

**FEATURE COLUMNIST COMMUNITIES:
THE ENGINES OF SOCIAL COHESION**

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Social cohesion has been an ongoing policy research concern of the federal government since 1996 when it was recognised that changes from the industrial age to the knowledge age were having significant effects. These changes included those that we now associate with globalization and which have been acknowledged to have significant impacts on Canada as a whole and on our communities in particular. For example, changes associated with financial deregulation, new production systems, transportation and international trade agreements have resulted in firms becoming increasingly mobile and less place dependant. Similarly, there are changes in our communities in that many people have multiple foci of identity and an increasing diversity in perspective. Overall, there is a sense that the institutions and attitudes that have served as catalysts for cohesion, particularly at the level of the nation-state, are becoming less relevant as Canadian communities face the repercussions of globalization more directly. These are challenges that have been brought into stark relief by the events of September 11.

Results of Current Research

Research carried out under the aegis of the Social Cohesion Network has taken a broad perspective reflecting the wide ranging interests of the 21 member departments. Guiding investigations has been the realization that there are many views on what is meant by social cohesion. However, the Network has established a concept of social cohesion that is relevant to the Canadian context. It is based upon the willingness of individuals to cooperate and act together, and the acknowledgment that cooperation and collective action occurs at all levels of society. Further, it is recognised that social cohesion and basic liberal social values exist in a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationship. Freedom, equality, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law are all predicated upon the willingness of individuals to cooperate together. The process of social cohesion provides the essential conditions for the continued development of these shared values. As Paul Bernard states, social cohesion depends upon “basic values that are inescapable as they are difficult to categorize, such as liberty, equality and solidarity.”¹ To maintain a cohesive society, a balance between these principles must be sustained.

Reviewing the research carried out by the Social Cohesion Network together with the results of the recent consultations, it is clear that, while many areas are increasingly well understood, some require further consideration. Research to date has been carried out under three themes, faultlines, axes of community identification and implications of changes in social cohesion, together with efforts to develop indicators.

Theme I: Faultlines

Researchers have examined the nature and extent of the social and economic changes being experienced by Canadians specifically the negative effects that are most often borne by the most vulnerable members of society. There are growing inequalities which have, in part, resulted from the effects of globalization, but that have also been exacerbated by the long-term effects of the 1990s restructuring of social programs. In addition, the Canadian population is increasingly diverse in terms of family, age structure, and ethno-cultural origins, for example. Whereas much research tends to look at these as single issues, research undertaken by the Social Cohesion Network has established that understanding real outcomes requires investigating the combined effects of social changes. It is in combination that the changes we observe pose the greatest challenges to social cohesion.

We have shown that there are persistent or growing income gaps linked to ethno-cultural diversity with the situation of Aboriginal people, in particular, being one of the most pressing issues. Attitudes of young people are also significant in that they are more unhappy, less satisfied and less optimistic than older Canadians. Given the reciprocal relationship between social cohesion and income inequalities and economic exclusion, findings such as these are a cause for concern.

¹. Bernard, Paul (1999), La Cohésion sociale: critique dialectique d'un quasi-concept? *Lien Social et Politiques*, Vol.41, pp.47-59.

Theme II: Axes of Community Identification

Canadians are strongly attached to Canada, but there are powerful competing attachments from both regions and localities. It is also apparent that for many Canadians traditional symbols such as the National Anthem and the flag no longer retain their preeminence as foci for identity. As sources of pride, these symbols are now being joined by concepts such as freedom and compassion, and by Canadian institutions, such as health care. In other words, Canadians are increasingly emphasizing the importance of social values and, consequently, the relevance of social citizenship.

An ongoing research program looking at the relationship between culture and social cohesion has underscored the benefits of cultural participation. Cultural activities bring with them the possibility of finding accommodations in diverse societies and of building social capital. Closely related to cultural participation, voluntarism has the capacity to add to a sense of cohesion. Social cohesion research has shown that Canadians volunteer more than most other countries. However, increasingly, it is a small group of these volunteers that performs the greater part of volunteer hours, a trend that has the potential to undermine the positive effects of voluntary activity. The development of the information society also enables Canadians to connect to each other and participate in the civic life of the country. Nevertheless, as with the voluntarism, there are aspects of the distribution of connectivity that have negative effects. Foremost amongst these is the 'digital divide' in which participation is prevented by social and economic inequalities. These and other observations, indicate that, while the conditions for a continuing cohesive society do exist, there are trends that require ongoing consideration.

Theme III: Implications of Changes in Social Cohesion

In examining the implications of changes in levels of social cohesion, researchers have looked particularly at the consequences of its weakening. We have found that economic activity, the functioning of government, levels of health and of crime, for example, are negatively affected by declining levels of social cohesion. In the case of first two issues, it is clear that trust plays a major part in that it tends to reduce transaction costs. This in time encourages cooperative behaviour and exchange relationships. However, our research has also shown that the outcomes of weakening social cohesion are generally felt in the long term. There are significant, and unpredictable, time lags between phenomena thought to affect social cohesion and observable social change.

Directions for Future Research

In terms of issues that need further research, reviewing the results of current research and the outcomes of a recent consultation process on social cohesion has highlighted several knowledge gaps:

Income Distribution. The way in which Canada's communities are developing are most clearly reflected in the changes in income distribution. Understanding the effects of income distribution in terms of generational and group differences continues to be a central issue in understanding the process of social cohesion.

Diversity. Canadian communities are increasingly diverse and, given that research has shown that a society in which dissent has been eliminated is one where social cohesion is under pressure, we need to understand how different values and attitudes can become a positive source for change.

1. ***Government Institutions and Inclusion.*** Analysis of the effects of government activities on social cohesion is significantly underdeveloped. We need to understand the effectiveness of different models of governance.
2. ***Citizenship and Identity.*** With the growing significance of global cultures, migration and transnationalism, Canadians now experience many more ways of belonging. How these ways of belonging develop and interact is a central issue in building an understanding of the process of social cohesion.

Examining these concerns in terms of their effects on Canadian communities will be central to understanding social cohesion. Further, these research gaps *have direct relevance to the situation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada today. Research is needed in order to understand the process of cohesion with respect to Aboriginal communities' interests in capacity building and self-realization.* Finally, there is also an ongoing need to reinforce the intellectual framework for Social Cohesion. This will require understanding the interactions of social processes that contribute to social cohesion.

As the organizers of the 2001 National Policy Research Conference highlight in their invitation, "Communities are where citizens live. ... they provide the context in which people build the quality of life; they are where people experience change; and they are a source for stability and support in the face of change." Communities are, in a sense, the 'engines' of social cohesion. It is in these places that citizens have the opportunities to participate in many aspects of Canadian life. But they are also the places where the experience of poverty, exclusion and prejudice are most keenly felt. In light of the increased stresses being felt by Canadians following September 11, now more than ever, we need to address the faultlines and understand how to strengthen the social fabric of our communities. We need to defend and reinforce our core values, promote participation and develop trust in each other and in our institutions. Research completed by the Social Cohesion Network indicates that understanding of the process of social cohesion at the scale of the community, in the form and content of relationships, even in the neighbourhood, is likely to make an important contribution in achieving these objectives. As Professors Ray Forrest and Ade Kearns suggest, these routine relationships are "arguably the basic building blocks of social cohesion – through them we learn tolerance, co-operation and acquire a sense of social order and belonging."²

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². Forrest, Ray and Ade Kearns (2000), *Social Cohesion, Social Capital and the Neighbourhood*, Paper presented to Economic and Social Research Council Cities Programme - Neighbourhoods Colloquium, Liverpool, June 5-6th.