Sharpening the Lens: Recent Research on Social Cohesion

Résumés

Beauvais, Caroline, and Jane Jenson. 2002. "Social Cohesion: Updating the State of the Research." CPRN Discussion Paper No. F/22. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks. http://www.cprn.org

In the last four years since CPRN published *Mapping Social Cohesion: The State of Canadian Researc*h, there have been significant additions to the body of academic research and policy-related findings on social cohesion. The principal goal of this literature and research review is to document and assess the major conceptual issues and themes in these recent studies. The paper starts by exploring the definitional range of the concept. The second part of the paper 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. One of the earliest ways of analyzing social cohesion was to see it as threatened by external economic factors, such as globalization or a fragmenting social order. Overall, the major change in the literature, that treats social cohesion as a consequence, has been the increased attention to the capacity of well-designed strategic action to *foster* social cohesion. 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.

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. 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 usefully serves as a *framing concept* for thinking through the complexity of policy issues. This said, however, the two authors are not suggesting that "anything goes." It is still important to be clear about the form of the argument and the definition used. Section 3 of the paper looks at the issue of measurement. The last section 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? Beauvais and Jenson argue that 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.

Jeannotte, Sharon, Dick Stanley, Ravi Pendakur, Bruce Jamieson, Maureen Williams, and Amanda Aizlewood. 2002. "Buying In or Dropping Out: The Public Policy Implications of Social Cohesion Research." Ottawa: Strategic Research and Analysis, Department of Canadian Heritage.

This paper is intended as a "primer" on the subject of social cohesion and as a summary of what researchers know about it so far. The paper begins by describing the framework for research on social cohesion developed by the Social Cohesion Network, outlines key research findings, draws tentative conclusions from those findings and suggests possible next steps for research. The paper addresses five questions: First, why is there so much interest in this seemingly obscure analytical concept? Second, can it help us to understand current issues of concern to the Canadian public? Third, is it a useful framework for public policy discourse? Fourth, can it be measured or tested empirically? In the conclusion, the authors ask whether an understanding of social cohesion helps policy-makers in all fields make better decisions. They suggest that evidence-based decision-making is always preferable to decision-making that is crisis-driven or based on wishful thinking. A good understanding of the role of social cohesion in sustaining Canadian society cannot help but improve our capacity to make sounder policy decisions in a variety of policy domains. The quality of decisions, made in institutions throughout a democratic society, determines how many citizens "buy in" to that society's collective well-being and how many "drop out" in frustration. In this sense, good public policy is part of the "virtuous circle" that maintains social cohesion and reinforces the trust that underpins sustainable societies.

Hannigan, John. 2002. "Culture, Globalization, and Social Cohesion: Towards a De-territorialized, Global Fluids Model." Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol. 27, No. 2-3 http://www.cjc-online.ca/title.php3?page=17&journal_id=43

To conceptualize the interrelationship among culture, social cohesion, and globalization, this paper uses Urry's three "social topographies" of space: region, network, and fluids. Fluids describe the de-territorialized movement of people, information, objects, money, and images across regions in an undirected and non-linear fashion. They are characteristically emergent, hybridized, urban, and cosmopolitan. Drawing upon Appadurai's five dimensions of global cultural flows (ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes) and using examples from Britain, the United States, and Canada, the paper argues for greater research and policy attention to the processes whereby transnational and hybrid identities are forged in cities. It concludes by introducing some empirical indicators of cosmopolitanization that represent a starting point for further research into the linkages between global cultural fluids and social cohesion.

What's New?

International Conference on Social Science and Social Policy in the 21st Century, Vienna, Austria, December 9-11, 2002. The purpose of the conference is to overview developments and accomplishments of the social and behavioural sciences during the last fifty years, and to look forward to future developments and dialogue with users of social science knowledge at national and international levels. The conference will focus on the past and future of interdisciplinary issues such as conflict management, international governance, human security, and urban problems. For more information, contact: Leszek A. Kosinski, Secretary-General, International Social Science Council, Maison de l'UNESCO, http://www.unesco.org/ngo/issc

Turning Visions into Action: Equality and Community Development, United Kingdom, September 6-8, 2002. How can rhetoric about social inclusion and community cohesion be turned into practical action? Workshops will include themes like "Including Young People's Voices" and "Investigating Social Cohesion." For more information, contact: Standing Conference for Community Development, Venue Bradford University and Bradford College, http://www.sccd.org.uk/