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Defining Social Cohesion

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Defining Social Cohesion

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Abstract

Promoting social cohesion is one of the most difficult, yet one of the most important, challenges facing South Africa. However, while there is a widespread agreement that social cohesion influences economic and social development, and that nurturing a more cohesive society is an important policy goal in itself, little progress has been made in trying to measure it and track progress in this domain over time. One of the most severe limitations to this progress is the lack of definitional consensus on social cohesion. It may seem intuitive to describe it as the glue that binds us together, or the forging of a common sense of identity and belonging. To others, it may speak to a willingness to extend trust to outsiders, to respect fellow citizens and uphold their dignity, and to be moved to action in the face of persistent inequality on behalf of those who are marginalised. Alternatively, specifically in the South African context, its very essence may be seen as common humanity embodied in the notion of ubuntu.

Introduction

Promoting social cohesion is one of the most difficult, yet one of the most important, challenges facing South Africa. However, while there is a widespread agreement that social cohesion influences economic and social development, and that nurturing a more cohesive society is an important policy goal in itself, little progress has been made in trying to measure it and track progress in this domain over time. One of the most severe limitations to this progress is the lack of definitional consensus on social cohesion. It may seem intuitive to describe it as the glue that binds us together, or the forging of a common sense of identity and belonging. To others, it may speak to a willingness to extend trust to outsiders, to respect fellow citizens and uphold their dignity, and to be moved to action in the face of persistent inequality on behalf of those who are marginalised. Alternatively, specifically in the South African context, its very essence may be seen as common humanity embodied in the notion of *ubuntu*.

However, since social cohesion is a term of art[1], in seeking to understand the phenomenon of social cohesion better, we cannot base our inquiry on colloquial usage in the way that we could if the term was "fairness" or "power". As an imprecisely defined term of art, "social cohesion" is liable to be dismissed as meaningless. It is also vulnerable to various forms of abuse. In particular—and in view of the fact that it is a term much used by governments and influential non-governmental organisations—there is a real danger that it will shift in sense from context to context, acquiring the meaning which suits the interests of the most powerful party. This is a danger familiar from other ambiguous social-scientific terms of art, such as "sustainability" and "transformation". If "social cohesion" does designate a phenomenon which is important and valuable, then it is worth making the attempt to pin down a relatively precise sense of the term on which there can be some degree of agreement. This is an important exercise in and of itself, but it is also key to any serious attempt to assess the state of social cohesion. Without clear definition, it becomes difficult to assess whether social cohesion has improved or worsened, which in turn makes it difficult to formulate policies that can be expected to improve social cohesion.

I. Why the current fuss about social cohesion?

Whilst social cohesion is not a new concept, finding its origins in the work of Durkheim as early as 1893, it is the case that social cohesion has generated increasing interest from international governance institutions, states and policy-makers since the 1980s. This has often been in response to divisions and cleavages within societies, related to factors including economic downturn,

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[1] A term of art is a word or phrase that has a specific or precise meaning within a given discipline or field and might have a different meaning in common usage.

tensions associated with migration, and ethnic or cultural conflict. In analysing the extent of social cohesion in Canada, for example, Jenson's (1998, p. 1) point of departure was evidence of a "fraying social fabric", "mounting differences" between people of different socioeconomic groups and worrying instances of "cultural insecurity and nostalgia for 'Old Canada' [which] are reducing tolerance and compassion" (Ekos Research Associates Inc., 1995, 17, in Jenson, 1998, p. 1). Similarly, the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion (SMI)[2]to test public attitudes followed a period of increased immigration which had led to heightened domestic tensions (Markus, 2014, p. 13). In this respect then, the recent focus on social cohesion by South African policy makers is unsurprising, given a context of widening inequality, growing unemployment, and persistent racial inequalities. Few would contest that in many ways, South Africa remains a deeply divided society. It thus perhaps comes as little surprise that, particularly given the declining focus on reconciliation within the national policy agenda, the South African government has increasingly focused on measures to deepen social cohesion through a range of different interventions and initiatives.

