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RECONSIDERING SOCIAL COHESION: DEVELOPING A DEFINITION AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT. Despite its growing currency in academic and policy circles, social cohesion is a term in need of a clearer and more rigorous definition. This article provides a critical review of the ways social cohesion has been conceptualized in the literature: in many cases, definitions are too loosely made, with a common confusion between the content and the causes or effects of social cohesion. This motivates us to propose a refined definition that we hope is clearer and more rigorous. We will show how our definition could be operationalized into a measurement scheme that facilitates empirical work on social cohesion.

KEY WORDS: definition, measurement, operationalization, social cohesion

INTRODUCTION

Among both the academics and the policymakers, ''social cohesion'' is a term that enjoys ever-increasing popularity. The Canadian federal government, for example, set up in 1996 a ''Social Cohesion Network'', which has since then become one of most active social cohesion research groups in the world. Across the Atlantic, both the Council of Europe and the European Union (hereafter EU) have called for more attention to the issue of cohesion in setting public policy. The EU Cohesion Funds, in fact, is now one of the major items featured in the Union annual budget (Jeannotte, 2000). At an even higher level, the idea of social cohesion is also coined by international organizations like the OECD and the World Bank, both of which have recently come to realize the importance of socio-cultural factors in economic development and growth (Ritzen et al., 2000). ''Social cohesion'', like ''globalization'', has become another buzzword of the day.

Despite its ubiquity in the literature, however, social cohesion remains a largely ill-defined term (Jenson, 1998; Jeannotte, 2000; Osberg, 2003), whose exact content varies from one author to another. Whilst some understand it as equivalent to solidarity and trust, others have displayed a tendency to inflate the meaning of the term so that it incorporates notions such as inclusion, social capital and poverty. Some more theoretically inclined sociologists have linked the term with such ideas as social integration and system integration (Gough and Olofsson, 1999). This apparent theoretical confusion has led to Bernard's critique (2000) that social cohesion is nothing more than a ''quasi-concept'' or ''concept of convenience'' that is ''flexible enough to allow the meanderings and necessities of political action from day to day'' (Bernard, 2000: 2–3). While there is some truth in Bernard's critique, we believe that the vagueness with the current analyses on social cohesion can be much improved, as this article testifies. With a more rigorous and clearer definition, ''social cohesion'' will become a more meaningful and useful concept in academic and policy research.

This article is structured as follows. We will start by reviewing briefly the background against which social cohesion evolves in the academic and policy discourse. While our focus will be on the policy side, we suggest that the academic discourse (especially in sociology and social psychology) has considerable contribution to the analysis. After a brief discussion on the criteria for a good definition, we will provide a critical review on how social cohesion has been (quite inadequately and inappropriately) defined in the policy literature. This paves the way for the core section of this article, where we will introduce our own definition of the term and contrast it with the existing definitions as well as other concepts like social capital. We will then close the discussion with a possible scheme for measuring the level of social cohesion in a society.

TWO DISCOURSES ON SOCIAL COHESION

There are, broadly speaking, two traditions to analyze social cohesion in the literature. The first one is from the academic social science disciplines, sociology and (more tangentially) social psychology in particular. The second one, undoubtedly more recent but increasingly influential, has been developed by policymakers and the more

policy-oriented analysts. We will look at these two traditions in turn, although our emphasis will be on the latter, for that is more relevant in our present context to develop an operational definition.[1]

The Academic Discourse on Social Cohesion

As Pahl (1991) suggests, the intellectual origin of "social cohesion" can be traced at least to the time of Emile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of modern sociology. To a certain extent, this tradition has survived in contemporary sociology, some recent examples being Berger (1998) and Gough and Olofsson (1999). One key feature of these works is that social cohesion is often analyzed in terms of the broader questions of social integration, stability and disintegration. Berger's edited book contains detailed analyses of "normative conflicts" (for example, ethnic conflicts and secessionist movements) in modern societies, as well as the possible institutional arrangements that may mediate these conflicts. In the introduction to their edited book, Gough and Olofsson made it clear that their major purpose is to "link the themes of social integration and social exclusion" (Gough and Olofsson, 1999: 1). A major characteristic with their analysis is that it is largely done at a systemic level, with little explicit reference to empirical individual level data. In fact, the first substantive chapter of the book (Mortensen, 1999) is devoted to mapping the meta-theoretical debate in sociology on "structure-centered versus actor-centered" approaches to explanation.

Preoccupation with relatively abstract questions and systemic analysis implies that these works, however important they are on their own weights, have provided relatively few hints as to how social cohesion can be defined and operationalized. Berger's book, for example, talks about "limits to social cohesion" without defining explicitly what social cohesion is. A large part of Gough's and Olofsson's book, as they suggested in the introduction, focuses on such topics as "embeddedness", social exclusion, social integration and system integration, rather than on social cohesion per se.

One major exception to this trend is Lockwood (1999), who has provided an explicit definition of social cohesion that has received considerable attention in the literature. According to Lockwood, social cohesion refers to a state of strong primary networks (like kinship and local voluntary organizations) at communal level.

"Social cohesion", together with "civic integration" (institutional order at the macro-societal level), represents two levels of social integration, which concern the "orderly or conflictual relationships between actors [in society]" (Lockwood, 1992, quoted in Gough and Olofsson, 1999: 5). From this Lockwood has suggested some possible measures of social cohesion (and civic integration) of a society (Lockwood, 1999: 69–92). At this point, it is instructive to note that "social cohesion", as Lockwood uses it, represents one end of two extremes. The opposite of social cohesion is "social dissolution". Similarly, the opposite of civic integration is civic corruption.

Lockwood's framework is an important and insightful one. In fact, some of his indicators of social cohesion, such as general altruism (like trust in, and willingness to help, those beyond one's primary network) will also be adopted into our own definition later on (Lockwood, 1999: 69). His focus, however, is primarily negative, or on the so-called social pathologies. This is evident in his set of measures of social cohesion (or social dissolution), which includes such items as the absence or presence of crime, urban riots and family disorganization. This is a perfectly legitimate approach, and his framework may indeed serve as a useful "early warning mechanism" against potential social disorders. Our proposed framework, on the other hand, will be more neutral and tries to give a balance sheet that reports both the positive and negative signs associated with a society's level of cohesion.

