



Cohesion and Social Capital

Riccardo Prandini and Marialuisa Villani

Abstract The chapter maps the evolution of the concept of social cohesion across scholarly and institutional arenas. It shows how cohesion operates with a dual status: analytically fragile in research debates yet powerful in policy communication, where it condenses concerns about order, integration and collective welfare. The discussion reviews major trajectories, from foundational reflections on social order and solidarity to contemporary frameworks that operationalise cohesion through multidimensional indicator sets, while noting persistent ambiguity and the recurrent conflation of aims, measures and outcomes. It then clarifies approaches to operationalisation by distinguishing ideational and relational components and horizontal and vertical dimensions, and surveys efforts to construct composite indices. Turning to its relationship with social capital, the chapter presents competing positions that either fold capital into cohesion or treat them as distinct but associated constructs, with implications for debates on exclusion, migration and education. It concludes that cohesion remains conceptually under-specified and normatively loaded, whereas research on social capital appears more internally consistent. The chapter's contribution is to

R. Prandini (✉) · M. Villani
University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
e-mail: riccardo.prandini@unibo.it
e-mail: marialuisa.villani@unibo.it

synthesise these trajectories and specify where cohesion and social capital intersect, diverge and remain indeterminate, providing clearer terms for analysis and use.

Keywords Social cohesion · Social capital · Policies · Operationalisation · Measurement

9.1 INTRODUCTION

These brief considerations on the concept of *social cohesion* has a precise and limited aim. After discussing how its meaning has developed through scientific and political reflection, we seek to understand its relationship with the concept of social capital.

The concept of cohesion has an interesting history because on one hand it has been invoked to explain the existence of social order, harmony and solidarity since the dawn of sociology (Pahl, 1991); on the other, more recently, it became a sort of short-hand for communicating growing concern about the problems of social and systemic integration in national and international society. Unlike the concept of *social capital*, that of *social cohesion* arose much later and immediately gave rise to a rather structured empirical research “tradition”, but does not seem to have acquired coherence and clarity in the course of time. As we shall see, almost all the scientific papers dedicated to the concept of social cohesion, begin (or end) showing that the scientific community does not yet agree on its definition or operationalisation. This absence of agreement is, however, abundantly compensated by the prevalently “political”, symbolic and performative use of the concept.¹ *Social coherence* is used to indicate something that is not completely clear, but clear enough to be communicated and understood by many, above all by persons outside the scientific system; and clear enough to raise socio-political alarm. The

¹ Consider the Council of Europe’s emphasis on the topic: the Council has a social cohesion strategy to be actuated by the European Committee for Social Cohesion (CCS) and has formed a Directorate-General of social cohesion. The underlying definition is “social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, reducing differences and avoiding polarisations. A cohesive society is a community of mutual support for free individuals who pursue common objectives by democratic means” (CCS, 2004, no. 1). Dozens of sites and “political” research centres now use the concept to communicate their concerns and recipes for solving the problem of cohesion.

term is calculated to draw the attention of public opinion to a common objective and to be a reason to act.

Social cohesion therefore has double citizenship. In the social sciences, it has a rather fragile statute, typical of a concept that presumes to measure something difficult to measure, a vaguely outlined social cohesive quality, where “social” includes a loose series of economic, political, civic and educational variables of “society”. In institutional and political communication it indicates particular attention to processes that should keep society “united”, although the meaning of “unity” and “society” is never fully clarified. At the political-institutional level, the recent proliferation of reports on social cohesion seems to indicate at least two distinct phenomena.

On one hand, we observe increasing emphasis on the mass-media dimension of communication that tends to favour alarmism, as in “multiple social cohesion crises”. Such crises take many interconnected forms ranging from the re-emergence of economic and territorial inequality, the weakening of traditional solidarity networks and the loss of trust in institutional government to cultural fragmentation induced by migration and political polarisation (Chan et al., 2006; Dickes et al., 2010; Hulse & Stone, 2007). To this we can add erosion of civic engagement, increasing social isolation in cities (Lockwood, 1999; Putnam, 2000) and widespread feelings of insecurity, also related to the global environmental and health crises (Kawachi & Ransome, 2024; Moustakas, 2023). In this context, “social cohesion” is often invoked in normative and performative terms: not so much as an empirically defined, measurable object but rather as a synthetic indicator of perceived systemic distress, which is simultaneously a symptom of, and an antidote for, a social order perceived as fragile.