There are a variety of reasons for this increased interest by governance institutions and policy-makers in social cohesion. The literature proposes a number of positive potential advantages for highly cohesive societies, including:

• More **stable democracies** and greater civic participation (Cuellar, 2009, p. 3; Dhéret, 2015, pp. 1; 3; Beauvais & Jenson, 2002);

• Greater **productivity and growth**, and resistance to the consequences of economic shocks (Easterly, Ritzan & Woolcock, 2009, pp. 10-11; Dhéret, 2015, pp. 1; 3; Beauvais & Jenson, 2002);

• Better **quality of life** for citizens, in that cohesive societies are simply more liveable and sustainable for people (Pervaiz, Chaudhary & van Staveren, 2013, p. 5; Dragolov *et al* (b), p. 8);

• Greater **inclusivity and tolerance** of diversity and multiculturalism (Dhéret, 2015, pp. 1; 3);

• Stronger **conflict management and resolution**, particularly after crises such as radicalism, violence, protests or political divisions, and in fragile states (Woolcock, 2011; Dhéret, 2015, pp. 1; 3; Langer et al, 2015, p. 4; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2015, p. 20; African Development Bank n.d.); and,

• Better **health outcomes**, particularly related to the links between health and income inequality, employment and social support measures (Beauvais & Jenson, 2002, pp. 16- 17).

On the other hand, there can be less positive consequences resulting from highly cohesive societies, including what Green & Janmaat (2011) describe as "social insularity" (Manole, 2012, p. 128). In this sense, highly cohesive societies can be closed off to other individuals – including, for example, minority groups and migrants – and become very exclusive. There is also the challenge of how to balance and align localised, cohesion-building practices with national or regional values and norms

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[2] Developed by the Scanlon Foundation, the Australian Multicultural Foundation and Monash University

set out in law and by governance institutions. As an example, cohesion within a traditional local community may be strengthened by shared beliefs around the lesser position of women in society, which would in practice be exclusionary and contradictory to most national and international law and policy. Questions remain about how such contradictions and opposing values could be addressed in ways that essentially deconstruct exclusive cohesion but also encourage cohesion around different norms and belief systems. Finally, in some quarters, there remains deep-seated scepticism that social cohesion is a concept invoked to distract citizens from material inequalities,[3] and to settle fears of powerful economic elites who belong to minority groups. Social cohesion is thus clearly a contentious idea. Nonetheless, its prominence in public policy and discourse mandates definition and measurement in order to settle these debates.

II. Origins and evolution of social cohesion

Social cohesion has been the subject of analysis, theory and research since the late 19th century[4]. Increasingly, it has also attracted the interest of international organisations, governments and policy-makers since the 1980s and 90s, as high levels of social cohesion have been linked with positive outcomes such as democratic stability and participation, economic growth and greater productivity, and an overall good quality of life for citizens. However, social cohesion is a complex notion, and despite an expansive body of literature, research and theory there is no universal consensus on a single definition of the term (Schefer & van der Noll, 2016; Dragolov *et al,* 2013b). Chan *et al* (2006, p. 274) argue that social cohesion remains a largely ill-defined term, largely due to the fact that social cohesion is 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, pp. 2-3, in Chan, To & Chan, 2006, p. 274). This poses particular challenges with regard to the measurement of social cohesion.

The foundations of contemporary social cohesion theory and practice are often located within the early work of a number of 19th century sociologists. In "The Division of Labour in Society" (1893), Émile Durkheim characterised social cohesion as an element of the quality of life in all societies (Dragolov *et al,* 2013a, p.12). Durkheim focused on two main dimensions of social cohesion: solidarity[5], and shared loyalty between people. Together, these elements created the foundations for social order and established bonds and inter-dependence between individuals (Manole, 2012, p. 128). Similarly, German sociologist and philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies' identified the absence of social cohesion as a decline in the strong traditional interpersonal bonds that existed within small social structures (*Gemeinschaft)*, which were replaced with loose, rational, associational bonds in

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[3] In the U.K. context, Peter Ratcliffe (2011: 33) has suggested the policy buzzword of "community cohesion" was used to distract attention from material inequalities under the New Labour government.

[4] Portions of this section of the report draw significantly on the following earlier work: Lefko-Everett, K. (2016). *Towards a Measure of Social Cohesion for Africa.* Concept paper commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), presented at a workshop on 7-8 June 2016, Johannesburg.

[5] He further distinguished between mechanical solidarity, which referred to "the traditional uniformity ofcollective values and beliefs", and organic solidarity, resulting from "modern relationships between individuals who are able to work together while developing an autonomous and even critical personality with respect to tradition" (Fenger, 2012, p. 40; Hassan, 2013, p. 2).

industrialised societies (*Gesellschaft*) (Giddens, 2009, p. 8; Beumer, 2010, p. 1). American sociologist Talcott Parsons also explored the concept of social cohesion, but from a perspective of shared norms and values, which would enable people to identify and pursue a set of common goals (Kearns & Forrest, 2000, p. 997; Berman & Phillips, 2004, p. 4). Many of the elements of this early theoretical work continue to inform current thinking and practice related to social cohesion.

