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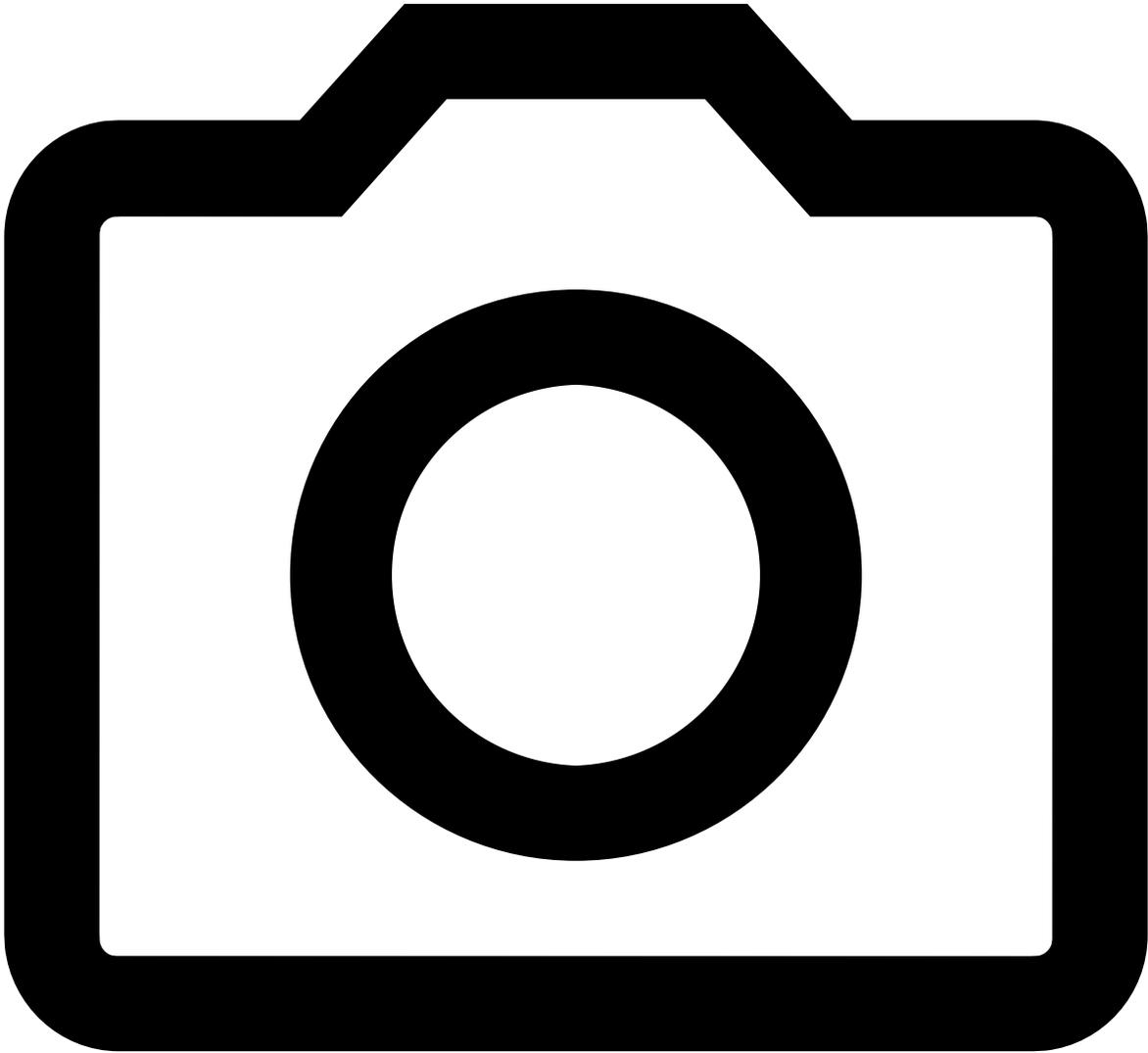
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Comparing Social Cohesion in Western and Asian Societies





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## **Comparing Social Cohesion in Western and Asian Societies**

Social cohesion is a topic of increasing importance in a rapidly globalizing world. The coherence of the social fabric has become a key policy goal around the globe – not only in the Western Hemisphere, but also in Asia. A new study based on the findings of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s “Social Cohesion Radar” compares, for the first time, social cohesion in Western and Asian societies.

