Cohesive Societies: Scoping Concepts and Priorities

Discussions at a British Academy
seminar on 30 January 2019

The British Academy
Cohesive Societies

About the British Academy

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About the Cohesive Societies programme

How can societies remain cohesive in the face of rapid political, social, economic and technological change? Through this cross-cutting programme, the British Academy is drawing on our expertise and knowledge to enlighten these issues through debate, publication and research.

The exploratory phase of this programme, including this publication, aims to capture existing work in relation to societal cohesion under five key themes: cultural memory and tradition; the social economy; meanings and mechanisms of social responsibility; identity and belonging; and care for the future.

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1. Introduction

How can societies remain cohesive in the face of rapid political, social, economic and technological change? This is the focus of a cross-cutting programme of work at the British Academy on *Cohesive Societies*. The programme seeks to understand the different ways that societies cohere, inviting historical and comparative analysis as well as in-depth explorations of the UK context.

The exploratory phase of this programme, including this publication, aims to capture existing work under five key themes:

1. **Cultural memory and tradition**
    How are communities shaped by people's understanding of their historical and cultural context, the ways that they talk about these things, and the practice of traditions?

2. **The social economy**
    How are communities shaped by the different ways in which people make choices, invest their energy, and make exchanges of all sorts involving skills, space, knowledge, networks, technologies and physical resources?

3. **Meaning and mechanisms of social responsibility**
    How much can social responsibility be supported by informal cooperative commitments and obligations, and how much does it require more formal structures like legislation?

4. **Identity and belonging**
    How do people define and defend their identities with others? How do people contextualise one another's identities?

5. **Care for the future**
    How should we think about the sustainability of society in the face of significant shifts like climate change and demographic change? In this context, how should we consider the nature of obligations across generations?

To explore these themes, the British Academy commissioned two landscape reviews. The Literature Review surveys a wide range of literature across humanities and social science disciplines to build an up-to-date picture of academic writing relevant to societal cohesion and the five themes. The Policy Review maps out current policy relevant to societal cohesion and the five themes at different levels of government in the UK.

The findings of these landscape reviews were presented at a Scoping Seminar held at the British Academy on 30 January 2019. This report summarises the discussion at the Scoping Seminar.

Disclaimer: This note is not intended to represent the views of the British Academy, nor to represent the views of individual attendees at the Scoping Seminar.

The full landscape reviews can be found on the British Academy website:
https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/cohesive-societies-literature-review
https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/cohesive-societies-policy-review

2. Landscape Reviews

2.1 Cohesive Societies Literature Review

Imogen Baylis, Harris Beider and Mike Hardy, Centre for Peace, Trust and Social Relations, Coventry University.

The Cohesive Societies Literature Review is a narrative review of academic literature exploring the five themes of the Cohesive Societies programme: meanings and mechanisms of social responsibility (here adapted to meanings of social cohesion), cultural memory and tradition (here adapted to collective memory), identity and belonging, the social economy, and care for the future. The review authors presented their main findings at the Scoping Seminar.

This is a summary of the review. The full review can be downloaded from the British Academy website at www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/cohesive-societies-literature-review.

The literature review explains the importance of a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of social cohesion. This conceptualisation incorporates both social characteristics, such as solidarity, shared values, and a sense of belonging, and structural characteristics, such as the political and economic dimensions of a society. This multi-dimensional concept is dynamic, conceptualising cohesion as a political, economic and social process. While there is an important academic tradition that focuses on only the social characteristics of cohesion, this narrower conceptualisation is limited and a less helpful theoretical tool for considering the four remaining themes of the Cohesive Societies programme: collective memory, identity and belonging, the social economy and care for the future.

With this multi-dimensional conceptualisation of social cohesion in hand, the review explores the ways in which group identities and feelings of belonging are produced, experienced and talked about at both local and national levels. One way in which group identity is created is through collective remembering. By telling stories about a shared past, we delineate the borders of our group and imagine a shared future. However, the telling of these collective stories can also create division, because part of the process of delineating the borders of the in-group is excluding others. Frequently, the groups telling the stories have more social power and those being excluded have less social power, and therefore these acts of collective remembering reinforce different kinds of structural inequalities. This can be seen in academic literature about national collective memories.

The review also explores the ways in which identities and feelings of belonging are produced and experienced by individuals, often in relation to groups of other people. One important way in which this plays out is through the ways that people identify with different social, cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic groups, and then take part in political processes as part of those groups. This can lead to the recognition of these identities in local and national politics. Another way in which people interact with different identities is through everyday experiences of multiculturalism. Communities that are both diverse and cohesive can be encouraged by convivial, commonplace interactions between neighbours. The study of individual identities and feelings of belonging is expanding and adapting to better consider the role of online groups, and the interface between online and offline communities.