For some, social cohesion describes the bonds or relationships that exist between fellow citizens and within intimate social groups, especially in contexts characterized by ethnic heterogeneity (Taylor, 1996; Schmeets, 2012; Moreno and Jennings, 1937; Festonger, 1950; Back, 1951, Bruhn, 2009). These definitions focus on the characteristics and benefits of membership within small groups (Norton & de Haan, 2013, p. 11). For others, it is the quality of these connections between individuals and the groups to which they belong that matters (Marc et al., 2012), since strong affective relationships allow (local) group boundaries to be transcended via consensus as opposed to coercion in the pursuit of social welfare (Green et al., 2009). Collectively they refer to the "strength of social relations, shared values and communities of interpretation, feelings of a common identity and a sense of belonging to the same community, trust among societal members as well as the extent of inequality and disparities" (Berger-Schmitt, 2000, p. 3; Woolley, 1998; Jenson, 1998). Further, Maxwell (1996, p. 13) added that social cohesion also involves "generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community".

More recently, the focus of social cohesion theory and research has broadened in scope to include entire societies, generally defined within the boundaries of nation-states. Pervaiz, Chaudhary & van Staveren (2013, p. 5), for example, define social cohesion as "a phenomenon of togetherness which may work to keep the society united and harmonised." Dragolov et al (2013b, p. 8) refer to it as the "manifestation of an intact society, marked by solidarity and helpfulness, and by a kind of team spirit. It is a desirable quality that makes a society liveable and sustainable."

However, others argue for a definition of social cohesion that both highlights the capacity of a society to pursue its members' welfare while at the same time reducing inequalities and promoting inclusion amongst diverse groups (Council of Europe, 2007). These definitions are often practice-oriented, and linked to implementable programmes and policies, particularly of governments and international donors and NGOs. This is present in the OECD definition of social cohesion, for example, which holds that:

> *'A cohesive society works towards the well-being of all of its members, minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation. It entails three major dimensions: fostering cohesion by building networks of relationships, trust and identity between different groups; fighting discrimination, exclusion and excessive inequalities; and enabling upward social mobility' (OECD, 2012, pp52-53)*

In a similar vein, the Council of Europe (2005, p. 23) has defined social cohesion as a "society's ability to secure the long-term well-being of all its members, including equitable access to available resources, respect for human dignity with due regard for diversity, personal and collective autonomy and responsible participation."

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (2009, p. 14) has also drawn on the work of Berger-Schmitt (2000) to define social cohesion within the context of its work. The UNDP has identified two main dimensions of social cohesion: first, reducing disparities, inequalities and social exclusion; and second, strengthening social relations, interactions and ties. According to the Programme, social cohesion also involves "tolerance of, and respect for diversity (in terms of religion, ethnicity, economic situation, political preferences, sexuality, gender and age) – both institutionally and individually", and non-cohesive societies risk "increased social tension, violent crime, targeting of minorities, human rights violations, and, ultimately, violent conflict." Notably, the UNDP also cautions against the risk that cohesive groups can actually "pose serious risks to the security of others", particularly when these groups are exclusive or in conflict with one another. Therefore, interventions to promote social cohesion should focus on transforming "bonding forms of social capital… into bridging social capital that links different groups together in an inclusive approach" (2009, p. 15).

Further, Norton and de Haan (2013, p. 9) usefully conceptualised social cohesion in a background paper prepared for the World Bank's World Development Report 2013. In order for social cohesion to be meaningfully addressed in policy, the authors proposed that three main conceptual dimensions need to be taken into account: shared values, identities and norms; fairness and equity (noting that "different societies have different levels of tolerance for inequality and for varying equality of opportunity and social mobility"); and security of access to livelihoods and basic services.

Similar ideas are evident in the conceptualisations of social cohesion by South African commentators and policy makers. Struwig et al. (2012:1) have identified social cohesion as the process of unifying South Africans across diverse backgrounds to create a common vision to work in the interest of the nation and all individuals therein. Both the President's Fifteen Year Review and the National Planning Commission recognise social cohesion as a key constituent of a broader development agenda for the country, an objective to be pursued in its own right, defining it as a "common attachment to the ethical principles of the constitution" (Chipkin and Ngqulunga; 2008:64). The Department of Social Development's White Paper on families identifies social cohesion as 'a process of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community.' (Department of Social Development, 2012: 4).

