

## Chapter 4: Social Cohesion

### Critical Theoretical Exploration of a Concept

#### 4.1 Introduction

The term “social cohesion” has become widely used over the past two decades, referring to various types of phenomena, both economic and social. Thus, it may be associated with different forms of capital (especially social capital), values and ethics. Nevertheless, in many cases its meaning appears rather vague, even in social science publications.

In this chapter we will approach the idea of social cohesion as it appears in political documents and the academic literature. On the basis of the discussion we will define and operationalise the concept for our purposes in the book. We will suggest ways of understanding its relevance in a societal context, as potentially useful both at the neighbourhood, city and national levels.

Intuitively, social cohesion may be conceived of as “the glue” or the bonds that hold a social system together. With reference to the emergence and popularisation of this concept in recent South African socio-political discourse, Desai (2015, 103) cynically comments that “(i)n almost every national and provincial document, the phrase ‘social cohesion’ is reiterated and emphasised.” He remarks that it is as if “some new magic balm has been invented that will be able to glue” together very disparate narratives and realities.

But what are these bonds that should hold a social system together? On the macro level of society such bonds can be people’s integration into important institutions, participation in education, in the labour market, in politics, in civil society organisations, etcetera. Lack of participation can be a result of the operation of exclusionary mechanisms in the form of forced exclusion; but it can also be voluntary. From the individual’s perspective, exclusion involves the individual’s lack of access or capacity to access the multitude of social opportunities that are available to anyone included in mainstream society. If we take the person’s “need” as a starting point, exclusion entails lack of “welfare” as the concept is defined by the Finnish sociologist Erik Allardt (1975; 1993). He differentiates between three dimensions of welfare: a material or economic dimension (“to have”); a dimension referring to social relations (“to love”); and a dimension of human quality referring to the person’s relationship to society, e.g. the need for self-fulfilment (“to be”). All three dimensions may be linked to participation, social inclusion and a feeling

of belonging. In particular, for young people who have not yet developed their potential resources and capacities, being excluded from such dynamics may have serious consequences – for themselves and society at large.

From the collective perspective, social exclusion breaks the social bonds that hold society together. In particular, in societies where there is much socio-economic inequality, the following observation of Amartya Sen (2000, 22) seems particularly relevant:

[S]ocial cohesion faces many difficult problems in a society that is firmly divided between a majority of people with comfortable jobs and a minority – a large minority – of unemployed, wretched, and aggrieved human beings.

This is true, of course, also for societies where the “comfortable jobs” are the privilege of a minority and the “unemployed, wretched, and aggrieved human beings” make up the majority of people, as in South Africa. It is no less true when it concerns young people. The concerns of governments with social cohesion have been accompanied in several European countries by a renewed interest in religion and FBOs (Braginskaia: 2015; Furbey & Macey: 2003; Flint & Robinson: 2008; Loga: 2012; Wollebæk: 2013). Referring back to Sen and his analysis of social exclusion, the role of religion and FBOs in processes of social exclusion or inclusion is certainly a politically and scientifically relevant issue both in South Africa and the Nordic countries.

Social cohesion has been theoretically constructed in many ways. In this chapter we will discuss possible ways of measuring social cohesion at different levels of society. At the same time we will consider the concept of social cohesion critically, problematising aspects of it.

## 4.2 The Concept of Social Cohesion

In the following sections we will address the concept’s historical roots and its contemporary use in political as well as social science discourses. We will define the concept in a way that makes it fruitful for this book, and show how it may be operationalised at different levels of society, and how we may relate social cohesion to the role of the state.

### 4.2.1 Roots of the Social Science Discourse on Social Cohesion

The notion of social cohesion is closely connected to basic sociological and political issues such as the question of social order. The social science discourse on

social cohesion draws its inspiration from sociologists such as Émile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies and their analysis of the transition from traditional to modern society – or differences between small-scale communities and large-scale, complex urban forms as basis for interrogating what holds social systems together. Durkheim (1984 [1893]) in this respect distinguished between “mechanical solidarity” (social systems characterised by common values, beliefs and life experiences) and “organic solidarity” (systems characterised by diversity, a complex division of labour, interdependence and cooperation, and a collective conscience based on shared principles and expectations as expressed in legal systems and the operations of the market).

