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Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

PROCEEDINGS

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EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION IN EUROPE: TESTING THE POST-MODERNIZATION THESIS

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In this paper, I test predictions coming from the modernization thesis by examining the relationships between social cohesion and educational attainment in Europe. Social cohesion is measured using indices of institutional trust, solidarity, and political and socio-cultural participation. I explore how education influences social cohesion and interacts with country-level characteristics, based on the assumption that the transition to modernized societies diminishes the role of economic resources in shaping lifestyles and opportunities. As a result, education is expected to play a crucial role in influencing social cohesion in these societies. Two hypotheses are tested: (1) education has a stronger impact on social cohesion in more modernized countries, and (2) education is more influential than social class in shaping social cohesion, particularly in these countries. Using multilevel models and structural equation modelling, I analyse data from the European Value Study. The results demonstrate that a higher level of education is associated mainly with greater social and political participation, and that this effect is significantly stronger in more modernized countries, partially supporting the proposed hypotheses.

social cohesion; modernization; social inequalities

INTRODUCTION

The topic of social cohesion has been widely studied over the past two decades. A vast body of literature has addressed its definition (Aruqaj, 2023), measurement (Delhey et al., 2023; Tok et al., 2024), and its main determinants (Walle, 2022). I consider social cohesion as a multidimensional concept that can be measured using individual-level data, stating that the overall level of social cohesion emerges from attitudes and behaviours at the micro level. Regarding the determinants of social cohesion, empirical research showed that

it is negatively affected by social inequalities (Vergolini, 2011a), educational inequality (Green et al., 2006), income inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Aruqaj, 2023), poverty and economic vulnerability (Whelan and Maître, 2005; Vergolini, 2011b; Andrews et al., 2014; Goubin, 2018), and ethnic concentration (Putnam, 2007).

This paper contributes to the literature by clarifying the role of education from a comparative perspective, focusing on the interaction between macro and micro factors. Specifically, I examine how a country's level of modernization (macro) affects the relationship between education and social cohesion (micro). The paper is organized as follows: the next section reviews the main definitions and measures of social cohesion, followed by an outline of the theoretical model and research questions, which guide the choice of data, methods, and empirical analysis. The final section provides concluding remarks.

1. SOCIAL COHESION: DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT

In the literature concerning social cohesion, a great emphasis has been placed on its definition and measurement. As pointed out by Vergolini (2011a) there is a distinction between two main families of definitions that have characterised the field of social cohesion since its beginning. The first considers social cohesion as a process directed toward the attainment of a particular goal: it concerns the goal of promoting equal opportunities and reducing disparities (Berger-Schmitt, 2002). In this way, there is the risk to create some confusion between the constitutive elements of social cohesion with the factor that could affect it. The second one looks at social cohesion in a static way, defining it as a state of affairs concerning the interactions among members of a society, interactions that take place in various domains of human associate life (Chan et al. 2006; Vergolini 2011a; Dickes and Valentova, 2012; Bottoni, 2018). The latter is the approach I follow since it is the more promising one to analyse social cohesion. For the measurement aspect we rely on individual data following the approach suggested by Dickes and Valentova (2012). They identify a set of indicators of social cohesion suitable for cross-countries comparisons identifying four main dimensions, measured by additive indexes that are made up by several indicators as detailed below:

- Institutional trust: confidence in national distributive system, national organisation, authority institutions and satisfaction of democracy and government.
- Solidarity: proximal and distal solidarity.

- Political participation: participation in legal and illegal political activities and political concern.
- Socio-cultural participation: participation in social, political, cultural associations as well as in youth and leisure associations.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this paper, I analyse a number of predictions derived from the modernization thesis, focusing on the cultural basis of social stratification. The key argument is that, in modern societies, the relevance of economic resources in defining lifestyles and life opportunities has declined (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 2007). In contrast, knowledge and cognitive ability have become more central in the stratification system (Bell, 1973). The research questions explore the relationship between educational attainment and social cohesion, as well as how this interacts with country-level characteristics. Previous section has highlighted that the economic sphere, measured through social class and economic conditions, shapes social cohesion. People in higher social positions are more likely to exhibit greater levels of social cohesion, as active participation in social life requires resources. This suggests that activities that foster social integration remains a costly activity, requiring time and/or money. This suggests that material resources, measured through social class, continue to shape social cohesion, with social class acting as a proxy for permanent income (Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2006).

