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What "Is" Territorial Cohesion? What Does It "Do"?: Essentialist Versus Pragmatic Approaches to Using Concepts

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What “Is” Territorial Cohesion? What Does It “Do”?: Essentialist Versus Pragmatic Approaches to Using Concepts

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ABSTRACT *The question, “what is territorial cohesion” has reverberated through European spatial policy since the publication of the European Spatial Development Perspective in 1999. Over the last 10 years, the European Spatial Policy Observation Network (ESPON) has made many efforts to define and measure the concept of “territorial cohesion”. Many such attempts assume that a policy concept must be defined in order to be “operationalized”. Or, in other words, that we must determine what the concept is before we can determine what it can or should do. This paper challenges this assumption in two parts. In the first, I review a number of ESPON projects to show how complex and uncertain these essentialist definitions have become. In the second, I analyse a number of national, regional and local government responses to the 2008 Green paper. I show that, whilst a clear and coherent definition has not been established, this concept is already operationalized in different policy frameworks. Bringing this together, I argue that users of such concepts ought to approach the issue differently, through a pragmatic line of enquiry: one that asks what territorial cohesion does, what it might do and how it might affect what other concepts, practices and materials do.*

1. Introduction

In 1999 Ann Markusen published a controversial paper named “fuzzy concepts, scanty evidence and policy distance” (Markusen, 1999). Her paper calls for planners to remove the ambiguity, or “fuzz” that she believes has gathered around some of the core concepts in urban planning like “sustainability” (Markusen, 1999). Ambiguous concepts, she argues, are difficult to operationalize and limit our ability to construct co-ordinated and robust plans. Markusen notes that, in order to be useful, a concept must be,

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pin(ned) down . . . to a set of characteristics that could be unequivocally posited and would be understood in the same way by all readers. (Markusen, 1999, p. 703)

In European spatial planning, a similar criticism has been directed at the concept of “polycentricity” following the publication of the European Spatial Development Perspective (CEC, 1999) and more recently at “territorial cohesion”. In 2007, the European Commissioner for Regional Policy, Danuta Hübner, made an appeal for a “clear and common understanding of the concept (territorial cohesion)” to help the European Union (EU) communicate and develop policy priorities (Hübner, 2007). This appeal was supported by the European Parliament. In their 2008 draft report they argue that such a definition is required to guide policy and to ensure integration across the member states (EP, 2008). As I show, these aims for conceptual clarity have been integral to a number of projects funded by the European Spatial Policy Observation Network (ESPON).

In seeming opposition to these calls for coherent definitions, a number of empirical studies in European spatial planning have emphasized the important, functional role played by these concepts in the creation of a plan despite the lack of conceptual clarity. Faludi and Waterhout’s empirical study, the “making of the European Spatial Development Perspective”, suggested that the concept “polycentricity” provided a “bridge” between differing political stances (Faludi & Waterhout, 2002).

According to Faludi, such concepts have a “generative capacity” allowing them to be (re)created in different ways to work within existing and developing policy frameworks (Faludi, 2001). Shaw and Sykes’ empirical study of polycentricity in regional contexts supports this position (Shaw & Sykes, 2004; Sykes, 2004). This concept, they note, “‘performs’ in different ways in different planning processes and contexts” (Shaw & Sykes, 2004, p. 300).

These academic studies suggest that determining what a concept like polycentricity or territorial cohesion “is” should be considered less important than what the concept “does” or “does not do”. Or, in other words, rather than asking “what ‘is’ territorial cohesion?” On this basis, perhaps organizations like the ESPON, which seek to operationalize the concept of territorial cohesion, should be asking instead “what does territorial cohesion ‘do’?”

This captures some of the arguments put forward by a number of pragmatist planning theorists. According to Healey, such pragmatists problematize the use of essentialist definitions as “first principles” in planning practice (Healey, 2009). Stein and Harper, for example, argue that tools developed from essentialist definitions impose a set of rules for planners to follow rather than encouraging innovative responses to unique contextual factors (Stein & Harper, 2012). In opposition to Markusen’s call for clarity, many such pragmatists have argued that policy-makers should keep concepts “fluid”, “fuzzy” and adaptable (Harper & Stein, 2006; de Roo & Porter, 2007; Healey, 2009; Stein & Harper, 2012). Such fluidity, they argue, allows these concepts to serve different roles in planning practice.

In recent years, this pragmatic position has been expanded by planning theorists like Jean Hillier. Drawing on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Hillier suggests that we should not only ask what concepts “do” in the actual world around us, but we should also speculate what these concepts “might do” and how they “might” affect what other concepts, practices and material entities “do” (Hillier, 2007, 2011). This broader, speculative approach to pragmatism may prove useful to groups whose research is intended

to consider how concepts affect policy-making practice now and in the future. The aim of this paper is to offer some support to this broader pragmatic stance.

I do this by developing two lines of enquiry. In the first part I review reports from a sample of ESPON's most developed Territorial Impact Assessments (TIAs) and European Territorial Cohesion Indicators (ETCIs). I introduce two models used to determine the essential components of a concept and show how these models underpin all the ESPON projects selected. Taken together, I show how complicated and confused these definitions have become, leaving policy-makers with the same unanswered question, "what is territorial cohesion?"

In the second part of the paper, I analyse a number of responses to the 2008 Green paper (CEC, 2008), which asked stakeholders across the EU to set out their definition for territorial cohesion. I show that some of these responses correspond with the latest, essentialist definitions. However, I argue that these definitions overlook aspects of the data that show how territorial cohesion has "already" been operationalized in different ways within different policy frameworks. As Shaw and Sykes had suggested, this has been achieved because the concept has been (re)created to work within these unique contexts: to "perform" a pragmatic role in, what Deleuze might have called, "complex assemblages" formed of policies, practices, actions and material entities (Shaw & Sykes, 2004; Sykes, 2004).

Bringing these two sections together, I conclude this paper with a call for policy-makers to re-consider the essentialist stance that a concept must be defined "before" it can be operationalized. Instead, I will recommend that future research into policy concepts should be focused on pragmatic question like, what does territorial cohesion "do" in context-specific assemblages? And, drawing on a broader, speculative approach to pragmatism, I suggest that they should extend this line of questioning by asking how this concept of territorial cohesion affects what other material and non-material entities "might do"?

