



What we talk about when we talk about social cohesion

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What is Social Cohesion?

Social cohesion is one of those terms that becomes prominent in public debate whenever concerns turn to national stability, particularly when that stability is under threat. Numerous government policies, white papers, missions, and special envoys exist; civil society groups are founded around strengthening it; and academic journals are filled with articles about it. And yet the concept often feels slippery and ill-defined.

Based on research conducted by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, which examined 26 academic journals, 24 government sources at the state and federal level, and publications from 23 civil society organisations, we can conclude that this slippery feeling is because there is rarely (if ever) a completely agreed-upon definition of exactly what social cohesion is. There are, however, some shared assumptions across all sectors about what it is made of.

It is, as one might expect, about relations in society: relations between individuals, between groups, and between us and the institutions we live in. These relationships are built on foundations of trust, belonging, participation, and inter-group interaction.

Trust in each other to be on our sides and support us in hardship, trust in institutions to make the right choices; belonging to our communities, neighbourhoods, and the wider national identity; participation and opportunities for participation in the actions that affect our lives (including economic opportunities); and positive interactions with those that are outside of the groups we commonly identify with.

The more of these key indicators we have, the better our relationships and the stronger our social cohesion, both of which are universally recognised as social goods. Stronger cohesion means a stronger group identity, whether that be in a local neighbourhood, a community group, or at the national scale – all of which potentially feed into each other.

Social Cohesion is Delicate

Across academia, government, and civil society, however, there is a strong sense that social cohesion is fragile and does not simply exist. It is something that needs constant care and maintenance, and occasionally repair.

As such, the discussion often turns to diagnosis of cohesion through at-risk communities. The term is often used in association with migrants and refugees, young people, specific religious communities and other groups positioned as vulnerable within these conversations.

This does not suggest these groups cause weak social cohesion, but rather that their experiences are used as indicators for where it needs reinforcement. A key point is that social cohesion is unevenly distributed and shaped by social and economic structures that disproportionately affect certain groups and individuals.

This is why the relational aspect of social cohesion is so important – strong social cohesion always depends on more than one party.

How is social Cohesion Used?

Despite these shared assumptions, there are still ways in which the conversation around social cohesion diverges, primarily in what the term is being used to do. These differences are less about disagreement and more about perspective.

For academia, it is often something to be interrogated and problematised, with debates occurring over how it can be measured and interpreted and how it can be used to reveal structural inequality. Worsening social cohesion here is linked to fragmentation and cleavage, inequality, and institutional trust.

Government sources use the concept for more operational purposes. They position themselves more as facilitators, co-ordinators, and funders, and much of the language use is around shaping the conditions through which social cohesion can grow through civil society and community participation and engagement. A lack of social cohesion from the governmental perspective comes with the risks to crisis response and democratic resilience.

Civil society groups, meanwhile, generally take a more practical and advocacy-focussed approach, with government seen as a partner in encouraging dialogue, community building, and responding to harm. The emphasis here is on the lived experience of social cohesion, particularly in the cases of those for whom real harm in the form of racism, exclusion, and isolation is a potential outcome of its breakdown.

So... What is Social Cohesion?

Taken together, social cohesion can be seen as an umbrella term under which different sectors can talk about connection, risk, and stability from their own positions. While these key indicators of trust, belonging, participation, and interaction remain relevant regardless of the discussion, when the term is brought into the public sphere as it quite often is, the pertinent question might not be 'what does it mean?', but 'what work is it being used to do in this moment?'

About the author



Matthew Skidmore is a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at Monash University, Melbourne. His research investigates how first and second-generation migrants negotiate cultural identity through a language-materiality lens, drawing on sociolinguistics and migration research. He works across qualitative and quantitative methods, from ethnographic interviews to large-scale census data analysis, to explore how language, objects, and spaces interact in shaping belonging. Beyond his doctoral work, Matthew contributes to social cohesion research at the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute and has presented internationally on themes of linguistic diversity, authenticity, and the transformation of cultural practices across contexts.