

SOCIAL COHESION: INSIGHTS FROM CANADIAN RESEARCH
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1. Introduction

Since 1997, Canadian researchers, both inside and outside government, have been conducting research on the subject of social cohesion. Over the past six years there have been many debates in Canada and in other countries about definitions of social cohesion. Some believe that social cohesion is a dependent variable, which can be negatively or positively influenced by other factors such as new technology or diversity. Others contend that it is an independent variable, which leads to desirable outcomes such as economic growth or better population health. Our research would seem to suggest that it is both a dependent and an independent variable, and that the relationships among the various factors involved in building social cohesion are more complex than commonly supposed.

Canadian research has not resulted in definitive answers about the nature of social cohesion, but it has created a new “lens” through which existing government and private sector policies and practices can be viewed and individual behaviours assessed. This paper will provide an overview of Canadian research activity on social cohesion since 1997, discuss the debates about definitions and examine the key findings about social cohesion that have arisen from the past six years of research in Canada. It will then turn to the public policy implications of social cohesion. Finally, it will propose a tentative model for social cohesion, based on what we believe that we know about the interrelationships between the multiple inputs and “complex mobilities” that contribute to social cohesion within any individual society.

2. Definitional debates

In 1996, the Government of Canada set out to strengthen its horizontal policy making capacity. Policy development, while functioning adequately in specific policy areas dealing with “hard” infrastructure, such as transportation or telecommunications, was becoming more difficult in areas involving so-called “soft” infrastructure, such as human resources, social policy, health care, foreign policy and sustainable development. The major characteristic of these tough, horizontal, “soft” policy areas was that they required a broad understanding – across departmental policy “stovepipes” – of complex societal phenomena. The research units in federal government departments were asked to produce short documents on key issues that would be likely to affect their policy areas in the next ten years. These documents were synthesized into 12 challenge papers, which focused on the horizontal policy implications of these phenomena and were later used as foundation documents for several themed research networks.

One of the research networks growing out of this process was the Social Cohesion Network, which brought together about 20 federal government departments and agencies with broad interests in this area. For several months in early 1997, the Network struggled to define what it meant by “social cohesion” and what it believed were the major challenges to social cohesion in Canada.

Defining social cohesion meant that we would have to understand the concept, and as we began to do research, we realized that there were no “standard definitions” and no clear understanding of the term anywhere in the world. Even within organizations such as the European Union, which allocates huge sums under its Structural and Cohesion Funds to strengthen economic and social cohesion within the Union, we found that social cohesion was defined by various types of political, economic or social threats rather than by conceptual rigour. (Jeannotte, 2000: 2-3).

Box 1 - Jenson’s Five Dimensions of Social Cohesion

Belonging ----- Isolation
 Inclusion ----- Exclusion
 Participation ----- Non-involvement
 Recognition ----- Rejection
 Legitimacy ----- Illegitimacy

Between 1998 and 2000, Canadian scholars and policy researchers spent a great deal of effort analyzing the concept of social cohesion and attempting to develop indicators based on this conceptualization. The most well-known of the Canadian theorists is Professor Jane Jenson of the University of Montreal, whose unpacking of the five dimensions of social cohesion is outlined in Box 1. In Jenson’s framework, the degree of social cohesion in a society can be characterized by where it

ranks on the continuum represented by each of the five dimensions. (Jenson, 1998:15).

Paul Bernard, a colleague of Jenson’s at the University of Montreal, later suggested that another dimension – equality versus inequality – be added to her framework to make it more complete (Bernard, 1999: 13). Bernard also pointed out that the resulting six dimensions could then be paired, since they represent either conditions promoting social cohesion (as manifested by formal state policies and programs) or substantive societal outcomes of these policies and programs. The resulting pairing is shown in Box 2.