2. "What 'Is' Territorial Cohesion?"

The concept of territorial cohesion has played an important and expanding role in the history of European spatial planning (Faludi, 2006, 2008). The shift from an implicit to an explicit use of this concept can be linked to Michel Barnier's term as European Commissioner for regional policy (Faludi, 2008). During this term, the second Cohesion Report, published in 2001, makes explicit and detailed references to this merging, third pillar of cohesion policy (CEC, 2001; Faludi, 2006).

During this same period, territorial cohesion was identified as an important line of enquiry in the first ESPON programme, 2000–2006. This focus has become central to ESPON's research ever since. ESPON's mission statement for the subsequent programme, 2007–2013, identifies territorial cohesion as their principal objective (ESPON, 2007). This second programme pursues this objective through three strands of research: applied research, targeted analysis and a scientific platform. The first of these, applied research, is intended to produce evidence to understand the "territorial dynamics ... at the level of regions and cities" (ESPON, 2007). Whilst targeted analysis is focused on engagement with various stakeholders, the intention of which is to "make use of the European perspective" in their respective territorial contexts (ESPON, 2007). The third area of research, scientific platform, focuses on developing territorial indicators and tools for monitoring and analysing territorial cohesion across member states (ESPON, 2007). As

this second programme draws to a close, ESPON's mission statement for the subsequent programme, 2014–2020, shows their ongoing commitment to these three lines of enquiry (ESPON, 2013).

In this first part of the paper I show:

- (1) How some of ESPON's most developed attempts to define territorial cohesion are underpinned by two models designed to identify essential components.
- (2) That these two models have not provided policy-makers with a clear, coherent definition, but rather a complex and confused definition that leaves the question, "what is territorial cohesion?" largely unanswered.

In doing so, I demonstrate the problems associated with essentialist definitions.

2.1 *Selected ESPON Projects*

I have selected eight ESPON projects from across the 2000–2006 and 2007–2013 programmes according to the following criteria:

2.1.1 *ETCIs and TIAs.* This paper argues against the essentialist position that a concept must be defined "before" it can be operationalized. This position is particularly visible in a number of ESPON projects aimed at measuring the state of territorial cohesion across the EU through an ETCI and assessing the territorial impact of EU, national and regional policy through TIAs. With this in mind, I have selected a sample formed from a roughly equal number of ETCI and TIA projects. The intention of this is to show that this essentialist approach to definition is not limited to one kind of tool.

2.1.2 *ESPON programmes.* As noted above, ESPON have funded several ETCI and TIA projects in 2000–2006 and many such projects in the 2007–2013 programmes. I have selected a representative sample of projects from both programmes.

2.1.3 *ESPON objectives in programme 2007–2013.* Given that territorial cohesion is defined as one of the core objectives in the 2007–2013 programme, I have selected projects from each of the three research groups: applied research, targeted analyses, scientific platform. The intention is to show that ESPON's essentialist stance and the problems associated with it are not limited to the scale or focus of the project.

2.1.4 *Reporting.* ESPON projects vary in size, scale and duration, which means that, at the time of writing this paper, some of the reports are either unpublished or in an early stage of development. Taking this into consideration, only projects whose results are published as complete interim or final report were considered as part of the sample.

The resulting sample of projects is captured in Table 1.

It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss all eight selected projects in detail. With this in mind, this paper focuses on two projects before summarizing all eight projects in tabular form (Table 2). The two projects selected are the Territorial Efficiency Quality Identity Layered Assessment (TEQUILA) definition from Project 3.2 (ESPON, 2006a) and the collection of definitions offered in the latest ETCI project, INTERCO (ESPON, 2011a). These two projects are important because:

Table 1. ESPON projects selected for analysis

| Name of project | Project type | Programme |
|----------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| ESPON, 3.2 (TEQUILA) | TIA | 2000–2006 |
| Project 4.1.3 | ETCI | 2000–2006 |
| TIP TAP | TIA | 2007–2013: applied research |
| ARTS | TIA | 2007–2013: applied research |
| EATIA | TIA | 2007–2013: targeted analysis |
| KITCASP | ETCI | 2007–2013: targeted analysis |
| INTERCO | ETCI | 2007–2013: scientific platform |
| BSR-TeMo | ETCI | 2007–2013: scientific platform |

- (1) They illustrate the definitions used for measuring and assessing territorial cohesion (TIA and ETCI).
- (2) Both definitions are used as references in subsequent projects. TEQUILA features in nearly all ESPON’s ETCI and TIA project briefs, whilst the more recent, INTERCO features in the ART, EATIA and BSR-TeMo projects.
- (3) These two projects provide us with one of the earliest and latest attempts to define “territorial cohesion” in an attempt to make it operational.

2.2 Two Essentialist Models: Trees and Storylines

Before I analyse these projects in detail I would like to introduce the two models I use to discuss the essentialist approach underpinning their respective definitions for territorial cohesion: the tree model and the storyline model. These two models are drawn from some of the latest advances in policy analysis. The first is drawn from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Joint Research Centre (OECD/JRC) methodology guidelines for constructing composite indicators (OECD, 2008). This method has been referenced in some of the latest projects led by ESPON (see ESPON, 2010a for example). The second is drawn from Hajer’s method for policy analysis (Hajer, 1989, 1993, 1998) and Waterhout’s more recent attempt to define territorial cohesion (Waterhout, 2007). I use these models to show two different understandings of the concept and the meaning/s that can be attributed to them.

2.2.1 The tree model. The OECD/JRC 2008 guidelines recommend an “ideal sequence” of 10 methodological steps. The first of these steps, the theoretical framework, is depicted according to three sub-stages: defining the concept, determining the subgroups of the concept (essential dimensions) and identifying the selection criterion for indicators (OECD, 2008, p. 22). The second step, data selection, uses the results of this framework to relate available indicators to the concept’s subgroups (dimensions).

Looking at these OECD stages diagrammatically, Figure 1 shows that they develop according to a tree-like structure moving from the central concept and branching out across dimensions and indicators.

This ideal, “tree model” assumes that concepts like “territorial cohesion” can be subdivided into component dimensions. These dimensions are thought to capture all or some of the essential traits, characteristics or themes of the concept. Taken together, these dimensions are deemed to provide us with one essential and universal meaning for territorial cohesion that can be used to assess variations.

