Intersecting Identities and Dissecting Social Capital in Canada

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ABSTRACT

There is a gradual shift taking place in theoretical discourse, away from the concept of social cohesion towards that of social capital. In the following article, Jack Jedwab contends that there are important similarities between cohesionist and social capitalist paradigms. He examines the growing interest in multiple and intersecting identities that make it difficult to measure societal trust. He also suggests that when it comes to ethnic identification considerable caution needs to be exercised in making a distinction between 'bonding' and 'bridging' forms of social capital.

Canada's ongoing identity debate has been characterized by relatively frequent shifts in the dominant paradigms and discourse. Over the 1990's strengthening citizenship, improving social cohesion, and more recently, generating social capital have been amongst the objectives most frequently referred to in Canadian social policy circles. Many countries use the same terminology thus reflecting the globalization of an important segment of the academic and policy-making communities in the effort to define common conceptual frameworks. Doing this presumably facilitates cross-national comparison and enhances dialogue on relevant social policy questions.

Emphasis on the need for greater social cohesion in Canadian society has recently given way to the need to augment the country's degree of social capital. By consequence, think-tanks have gradually gotten off the social cohesion bandwagon and demonstrated a growing interest in social capital. One of Canada's most widely respected political philosopher's, Will Kymlicka (2003), recently endorsed the shift to social capital from social cohesion. In its maximal form he describes social cohesion as the achievement of a harmonious society in which people understand each other's identities and differences and there are no conflicts or misunderstandings related to ethnic diversity. He argues that this sort of harmony is not only unrealistic but inappropriate as a goal of public policy.

Calling social cohesion a catchall term for a wide range of unconnected phenomena, Kymlicka expresses greater optimism that social capital will prove a more fruitful addition to our conceptual toolkit than did social cohesion. Yet upon closer observation some of the very same problems that Kymlicka identifies with respect to social cohesion may equally apply to the notion of social capital. Indeed leading advocates of the social capital paradigm fear that it "…now appears poised to repeat the experience suffered by other promising social science concepts in the past: from intellectual insight appropriated by policy pundits, to journalistic cliché, to eventual oblivion" (Portes and Landolt,1996).

The significant areas of converge between the two concepts has facilitated the transition amongst some researchers from 'cohesionism' to 'social capitalism'. But studies on social cohesion and social capital have often made assumptions about identity and its manifestation that pay insufficient attention to the evolution in our understanding of diversity. Identities are neither fixed nor static and can change over time. Certain public policies that address Canadian identity needs are in the process of being rethought in order to accommodate multiple identities and the interaction between them that is referred to as intersections.

Several theoretical traditions within psychology and sociology have encouraged analysts to think in terms of singular and multiple expressions of identity. Those who favour the idea that there are a set of separate and distinct identities whose importance varies according to situation and context must consider how and when these identities relate to one another and where there are points of overlap among identities? 'Intersectionality' is a term introduced by legal theorists to refer to the specific conditions that exist when one holds two or more social statuses and the results that arise from that combination.

Analysts across North America concede that there is no universally accepted definition of ethnicity (Statistics Canada and United States Bureau of the Census, 1992). Nonetheless, there is consensus on the idea that ethnicity is a multidimensional concept that can encompass racial, ancestral, religious attachments and language knowledge and use. It is further contended that ethnic identification evolves through the life cycle, as identities tend to shift with age. Yancey et al. (1976) maintain that: "…rather than a constant ascribed trait that is inherited from the past, ethnicity is the result of a

process which continues to unfold. It is basically a manifestation of the way populations are organized in terms of interaction patterns, institutions, personal values, attitudes, life styles and presumed consciousness of kind." Yet researchers that refer to ethnic identification as detrimental to social capital rarely feel compelled to define ethnicity.

Following upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman the most widely quoted proponent of social capital is Robert Putnam (2000). He notes that: "…of all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary perhaps the most important is the distinction between bridging (or inclusive) and bonding (or exclusive)." Putnam goes on to describe some forms of social capital as being either by choice or necessity inward looking, and thus tending to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Examples of such bonding forms of social capital are ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women's reading groups and fashionable country clubs. On the other hand, bridging includes youth service groups and ecumenical religious organizations.

Putnam refers to bonding social capital as a kind of superglue whereas as bridging provides a sociological WD-40. By creating in-group loyalty, bonding may create strong out-group antagonism. It all sounds strikingly similar to the arguments advanced by those concerned with social cohesion. To be fair Putnam adds that bridging and bonding is not always an 'either-or' category into which social networks can be neatly divided. Rather they are 'more or less' networks along which different forms of social capital can be compared. This leads to one of the principal arguments made by Putnam concerning the importance of trust within society that is generated by organizations in the business of bridge-building. Indeed the issue of societal trust has emerged as a central tenet of the social capital paradigm. Fukuyama explains that if increasing attention is being given to the notion of social capital by such international bodies as the OECD and the IMF it is due to the importance of trust relationships, values and networks to sustainable economic development, social cohesion and individual well-being (April, 2000).

