

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE DISCUSSIONS ON SOCIAL COHESION AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

### Sosyal Kohezyon Tartışmalarına Kısa Bir Giriş ve Bu Tartışmaların Sosyal Hizmet İle İlişkisi

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#### ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to understand what social cohesion is and explores the linkages between social cohesion and ethics of social work and to trace some of the reflections of social cohesion on social work practice.*

**Key Words:** *Social Cohesion, Social Work, Active Citizenship*

#### ÖZET

*Bu çalışma; sosyal bütünlüğün ne olduğunu anlamayı, sosyal bütünlük ve sosyal çalışma etiği arasındaki rabıtayı keşfetmeyi ve sosyal bütünlüğün sosyal çalışma uygulamasındaki kimi yansımalarının izini sürmeyi amaçlamaktadır.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Sosyal Bütünlük, Sosyal Çalışma, Aktif Yurttaşlık*

#### INTRODUCTION

How communities and societies stay together has always been a debate of both social policy and social work. After the second half of the 20th century, discussions on social integration and merging have been accompanied by the concept of social cohesion. Especially in Europe, social cohesion has been one of the hotspots of political, academic and public discussions for the last two decades. The reason behind this is the fact that some of the characteristics of the traditional society such as common space, kinship relationships, common religion and moral values are replaced with anonymity, individualism and competition. Insecurity created by the results of the global migration and the rise of the multi-cultural societies have brought about an increase in the segmentation of society, decay of values and norms, and a decrease in social trust (Forrest and Kearns, 2001: 2125). Therefore, this change has also enlarged the field of social work and transformed its scope for a multicultural and developmentalist practice.

In order to understand the change from industrial to information society which we are experiencing, many social scientists in the USA and Europe, mainly Chicago School sociologists (Crutchfield et al. 1982; Drake and Cayton, 1945), have done field researches. Despite the accumulation of knowledge, it is still very difficult to say something about the quantity of the change.

According to the International Federation of Social Workers, "social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. Since its beginnings over a century ago, social work practice has focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are dis-advantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. Social work values are embodied in the profession's national and international codes of ethics" (2008). These values of the profession are in harmony with what social cohesion implies: every individual in society respecting law, each other's human rights and values, and feeling responsible for the maintenance of social order. This is also in line with the very basis of social work, namely, acceptance of others. Similarly, European Committee for Social Cohesion defines it as follows (2004: 2): *social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization*. A cohesive society is a mutually supportive community

of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means.

## ETHICS OF SOCIAL COHESION

The concept of social cohesion indicates the tension between individual freedom and social order from a *moral* point of view. Many social workers' (Derezotes., 2000; Payne 1997, Zastrow, 1997) understanding of personal development depends upon the reciprocal interaction between the individual and his/her environment. At this point, what constitutes the morale is individual's will to promote his/her environment via developing his/her own self (Derezotes, 2000). Therefore, arguments on social cohesion emphasize that reproduction of social wholeness depends on a moral system that makes a society survive (Jansen *et al.*, 2006: 190).

French sociologist Durkheim (1973) defined social cohesion as *social consensus*, but currently moral regulation of society is not seen as a result of the consensus based social values. On the contrary, the focus of social cohesion moves from consensus to the *art of coping with differences*, transforms into the *struggle for living with differences* (Butler, 2004; Derrida, 2001; 2003; Habermas, 2004). Here, the purpose of social cohesion is not "how to legitimize **us**", but "how to live with **others**." The understanding of "how to legitimize us" necessitates the other. For instance, if we identify ourselves as urban, we assume the existence of rural; and if we claim to be modern, there appears the opposition of traditional, etc. An inquiry of "how to live with others," on the other hand, first of all, means the acceptance of others (Bauman; 1998), and this implies living with other groups and their

ways of identifying themselves, and seeking for the means of this. Today, in societies where “antagonistic co-existence” prevails, according to Giddens (1991), it is mandatory to constantly negotiate with the moral values of society in order to be included in social life as an individual. The big challenges of social cohesion are *identification* and *negotiation*. Is there an interaction space in between the two? The answer to this question implies the *respect for autonomy* which should be understood as the acceptance of the other's vague and ambiguous aspects (Jansen *et al.*, 2006).