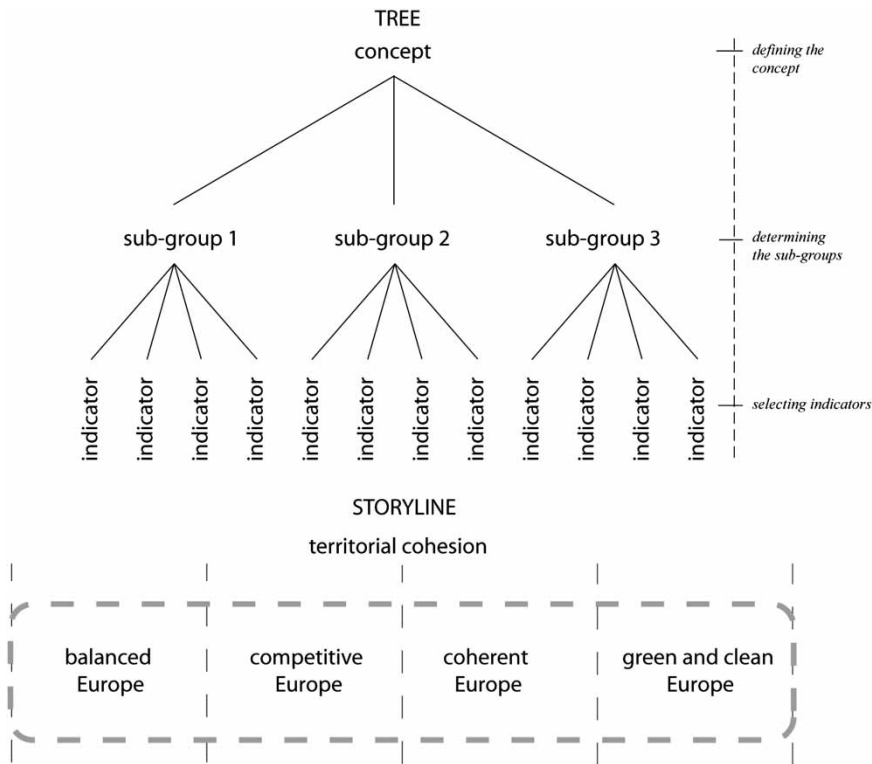


Figure 1. OECD tree model and storylines model used to define territorial cohesion.

2.2.2 *The storyline model.* Maarten Hajer's perspective would contest the idea that concepts like "territorial cohesion" can be defined according to only one set of dimensions. He argues that such concepts have several, different meanings, each understood as part of a developing narrative, or storyline (Hajer, 1989, 1993, 1998). For Hajer, these storylines run across many different policy contexts and policy documents. Rather than arguing for a number of essential traits for one concept like territorial cohesion, Hajer argues that storylines provide us with a set of essential traits common to many such concepts.

A good example of this approach can be seen in Bas Waterhout's storylines for territorial cohesion (Waterhout, 2007). In his academic study, Waterhout defines four such storylines for this concept (Waterhout, 2007). Looking at these diagrammatically, the concept of territorial cohesion is formed from four competing storylines (Figure 1) rather than branching out from a central concept.

According to Waterhout, these storylines do not tessellate to form a single concept in the same way that the dimensions used in the tree model are thought to. Instead, they provide us with four distinct and competing understandings of territorial cohesion (Waterhout, 2007). Like Hajer, Waterhout argues that these run through many such concepts and policy documents. The concepts that define these storylines, such as "balance" or "competitiveness", are essential components of the key concepts used in European spatial policy.

These two models provide us with very different understandings of the concept. One model points to a single, coherent meaning whilst the other argues for multiple, competing meanings. Building on this, the tree model holds that any one concept can be identified according to a number of essential components (dimensions), whereas the storyline model does not focus exclusively on one, singular meaning. Nevertheless, it suggests that all policy concepts can be understood according to a combination of essential components (storylines). Thus, whilst these two approaches may differ according to the way they understand meaning, they both show an underpinning trust in essences, i.e. they both believe that a concept has an inherent set of components that can be identified and modelled into a coherent definition.

2.3 TIAs and ETCIs: A Collection of Trees and Storylines

2.3.1 *Tree: TEQUILA*. Responding to the ESDP’s call for spatial sensitivity, ESPON launched a project in 2003 intended to consider the spatial effects of European policies and projects. Part of this project was the development of a TIA method.

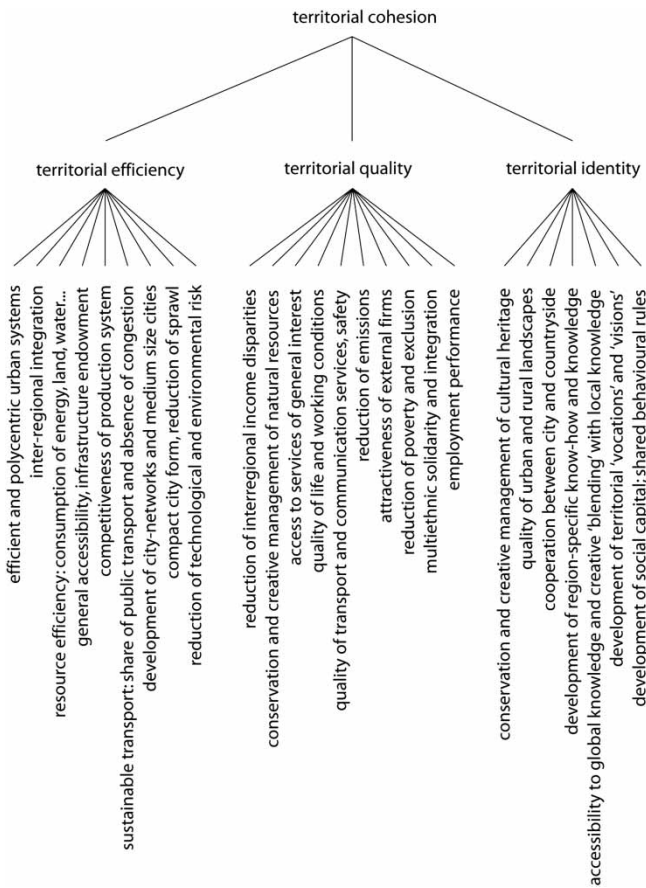


Figure 2. The TEQUILA conceptual model for territorial cohesion.