Tönnies (2001 [1887]) developed the parallel notions of *Gemeinschaft* (solidarity and social ties based on personal, face-to-face social interactions, and the common roles, values and beliefs based on such interactions, especially in family and peer groups) and *Gesellschaft* (solidarity related to indirect interactions, impersonal roles, formal values, and beliefs based on such interactions, and governed by formal authority).

In the tradition of Durkheim and Tönnies, the idea of social cohesion as a form of social dynamics that “holds social systems together” is often analysed in terms of social integration, stability and disintegration (e.g. Berger: 1998). The problem for research, however, is that many approaches to social cohesion are rather abstract, with few attempts at defining and operationalising the concept.

#### 4.2.2 The Political Discourse on Social Cohesion

The political discourse on social cohesion is largely problem-driven. This problem orientation has made the issue of measurement more topical. In Europe population mobility, ethnic and religious diversity, and growing economic inequality have brought about new social problems and political challenges, which have made participation, political and civic, an important political theme from a social cohesion perspective (Chan et al.: 2006). Ritzen et al. (2000, 6) define social cohesion as a situation in which people collaborate in a way that produces a climate for change. Social cohesion leaves “room for maneuver”, which may produce better institutions and economic development to benefit the poor (Ritzen et al.: 2000, 9). In a European political context, the concept is widely used in EU documents, indicating a social phenomenon of political importance in the Union (see e.g. European Committee for Social Cohesion: 2004).

In South Africa the directorate for social cohesion in the national Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) defines social cohesion as “the degree of social integration and inclusion in communities and society at large, and the extent to which mutual solidarity finds expression amongst individuals and communities” (DAC: 2012). A community or society is cohesive to the extent that the inequalities, exclusions

and disparities based on ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, age, disability or any other distinctions are reduced and/or eliminated in a planned and sustained way. The precondition for such cohesion is community members and citizens who are active participants in society, working together for the attainment of shared goals, designed and agreed upon to improve the living conditions for all. This corresponds with the strong emphasis on civil society agency to be found in North American and European discourses on social cohesion.

In European political documents social cohesion has been linked to a concomitant marginalisation through social mechanisms producing or maintaining social inequality:

The promotion of social cohesion requires the reduction of the disparities which arise from unequal access to employment opportunities and rewards in the form of income. Such inequality tends to have serious social consequences through the marginalisation of sections of society (European Commission: 1996, 14).

In the South African context, such reduction of social inequality will not only include improved access to skills, employment and income, but also increased access to land, restitution and redistribution of land, and the spatial transformation of human settlements that were divided racially, thereby marginalising black and poor South Africans systematically and institutionally over decades (De Beer: 2014, 6–8). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was one-sided in its emphasis on social cohesion as relational reconciliation, without addressing the deep structural injustices and inequities of the colonial and apartheid past (Terreblanche: 2014, 141–142). Desai (2015, 101) speaks of a reformist approach with its emphasis on reconciliation and good governance, instead of a transformative approach, aimed at transforming the way in which society is structured, through redistribution and a “bottom-up, mass based approach”.

#### 4.2.3 Interdependence of Social Science and Political Discourses on Social Cohesion

Just as the concept of social cohesion lacks a clear, unified and coherent meaning in political discourse, the same may be said of the concept in social science discourse. With an urban governance perspective in mind, Kearns and Forrest summarise the situation in this way:

Typically, it [social cohesion] is used in such a way that its meaning is nebulous but at the same time the impression is given that everyone knows what is being referred to. The

usual premise is that social cohesion is a good thing, so it is conveniently assumed that further elaboration is unnecessary (2000, 996).

Bernard (1999, 2) is even more critical and views the notion as a “quasi-concept” or a “hybrid mental construction” of political correctness. One reason why he characterises the concept in this way may be that the word “cohesion” is part of ordinary language and therefore subject to ordinary, imprecise usage by ordinary people. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines cohesion as “the action or fact of forming a united whole” (Soanes & Stevenson: 2005, 335). This corresponds closely to Kearns and Forrest’s idea of social cohesion. They provide no explicit definition, but state that “the kernel of the concept is that a cohesive society ‘hangs together’” (2000, 996).