In addition to sociologists, some works by social psychologists are also worth noticing. Here their major contribution is on the concept of "cohesion" itself. A good case in point is Bollen and Hoyle (2001). They suggest that there are two perspectives to cohesion: objective and perceived. The former refers to some objective attribute of the group as a whole, and this involves some composite measures based on each member's self-reported closeness to other members in the group.[2] Perceived cohesion, on the other hand, is a function of each member's perception of his own standing in the group. This, in turn, depends on (1) the individuals' sense of belonging to the group and (2) their feelings of "morale" (that is, the emotional response) associated with membership in the group. The sense of belonging is fundamental to the existence of the group, while "morale" has direct implications on the motivation of the group members. Admittedly, Bollen's and Hoyle's analysis of cohesion is a general one and their

definition is not steered specifically towards societal level cohesion. Yet their framework, especially the perceived perspective, is of much relevance to the analysis of social cohesion.[3] As we will argue later in this paper, items like sense of belonging are indeed constituent of the concept of social cohesion.

To summarize, the academic literature has provided considerable insights on conceptualizing social cohesion, although a satisfactory and operational definition is still in waiting. To a large extent, this is a result of diverging research interests by scholars in different disciplines. Most sociologists are ultimately interested in the systemic question of social integration and stability, and consequently have paid only passing attention to defining social cohesion per se. Social psychologists, on the other hand, have provided some useful frameworks for measuring group cohesion. Yet appropriate modifications are needed before these frameworks can be adopted to analyze cohesion at societal level.

The Policy Discourse on Social Cohesion

The second, doubtlessly more recent, "tradition" to social cohesion comes from policymakers and social policy analysts. The pressure for solution means that they have to deal with the problem of measurement more directly. In fact, explicit attempts to define and operationalize social cohesion in the literature have largely been initiated by the policymakers and the policy-oriented analysts, most notably in Canada and Europe.[4] We will examine these frameworks in detail later on. At this juncture, we should first look at how "social cohesion" emerges as a key issue on the policy agenda, focusing particularly on the cases of Canada, the EU and a couple of other regimes.

When the Canadian federal government introduced "social cohesion" onto its official agenda in the 1990s, the idea was largely a new catchword for its long-time policy to promote multiculturalism. In an annual report by the Department of Canadian Heritage, for example, it was stated that "a cohesive and inclusive society depends on respect for all ethnic groups and the fullest possible participation of all citizens in civic life" (Department of Cultural Heritage, 2001: 7). As time passes, however, social cohesion has gradually become an overarching notion that links up different policy areas. This is

reflected in the outcome of a series of ''structural conversations'' on social cohesion (held in 2001–2002) between the government and various civil society players. There it was suggested that social cohesion should encompass a wide range of elements, from income distribution, employment, housing, universal access to health care and education systems to political and civic participation (''Inclusion for all'', http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/rs/rep/comsocohe.pdf).

To some extent, ''multiculturalism'' is also a key force that motivates the discussion of social cohesion in the EU, where increasing population mobility and diversity since the formation of the Union has brought about a range of new social problems. However, as in the case of Canada, ''social cohesion'' has become much more than an ethnic or regional issue; it is also social and economic in nature. In fact, a large part of the Union's cohesion policy – like the Structural Funds and the EMPLOYMENT initiative – is devoted to such problems as unemployment, poverty and exclusion from the Information Society (Jeannotte, 2000). Another regime in this part of the world – the Council of Europe – has brought the idea of social cohesion one step further to explicitly incorporate the political element. The Council stresses, in particular, the growing public disenchantment with democratic politics as a key threat to social cohesion in Europe. Consequently, the promotion of political and civic participation becomes a prominent theme in the Council's social cohesion policies.

Of course, policymakers' interest in social cohesion is not confined to the social or political realm. Many international organizations, such as the World Bank and the OECD, are also interested in the possible economic benefits brought by a high level of social cohesion in society. In a World Bank policy paper, Ritzen et al. (2000) suggest that the level of social cohesion determines the ''room for maneuver'' in designing better institutions, which in turn affect the economic performance of a country. Hence, the concern with social cohesion here grows largely from policymakers' recognition of the importance of social factors to economic development.

While the above examples are all unique in certain respects, they should give us some idea about the background against which social cohesion emerge on the policy agenda. A series of structural changes – usually in the name of ''globalization'' – have posed severe challenge to the traditional welfare state model in many advanced (post)

industrial countries: public disenchantment with democratic politics, persistent unemployment as a result of economic restructuring, increase in population mobility and diversity, and new forms of exclusion in the age of information technology and network society, to name but a few (Jeannotte, 2000; Jeannotte et al., 2002). Politicians and policymakers worldwide have gradually come to recognize that these new forms of social cleavages necessitate a new form of governance, which in general entails three elements: (1) promoting trust or "solidarity" alongside with other traditional welfare and economic policies; (2) a recognition that the process of participation matters as much as the outcome and (3) a more holistic approach to public policy design and coordination. It is then discovered that the term "social cohesion" seems to capture these new features of governance quite well. This sets the backdrop against which countries and regimes like Canada, the EU and the Council of Europe began to promote the idea of social cohesion during the last decade or two.

Compared with the academic approach, the policy discourse on social cohesion is largely problem-driven: the talk of "cohesion" is largely a reaction to the many new social cleavages. As we will see, the nature of this discussion can apparently account for some of the common problems in the policy-oriented literature, particularly those pertaining to the confusion between the constituents and the causes or effects of social cohesion. It is also instructive to note that, while the academic and the policy discourses have very different focuses, they do share one common inadequacy: the lack of a clear and operational definition that would facilitate empirical investigations on the possible correlation between the level of social cohesion and other socioeconomic qualities of a society. It will not be exaggerated to say that such a definition is a prerequisite for more concrete research and better policies. Therefore, although our primary interest in this paper is to propose a workable definition for policy analysis, it is hoped that our formulation will also contribute to the more theoretical debates in sociology.