On the other hand, we observe ready access to datasets that can be used for reporting, access that is often without adequate scientific control. In particular, access to databases with indicators disaggregated at different territorial levels facilitates the construction of complex indices, which provide immediate detailed maps of the presumed quantity of social cohesion (Noll, 2002). For national institutions, this is clearly an excellent tool to facilitate, in the words of Foucault (2017), the government and control of society.

9.2 THE TRADITION OF STUDIES ON SOCIAL COHESION

As already mentioned, the concept of cohesion has a long sociological tradition, although the “classics” do not always use the term. This is evident because the question of social order defines the discipline itself

(Luhmann, 2022). Whether with cohesion, or more often integration and solidarity,² or their absence (social disorder and disintegration), sociology has been concerned with the concept since Durkheim (1893), Weber (1905) and Simmel (1908, 1912), including the Chicago school, neo-Marxism, functionalism and conflict theory. The first contributions are usually attributed to the theoretical reflections of Durkheim, particularly regarding solidarity and subsequently anomie. In his paper of 1893, he sustains that the maintenance of social order is linked to different forms of solidarity that vary with variations in the forms of differentiation. The first form was “mechanical solidarity”, prevalent in traditional societies (that tended to be small), where cohesion sprang from the many shared qualities of members, above all cultural and religious. The second form was “organic solidarity”, typical of large modern societies with greater internal differences and therefore increasing interdependence, where cohesion was generated by the specialisation of different parts of society. Also, Simmel (1908), who formulated a completely different theory, observed that in premodern societies, individuals interacted within relatively small “concentric” social circles that exercised strong control and influence over the “parts”. With the advent of Modernity, individuals could enter more complex intersecting social circles with different values and expectations. This greater social complexity enabled them to forge unique identities and to access different resources. Simmel also realised that Modernity brought greater possibilities of social conflict, but that this could in turn be a form of order. The classical reflections of sociology were definitively condensed in the 1950s by Parsons. (1951) who sought to unite the two approaches, showing that in the Modern age, order and conflict, short- and long-range solidarity and more generally processes of social differentiation stimulate the emergence of new forms of social cohesion and order. In a nutshell, the American sociologist used the concept to explain why such a differentiated society as that of the US could produce structural and semantic “bonds and links” through reference to a common normative basis, institutionalised in the various spheres (Alexander, 2003).

Modern societies, especially European, also enjoyed a period of institutionalisation of collective actors representing society, who through (sometimes conflictual) dialogue, managed to “govern” it. Boltanski and Chiapello (2014) effectively summarised the social morphology

² Comparison and distinction of these three terms could produce a more meaningful and less evasive formulation of the concept of social cohesion than has so far emerged.

typical of the glorious post-war decades, which consisted of large political parties, large trade unions, a cohesive workers' movement and entrepreneurial associations. Towards the end of the 1970s this type of society began to crumble, and Parsons' great narrative began to show some cracks. Sociology (which gradually became global), therefore, lost what was believed to be a unifying theory. It was replaced by a number of theories sharply critical of the prior order and the social imaginary (Taylor, 1994). The social world hyper-diversified: the terms *complexity* (Morin, 1983, 2020) and post-modernity (Lyotard, 1979) indicate that no great narrative or "centre and vertex" can any longer unify it. Sociology reconfigured in a confusion of approaches, directed increasingly less by a clear theory to verify, and increasingly more by a strong component of empirical research enabled by the growing availability of databases and the technologically driven specialisation of statistical research methods. While the topic of social cohesion did not disappear, it lost relevance, also because between the early 1970s and the late 1990s, the social sciences were engaged in clarifying the many processes of change and their consequences for a society becoming increasingly post-, after- and hyper-modern (Alexander, 2003).