In order to assess the territorial impacts of European policy and projects, the project leader, Roberto Camagni, argued that we must first define the concept, “territorial cohesion” (ESPON, 2006a). According to Camagni, territorial cohesion can be understood according to three dimensions:

- (1) Territorial efficiency
- (2) Territorial quality
- (3) Territorial identity (Camagni, 2005; ESPON, 2006a, p. 75; Camagni & Fratesi, 2011)

For Camagni, these dimensions capture the key ideas used across different policies.¹ As in the OECD method, Camagni breaks these dimensions down further by offering a series of sub-components for each dimension (ESPON, 2006a, p. 79). Each of these sub-dimensions is then explained according to a selection of indicators (Figure 2).

Figure 2 is adapted from that presented by Camagni in his final report (ESPON, 2006a). It shows a series of dimensions and sub-dimensions branching out from a central concept. Like the OECD, Camagni envisages a coherent concept composed of dimensions, in turn, composed of sub-dimensions to which indicators are attributed.

2.4 Trees and Storylines: The INTERCO Project

In 2010, ESPON commissioned a project to devise an ETCI. Unlike many earlier efforts to define territorial cohesion, this project would make extensive use of both policy documents “and” stakeholder engagement. These two sources of data looked to combine the tree and storyline models, resulting in a complex web of definitions. To illustrate this complexity, I review each of these models in turn as they appear in the inception and final reports.

2.4.1 *Trees.* The brief for this project, entitled “INTERCO”, asked the research team to draw on the indicators used in projects 3.2 and 4.1.3 (ESPON, 2010a, p. 24). It also suggests that the team make use of the OECD’s guidelines for constructing composite indicators (ESPON, 2009, p. 4, 2010a: Annexe 2). This implies that the project team’s attempts at an ETCI should follow a tree-like structure drawing on indicators used in other models.

In its review of “first results” the inception report outlines a “first attempt to synthesize (their) comprehension of the various dimensions of territorial cohesion” (ESPON, 2010a, p. 21). This definition is offered as a series of dimensions similar to those seen in the OECD guidelines, and the TEQUILA definition. Like previous attempts to define the concept, these dimensions draw on key policy documents. The project team do not develop this definition further. Instead, their early report refers back to the three dimensions used in the TEQUILA definition (ESPON, 2010b, p. 7).

Building on this definition, the final report outlines eight thematic dimensions. These, they argue, capture the core thematic dimensions of territorial cohesion “relevant at each scale and for every territory, no matter its geographical characteristics” (ESPON, 2011a, p. 11). This provides us with a further iteration of the tree model (Figure 3).

This report, therefore, refers to two definitions of the concept supported by references to two other definitions. These definitions are all variants of the tree model. Both assume that

territorial cohesion can be defined according to its essential traits (dimensions). Additionally, both sets of dimensions are derived from key policy documents and projects.

2.4.2 Storylines. This group of tree-like definitions are not the only ones indicated within the project. The inception report also requests the project team to involve stakeholders in discussions focused on five storylines:

- (1) Smart growth in a competitive and polycentric Europe
- (2) Inclusive, balanced development and fair access to services
- (3) Territorial diversity and the importance of local development conditions
- (4) Geographical specificities
- (5) Coordination of policies and territorial impacts (ESPON, 2010a, p. 6)

The report does not discuss the processes used to form these five storylines. Whilst they do share some similarities with those produced in previous storylines for territorial cohesion (Waterhout, 2007; Evers et al., 2009), these similarities are not consistent.

These storylines were discussed and debated in stakeholder workshops (Hague, 2011). The difficulties in establishing a meaning for the concepts within each storyline and the indicators used to capture these are reflected in Gløersen and Böhme's review of the process (Gløersen & Böhme, 2011). They found that, after starting with the five storylines defined by the inception report, the project team adjusted, merged and extended these storylines (Gløersen & Böhme, 2011).

These early reports on the INTERCO project resulted in two groups of definitions: those based on a tree-like approach to coherent definition alongside those based on storylines as "snapshots" of multiple definitions (Gløersen & Böhme, 2011).

2.4.3 Tree. This distinction between two groups of conceptual models does not extend beyond the inception report. In the draft final report, the tree definitions and the storylines are combined to form a revised set of dimensions (Figure 3).

What conclusions can be drawn from these two studies? Firstly, my analysis shows how the pursuit of essential traits has been the driving force behind these projects, and this has been achieved, for the most part, through the use of a tree model, in which the core meaning of concepts is broken into groups of dimensions, components and/or themes. Secondly, it illustrates how complicated and confused these definitions have become over the six-year period separating these two projects. And thirdly, it suggests that this confusion may relate to the "opening up" of this process from desktop policy analysis by one project team, to the working definitions used by a number of stakeholders.

These conclusions are not limited to these two projects. Table 2 summarizes attempts by ESPON to define and operationalize territorial cohesion through a TIA or ETCI across all of the eight projects analysed.

The third column in this table identifies which of the two models have been used to define territorial cohesion or other associated concepts. With the exception of the INTERCO project, these projects rely almost entirely on a tree model approach to definition. Looking across to the second column and in reference to Table 1, it seems that this essentialist approach is not dependent on the tool for which these definitions are to be operationalized or the geographic, scalar and methodological focus of the project.