KEY CRITERIA FOR A GOOD DEFINITION

It will much facilitate the foregoing analysis if we can first lay down some general principles for evaluating the many different definitions of

social cohesion proposed by policy-oriented analysts.[5] We believe that a good definition of social cohesion, just like any other concepts in the social sciences, should be judged in terms of two criteria: (1) minimal in scope and (2) close to ordinary usage. Neither of these criteria is associated with any particular school of thought or social science methodology; instead they are some very basic principles embodied in virtually all social science research, as we will explain below.

Minimal in Scope

A definition should be about, and only about, what constitutes the concept. It tells us the essential components of the term, not the "conditions" or "factors" or "values" that may promote it. As we will see, this minimalist approach apparently contradicts with the way social cohesion has usually been conceptualised in the literature, where the term has often been defined with references to other concepts and values. We believe, however, that there are a number of reasons why a minimalist definition is to be preferred.

From an analytical point of view, the informative nature of a concept depends on how much it excludes, not how much it includes. When social cohesion becomes synonymous with a good society, it no longer carries analytical value. Meanwhile, a narrow definition also facilitates empirical research in two ways. First, it allows empirical testing of correlations by clearly separating its constitutive parts from states of affairs that are merely its conditions or effects. Second, a narrow definition that excludes culture-specific values also facilitates cross-cultural comparison. This strategy also helps us to deal with the critique – often by those sceptical of *any* rigorous definitions in social science – that "social cohesion" often invokes different connotations and interpretations across countries and over time. On the prescriptive and normative side, a minimalist definition makes possible the view that social cohesion is just one good and can conflict with other ends or goods, like tolerance, pluralism, openness to change or minority cultures and so on.

Close to Ordinary Usage

It is instructive to note that social cohesion, unlike other esoteric social science constructs, is very much a figurative term that most lay

people will have at least a rough idea of what it means. Therefore, unless there is some justified reason, a good definition of social cohesion should not be too distant from its ordinary meaning. This point is particularly important when one recalls that the recent discussion of social cohesion is much policy-oriented: a rigorous yet intuitive conception of social cohesion will much facilitate policy analysis and deliberations.

This point is, unfortunately, sometimes overlooked in the literature. For example, in one of its policy paper by the Policy Research Sub-committee on Social Cohesion of the Canadian Federal government, social cohesion is defined as "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" (quoted from Jenson, 1998: 4; emphasis added). Other problems with this definition aside, it is doubtful whether defining social cohesion as a "process" matches at all with our intuitive understanding of the term. In daily usage, "cohesion" refers to the level of cohesiveness of a group or community; it is therefore clearly a state of affairs, not a process. The word "process" would elicit a counter-intuitive implication that there exists some "end-state" or "maximal" level of social cohesion.

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE POLICY LITERATURE

As pointed out earlier in this paper, it is largely in the policy discourse, rather than the academic one, that explicit attempts to define social cohesion have been made. We will now proceed to reviewing a number of definitions or conceptions[6] of social cohesion in this policy-oriented literature, bearing in mind the two evaluative criteria developed in the previous section. Roughly speaking, one can identify two approaches here. They are (1) the means-end approach and (2) the pluralistic approach. As we will show, these two approaches suffer from similar methodological problems.

The Means-End Approach

This approach considers cohesive society as an *end*, but defines social cohesion in terms of the means through which this end can be

achieved. In some formulations, these "means" may take the form of some policy goals; in others, they may take the form of factors or conditions that are thought to be favorable to (or at least positively correlated with) social cohesion. We will examine examples of both of these in turn, and show how they are all unsatisfactory ways of conceptualizing social cohesion.

In a proposal to measure social cohesion, Berger-Schmitt (2000) points out that social cohesion involves two analytically distinct "societal goal dimensions": (a) reduction of disparities, inequalities, and social exclusion and (b) strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties. In particular, the second dimension "embraces all aspects which are generally also considered as the social capital of a society" (Berger-Schmitt, 2000: 4). The author then illustrates his two societal goal dimensions with various items from the European System of Social Indicators, which he thinks can form a measurement scheme for social cohesion (Berger-Schmitt, 2000: 8). Part of his list is reproduced in Table I.

It should not be too difficult to notice that Berger-Schmitt has adopted a means-end approach in conceptualizing social cohesion. By specifying the two "societal goal dimensions", he is effectively defining the concept in terms of the conditions – more social capital combined with less inequality and exclusion – that he thinks will promote the building of social cohesion. However plausible these conditions or factors may seem to be, it is still problematic to define social cohesion in this way. As we argued above, a good definition should be a narrow one that includes only the essential constituents of what social cohesion is about. In other words, the relationship between

TABLE I

Social cohesion as two societal goals – possible indicators (from Berger-Schmitt, 2000: 8)

First societal goal dimension: reduction of disparities and social exclusion	Second societal goal dimension: strengthening of social capital of a society
Regional disparities	Availability of social relations
Equal opportunities (between gender, different social strata and groups so on)	Social and political activities and engagement
Social exclusion	Quality of societal institutions

social cohesion and such factors as poverty cannot be assumed; they have to be tested empirically. Even if one could confirm empirically that reduction in poverty always makes a society more cohesive, it is still incorrect to incorporate this "condition" into the definition of social cohesion, for "constituents" and "conditions" are conceptually distinct entities. This point may be illustrated more clearly with an analogy. While redistribution of assets is certainly one way to achieve equality, it would be counter-intuitive to define the latter in terms of the former. Redistribution, after all, is only a *means* to achieve equality; it does not constitute equality per se.

This means-end approach also underlies some other measurement schemes proposed in the social cohesion literature. The Canadian Council on Social Development (2000, thereafter CCSD), for example, has devised a set of "possible indicators" of social cohesion in Canada. More specifically, the CCSD indicators have included two sets of data: "elements of socially cohesive activity" and "conditions favorable for inclusive social cohesion". To facilitate analysis, a summary of the CCSD measurement scheme is provided below (Table II).