Box 2 – Bernard’s Formal and Substantive Dimensions of Social Cohesion

FORMAL	SUBSTANTIVE
Equality / Inequality	Inclusion / Exclusion
Recognition / Rejection	Belonging / Isolation
Legitimacy / Illegitimacy	Participation / Non-involvement

Bernard’s argument, which has since been made by other researchers, is that social cohesion can be both an independent variable or a dependent variable. In other words, social cohesion can cause good societal outcomes, but those outcomes can also be a consequence of social cohesion (or in this case, policies that promote social cohesion) (Beauvais and Jenson, 2002:6). For example, a state may have in place a variety of policies and programs to promote social and economic equality. If these policies are effective, the substantive outcome will be citizens who feel included in the life of their communities. If they are not, large portions of that population may feel excluded, posing a threat to the cohesion of that society or community. Similarly, the legitimacy of political, social and economic institutions, as established by constitution, rule of law or tradition, frequently dictates the degree of political, social and economic participation by individuals within the society. If political institutions are not viewed as legitimate, large numbers of citizens may withdraw their support. Withdrawal from the political and social spheres manifests itself in a variety of behaviours, such as low voter turnout and falling volunteerism rates, that are frequently considered to have negative consequences for social cohesion.

As a result of research by Jenson, Bernard and others, the Social Cohesion Network moved away from its initial values-based definition of social cohesion (“the ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians”) to one with a much more functionalist focus on behaviours. By 2002, the Network concluded that a more workable definition would be as follows:

Social cohesion is based on the willingness of individuals to cooperate and work together at all levels of society to achieve collective goals. (Jeannotte et.al., 2002: 3).

The virtue of this definition is that it focuses very clearly on the outcomes of social cohesion and on a set of potential metrics for measuring the amount of social cohesion in a society (i.e. “the willingness of individuals to cooperate”, to “work together” and “to achieve collective goals”). By excising values, equal opportunity and shared challenges from the definition, the task of measurement is simplified. However, the definition can no longer tell us much about the independent variables that contribute to these outcomes.

3. Key research findings about social cohesion in Canada

In this paper, I was asked to explain the societal circumstances that triggered Canadian policy development in the area of social cohesion. While few policies in Canada can be explicitly identified as addressing social cohesion, there has been no shortage of concern about the possible weakening of social cohesion. It was these concerns that guided the Social Cohesion Network’s research plan over its first five years.

At the risk of oversimplification, one can summarize the main conclusions arising from this research as follows:

- There are faultlines and growing cleavages in Canadian society.
- These cleavages are contributing to a weakening of the axes of community identification in Canada. These axes – fundamental democratic values, mutual attachments and willingness to engage in collective action – form the basis of a social citizenship that is being threatened by the forces of globalization.
- The consequences of weakened axes of community identification are poorer social and economic outcomes for Canadians, growing political disenchantment and, possibly, a lessening commitment to Canada. (Jeannotte et.al., 2002: 1)

There is no doubt that faultlines and cleavages within Canadian society were the symptoms that initially got policy makers interested in social cohesion. This is consistent with Jane Jenson’s observation that the term “social cohesion” often enters “the vocabulary of those who judge that things are not going well” (Jenson, 1998:3). Our research on faultlines focussed on two issues: 1) the intersection of ethnic, gender and age-related faultlines with economic disadvantage; and 2) the linkages between economic exclusion and political, social and cultural exclusion. The reason for taking this two-pronged approach was that we discovered that growing cleavages in Canadian society were not the result of diversity per se. Instead, we found that being young or old, being an Aboriginal person or a member of a visible minority, or being a single mother was only a “problem” when it intersected with other exclusionary factors, such as poverty or social and cultural marginalization.

