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Social Cohesion: Definitions, Causes and Consequences

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Definition: Viewed as the glue that binds societies, social cohesion is considered an essential ingredient to address common societal challenges. Definitions and associated conceptual frameworks usually summarise social cohesion as collective attributes and behaviours characterised by positive social relations, a sense of identification or belonging, and an orientation towards the common good. However, there are a large variety of definitions, and disagreement exists about what constitutes the core components, causes and consequences of social cohesion.

1. Introduction

As society's social, demographic and economic structures have changed over the last fifty years, policymakers, researchers and practitioners have increasingly shifted away from focusing uniquely on economic growth and have instead concerned themselves with more holistic notions of social cohesion [1–4]. Consequently, social cohesion is generally conceived as a multi-dimensional construct, and together, these dimensions are considered crucial in order to address common societal challenges. Academic literature likewise supports the importance of social cohesion, linking higher social cohesion with several positive social outcomes, including environmental sustainability [5], social stability [6], increased overall health [7,8], or an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic [9,10].

Despite its growing attention and relevance, the notion of social cohesion remains subject to numerous criticisms and definitional debates. For one, the term has often been vaguely defined in research and practice, leading to criticisms that social cohesion may be merely a quasi-concept upon which researchers or policymakers can superimpose their own interpretations or values [11,12]. In turn, existing definitions have also been criticised for being overly broad and confusing social cohesion's core meaning with its causes or consequences [13,14]. As such, through an extensive review of the existing literature, the following entry seeks to provide an overview of definitions and associated literature around social cohesion. In particular, the main definitions and frameworks concerning social cohesion will be presented, a summary of policy perspectives will be outlined, literature on the causes and consequences of social cohesion will be reviewed, and future directions will be proposed.

2. Definitions and Frameworks of Social Cohesion

Most likely, the first ideas around social cohesion can be traced back to the writings of Ibn-Haldun in the 14th century [15,16]. In particular, Ibn-Haldun put forth the idea of *asabiyyah*, which has often been translated as group feeling or social cohesion [17]. He presented *asabiyyah* as a mix of unity and group consciousness. Central to his theory was that ruling dynasties or civilisations will eventually be replaced as the ruling classes became less concerned with maintaining *asabiyyah* and more concerned with preserving their status. In turn, this allows groups with stronger *asabiyyah* to emerge [16–18].

In more modern times, numerous political scientists and economists, including Hobbes, Smith and Tönnies, have engaged with social cohesion and related concepts [15]. Arguably,

the most prominent and influential contemporary work comes from Emile Durkheim's conceptualisations of solidarity. Most notably, Durkheim [19] argued that maintaining social order rests on one of two forms of solidarity. One is through the mechanical solidarity inherent to traditional and small-scale societies, whereby social cohesion stems from homogeneity as individuals share similar work, personal, educational, and religious backgrounds. The other is via organic solidarity, which emerged in more modern or capitalist societies and comes from the inherent interdependence of individuals as a result of the division of labour [19]. In a related vein, Georg Simmel observed that individuals in preindustrial times usually interacted amongst a relatively small number of the same people whereas, with growing transportation and communication possibilities, modern individuals could and did inhabit various social groups. This interaction with numerous groups allowed individuals to form increasingly unique identities and access new resources but also provided opportunities for additional conflict between groups [20,21].

Building on this history, numerous disciplines became involved in the study and conceptualisation of social cohesion, leading understandings of the concept to be influenced by disciplinary boundaries based on the theoretical assumptions of a given discipline [22] (p. 31). Since the 1990s, there has been tremendous growth in the literature and research on social cohesion [1,15]. Indeed, a recent review has shown that academic output concerning social cohesion has increased exponentially over the last 25 years [3]. With this increasing output, further academic disciplines have concerned themselves with the topic, leading additional perspectives, causes, and outcomes to be connected with social cohesion. For instance, sociologists have often concerned themselves with social networks and personal relationships [22], whereby anthropologists have devoted much attention to investigating how various rituals promote a cohesive group identity [23]. The contributions across these disciplines have enriched, muddled, or even inflated our understanding of social cohesion. Through this scholarly work, several related behaviours or concepts have been included in the definition of social cohesion. Amongst others, shared values, shared experiences, civic participation, mutual help, trust in others, social networks, social order, acceptance of diversity, well-being, equality, and social mobility have been included as core components within various definitions or frameworks [14,24–27]. Despite the debate around precise definitions and dimensions, literature broadly agrees that social cohesion manifests itself at the micro, meso and macro levels of society [15,24].