Unlike ethnic identification, Putnam contends that as a central fount of American community life religiously-based organizations serve civic purposes by providing social supports and services to the wider community and indirectly nurturing civic skills inculcating moral values and encouraging altruism. He fears however that the community-building efforts of new denominations have been directed inward rather than outward and this has presumably diminished America's stock of social capital. Putnam maintains that Americans are going to church less often than they did thirty or forty years ago and the churches that they attend are less involved with the wider community.

Any validation of these ideas in empirical terms depends on demonstrating the causal relationship between markers of identity (i.e. ethnicity) and how they are manifested in society, or in this case how the expression of such identities influences an often loosely defined notion of societal trust. In the case of ethnocultural attachments and social capital, ideally those segments of the population for whom such identification is especially relevant would be examined with a view to determining how their institutional behaviour affects trust between members of society.

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The growing interest in intersectionality is in part connected to changes in the way that the expression of identity is understood. The shift is due in large measure to the growing diversity in the composition of the population and the increased mixing of persons of various and varied origins. The rise in the multiple attachments of the population represents an important challenge to researchers both in Canada and abroad. It is a phenomenon that is a good deal more complex to measure than are singular attachments. Individuals may be more inclined to break-off from the group and re-identify themselves. In the case of immigrants such shifts are frequently associated with the process of adaptation. This phenomenon is very relevant to the bridging and bonding paradigm referred to by social capital theorists. It is the culmination of an individual's attachments to such things as gender, language, ethnicity and region that can have a bearing on attitude and behaviour and in whom and how they trust others. Trust of those with which an individual may identify does not imply distrust of others.

In her essay 'Equality, Trust and Multiculturalism' Avigail Eisenberg (2002) suggests that some skepticism may be in order around claims that public institutions are ethnically neutral and accommodate all individuals equally regardless of their ethnic or religious identities. The notion that public organizations and civic institutions are not ethnically neutral and accommodate those who belong to mainstream groups more easily is a central problem which advocates of multiculturalism in Canada continually address. Eisenberg quite rightly argues that critics of multiculturalism insufficiently consider this in conducting social capital research, particularly as it concerns the important distinction between bridging and bonding.

In research based on the World Values Survey, Johnson and Soroka (2002) suggest that while ethnic differences in social capital do exist, paradoxically those provinces with high ethnic diversity do not demonstrate lower scores on civic measures but rather exhibit high scores on social

capital measures. They concur that existing differences may be mitigated by controlling for the age and education level of respondents. While the findings may require more specific data on ethnicity at the community level they nonetheless raise questions about the relationship between ethnic identification and social capital. Yet another study by Aizelwood and Pendakur (2003) suggests that "…individual ethnocultural characteristics do not appreciably affect scores on social capital measures but that broad designations of ethnicity such as visible minority and immigrant do so however weekly." The authors suggest that large community size may be a more consistent predictor of lower interpersonal trust.

All things considered ethnicity may be no less an impediment to bridging than other expressions of identity and therefore the key variable in any such observation may depend more on the salience of one's group identification and the type of behaviour it generates.

According to 'social capitalists' the phenomenon of bridging is essential to the promotion of trust that is in turn deemed fundamental to sustaining a strong democracy. Hence if ethnic ties are associated with bonding, then significant attachment to an ethnic group will presumably undercut trust. But testing this relationship does not seem to validate the notion that ethnic attachments imply mistrust of others. Nor, as proclaimed by detractors of multiculturalism, does a strong sense of belonging to one's ethnic group result in diminished attachment to national identity. Findings from Statistics Canada's Ethnic Diversity Survey (2003) provide little support for social capital theorists in this regard as they make quite clear that strong ethnic attachments neither undercut strong Canadian identification nor reduce trust of others.

As revealed below, those persons of ethnic origins other than Canadian, British or French have rates of belonging to Canada that are as strong as those who are more rooted in the country. All groups demonstrate a higher sense of attachment to Canada than to their particular ethnic groups Moreover there does not appear to be a contradiction between ethnic and national attachments judging by the importance attributed to one's ethnic group amongst more recently arrived communities.

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Strong Sense of Belonging to Canada, Strong Sense of Belonging to Ethnic or Cultural Group and proportion that Believe "most people can be trusted"

	Strong Sense of Belonging to Canada	Strong Sense of Belonging to Ethnic or Cultural Group	Proportion that Believe "most people can be trusted"
Filipino	85	78	—
Portuguese	85	65	55
East Indian	81	65	47
Chinese	72	58	54
Italian	78	56	41
French	70	53	45
English	87	44	60
Irish	85	41	57
Polish	84	39	55
Scottish	88	38	60
Dutch	86	36	58
Russian	82	35	60
Ukrainian	84	33	56
German	83	33	58
French-Canadian	73	60	42
Quebecois(e)	51	59	30
Canadian	80	58	45

Source: Ethnic Diversity Survey was developed by Statistics Canada, in partnership with the Department of Canadian Heritage, April to August 2002

(The Ethnic Diversity Survey was developed by Statistics Canada, in partnership with the Department of Canadian Heritage, to provide information on the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of people in Canada and how these backgrounds relate to their lives today. The survey covered topics such as ethnic or cultural ancestry and identity, family background, religion, language use, social networks, interaction with others and civic participation. The survey was conducted from April to August 2002. About 42,500 people aged 15 and over were interviewed by telephone in the 10 provinces).