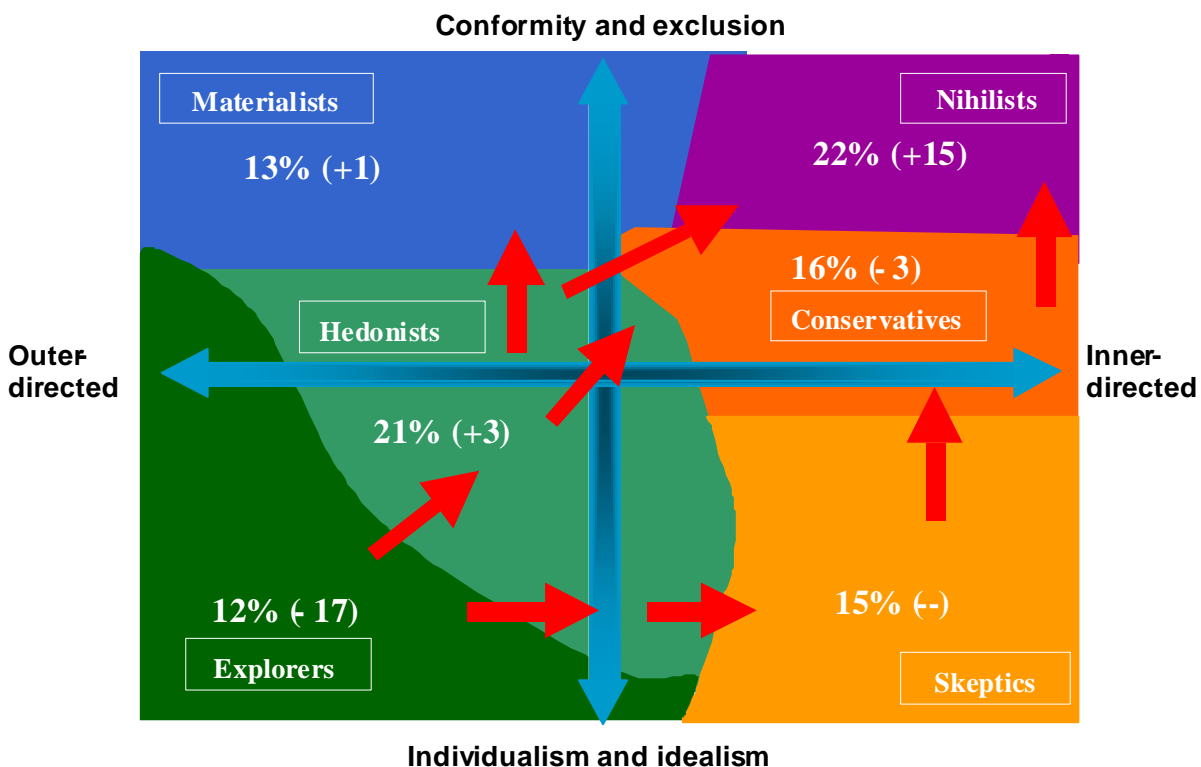
Much of this research was driven by the “equality/inequality” and “inclusion/exclusion” dimensions of Jenson and Bernard’s social cohesion framework, since we recognized that in a market-based economy, the main exclusionary factor tends to be economic exclusion. However, economic exclusion is frequently a marker for other forms of exclusion – social, cultural or political – which also serve to marginalize individuals. We were therefore interested in how issues of inequality and exclusion translated into feelings of isolation and non-recognition within the citizenry. From there, it was a short step to looking at the legitimacy of institutions and the degree to which citizens participated (or did not participate) in their communities.

If legitimacy is linked to participation or non-involvement of citizens, then we found some disturbing trends. Both voter turnout and interest in election campaigns has been falling among the young and among people with lower incomes. And over the past decade, benevolent social

participation has exhibited a clear trend. Those Canadians who already donate their time and money are increasing their commitments, while those disengaged from the civic sphere remain uninvolved (Jeannotte et.al, 2002: 15-16). In fact, a core group, amounting to only 28 per cent of all volunteers, accounts for nearly 84 per cent of total volunteer hours, 77 per cent of total dollars donated, and 69 per cent of all civic participation in Canada (Reed and Selbee, 2000).

While an examination of value trends has not been a prominent part of social cohesion research in Canada, changing axes of community identification have been thrown into sharp relief by recent data on value change and its implications for citizenship. The 3SC Monitor is a syndicated research program that has studied sociocultural change in Canada since 1983. Its purpose has been to trace the evolution of over 100 values and to calculate the trajectory of the Canadian population. Figure 1 shows this trajectory between 1996 and 2002.

**FIGURE 1- SEGMENTATION EVOLUTION
CANADA, 1996-2002**



SOURCE: CROP Inc., "Citizenship, Governance and Social Change", Presentation to the Department of Canadian Heritage, July 3, 2003.

