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Social cohesion: An experiment in measuring the indefinable

More than a century ago, Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology, declared that social solidarity – the bond between all individuals in a society – "does not lend itself to exact observation and indeed to measurement".

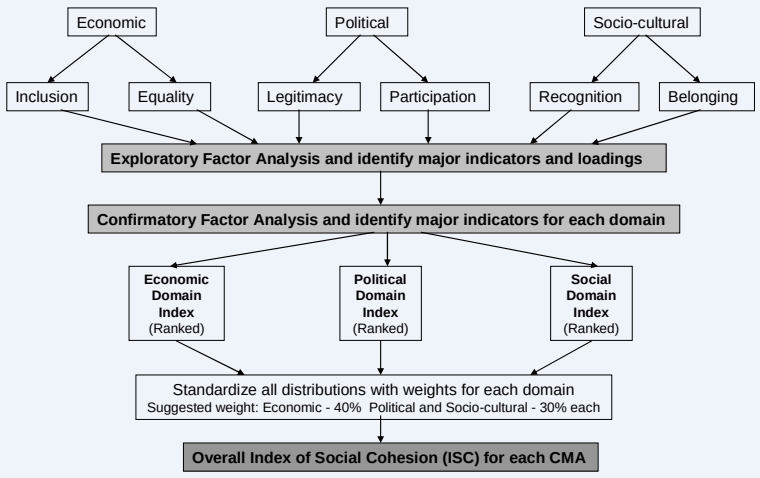
Many sociologists and other students of society have taken up the challenge in the intervening years, amongst them a team of UWO socio-demographers, headed by Fernando Rajulton, whose study *Measuring Social Cohesion: An Experiment Using the Canadian National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating* was published recently in *Social Indicators Research*.

In the article, the authors present the model they developed to "measure the indefinable". Adopting a loose definition of social cohesion as "the social glue that holds society together", they explore the possibility of modelling its multi-dimensional nature using six underlying dimensions identified by Canadian sociologists, Jane Jensen and Paul Bernard.

With data from Statistics Canada's National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (NSGVP), accessed at the RDC, they use factor analysis to create and refine indicators of the social, political and economic aspects of social cohesion in Canada's Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA). These indicators are then combined to produce an overall *indicator of social cohesion*.

The *social* domain includes volunteering, civic participation, ethnic diversity and socialising with family and friends; the *economic* domain includes personal income, employment status and job tenure, and the *political* domain includes voting in federal, provincial and municipal elections.

Figure 1: Methodology used for construction and analysis of indicators of social cohesion



Clustered in the provinces, the domain scores clearly reflect commonly known regional differences. With its strong economy, many cities in Ontario rank highly in the economic domain. Several CMAs in the Atlantic Provinces, where

communities are generally seen as closely knit, have high scores in social domain. Finally, and not surprisingly given its politicized history, many of Quebec's CMAs rank highly in the political domain.

Interestingly, CMA scores varied enormously in the three domains. Ranked 1st in the economic domain, for example, Toronto came 36th in the social and 43rd in the political domains. The fact that no CMA scored high in all three areas prevented a polarisation in the overall rankings. Low scores in one domain were compensated by higher ones in others.

Such enormous variations among CMA scores result in small CMAs with a moderate to high rank in at least two domains scoring best in the overall social cohesion ranking, using the weights of 40% for the economic dimension and 30% each for social and political dimensions. Hamilton took first place, followed by St. Catherine-Niagara, Red Deer and Sudbury. Quebec, Prince George and Trois-Rivières came in last.

The authors stress that the usefulness of their study depends not so much on the ranking but on the latent scores generated by the model, which can be used to examine the impact of social cohesion on other outcomes such as population health. Rajulton adds that this study does precisely what Durkheim proposed more than a century ago. Referring to social cohesion as a "moral phenomenon", Durkheim suggested that: "we must substitute for this internal fact which escapes us an external index which symbolizes it and study the former in the light of the latter."

Nonetheless, the ranking raises some important questions about social cohesion. The most fundamental is undoubtedly whether these findings should be interpreted as a faithful reflection of social solidarity, or as a confirmation of Durkheim's assertion that social solidarity can be neither observed nor measured?

To discuss this question, and find out more about this very skilfully conducted experiment, do join us at the UWORDC Brown Bag Series on Wednesday, October 10 (12:00-1:30PM) at the Population Studies Centre.

Note: Summary prepared by Heather Juby, Knowledge Transfer Coordinator of the RDC National Coordinating Committee, based on: Rajulton, Fernando, Zenaida R. Ravanera, and Roderic Beaujot. 2007. Measuring Social Cohesion: An Experiment Using the Canadian Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating. *Social Indicators Research* 80: 461-492.

Data for this study came from the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (NSGVP). The analysis was conducted at the Statistics Canada Research Data Centre. The Research Data Centre program is part of an initiative by Statistics Canada, SSHRC, CIHR and university consortia to strengthen Canada's social research capacity.