Having discussed the production and experience of identities at the individual, local and national levels, the review then examines some of the processes through which a sense of belonging and community is created.

Networks of reciprocity and sharing, such as cooperatives and informal networks of community volunteers, can build a sense of community. Many of these networks have changed significantly with the development of digital platforms which facilitate sharing and other informal economic interactions. Both offline and online versions of these networks can be exclusionary, as they reinforce other kinds of exclusion based on structural inequalities. This demonstrates the importance of using a multi-dimensional concept of cohesion: these networks are often thought of as purely social spaces, but they are actually constrained by political and economic inequalities.

The final section of the review looks forward to consider cohesion in the future, especially in anticipation of major demographic and environmental shifts. The key theme identified is the importance of responsibility, including the responsibilities that different generations have toward each other and the responsibilities that communities have toward the environment. Both of these kinds of responsibilities are felt at the local, national and global levels. The review suggests that caring for the future means developing mechanisms that can nurture social and environmental relations simultaneously, because social sustainability and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked. This challenges the original conceptualisation of cohesion as incorporating social and structural dimensions, suggesting that it might need to be further broadened to take the environment into account.

The review concludes with suggestions for future research. Key areas identified include:
– Theoretical and empirical research to further interrogate the different dimensions of social cohesion, including how different forms of inequality relate to cohesion, and how conceptualisations might take the environment into account.
– Investigations of how social cohesion can support or undermine environmental sustainability, and vice versa.
– Research drawing together scholarship on collective memory and the production of identities and feelings of belonging, particularly in periods of rapid social change.
– Explorations of how new digital technologies are affecting the processes through which cohesion is created and undermined.
– Investigations into the influence of social and political context on the capacity of communities to develop mechanisms which enhance social cohesion.

2.2   Cohesive Societies Policy Review

Matthew Donoghue and Sarah Bourke, University of Oxford.

The Cohesive Societies Policy Review is a thematic review of policy documents that maps out the major themes in approaches to social cohesion at national, devolved and local levels of the UK. The review also compares social cohesion policy in the UK to approaches taken in Australia and Canada. The review then relates its findings to the five themes of the Cohesive Societies programme: cultural memory and tradition, the social economy, meanings and mechanisms of social responsibility, identity and belonging, and care for the future. The review authors presented their main findings at the Scoping Seminar.

This is a summary of the review. The full review can be downloaded from the British Academy website at https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/cohesive-societies-policy-review.

At the centre of the policy review are three implicit questions: *what* is social cohesion, *who* is social cohesion for (and *who* is the subject of social cohesion policy), and *how* should social cohesion be pursued?

In answering these questions, the review finds that social cohesion in policy suffers from imprecise definition and a lack of measurement strategies. How social cohesion is understood and defined differs across the UK, and these definitions can reflect different political, ideological, social and economic priorities. Imprecise or undefined conceptions of cohesion are common at all levels of government. One of the key differences between the different levels of government is that at the UK level there as an emphasis on 'British values' and integration, implying that it is for migrants and people from minority ethnic backgrounds to integrate with existing British society. This is much less common at the devolved and local levels. However, there are also come commonalities in understandings of social cohesion at the UK, devolved and local levels. These include the importance of demographic change, and particularly the pace of change, the relationship between cohesion and security, and the challenge that economic inequality and social deprivation poses to cohesion.

Another major finding of the review is that there are important differences between stated policy aims and policy in practice. For example, social exclusion and economic inequality are identified in several policy documents as key problems that need tackling in social cohesion policy, especially at the devolved and local levels. Yet in practice, at all levels of government, security, resilience and race relations are prioritised. This suggests that in practice social cohesion is being treated as a means to some other ends, such as security and stability, not as a social goal in its own right.

Comparisons to social cohesion policy in Australia and Canada demonstrate that the complex, imprecise landscape with an emphasis on security and integration that the review finds in the UK is unusual. Both Australian and Canadian documents frame social cohesion as a positive, social endeavour. These documents emphasise the role of social cohesion in reducing national and local inter-cultural tensions and promoting diversity and multiculturalism. There is a strong sense in these documents that the purpose of social cohesion is to support diverse communities and the expression of their various identities, rather than merely to support their integration into existing norms.

The complexity of the political make-up of the UK, including the different levels of government, exacerbates the differences between policy ideals and policy in practice. The complexity of the UK situation also makes it difficult to

identify a coherent conception of cohesion, and to create straightforward, actionable policy that is relevant at different levels.