What this sociocultural map illustrates is that during the six-year period between 1996 and 2002, the proportion of the Canadian population described by 3SC as "Explorers" (people who consider physical and moral well-being important and who care about being open to others) decreased by 17 per cent. During the same period, the proportion that has been labelled as "Nihilists" (people who feel excluded with no place in society and no purpose in life) has increased by 15 per cent. Members of this latter group tend to be young, to have lower levels of education and incomes, and to have very little respect for the community or the social contract.

This map confirms earlier findings by members of the Social Cohesion Network. A study done within the Department of Canadian Heritage found that “those believing economic and political systems were ill-equipped to respond to changes in the global economy were also more likely to feel a lack of personal control over their lives, express low levels of life and financial satisfaction and feel least confident about the integrity of the system in general” (Jeannotte and Aizlewood, 1999: 6). This growing group of Canadians appears no longer willing to engage in the cooperation that underpins social cohesion and is increasingly becoming the focus of economic, social and cultural policy concerns.

4. Public policy implications of social cohesion

The Social Cohesion Network has also devoted a good deal of time to investigating and understanding the public policy implications of social cohesion – what we have labelled the “so what?” question or what others have less irreverently called “the socioeconomic and social policy supports for social cohesion” (Beauvais and Jenson, 2002: 7). Several aspects of this theme have been investigated, including the positive relationship of social cohesion to economic development, health, the well-being of children, the security of communities, the functioning of institutions and the degree to which social capital reinforces social cohesion and sustainable communities.

There has been an explosion of literature in recent years on the impacts of social capital and social participation on social cohesion and individual well-being. Social capital is to social cohesion what saving is to wealth: in other words, social capital appears to be one of those investments that a society needs to make in order to guarantee downstream revenue pay-offs in the form of social cohesion. The best-known of the social capital researchers is the American academic, Robert Putnam, whose book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* has been widely cited. In Canada, one of Putnam’s collaborators, John Helliwell, has stated that “... while much of the current interest in social capital is based on its presumed effects on economic outcomes, the linkages flowing from social capital to well-being are if anything better documented and likely to be of greater theoretical and empirical significance” (Helliwell, 2001: 44). In fact, Putnam’s work documents a strong correlation between social capital and a number of social policy outcomes, including positive child development, healthy and productive neighbourhoods, democratic participation and government performance (Putnam, 2000: 287-349).

A series of papers commissioned by the Department of Canadian Heritage recently appeared in a book published by the University of Toronto Press, *The Economic Implications of Social Cohesion*. Several of the authors document a strong causal linkage from social cohesion to macroeconomic performance, using proxy indicators of social cohesion such as trust and willingness to cooperate. Many of these studies (following a line of reasoning also pursued by Francis Fukuyama in his book *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*) suggest that social cohesion reduces transaction costs in a society by reducing the need for defensive actions against risk and by improving political and labour stability. Social cohesion may also improve productivity by reducing employee social dysfunction, thereby increasing satisfaction and promoting the development of new ideas. (Stanley and Smeltzer, 2003: 231-246).

The same publication also contains a number of papers that examine the impact of social cohesion on social well-being. For example, researchers have found that mortality and ill health increase as social cohesion in a community decreases and that children of poor single mothers enjoy better health if they live in stable supportive neighbourhoods (see Phipps, 2003: 79-120 as well as Upperman and Gauthier, 1998: 24-27). The positive effects of socially cohesive

neighbourhoods have also been extensively studied by other researchers in the United States besides Putnam, and it has been found that “collective efficacy” (defined as social cohesion among neighbours) combined with a willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good is linked to reduced violence (Sampson et al., 1997: 923).

5. A tentative model for social cohesion

Attempts to develop a conceptual framework within which social cohesion in Canada can be studied and measured have led us away from simplification and toward a greater appreciation of the complexities of the contemporary policy environment. As may have perhaps been evident from the preceding discussion, there are many factors at play in the development of social cohesion and, while many studies have shown correlations between social cohesion and various public policy outcomes, it has been very difficult to prove causation.

In a perceptive paper prepared for this conference, Chan, Chan and To have made the case for a simpler, more intuitive definition of social cohesion, which could then be used to develop appropriate measurement tools. They have suggested that “cohesion” refers to a state in which components “stick” together to form an effective or meaningful whole. Hence, “social cohesion” could also be understood as a state of affairs concerning how well people in a society “cohere” or “stick” to each other” (Chan et.al., 2003: 11). They have then proposed a number of criteria that must be met in order for people to “stick” to each other:

- 1) They can trust, help and cooperate with their fellow members of society,
- 2) They share a common identity or sense of belonging to their society, and
- 3) The subjective feelings in (1) and (2) are manifested in objective behaviour. (Chan et.al., 2003: 12).