As a result of the expanding perspectives, there have been numerous attempts to summarise existing work on the subject and, from that, to propose a common definition of social cohesion. In turn, these attempts have led academics to advocate for broader or more narrow definitions of the term. In their already influential paper, Fonseca, Lukosch and Brazier [24] adopt a broader perspective, arguing that much current work fails to consider the role of institutions and governance in social cohesion. Flowing from that, the authors put forward a definition of social cohesion that encompasses elements of well-being, belonging, social participation, tolerance, and equal opportunities. Specifically, they define social cohesion as "the ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and while granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society" [24]. Many prominent policy documents take similar stances, integrating many dimensions into their definitions, including inequality, well-being and social mobility [26,28].

Advocates of narrower definitions challenge such broader conceptualisations, contending that these perspectives confuse core components of social cohesion with its causes or consequences [29]. As Beauvais and Jenson [30] have noted, debates around social cohesion often present it as both cause and consequence of numerous other aspects of social life. As such, a contrasting body of work proposes narrower definitions and frameworks for social cohesion [13–15]. With this narrower perspective, social cohesion revolves mainly around three core aspects: a sense of belonging, social relations, and an orientation towards the common good. In one influential conceptual article, Chan et al. [13] define social cohesion

as "a state of affairs (...) characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations" [13]. Elsewhere, one prominent and widely used narrower conceptualisation of social cohesion comes from the radar model by the Bertelsmann Foundation [15,31]. In their work, they define social cohesion as the:

"quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviours of its members. A cohesive society is characterised by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good" [15] (p. 6).

This framework, presented in Table 1, contains three core dimensions, each broken into three related sub-dimensions. The first is *social relations*, which includes social networks, trust in people and acceptance of diversity. The second is *connectedness*, which includes notions of identification, trust in institutions and perception of fairness. Finally, there is a *focus on the common good*, which comprises ideas of solidarity, helpfulness, respect for social rules and civic participation. In line with the criticisms detailed above, the framework excludes numerous potential antecedents or outcomes of social cohesion, such as material wealth, social inequality or well-being [15,32]. In that sense, it echoes the other narrower models cited here and has been adopted for numerous national-level measurements of social cohesion [25,33].

Table 1. Dimensions and sub-dimensions of social cohesion. Adapted with permission from Dragolov et al. [31], 2013, Bertelsmann.

Dimension	Sub Dimension	Description
Social relations	Social networks	Strong, resilient social networks
	Trust in people	High level of trust in other individuals
	Acceptance of Diversity	Accept individuals with different backgrounds and lifestyles as equal members of society.
Connectedness	Identification	Individuals feel strongly connected with their geographic area and identify with it.
	Trust in Institutions	Individuals have a high level of confidence in political institutions.
	Perception of fairness	Individuals believe that they are being treated fairly in society.
Focus on the common good	Solidarity and Helpfulness	Individuals feel a responsibility for and willingness to help others.
	Respect for social rules	Individuals respect the fundamental rules of society.
	Civic participation	Individuals participate in society and civic and political life.

As the above review makes clear, current definitions and operationalisations of social cohesion include an extensive array of concepts and sub-dimensions. Disentangling and summarising these different approaches can, therefore, become difficult. Recognising this increasing conceptual confusion, Schiefer and van der Noll [14,32] worked to organise the core elements within the term's various academic and political definitions. In doing so, they identify six common dimensions present within the multitude of social cohesion definitions. These include social relations, a sense of identification, orientation towards the common good, shared values, equality, and quality of life [14,32]. Social relations speak to the quality, tolerance, trust and levels of participation present within social networks. Sense of identification refers to a sense of attachment or identity with a specific social entity, such as a geographical region. Orientation towards the common good features feelings of

responsibility to others and a certain acceptance of the existing social order. Shared values refer to a consensus concerning social values and beliefs. Equality refers to the distribution of income and other social resources, such as education, employment or other forms of social support. Finally, quality of life mixes subjective and objective well-being measures, including physical and psychological health. The elements above are likewise summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Common Dimensions of Social Cohesion. Adapted with permission from Schiefer and van der Noll [32], 2012, Bertelsmann.

Dimension	Description	Sub-Dimensions
Social Relations	Quality and strength of relations between groups and individuals	Social networks; participation; trust; mutual tolerance
Sense of Identification	Feelings of attachment or identification to a social entity	Feelings of belonging
Orientation towards the common good	Feelings of responsibility for the common good and compliance with social order.	Feelings of responsibility; acceptance, and compliance with social order
Shared values	Shared, commonly held values across societal groups	Value consensus; preference for values that enhance cohesion
Equality and Inequality	Level of equality in the distribution of social and economic resources	Distribution of resources; diversity; social exclusion
Quality of Life	Objective and subjective levels of quality of life	Psycho-social well-being, physical health, living conditions

In the end, the authors also argue for a narrower conceptualisation of social cohesion and contend that elements such as inequality or quality of life are better positioned as cause and consequence, respectively, of social cohesion [14]. Likewise, a reading of the broader literature suggests that narrower conceptualisations prevail. Indeed, recent defintional [13–15,32], quantitative [25,33,34] and qualitative works [35] have all employed narrower conceptualisations, as described above.