More recently, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 has afforded social cohesion an even more prominent role within the national policy framework (DPME, 2012) Within the NDP, social cohesion is identified as a long-term development goal and linked with a series of measurable outcomes. These include:

- Sub-outcome 1: Promoting knowledge of the constitution and fostering constitutional values;
- Sub-outcome 2: Equalising opportunities, promoting inclusion and redress

- Sub-outcome 3: Promoting social cohesion across society through increased interaction across race and class[6]
- Sub-outcome 4: Promoting active citizenry and broad-based leadership; and
- Sub-outcome 5: Achieving a social compact that will lay the basis for equity, inclusion and prosperity for all.

Ndinga-Kanga (2016) also notes that Outcome 14 identifies a number of key impact indicators related to nation-building and social cohesion, which relate to issues of gender representation, reducing instances of racism, active citizenship, pride in South African identity and sports teams, trust, and identification with national symbols.

While these examples illustrate the approaches to social cohesion taken by international organisations and governance bodies, a key conceptual failing in these definitions is that they highlight what a cohesive society would do, or the qualities that would characterise a cohesive society, but do not actually define what constitutes social cohesion itself. Some proposed understandings of social cohesion have written hypothesised causes or effects of social cohesion into the very definition of "social cohesion", which creates conceptual confusion.[7] Other proposed definitions are little more than a smorgasbord of societal characteristics thought desirable by the author, so that the concept loses all unity.[8] We propose a different route for arriving at a definition of social cohesion in section 4.

III.   Towards a definition of social cohesion

We can approach the task of defining social cohesion by means of a method of conceptual triangulation using, as co-ordinates, other phenomena which social cohesion is in causal or constitutive relations with, and phenomena which it is agreed social cohesion is non-identical to. As a preliminary starting-point, a metaphor of physical cohesion is helpful.

3.1.   The metaphor of physical cohesion

The metaphor of cohesion calls to mind a physical structure whose parts *stick together*. There is a failure of cohesion when a structure *falls apart*. Keeping that visual metaphor in mind, we can think

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[6]   In practice, however, it appears that interventions initiated by government to promote social cohesion have been relatively narrow in scope to date. Many of the actions proposed together with Sub-outcome 3 above relate to sports and recreation, including increased access, opportunities for participation, community events/competitions, and support for high performance athletes, and transformation. Other proposed actions include hosting and participating in international events in which South Africa can be promoted as a "diverse socially cohesion nation", as well as the cleaning of cities and greening of public spaces (DPME, 2012; Ndinga-Kanga, 2016).

[7]   Green and Janmaat (2011: 3) note this shortcoming of much work on reaching a definition of social cohesion.

[8]   Green and Janmaat (2011: 10) rightly note a hazard of working from policy documents when attempting to analyse social cohesion rigorously: 'Policy documents are not necessarily the best source for analysis of sensitive topics like social cohesion because they tend to be somewhat vague and gestural—often providing appropriate nods towards all politically correct notions rather than coherent statements of position.'

of two paradigmatic ways in which a structure could fail to stick together: it could either crumble into a multitude of individual fragments, or break into a few pieces. As we will see, these two types of falling apart correspond with two different ways in which a society can fail to be cohesive: by being an *atomised society* and by being a *divided society*.

The visual metaphor also suggests two paradigmatic ways in which a structure composed of a multitude of individual fragments could be made to stick together. One option would be for each of the multitude of fragments to be bonded to every other fragment next to it using the same type of adhesive. Another option would be for discrete sets of fragments to be bonded together into a few separate pieces, and for those few pieces—each composed of a multitude of fragments—then to be bonded together by means of a different type of adhesive (for example, tied together with string rather than stuck together with glue).[9] These physical analogies will prove valuable when we come to consider cohesive societies made up of sub- groups.

3.2. Triangulating social cohesion

The analogy of physical cohesion can take us only so far in our effort to delineate the nature of social cohesion. Further progress is possible by a process of conceptual triangulation using, as co-ordinates, phenomena to which social cohesion is generally acknowledged to stand in causal or constitutive relations, and phenomena with which social cohesion is generally acknowledged to be non-identical.

