Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: The University of Hong Kong (HKU)

Unit of Assessment (UoA): 25 - Political Science (incl. Public Policy & Administration & International Relations)

Title of case study: Improving society through better conceptualization of social cohesion

(1)   Summary of the impact

The UoA's research on social cohesion began in 2002 through a commission from the Hong Kong Government's Central Policy Unit (CPU). It was much-needed research because a) social cohesion was a priority goal, especially for policymakers in multiracial and multicultural societies; and b) research in social cohesion was in its infancy and confusion was rife. The HKU researchers' major contributions included an improved definition of social cohesion and the provision of empirical indicators of cohesion. The research has significantly influenced and assisted world's leading think tanks and public bodies such as the UNDP, German Development Institute, and Bertelsmann Stiftung in investigating social cohesion in around the world.

(2)   Underpinning research

As social cohesion mainly concerns civil society, it is about relationships and actions among society members, as well as between them and the government. CPU therefore sought the expertise of HKU's Centre for Civil Society and Governance, which pioneered research in this field. CPU commissioned the Centre to conduct a literature review and identify overseas examples of mechanisms that build social cohesion.

The research team was led by Joseph Chan (principal investigator), then associate professor at the UoA, and consisted of other full-time and part-time academic staff at the UoA - Elaine Chan, Rowena Kwok, and Benny To. The final report, entitled "Research on Social Cohesion: Literature Review and Lessons for Hong Kong" was submitted in June 2003. This research led to the publication of several articles that later proved to have an impact on the understanding and study of social cohesion internationally. The most important outcomes of the research were as follows:

A.   Conceptual clarification

The researchers uncovered an academic and a policy discourse from the vast body of literature. The two discourses typically talked past each other, resulting in tremendous confusion. More seriously, it was found that the basic elements of the concept were sometimes muddled with its causes or effects, making identification of cohesion mechanisms impossible. Furthermore, international comparisons were hampered by a lack of common measurement. The UoA's research aimed not only at conceptual clarification, but also at redirecting the discourse in order to take advantage of the discourse's intellectual roots in the social sciences (3.1).

B.   An improved definition

The researchers argued that a good definition of social cohesion should be minimal in scope and

expressed in ways that are close to ordinary language. A minimal definition would include only the essential elements of social cohesion, and exclude the conditions, factors or values that enhance it. This would allow empirical testing of correlations, and encourage cross-cultural comparisons by barring culturally specific values. Also, a definition that was closer to ordinary understanding would facilitate policy analysis and deliberation. The UoA defined social cohesion as a state of affairs and considered the attitudes and actions of members of society, both towards one another and between them and the state (3.1).

C.   Empirical indicators

The minimal approach to definition allows a theoretically informed operationalization of social cohesion in such a way as to permit cross-cultural comparison. The measurement of social cohesion was depicted in a two-by-two table that showed the people's attitude and behavior as one dimension, and the objects of cohesion (cohesion among people and between people and the state) as the second dimension (3.1). The indicators were adopted in empirical studies of the state of social cohesion in Hong Kong (3.2, 3.3).

(3)   References to the research

3.1 Joseph Chan, Ho-Pong To and Elaine Chan. "Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research," *Social Indicators Research* vol. 75, no. 2 (2006): 273-302. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-005-2118-1

3.2 Joseph Chan and Elaine Chan. "Charting the State of Social Cohesion in Hong Kong," *The China Quarterly* vol. 187 (September 2006): 635-658. This article applied the framework of social cohesion empirically. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000415

3.3 Elaine Chan and Joseph Chan, "Social Cohesion in a Semi-Democracy: the Case of Hong Kong," in Paul Spoonley and Erin Tolley (eds), *Diverse Nations, Diverse Responses: Approaches to Social Cohesion in Immigrant Societies* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012). This article showed the effects of the political system on various dimensions of social cohesion.

3.4 Joseph Chan and Elaine Chan. "Social Cohesion with Asian Characteristics? Conceptual and Methodological Reflections." In The Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed), *What holds Asian Societies together? Insights from the Social Cohesion Radar* (Gütersloh, Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). This chapter discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the Social Cohesion Radar – Asia.