This explanation forms the basis for a proposed definition of social cohesion which states that “Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and a willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations” (Chan et.al., 2003: 12-13).

In comparison to many of the definitions used by other researchers and by other jurisdictions, this one is admirable in its clarity and its rigour. But can it answer all the key questions about social cohesion? Or, to be more precise, can the use of this definition provide policy makers with the information they require to deal with the many intractable issues that face them in a globalized, post-industrial world?

As someone who has struggled for many years to understand the factors contributing to social cohesion, I would have to say that this definition provides an excellent starting point for understanding and for measuring, using both subjective and objective variables, the state of social cohesion in a society. However, it leaves one important question unanswered: what are the factors that contribute to this state?

In the rarefied atmosphere of policy development it is seldom enough to know that something exists. Policy makers must also know *why* something exists or, if it does not, then what might be required to bring it into existence. This is relatively straightforward in some policy domains that deal with physical or material infrastructure. To use one of the examples cited earlier, if one is a policy maker in the area of transportation and one is faced with a series of data which indicate that people in a certain part of the territory are experiencing economic and social

hardships due to the sub-standard condition of the roads, the solution is fairly straightforward. You improve the roads, if your government has the money, or you provide incentives for the private sector to introduce other forms of transportation (for example, a railroad) that might alleviate the economic and social problems caused by the sub-standard roads.

Appealing as this example might be, in the real world, policy interventions are seldom that simple. In fact, many policy problems are what a British researcher, Jake Chapman, has described as “messes”. In Chapman’s book, *System Failure: Why governments must learn to think differently*, he characterizes policy “messes” this way:

... messes are characterised by no clear agreement about exactly what the problem is and by uncertainty and ambiguity as to how improvements might be made, and they are unbounded in terms of the time and resources they could absorb, the scope of enquiry needed to understand and resolve them and the number of people that may need to be involved. (Chapman, 2002: 27)

As examples, Chapman cites reducing crime or improving the operation of the health service. He might also have added the strengthening of social cohesion.

Chapman argues that policy makers must begin to apply systems theory to such complex social problems. Two characteristics of complex systems are that they have emergent properties (which means that the system has new properties that emerge from the sum of its parts) and that they are adaptive (which means that they have the ability to withstand changes in their environment) (Chapman, 2002: 29-30). In other words, the complex system is self-referential and feeds back on itself, which makes outcomes unpredictable. Chapman uses the metaphor of throwing a stone into the water, as compared to throwing a bird into the air. If one throws a stone in the water, he says, the physical reaction of the water and the resulting wave patterns are complicated, but they do not comprise a complex system because their pattern is measurable and predictable. However, if one throws a bird into the air, the bird may fly in any direction. Its flight pattern is unpredictable, and it will adapt that flight pattern in response to various types of external conditions, for example the presence of food or predators (Chapman, 2002:40). Unfortunately for governments, many of the policy challenges that they face display more of the characteristics of the bird than of the stone!