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Social cohesion is a relatively new concept that describes a not yet adequately understood quality of societies – one that makes them robust, sustainable and livable. Over the past two decades, it has received increasing attention in both academic and policy discourse. The explicit or implicit assumption often is that social cohesion is or could be weakened by the consequences of modernization and globalization. That is why social cohesion is seen as an important policy goal by many governments, supranational and international organizations, as well as by nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, and other actors of civil society.

Despite this growing interest, little is known about the conditions that foster or weaken social cohesion, or about its tangible or intangible outcomes. Against this backdrop, the Bertelsmann Stiftung developed the “Social Cohesion Radar”, a multidimensional measuring instrument that integrates different facets

of cohesion. In this context, social cohesion is understood as the quality of social cooperation and togetherness in a territorially delimited community. More specifically, a highly cohesive society is characterized by three elements: resilient social relationships, a positive emotional connectedness with the community among its members as well as a pronounced focus on the common good.

In a new study, a team of academic experts headed by Prof. Dr. Klaus Boehnke (Jacobs University Bremen) and Prof. Dr. Jan Delhey (Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg) conducted a comparative analysis of the state of social cohesion, the determinants that shape it, and its consequences in Western and Asian societies. The findings were published under the title “**Social Cohesion and Its Correlates: A Comparison of Western and Asian Societies**” in the prestigious journal *Comparative Sociology*. The empirical analysis is based on previous studies of the “Social Cohesion Radar”. Bringing together separate analyses of **34 Western** and **22 Asian societies**, the authors explore the associations of economic, social, political and cultural conditions with cohesion, as well as the associations between cohesion and population well-being. The main goal of the study was to identify both “universal” correlates of social cohesion that work similarly in both world regions and “particularistic” ones, which operate differently in Western and Asian societies.

## **Social Cohesion in Asia and the West**

The results of the study suggest that some correlates of social cohesion do indeed work universally, while others do not. The most striking similarity between the West and Asia is the positive impact of economic prosperity. In both world regions, economic resources foster social cohesion. The most striking peculiarities of the Asian region refer to income inequality and political conditions. Regarding disparities in income distribution, a simple formula applies in the West: The larger the gap between rich and poor, the less cohesive the society. For Asia, the formula is more complex, as the most cohesive societies are those with a moderate level of income inequality, not those with the lowest inequality. A possible interpretation is that Asian societies experience two competing influences of income inequality: a negative and a positive effect, balanced out at a medium-level of inequality. Moving from small to moderate inequalities in income tends to promote social cohesion, whereas moving from moderate to high income inequality undermines it. Disparities in income seem to foster social cohesion as long as they are not excessive.

The second major peculiarity of Asia in comparison to the West is the evidence of more authoritarian regimes having stronger, not weaker, cohesion. For the West, the evidence speaks of the opposite: liberal democracy strengthens social cohesion. The most cohesive societies are those with the most liberal democratic setup – that is, elevating the rights of minority groups to a level of protection equal to those of the majority. In contrast to this Western model, at similar levels of economic development, the more authoritarian societies in Asia are slightly more cohesive than the democratic ones. The authors link these findings to sociological and cross-cultural psychological theories on Asian modernization and Asian values.

The practical conclusion of the study is that not all policy recommendations for strengthening social cohesion can easily travel from one world region to another. Ultimately, the authors conclude that there are only few “one-size-fits-all” public policy solutions for strengthening social cohesion: “A firm conclusion of our research is that policy makers interested in strengthening social cohesion should be careful in copying recipes that worked well in other parts of the world. One key exception is economic prosperity; obviously, economic means are useful for achieving social ends, too.”

The complete article can be [downloaded here](#).

### **Social Cohesion Radar**

With the Social Cohesion Radar (SCR) the Bertelsmann Foundation offers an empirical, international comparison of social cohesion in various countries worldwide. The SCR is based on a broad set of indicators drawn from comparative international surveys and other data sources. It breaks down the concept of social cohesion into three domains — social relations, connectedness and focus on the common good. Each of these domains comprises three measurable dimensions: social networks, trust in people, acceptance of diversity, identification, trust in institutions, perception of fairness, solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and civic participation.

For more information see: [www.social-cohesion.net](http://www.social-cohesion.net).

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