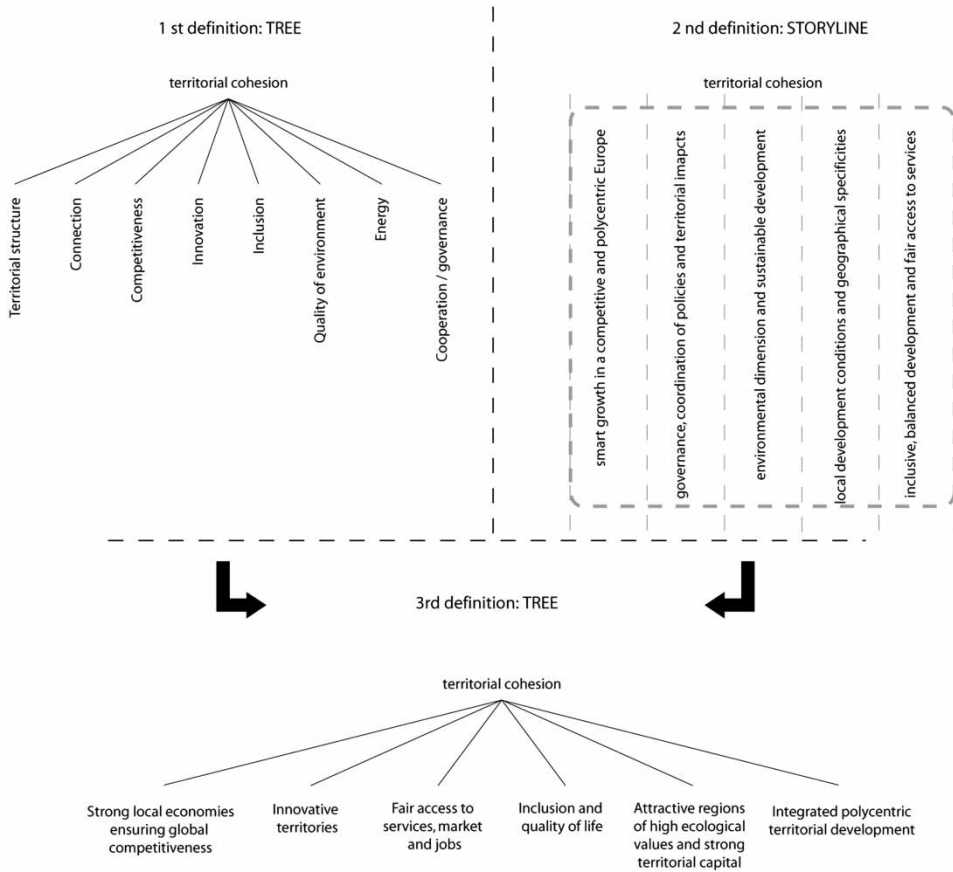


Figure 3. INTERCO’s consolidation of definitions to form one set of themes.

Whilst a tree model has been used in all projects, the fourth column shows how varied these definitions have become, and how difficult it is to relate these essential components across projects. This constant succession of projects and proliferating definitions show that the tree model has not been successful in meeting the call by the European Commissioner for Regional Policy and the European Parliament for a “clear and common understanding of the concept” to guide policy and to ensure integration across the member states (Hübner, 2007; EP, 2008). In many ways, we might argue that the question, “what ‘is’ territorial cohesion?” remains largely unanswered.

The fifth column shows the methods used to determine the “essential” traits outlined in each project. Running down this column, we can identify a shift in the methods used. The two projects in the first ESPON programme, Project 3.2 and 4.1.3 and one of the earliest projects in the subsequent programme, TIP TAP are derived from desktop policy analysis, whilst each of the other projects within all three research areas of the second programme, 2007–2013, are derived, in some form, through stakeholder engagement. It is difficult to say what caused this shift. One possible explanation could be the 2008 Green paper which launched a large-scale survey across the member states (CEC, 2008).

Table 2. Summary of eight ESPON TIA and ETCI projects

| Project | Tool | Model | Essential components / definition | Method for definition |
|--------------------------------------|------|-------|--|---|
| Project 3.2 – TEQUILA (ESPON, 2006a) | TIA | Tree | Territorial cohesion: (traits) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Territorial efficiency • Territorial quality • Territorial identity | Traits identified through policy analysis |
| Project 4.1.3 (ESPON, 2006b) | ETCI | Tree | Territorial cohesion: (traits) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced distribution of population • Sustainable structures TC = polycentricity: (traits) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to services • Avoiding negative externalities of excessive concentration of population, traffic, etc. • Avoiding excessive disparities in terms of income and wealth • A limited use of surfaces and environmental resources for human activities | Traits identified through policy analysis. |
| TIP TAP—(ESPON, 2008) | TIA | Tree | Territorial cohesion: (traits) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Territorial efficiency • Territorial quality • Territorial identity | Traits identified through policy analysis |
| ARTS (ESPON, 2012a) | TIA | Tree | Vulnerability: (traits) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure • Territorial sensitivity • Adaptive capacity | Traits identified through Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change |
| EATIA (ESPON, 2012b) | TIA | Tree | Territorial impact: (traits) . . . any impact on a given geographically defined territory, whether on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spatial usage, • governance, or • on wider economic, • social or • environmental aspects, which results from the introduction or transposition of an EU directive or policy' (ESPON, 2012b, p. 60) | Traits for territorial impact derived from ESPON's TEQUILA, ARTS and INTERCO projects |

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued

| Project | Tool | Model | Essential components / definition | Method for definition |
|---|------|-------|--|--|
| | | Tree | <p>Assessment of impact: “Territorial characteristics”. These could be on a case-by-case basis or standardized criteria. One example offered is drawn from Europe 2020 (EC, 2010):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment • Investment in research and development • Greenhouse gas emissions • Renewable energy • Energy efficiency • Educational attainment • Poverty and social exclusion (ESPON, 2012b, p. 67) | Territorial characteristics used as criteria to assess impacts. Characteristics determined by stakeholders for individual assessments or at a pan-European scale |
| KITCASP (ESPON, 2012c) | ETCI | Tree | <p>Territorial cohesion: (themes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic competitiveness and innovation • Balanced regional development and settlement-infrastructure alignment • Social cohesion and quality of life • Sustainable development and environmental quality • Territorial co-operation and governance | Themes identified through workshops |
| INTERCO (ESPON, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b) | ETCI | Tree | <p>Territorial cohesion: (themes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Territorial structure • Connection • Competitiveness • Innovation • Inclusion • Quality of environment • Energy • Cooperation/governance | Themes identified through policy analysis/drawing on TEQUILA and Project 4.1.3 |

| | | | |
|------------------------|-----------|---|--|
| | | Storyline Territorial cohesion: (storylines) | Five number storylines introduced in brief (drawn from other studies) expanded, adapted and merged through workshops |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smart growth in a competitive and polycentric Europe • Governance, coordination of policies and territorial impacts • Environmental dimension and sustainable development • Local development conditions and geographical specificities • Inclusive, balanced development and fair access to services | |
| | Tree | Territorial cohesion: (objectives) | Objectives identified by merging tree and storyline models above |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong local economies ensuring global competitiveness • Innovative territories • Fair access to services, markets and jobs • Inclusion and quality of life • Attractive regions of high ecological values and strong territorial capital • Integrated polycentric territorial development | |
| ESPON BSR-TeMo (2012d) | ETCI Tree | Balanced territorial development | Dimensions identified by merging a range of established definitions and Baltic Sea Region goals |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polycentricity • High quality of urban nodes • Regional clusters of competition and innovation Integrated development of functional areas • Territorial assets/territorial capital • Wise use of the sea space • Eco-resilience • Accessible infrastructure • Inter-modal, green transport renewable energy resources • Territorially oriented governance (ESPON, 2012d, pp. 12–13) | |