A commonplace in the literature about social cohesion is that if a society exhibits social cohesion, then it is more likely to be a *peaceful* society, and a *prosperous* society (e.g. Easterly et al. 2006). There are a number of possible ways of developing this causal hypothesis. For example, the hypothesis might be that, other things being equal, in any society there is a linear relationship between its degree of cohesiveness and its degree of peacefulness and prosperity. Alternatively, the hypothesis might be that a certain threshold degree of cohesiveness is necessary for anything above an excessively small degree of either peacefulness or prosperity, but that once a society exhibits that threshold degree of cohesiveness, further increases in cohesiveness do not translate into any further increases in either peacefulness or prosperity. However exactly it is spelt out, it is a commonplace that social cohesion has some tendency to generate peace and prosperity in a society.

However, not all factors which have a tendency to generate peace or prosperity are to be counted as social cohesion. In particular, a society in which peace and stability are maintained, but exclusively through violent force and the threat of violent force (*e.g.*, on the part of the police and army), does not count as cohesive. Cohesiveness is generally agreed to be a different, and a superior, mechanism by which to achieve peace and stability to sheer coercion. Some might even question whether coercion alone, without a minimum degree of cohesiveness, could ever be enough to ensure peace and stability.[10] In any case, there is general agreement that the phenomenon of

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[9]   The metaphor of "social glue" is widely used in literature on social cohesion (e.g. Healy 2013: 14).
[10]   For example Green et al. (2011:) state that social cohesion involves 'attitudes, behaviours, rules and institutions which rely on consensus rather than pure coercion'.

social cohesion is something different from coercion through violent force and the threat of violent force, even though both can play a role in generating peace (and, through peace, prosperity).

It is also implicit in most of the literature on social cohesion that cohesion is not identical with purely individually self-interested interactions (paradigmatically, market exchanges), even though such individually self-interested interactions can certainly play a role in generating prosperity (and, through prosperity, peace) in a society. For one thing, a minimum degree of social cohesion is thought to be a necessary precondition (establishing a minimum of trust and dependability) for contract-based market exchanges to be routine and successful. If social cohesion is a necessary precondition of individually self-interested market interactions, then it is not identical with them. For another thing, a minimum degree of social cohesion is thought to be a vital fall-back for times of economic (or other) crisis, so that society does not descend into anarchy when market interactions are undesirable or impossible.[11]

So far we can say that social cohesion is the tendency of society-members to co-operate with one another without being motivated to do so either by coercion or by narrow individual self- interest. We must next consider whether this understanding of social cohesion is already contentful enough, or is too spare.

3.3. Social cohesion as variably realisable

So far we have what might seem to be a purely negative, place-holding account of social cohesion: society-wide co-operativeness motivated neither by sheer coercion nor by individual self-interest alone. It might seem that the next step must be to fill in a more positive, concrete account of this phenomenon.

What must be the nature of the relations between members of a society, if that society is to exhibit the non-coerced, non-self-interested co-operativeness which (by common hypothesis) contributes causally to peace and prosperity? It is very tempting to respond to this question by specifying a determinate attitude which all and only members of cohesive societies manifest towards their fellows. An egalitarian might say, "Fraternal goodwill;" a nationalist, "Identification as a homogenous ethnic group;" a communitarian, "Consensus on fundamental goals and values;" a liberal, "Toleration and respect."

However, for each of these determinate proposals, we can *conceive of* (even if we can't point to an actually existing example of) a society which is cohesive despite the absence of the attitude in question. Though the relations between members of a cohesive society could well have the horizontal character favoured by egalitarians, they could *conceivably* also be hierarchical, with the goodwill having a more paternal and filial, rather than fraternal, character. Likewise, a society which is ethnically and culturally heterogenous but in which there is a great deal of goodwill and mutual trust is not *inconceivable.* Nor is a high level of co-operation between a homogenous group of people who are fundamentally intolerant of people different from themselves—of whom there happen to

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[11] Healy (2013: 63) voices scepticisim about 'models of belonging based on markets', observing that 'markets require individuals to be *disconnected* from others in particular ways'.

be none in their society. Nor is co-operation between people who disagree about values and goals. From a conceptual point of view, it would seem that social cohesion—uncoerced and non-self-interested co-operativeness across a society—is *variably realisable*.