In that period, cohesion was of the utmost interest to international institutions. Yet it is easy to suppose that downstream of the new globalisation processes, the international institutions were forced to take an interest in cohesion, since the practical (as distinct from theoretical/observational) consequences of the global morphogenesis created new inequality, marginality, exclusion and poverty for some social groups, and new opportunities for others. Under the influence of the so-called neo-liberal pressure of the 1980s, that regarded social policies as a cost to eliminate via privatisations, outsourcing of services and economic management of healthcare (Harvey, 2005; Taylor-Gooby, 2002), sociology reflected more or less critically on events and set aside its conceptual toolbox of the previous decades, which as we saw generally concerned collective aspects of social organisation like social "class" and "integration" (Dubet, 2010, 2011), to concentrate on new "risks" of vulnerability, the "individualisation" of social careers and access to the resources necessary for capitalising on opportunities (Santurro, 2023). Paradoxically, this de-collectivising trend was intercepted by at least three major international establishments that launched the concept of social cohesion globally (Di Franco, 2014): the World Bank, the OECD and the European Union (Bernard, 1999). Policy analysis and policy makers used a more problem-driven approach (Chan et al., 2006),

preferring a less theoretical and more operative definition of the concept. Indeed, policy research was initiated principally by the socio-political institutions of various countries and by national and transnational organisations (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The World Bank (Ritzen, 2001) began to introduce the concept, interpreting social cohesion as a means for economic growth; the new growth-related inequalities had to be compensated “socially”. This approach centred on the aptitude of the citizens of a country to collaborate, the legitimacy of political institutions and quality of life. Since the 1980s, the OECD too began to use the term cohesion as the “social” part of economic development, which was considered a winning strategy for the growth of countries. The rather generic but fundamental recipe of the period was to create synergy between open competitive markets and a strong social fabric. The OECD therefore identified a cohesive society as one that “works for the welfare of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, fosters trust and offers its members opportunities for upward social mobility” (2011, p. 17). As often occurs with such concepts, it was easier to list the critical factors of cohesion than to decline it positively: thus we saw an increase in poverty, unemployment, income inequality, social conflict, micro- and macro-criminality and political disenchantment/disaffection. In general, a perceived and measured increase in inequality, job insecurity and social as well as ethnic segregation made social cohesion important as a concept to explain in order to orientate social change (Moustakas, 2023). Since social cohesion becomes important in moments of social “dis-order”, “dis-association” and “dis-union”, many studies, especially those concerned with policy analysis, but also with sociology in general, focalised on identifying variables postulated to reduce or even destroy it. Thus when social cohesion is lacking or negative, it is often analysed as the sum of the variables that damage it (Harvey, 2005; Chan et al., 2006; Dickes et al., 2010; Hulse & Stone, 2007). The debate therefore acquired clear and recognisable “moral” connotations, where rather than define the concept clearly, it became important to take it for granted and to proceed on the presumption of a crisis in social cohesion.

In the same period, the European Union conducted a more central analysis (Berger-Schmitt, 2002). The idea of the Union, expressed in the Treaty of Maastricht, centres on the so-called social market economy and unifies the “trinity” of social cohesion, single market and monetary union (Camerlengo, 2015). The first to be enacted were the economic aspects, with social compensation as the second step of a process that was often to

recur in European history. The Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2005; European Committee for social Cohesion, 2004) defined social cohesion as “the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation. A cohesive society is a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means (European Committee for social cohesion, 2004, p. 3). With the entrance of new member states, the European Union added the question of social cohesion to its political agenda as a crucial theme for the success of the expansion process (Dickes et al., 2010). Thus social cohesion is considered normatively to be a variable that concerns *unifying* relations between individuals, groups, associations, organisations, institutions and territorial units (Berger-Schmitt & Noll, 2000, p. 2). Many reports of the European Commission have gradually added to the list of dangers caused by increasing economic inequality, above all regional (Graziano & Polverari, 2020). These include those due to the problem of the cultural identity of European citizens (Hulse & Stone, 2007), the legitimacy of the European institutions (first and foremost the Parliament) and the waves of intra- and extra-European migration. In any case, cohesion, which, according to Community “mythology” represents the solidaristic fraternity that opposes technocratic drives (Habermas, 2014), is considered prevalently an input in the equation of development. Briefly, a cohesive society creates opportunities for socio-economic inclusion and participation, pursuing equal distribution, limiting criminality and anomie, and offering adequate social services in an accelerating world. The concept of social cohesion expressed by these three international institutions transmits their concern for the fragility of social unity. Thus social unity is presented as in need of continuous “protections” by the political-administrative system, the self-styled central actor in this mission. This is a particularly effective topic during elections (Ritzen et al., 2000) but has at least three major limits: (1) social cohesion is almost invariably conceived as functional for economic growth; (2) its defining elements are largely based on economic indicators; (3) it is communicated as an objective when it is in fact a dimension of a social situation that needs to be changed.

