

Does diversity erode social cohesion? It depends on how diversity is conceptualized and measured

By Democratic Audit UK

Political debate, including in the UK, tends to assume that religious and ethnic diversity and social cohesion are at odds, with increased immigration in the UK being frequently used as an explanation for declining support for the institutions of the welfare state. Gal Ariely argues that whether this is the case rests on how diversity is defined and measured.



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The fragmentation of societies in the face of increasing immigration, and the ethnic and linguistic diversity to which the latter gives rise, are a source of concern for many scholars and pundits. Some argue that increasing diversity reduces the conditions necessary for “social cohesion” – a fashionable buzzword in the discussion of immigration and integration policy. Robert Putnam’s “[hunkering down](#)” thesis concerning the negative effects of ethnic diversity on trust and the willingness to participate in collective life launched an ongoing debate regarding the implications of diversity for social cohesion.

The view that heterogeneity reduces social cohesion and leads people to “hunker down” and withdraw from public life is disputed, the theoretical debate spilling over into the arena of policymaking and the public sphere, where the claim that diversity reduces social cohesion forms the justification for a restriction on immigration on occasion. Despite the popularity of the concept of social cohesion, the results from the numerous studies addressing this issue are inconsistent. Some findings support the “hunkering down” thesis while others do not.

While social cohesion currently possesses a high profile in scholarly research and policy, it remains a vague concept. Despite numerous attempts to define and measure the phenomenon, little consensus exists regarding its nature and the best way to measure it. A review of the various definitions proposed reveals that the approach to social cohesion differs not only between different scholars and disciplines but also according to context. To date, the sole consensual recognition is that social cohesion is a multidimensional concept. Although attempts have been made to measure social cohesion, the proper method for measuring it remains under dispute.

While some scholars argue that, being an attribute of a group, social cohesion should be measured on the group level, others maintain that it is best measured on the individual level. Disagreement also exists regarding the indexes appropriate for its measurement. In this paper we do not presume to suggest a comprehensive definition or measures of social cohesion, or even attempt to determine which dimensions form part of social cohesion and which do not. Our concern is rather to demonstrate how measuring variant aspects of social cohesion leads to divergent results regarding the effects of diversity. We focus on three elements frequently adduced as elements of social cohesion: interpersonal trust, belonging, and solidarity.

This study demonstrates how the relations between diversity and social cohesion vary according to the dimensions of social cohesion examined and the indexes employed for their measurement. It demonstrates that the relationship between diversity and social cohesion derived from a single data-set depends on the specific definition of social cohesion adopted. Thus while one dimension of social cohesion may not be related to diversity, other aspects may exhibit either negative or positive relations.

Analyzing data from the European Value Survey 2008 across 42 countries, it found that diversity exhibits dissimilar relations with different dimensions and operationalizations of social cohesion. How should these results be interpreted? Do they support the claim that diversity is indeed related to lower levels of social cohesion? If the focus is placed on interpersonal trust, the results match those of previous studies examining diversity on the state level across European countries no link obtains between the four indexes of diversity and social trust. Observation of other dimensions of social cohesion, however, suggests a more complex picture. Here, the relations between belonging and diversity diverge when dissimilar ways are employed to measure the sense of belonging – the relations between diversity and solidarity also changing according to the manner in which solidarity is measured.

If this dimension is measured by items reflecting general concern with the living conditions of other members of the community, no relation with diversity obtains. If solidarity is measured by very similar items explicitly asking about the disadvantaged groups in one's country, negative relations obtain between linguistic diversity and solidarity. Despite the fact that these two variables for solidarity closely correspond, using one of them alone might lead to mistaken conclusions regarding the relationship between diversity and solidarity. The findings also demonstrate that different indexes of diversity have a dissimilar impact. While the more static indexes of ethnic and linguistic fractionalization are negatively related to national pride, the more dynamic index is positively related to national pride.

The findings highlight the concerns raised by some scholars concerning the integration of the concept of social cohesion into the public debate. In light of the increasing sense of foreboding regarding the implications of diversity for social cohesion, we hope that this study demonstrates the caution which should be exercised when the multi-faceted concept of social cohesion is employed in discussions of immigration and integration.

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