Coordinating for Cohesion: The Contribution of Public Management to the Cohesiveness of Society

Despite the growing threat posed to social cohesion by the economic crisis and fiscal austerity in many countries, scholars have so far paid little attention to theorising or empirically investigating the contribution that public management can actually make to the cohesiveness of society. In this paper, I draw upon Moore’s (1995) distinction between managing inward and managing outward to offer a simple empirical test of two alternative paths to coordinating for social cohesion in the public sector. Does a focus on improving coordination of the internal activities of public organizations lead to better social outcomes? Or do externally-orientated activities have greater social impact? To provide an initial answer to these important theoretical questions, multivariate analysis of primary and secondary data on public management and social cohesion in English local governments is presented, and some theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

KEY WORDS: social cohesion; managing inward; managing outward.
During the past thirty years or so, government has grown ever more accustomed to developing initiatives to enhance the performance of key institutions and organizations. At the same time as being subject to the introduction of wide-ranging management reforms, many of those institutions and organizations are now increasingly charged with responding effectively to complex and intractable social problems. Amongst the so-called “wicked issues” public organizations are expected to address is the cohesiveness of the societies that they serve. In fact, governments across the world have implemented a swathe of initiatives designed to prompt public organizations to devote more energy to addressing the supposed centrifugal tendencies associated with globalisation and the breakdown of traditional social structures. This is especially so in the European Union (EU), where the pursuit of social cohesion is a key policy aim, both in terms of enhancing the equity with which public services are distributed and in terms of the harmoniousness of the relationships between different social groups. Yet, despite the growing emphasis on the need to build cohesive societies, and the threat posed to social cohesion by the economic crisis and fiscal austerity in many countries, scholars have so far paid little attention to theorising or empirically investigating the ways in which public management might influence the cohesiveness of society. In this paper, I offer a preliminary evaluation of the relationship between public management and social cohesion by carrying out a simple empirical test of the effects of two alternative basic managerial orientations in English local governments. The theoretical and practical implications of the results of this test are discussed, and a future research agenda sketched out.

What is Social Cohesion? And Why does it Matter?

Social cohesion is in many respects a kind of ‘buzzword’, which is used by policy-makers to depict an idealized togetherness within society that, in turn, justifies the mobilization of
government resources for its sustenance (Bernard, 1999). Whether by drawing on images of a
golden age in the past or constructing narratives of social progress, governments everywhere
have drawn upon the rhetoric of cohesion as means to garner support for their social
programs (Novy, Swiatek, & Moulaert, 2012). Inevitably, the term is bandied around with the
greatest vigour and enthusiasm when perceived social problems, or threats, cause observers to
question the kind of society in which their countrymen are living. Indeed, one might say that
any kind of social crisis can be turned into a crisis of cohesion. Yet, despite its frequent
 politicization, the concept of social cohesion is actually one of considerable theoretical
pedigree within social science and has long been deployed as a means for understanding the
capacity of a community to reproduce itself in the long-run (e.g. Durkheim, 1984; Putnam,
2000). Even so, while the concept of cohesion does have a scientific aspect (some societies
are simply more close-knit than others), it is also intrinsically normative in orientation: a
cohesive society is the kind of society in which we all ought to live. Hence, sociologists often
regard communities and societies as cohesive when aggregate level conditions ‘are producing
positive membership attitudes and behaviours’ (Friedkin, 2004, p.410).

Given its somewhat idealized and stylized application within public policy debates, it
is perhaps no surprise that there has been little progress on the development of a precise
definition and conceptualization of social cohesion. Often academic debates have focused on
issues of measurement and operationalization, and in so doing probe the value of alternative
subjective indicators of positive social attitudes, such as interpersonal trust, all the way
through to objective indicators, such as the crime rates within a given society. In this respect,
social cohesion represents a kind of latent construct that, in itself, cannot be directly
observed, but rather is composed of myriad separate though likely inter-related aspects of
social life. This focus on the wider attributes of a cohesive society has facilitated some broad
agreement amongst many scholars and policy-makers about the kinds of positive social forces
that contribute to cohesiveness. The urban geographers Ade Kearns and Ray Forrest (2000) usefully distinguish five aspects of social cohesion in this regard: common values and civic culture; social order and social control; social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities; social networks and social capital; and place attachment and identity.

For the purposes of this paper, I focus on those aspects of social cohesion that have been most influential within debates about policy action on cohesion, particularly the debates in Europe where the issue of social cohesion has been at the top of the policy agenda for some time now (Council of Europe, 2007). So, rather than discuss each of the five dimensions of social cohesion in depth, I reflect upon the two aspects of cohesion that have been at the heart of European debates about the role that public management might play in building a cohesive society: social order; and social solidarity.