Operationalising Social Cohesion

At the beginning of the 1990s, sociology and the social sciences resumed interest in the concept, prompted also by the fact that data sets, now at an international level, facilitated empirical research. The question of social

cohesion emerged in relation to social integration, stability and disintegration (Gough & Olofsson, 1999). Globalisation processes (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) were also identified as factors that damage social cohesion (Chan et al., 2006; Chiesi, 2004; Hulse & Stone, 2007; Jenson, 2010; Mitchell, 2000).

Social cohesion has long been a topic of study in the field of migration research. New migrant flows were and continue to be a crucial dimension for the analysis of social cohesion, especially from a comparative perspective at national and transnational levels (Ariely, 2014; Beauvais & Jenson, 2002; Chan et al., 2006; Cheong et al., 2007; Harell & Stolle, 2014; Hulse & Stone, 2007; Niessen, 2000; Putnam, 2000).

Rapid development and massive use of new technologies in the production of information, knowledge and sociality (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) have also prompted researchers to analyse their effects on social coherence (Beauvais & Jenson, 2002; Ferlander & Timms, 1999). Increased in scientific production in the social sciences has been substantially continuous (Berger, 2019; Bernard, 1999; Chan et al., 2006; Dickes et al., 2010; Gough & Olofsson, 1999; Hulse & Stone, 2007). Scholars of various disciplines (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Dickes & Valentova, 2013; Etzioni, 1995; Gough & Olofsson, 1999; Green & Janmaat, 2011; Hulse & Stone, 2007; Lockwood, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Rajulton et al., 2007) have analysed the concept of social cohesion from different theoretical perspectives in attempts to identify its dimensions. Many have endeavoured to produce a genealogy of social coherence, although it is difficult if not futile to clarify who initiated what. The literature (Berger-Schmitt, 2000a, b; Chiesi, 2004; Di Franco, 2014; Friedkin, 2004; Green & Janmaat, 2011; Jeannotte, 2000; Santurro, 2023; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) indicates various and diverse realisations and reflections considered important, which we summarise below.

The first include Jenson (1998, 2010) who prepared a report for the *Canadian Policy Research Network*, adopted by the Canadian Federal Government (Stanley, 2003), that set out to operationalise social cohesion in its political agenda (Beauvais & Jenson, 2002; Jackson et al., 2000; Jeannotte et al., 2002; Maxwell, 1996). Jenson (1998) identified five defining dimensions: (1) belonging/isolation—shared values, identity and feelings of being part of the community; (2) inclusion/exclusion—equal access to opportunities, rights and resources; (3) participation/non-involvement—engagement in political, civic and community life; (4) recognition/rejection—acceptance of diversity, respect and mutual recognition;

(5) legitimacy/illegitimacy—trust in institutions, fairness and rule of law. Jenson’s approach focused greatly on the dimensions of participation and sharing of values of cohesion.

Bernard (1999) changed the perspective by defining social cohesion as a quasi-concept since it is flexible and adaptable to the needs of local, national and international governance. He identified three defining dimensions: (i) economic, (ii) political and (iii) social, analysing them on two levels, substantial and formal. At a substantial level, the concepts of reducing inequality versus the presence of inequalities emerged together with political participation versus passivity and sense of belonging versus isolation. At formal level, we find the concepts of economic inclusion/exclusion, political legitimacy/illegitimacy and recognition/rejection of diversity. Using the same theoretical framework, Gozzo et al. (2021) further refined the key factors that contribute to social cohesion. These included: (1) equality and inclusion in the economic sphere; (2) participation and legitimacy in the political sphere; (3) sense of community and recognition of diversity in the social sphere. In particular, equality refers to the “substantial” level of equal opportunity, whereas inclusion is associated with the “formal” aspect of equal opportunity that can manifest in the economic, social and community sectors.