As in the case of Berger-Schmitt, the CCSD scheme has blended the content of social cohesion (Set 2) with the conditions or factors

TABLE II

CCSD indicators of social cohesion: a summary (from the Canadian Council on Social Development, 2000)

Set 1: Conditions favorable for inclusive social cohesion	Set 2: Elements of socially cohesive activity
Economic conditions (distribution of income, poverty, employment, mobility) Life chances (in health care, education, housing etc.) Quality of life (population health, personal and family security, economic security, communication networks, quality of natural environment etc.)	Willingness to cooperate (e.g. trust in people, confidence in institutions, sense of belonging, respect for diversity etc.) Participation (including voluntarism, group activities, social support networks, political participation, literary etc.)

that may promote it (Set 1), whose incorporation has rendered the whole scheme of indicators misleading. As we have stressed, these "conditions" should instead be posed as possible correlations subject to empirical testing. Having said this, however, Set 2 ("elements of socially cohesive activity") also contains some problem of its own. In particular, it has included substantial values like "respect for diversity" a constituent of social cohesion. This is an unnecessarily broad conception of social cohesion. As we will elaborate below, social cohesion requires only people's participation, cooperation and mutual help; as such it does not presuppose values like tolerance or respect for diversity, or vice versa. To appreciate this point, one can consider a highly homogeneous society in which people are coalesced by, for instance, a religion that stresses self-sacrifice for "ultimate happiness" in the afterworld. In this case it would be plausible to argue that social cohesion would not be promoted by toleration or respect for pluralism; indeed cohesion would be more likely with further homogenization, which could imply intolerance and the purging of dissidents.

Similar problems can be found in a recent proposal by Duhaime et al. (2004), in an attempt to measure the level of social cohesion in the Canadian Artic. Following Durkheim, the authors asserted that social cohesion is founded on two components: organic solidarity and mechanical solidarity. The former refers to "access to formal economic and governmental conditions" while the latter refers to "access to family and community-based, face-to-face relations" (Duhaime et al., 2004: 301).

To operationalize these two types of solidarity, Duhaime et al. have listed six sets of indices. They are, respectively:

(1) Presence of social capital: this includes trust and confidence in civic institutions, and participation in volunteer organizations and other related activities;
(2) Demographic stability: this refers to the people's mobility, population growth rate of community as well as subjective reasons for moving/staying in the community;
(3) Social inclusion: this refers to access to informal networks of emotional, social and material support;
(4) Economic inclusion: this refers to employment activity and income;

(5) Community quality of life: this includes satisfaction and personal feeling of safety in the community; and
(6) Individual quality of life.

Duhaime et al. have undoubtedly provided a very detailed framework for measuring social cohesion. As a matter of fact, some of their indicators, especially those pertaining to political participation and voluntarism, can also be found in our measurement scheme. There are several weaknesses with the framework by Duhaime et al., however. To begin with, the relationship between some of the indices and the two types of "solidarity" is unclear: this applies particularly to the sets of indices under (2), (5) and (6). Presumably, demographic stability and quality of life are factors affecting access to networks and institutional support; they themselves do not constitute solidarity. If social cohesion were to be understood as access to social networks and institutional support, as Duhaime et al. have maintained, only sets (1), (3) and (4) should appear in their scheme. Most important of all, however, there is a fundamental problem of equating social cohesion with access to network or support. Similar to the CCSD indicators, Duhaime et al. has provided another example of a means-end approach to measure social cohesion. Most of their indices, especially those under (2)–(6), are not constituents of social cohesion; they are, at most, plausible factors that may contribute to the level of social cohesion in a society.

In a way, the confusion between content and conditions in the means-end approach reflects the policy-oriented nature of the social cohesion discourse. In Jenson's (1998) own words, social cohesion is often invoked "among those who sense an absence of some sort" and "when a set of problems are evoked" (Jenson, 1998: 3, 5). As a result, social cohesion is equated with ideas like inclusion, participation, reduction of poverty, to name but a few. The delineation between content and conditions is often ignored. This tendency is even more pronounced in the pluralistic approach, to which we will now turn.

The Pluralistic Approach

In the face of the theoretical confusion, some authors have altogether given up the ambition of arriving at a single definition of social

cohesion. As its name suggests, the essence of the pluralistic approach lies in its acceptance of multiple possibilities in defining social cohesion. This ''pluralism'' need not be a philosophical one, that is, the ontological claim that there can never be a single definition of social cohesion; instead, this ''pluralism'' is often a modus vivendi in response to the pressing need for policy analysis. More specifically, a typical adherent to the pluralistic approach assumes that it is the social issues of the day that shape the content of the term ''social cohesion''.

We will start with Jenson's (1998) analysis, one of the earliest and most widely cited accounts on social cohesion in the recent round of discourse on the term. Having reviewed official or quasi-official documents on social cohesion from Canada, France, the OECD and the Club of Rome, Jenson observes that there exists a variety of ways in which social cohesion is understood. At one point of her survey she concludes that:

> ''[A] lesson to take from this very limited overview of … social cohesion is that there is no single way of even defining it. Meanings depend on the problem being addressed and who is speaking.'' (Jenson, 1998: 17)

Notice that Jenson does not explicitly eliminate the possibility of a single definition of the term in future. However, instead of providing a single definition of term, she has ''unpacked'' social cohesion as it is commonly conceptualized in the literature into five different dimensions (Jenson, 1998: 15–17):

(1) Belonging v. isolation. This refers to the existence or absence of shared values and a sense of identity (Jenson, 1998: 15).
(2) Inclusion v. exclusion. This dimension looks at the equality of opportunity among citizens in economic realm, that is, the market (Jenson, 1998: 15).
(3) Participation v. non-involvement. This focuses on people's political participation at both the central and the local levels of government (Jenson, 1998: 16).
(4) Recognition v. rejection. This dimension concerns the respect for difference or tolerance for diversity in society (Jenson, 1998: 16).
(5) Legitimacy v. illegitimacy. This refers to the maintenance of legitimacy of major political and social institutions – the state in particular – as mediators among individuals of different interests (Jenson, 1998: 16–17).