Bringing these points together, it seems that, despite attempts to accommodate different contextual understandings of territorial cohesion, these projects have maintained the essentialist belief that a concept can be defined according to a set of coherent, essential traits and these traits can be used as the basis for measurement and assessment tools.

However, one of these eight projects, EATIA, suggests that there might be problems with this approach. Whilst the EATIA report acknowledges that a universal set of characteristics could be used for all projects, it suggests that it might be more appropriate to define essential characteristics on a case-by-case basis.

Given that policy objectives between the stakeholder countries differ, and indeed do not remain stationary over time, it was consequently believed to be less important for the project to propose a specific set of criteria on which to base a TIA. (ESPON, 2012b, p. 66)

Whilst this argument does not fully challenge the essentialist idea that a concept must be defined before it can be operationalized, it does acknowledge that concepts can perform differently in different times and spaces and that policy-makers and policy analysts must take this into consideration. This points towards a pragmatic approach to territorial cohesion in which policy impact assessments are not based on essentialist responses to the question, “what ‘is’ territorial cohesion?”.

3. “What Does Territorial Cohesion ‘Do’?”

In this second part of the paper, I show why conceptual definitions can be an inadequate method for understanding and assessing territorial cohesion. I do this by exploring a sample of responses to the 2008 Green paper, which asked a range of stakeholders across the member states what they understood by the concept, “territorial cohesion”. I have selected this data because:

- (1) It provides us with one of the most detailed insights into the way this concept has been understood and, more importantly, operationalized in different policy contexts.
- (2) Despite the richness of this data, the database of 388 responses published on the Inforegio website (Inforegio, 2011) has been mostly overlooked by academics in the field of European spatial planning. Indeed, the most notable analysis of this data is concluded in the five thematic points presented in the sixth progress report on social and economic cohesion (CEC, 2009, p. 12).

3.1 Selected Responses to the 2008 Green Paper

I have selected a sample of responses according to the following criteria:

3.1.1 Stakeholder groups. The Green paper targeted 11 stakeholder groups who responded as follows: European institutions (5 responses), National governments and Institutions (30 responses), Regional and local governments (97 responses); Interest organizations and networks (158 responses); Economic and social partners (17 responses); Universities, research and consultancies (17 responses); Experts, citizens (34 responses); Non-EU Member state bodies (9 responses); Towns and cities (10 responses); (EU) Pro-

grammes (7 responses); Political parties (2 responses). I have selected two of these groups, national government and institutions; regional and local governments, because they provide insight into the policy frameworks conceived and applied at a range of scales.

3.1.2 *Language used to respond to the survey.* Many responses were professionally translated into English. This reduces misunderstanding and allows for more effective reviews and comparisons. On this basis only respondents written or translated in English were included in the sample.

These two considerations resulted in a sample formed of 54 respondents, 21 from national government and institutions and 33 from regional and local government. In the following, I analyse this data to show that the tree and storyline-based definitions overlook key lines of enquiry based on a pragmatic rather than an essentialist understanding of territorial cohesion.

3.2 *Tree and Storyline Definitions*

Figure 4 shows how the tree model definition of territorial cohesion provided in the INTERCO inception report and the storyline definitions developed in the subsequent workshops can be identified in one of the most detailed responses (the UK).

This figure marks the areas of the text that correspond with the dimensions of the tree definition (shown in the first extract) and the storylines in the storyline definitions (shown in the second extract). This figure shows that large aspects of the text can be related to either a dimension or a storyline. The range of highlights across both marked-up extracts suggests that the definition of territorial cohesion offered by the UK Government touches upon all the dimensions of the tree model and all the storylines in the storyline model.

The figure also shows how these mark-ups are similar in both models. In both extracts I have highlighted the phrase, “What is appropriate in one Member State may not be appropriate in another”, for example. Using a tree model we would categorize this as the sub-dimension, “territorial diversity” under the broader dimension, “spatial dimension of cohesion policy”. Using the storyline model we would categorize this under the storyline, “local development conditions and geographic specificities”. This suggests that, using these two models, we are likely to code these responses in similar ways.

Analytically, however, we can draw different conclusions from the marked-up data. Using the tree model as our starting point, the data support the argument that these dimensions are essential dimensions of the concept, territorial cohesion. From a storyline model perspective, we would argue that this definition fails to explain the pattern of dimensions visible in the response. The text contains many phrases related to “governance, coordination of policies and territorial impacts” especially when used in combination with the storyline, “local development conditions and geographical specificity”. If we were to adopt the storyline model, we may argue that the storyline, “local development conditions” occupies a hegemonic position in UK Government policy. We may go on to argue, therefore, that territorial cohesion can only be understood by relating it to the broader discourses associated with this storyline; and, most probably, to the broader discourses associated with growth-centric policy and the economic competitiveness of localities.

