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# **Social Cohesion: Updating the State of the Research**

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## **Executive Summary**

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## Executive Summary

In the last four years, since CPRN published *Mapping Social Cohesion: The State of Canadian Research*, there have been significant additions to the body of academic research and policy-related findings on social cohesion. A range of researchers and research organizations have pursued an agenda of analysis using the concept. Therefore, the principal goal of this literature and research review is to document and assess the major conceptual issues and themes in these recent studies. This paper provides a structured reading of this literature and a bibliography.

Section 1 explores the definitional range of the concept. Progress has been made in defining the concept of social cohesion. Nonetheless, it still has a variety of meanings, and the choice of which to employ as a definitional starting point has immediate consequences for what is analyzed, what is measured, and what policy action is recommended. Moreover, behind all of these definitional choices are important, and often long running, theoretical debates about what generates well-being, innovation, and so on. Therefore, while the focus of this literature review is *not* on settling definitional disputes, readers must be aware of the consequences of the definitional choices made at all points of any analysis.

Section 2 begins from the observation that there is no unanimous position on whether social cohesion is a cause or a consequence of other aspects of social, economic and political life. For some analysts and policy-makers, the condition of social cohesion in any polity is an *independent variable*, generating outcomes. For others, social cohesion (or the lack thereof) is the *dependent variable*, the result of actions in one or more realms. As illustrated in Box 1 (reproduced here), it is therefore possible to separate the literature into two groups, one that treats social cohesion as a consequence, and the other, which sees it as a cause.

### Box 1. Patterns of Causation

VARIOUS FACTORS



SOCIAL COHESION

**Factors** such as:

- ◆ globalization and new technologies
- ◆ diversity
- ◆ community

SOCIAL COHESION



VARIOUS OUTCOMES

**Outcomes** such as:

- ◆ economic performance and well-being
- ◆ health
- ◆ participation rates and legitimacy of democratic institutions

While we have used the language of causality and from time to time speak of “dependent” and “independent” variables, it is very important to take note that, in the vast majority of cases, the most that the studies reviewed can demonstrate is that a *correlation* exists. Causal connections are not established and, as later sections document, there is an increasing tendency to see social cohesion in *interactive* rather than *unidirectional* relationships.

When social cohesion is analyzed as an outcome, the factors affecting it can be grouped under the headings of economic restructuring, diversity, and the characteristics of some communities.

One of the earliest ways of analyzing social cohesion was to see it as threatened by external economic factors, such globalization or a fragmenting social order. Two elements of change and their effects on social relations are examined in particular – new technologies and globalized markets. This perspective has given rise to a series of studies concerned about socioeconomic threats to social cohesion and mechanisms to protect it. Recent years have brought significant adjustments in the way analyses are constructed. If the earliest versions tended to be heavy on hand-wringing (“oh dear, so many threats to social cohesion exist”), the newer literature focuses on the kinds of interventions that can prevent social cohesion from being undermined, or on those that can rebuild it. It pays attention, in other words, to more than big socioeconomic trends. It identifies the actors that can intervene to mediate, mitigate, and alter effects so as to foster social cohesion.

A second important group of studies are those that see *societal diversity* as a factor which potentially undermines social cohesion. They also tend to use a definition of social cohesion in which social solidarity as well as common values are constitutive elements. There is a significant difference, however, in the way this threat is appraised, as compared to the economic restructuring associated with globalization. The literature that analyzes social cohesion as a consequence of economic change tends to focus almost exclusively on threats. In contrast, the literature addressing diversity as factor affecting social cohesion tends to see *both* positive and negative potential. The latter also tends to emphasize the role of values, as well as institutions and practices. Specifically, if globalization produces greater diversity, then public policy – whether cultural or other – can temper the negative consequences and promote the positive ones.

Overall, the major change in the literature that treats social cohesion as a dependent variable has been the increased attention to the capacity of well-designed strategic action to *foster* social cohesion. Such analyses necessitate attention to *actors*. In this literature, however, there is limited attention to actors in civil society. Some research looks at workers and employers, some at changing families, and some at citizens, but the bulk of attention goes to the state and governance forms. With respect to the state, there are somewhat separate literatures that identify cultural policy and education as important ingredients for fostering social cohesion. There is a significantly larger literature, however, that points to economic and social policy, especially the need to make *investments* – in children, in quality jobs, in neighbourhoods and local partnerships, and so on.

The other way to treat social cohesion is to emphasize “what it does.” The focus is no longer on the fragility of social cohesion but on its *contribution* to or implications for growth, well-being,

and participation. By far the most important definition of social cohesion used in these studies is one that treats social capital and social networks as the constitutive element. Social capital occupies almost the whole stage – except in the literature on health outcomes, where patterns of resource distribution have always been central, and in the newer literature that focuses on economic well-being rather than a single aggregate measure of macro-economic growth. Rates of social participation have also been described as the result of social capital.

With these studies, there is a return to concerns for distributional matters since well-being considers both distribution and economic security. This time, however, social cohesion (defined as social capital) is considered to be the factor fostering well-being, rather than distribution fostering or undermining social cohesion. In both cases, however, the causal argument is theoretical and the empirical analysis demonstrates only co-variation.