At least two of these dimensions – inclusion and recognition – are strictly speaking not the constituents of social cohesion, but conditions that may promote it. We already saw earlier why recognition, or respect for diversity, does not imply social cohesion. On the other hand, inclusion (in Jenson's formulation) refers to equal opportunity in society. To be sure, "equality of opportunity" has become such an important social value that it is tempting to incorporate this idea into the definition of social cohesion. Yet there are two reasons why this is not a wise move. First of all, as we argued above, "constituents" and "conditions" are two conceptually distinct notions. Second, we cannot even argue for sure that equal opportunity is a necessary condition for social cohesion building: it is not difficult to quote from human history numerous instances of highly cohesive and stable societies in which "equal opportunity" would be an utterly alien notion, not only in theory but also in practice. Consider, for instance, the social status and life chances of men and women in medieval Europe and imperial China; in both cases there existed substantial gender inequality even though social cohesion was maintained over long periods of time. All in all, Jenson has not provided the theoretical justification for these five dimensions. It is at most a framework for understanding the literature but not the concept of social cohesion per se.

This pluralistic approach is illustrated once again in a recent review by Beauvais and Jenson (2002), who examine five different possible conceptions of social cohesion:[7]

(a) social cohesion as common values and a civic culture;
(b) social cohesion as social order and social control;
(c) social cohesion as social solidarity and reduction in wealth disparities;
(d) social cohesion as social networks and social capital; and
(e) social cohesion as place attachment and identity.

In a sense, these five conceptions are even broader in scope than Jenson's (1998) own formulation, since they have incorporated ideas like social order and social control. Most significantly, the authors have not attempted in their exercise to identify any conception that they think is more appropriate than the others. In fact, they explicitly state that it is not their intention to settle the definitional disputes, as "behind all of these definitional choices are important,

and often long running, theoretical debates about what generates well-being, innovation and so on'' (Beauvis and Jenson, 2002: 4). In other words, how social cohesion is to be defined depends to a large extent on the substantial problem(s) the researcher or policymaker is focusing on.

Beauvis and Jenson represent, we think, the culmination of a tendency that we have observed from the beginning of this article: social cohesion is largely a ''catchword'' for incorporating the most pressing social issues of the day: unemployment, poverty, discrimination, exclusion, disenchantment with politics, together with any problems that a policymaker sees fit. While the pluralistic approach as a modus vivendi may have the pragmatic effect of encouraging more policy coordination and integration in the name of ''social cohesion'', it does not facilitate policy research and analysis at all: why bother talking about social cohesion if it is simply another word for the familiar problems of poverty, exclusion and so on? Unless one can demonstrate the concept of ''social cohesion'' contains unique analytical content of its own, its introduction into the policy discourse is basically redundant.

Due to the lack of space the survey here is inevitably selective. However, we believe that our analysis has already revealed some common problems or inadequacies in the social cohesion literature. Sometimes certain key elements are missing from the definition; even more often, however, the distinction between the content and the causes or effects is overlooked. In other words, many of these definitions are so broad in scope that much of the analytical value with the concept is lost. Our next task is therefore to formulate a refined definition that is free from these defects and, at the same time, meets the two evaluative criteria as stated above.

BEYOND THE CRITIQUE: SOCIAL COHESION REDEFINED

We believe that the best way to arrive at a rigorous yet intuitive definition of social cohesion is to start from the daily meaning of the word ''cohere'' or ''cohesion''. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, ''cohere'' means ''hold firmly together, form a whole''. The same word is explained in the Oxford American Dictionary of Current English as ''(of parts or a whole) stick together, remain

united''. The Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, on the other hand, says that ''cohesion is a state or situation in which all the parts or ideas fit together well so that they form a united whole''. These three lexicographic definitions suggest that ''cohesion'', in our ordinary usage, refers to a state in which components ''stick'' together to form an effective or meaningful whole. Hence, ''social cohesion'' should also be understood as a state of affairs concerning how well people in a society ''cohere'' or ''stick'' to each other. Moreover, this cohesiveness or ''sticking together'' is ultimately a reflection of individuals' state of mind, which will be manifested in certain behavior; in particular, people in a society are said to be ''sticking'' to each other only if the following three criteria are simultaneously met:

(1) they can trust, help and cooperate with their fellow members of society;
(2) they share a common identity or a sense of belonging to their society;
(3) the subjective feelings in (1) and (2) are manifested in objective behaviour.

The rationale for criterion (1) should be obvious: trust, help and cooperation are all immediate implications from a state of ''cohesiveness''. As a matter of fact, one may say this is a quasi-tautology, since it is virtually impossible to conceive of a situation in which we say people are ''sticking'' together even though they refuse to trust, help or cooperate with each other. Criterion (2) may need further elaboration, for one may be tempted to say that satisfaction of (1) should already constitute some level of social cohesion. However, we contend that both (1) and (2) are indispensable. To see why ''identity'' or a sense of belonging is essential, recall that ''social cohesion'' is about the overall level of cohesiveness of a society. This implies that our focus is on people's repeated interactions that are spatially-specific. By ''spatially-specific'' we mean that we are looking at the state of cohesiveness within a particular society or political community, which is (as explained below) equivalent to the modern state. ''Repeated interactions'', on the other hand, means that social cohesion is about the state of cohesiveness over a period of time. Therefore, one-off or short-term acts of trust, help or cooperation do not constitute social cohesion, since such behaviour may simply be

some manifestation of "universal" humanity. Consider, for example, the scenario in which a group of mutually unacquainted victims spontaneously helping each other during a terrorist attack (or any another case of emergency). While helping and cooperation behaviour do indeed take place in this case, the absence of some sense of identity means that one cannot apply the concept of "social cohesion" to this group of victims. Finally, criterion (3) reminds us that social cohesion is not only about people's feelings or psychological conditions; it is also about certain behaviour or acts of belonging, trust, cooperation and help. Both the subjective and the objective components are indispensable. For example, a high level of willingness to cooperate and help would be rather meaningless unless it is also witnessed by substantial amount of social and political participation. With the above analysis in mind, we will therefore propose to define social cohesion as follows.

Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.

Some annotations of terms are in order. "Members of society" are not limited to individuals; they include also the various groups, organizations as well as institutions that make up a society. This justifies our distinction between the "vertical" and the "horizontal" interactions: the former refers to the relationship between the state and society at large, while the latter focuses on the interactions among different individuals and groups in society. The group boundaries can run along many different lines, though class, gender, ethnicity and religion have apparently received more attention than the others in the literature. There is, nevertheless, nothing in this definition that precludes other possible divisions from the analysis.

Our definition also stipulates that social cohesion is a societal attribute. By "societal" we mean that our primary focus is on the state of cohesiveness of society as a whole, even though in practice social cohesion may still be measured in terms of individual and group level data.[8] The significance of this "holistic" emphasis will become much clearer when we contrast social cohesion with the concept of social capital below. "Attribute", on the other hand, suggests that social cohesion is a state of affairs, not a process; hence

there is no such thing, even theoretically, as an ''ideal'' or ''maximal'' state of social cohesion.[9]

A few more words on the unit of analysis are necessary here. To be sure, one can legitimately talk about the level of ''cohesion'' of any groups or communities – cities, neighbourhoods, religious groups, to name but a few. As we have seen, considerable amount of work has been done by social psychologists at this level. This is also an active field of research in urban studies (see, for example, Kearns and Forrest, 2000). In the present context, however, we contend that ''social cohesion'', as a societal attribute, should adopt sovereign state as its unit of analysis. There are several reasons for this. First and foremost, ''society'', as we understand it, is comprehensive in nature and operates within a political community. Given that the state, despite the encroachment of various globalizing forces, is still the most important political institution in today's world, we believe it is the most appropriate to locate social cohesion at this level of analysis. Two related observations could illustrate this centrality of the state. Like it or not, most ''social cohesion policies'', like many other policies, have either been initiated or implemented by governments of sovereign states. Meanwhile, ''citizenship'', or membership to a sovereign state, is still one of the most (and probably the most) important sources of identity for any individuals in contemporary world.[10]

Having discussed its key elements and unit of analysis, it would now be useful to bring our definition vis-à-vis the two evaluative criteria discussed above. To begin with, our definition is close to the ordinary usage: social cohesion is understood as a state of affairs, not a process. More importantly, we have tried to maintain a minimalist definition, one that includes only the essential constituents, not causes or effects, of social cohesion. Therefore, items like ''inclusion'', ''equal opportunity'', ''tolerance'' or any particular set of ''shared values'' have been excluded.[11] Recall also that our conception of social cohesion contains both the objective and the subjective components: the former refers to people's actual participation, cooperation and helping behaviour, while the latter refers to the norms and subjective feelings of trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to help. Both components are indispensable, and they will become a useful guide in formulating our scheme for measuring social cohesion. More generally, our definition of social cohesion has highlighted

the following three points that are sometimes confused, neglected, or even denied, by other analysts.

Social Cohesion is Conceptually Different from Social Capital

As a matter of fact, ''social capital'' is also a nebulous term: various researchers have defined it differently, with some definitions much broader than the others.[12] For our purpose, it suffices to look at the definition by Putnam, who defines social capital as ''features of social organization, such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits'' (Putnam, 1993: 36). This suggests two differences between these terms. Analytically, social capital focuses primarily on the individual and group levels, like the networks maintained by each individual and the personal benefits that flow from them. Social cohesion, on the other hand, is more holistic and is concerned mainly with the general condition of society. Logically, high amounts of social capital need not imply a high level of social cohesion. In a highly ethnically segregated society, for example, individuals may maintain large amounts of networks with members of the same ethnic group even though there may be no inter-ethnic social ties at all.[13] However much social capital there may be within ethnic groups, such a society cannot be considered cohesive.

Social Cohesion Does not Necessarily Require, or Imply, Tolerance or any Particular Values

While many analysts have defined social cohesion in terms of particular values like tolerance or respect for diversity, these items do not at all enter into our definition of the term. Social cohesion per se bears no logical relationship with liberalism, or with conservatism, or with any systems of ideology whatsoever. In fact, one may well envisage that social cohesion in an eighteenth-century agricultural society may depend more on values like ''hierarchy'' and ''respect for tradition''. Of course, this is not to deny the possibility that social cohesion will correlate with particular set of values under different socioeconomic and cultural settings. For example, it may well be the case that liberal values are indeed particularly conducive to social cohesion in modern capitalist societies. This, however, is an entirely

empirical question and therefore should not be included in the very definition of the term.

Social Cohesion is One of the Many Social Values

It may indeed be in conflict with other values or goods, such as diversity, pluralism and creativity. Depending on culture and other socioeconomic factors, different societies may have different preferences as to how much social cohesion they would like to maintain. Recognition of this point is crucial, as it is the first step towards a normative analysis of when or under what conditions it is morally justified to trade off social cohesion with other values or goods.[14] It will also resolve an apparent "dilemma" faced by many researchers, who often have to argue for social cohesion on the one hand, and to defend (sometimes painfully) on the other that they are not advocating values like intolerance or national purity (see, for example, Ritzen et al., 2000).

FROM DEFINITION TO OPERATIONALIZATION: A 2X2 FRAMEWORK

With the definition of social cohesion in mind, we may now proceed to operationalizing the term. This will provide us with a more systematic and theoretically grounded framework for measuring and comparing the state of social cohesion in different societies. To be sure, similar attempts have been made in the literature. However, many of these tend to conflate the content with the causes of social cohesion, as we have seen in the examples of Berger-Schmitt and the CCSD.[15]

How should a measurement scheme of social cohesion be derived from our definition of the term? As discussed above, our definition of social cohesion actually comprises two "dimensions" (horizontal versus vertical) and two "components" (objective versus subjective). To reiterate, the horizontal dimension focuses on the relationship among different individuals and groups within society, while the vertical dimension looks at the relationship between the state and its citizens (or civil society). As for the two components, the subjective one refers to items like trust and the sense of belonging, as well as the

willingness to cooperate and help. The objective one, on the other hand, refers to the actual cooperation and participation among members of society.[16] Taken together, our analysis suggests a two-by-two framework for measuring the level of social cohesion in a society, as summarized in Table III.