Our task here is to answer the question what social cohesion is, and not to prejudge answers to other distinct questions. It might well be that only one type of attitude on the part of society-members towards one another would make possible the compresence of cohesion and some *other* important value, such as equality. But that does not warrant smuggling that other value into the account we give of social cohesion. After all, it might also be the case that the most cohesive societies do not exhibit that other value. For example, it might be that societies which are both cohesive and egalitarian are always, or generally, less cohesive than societies which are both cohesive and hierarchically structured. Though the absence of another important value will often be a count against a cohesive society, it is crucial to note that it does not render that society less *cohesive*. It is also possible that, due to limitations of human nature, only some of the conceivable ways in which cohesiveness can be manifested in society-members' attitudes are psychologically or socially possible. That would, however, not be part of the definition of social cohesion, but rather an empirical finding which stands alongside it.

3.4. Intra-group and inter-group solidarity

At this point it is helpful to return to the metaphor of physical cohesion to clarify further ways in which social cohesion is a variably realisable phenomenon. We noted earlier that a physical structure can fail to stick together either by shattering into a multitude of fragments or breaking into a few pieces. The correlate of that physical image is that a society in which there is a great deal of uncoerced, individually non-self-interested co-operation among individuals need not be cohesive as a whole. This is because the co-operativeness may be exhibited only between members of societal sub-groups, and never across the boundaries of these sub-groups. In this situation the society is *divided* (as per our visual metaphor, break into a few pieces). When there is a lack of co-operativeness even among the individual members of sub-groups (the correlate of a physical structure which has shattered into fragments), the society is *atomised*.[12]

A society whose members belong to several sub-groups, to be cohesive, must exhibit uncoerced, non-self-interested co-operativeness not only within but across sub-groups. This can occur in two paradigmatic ways. On the one hand, it could occur because the members of sub-groups also have a strong sense of being members of a larger society-wide group, meaning that as individuals they are motivated to co-operate with members of other sub-groups. This is the correlate of the physical structure whose fragments are all bonded in the same way to all the other fragments next to them.

On the other hand, it could occur without this motivation on the part of all individuals, if

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[12]   Robert Putnam's classic study of American society, *Bowling Alone*, diagnoses a problem of atomisation (Putnam 2000) due to a reduction in associative bonds and thus diminishing social capital. By contrast, much of the interest in social cohesion over the past couple of decades from European policy-makers has arisen from a concern about immigrant groups living "parallel lives" in a host society—i.e. divided societies (see e.g. Home Office 2001).

representatives of the separate internally cohesive sub-groups were to ensure that there was sufficient co-operation between the distinct sub-groups as corporate entities. This is the correlate of the physical structure whose larger pieces are bonded together in a fashion different to that in which the individual fragments which make up a given piece are bonded together.

The concept *solidarity* can usefully be employed to cover the different ways in which individuals in a cohesive society articulated into sub-groups relate to one another. On the one hand, the solidarity of individuals with a common identity or common purpose can be what constitutes those individuals into a sub-group distinct from other societal sub-groups. On the other hand, we can also speak of one societal sub-group exhibiting or expressing solidarity for another. For example, Jews might express solidarity for persecuted Christians.

Not only can societies be articulated into sub-groups in many different ways, but the form which both *intra-group* and *inter-group* solidarity can take is also variably realisable. The solidarity one group expresses for another need not be egalitarian, for example. It could also take a more vertical form, better described as paternalistic or else filial.

3.5. Social cohesion as uncoerced, non-self-interested co-operativeness across a society

We have seen that there is virtue in stopping short at an austere understanding of social cohesion.[13] More specifically, we choose to define social cohesion as follows:

> *Social Cohesion is the extent to which people are co-operative, within and across group boundaries, without coercion or purely self-interested motivation.*

The uncoerced, non-self-interested co-operativeness across society which, by common hypothesis, tends to generate peace and prosperity, can conceivably be realised in a large number of different ways. The articulation of a society into sub-groups and the relations between those sub-groups, as well as the attitudes towards one another of members of sub- groups and members of society as a whole, can take many different forms while still exhibiting uncoerced, non-self-interested co-operativeness.

The austere understanding of the term "social cohesion" we have attained is nonetheless contentful enough for the charge of meaningless to be rebutted. It also avoids abuse of the term by refraining from covertly writing into the understanding of "social cohesion" specific normative

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[13]   Alongside the more expansive definitions in the literature, some others have adopted an austere approach to defining social cohesion. For example, Green & Janmaat (2011: 18) define social cohesion as 'the property by which whole societies, and the individuals within them, are bound together through the action of specific attitudes, behaviours, rules and institutions which rely on consensus rather than pure coercion'. Also in 2008 the UK Department for Communities and Local Government defined community cohesion as 'what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together' (DCLG 2008: 10). The definition of social cohesion proposed in this paper differs from both these definitions in some respects, but resembles them in that it is an austere minimal definition of cohesion, for the reasons given in the text.

commitments or empirical hypotheses on which there can be reasonable disagreement. It acknowledges that the question which other values a society should strive to realise together with cohesion, and the question which conceivable forms of social cohesion are actually realisable given human constraints, are both different from the question of what social cohesion is, and both require independent investigation.