Today social cohesion addresses what all societies need the most: culture of democracy. It requires the respect for the differences stating themselves in their own way in order to live together. In a cohesive society, neither the life style and freedom of speech of the ordinary person is attacked nor may the life styles be barrier for the status in society. Social cohesion aims at co-existence of all the differences, not in harmony with renunciation, but with respect. This perspective is very much like social work's emphasis on unity in diversity implying many different parts living and constituting the whole together.

Social cohesion with its strong moral focus is both an economic and social phenomenon. Capital within the framework of social cohesion could be defined in terms of value and ethics. The value of human beings and inter-personal relationships can be understood as the human, social, and cultural capital. In this case, we may think of the inter-personal differences, and the relationships and networks constituted by these different individuals as a whole of

human, social and cultural capital that enriches all of us. Our social, moral and economic lives are the most obvious indicators of our value in society. This value produces necessary ethical codes and norms for the functioning of a society. Power of social relationships is nourished by these values (Heuser, 2005: 8). The stronger social relationships are, the wealthier the society is and the more constituted social cohesion is. At this point, it is not wealth which creates cohesion, but it is cohesion which causes wealth.

Apparently, cultural and economic development is injured in societies where political, social or cultural differences cannot be managed in a cohesive way. Social and economic results of political crises in especially developing countries such as Turkey cause irreparable harm. As can be understood from various international reports (UN 2007; 2006; 2005), today many parts of our world are dominated by insensitivity, pressure and intolerance. International tensions and local reflections of these exhaust our hope for a more peaceful world. Income injustice and conflicts all over the world, fascist winds in Europe, and the reflections of all these in the ordinary life should lead us to think more on the importance of social cohesion to create a more peaceful world.

Since the world we live in is not a peaceful one, we should first and foremost focus on disparities that cause inequalities and injustice, and try to find solutions.

### **COPING WITH DISPARITIES**

The most dominant differences of all social cohesion tries to cope with are

the disparities between the poor and the rich, unjust income distribution in different regions, and gender inequality.

Cities and the poor masses in cities are indeed the main subjects of the discussions on social cohesion. Considering poor masses in the context of this discussion addresses the fact that disadvantaged regions are deprived of the qualities to create and maintain social cohesion. For example, the events in the Gazi District can be interpreted as the inability of that community to set social cohesion or maintain it (Evrensel Newspaper, 2006). These masses and the places they live in break off the mainstream culture and society.

It is obvious that all societies experience some problems caused by various distinctions. For example, there are disparities between the rich and the poor in all societies. When these differences become excessive, social integration and cohesion are at serious risk. No society, on the other hand, is free from ethnic and cultural differences. What needs to be done is to manage this difference so that it wouldn't be a matter of conflict, but become a resource for reciprocal enrichment. A cohesive society is the one which could cope with these problems in an open and democratic way (European Committee for Social Cohesion, 2004).

This negative relationship between poverty and social cohesion is based on analyses of Western cities (Cars et al. 1998; Hirschfield and Bowers, 1997), and it is shared by social scientists in Turkey, too. As an example to this, we can mention the studies on poverty and culture of poverty in the 2000s (Erdoğan, 2002). These stud-

ies try to explain the dynamics of these communities, their relationships and relationship networks in the process of coping with their conditions, and their culture.

While discussing the regional income distribution equality, an important factor to be mentioned is regional production capacity. In the last two decades, despite a lot of social support and economic support for new members in the EU, some countries such as Portugal, Greece and the Old Eastern Block countries have not reached the desired income per capita yet. So, social cohesion discussions within the EU context show that economic integration and regional income distribution equality constitute a vast place in it as much as social and community cohesion (Pardo, 2005).

Another important dimension is gender equality. Gender from the social cohesion perspective should be considered in terms of ensuring equality and empowerment. At this point, there are many transactions between social work and social cohesion. For instance, empowerment is a social action process in which people obtain more personal control, productivity and social justice (Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2007). One way of improving empowerment is meaningful and active participation in community and group activities. Social cohesion is a structure which enlarges community participation in such a way to include common components of dependency and reciprocity.

Language of social cohesion emphasizes individual rights, freedom and responsibilities. It presumes that all individuals and groups in the society par-

ticipate in social life and production processes. Therefore, gender equality and women's visibility in the public sphere and women's right to defend their rights have to be one of the primary aims of social cohesion.