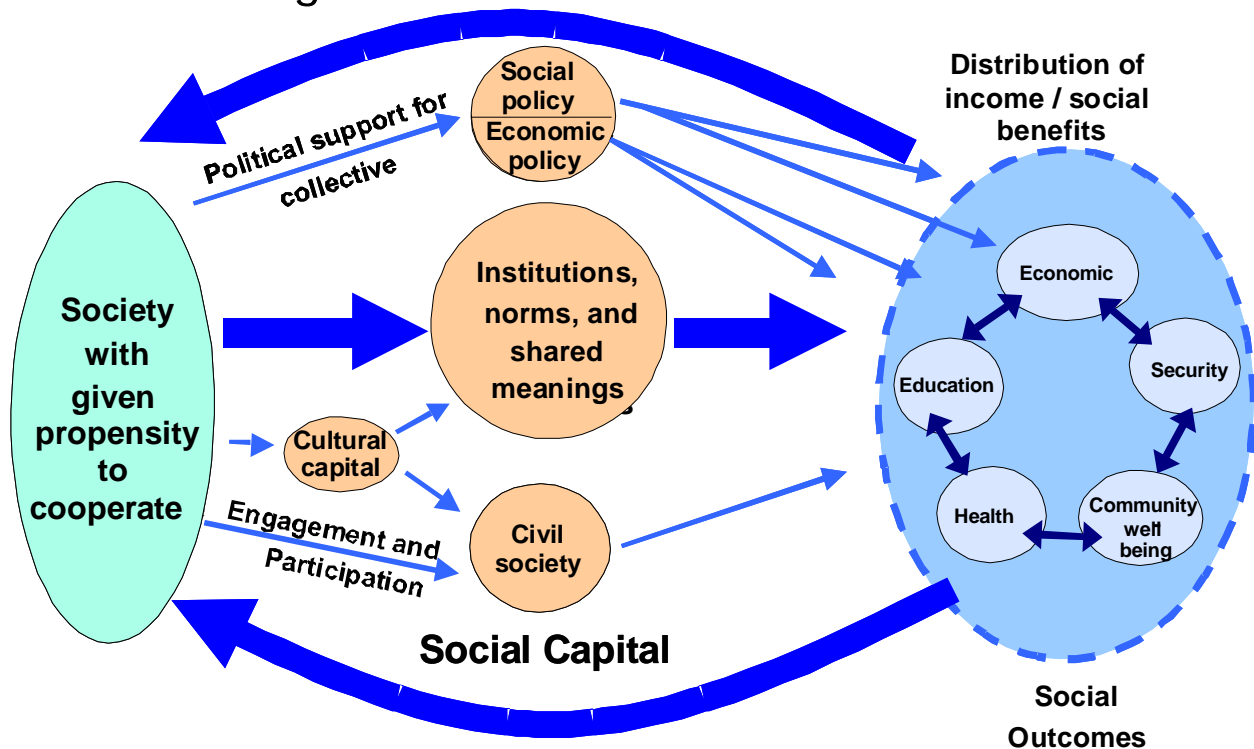
Policy “messes” founded on complex systems are also distinguished by a variety of perspectives on the problem, based on the different mental frameworks used by the various stakeholders. These perspectives are not limited to differences in academic disciplines, but may also arise from “... different contexts, different cultures, different histories, different aspirations and different allegiances” (Chapman, 2002: 31). As a result, stakeholders may not agree on the nature of the problem or may dismiss as irrelevant differing perspectives on it which do not fit within their frame of reference. For this reason, it is seldom possible to approach a policy “mess” using a linear or rational model of policy or decision making, since there is never a single, correct way to address it.

Two Australian researchers, Gabrielle Meagher and Shaun Wilson, have also commented on the contextual nature of social reality, noting that “the ‘complexity’ of the problems very often stems from the reflexive behaviour of social actors themselves” (Meagher and Wilson, 2002: 663). In their view, “the development of practical knowledge depends less on methodological choices and disciplinary cultures and more on (a) the nature of the problem at hand and (b) what we might call the ‘effective demand’ for practical knowledge in the broader policy making and political environment” (Meagher and Wilson, 2002: 664).

With these thoughts in mind, let us return to the “messy “ problem of social cohesion. In our research on social cohesion at the Department of Canadian Heritage, as we delved deeper, we inevitably began to ask ourselves questions about causation. What are the inputs and outputs of a socially cohesive society? Do the inputs feed directly into the outcome of social cohesion or do they work indirectly through other intervening processes? Are the processes recursive and, if so, how do the feedback loops work? Which feedback loops are critical determinants of social cohesion? What are the causal links? How can public policy contribute to the “virtuous” loops and avoid perpetuating the “vicious” ones? Although we did not recognize it at the time, these are all questions about systems of the “messy” variety described by Chapman. The preliminary model of social cohesion that we derived from all this questioning is depicted in Figure 2.