For Kearns and Forrest (2000), social order is a product of the harmony between the diverse social groups present within any given community. Harmonious co-existence is a key indicator of the capacity of a community to sustain itself and resolve minor disputes and complications between social groups through informal processes of civil behaviour and respect for difference (see Calhoun, 2000). The degree of social solidarity within a community reflects the extent to which social groups perceive there to be ‘open access to services of general benefit and protection’ – especially those provided by the state (Kearns & Forrest, 1999, p. 999). Where access to quality public services is embedded within the social structure of a given community, its members may be more inclined to support (and pay) for other public policies and institutions aimed at benefiting the community as a whole (Esping-Andersen, 1990). These two aspects of social cohesion therefore reflect the actual quality of social relations between people, and the shared norms and values that bind them together, both of which are key to group cohesiveness and its benefits (Delhey, 2007).
How Might Public Management

Make a Difference to Social Cohesion?

From a public management perspective, social order and social solidarity are high-level goals, or social outcomes, towards which multiple public agencies work either singly or in collaboration. In fact, one of the most striking features of the contemporary public administration landscape is the growing emphasis being laid upon outcomes-based management rather than a narrow focus on inputs and outputs, or indeed effectiveness, efficiency and results (Perrin, 2006). This emphasis on social outcomes reflects the concern of policy-makers with the so-called “wicked issues” that confront today’s governments, from family breakdown and long-term unemployment to violent extremism and global warming. Within this overarching policy discourse, social cohesion can be viewed as a meta-outcome that shapes and is shaped by multiple other social outcomes. In the EU, for example, debates about cohesion originally focused on how to address inequalities in access to public services following market liberalization (Héritier, 2001), and have now turned towards the tensions between the increasingly diverse social groups within Europe’s cities (Council of Europe, 2007). All of which highlights that public organizations and public managers may have a large role to play in delivering improvements in the cohesiveness of society – as urban planners and community development activists have long noted.

But in what ways might we expect public organizations and managers to actually make a contribution to the cohesiveness of society? Well, firstly, of course, public organizations often implement policies specifically designed to improve the relations between different social groups or to improve distributional equity. For example, within the UK, local governments have for some time supported community development activities both on their own initiative and at the behest of central government (Lowndes & Thorp, 2011). At the
same time, public managers are responsible for the delivery of key services that often have important implications for social order and social solidarity. The effective provision of schooling, social services and policing by street-level organizations, in particular, can make an important contribution to improving social relations and the perceived equity with which key services are distributed (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005). Thus, the selection of one or another managerial strategy, structure or process by any given organization is likely to have an important impact on the prospects of policy interventions and service provision contributing to social cohesion. Yet, although there is strong evidence that some managerial strategies are likely to work better than others for outputs and effectiveness (Andrews et al, 2012), little is actually known about what works for social cohesion, or about how one might conceptualise the contribution of managerial activities undertaken in order to build cohesiveness.

One way in which it is possible to think about the types of managerial activity that are most likely to positively influence social cohesion is to draw upon Mark Moore’s (1995) well-known distinction between managing inward and outward. Managing inward is constituted by those activities that are intended to strengthen management’s control over the internal functioning of organizations, such as centralization of decision-making, the introduction of alternative performance management and other information management systems, the amalgamation of functions and departments or the creation of new hierarchical structures in order to improve organizational capacity. Such activities may result in better social outcomes because management becomes better able to control how effectively and efficiently an organization carries out its core tasks. Managing outward is activity that typically aims at improving an organization’s engagement with key stakeholder groups. This might take the form of involving those stakeholders more intensively in key activities. For example, services could be made more customer-focused by offering citizens a greater role in
their production. It might also entail bringing together the multiple stakeholder groups involved in the formulation and design of policy in pursuit of more joined-up strategic thinking, which, in theory, should generate closer coordination across a whole policy field, and thereby result in improved social outcomes.

While both internally and externally focused activities may produce improvements in social outcomes, theoretically, it is likely that there is some kind of optimum balance to be achieved between managing inward and managing outward. It is also likely that the point at which this optimum balance is achieved will depend upon the outcome in question. For example, it is possible that the optimum point for managing outward may be higher for social order since improvements on this aspect of social cohesion require considerable engagement with a wide range of external actors, while that for managing inward may be higher for social solidarity because a focus on delivering internal improvements to service production better facilitates perceived service equity. These possibilities are explored next.