Some of those who have criticised the use of the concept (in political discourses) argue strongly that social cohesion is a euphemism for social coercion or social control. Fitzpatrick and Jones argue that the government in the United Kingdom prioritises social cohesion over social justice by using “forceful measures [...] for enforcing social cohesion instead of measures that would facilitate higher degrees of social justice” (Fitzpatrick & Jones: 2005, 389). In their analysis, therefore, the notion of social cohesion is part of a discourse used to cover over deep societal fractures instead of addressing the real causes of a socially fractured society, which are often structural injustices or exclusions.

In their review of the policy literature on social cohesion, Chan et al. (2006) identify three main approaches, outlined below.

First, in the “means-end approach” social cohesion is primarily defined in terms of the means through which a desired state of society is reached (Chan et al.: 2006, 281f). We may use Berger-Schmitt’s (2000) way of conceptualising social cohesion as an example, in line with Chan and his colleagues. Berger-Schmitt draws on political documents (both national and EU-level documents), as well as on social science research literature in her analytical approach. Summarising, she distinguishes two societal goal dimensions that the various uses of the concept incorporate: reducing social inequalities and social exclusion in a way associated with social integration, and strengthening social relations, which we may associate with generating social capital (including trust). This distinction correlates with the broad distinction made earlier between goals of equity and justice, and goals of diversity and participation. However, one problem with this approach is that the two societal goal dimensions she specifies are perceived as conditions to promote social cohesion, or as means to an end; the concept is defined in terms of its conditions or causes, not its aspects or dimensions.

Second, authors using a “pluralistic approach” have accepted multiple ways of defining the concept (Chan et al.: 2006, 285f). Chan et al. take Jenson’s widely used

analysis as one example (Jenson: 1998). Her conception of social cohesion is based on a policy literature review. Thus, it is more an outcome of an analysis of the existing literature than an attempt to come up with a single, coherent definition. She identifies “five dimensions” of the concept (Jenson: 1998, 15–17):

- Belonging vs isolation (refers to shared values and a sense of identity);
- Inclusion vs exclusion (refers to opportunities in economic institutions, especially the market);
- Participation vs non-involvement (refers to political participation at various levels of government, especially the local level);
- Recognition vs rejection (refers to tolerance of diversity in society);
- Legitimacy vs illegitimacy (refers to attitudes to political and social institutions).

With respect to each dimension, the first situation contributes to social cohesion (left side of the polarity), while the second (the reverse) represents a threat to cohesion. Jenson and others who pursue a pluralistic approach on the basis of policy-oriented analyses demonstrate that in a social science context the term social cohesion is by and large “a catchword” for incorporating the most pressing social issues of the day” (Chan et al.: 2006, 288).

Third, approaches based on “identification of constituent elements” tend to have in common two types of components: objective (associated with behaviour) and subjective (like feelings of trust and sense of belonging), and two main dimensions: horizontal (cohesion in civil society) and vertical (state-citizen cohesion) (Chan et al.: 2006, 293–294). This is the approach Chan et al. subscribe to in the way they define social cohesion:

Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized 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 (2006, 290).

These elements may be put together as outlined in Table 4.1 (as a first step toward operationalisation or concretisation).

#### 4.2.4 Social Cohesion – Preliminary Definition and Operationalisation

In this chapter we define social cohesion in line with the definition given above (Chan et al. 2006, 290), but with some modifications, as we add normative, subjective components related to cooperation, solidarity and mutuality, in line with Dimeglio et al. (2013, 759).

Table 4.1 Aspects of Social Cohesion, by Dimension and Component

	Subjective component	Objective component
<b>Horizontal dimension</b>	General trust of fellow citizens	Social participation and vibrancy of civil society
	Willingness to cooperate and help fellow citizens, including those from “other” social groups	Voluntarism and donations
	Sense of belonging and identity	Presence or absence of major inter-group alliances or cleavages
<b>Vertical dimension</b>	Trust in public figures (such as politicians, celebrities, social media personalities, business leaders)	Political participation
	Confidence in political and other major social institutions	

Source: Chan et al. (2006, 294), slightly modified.

