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Psychological contributions to societal cohesion

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Social or societal cohesion is a basic requirement for positive development and resilience of societies. It requires for all members of a community, an organisation, a society or a state, to sense commonalities and to see themselves as part of this community.

In states these commonalities are often characterised by ethnicity, language, cultural or religious characteristics or a shared history. Shared heritage doesn't necessarily mean homogeneity. Solidarity can also arise out of diversity by being connected, benefiting from or even depending on each other. As an analogy think of concrete, whose strength depends on the right ratio of chalk, clay, sand and grit.

In states, societal cohesion is crucially supported and moderated by its government. If this doesn't succeed, there is a threat that parts of society become separated, rival or at its worst fight each other.

Basic and psychological needs

Derived from psychological theories of motivation and from empirical studies on political participation and political apathy hereinafter some ideas and suggestions about societal cohesion will be presented. What do governments and administrations need to consider in order to promote societal cohesion? Governments mainly feel responsible for providing basic economic needs, and inner as well as national security. This is important and indispensable. A modern state that is unable to provide its citizens with basic supplies is considered as failed. Food, clean water, clothing and housing, health care and security are mandatory. A society in which the government is unable to achieve those basic needs will fall apart into groups trying to meet those demands separately or in rivalry.

But societal cohesion needs more than just providing the basic necessities. Cultural and psychological needs are equally important. Psychologically we differentiate several classifications of motives. Cross-culturally there are besides basic needs three particularly important psychological needs, which should be effective in all people and civilisations. A government that is able to follow those psychological needs appropriately provides the best preconditions for societal cohesion.

What are those psychological needs (according Deci & Ryan, 1985; 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2000; originally postulated by Abraham Maslow, 1954)?

- relatedness
- autonomy
- competence.

1. Relatedness

The need for relatedness originally concerns the search for attachment, safeness and comfort inside the family and partnership, furthermore in relationships in general. In families, friendships and small groups this will almost develop automatically. Organisations and states can utilise the positive feeling of affiliation, to promote bonding to a company, an institution or the state itself. The requirements can be derived from well-functioning families. Family members almost automatically feel connected. Functioning families provide their children and all members with

- positive feelings of belonging
- satisfying relationships without fear
- faith in their parents' good intentions
- reliability and predictability
- proficient actionability: the family is solving problems and eradicates difficulties.

Transferred on how states can achieve bonding of their citizens:

- raising awareness of belonging and participation. All citizens should be able to participate in public life equally.
- satisfying contacts free from fear means for example freedom of speech without repressions, access to information, freedom of press, internet access
- trust in the state's good intentions: a government for the people, not for the benefit of the politicians
- reliability and predictability, for example through a transparent legal system, equal rights for all members of society, social inclusion
- proficient actionability, for example in managing political crisis, supply problems, pandemics.

2. Autonomy

By granting their citizens freedom of decision and action, freedom of travel and free and fair elections, the state can strengthen the bond. It is not only the formal possibilities of self-determination and participation as stated in the constitution or legal system; moreover it is the cognitive awareness of the actual possible actions. The citizens need to know their possibilities and how to implement them, without fearing repressions or embarrassing themselves (cf. Preiser, 2018; 2019).

3. Competence

All placentals biologically have the tendency in common, to train and expand their skills needed for coping with life. This is done mainly by watching and practicing. In humans playful exercises and imitation play an important role during the first years of life. Particularly motor and psychomotor skills are practiced during this time. Mammals, some birds, and even some invertebrates show signs of curiosity and exploratory behaviour. Humans tend to try things out, and ask questions, thus promoting knowledge and cognitive skills.

By observing human behaviour and experience beyond childhood throughout the whole lifespan, a consistent motivation can be observed:

- People want to develop, practice and expand their own skills in areas important to them.
- They want to prove their skills to themselves. This way self-confidence and self-efficacy will develop.
- They expect acknowledgement from the people around them.
- They want to utilize the skills to their own advantage, they want to benefit. If societal cohesion exists, they want to utilise their skills for the good of society, too.

A state can encourage the identification and societal cohesion by creating the requirements for the citizens (through its economic and educational system) to develop, expand, demonstrate and utilise their skills for the collective benefit.

Social cohesion in the cultural evolution of mankind

We can only assume how societal cohesion developed in tribes, clans and nations throughout the history of mankind. The “social contract” by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke is just a metaphor for a cultural evolutionary process. But we can be certain, that satisfying experiences within the family have played an important role in the cultural evolution. On the other hand, destructive family systems have had and can have a fatal influence on communities and societies.

Inclusive institutions

In their book “Why nations fail” Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) demonstrate that power and prosperity of nations depend on the inclusiveness of economic and political institutions. In inclusive institutions, members participate in political decisions and the economic benefit. Transparent and effective structures in state and economic systems help in the implementation of fair participation.

Summary:

What do human needs mean for societal cohesion?

People experience cohesiveness based on certain criteria. The rate of subjectively perceived and objectively practiced cohesion depends on the opportunity to satisfy important basic and psychological needs in society. In states this is subject to the political system: the constitution, the legal system, the government, the administration, the media and political practice.

The societal cohesion and the willingness to defend the system depends on how visible and competent the important needs are fulfilled by the system itself:

- basic human needs, ensuring survival
- awareness of affiliation, profound participation
- autonomy as a maximum freedom of decision and freedom of action
- competence

A political system that is able to satisfy those motives can make an important contribution to the societal cohesion.

A state that isn't able to fulfil those needs, risks the formation of separating split societies and subcultures. Adding vast developments like the COVID or climate crisis, conspiracy theories and derogatory discrimination can evolve.

Inclusive political systems promote economic innovation, creativity and societal commitment, thus promoting prosperity and stability. By supporting the stated psychological motivation, political systems promote economic development and societal cohesion.

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