**Testing for the Effects of Public Management on Social Cohesion**

I offer a simple test of the potential for public management to influence social cohesion by applying Moore’s distinction between managing inward and outward to survey data drawn from a sample of English local governments. These organizations provide nearly all of the key public services upon which local residents rely (e.g. education, social care, housing, waste management, leisure, road maintenance), and the ‘street-level bureaucrats’ who deliver those services shape users’ experience of what it means to be a citizen (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). Moreover, concerns about the cohesiveness of local communities have been at the heart of social policy in the UK for more than decade (Lowndes and Thorp, 2011).
DEPENDENT VARIABLES

The measurement of social cohesion is as hotly debated as its conceptualisation (see Dickes & Valentova, 2012). For the simple test presented here, social cohesion is measured as an attitudinal phenomenon reflecting individuals’ perceptions of the characteristics of their local community (see Moody & White, 2003). Quantitative data on English citizens’ perceptions of social cohesion are drawn from the Place Survey conducted by local governments across England in 2008.¹ This survey asked a representative sample of residents a series of questions about the quality of life in their local area. The questions within the Place Survey were all based on a 5-point response scale with the published figures showing those agreeing with the survey statements as a percentage of those responding to the question (see Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 2009). One of the items in the Place Survey asked respondents whether they believed that “people from diverse backgrounds got on well together in the area” (i.e. “social order”) (mean = 77.1%, s.d. = 6.2). Another item gauged the extent to which respondents’ agreed that local public services “treat all types of people fairly” (i.e. “social solidarity”) (mean = 71.55, s.d = 4.2). These two questions are therefore used to capture the two different dimensions of social cohesion described above.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Data on managing inward and outward were drawn from an email survey of the population of senior and middle managers in English local governments administered by email in late 2007 (response rate of 16 per cent). To overcome possible biases associated with differing managerial roles at the senior and middle levels, and to capture organizational variations in managing inward and outward, only governments from which there were responses from both
senior and middle managers are included in the analysis (N of organizations = 175). *Managing inward/outward* was gauged by asking survey respondents to indicate, in a typical week, how their time would be divided between “% managing the organization” (*mean* = 70.3%, *s.d.* 10.87) and “% interacting with people from outside the organization” (*mean* = 26.0%, *s.d.* 9.35). Since the responses to these two questions did not always sum to 100% and because those responses are aggregated to the organizational level, separate *managing inward* and *managing outward* variables are entered into the statistical model. To explore the likelihood that there is some kind of optimum balance between managing outward and managing inward for social cohesion, squared versions of these variables are included in the model. Respondents typically spend more than twice their time managing inward than outward, indicating the relative importance, on average, of managerial attention to the internal functioning of the organization. I therefore anticipate that the relationship between managing inward and cohesion is likely to be u-shaped, while that for managing outward is likely to take on an inverted u-shape.

To capture the impact of public management on social cohesion, it is important to control for the pre-existing levels of cohesiveness within a community. This is done by including identical measures of social cohesion garnered from the General User Survey carried out by English local governments in 2006 (“social order” *mean* = 78.9, *s.d.* = 6.9; “social solidarity” *mean* = 73.1, *s.d.* = 5.1) (DCLG, 2007). In addition, the average ward score on the indices of socio-economic deprivation in 2007 (*mean* = 18.7, *s.d.* = 8.9) is incorporated within the model. Numerous studies have indicated that deprivation is negatively related to social cohesion (e.g. Andrews, 2009; Letki, 2008).
RESULTS

Seemingly Unrelated Regressions (SUR) are estimated to control for the correlation (.2) between the error terms for the models of social order and social solidarity. SUR estimates of the linear and nonlinear relationship between managing inward and managing outward and social cohesion are presented in Table 1.

The findings in Table 1 indicate that the statistical models explain a large proportion of the variation in social cohesion across English localities in 2008 (about 75% for social order, and about 63% for solidarity). The results suggest that residents’ perceptions of cohesiveness are fairly stable, with the mean level of cohesion in 2006 accounting for about 50% of the variation observed in 2008. At the same time, socio-economic deprivation has a sizeable statistically significant impact upon perceptions of cohesiveness even when controlling for the level of cohesion recorded in 2006. Not only are these two factors important determinants of cohesion, but so too are the measures of managing inward and outward.