However, this paper challenges that perspective by focusing on the cultural basis of stratification—education—rather than purely economic factors. According to modernization theory, the transition to modern societies decreases the importance of economic resources in shaping life opportunities, with education assuming a more significant role. Higher levels of education are associated with greater cognitive resources, such as knowledge and skills, which increase civic engagement and participation in social life (Almond and Verba, 1963; Green et al., 2006). Thus, education promotes social cohesion through various channels, including socialization to values and to the access of remunerative occupations.

Country characteristics play a pivotal role in this framework. Modernization, marked by rising education levels, economic growth, and a strong civil society, fosters social cohesion. It creates more integrated societies by promoting shared values, economic security, civic participation, and interdependence, enhancing trust and cooperation (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2007; Bell, 1973). From

these arguments, I propose the following hypotheses:

- H1) Education influences social cohesion (H1a), and this effect is stronger in more modernized countries (H1b).
- H2) Education plays a more significant role than social class in shaping social cohesion, especially in more modernized countries.

3. DATA VARIABLES AND METHOD

The analyses presented in the paper are based on data from the 2008-2009 wave of the European Value Study (EVS) that has been carried out on a representative sample of population aged 15+ in 47 countries. As discussed in the previous section, social cohesion is measured following the Dickes and Valentova (2013) approach, while the main independent variables are educational level and social class. Social class is measured according to the ESEC scheme (Rose and Harrison, 2010). I use as indicators of the level of modernization of a country the human development index (HDI) that is the most adequate indicator to capture aspects related to modernization (Inglehart and Baker 2000). To avoid the risk of circularity, the macro variable is measured at time t-1 (i.e., one year before the survey). The descriptive statistics for the main variables used in the analyses are reported in Table 1. To test the first hypothesis, I employ a random intercept multilevel model that is the best tecnique to detect the role of individual and contextual characteristics as well as their interactions.[1] For the second hypothesis, I need to decompose the direct and indirect effects of education and social class to understand which of the two aspects is more relevant in shaping social cohesion. To answer this research question, I rely on a multi-group structural equation model (SEM), that allows for this decomposition according to clusters of countries ranked by their level of modernisation.[2]

[1] All the models presented in the next section control for age, sex, citizenship, civil status, employment condition, and social origins.
[2] Since SEM model requires continuous variables, I use the international socio-economic index (ISEI) and the years of education, instead of respectively of social class and educational level.

Tab. 1. Descriptive statistics for the main variables used in the analyses (N=23,251). Source: European Value Study (2008).

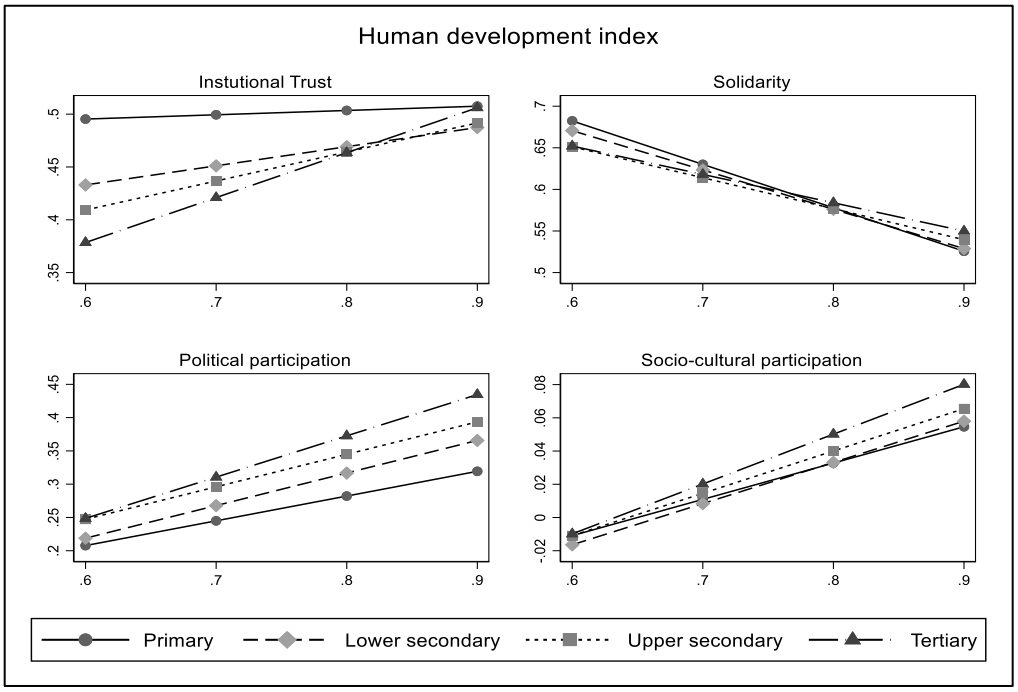
Outcome variables		
	Mean	Std. Dev.
Institutional trust	0.470	0.168
Solidarity	0.571	0.186
Political participation	0.369	0.185
Socio-cultural participation	0.053	0.096
Main independent variables		
Country level	Mean	Std. Dev.
Human development index	0.828	0.071
Individual level	Mean	Std. Dev.
Socio-economic status index	44.031	16.749
Years of education	12.408	3.658
Educational level	%	
Primary	9.7	
Lower secondary	15.5	
Upper secondary	40.0	
Tertiary	34.8	
Social class	%	
Salariat	33.5	
Intermediate	18.1	
Self-employed	8.2	
Lower white collars	11.2	
Working class	29.0	