3. Social Cohesion within Policy and Politics

Growing levels of social inequality, precarity and segregation worked to move social cohesion up to the political agenda in the 20th and 21st centuries, prompting governments and civil society actors to engage more explicitly with defining and promoting social cohesion [1,2]. From a policy perspective, the writings of political scientist Jane Jenson [36] are often considered one of the key building blocks for many of today's social cohesion policies. In her work, she identified five main dimensions that define socially cohesive societies. These included a sense of inclusion, belonging, recognition, participation and legitimacy [36]. Her work on social cohesion later influenced European policy work such as that of Berger–Schmitt and Noll [37]. In their working paper, the authors rely extensively on Jenson's previous efforts and propose a similar, European-centered definition of social cohesion focusing on reducing disparities between groups and strengthening social relationships.

Much like in academic circles, there is no universally shared definition of social cohesion within public policy [38]. Nonetheless, reflecting the influence of her work, many existing policies reflect several of the ideas put forth by Jenson. For instance, the Council of Europe [28] defines social cohesion "as the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members—minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation—to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members". In a similar vein, the OECD defines a cohesive society as one that "works towards the

well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility" [26]. Numerous governments, including Australia, the European Union, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, have likewise put forth policy definitions and programmes concerning social cohesion [2,39–41]. Relating to the definitional debates above, these documents illustrate how policymakers tend to take a larger view of social cohesion and actively include elements related to quality of life and inequality within their frameworks.

Beyond mere definitions, these policies are linked to several actions meant to foster social cohesion. Some countries employ policies mandating certain levels of civic participation or knowledge about the national culture. For instance, various European countries mandate that migrants complete civic integration tests [42], while others require its citizens to complete military or civic service [43]. Other 'softer' policies concerning social cohesion tend to target areas such as employment, social protection, education and civic participation [26,44]. For instance, governments may fund a number of volunteering, exchange, educational, employment and entrepreneurship initiatives under the banner of supporting social cohesion [4,45]. However, such initiatives are often not delivered by governments themselves but rather by civil society actors on the receiving end of government funding [4,45]. In particular, this push to engage civil society actors and civic participation in the promotion of social cohesion has been strongly influenced by Putnam's work on social capital in the 1990s [46]. Putnam argued that civic participation allows individuals to become enmeshed in social structures that help them develop social relations, networks and resources while reinforcing trust, solidarity and respect for social rules with the larger community [47]. Nonetheless, some existing research suggests that civil society or community-driven initiatives have had mixed results in terms of promoting social cohesion [39,48].

More broadly, the conceptualisation and implementation of social cohesion policies have often been criticised for framing diversity or heterogeneity as a problem that is to be resolved by imposing shared values on groups that are believed to not share the values in question [35]. For instance, this is partially reflected in the numerous European policy documents that underline the need to "promote European values" [40]. Critics note that such views position diversity as a threat and are part of a pattern that places the responsibility for greater social cohesion on discriminated or marginalised groups already facing various forms of social insecurity [39,49]. In other words, the politics of social cohesion are critiqued for targeting supposedly problematic groups and singling them out for behavioural change [2].

4. Causes and Consequences of Social Cohesion

Related to the definitional and conceptual debates outlined above, extensive work has sought to disentangle the variables around social cohesion and identify both causes and consequences of social cohesion. Indeed, statistical investigations support the contention from Schiefer and van der Noll [14] that inequality, or related measures such as wealth, are causally related to social cohesion. Though these studies show the connection between absolute wealth and social cohesion is tenuous [33,50], the role of inequality is much more well-supported. Indeed, a body of work supports the argument that inequality negatively affects social cohesion [51–56]. For instance, Coburn finds that greater levels of income inequality bring about lower levels of social cohesion [51,52], and work by Vergolini [57] has found that inequality weakens the recognition and identification of individuals with their society and its institutions. Likewise, in studies using European and Asian statistical data, high levels of inequality affect social cohesion negatively [33,50], though the relationship is not always strictly linear. Theoretically, this relationship may be explained by human capital accumulation theory, which argues that inequality reduces educational opportunities for disadvantaged individuals, thus lowering their ability to accumulate human capital and become socially mobile [58].

Another strand of work has analysed how a country or community's demographic composition, especially as it pertains to diversity or levels of migration, affect social cohesion. Though some individual-level experiments find negative associations between perceived diversity and related dimensions such as trust [59], broader literature hardly supports such a clear relationship [60]. Other studies find that diversity leads to greater levels of perceived social cohesion [61]. Of note, Portes and Vickstrom argue that diversity supports the viability of nations that rely on more modern forms of association [62]. Adding to this debate, other scholars argue that segregation, and not diversity per se, negatively contributes to social cohesion [63–65]. Looking specifically at migration, Saggar and colleagues likewise conclude that neighbourhood deprivation, and not levels of migration, negatively impact social cohesion [66].