The three main reasons for adopting this definition are, firstly, that it specifies components of social cohesion; secondly, that empirical research, including a large sample of countries with different types of welfare systems, proves that the selected components are statistically interlinked, that is, that they make up a consistent way of operationalising the concept; and thirdly, that the components are applicable even in qualitative research such as the case studies in this book. The operationalisation of the concept thus defined enables us to use indicators of social cohesion in conjunction with empirically established conditions or means and (possible) social mechanisms connecting the two. A possible example would be a city district where a correlation between a high level of economic inequality or widespread poverty and unemployment among young people, and a low level of confidence in political institutions as well as trust in fellow citizens is observed. A qualitative research strategy may enable researchers to construct mechanisms that explain the correlation.

Both Chan et al. (2006) and others claim that shared values should not be included in the definition of social cohesion, but rather be seen as a possible empirical correlate. In the real world the correlation between the level of social cohesion and the degree to which values are shared in a given population or social system may vary, for example, by cultural context. The idea, therefore, is that it is possible for social systems to have a high level of social cohesion without a shared value system.

The countries represented in this book are different, but they are all marked by increasing diversity ethnically, culturally and religiously. For these countries we find it difficult to think of high levels of social cohesion without people sharing values – and practices – that enhance respect for diversity, solidarity and mutuality.

When we take into consideration that social cohesion must refer to societies undergoing change, it means that values of respect for diversity as well as confidence

Table 4.2 Aspects of Social Cohesion, by Dimension and Component (Revised Version)

	Subjective component	Objective component
<b>Horizontal dimension</b>	General trust of fellow citizens	Social participation and vibrancy of civil society
	Willingness to cooperate and help fellow citizens, including those from “other” social groups	Voluntarism and donations
	<i>Respect for diversity</i> <i>Sense of belonging and identity</i> <i>Solidarity and mutuality</i>	Presence or absence of major inter-group alliances or cleavages
<b>Vertical dimension</b>	Trust in public figures	Political participation
	Confidence in political and other major social institutions	

Chan et al. (2006, 294), further modified.

in social institutions should be associated with the “sensitivity towards discrimination and exclusion” (Dimeglio et al.: 2013, 759), social and political participation characterised by accommodation of dissent, and space for diversity of expression and high levels of debate (Desai: 2015). Therefore, with a view to the case study analyses presented in the book, these elements should be included as aspects of the components indicated in Table 4.2.

Based on our definition, a high level of social cohesion is thus present in the population or social systems we address when:

1. people trust, help and cooperate with each other;
2. people accept and respect others, different from themselves;
3. people share a sense of belonging to or identity with the social system in question;
4. people manifest these values, attitudes and feelings in the way they behave;
5. people manifest high levels of social and political participation.

The first four components, by themselves, may facilitate at least some level of social cohesion. The fifth component in turn safeguards the depth of cohesion by securing a vibrant civil society through the active participation of people at all levels of society, where people engage in debate, where diversity of expression is given space, and dissent is allowed – on the condition that the behavioural aspects reflect voluntary engagement and not enforcement by state power (Green & Janmaat: 2011).

Nevertheless, the countries participating in this study make it particularly topical to draw attention to the significance of social exclusion, already mentioned several times in this chapter, for wellbeing and the level of social cohesion. As Amartya Sen (2000) has observed, where there is a high level of socio-economic inequality, “social cohesion faces many difficult problems”; and, not least in this regard, is the functioning of the labour markets in determining the level of inequality and thus



social cohesion. Empirically, Larsen (2013, 73) has demonstrated the correlations between increased levels of social cohesion in societies where economic inequality and poverty has decreased, and decreased levels of trust and cohesion where inequality and poverty have increased, though specifically with reference to the USA, UK, Sweden and Denmark after World War II.

With a view to the topic of the book and the case studies presented in later chapters, our definition of social cohesion leads us to ask if FBOs, in their interactions with young people, contribute towards:

- a) developing, maintaining or strengthening mutual trust and young people's ability and willingness to help and cooperate with other people;
- b) enhancing respect for diversity, solidarity and mutuality and/or inspiring a shared sense of belonging and identity;
- c) fostering young people's agency to participate socially, politically and economically in meaningful ways, and
- d) mutual cooperation – where there is more than one FBO present – in addressing the challenges of young people, instead of competing for affiliation and membership.

