

Measuring cohesion

The Identity Structure Analysis approach...

The quote 'Cohesive communities are ones that are able to exist together in a state of harmony and peaceful relationships characterised by a climate of mutual understanding and respect', taken from 'Themes, Messages & Challenges' from the Commission for Cohesion and Integration Consultation, describes the ideal scenario of disparate cultures, religions, race and class living side by side in communities of interwoven peaceful relationships but, in reality, how many communities/towns/cities in the UK reflect this?

Perceptions and attitudes – for example, with regard to inequalities, employment opportunities or fundamental racial or religious differences – all affect the cohesiveness of any community. The difficulty lies in extracting this information from the general public and forming a strategic plan from it. Underlying opinions are difficult to establish and yet are vital to building the depth of understanding that can guide programmes aimed at developing a more cohesive environment. So the question is: how do you get to the heart of people's opinions, attitudes and beliefs?

In its June 2007 report, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion recognised the difficulties faced by all partners when trying to effectively measure cohesion or integration. This challenge is specifically addressed by Identity Structure Analysis (ISA).

ISA is a social measurement technique that allows those studying communities to identify factors that are shared by communities or are considered (possibly wrongly) to be 'different' and therefore a source of tension. ISA measures specific aspects of communities, cultures and interactions, reporting on, for example:

- The extent to which communities actually share common values and beliefs;

- Those factors on which one section of the community feels other groups are different or they themselves are seen as different;
- Different groups' perceptions of and evaluations of relevant community participants, for example public bodies, schools, religions, government;
- Trends in perceptions, measuring the extent to which different groups feel that their situation is getting better or worse and whether or not they have positive aspirations;

The differences between different sub-groups, for example based on age, social strata, level of education, or time in the UK, can also be identified.

ISA is a tremendously flexible tool that can be adapted to study any factors of interest. ISA is a software platform that the researcher uses to build a study 'instrument' in which the factors to be studied are defined. The software then also presents this 'instrument' as a visual tool for the researcher to use with the groups being studied. ISA builds an understanding of the study group by capturing input from individuals and the data on these individuals can then be manipulated by the software to look at group dynamics, for example similarities and differences.

ISA has been used extensively on an international level to measure factors affecting community cohesion. Examples include studies of the identities of Israeli, Christian, Arab Youths, Hong Kong Chinese and Irish Republicans and Unionists. Extensive studies on the identity of immigrants and offspring of migrant ancestry has been carried out in the UK, covering, for example, Muslim Pakistanis, Greek Cypriots, Birmingham Gujaratis and Kashmiris. Throughout

these studies, the core component has been the use of ISA techniques to build dedicated survey instruments, conduct complex analysis and generate meaningful, measurable results, which provide clear insights into the cross-cultural issues at hand.

Sycadex Ltd has been formed specifically to widen the use of ISA in the social and work arenas. We have developed the software package 'ipseus', which allows ISA to be put to practical use by social researchers, psychologists and those responsible for developing community cohesion programmes. Our team of researchers and developers works with our clients through a clear process, which can begin with background ethnographic research (to define the scope and content of the instrument), instrument development, survey data capture and data analysis. We can also provide clients with detailed training so that they too can become expert users of the ipseus software and build their own powerful survey and analytical instruments for ongoing measurement of social cohesion issues.

For further information, please visit the websites detailed below.



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