Community Social Quality and Social Capital

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Social Quality: definition

'The extent to which citizens are able to participate in the social and economic life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potential.'

Based on 'the social', which is:

'The outcome of the dialectic between individual self realisation and the formation of collective identities'

In a society with high social quality:

'Citizens would be able and required to participate in the social and economic life of their communities and to do so under conditions which enhance their well-being, their individual potential and the welfare of their communities. … citizens must have access to … economic security and of social inclusion, live in cohesive communities, and be empowered to develop their full potential.' (*Amsterdam Declaration:* Walker, 1998:109)

The anatomy of social quality
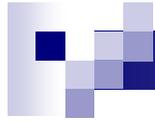
Social quality has four elements
- Socio-economic security
- Social inclusion
- Social cohesion
- Empowerment

All can be represented as continua:

Socio-economic security

refers to the way the essential needs of citizens with respect to their daily existence are addressed by the different systems and structures responsible for welfare provisions. An acceptable minimum of socio-economic security provides protection against poverty, unemployment, ill-health and other forms of material deprivation.

Social Inclusion

is connected with the principles of equality and equity and the structural causes of their existence. The goal is a basic level of inclusion with help of supportive infrastructures, labour conditions and collective goods in such a way that those mechanisms causing exclusion will be prevented or minimised. This element focuses attention on the structural causes of exclusion.
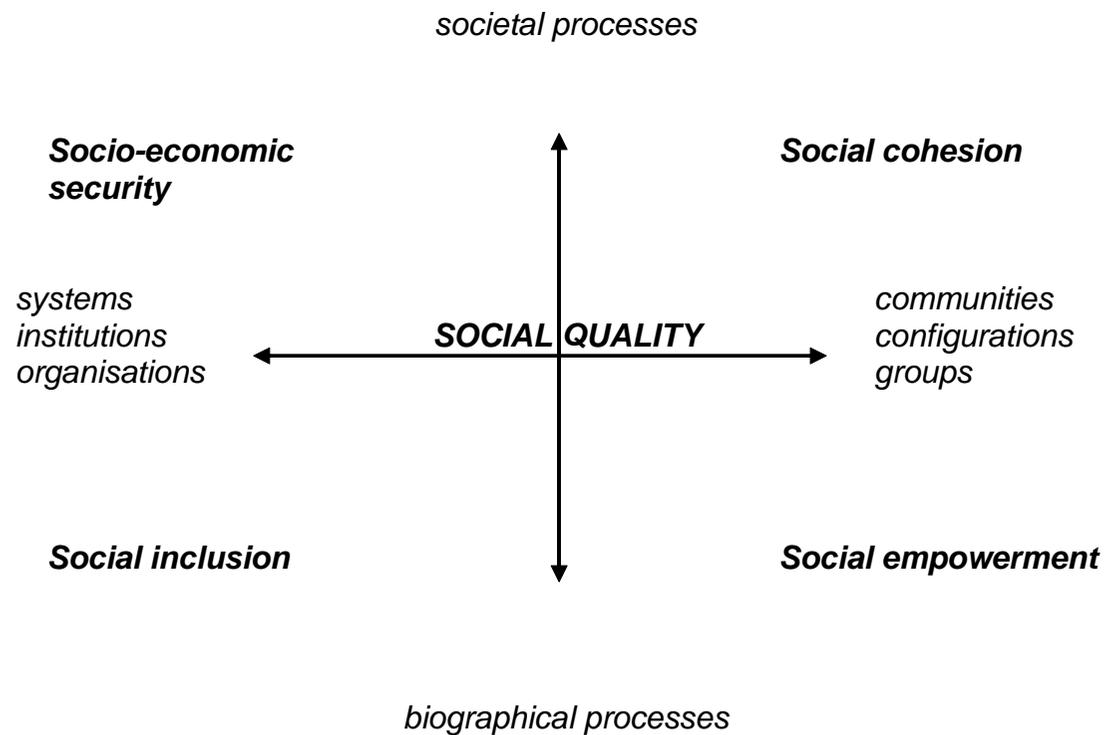
Social Cohesion

concerns the processes that create, defend or demolish social networks and the social infrastructures underpinning these networks. An adequate level of social cohesion is one which enables citizens 'to exist as real human subjects, as social beings'. Social cohesion is related to both social capital and social integration.

Empowerment

is the realisation of human competencies and capabilities, in order to fully participate in society. It primarily concerns enabling people, as citizens, to develop their full potential. Empowerment is a concept with both active and passive connotations, with active predominating in the sense of self-empowerment, or taking control. Its passive connotation lies in being empowered, thus enabling empowerment to take place.