Kearns and Forrest (2000) changed perspective, passing from international and national level to concepts regarding urban governance and the resilience of its social fabric (for more details see Ganugi, 2024). The concepts used were: (1) shared civic culture; (2) social order and control; (3) solidarity; (4) networks and social capital; (5) sense of belonging to a community.

In the early 2000s, Berger-Schmitt and Noll (Berger-Schmitt, 2000a, b, 2002; Berger-Schmitt & Noll, 2000; Noll, 2002) endeavoured a summary for a research programme funded by the European Commission *Towards a European System of Social Reporting and Welfare Measurement*, included in the *European System of Social Indicators* project. They proposed an analytical distinction between processes: (a) for reducing inequality (especially economic) and (b) for strengthening social capital. Among the former they included inequality indicators at European regional level regarding equal opportunity, anti-discrimination, mitigating exclusion and reducing poverty. Among the latter they indicated strengthening associative bonds, fostering trust and shared values, and improving the functioning of social institutions. This approach had some influence on the discussion, at least at European level, but caused some persisting problems. The first was that

indicators of social cohesion were conceived as both condition (indicating portion) and result of the concept itself, producing a loop between definition and objectives. The second was that the approach introduced a completely autonomous concept, that of social capital, causing overlapping of two lines of research. A similar distinction (and therefore similar criticisms, highly detailed), was proposed by Duhaime et al. (2004). They distinguished between access to political and economic institutions (Durkheim's organic solidarity) and access to primary and community relations (mechanical solidarity).

For Lockwood (1999)—a contemporary reference in the debate on social integration—cohesion refers to a condition of solid primary networks, like family bonds and local voluntary organisations, within a community. “Social cohesion” and “civic integration” are two distinct levels of integration: the first is linked to social and community relations, the second refers to institutional order on a macro-social scale. These two levels link up with Habermas's (2014) categories: the “world of life” (social integration) and “systems” (systemic integration). The levels are articulated according to the relational dynamics between social actors, which may be orderly or conflictual. Institutional order, or systemic integration, places the accent on indicators that distinguish the degree of integration or civic corruption in a given context, whereas social integration regards more local and primary aspects, focalising indicators of social cohesion or dissolution. Importantly, in this perspective, social cohesion is identified as a specific aspect of the broader problem of social integration and not as the only element of analysis. This analytical formulation with two separate planes of integration was why that approach failed to gain many followers in subsequent research.

Bollen and Hoyle (1990) introduced two distinct perspectives of cohesion: objective and perceived. In their view, objective cohesion is a tangible group attribute, measured by composite parameters based on the self-reported closeness of a member to the other members of the group. Perceived cohesion is determined by an individual's perception of their position in the group. This perception depends on two main factors: a sense of belonging to the group and “morale”, the emotional response associated with belonging to a group. A sense of belonging is essential for the existence of the group, whereas morale directly influences the “cohesive” motivation of members.

To conclude this brief presentation of approaches, let us mention Chan et al. (2006) who proposed a definition of social cohesion based on

vertical and horizontal interactions between the members of a society. They describe cohesion as “a state of things characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that include trust, sense of belonging, willingness to engage and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations (Chan et al., 2006, p. 290). We return later to this distinction when we tackle the topic of operationalisation.

Briefly, the concept of social cohesion as developed so far seems to identify two fundamental elements. The first, known also as the “ideational” component, regards the sense of belonging of members of a social group (of any type but especially “society” as a whole). The other aspect, the “relational” component, regards aspects empirically observable between group members and their participation in social institutions. Scientific research usually distinguishes these two components on the basis of the aim of the research. The literature on the ideational component is prevalently concerned with the meanings, like sense of belonging, that individuals attribute to their social context. Research on the relational component analyses the links between individuals and society, seeking to measure dimensions deemed to be relevant (Moustakas, 2023).