This model looks rather daunting, but essentially what it is trying to say is that there are multiple inputs to social cohesion (or to a society with a given level of cooperation) and that government policies are only one set of these inputs. Civil society and the social capital that underpins it are also important components of the system, as are the institutions and values upon which the society is founded. Cultural capital is a recent addition to this model, based on research which suggests that it not only provides personal benefits to the individual and promotes shared norms, but also enhances the quality of social capital and provides collective benefits to society. The model also illustrates that there is a considerable amount of system unpredictability in “ways of sticking together” – a factor which serves to complicate government responses.

Figure 2 - How does social cohesion work?



Source: Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate, Department of Canadian Heritage

The model is an attempt to illustrate how social cohesion influences social outcomes and how social outcomes in turn affect the degree of social cohesion in a society. We think that there are three main causal connections. First, the higher the degree of social cohesion in a society, the more political support there will be for public policy in such areas as education, health insurance and income distribution programs. These policies have demonstrable positive effects on social outcomes, particularly if they are provided on a universal basis. Second, the higher the degree of social cohesion, the greater adherence to social norms of behaviour and the greater support for social institutions and values, such as trust, respect for the law and fair play. As indicated earlier, institutions based on these values tend to make cooperation easier and more risk-free, thereby increasing the efficiency of both economic and social outcomes. However, it is important to note that not all norms promote social cohesion. Those that do not promote widespread inclusion and trust within a society may actually erode social cohesion. Third, higher levels of social cohesion increase participation in civil society, which not only contributes to good social outcomes but also enriches social capital – an indirect contributor to social outcomes.

The key component of the model, however, is not the causal links but the mechanism through which enhanced social outcomes, if equitably distributed within a society, contribute to social cohesion. If members of a society are getting their fair share – something which becomes more likely if they live in a society which supports collective action, adheres to norms that promote cooperation, such as respect for the law and fair play, and has a high level of civic participation – they will be motivated to cooperate and contribute to that society. This reciprocity has three main implications:

- 1) Social cohesion and good social outcomes reinforce each other in a virtuous circle. However, if the spiral ever turns downward due to factors such as inequitable or insensitive policies, the result will be negative social outcomes or inequitable distribution of social benefits, both of which can erode social cohesion. This, in turn, will reinforce the deterioration of social outcomes. In other words, a vicious circle can be created instead of a virtuous one.
- 2) Any change in any part of the model can affect any other part of the model. For example, reduction of political support for a social welfare program may seem to be unrelated to health or to education outcomes, but if it erodes social cohesion, it will likely have a far-reaching effect on a variety of social outcomes.
- 3) Good policy is the only lever available to governments to enhance social cohesion, since political support cannot be dictated, values and adherence to norms can rarely be legislated and civic participation cannot be compelled. However, all policy can be social cohesion policy, since all policy can have the indirect effect of increasing or decreasing people's willingness to cooperate, their sense of inclusion and their sense of belonging.

6. Coping with policy “messes”

An American researcher, Jeff Conklin, has come to some of the same conclusions as Jake Chapman about the nature of policy “messes” such as social cohesion, which he calls “wicked problems”. These types of problems, according to Conklin, have a number of characteristics:

- They owe their “wickedness” to social complexity: different stakeholders will have different views about the problem and about possible solutions. The factors and conditions surrounding the problem will be embedded in a dynamic social context.

- There is no definitive statement of the “problem” because it is usually ill-structured, with an evolving set of interlocking issues and constraints.
- Solutions to wicked problems are not right or wrong, but rather “better”, “worse”, “good enough” or “not good enough”. These solutions are assessed in a social context with many stakeholders whose judgements are likely to vary widely depending on their values and goals. (Conklin, 2001:7-8)

There is no “quick fix” for these types of problems, in Conklin’s opinion, because the root of the difficulty is fragmentation – fragmentation of direction and mission, fragmentation of work, fragmentation of meaning, fragmentation of stakeholder identity and fragmentation of relationships and communication (because the problem is often widely dispersed over diverse territories and populations). And what is the antidote to fragmentation? Interestingly enough, Conklin thinks that is coherence, a term not unrelated to social cohesion in many ways.

In Conklin’s lexicon, coherence means shared understanding and shared commitment -- “Shared understanding of meaning and context, and of the dimensions and issues of the problem. Shared commitment to the processes of project work and to the emergent solution matrix” (Conklin, 2001:23).