(4)   Details of the impact

The UoA's effort at conceptual clarification building on works in the academic and policy sectors has had an impact, especially on institutions that demand intellectually informed research. In particular, the first published article, "Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research" (3.1) turned out to have considerable impact on the work of NGOs and think tanks that were striving to influence public policy. Hence the impact has occurred predominantly through the work of think tanks and NGOs that applied the UoA's conceptual framework in their program design or empirical inquiries. This has in turn generated various policy implications. The work of the following influential think tanks and NGOs illustrates the impact of the UoA's research:

1.   Bertelsmann Stiftung

Bertelsmann Stiftung is the largest private operating foundation in Germany. It is more than a think tank, as it aspires to be an agent of social change. Dr. Peter Walkenhorst, Senior Project Director of the Social Cohesion Radar project, testified that the UoA's conceptualization "*has been very influential in the original conceptualization of the Social Cohesion Radar project*" (5.1). The Radar project developed a theoretical and methodological approach to social cohesion, which "*is much in line with the approach by Chan et al. (2006).*" The authors of the project wrote: "*indeed we see their approach as resembling best what have identified as the common core.*" (5.1)

The Radar project was then empirically tested in Germany, the EU and OECD member states (34 Western countries), and in East and Southeast Asia (22 non-Western societies). The project provided new perspectives on the social cohesion phenomenon, such as the impact of ethnic and cultural diversity on social cohesion, as well as the relationships between social cohesion and democracy. More specifically, it has led to the following:

In Germany:
  (a) Putting social cohesion on the political agenda of the coalition government of Germany;
  (b) Establishment of the Institute of Social Cohesion by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in 2017; and
  (c) Research-based idea generation for political issues.

Outside Germany:
  (a) Identification of the relationship between social cohesion and subjective well-being in the EU member states; and
  (b) The Social Cohesion Radar as a standard of measurement for projects by the World Bank, UNDP and other leading institutions.

2.   German Development Institute

The UoA's definition was adopted by the German Development Institute, one of the Top Ten influential think tanks in the field of development policy worldwide, in their "Social cohesion in Africa (2018-2020)" project. The project aims to identify the levels of, as well as domestic and international factors influencing, social cohesion. The project director, Julia Leinnger, testified that

> "o*f all the available concepts and understandings of social cohesion, the German Development Institute's (DIE) project on "Social Cohesion in Africa" found Joseph Chan's conceptualization most agreeable and thus adopted it for their research. In addition, DIE'S regular exchange with policy-makers and institutions in international (development) cooperation shows a high uptake of Chan's understanding of social cohesion. Various policy documents, reports and project documents on international support to social cohesion are based on Chan's definition.*" (5.2)

 3.   United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

In the "Promoting Social Cohesion in the Arab Region Regional Project" by UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP RBAS, 2017), it is stated that

> "*we adopt a definition of social cohesion that is close to Chan et al.'s conception of social cohesion*" and "*the paper defines social cohesion as a state of affairs concerning both the*

vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of a society characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that include trust, a sense of belonging, and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations".

In more detail, it mentions that

"specifically, we propose to assess citizens' perceptions of the different social group components with which they interact (horizontal attitudes) and their perceptions of state and local authorities (vertical attitudes). We conceptualize these attitudinal measures as the closest indicators of social cohesion as defined by Chan et al. and in line with the social and political psychology literature on intergroup dynamics and collective action." (pp. 16-17) (5.3)

4.   Other NGOs/think tanks

A Google Scholar search revealed that as of 7 June 2018, the article (3.1) was cited in 57 works produced for or by non-academic institutions. These works were written in eight languages other than English, including French, Korean and Croatian.

(5)   Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Supporting letter by Dr. Peter Walkenhorst, Senior Project Manager, Bertelsmann Stiftung.

5.2 An Email by Dr. Julia Leininger, Project Director, German Development Institute.

5.3 UNDP RBAS. (2017). Developing a social cohesion index in the Arab region: Background methodological paper by Charles Harb April 2017.