IV. Social cohesion and *ubuntu*

In South Africa, the concept of *ubuntu* has , for many, become synonymous with social cohesion, nation-building and efforts to bridge the cultural and racial divides of the past[14]. As such, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which our proposed definition resonates with the notion of *Ubuntu*.

Kamwangamalu (1999) writes that *ubuntu* is a Nguni term and a

> *"multidimensional concept which represents the core values of African ontologies: respect for any human being, for human dignity and for human life, collective shared-ness, obedience, humility, solidarity, caring, hospitality, interdependence, communalism, to list but a few." (Kamwangamalu 1999, pp. 25-26)*

He suggests that its core values include communalism and interdependence, in contrast with the high value placed on independence in Western societies (pp. 27; 30) Eliastam (2015, p. 2) reviews a number of texts and definitions of *ubuntu*, and finds that it has been variously translated and conceptualised as "humanity" (Shutte, 2001, p. 2), "African humaneness" (Broodryk, 2002, p. 13), "humanism or humaneness" (Mnyaka and Motlhabi, 2009, p. 63) and "the process of becoming an ethical human being" (Mkhize, 2008, p. 35). According to Mthembu (1996, p. 216), it involves both a "good disposition towards others" and a "moral nature", and "describes the significance of group solidarity and interdependence in African culture". Ubuntu emphasises shared values, including sympathy and generosity towards others (Makhudu, 1993; Prinsloo, 1996, pp. 113-114).

As in Kamwangamalu's (1999) definition, many texts emphasise a set of human qualities associated with *ubuntu*. These include hospitality, friendliness, generosity, compassion and caring for others (Goduka, 2000, in Arthur *et al*, 2015, p. 70). For Mkhize (2008, p. 43, in Eliastam, 2015, p. 2) these qualities also include a concern for social justice, righteousness, care, empathy and respect. *Ubuntu* has also been associated with a number of behaviours and practices which, according to Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2009, p. 74, in Eliastam, 2015, p. 2), include "deeds of kindness, compassion, caring, sharing, solidarity and sacrifice." Masina (2000, in Arthur *et al*, 2015, p. 70) emphasises the

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[14]   For example, it features in the final clause of the 1993 Interim Constitution and informed the approach of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). However, much like the term social cohesion, *ubuntu* has been described and analysed in a wide range of texts, but there appears to be no single, universally accepted definition of the term.

importance of participation and cooperation towards a common good, rather than competition between people[15].

Eliastam (2015, p. 4) spoke to South Africans directly, interviewing 20 people in East London from a range of age groups. Responses to the question of the meaning of *ubuntu* included the following:

"Ubuntu is about treating people with respect, it's about courtesy and compassion." (Respondent 3)

"My child is your child." (Respondent 6)

"If you want to see ubuntu you will find it in socialism. It's when we are sharing." (Respondent 8)

"Ubuntu can't be defined, but speaks for itself in action." (Respondent 10)

"Ubuntu is a general term, and it is associated with your heart. How do you feel about others, how do you see the whole community you are sharing, you see? If there is empathy, take yourself to the shoes of that person. If it were you, how would you feel? Ubuntu is something in a person's heart." (Respondent 12)

Interview participants were also asked to about their experiences of *ubuntu*, which included accounts of resource sharing and in particular, providing food and assistance to other community members, although there was a sense that these practices are in decline due to poverty and changing social values. Whilst the purpose of this paper is to not undertake an in-depth review of the literature concerning *Ubuntu*, we would argue that our proposed definition of social cohesion reflects well the idea of *Ubuntu*.

V. South Africans define *social cohesion*

Since "social cohesion" is a term of art, it is worth reflecting on whether our definition resonates with common usage of this term. Whilst there has been quite a lot of intellectual activity devoted to defining social cohesion within the fields of sociology, philosophy, political science and economics, there is a relative dearth of studies that have explored the common usage of this term.