Status and roles of women and men in the community within the dominant culture do not always support their potentials. Especially for women, issues such as just human capital investment, sharing of housework, and appearing in the public sphere are critical in terms of their participation in social life, and of both empowerment in their personal lives and empowerment of the community by gaining their human potential (Peterson *et al.*, 2005).

Coping with disparities in society requires that professionals of social work and the ordinary person actively participate in social, political and economic life. Active citizenship is an important frame for such actions.

### **SOCIAL ACTION AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

What is important in the context of social cohesion is to empower all the demographic groups and make them participate in active citizenship practices so that human, social and cultural capital of individuals may provide community enrichment.

In modern times, functioning in the public sphere is assumed by civil society and modern citizenship. Late modernity transformed the nature of public sphere dramatically. Especially in the westernization process of the developing countries, what balances communitarism and freedom is *active citizenship*. Active citizenship defines the use

of civil, political and social rights from the local and national levels to international and transnational levels. What characterizes this participation is "social inclusion", that is to say, belonging to different groups and the practice of living with different communities. Active citizenship implies reproduction of common wishes and needs within everyday life interactions. Moreover, it requires critically integrating into the current political and social institutions (Jansen *et al.*, 2006).

Active citizenship in the context of social cohesion has a potential to set a barrier for challenges in the society turn into conflicts. Complaints of the migrants in Europe, social movements against income injustice, and ideological polarization especially in recent years in Turkey can only be negotiated in a cohesive society. The most important factor to keep differences together is the possibility of a free and objective negotiation. The demands which cannot be negotiated in less cohesive societies may turn out to be explosions which have no positive results. Street fights in French and the events in Brazil and Argentina are close examples of these explosions.

The profession of social work is by definition based on the advocacy of human rights. Distribution of the rights for all is determined within the framework of active citizenship. Current practices of social work do not shape the intervention according to "behavior", but participation. Thus, social functioning means full participation of all in society. In this sense, the language moves from "marginalization" to "exclusion," from "regulation" to "participation" and to "anti-oppressive practice."

In fact, social cohesion discussions are a break off with conflict theories and analyses, and implies a search for a new social contract to be implemented both in local and international levels.

In this sense, social cohesion emphasizes (Forrest and Kearns, 2001: 2129):

- Common morale and the need for common goals
- Social control and social order
- Social solidarity
- Injustice in income distribution between people, groups and regions
- Trust
- Security
- Belonging

The means social cohesion suggests are (Forrest and Kearns, 2001: 2140):

- Empowerment
- Participation
- Active citizenship
- Organized acts (NGO activities)
- Strengthening social networks
- Reciprocity

Moreover, social cohesion is not only about social exclusion and fight against poverty, but it also aims at setting up solidarity bonds to minimize exclusion. As far as exclusion and poverty prevail in society, there always emerges the need to take some measures for the vulnerable members of society. There is a serious anxiety in especially European countries that social cohesion is at risk. For example, doubts about the changing employment patterns and social security systems represent a threat for the future of many people. Increasing crime rates, on the other hand, make

the ordinary life less secure (European Committee for Social Cohesion, 2004).

Social cohesion is the capacity to ensure welfare for all members of the society and minimize all kinds of polarization. Welfare implies the honor and contribution of each individual to society; the respect for cultural, intellectual and religious differences; the possibility of each individual to freely develop herself; and the active participation of each individual as a member of the society. A society can only be cohesive when each member assumes responsibility for the other (European Committee for Social Cohesion, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

Social cohesion strategy is in harmony with the professional ethics and values of social work. There are two important implications of this discussion for the purposes of this paper. First, social cohesion has become a political strategy, which means values of social work profession have become elements of political agenda. Therefore, this is a new opportunity for the development of the social work profession. Second, the discussion appears as constituting a new base for reproducing and refreshing values of social work. In other words, political expansion of values of social work provides a new framework to combine micro mezzo and macro practice.

Social work practice focuses on the interaction between human beings and society. The profession presumes that all its activities aim at increasing the quality of life of human beings and society. Although human beings and their environments are continuously exposed to various problems, the profession invests upon the capacity of human be-



ings for development. Human being is the key to change and determine her own life. Human being is also the key to a cohesive society.

If this is to be a new opportunity for social work, it is mandatory that more social workers get involved in the discussions of social cohesion, contribute to the terminology, and try to analyze theoretical linkages between this new discussion and conventional ethics of the profession.

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