However, whilst this analysis offers some support to the use of these definitions and the basis for selecting an appropriate model, it overlooks one of the most important points

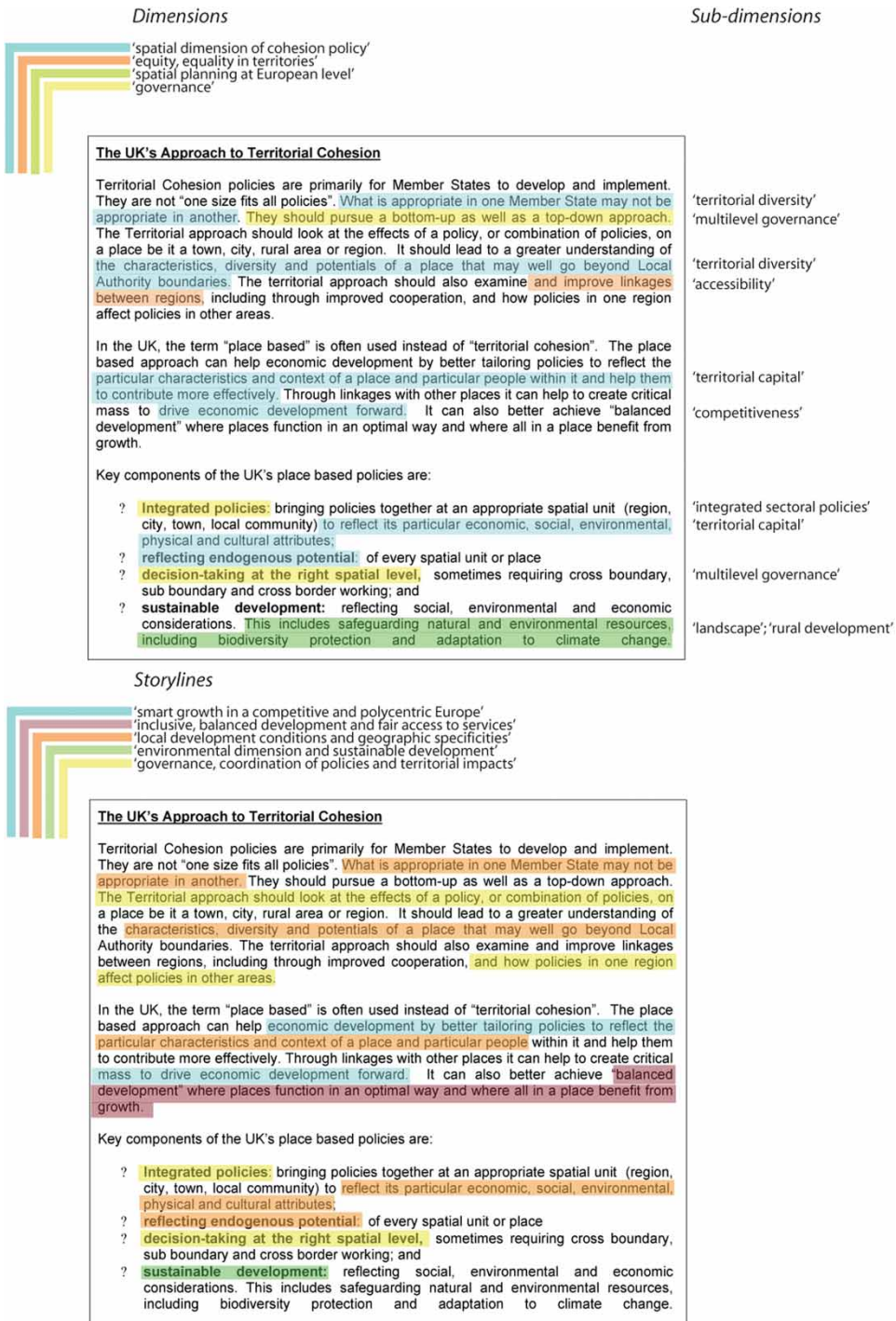


Figure 4. Marked-up extract of UK response according to tree model and storyline model. Source: UK Government (2009), text reproduced with permission. © Crown copyright.

raised in the document. This extract from the text is not offered in direct response to the question, “what is territorial cohesion?” Rather it is found in the introduction to the document under the title, “The UK’s approach to Territorial Cohesion”. In this part of the paper, they note that, “In the UK, the term ‘place based’ is often used instead of ‘territorial cohesion’” (UK Government, 2009, p. 2). This comment is important because it begins to reveal how the concept of territorial cohesion is understood “through” existing concepts and policies quite specific to the UK.

This is not unique to the UK response. Neither is this observation limited to responses by national governments. Twelve of the 54 responses identified in this sample (22%) explicitly argue that their understanding of territorial cohesion is captured in existing policy formed and operationalized at their respective scales. This is captured in Tables 3 and 4.

The quotations in Tables 3 and 4 suggest that, for these national, regional and local governments, the question, “what is territorial cohesion?” relates to processes being developed “within” their developing strategic plans. It does not refer to a set of relationships or essential traits outside of these plans. Even when they draw on other documents such as the Territorial Agenda, 2007 (German Presidency, 2007a, 2007b), there is little suggestion that concepts are lifted and transferred into their respective policy framework. Indeed, many of them argue that territorial cohesion is “already” part of these frameworks and cannot be reasonably separated from such practices despite the absence of a coherent definition.

For European spatial planning policy, therefore, the important question is whether “territorial cohesion” has affected the way these policy frameworks were constructed, or whether this link has been made retrospectively. Or, in pragmatic terms, whether the concept has “done” something useful or not. Looking across the quotations we can identify some support for both possibilities. The three national responses in Table 3 seem to suggest that territorial cohesion is seen as a term to describe concepts and policy initiatives that have already being put in place. However, some of the responses in Table 4, such as

Table 3. Quotations from national governments showing how territorial cohesion is already operationalized in national policy frameworks

| National government/ institution | Reference |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Hungary | Argues that “the interpretation of territorial cohesion as specified in the Green Paper is very close to the vision and system of objectives formulated in the National Concept for Regional Development (NCRD), a basic document in Hungarian territorial policy . . .” |
| UK | “In the UK, the term ‘place based’ is often used instead of ‘territorial cohesion’ Key elements for delivering these place based policies in the UK include: (i) A sound evidence base; (i) Clear, spatially expressed, strategies; (iii) Flexible and strong Governance; (iv) Sustainable Policies . . .” |
| Finland | “It is positive that the Green Paper recognises the role of regional structures with polycentric and urban areas in safeguarding vitality in rural regions. This is in line with Finland’s national policy . . . In Finland’s view, interaction between cities and rural areas can be viewed as a goal of territorial cohesion” |