The results for the linear estimations suggest that there is a straightforward positive connection between managing outward and social cohesion, but that managing inward makes no difference. However, inspection of the models including the base and the squared managing inward/outward variables confirms the nonlinear hypotheses advanced above. The coefficient for managing inward is negative and statistically significant in both nonlinear models, while the coefficient for the squared version of the managing inward variable is positive and statistically significant. At the same time, the coefficient for managing outward is positive and statistically significant, but turns negative for the squared version. Further
analysis revealed that the optimum balance between managing inward and outward for social order was 65/35, while that for social solidarity was 56/39. The optimal balance for both aspects of social cohesion is weighted more towards managing outward than the average observed for the local governments studied here (70/26 inward/outward), suggesting that those governments that are more outward-facing are better placed to achieve higher levels of social cohesion (see also the linear estimations in Table 1). Even so, the nonlinear estimations also indicate that a comparatively high level of internal managerial control is still needed for governments to contribute to the cohesiveness of society.

**Conclusions**

In this paper, I have sketched out some very basic propositions about the contribution of public management to the cohesiveness of society, and have offered a simple empirical test of those propositions. From a policy-maker’s perspective, the findings highlight that public management can make a contribution to the cohesiveness of society, but that managerial strategy matters. Although the analysis that has been presented has limitations, it does illustrate that those organizations with the right balance between an inward and outward focus, perhaps unsurprisingly, are doing better in terms of social order and social solidarity. While the findings offer succour to those who have called for public organizations and managers to reach out and develop better connections with other social actors and institutions, they also contain a cautionary note. For the English local governments studied here, more attention to external managerial activity does seem to pay dividends for the cohesiveness of society, but works best in organizations in which managers continue to devote around 60 per cent of their time and effort to improving internal organizational
functioning. Thus, it is important that managerial networking with external actors does not come at the expense of a well-managed organizational base from which to operate.

Despite the clarity of the take-home message from the analysis presented here, it must be remembered that the study is based on a single snapshot in time of a particular set of organizations. More research is needed in other settings and countries to learn more about the appropriate balance between managing inward and outward. In addition, the findings do not really tell one which specific activities are most likely to contribute to social cohesion. Prior research has suggested there are several ways local governments can reach out into the community to improve social cohesion, ranging from efforts to educate citizens (Andrews, Cowell, & Downe, 2011) to carrying out extensive community development work of one kind or another (Lowndes & Thorp, 2011). In fact, within the survey reported here, managing outward is positively correlated with items gauging a commitment to public participation activities in local governments; managing inward, by contrast, is negatively correlated with these activities. All of which suggests that public managers’ efforts to develop closer connections with the citizenry and the community-based organizations in which they participate may hold the key to bringing about desired changes in the cohesiveness of society. Indeed, encouraging public organizations to be more supportive of social innovations by non-state actors and organizations is now a key goal for EU policy-makers (Hubert, 2010).

Since the adoption of an appropriate balance between an inward and outward-looking managerial orientation by public organizations is not something that policy-makers can take for granted, it may be necessary to elicit behaviour change in one way or another. Initiatives that can encourage organizations to become more externally focused, in particular, appear likely to have an especially important role to play in delivering improvements in social cohesion. To date, little systematic research has been carried out to assess what works in terms of building the commitment of public organizations to coordinating for cohesion. What
little research there is though, suggests that it is possible to change the behaviour of public organizations. For example, in the UK, the introduction of targets for improving levels of social cohesion prompted local public service providers to work more intensively with each other (Andrews, Downe, & Guarneros-Meza, 2011). Future research that sought to disentangle the relative merits of alternative approaches to strengthening the connections between public organizations and the communities that they serve would therefore contribute greatly to our understanding of this key issue in contemporary public administration.

Notes

1. Place Survey data were independently verified by the Audit Commission, a central regulatory agency. Each local government was required to achieve a sample size of 1,100 based on a confidence interval of +/-3% at the 95% confidence level.

2. Independent t-tests revealed that the levels of social cohesion and deprivation in the sample used for the analysis do not differ from the population of English local governments. Bootstrapping of the regression estimates revealed near identical results to those presented, adding further confidence that the findings are not biased by sample selection or measurement error.

3. Managing outward is also positively correlated with the presence of an entrepreneurial ‘prospecting’ strategy and decentralized decision-making, but negatively correlated with a core business focused ‘defending’ strategy. Managing inward is positively correlated with a defending strategy and centralized decision-making. For reasons of space, it is not possible to explore in full the nature of managing inward and outward on this occasion, though these correlations indicate that further research exploring this issue would be valuable.
References


### Table 1  Managing Inward, Managing Outward and Social Cohesion in English Local Governments (2008)

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<td>- .393+</td>
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<td>.030</td>
<td>.363**</td>
<td>.155</td>
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<td>.040</td>
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<td>47.506**</td>
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<td>504.55**</td>
<td>278.47**</td>
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$N = 175. + p = 0.10; ** p = 0.01. * p = 0.05; ** p = 0.01.$