Despite the initial resemblance there exist two crucial differences between our scheme and the ones developed by Berger-Schmitt, Duhaime et al. and the CCSD. As the reader may be aware, these two features follow directly from our criterion of a minimalist definition. First, we have not included any socioeconomic factors that are commonly seen as favorable to social cohesion: hence items like income distribution, unemployment, poverty and quality of life are absent. Second, we are also conscious to exclude particular values or ideologies, like tolerance, from our measurement scheme.

Undeniably, this two-by-two framework is only a first step towards measuring social cohesion. In practice, more specific proxies have to be introduced to measure each of the items in the four cells of Table III. We have listed some sample proxies or questions that can be

TABLE III

Measuring social cohesion: a two-by-two framework

	Subjective component (People's state of mind)	Objective component (Behavioural manifestations)
Horizontal dimension (Cohesion within civil society)	General trust with fellow citizens	Social participation and vibrancy of civil society
	Willingness to cooperate and help fellow citizens, including those from "other" social groups	Voluntarism and donations
	Sense of belonging or identity	Presence or absence of major inter-group alliances or cleavages
Vertical dimension (State-citizen cohesion)	Trust in public figures	Political participation (e.g. voting, political parties etc.)
	Confidence in political and other major social institutions	

used under the four cells in Tables IV–VII. These questions or proxies have been developed and used by the authors in an empirical study on the level of social cohesion in Hong Kong.[17] We will briefly discuss each of these tables in turn.

Table IV gives a set of sample questions that could be used to measure the "subjective" side of horizontal cohesion, that is, cohesion within civil society. This includes cohesion among individual citizens as well as cohesion among different social groups. There are three major subsets here. Question 1 tries to measure the overall level of general trust, that is, mutual trust among citizens. This question is adopted from similar questions used by the World Value Survey (http://www.worldvaluessurvey. org/statistics/index.html).

The second subset (questions 2 and 3) aims at measuring people's willingness to help and cooperate with others. Question 3 deserves

TABLE IV

Sample questions/indicators for the "horizontal-subjective cohesion"

General trust with fellow citizens
1. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? A. "Do not trust people so easily in this country" B. "People in this country are always out to take advantage of you" C. "People in country are not to be easily trusted"
Willingness to cooperate and help, including those from other social groups
2. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? A. "I would like to spare part of my leisure time to do voluntary work/help others" B. "I am willing to pay more tax if that could improve social welfare"
3. Would you be less willing to cooperate with your colleagues if he/she has the following background? A. He/she is from a lower social stratum than yours B. He/she is from a higher social stratum than yours C. He/she is a homosexual D. His/her political view is much different than yours E. He/she is a new immigrant F. He/she lives on the government welfare system
Sense of belonging or identity
4. Overall speaking, how strong is your sense of belonging to this country (1–10 scale)?[i]
5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? A. "I feel proud of being a member of this country" B. "Despite its many defects this country is still our home"

TABLE V

Sample questions/indicators for the "horizontal-objective cohesion"

	Social participation and vibrancy of civil society
6.	Are you a member of the community groups, political parties, pressure groups, trade unions, professional societies, churches, clubs etc.? If so, how often do you usually participate in their activities?
7.	Could you describe your depth of participation in the above organization(s)? – Mere members? Regular event helpers? Or chief organizers?
	Voluntarism and donations
8.	How often do you help your neighbors/friends on matters like household work, financial problems and emotional problems?
9.	How many hours of (organized) voluntary work you have done over the last year?
10.	How much donation (to charities or social groups) you have made over the last year?
	Presence or absence of major inter-group alliances or cleavages
11.	If you are a chief organizer of the above organization(s), could you please tell us if there are any other groups in society that your organization(s) will A. regularly cooperate with? (please specify) B. be unwilling to collaborate with? (please specify)

special attention, as it tries to detect whether such willingness to help or cooperate is systematically undermined by any major social divisions. As far as the authors are aware of, such questions on "group" level have seldom been posed in similar surveys and we believe this is a major weakness in the literature.[18] To be sure, what constitute "major social divisions" may vary across societies. We list here only some possible examples.

The third subset (questions 4 and 5) measures citizens' sense of belonging and identity with the country. Again these questions have been adopted from the World Value Survey.

Table V, which contains three subsets of questions, focuses on the objective manifestation of horizontal cohesion. The first subset (questions 6 and 7) measures the vibrancy of civil society, that is, people's degree of social participation. We are careful to measure not only the scope and frequency but also the depth of participation.

The second subset of questions (8–10) looks at people's acts of voluntarism and donation. Both organized and self-initiated (for example, helping neighbors) voluntarism and donations have been taken into account.

TABLE VI

Sample questions/indicators for the "vertical-subjective cohesion"

Trust/confidence in public figures and major political and social institutions
12. On a 1–10 scale, how much trust or confidence do you have with the following personalities and institutions? – The chief executive, the principal officials, legislators, civil servants, the judicial system, the police, the ombudsman, mass media etc. etc.

TABLE VII

Sample questions/indicators for the "vertical-objective cohesion" cell

Political participation
13. How often do you express opinions towards current affairs through the mass media?
14. How often did you participate in signing petitions, strikes, demonstrations etc.?
15. How often did you vote in legislative council and local council elections?

The third subset (question 11) again represents the authors' attempt to bring in group level data to the measurement of social cohesion, an aspect that has often neglected in the literature. More specifically, this question tries to test whether there exists any emerging inter-group alliances or cleavages in societies. Both strong alliances and strong cleavages will lower the overall level of social cohesion, for they will divide society as a whole.

Table VI looks at the subjective side of vertical cohesion, that is, cohesion between citizens (or civil society) and the state. This entails measurement of people's trust in both the major public figures and political and social institutions. The former includes politicians at the top as well as the senior civil servants; the latter includes, to name but a few, the legislature, the judicial system, the police and mass media.

