identification and cooperation with larger and larger collectives and levels of complexity: from Neolithic tribes to chiefdoms, from city states to kingdoms, from nation states to global diasporas and, just fifty years ago, the first photograph of Earth from space.

Right now, we're teetering between breakdown and breakthrough. A breakdown scenario would see us fragment into multiple smaller groupings, with catastrophic results given our global interdependence and the scale of the challenges we face.

Breakthrough, by contrast, would see us jump to the much higher level of coherence needed to manage planetary level problems, for all of us and for generations to come.

The most important variables that will tip the balance between these scenarios are psychological. How we see ourselves and each other; whether we're able to manage our emotional and mental states at a time of extraordinary turbulence; the stories we reach for to understand what's happening at this moment in history.

But psychological practice as it exists today is inadequate to the task. Psychology and self-help have some of the answers, but only if they can break out of being concerned with individuals alone and instead help all of us to heal, with no one left behind.

It's time for psychology to get collective.

About the Collective Psychology Project

The Collective Psychology Project was started by Alex Evans in 2018. Alex is a Senior Fellow at New York University's Center on International Cooperation where he works on political polarisation; the author of The Myth Gap (Penguin, 2017), a book about the power of deep stories to unlock systemic social and political change (summarised here); and until last year was a Campaign Director at Avaaz, where he ran the Brexit campaign. He's also been a Special Adviser to two UK Cabinet ministers, worked in the UN Secretary-General's office, and published research on global issues with Brookings, Chatham House, and the US National Intelligence Council.

From here on out, the aim is for the Collective Psychology Project to be just that: collective. So if you'd like to be part of one of the mapping exercises, involved in the Collective Psychology Network or the Larger Us Network, explore a project idea that you'd be interested in working on at the Collective Psychology Project, or just to get in touch for a chat, then please drop us a line.

Acknowledgements