The review relates its findings to the five themes of the Cohesive Societies programme, and finds that social cohesion policy in the UK is particularly strongly related to identity, belonging and cultural memory, and the 'social' dimensions of cohesion identified by the Literature Review (above).

The review concludes with suggestions for future research. Key areas identified include:
– Understanding with greater clarity the purposes, targets, outcomes and mechanisms of social cohesion.
– Investigating the importance of formal and informal institutions, including different governments in the UK.
– Exploring whether there may be routes beyond formal policy that are better suited to improving social cohesion.
– Mapping with more precision the relationships between social cohesion policy and practice, including understanding what cohesion looks like 'on the ground'.

3. Respondents

3.1   Response: glue or sugar?

*Shamit Saggar, UWA Public Policy Institute,
University of Western Australia*

This has been adapted from an oral response given to the Cohesive Societies
Literature and Policy Reviews at the Scoping Seminar.

Glue or sugar?

Societal cohesion is often described by two (contrasting) metaphors:

– Cohesion is the 'glue' that holds society together. It encompasses the well-set, invisible bonds that exist between people, such as common goals or similar values. This kind of cohesion is often only visible in response to a crisis, a resource to be called upon when needed.

– Cohesion is found in the cups of sugar that neighbours borrow from one another (or at least once did, we believe or wish to believe, in a golden age of social cohesion when people baked on Sundays). Cohesion is active, the collection of often relatively small actions through which people call upon each other for everyday things. A cohesive society is one in which neighbours more readily and easily borrow sugar from each other, a fragmented society is one in which neighbours view each other with suspicion.

These metaphors represent the extreme ends of a continuum from a conception of societal cohesion as something that is relatively static, macro, societal (glue) to a conception of societal cohesion as something flexible, micro and neighbourly (sugar). In reality, most conceptions fall somewhere between these two extremes, but there are real choices to be made about where on the continuum we wish to be, and how we think about societal cohesion. Both of these kinds of societal cohesion are challenging to measure, but having conceptual clarity about what it is we are trying to measure is an important first step.

In the UK, we are often closer to the 'glue' conception, thinking of societal cohesion as an invisible, ever-present resource to be accessed only when needed, usually during times of crisis. Understanding cohesion in this way can justify exclusionary 'hunkering down' with narrow in-groups during times of rapid change.

Conceptual flexibility

There are two further challenges to keep in mind if we are determined to translate our best research evidence and insights into practical action by policymakers. One relates to whether, or how far, we couch our policy responses in ways that are flexible and responsive, and take an incremental approach to fostering greater social cohesion. the other is the perennial problem of government when facing problems that require cross-government coordination and the use of several levers that are hard to pull in unison.

In practice, public policy is often made incrementally, responding to particular policy problems as they occur. Policymakers draw on scholarship to answer specific, urgent questions. In this context, there are benefits to a concept, like societal cohesion, that is not fully defined. A concept that is flexible can be adapted to speak to live policy problems, taking part in the kind of positive, even 'glorious', incrementalism through which most policy is made.

Conceptual flexibility can also be helpful when considering which policy levers are the most helpful for advancing an agenda. Societal cohesion is not strongly anchored in any single government department, which can be challenging. However, this also opens possibilities for thinking about large policy levers that could encourage inclusion and cohesion, but which are situated in governmet departments that are unlikely to be interested in societal cohesion policy unless it can be adapted to make it directly relevant to their live policy questions.

3.2 Response: practical applications

Jamiesha Majevadia and Andrew Dixon, The Challenge

This is a written summary of an oral response given to the two Cohesive Societies
Literature and Policy Reviews at the Scoping Seminar. The Challenge is the UK's leading
charity for building a more integrated society. They design and deliver programmes that
bring different people together to develop their confidence and skills in understanding
and connecting with others.

Conceptual and practical flexibility

There are political benefits to the flexibility and adaptability of the concept of
societal cohesion. One of these is the ability to speak directly to live policy
problems (see Shamit Saggar's response, above). Another is that the
expansiveness of the concept can allow people from different political
traditions to work together towards common goals.

The importance of the different levels at which cohesion operates, including
the local and regional, means that there are benefits to flexibility in the
development of societal cohesion in practice. Cohesion looks different in
different contexts, and it is important that communities can build it for
themselves. This kind of approach can be seen in the UK government's five
'Integration Areas', local authorities that are developing their own local
integration plans as part of the national Integrated Communities Strategy.
This kind of bottom-up approach, within a minimal government strategy,
might be more resilient to changes in political attention.