Table 4. Quotations from regional and local governments showing how territorial cohesion is already operationalized in regional or local policy frameworks

| Regional/local governments | Reference |
|--|--|
| Mid-West Regional Authority, Ireland | The definition of territorial cohesion provided in the green paper “... very much mirrors some of the language in the National Spatial Strategy ... Ireland already has developed such approaches to some extent in the National Spatial Strategy which incorporates both inter-territorial and trans-national opportunities for cohesion” |
| Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, UK | The CSLA “... has long been advocating strong, consistent Territorial Cohesion ...” |
| German Metropolitan Regions Initiative | “The European metropolitan regions are the cornerstones of Territorial Cohesion” |
| South-West of England, UK | “The Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion introduces three key concepts to underpin Territorial Cohesion ... The South West supports these three concepts as they are in line with the South West Single Regional Strategy” |
| Randstad provinces, NL | The Randstad response sets out a number of initiatives that they argue capture the concept of territorial cohesion |
| Flemish Government, Belgium | “Territorial cohesion can only be successful if it is seen as an integrated cooperation process ... With Flanders, this integrated approach is applied to the creation of Flemish Master Plans, the implementation of those plans ...” |
| Welsh Assembly Government, UK | “‘One Wales’, the Government’s progressive agenda for Wales, (is) consistent with the European Union’s goals, as represented by broad Cohesion Policy and expressed and implemented according to the Treaties” They go on to suggest that territorial cohesion is captured in <i>The Wales Spatial Plan</i> |
| The Scottish Government, UK | “Our response to the Green Paper is fully consistent with the domestic policy objectives that have been established by the Scottish Government” |
| North West Regional European Partnership, UK | The NWREP suggests that the concept of territorial cohesion is captured in the <i>Regional Strategy 2010</i> |
| Powys County Council, UK | “As a Local Authority, the context of spatial planning and territorial cohesion provides the framework and the background for its activities ...” |

those offered by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Powys Country Council highlight the influential role played by territorial cohesion “during” the construction of context-specific policy.

By focusing their attention and resources on projects intended to identify the essential traits of this concept, ESPON is unable to explain what the concept of territorial cohesion “does” in these different contexts. As a result, European policy-makers have little idea as to how this concept affects “place-making policy” in the UK, the National Concept for Regional Development in Hungary, the range of initiatives developed in the Randstad or the Welsh Spatial Plan developed by the Welsh Government. At a finer scale still, ESPON is also unable to explain how this concept of territorial cohesion affects what other, associated concepts and strategies “do”. This is particularly important at the local

scale where councils must create a policy framework based on several different variants of the territorial cohesion concept. Looking at Tables 3 and 4, Powys County Council, for example, must draw on the European concept of territorial cohesion, the UK variant, “place-based policy” and the Welsh variant captured in the Welsh Spatial plan. At present, ESPON cannot explain how the concept of territorial cohesion used in European policy influences this relationship, and the role these other concepts and initiatives play as a result.

Understanding what territorial cohesion “does” in different contexts may help policy-makers consider whether policy-makers should continue to promote and develop this concept, and, if so, in which direction. Doing so means expanding the pragmatic question, “what does territorial cohesion do” by asking, what “might” territorial cohesion do? Looking to developments in planning theory and geography, groups like ESPON may benefit from some of the Deleuze-inspired research focused on similar questions. The work of geographer and criminologist, Mark Halsey may provide a good starting point.

In line with this paper, Hasley rejects the idea that essentialist definitions should form the basis for making judgements. Rather, he argues, we should ask ourselves how a policy concept or a policy initiative more broadly, encourages or limits the way entities in the world around us respond to a changing environment. We should speculate what futures might come into being as a result of these affects, and use these speculations to guide future engagement (Halsey, 2006).

Such speculations are not entirely new to this area of policy research. One of the early stages of the EATIA method is intended as a speculative exercise. Policy-makers and strategic planners were asked to speculate how a policy might affect other policies, practices or material entities (ESPON, 2012b). Rather than judging these against preconceived criteria (“territorial characteristics”), Halsey’s approach suggests that this speculative stage should be extended to consider how they might play out over time. Again, this idea is not new. ESPON have a long-established history of combining TIAs with forecasting methods. This can be seen in project 3.2 discussed above, as well as more recent projects such as ET2050 (ESPON, 2012e). This suggests that organizations like ESPON could explore this pragmatic approach by expanding, combining and revising some of the work already completed.

4. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study has been structured around my argument that groups like ESPON should abandon the essentialist idea that a concept like territorial cohesion should be defined according to a series of traits “before” it can be operationalized. As an alternative, I have called for a pragmatic approach based around questions such as, what does this concept “do” and what “might” it do?

I have built this argument around two lines of enquiry. In the first, I have reviewed a sample of projects intended to develop either an ETCI or a TIA. I have illustrated how these projects have been underpinned by two essentialist models: the tree model and the storyline model. I have shown that by holding onto these models, this collection of projects leaves policy-makers with a complex and confused collection of definitions.

In the second line of enquiry I have demonstrated why I believe such conceptual definitions to be an inadequate starting point for understanding, and assessing territorial cohesion. I have done this by analysing a sample of responses to the 2008 Green paper. This

analysis has shown how tree model and storyline model definitions fail to take account of the most important message within these responses: the idea that territorial cohesion is “already” operationalized within a range of context-specific policy frameworks and cannot be reasonably separated from such frameworks and practices. I have argued that the success or failure of this concept should be based on our assessment of its usefulness, i.e. how it has affected policy-making frameworks and other policy concepts and initiatives at different territorial scales. Taking this further, I have suggested that an assessment of such concepts should consider what this concept “might do” as well as what it “does/has done”. This line of enquiry, I have suggested, may benefit from developments in planning theory and geography, and from the work of Halsey in particular.

Taking these points into consideration I would like to make three recommendations for future research:

- (1) Firstly, a thorough analysis of the 388 responses to the 2008 Green paper should be undertaken and explored in greater depth through several context-specific studies. The aims of such studies should be to understand what territorial cohesion “does/has done”.
- (2) Secondly, all future attempts to measure or assess territorial cohesion (through ETCIs and TIAs for example) should pursue a pragmatic line of enquiry based on what concepts and policy “do/might do” rather than searching for and improving on essentialist definitions.
- (3) Thirdly, future research should explore and expand on Mark Halsey’s proposals for making judgements in the absence of essentialist criteria. Such research could then use this as a starting point for revising and combining projects like EATIA and ET2050.

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Note

1. The importance of these dimensions can be seen in the model’s name, TEQUILA.

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