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

4.1. The role of modernization and education

The results reported in Figure 1 are intended to answer the first research question about the role of education and its interaction with modernization's level. Regarding political and socio-cultural participation, I find that higher levels of education generally correspond to greater involvement in social and political life (H1a), and at the same time the influence of education tends to fan out as the HDI rises (H1b). In this case both H1a and H1b are corroborated by the empirical analysis. The situation is less clear when I move to institutional trust and solidarity, which show peculiar patterns. In the first case, I show that the less educated people have a higher trust in the institution and that the differences between the levels of education disappear in countries with higher values of HDI, which is exactly the opposite of what is stated in H1.

Fig. 1. Predicted values from random intercept multilevel models for the interaction effects of human development index and educational level on the four dimensions of social cohesion (N=23,251). Source: European Value Study (2008).



This unexpected result can be explained by the fact that highly educated people in countries with a low HDI may have a better knowledge of the functioning of the institution and are able to compare the situation in their country with that in more developed countries, which may lead to lower values of institutional trust. The "fan

in configuration" can be interpreted as meaning that in countries with a high HDI, all people, regardless of their level of education, tend to have a high level of trust in institutions, as a sign of the overall good performance of institutions.

Regarding solidarity, there are practically no differences between levels of education and the relationship is negative, which also contradicts H1. One possible explanation lies in the rise of individualism in modern societies, which may become more pronounced as people become less dependent on their communities for survival. This increased focus on individual achievement may reduce the need for collective solidarity.

4.2. Do cultural resources matter more than economic ones?

Table 2 shows the results from the SEM analysis intended to shed light on the second hypothesis. Overall, the effects of ISEI and education are substantially in line with H2: I find that education exerts always a greater influence than ISEI and the role of education tends to become more relevant in more modern countries. The overall picture is challenged, also in this case, by the results regarding institutional trust and solidarity. In fact, I find that the effect of education is positive only in countries with higher level of modernization and, the educational effect is always greater than the ISEI effect. Moreover, education is more relevant than ISEI in high modernized countries, while in the others the main driver of social cohesion is the economic dimension.

Tab. 2. Total effects of ISEI index and years of education on the various dimensions of social cohesion according to different levels of modernization (N=23,251). Source: European Value Study (2008).

	Institutional trust	Solidarity	Political participation	Socio-cultural participation
ISEI index				
Low modernization	0.032**	0.051***	0.047***	0.043***
Medium modernization	0.046***	0.032***	0.090***	0.088***
High modernization	0.043***	-0.006	0.080***	0.079***
Years of education				
Low modernization	-0.118***	-0.062***	0.217***	0.049***
Medium modernization	-0.060***	-0.017*	0.185***	0.126***
High modernization	0.079***	0.075***	0.221***	0.142***

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, I tested the predictions of the modernization thesis regarding the relationship between education and social cohesion in Europe. The findings confirm that education plays a significant role in shaping social cohesion: higher levels of education are consistently linked with greater social and political participation, and this effect intensifies as countries become more modernized. However, the results are less clear for institutional trust and solidarity, where the expected relationship with education was either weak or counterintuitive. These unexpected outcomes suggest that while education is important for fostering participation, other societal factors, such as cultural shifts toward individualism in highly developed countries, may undermine solidarity.

Further research should explore the role of exogenous events, such as the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have reshaped social cohesion by influencing economic vulnerability, participation, trust, and solidarity. These crises have likely exacerbated social inequalities and altered the dynamics of social cohesion, warranting a deeper understanding of their long-term impact on education's role in modern societies.

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