In addition, it is worth noting that the actors invoked in these studies are not the same as those mentioned above. To the extent that actors and their strategy are mentioned at all, they are primarily private ones, especially firms and families. John Helliwell has noted that authors using the social capital concept “are weakest in terms of policy prescriptions.”

There is an emerging tendency towards treating the relationship between social cohesion and other factors as bi-directional. To the extent that causal arguments become bi-directional, they become much less robust, as the notion of “chicken and egg” has taught us in folk wisdom for centuries. Whether it is a “problem” or not, however, depends on the *standing* one grants to social cohesion as a concept.

As a scientific concept, the fact that we are dealing with correlation but still lack adequate theory to provide convincing explanations is definitely a challenge. Such situations plague the social sciences, and it is not surprising that works on social cohesion have fallen victim to it. This is not helped by the fact that the one approach which seemed most likely to give solid empirical results because of available data – that of social capital – has begun to implode into the circular. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to make hard and fast causal statements about what social cohesion “does” or about where it “comes from.”

However, as a quasi-concept useful for policy purposes, social cohesion remains robust – as long as there is not too much pressure to establish its scientific letters patent by forcing a narrow definition or a causal argument. It serves usefully as a *framing concept* for thinking through the complexity of policy issues. In these circumstances, correlation is an important finding. The fact that there is a correlation between societal level outcomes and patterns of distribution of revenue, as numerous studies from health policy to economics have found, is an important contribution to policy discussions. They demonstrate that there *is* a connection between the economic and the social, and that it is therefore not sufficient to work on “fixing the economy” alone. Getting the “social fundamentals right” is also necessary.

This said, however, we are not suggesting that “anything goes.” It is still important to be clear about the form of the argument and the definition used. Therefore, attention needs to go to measurement, which it does in Section 3. Given the variability in the empirical literature, we

organize this third section by efforts to operationalize the nature of social cohesion, to measure its effects, and to measure its causes.

We look first at texts that seek to *operationalize* social cohesion. The conclusion that emerges is that the indicators depend on the definition employed. Those who define social cohesion in terms of social solidarity and patterns of distribution turn to measures of inclusion-exclusion, as well as to individual measures of income distribution, poverty, and a range of inequalities. Those who define social cohesion in terms of social bonds and capital measure rates of participation, membership and trust, as well as trying to characterize the network form.

Then we look at measures of the *effects* of social cohesion. Because there are an increasing number of analysts who see social cohesion as generating economic and other social benefits, a notion gaining ground is that the capacity to cooperate, as well as trust, is the foundation of innovation and well-being. In studies of what creates growth and good economic performance, we find numerous references to the trust, cooperation, and coordination that comes from well-developed social capital. Such operationalizations overwhelmingly focus on trust and networks, and within them on measures of trust drawn from surveys. However, notions of social quality are also important.

Finally, we look at the much more limited literature that seeks to understand the *decline* of social cohesion. There is no consensus in this section, with authors examining – and frequently rejecting – hypotheses about the negative effects of television, social isolation, and so on.

As a quasi-concept, social cohesion is judged not only by its analytical rigour but also by its utility. Therefore, Section 4 examines the ways in which social cohesion has been used in policy networks to address real problems encountered by policy-makers, asking: What have they made of the concept recently?

We observe that social cohesion is used in policy discussions at the point where single-focus policies such as anti-poverty, employment, community development, and so on (all of which are in themselves complex and multidimensional) do not seem to work as they should. Policy communities increasingly feel the need for integrating concepts that can make sense of a wide range of challenges – from income security, to security in neighbourhoods, to national security, for example.

In effect, social cohesion is one of the concepts often deployed in political discussions about ways to modernize the architecture of social and economic policy. One of the lines of dispute in these discussions is who or what institutions – markets, families or public policy – will have responsibility for ensuring the well-being of individuals as well as the community? In other words, because it addresses issues of the responsibility mix, social cohesion may be used as a key concept in discussions of citizenship.

Being a quasi-concept, social cohesion is always contested. It is challenged, rejected and dismissed by those who have other ideas about how the future should be designed, the principles around which social life and citizenship should be organized, and so on. Its utility is questioned by those who prefer to put their efforts in areas other than shoring up collective well-being.

Therefore, it is important to recognize two things about such policy debates. First, because social cohesion is a quasi-concept, the debates are about political *values and goals* as much as, if not more than, about “science” or even about relations of causality. Following from this, the second thing to recognize is that the utility of the concept depends on its contribution to *framing* conversations, to helping to make sense of complex relationships, and to setting goals.

We have several recent examples within the Canadian, European and international policy literature of this move towards using social cohesion as a quasi-concept within a complex framing discussion. Rather than attempting to develop tight causal arguments, particularly ones that clearly try to separate cause from effect, there is a conscious embrace of interactive arguments.

The final section of the paper provides a number of examples of major national and international bodies that have turned to social cohesion as a concept for framing their responses to the challenges of the future. They have discovered its utility, find it helpful in engaging in dialogue with their citizens, and use it when confronted with the need to choose among options under conditions of limited resources. In other words, after several years of intense discussion, research, and policy development – and despite the ongoing dialogue about “what it *really* means” – social cohesion is a concept that remains valuable today and is likely to continue to serve us well in the years ahead.