Related to the above, there have been questions as to the role of language in social cohesion, especially within multilingual nations such as Spain, Belgium, Sri Lanka, or Canada. Much like other forms of diversity, research has argued that multilingualism is not detrimental to social cohesion per se, but it is rather the policies surrounding multilingualism that are determinant. In particular, ensuring the freedom to receive education in and use one's preferred language without discrimination are seen as key to ensuring social cohesion in multilingual contexts [67,68].

Finally, literature has concerned itself with more meso or micro ideas of education, norms and values and their potential connection to social cohesion. Some authors argue that education can support social cohesion, as education can promote economic opportunities and support common norms or values that can support social cohesion [4,69]. Relatedly, research has explored what norms or values are important for social cohesion. Values are often vaguely defined, and not all values are per se conducive to social cohesion [70]. Shared values concerning the exclusion of certain social groups may provide cohesion in the short term for the dominant ingroup but do not foster longer-term, sustainable cohesion [15]. Other values, such as individualism or personal responsibility, may be widely shared but clash with ideas of common good, participation or mutual help embedded in many understandings of social cohesion. However, emerging literature suggests that individual values around acceptance of diversity and benevolence towards others are positively associated with social cohesion [70,71].

The consequences of social cohesion, however, are far less contested. Further theoretical and statistical analyses find that greater levels of social cohesion directly contribute to greater well-being [14,50–52]. This relationship also plays out at the individual level, with numerous studies tracing associations between perceived social cohesion, physical activity and overall health [8,72].

5. Challenges and Future Directions

As the above entry has exposed, social cohesion has become an increasingly relevant and valued socio-political concept, and its definition has been highly contested. Contrasting with this, however, many empirical studies engage with the term rather casually, either failing to define it altogether [73] or conflating it with narrower ideas of social capital [12,65]. In turn, this has fed criticisms that the term is included more for its popularity than its value and reinforced the contention that social cohesion is a mere 'quasi-concept' [11]. A distinct but related issue is that social cohesion is often presented as a generic blob where all included dimensions co-exist and interact more-or-less equally and bi-directionally. However, we know that different sub-dimensions will interact differently in different contexts. Beyond a handful of analyses or discussions [14,74], the way that different sub-dimensions mutually interact or relate to each other has yet to be fully addressed in academic literature, and this is despite enduring calls to explore such connections [11,29].

These gaps and criticisms also provide a roadmap for further action and inquiry. Firstly, there is a clear need for researchers, especially those producing empirical work in fields such as health or the social sciences, to engage with definitional debates seriously. As a starting point, researchers need to be explicit about their definitions of social cohesion and why any

particular definition is chosen. Though this may sound rather elementary, clear definitions are crucial for both academic and policy work. Indeed, proper definitions allow researchers to adequately describe the characteristics of the concept of interest and disentangle it from other potentially similar concepts. In other words, definitions help researchers disentangle the causes, consequences or correlates associated with social cohesion [75].

Beyond merely establishing a definition, further unpacking the term and its dimensions is essential. As reflected by the vast array of dimensions associated with the term, social cohesion is meant to be a holistic and multi-dimensional concept. To further progress our understanding, these various sub-dimensions need to be further defined and conceptualised. The linkages between the different sub-dimensions also needs to be much more closely investigated. As highlighted above, the interrelations between different dimensions have not yet been fully explored [11,29]. Yet understanding the dynamic relationship between sub-dimensions is crucial in order to understand how social cohesion can be built and sustained. For example, civic participation is typically presented as a core dimension of social cohesion [14,32], yet there are also arguments that civic participation helps build trust and social relations [47]. Research must fully elucidate the directionality and strength of such relationships. There is also a need to understand how the understandings and dynamics of social cohesion vary according to social, cultural and political contexts. Most definitions and measurements on social cohesion are rooted in Global North countries and institutions, and their applicability in other contexts remains unclear. For instance, definitions and experiences of social cohesion may vary greatly in countries with different economic levels, linguistic backgrounds or demographic compositions. Further elucidating and disentangling social cohesion will require researchers to not only develop or test statistical models exploring these interrelations, but to also pursue deep qualitative insights into the understanding and experiences of individuals [76].

In short, further development of social cohesion requires researchers to continue in-depth work to understand social cohesion and how to foster it. This means moving past shallow or surface-level engagement with the term and pursuing in-depth work around how individuals and communities relate to social cohesion and its different sub-dimensions.

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