We are interested in whether FBOs by and large foster conformity, even silence in the face of unjust adversity, or allow for critical debate, and even dissent, in ways that can contribute to innovation and new ways of engaging with and seeing the world. We are particularly interested in how this applies to young people at the periphery of society in terms of their social participation, their integration into important institutions in society, and in how far they are allowed to express dissent from mainstream society if their concerns or exclusions are not regarded – in ways that would enhance their full integration.

### 4.3 Social Cohesion at Different Levels of Society

Research has been done – and legitimately so – on social cohesion at various levels of society, for example, in urban studies, and among various kinds of groups and communities, including religious groups, neighbourhoods, as well as society as a whole. Dimeglio et al. (2013, 757) pose the question about the level at which social cohesion is an attribute: is it at an individual, community, societal or international level? Like many other authors, they make the point that what “hangs together” at one system level may not do so at another, higher level (see e.g. Forrest & Kearns: 2001; Chan et al.: 2006; Green & Janmaat: 2011; Janmaat: 2011). Forrest and Kearns (2001, 2128), for instance, illustrate the point by comparing a situation where citizens may have a strong attachment and loyalty to their city, but at the expense of a sense of common purpose connected with the wider society (macro level) in

which they live. Their attachment and loyalty to the place may even go together with a conflictual relationship to the society – and other places for that matter. The same may be true at the neighbourhood level. Keeping this in mind, social cohesion may nevertheless be conceived of and analysed at various systems levels.

In what follows we will approach social cohesion at three levels: the neighbourhood, the city, and the societal or national level. It means that we in principle use an urban perspective as our point of departure, even though there may be parallels – at least partly – between what applies to the urban neighbourhood and a more rural area. In our analysis of social cohesion, these levels do not exhaust the number of relevant societal levels; they are selected because of their general theoretical – and policy – relevance in research.

#### 4.3.1 The Neighbourhood

Are locally based identities, networks and cooperation still relevant and important to people at this level of society? If so, are they equally relevant to all people in a neighbourhood, or are they more/less relevant to some people than to others? The neighbourhood level has received renewed attention and interest in policy debates internationally, not least because a tendency has been observed for disadvantaged people, the poor or the classes lowest in the social hierarchy to concentrate in certain areas of cities (Friedrichs: 1998; Forrest: 2008). In policy debates this tendency has been a matter of concern both because of possible problems it may generate for the neighbourhoods and for social cohesion at the city level (Forrest & Kearns: 2001, 2133).

In the South African context apartheid legislation created legal divisions between people and neighbourhoods of different races. The abolition of apartheid laws did not succeed in eliminating social and spatial differentiations overnight. Spatial differentiation underscores the reality that local neighbourhoods, even in the case of urban informal settlements, might display high levels of social cohesion. However, new exclusions and hostilities between neighbourhoods and people, spatially expressed, diminish the quality of social cohesion at the city or societal level.

The Nordic countries also face challenges, though not at all of the same scale as in South Africa, and spatial segregation is more of a consequence of the way market forces work than a result of forced (re)location. In Norway economic inequality and spatial segregation between the “haves” and the “have-nots” are more conspicuous in the capital, Oslo, than elsewhere. Poverty, youth unemployment and criminality rates are higher in some city districts than in others. These districts also see higher levels of migrant population, of moving in of people with migrant background and moving out of people without migrant background (Lepperød: 2017; Nærland: 2014; Strand & Kindt: 2019). However, tensions between majorities and minorities have not materialised in terms of riots, as in other European cities. Moving out

of neighbourhoods in Oslo by majority people has often been caused by what they experience as language problems in school when children with minority backgrounds lack satisfactory skills in the Norwegian language (Spence: 2017).