The social quality quadrant

societal processes

Socio-economic security

Social cohesion

systems
institutions
organisations

SOCIAL QUALITY

communities
configurations
groups

Social inclusion

Social empowerment

biographical processes

Social quality of community members

- As citizens: in their individual dealings with society

- As community members: derived from strength of community and community support

- *Community social quality:* from the social quality of the community vis-a-vis the society

Internal Community Social Quality

- Socio-economic security: material quality of life compared with other communities and the nation as a whole
- Social inclusion: strong ties & networks essential
- Social cohesion: particularly important in first generation immigrant communities
- Empowerment:
  - passive through communal norms and expectations
  - Active through leadership

Interactions in internal community social quality

- Socio economic security largely independent of the other three [not always correlated: cf Jews in Nazi Germany]. It can be seen as a threshold

- Strong interaction between the other three: in general an increase in any one will lead to increased internal community social quality – but very high levels of [bonding] social cohesion can be counterproductive.

Community social capital, Community social cohesion and Community social quality (I)

- Bonding community social capital can be positively dangerous – producing 'superglue' rather than social cohesion.

Community social capital, cohesion and quality (ii)

Often high levels of social capital within disadvantaged minority communities, while supporting cultural identity and group cohesion and providing vital socio-economic support systems, also have detrimental effects of isolating the community from wider social resources.

Community social capital, cohesion and quality (iii)

Therefore it is vitally important that communities, groups and networks that have strong internal, bonding social capital also have access to external, bridging social capital too.

External Community Social Quality

Community empowerment, and indeed overall community social quality, are also mediated and constrained by the community's relationship with powers beyond its boundaries. It is to these issues that we now turn.

Societal cohesion is a double-edged sword

High levels lead to homogeneity and provide a sense of belonging. But homogeneous societies do not encourage diversity and can tend toward totalitarianism. Low levels of societal social cohesion, while encouraging diversity, can lead to fragmentation. There is no 'best model': for some countries, relatively high levels of homogeneity consistent with tolerance and liberal democracy may be the most appropriate; whereas for others, wide-ranging pluralism coupled with enough cohesion to avoid social disintegration may be best.

Pluralistic societal cohesion

The enhancement of pluralistic societal cohesion leads directly to opportunities for enhanced community empowerment, and thus community social quality – but these community enhancements do not *necessarily* follow. The onus is upon the community to respond and it is here that strong community cohesion has an empowering effect. In this context there are close links between social cohesion and social inclusion.

Community inclusion in society

The overall social inclusion of community members will be enhanced if the community itself is strongly included in society. Conversely, even a strong community with high levels of internal social inclusion will have a low overall social inclusion and social quality level if the community is not fully included in society. Its members will also have low levels of societal social inclusion. In the UK Gypsy communities find themselves in this position; they have high levels of community inclusion and cohesion but are prey to discrimination and social exclusion.

Examples: the British Jewish and Muslim communities

- (1) The British Jewish community:

    Long-established rich families (Rothschilds etc). Britain had to cope with 150,000 east European Jewish refugees. 1880-1900. But, the community itself policed the immigrants, repatriated those who were not able to become self-sufficient, and provided financial support for those who needed it – all without recourse to government finance. Its success in coping with this crisis further strengthened the community's inclusion in British society

Examples: the British Jewish and Muslim communities

- (2) The British Muslim community:

  It has never achieved such a high level of inclusion in society. The primary reason for this is that the community itself has not achieved similar levels of either internal cohesion or inclusion to that of the Anglo-Jewish community; and this has led to it having a relatively weak collective identity. In particular, it does not have a leadership that is recognised either at national level or by the community itself

Conclusions

Internal community social quality depends upon community cohesion, inclusion, socio-economic security and empowerment. Externally a community must achieve a high level of inclusion in society in order to have influence at the national level. Most importantly, though, the nature of societal social cohesion constrains the extent to which any community can be responsible for aspects of its members' social quality that would otherwise be under the control of national institutions. Therefore, some aspects of societal social cohesion affect the extent to which the community can optimise its external social quality.

… continued

Therefore, the extent to which a community can empower itself is tightly constrained by the nature of societal cohesion. At national level, increasing pluralism, coupled with a multicultural ethos, can facilitate further community empowerment. There is scope here for ethnos and other communities to act collectively to put pressure on governments to move towards more pluralistic approaches to societal cohesion.