At the moment, it can be said that debate on the definition and variable dimensions of the concept continues, broadening the mesh of its meaning, often without finding a common point. The only true common criteria of orientation are those referring to various structural and semantic social-bond phenomenologies and attempts to measure them at micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Moustakas, 2023). In a nutshell: social cohesion can be conceived as the degree of positive interconnection between individuals, groups and social institutions (democratic nation states in the modern age). A high degree of social cohesion is necessary to achieve objectives such as promoting equality, attenuating the negative effects of uncontrolled economic growth and preventing social divisions. Thus social cohesion is not only a fact to measure but also an objective to achieve at least by: (1) reduction of latent social conflict which implies analysing different forms of inequality, including economic inequality, ethnic tensions and other forms of social and especially political polarisation, and intervening; (2) the creation and maintenance of social bonds by fostering trust and reciprocity, aspects known as “social capital”. This underlines the importance of the associative processes typical of so-called “civil society”, that ought to create social bonds where they are threatened. It also underlines the importance of social institutions able to effectively manage the

conflicts they cause, such as those of the rule of law and an independent judicial system.

Faced with the variety of definitions in the literature, Santurro (2023) recently sought to develop one for the purpose of building a readily reproducible index representing the multi-dimensional nature of the concept. He used the variables available in the dataset of the *European Social Survey*. Santurro entered the theoretical debate by taking up the concept of social cohesion proposed by Fenger (2012), who considered it something that keeps society together. The elements that have to be “kept together” can vary according to the perspective of the research and may include individuals, families, social classes, groups and institutions. Defining social cohesion is a fundamental preliminary step for measuring it empirically. For a given concept, it is necessary to identify a suitable unit of analysis and to select the most appropriate variables for measuring it. If the aim of the research is to show the economic effects of cohesion, territorial data is more appropriate, whereas to investigate the more social dimensions of cohesion, it is preferable to gather individual data by sample surveys such as those of the *European Social Survey* (Santurro, 2023).

Once the unit of analysis is decided, the next step is to select the variables for measuring whether cohesions exist, and if so, their level. This process requires indicators that can capture the different aspects of the phenomenon, from social bonds to economic inequality and trust in institutional government.

Santurro used the definition of Chan et al. (2006) which states that social cohesion is a general condition of a society that concerns the behaviours, attitudes and interactions of social actors in the various spheres of life. Chan and colleagues identified a horizontal and a vertical dimension of cohesion. The horizontal one focuses on the degree of interpersonal trust, on the strength of primary bonds within families and between friends, and relations between secondary groups and neighbours. The vertical dimension is concerned with the degree to which relations, practices and beliefs contribute to the development of a sense of belonging, the legitimacy of public institutions and political participation. Two components, attitudes and behaviours, are then compared at these two levels (Santurro, 2023, p. 91). The attitude component considers the opinions, motivations and sentiments contributing to social cohesion; the behavioural component concerns practical actions by individuals that contribute in some way to the development of social cohesion. Table 9.1 summarises the sub-dimensions of the concept of social cohesion.

Table 9.1 Sub-dimensions of social cohesion (Santurro, 2023, p. 94)

<i>Level</i>	<i>Components (type of relation)</i>	
	<i>Attitudes</i>	<i>Behaviours</i>
Horizontal	Interpersonal trust Social support	Density of social relations Social participation
Vertical	Trust in institutions Legitimacy of institutions Sense of belonging	Political participation

Once he had chosen the sub-concepts or dimensions deemed to define the concept social cohesion, Santurro proposed a selection of indicators for building a complex index. This choice, which he upheld theoretically, methodologically and also with statistical tests, is of course contingent and does not concern us here in our excursus on a slippery concept.

9.3 COHESION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: TWO DISTINCT CONCEPTS?

Let us now see the different semantic and empirical relations between social cohesion and social capital. Here, the “chickens come home to roost”, because most scholars of cohesion conceive social capital as one of its dimensions (Venturini & Graziano, 2016), one that underlines the importance of well-functioning family and community life with shared values (Hulse & Stone, 2007). Social capital shares a sort of double nature with concepts like integration, solidarity and opposition to social exclusion: on one hand it has its own theoretical autonomy, on the other it is often included in the super-concept of social cohesion.

According to many, social capital contributes to social cohesion, fostering bonds and relations and reinforcing the sense of belonging and attachment within communities. Social cohesion is therefore the “whole” and social capital only a part without any real analytical independence.