Table VII concerns the objective behavior associated with vertical cohesion. Chiefly, this refers to measuring people's political participation. We have listed three sample questions here. We acknowledge that, depending on the specific context and political culture, what constitutes "political participation" may have some variation across societies. What we have suggested here are therefore some common examples.

To conclude this introduction to our measurement scheme, we would like to reiterate two points. First, our measurement of social cohesion is a composite of both individual level and group level data. This distinguishes us from the ''systemic sociologists'' as well as from many policy-oriented analysts. The former, as we discussed, tends to study social cohesion (and integration) without looking at the problem of operationalization. Many policy-oriented analysts, while aware of the importance of operationalization, tend to look only at the individual level and neglect the group level, which we believe is equally important. Secondly, as far as the measurement of general trust and sense of belonging is concerned, many sample questions from large-scale surveys as the World Value Survey can be readily adopted.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted three main tasks. To begin with, we have reviewed the many definitions or conceptions of social cohesion in the literature; in so doing we observed that many of these accounts are not very satisfactory, as they have either too loosely defined the term, or has formulated it in such a way that does not discriminate between the content and the conditions for social cohesion. Built on this account, we have proposed our own definition of the term, in which social cohesion is defined as a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations. Finally, we have suggested how this definition can be operationalized to measure and compare the level of social cohesion in different societies.

As the title of the article suggests, this discussion is meant to provide a conceptual analysis of social cohesion, a term that we believe is meaningful yet inadequately analyzed in the literature. This insistence on conceptual clarity and rigor is not pedantry, but a prerequisite for more fruitful research and policy analysis. Having said this, however, we would also like to stress that a sound conceptual foundation is only a necessary but not sufficient condition for a good theory of social cohesion, which requires large amounts of

empirical research. The latter is already becoming a researchers' attraction, although much more has yet to be done.

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NOTES

[1] This division of literature into "academic" and "policy" is certainly an artificial one, and the boundary between the two can be blurred. We do, however, believe that this classification is meaningful, at least in two senses. First, the two traditions have quite discernable differences in terms of their approach and level of analysis. Secondly, the pattern of cross-references also seems to suggest that these two sets of literature are relatively self-contained.

[2] It is not very clear why Bollen and Hoyle have called this approach "objective", since the measures are based after all on members' self-reported distance to others. We suggest that it may be more appropriate to call this an "inter-subjective" approach to group cohesion.

[3] In fact, Bollen and Hoyle also suggested in their paper that the perceived perspective will be particularly applicable to the analysis of large social groups, including society as a whole.

[4] See, for example, Jenson (1998), Jeannotte (2000) and Beauvais and Jenson (2002).

[5] In principle, these criteria should apply to any operational definitions in the social sciences. However, many sociologists, as we have argued, tend to focus on "systemic analysis", and therefore have less interest in operationalizing the concept of social cohesion. Therefore, we have not subjected these definitions and frameworks to the two evaluative criteria. We insist, however, that all policy-oriented definitions and frameworks, including our proposed one, should be subject to these two criteria. This stems from our belief that policy analysis should be based on concrete empirical research, which presupposes an operational definition.

[6] It would be more appropriate to call some of these definitions "conceptions" because the authors in such cases have explicitly stated that it is not their intention to

provide a rigorous definition of the term. In fact, as Jeannotte (2000) observes in her survey, most countries or organizations have used the term ''social cohesion'' in their policy discourse without any explicit effort to define it. However, the researcher can still work out from their policy papers the ''implicit definition'' (that is, conception) of social cohesion held by these governments or regimes.

[7] These five formulations are, in turn, due to Kearns and Forrest (2000). It must be stressed that our primary interest here is in the interpretation and elaboration by Beauvais and Jenson in their paper. In the original analysis, Kearns and Forrest seem to consider these five dimensions as constituents of social cohesion and, therefore, their conception of the term is arguably less pluralistic.

[8] More discussion on these technical points will be given below.

[9] This, however, by no means eliminates the possibility that one can meaningful *compare* the level of social cohesion across different societies. In fact, in the next section we will devise a scheme for measuring social cohesion.

[10] In other words, we admit that there is no *a priori* reason why the unit of analysis for social cohesion should be that of a sovereign state. Further globalization and the creation of a sovereign, ''global'' government in future, should it happen, will imply that the level of analysis could well shift from ''state'' to ''global''. Before this happens, however, the state boundaries are still the most important relevant, as far as social cohesion is concerned.

[11] One may be tempted to counter that items like political and social participation, the willingness to cooperate and help already constitute ''a set of shared values''. This is, again, stretching a concept too far. Participation per se is only an objective behaviour, while the willingness to cooperate and help can be justified by more than one type of ideologies or values (including instrumental ones).

[12] For the various analytical frameworks of social capital, see the review by Feldman and Assaf (1999).

[13] Or, to quote the phrases from Putnam (2000: 22–24), there could be a lot of exclusive ''bonding capital'' (within groups) without much inclusive ''bridging capital'' (across different groups).

[14] Of course, this also points to the importance of studying empirically *when* and *how* the pursuit of more social cohesion may conflict with such other social values.

[15] For more discussion of other measurement schemes in the literature, see the review by Beauvais and Jenson (2002).

[16] One may argue that ''objective behaviour'' on the right need not be an indication of social cohesion. For example, high voters' turnout may be a result of extreme dissatisfaction with the incumbent government, and high donation rate can be a result of taxation incentives. This is a valid doubt, and indeed it is a major methodological difficulty with most empirical research. Despite these complications, there are two justifications for retaining these items on the measurement scheme. Conceptually, objective behaviour, like the subjective feeling, is integral to social cohesion. Empirically, while behaviour like high voters' turnout *per se* may not be perfect indication of high social cohesion, it is at least a testimony that the people share minimal trust or confidence in the institutions, which is integral to social cohesion.

[17] The full set of questions adopted in this research is reported in Chan and Chan (2004).

[18] We must stress that this attention to group level data does not mean we are deviating from our claim that social cohesion is a societal attribute. Our interest here is not to look at internal cohesion within any particular groups or class; rather, we

would like to check if such social divisions have undermined the level of cohesion of society as a whole.

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