At the very local level, social cohesion is basically about “getting by and getting on at the more mundane level of everyday life” (Forrest & Kearns: 2001, 2127; cf. Turner: 1990). In more ethical terms, social cohesion may be defined as “the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper” (Stanley: 2003, 5). Members’ willingness means that they collectively, as autonomous persons, “choose to form partnerships and have a reasonable chance of realizing goals, because others are willing to co-operate” and “do good across group dynamics and organizational boundaries” (Heuser: 2005, 13). Though this approach explicitly refers to the societal level, it may well be applied to other spatial levels, such as the neighbourhood level.

Still, one would expect that the neighbourhood has gradually lost its significance as a source of social identity and belonging, not least for young people, as ways of life have become more individualised and fluid, and social relationships more virtual. The new situation makes even an international perspective on social cohesion topical. Phenomena such as the marginalisation of young people, not least those who belong to religious minorities, the feeling of being excluded from the majority society, the search for identity in FBOs, and calls for strong religious commitment as a basis of identity in the online environment, may all be factors conducive to “radicalisation” (Flemström & Ronnby: 1972; Jacobsson & Åkerström: 2013).

Social networks are less territorially limited than before. But not all people are equally mobile. For children, older and disabled people, the unemployed and those whose work is home-based, the neighbourhood continues to be important. They are likely to spend much more time there than those people who are in part- or full-time employment (Forrest: 2008). The same may hold true for young people, in particular those described as NEET (cf. Chapter 2). Social cohesion at this level of society in this context at least is about social networks, care, supervision and participation. The neighbourhood is significant as an arena for the development and maintenance of social ties (Henning & Lieberg: 1996). Henning and Lieberg (1996, 6) underscore the importance of “weak ties” (cf. Granovetter: 1973), that is, of the “unpretentious everyday contacts in the neighbourhood”, including “weak ties of friendship”, in a “friendly society”. Such contacts may give people a feeling of belonging; it provides opportunities for exchanges of services and support, and “help people get through life effectively and responsibly” (Kearns & Forrest: 2000, 1000). From this vantage point, local civil society organisations, and among them faith-based actors, may serve similar functions (functional equivalence), not least for young people without extensive social networks.

We may relate such a functional equivalence to a distinction made by Forrest and Kearns (2001) between neighbourhood and neighbouring. The latter refers to

the process of developing weak and strong ties locally, with differential significance for different categories of people, as pointed out above. A neighbourhood where neighbouring is prominent may be characterised as a community distinguished by a set of “relationships that help to achieve different aspects of well-being” within the same group of people (Völker et al.: 2007, 100–101). But neighbourhoods can also be characterised by lack of neighbourliness and community, lack of mutual trust, support and services, of qualities of self-help, which reduce the level of social cohesion (Forrest & Kearns: 1999; Putnam: 1993; Putnam: 2000).

A high level of social cohesion in a neighbourhood is not always a good thing though. Above we emphasised the important role of weak ties for social cohesion. Portes and Landholt (1996), in a critical analysis of the role of strong ties at this level of society, state that such ties can create “downward-levelling pressures”. What they mean is that strong ties can involve pressures to conform in such a way that “the same kinds of ties that sometimes yield public goods also produce ‘public bads’” (Portes & Landholt: 1996, 20), attitudes and behaviour that make it difficult for people to enter mainstream society. A possible example would be young people with a substance use problem caught in a social network of people suffering the same problem and finding it difficult to escape the situation because of a lack of external support persons and/or other resources.

Does diversity have a negative effect on social cohesion at the neighbourhood level? Various scholars have concluded in the affirmative, but Natalia Letki’s seminal study of British neighbourhoods (Stead: 2017) mainly disconfirms the negative effect, bringing in the socio-economic status of the neighbourhood as a mediating factor.

The way that social cohesion could manifest itself at the neighbourhood level of society is suggested by Forrest and Kearns (2001, 2134) who observe that it would be constituted by “groups of people who live in a local area getting together to promote or defend some common local interest” in line with what was captured by the (positive) term neighbouring above. Applying a case study research strategy, it should be possible to look for such engagement, keeping in mind the aspects of social cohesion as we have defined them (cf. Chapters 6–11).