Socio-economic inequality

The Challenge is currently undertaking survey research into the extent of
social mixing in the UK. They are finding strong evidence that social class and
education have a significant relationship with societal cohesion. The findings
of the Policy Review (above) suggest that this relationship is not well-
understood or prioritised by policymakers.

Future learning

As the UK government increasingly emphasises a decentralised, bottom-up
approach to developing policy on societal cohesion, it is important that we can
share learning across different areas. One key to this is the development of
common measures. The Challenge has had some success in measuring the
outcomes of meaningful social mixing through proxy measures like trust,
friendship formation and comfort with difference. When comparing policies
and experiences across significantly differences places, such as different
countries, care should be taken. For example, there are important differences
between the UK and Canada's experiences of immigration that might limit the
comparability of their policy approaches to societal cohesion.

Two directions for future academic research that would be helpful for
the practical development of policy and programmes promoting societal
cohesion are:

– Understanding how perceptions (such as a fear of crime) feed into real
   division and disparities; and
– Understanding the relationships between online and offline communities.

4. Discussion

This section summarises discussions and conclusions reached at the Cohesive Societies Scoping Seminar held at the British Academy on Wednesday 30 January 2019.

4.1 Refining our understanding of societal cohesion

4.1.1 Societal cohesion can be understood as a process, or as a destination.

While it might be more common to think of cohesion as a destination, or outcome, thinking about cohesion as a process can be very useful for understanding its forms, operations and functions, and how it is actually experienced in the real world. Focusing on process in particular helps to ensure that we address how cohesion changes over time.

This is not to say that thinking of cohesion as a destination is never appropriate. It can be especially useful if we want to act to improve cohesion *at* something specific. Even if this aim is practically challenging, it can still be useful to have a definable goal towards which progress can be measured.

4.1.2 Societal cohesion should be considered at different geographical levels.

Cohesion and fragmentation occur at hyperlocal, local, regional, national and global levels. There is a tendency in the literature to focus on local or 'community' cohesion or on national cohesion, but these are not the only scales at which cohesion is relevant, and different levels interconnect in different ways.

Cohesion is often described as the 'glue' that holds a society together, the invisible bonds that exist between people such as a common goal or similar values. This kind of cohesion is often only visible in response to a crisis. An alternative conception sees cohesion as something more neighbourly, the collection of often relatively small actions through which people call upon each other for everyday things. Under this conception, a cohesive society is one in which neighbours more readily and easily borrow sugar from each other, a fragmented society is one in which neighbours view each other with suspicion. (For more on this distinction, see Section 3.1, above.)

4.1.3 Discussion of societal cohesion is often responsive.

Periods of increased societal cohesion are frequently thought of as occurring in response to an external threat, such as a war. Politicians have repeatedly called for improved cohesion in response to specific events, such as riots and other forms of violent social conflict. Allusions to cohesion in these situations commonly portray it as a sort of passive and well-set 'glue' (above). Often the images are backwards-looking, exclusionary and even inappropriately nostalgic.

Cohesion can also be active in response to threat, becoming politically entrepreneurial, finding its way onto the most prominent agendas of the day, a useful tool for combatting crises. For example, there could be real value in building societal cohesion in opposition to the 'enemies' of plastic, waste and climate change. This conception frequently sees societal cohesion as a means to other ends, such as safety.

A more extreme version of this conception might consider societal cohesion to be purely a rhetorical device used to discuss the absence of social conflict, rather than some real 'glue' or set of activities. If this is the case, it may still be helpful to consider the characteristics of cohesive societies, even if an overall characterisation of 'cohesion' is not particularly meaningful.

4.1.4 Societal cohesion may be a positive goal in its own right.

As a positive goal in its own right, societal cohesion, be it passive or active, has value in and of itself. This conception might see cohesion as *both* a process and as the destination towards which the process is directed (above). The primary challenges for this conception of cohesion are the inherent and de facto trade-offs between cohesion and other positive social goals. For example, societal cohesion may be easier to achieve in smaller, relatively homogenous societies, but this might come into conflict with social goals of diversity and inclusivity.

4.1.5 Societal cohesion should be understood as including social and structural components.

Some theorisations of cohesion are exclusively focused on social components, and consider cohesion to therefore be based on solidarity, shared values and a sense of community. However, more complete and compelling theorisations take a broader approach, including the political and economic systems of society. The broader theorisations of cohesion relate to the understanding of cohesion as a (social, political and economic) process as well as a destination (above). These theorisations are particularly helpful for getting purchase on questions about how cohesion interacts with different forms of inequality.