Scholars of social capital, on the other hand, tend to separate the two concepts, while pointing out possible correlations. To do so they have often used a third bridging concept, namely social exclusion, meaning a process by which certain groups and persons in a region are marginalised economically and socially (Arthurson & Jacobs, 2003, p. 5). The three

concepts have been studied as phenomena that are related to and that reinforce each other (Hulse & Stone, 2007). Social capital contributes to social cohesion, promoting networks and relations built through social and political participation. When people engage in community activities (civic engagement) and build trust (Cartocci, 2007; Putnam, 2000), they increase the general cohesion of society. Thus social cohesion aims to combat social exclusion. According to this line of reasoning, a cohesive society has less probability of generating exclusion and marginalisation. High social capital can mitigate social exclusion, giving individuals access to resources and systems of support. To the contrary, low social capital may increase exclusion because individuals are unable to be part of the networks necessary to become integrated via political, social and cultural participation (Hulse & Stone, 2007).

Oxoby (2009), too, used capital, cohesion and opposition to social exclusion in developing an analytical model that considers the theory of justice and the *capability approach* of Amartya Sen (Sen, 1985, 1992). According to Sen, when we analyse questions of exclusion and inequality, we cannot consider solely unequal distribution of economic resources, but we must also consider that the poor and excluded are not free to choose a type of life that would develop their capacities (Sen, 1985, 1992). This perspective shows the need for policies to foster inclusion and social cohesion that strengthen social capital as well as individual capacities. When individuals invest in community participation, they create stronger social bonds, which in turn foster a sense of belonging and community identity. This inter-connection is fundamental for reducing social exclusion because cohesive communities are better equipped to sustain the marginalised and ensure their participation in community life. Oxoby (2009) concluded that social inclusion is crucial for institutional planning and for fostering motivation to socialize, noting that these factors had been largely overlooked in social capital research.

The intersection between social cohesion and social capital has also been abundantly studied in the context of migration. The expansion of the European Union in the last 25 years made the question of migration a central theme in debates on social cohesion and social capital, giving rise to two main lines of research. A first approach sustained that an increase in ethnic diversity tends to erode trust and social capital (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, certain scholars showed that diversity can improve relations between ethnic groups (Marschall & Stolle, 2004; Oliver & Wong, 2003; Stein et al., 2000). High social capital favours

relation-building within communities, above all between natives and migrants (Zetter et al., 2006). This indicates that diversified environments can also foster understanding and tolerance between ethnic communities (*bridging* social capital). Promotion of links between ethnic groups may therefore facilitate a culture of tolerance.

In educational contexts, the concepts of social capital and social cohesion have been used to analyse the building of trust and shared values in schools (Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2017; Veerman & Denessen, 2021) and universities (Moiseyenko, 2005), as direct effects of fostering trust (Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2017) as well as civicness in students.

In the work of Putnam, education is regarded as a determinant factor of social capital, being a predictive element of individual affiliation with associations, interpersonal trust and political participation (Putnam, 2000). According to Putnam's analysis, the US data indicate that the last two years of university education have twice the impact on trust and joining social groups of the first two years of high school, irrespective of gender, ethnicity and generation. He holds that individuals with a higher level of education tend to participate more in associative life and place more trust in others, not only by virtue of better economic status, but above all, of skills, resources, and dispositions developed in their family and school environments (Putnam, 1995, p. 667). However, there is a paradox. Despite a general increase in the level of education, in *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam shows progressive erosion, since the end of the 1960s, of all the indicators he used to measure affiliation, trust, political engagement and voting in elections. In his view, this phenomenon is felt transversely across genders, ethnic groups, social classes and levels of education, and cannot be attributed to factors such as urbanisation, geographic mobility, temporal pressure or changes in gender roles. This shift can be traced to generational dynamics, particularly the gradual replacement of the socially engaged New Deal generation (baby boomers) by Generation X, whose lifestyles were more individualistic and oriented toward television consumption. Thus the traditionally dense associative fabric of US society gradually lost this feature over two generations (Green & Preston, 2001).

In relation to social capital, social cohesion and education, Green and Preston (2001) see Putnam's study as focalising individual behaviours. They propose an analytical approach that concentrates on the macrosocial aspects of social capital and social cohesion in relation to education. They underline that educational inequality can have a greater effect on social cohesion than

overall educational level. They suggest that disparity in educational results can lead to greater social fragmentation and lower levels of civic engagement, accompanied by a decrease in social capital detrimental to social cohesion. They assert, moreover, that education influences social cohesion indirectly, via the distribution of income. Countries with fairer education systems tend to show a more even distribution of income, which in turn favours social cohesion. This relation shows the importance of tackling educational and economic inequality jointly in order to strengthen cohesion.