So, is the way to understand social cohesion to build social cohesion? This may sound like a tautology, but all it really means is that researchers and policy makers need to work together to build their understanding of the particular part of the policy “mess” that they wish to address. Here is what Conklin says is required:

Coherence means that stakeholders have shared meaning for key terms and concepts, that they are clear about their role in the effort, that together they have a shared understanding of the background for the project and what the issues are, and that they have a shared commitment to how the project will reach its objectives and achieve success. Coherence means that the project team understands and is aligned with the goals of the project and how to reach them. Coherence means that a wicked problem is recognized as such, and appropriate tools and processes are constantly used to “defragment” the project. (Conklin, 2001:23-24)

It is worth noting the emphasis on “defragmenting” the problem. In the traditional linear approach to problem solving, a complex problem is simplified by fragmenting or dividing it into sub-components that can be analyzed and understood separately. Then the original complex problem is reconstructed from an analysis of the separate components. This works well if there are no *emergent* characteristics in the system: in other words, if the way that the system behaves is merely the sum of its parts. In a complex social system, however, social cohesion results not from the individual components of a cohesive society but from the *interconnections* and the feedback loops between them. It is the *interactions* that are important, and not simply the individual parts of the system.¹ Therefore, rather than focusing only on the fragments or individual elements of social cohesion and trying to “re-linearize” the problem, research and analysis must also examine the linkages and the dynamics of the interactions between them.

¹ For a detailed discussion of systems theory in a policy context, the reader is encouraged to consult Chapter 3 – “Systems Thinking” in Chapman’s book *System Failure: Why governments must learn to think differently*

Does this mean that there is no merit in trying to define social cohesion or to develop a deeper understanding of its individual elements, such as belonging or inclusion? On the contrary, there is a great deal to learn, since as has been pointed out earlier, shared meaning among stakeholders is necessary to tackle a complex issue like social cohesion. However, it is also important to be aware of the role that different contexts, cultures, histories, disciplines and allegiances play in the definition of social cohesion and in understanding how the various dimensions of social cohesion fit together in that particular society.

Quite early in our study of social cohesion in Canada, we considered the question of “scale” and decided to focus our attention on social cohesion at the level of the nation state. (The fact that all the members of the Social Cohesion Network were departments or agencies of a national government undoubtedly had an influence on this decision!) We were aware that issues related to social cohesion also existed at sub-national levels and that there might also be a supra-national aspect to be examined (especially after we began to study the situation in the European Union). However, we were not responsible for policies at the sub-national or supranational levels. Nor were we confronting problems linked to social cohesion at those levels on a daily basis, and we were certainly not interested in intruding upon the work of stakeholders who had much more familiarity with those environments than we had. It was important for us to confine our research to the jurisdiction where our policy stakeholders were engaged and where, as Meagher and Wilson have noted, there was an “effective demand” for knowledge.

There are no shortcuts around the step of developing a shared understanding of the contextual aspects of social cohesion, at whatever level is being studied, if one intends to test or implement solutions to social cohesion deficits. That being said, one should not underestimate the difficulties. As Conklin points out, “In severe cases, such as many political situations, each stakeholder’s position about what the problem is reflects the mission and objective of the organization (or region) they represent. In such cases there is a fine line between collaboration and colluding with the enemy” (Conklin, 2001:17). In such a situation, it is easy to fall into what Chapman calls “mental traps”—refusing to consider anything other than a traditional framework or strategy to address problems, even if one knows that it has not worked in the past (Chapman, 2002: 33-34). The only way out of a mental trap is to carefully consider all the competing frameworks and to work together to develop a shared understanding out of the diversity of perspectives that are brought to the table. This is why Conklin concludes that solving a wicked problem is fundamentally a social process (Conklin, 2001:17), and why Chapman sees “learning what works” as the only method of addressing it (Chapman, 2002: 13).

There are no “right” answers when it comes to building social cohesion because of the different ways that its various elements are embedded in different societies. But almost everyone living in a community, region or nation state has a stake in understanding “what will hold us together”. Promoting cohesion in a world where there are many forces working to pull us apart is not an easy task, but it is one that is likely to become more important as we advance into the 21st century.

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