Social Cohesion: Definitions, Causes and Consequences

Subjects: Sociology

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Viewed as the glue that binds societies, social cohesion is considered an essential ingredient to address common societal challenges. Definitions and associated conceptual frameworks usually summarise social cohesion as collective attributes and behaviours characterised by positive social relations, a sense of identification or belonging, and an orientation towards the common good. However, there are a large variety of definitions, and disagreement exists about what constitutes the core components, causes and consequences of social cohesion.

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As society's social, demographic and economic structures have changed over the last fifty years, policymakers, researchers and practitioners have increasingly shifted away from focusing uniquely on economic growth and have instead concerned themselves with more holistic notions of social cohesion [1][2][3][4]. Consequently, social cohesion is generally conceived as a multi-dimensional construct, and together, these dimensions are considered crucial in order to address common societal challenges. Academic literature likewise supports the importance of social cohesion, linking higher social cohesion with several positive social outcomes, including environmental sustainability [5], social stability [6], increased overall health [7][8], or an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic [9][10].

Despite its growing attention and relevance, the notion of social cohesion remains subject to numerous criticisms and definitional debates. For one, the term has often been vaguely defined in research and practice, leading to criticisms that social cohesion may be merely a quasi-concept upon which researchers or policymakers can superimpose their own interpretations or values [11][12]. In turn, existing definitions have also been criticised for being overly broad and confusing social cohesion's core meaning with its causes or consequences [13][14]. As such, through an extensive review of the existing literature, the following entry seeks to provide an overview of definitions and associated literature around social cohesion. In particular, the main definitions and frameworks concerning social cohesion will be presented, a summary of policy perspectives will be outlined, literature on the causes and consequences of social cohesion will be reviewed, and future directions will be proposed.

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