The relation between cohesion and social capital has also been analysed in studies on subjective well-being (SWB) (Maggino, 2023; Manca, 2023). There is a vast literature on the effects of social capital and cohesion on SWB, with particular attention to themes such as health (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Kawachi & Ransome, 2024), food security and nutrition (Kaiser et al., 2020). There has also been a long debate on the relation between income, consumption and SWB in the framework of happiness studies. The relation between social cohesion, social capital and well-being can be studied, accepting the assumption of Osberg (2003), namely that cooperation between economic agents is generally beneficial for all of society. Agreements and decisions are simply easier when a group (firms, families, associations, teams etc.) has high internal cooperation (Klein, 2013). Osberg (2003) mentions a virtuous circle in which greater cohesion implies greater cooperation, which in turn determines an increase in economic production that further increases social cohesion. Klein (2013) accepts this assumption and seeks to broaden Osberg's argument, stating that social cohesion and social capital have direct and indirect effects on subjective well-being, mediated by economic production.

As already mentioned, the dimensions used to measure social capital and social cohesion have elements in common. In the social capital literature, three general characteristics are indicated: social relations (and social networks), belonging to social groups and trust (Klein, 2013; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000; Bartolini et al., 2008). With regard to social cohesion, macro- and micro-scale empirical indicators have been developed. At the macro level, the European Union and the OECD use indicators published by Eurostat (structural indicators 2009) and by the OECD (OECD, 2009), respectively. At the micro level, Rajulton et al. (2007), Dicks et al. (2008, 2010) and Acket et al. (2011) recently proposed methods of measurement based on exploratory and confirmative factor analysis to create factor scores for the various dimensions of social cohesion (as defined by Bernard, 1999;

Jenson, 1998). A fundamental difference between the two approaches is that Rajulton et al. (2007) consider social cohesion at community level, whereas Dickes et al. (2008), (2010) and Acket et al. (2011) consider it at individual level. A limit of this method is its failure to consider the economic sphere due to the difficulty of determining operative indicators at individual level (Klein, 2013).

9.4 CONCLUSIONS

After this incursion into the universe of social cohesion, it is necessary to draw some conclusions. In general, while social capital theory and research have used a plurality of approaches, they seem well developed and substantially coherent, whereas social cohesion theory remains somewhat incomplete. Rather than giving rise to a theoretically and empirically fruitful research programme, the concept appears to serve primarily as a normative framework through which issues concerning social bonds and social order are expressed. It is burdened with phenomena having emerging effects, positive and negative feedback and confusion of *explanans* and *explanandum*. The resulting complexity frustrates any effective application except for models devoid of real utility. Resorting to more tested concepts, such as social and systemic integration and inclusion, could possibly help to clear the debate, which currently seems to be stranded. The term social cohesion is clearly of political and normative importance and circulates freely in public debate and among national and international policy institutes. Its capacity to call to (social) order recalls the *Ecclesia* of Christian theology, a *communitas perfecta* where everyone is in correct relation to the others. It is well known, for example, that in his essays on religion, Simmel (1908) observed the close analogy between God (and his Ecclesia) and the supra-individual unity of society, based on a division of labour where each finds his “proper calling”. In both the religious and socio-political conceptions, the idea of cohesion meets a need for order and stability, but often at the expense of an analytical definition and empirical measurement.³ Indeed, a solid operationalisation of the concept is still lacking: comparison with the real world is often disappointing and fails to sustain the normative burden that the term implies.

³ The English translation for Georg Simmel’s 1912 work “Religion” (or “Die Religion”) is not available in a single, widely cited source but is part of his collected essays, specifically appearing in the 1995 volume of *Essays and Writings* (Aufsätze und Abhandlungen) published by Suhrkamp.

The aim of this chapter has not been to establish a causal link between *social capital and social cohesion* but rather to shed light on how they intersect, overlap and interact, exploring the historical forms of sociality that these two concepts help describe and orientate.

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