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[15]   As with social cohesion, a review of the literature shows some conceptual challenges associated with *ubuntu*. Gade (2013, p. 52) raises questions of the consistency of understanding of terms such as *ubuntu*, especially across different languages and cultures. He also observes that there is no consensus on the meaning of *ubuntu*, adding that this meaning has changed over time. Cornell and Van Marle (2005, p. 196, in Eliastam, 2015, p. 3) also raise questions about the relevance of *ubuntu* as a contemporary social value, particularly for young people. Enslin and Horsthemke (2004, pp. 548 - 549) suggest that some of the "values and principles claimed to be emphasised by *ubuntu* are dubious", and raise questions about the coexistence of a set of shared, unifying values alongside evidence of practices such as genocide, undemocratic governance, sexism and homophobia. Other concerns included the view that "ubuntu is inherently patriarchal and conservative" and that its "usefulness as a guiding principle for South African society is also diminished by its vagueness and ability to accommodate a range of meanings" (Eliastam, 2015, p. 3).

In a separate paper, we report in detail the results from a series of 11 focus groups run across four different provinces in South Africa, in which ordinary citizens were asked their views and understanding of aspects of social cohesion. Below we report some of the key themes to emerge from that work, and reflect on the extent to which our proposed definition of social cohesion resonates with the lived experiences of everyday South Africans.

Key results to emerge from the focus group discussions are:

• The term "social cohesion" is not widely used in common usage, with individuals more readily identifying with the idea of *Ubuntu* or the rainbow nation.
• Value-based attributes, such as respect, tolerance and solidarity, feature prominently in how individuals think about social cohesion.
• Individual identity, which is multi-dimensional appears to be distinct from how individuals view others, which tends to be through fairly narrow, ascriptive group-based identities.
• Race continues to be a salient identity when people consider sources of division but language, class and religion emerge as important too.
• Racial division is often linked to political affiliation and socio-economic inequality.
• Racial division and economic inequality undermine the substance and meaning of the rainbow nation
• White guilt and discomfort on race related subjects and socio-economic inequality leads to silence and avoidance of the matter
• For some groups, racial identity is a source of low levels of intra-group cohesion.
• Trust levels, both inter-personal and institutional, are very low
• Trust is undermined by high levels of crime and violence as well as dishonesty and the absence of good governance.
• Material self-interest and scarce economic opportunities undermine trustworthiness
• Group identity appears to be an important shortcut used by individuals in their decision to trust or not, but this need not produce high levels of intra-group trust
• Sources of cohesion include events or causes that allow individuals who share a common interest to voluntarily associate together in this regard.
• Collaborative efforts tend to be linked to a common goal, usually with some material benefit, or arise in response to the failure of the state to fulfill its mandate.
• There is a willingness to co-operate in the right circumstances and with the right people.
• The challenge in building cohesion is to ensure that opportunities for bridging group divides persist beyond the event or cause itself. For example, work projects are a starting point for cross racial interaction and professional relations, but are not sufficient

Once again, many of these insights resonate well with our proposed definition of social cohesion which highlights the importance of group-based identities that need to be transcended by individuals voluntarily co-operating together with common purpose to achieve an end that is not only rooted in material self-interest, but yields benefits for the larger community.

Conclusion

The rise to prominence of the term social cohesion in policy documents and debates has revealed the lack of definitional consensus concerning the term itself. This is hardly surprising since it is a multi-dimensional concept. Yet, lack of conceptual clarity around definition hinders attempts to measure and track progress in the realisation of social cohesion over time. The goal of this paper has been to propose a definition of social cohesion that is austere but contentful, and one that avoids the tendency to define social cohesion on the basis of what a cohesive society would do, or the qualities that would characterise a cohesive society, or that is premised on the hypothesised causes or effects of social cohesion.

Having considered the existing definitions and approaches to measuring social cohesion, we propose to define social cohesion as *the extent to which people are co-operative, within and across group boundaries, without coercion or purely self-interested motivation.*

The uncoerced, non-self-interested co-operativeness across society which, by common hypothesis, tends to generate peace and prosperity, can conceivably be realised in a large number of different ways. The articulation of a society into sub-groups and the relations between those sub-groups, as well as the attitudes towards one another of members of sub- groups and members of society as a whole, can take many different forms while still exhibiting uncoerced, non-self-interested co-operativeness. Thus, we argue that this definition avoids abuse of the term by refraining from covertly writing into the understanding of "social cohesion" specific normative commitments or empirical hypotheses on which there can be reasonable disagreement. It acknowledges that the question which other values a society should strive to realise together with cohesion, and the question which conceivable forms of social cohesion are actually realisable given human constraints, are both different from the question of what social cohesion is, and both require independent investigation.

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