4.1.6 Ambiguities in understanding societal cohesion can be advantageous, but can also create difficulties.

For example, they can allow proponents of cohesion to adjust their language to speak more directly in terms that fit with the language of change priority agendas in politics and policymaking. Further, in practice policy is frequently made in inductive, incremental steps that instrumentalise concepts. A flexible concept can adjust itself to take advantage of this process, and achieve greater prominence through a kind of 'glorious incrementalism' (see Section 3, above).

The flexibility of the concept can be practically constrained by political expediency and other agendas, leading to a situation in which societal cohesion is always understood as more passive than active and more responsive than a positive goal. Policy related to societal cohesion can be overwhelmed by urgent questions set by other agendas, relegating less urgent but more important questions that do not fit as neatly with other, more powerful political priorities.

The flexibility of the concept of societal cohesion can also enable its use as a cypher for the discussion of other concepts. It can be used to obscure conversations about topics that are more difficult to talk about, such as race, colonial heritage and economic inequality.

4.2   Priorities for deeper investigation

4.2.1 How does societal cohesion relate to other social goals?

What are the relationships between cohesion and recognition, voice, participation and people's sense of their place in society and in politics? How do representation, power and trust relate to people's engagement with society? Are there inherent or de facto trade-offs between societal cohesion and other social goals, such as different forms of equality? How to we understand the societal context of our own situations? How are these relationships changing given the ongoing and potentially long-term Brexit process?

4.2.2 How does societal cohesion change over time and place?

Can we gather examples of real societies in other places and other times, with different kinds of cohesion and making different decisions and trade-offs with other social goals? Can we compare across these different examples to find common characteristics of cohesive societies? We cannot assume all forms of cohesion are functional or desirable. Cohesive authoritarian and non-democratised societies may serve as important comparisons through which we can better understand key trade-offs and tensions.

What are the relationships between different levels of cohesion, from the hyperlocal to the national? How can we better contextualise evidence about the state and operation of cohesion at different levels?

What is the relationship between cohesion and people's local identities and attachment to place? How does this vary across different, often cross-cutting groupings? What are people's lived experiences of local and hyperlocal cohesion and fragmentation?

Much of the research into societal cohesion is focused on urban contexts. We also need to know more about historical and contemporary rural experiences of cohesion.

How can we situate our understanding of societal cohesion in the historical context of the *longue durée*? In what ways is the UK's position as a post-colonial liberal democracy relevant to understanding cohesion in the UK?

4.2.3 How does societal cohesion interact with different identities?

A critical and recurring question is how experiences of cohesion and fragmentation relate to experiences of different identities, including racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious identities. Does discussion of societal cohesion that focusses on social integration and community cohesion obscure conversations about other topics, like race, that are difficult or complex to address?

How are cross-cutting social roles associated with gender, age and social class connected with processes of cohesion and fragmentation, and how do they converge or conflict with cohesion connected with other types of group membership?

How do the legal and institutional definitions of minority categories bear on the processes of cohesion and fragmentation? To what extent do majority perspectives frame narratives and gain power in describing 'in' and 'out' groups?

4.2.4 Which modes of enquiry should we use to learn about societal cohesion?

How and when should different modes of enquiry, such as approaches that are primarily quantitative and approaches that are primarily qualitative, work together to create a more complete picture of cohesion? How can we create a richer understanding that connects insights from research on (for example) history, culture, language, philosophy and law, through anthropology, geography, political sociology, economics and psychology, and in relevant science disciplines such as computing, evolutionary biology, medicine, psychiatry and neuroscience?

4.2.5 How can we make better policy about societal cohesion?

We need to map and understand the range of productive and counter-productive policy interventions that have been implemented with an aim of affecting cohesion. Where and when have these interventions occurred? Do we have a good sense of the time frames (in delivery and effectiveness) of response-mode versus ambition-mode policies, and of their relative success and failure to promote cohesion? How have policies been measured and evaluated?

When considering policy interventions and other policy projects designed to affect cohesion, are there particular characteristics that these policy projects share? For example, are they often responsive and incremental, piggybacking on other policy priorities? Or do they treat cohesion as a positive goal in its own right, and aim to set the agenda?

Are there opportunities to affect cohesion through other, more mainstream policy levers? Do these differ at local, regional and national levels?

How can communities best be engaged in policymaking that affects them? Are there examples of good practice that is genuine and non-tokenistic?

What are the roles, structures and resources that enable different groups to promote and/or inhibit cohesion? These groups might include:

– Local, devolved and national governments;
– Non-state actors including charities, faith organisations, local businesses and community organisations;
– Groups gathered around arts, sports and leisure; and
– Online groups, and their corresponding offline groups.

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