#### 4.3.2 The City

One reason for introducing this level is that high – or low – levels of social cohesion at the neighbourhood level may not be reflected in a corresponding level of social cohesion at the city level. Similarly, relatively high – or low – levels of social cohesion at the city level do not necessarily mean that all neighbourhoods of the same city experience the same level of social cohesion. To build social cohesion in society is not a simple bottom-up process, though this is partly how it is conceived in much policy debate (Forrest: 2008). Neighbourhoods with a high level of social

cohesion may be in conflict with each other; “neighbouring” may be prominent in each neighbourhood, but does not by necessity “spill over” into tolerance, respect, trust, help and cooperation across neighbourhood divides, or a common sense of belonging and identity. And there are also other relevant perspectives on the neighbourhood than the community perspective. We may, for instance, conceive of the neighbourhood as commodity, when characterised by social and spatial exclusion; or when the neighbourhood is mostly private space and “safety and security becomes a commodity to be packaged and sold as a neighbourhood type” (Forrest: 2008, 135). Thus, this type of neighbourhood may define itself in contrast to or in conflict with other neighbourhoods, where the residents may perceive that they have little that binds them together.

There has been a debate in the literature about the importance of the neighbourhood as compared to the city level with regard to those aspects of how people relate to each other (see e.g. Bagnall et al.: 1997). From a policy perspective, a high level of social cohesion at the neighbourhood level may be expressed in terms of organised ways of cooperation between people. It may imply that organised cooperation may be structured, for example in the form of voluntary associations, to work for the welfare of the neighbourhood. In such a situation the associations may find it relevant to engage with the authorities at the city level. However, the ability to do so may depend on formal structures at the city level, informal strategies and the political system. Thus, in many ways there are important connections between these two levels of society. Many urban neighbourhoods with a high level of social cohesion may result in low levels of social cohesion in the city at large if the neighbourhoods are shut off from each other, in particular when the well-off maintain “a wilful blindness to the social conditions of the lower parts of society” (Cassiers & Kesteloot: 2012, 1916). More generally, this may be the case when respect, trust, help and cooperation limit themselves to the neighbourhood, and relations between neighbourhoods are characterised by tensions or conflicts, which is the case in many ethnically or socio-economically segregated cities. Riots in neighbourhoods in European cities such as Paris, the self-imprisonment of wealthy neighbourhoods and violent service delivery protests in poor and socio-economically excluded neighbourhoods in South African cities, and, in a mild form, spatial segregation of (relatively) wealthy and (relatively) poor neighbourhoods in Nordic European cities could be understood from this perspective. A reasonable conclusion is that the relationship between social cohesion at the neighbourhood level and the wider urban or societal levels seems rather complex.

Cassiers and Kesteloot (2012) combine the city and neighbourhood levels through a policy perspective, considering preconditions and social mechanisms for social cohesion to be achieved. They examine the city and its neighbourhoods in the context of new forms of capitalist accumulation and the changing role of the public sector (Cassiers & Kesteloot: 2012, 1911–1912), acknowledging

contradictory interests and ideals among diverse local populations. Instead of brushing over difference, they argue that the city should “create institutions in which these groups can confront each other and decide about the city’s future” (Cassiers & Kesteloot: 2012, 1910). This is similar to Stead’s (2017) assertion that social cohesion is the outcome of negotiating conflicting interests and visions, instead of consensus-oriented city processes, which often involves silencing or suppressing minorities (cf. Beaumont & Nicholls: 2008).

In exploring the theoretical concept of social cohesion, the usefulness of the concept, and the actual possibility of socially cohesive cities, it is important also to retrieve hopeful narratives of possibility. A city such as Medellín, Colombia, demonstrated the possibility of social cohesion between vastly disparate and diverse neighbourhoods, when politicians, planners, architects, designers, community leaders and local neighbourhood people themselves intentionally worked towards it (Puddephatt: 2006; see also Roden: 2017). Through deliberate planning and design interventions, as well as active community participation in social and design planning processes, trust, cooperation and a feeling of belonging were developed by connecting socio-economically diverse neighbourhoods with each other. For this book, based on research which in itself was not policy oriented, experiences from cities like Medellín offer fruitful perspectives in the case study analyses, even though the findings may not easily be constructed in terms of “hopeful narratives”.

### 4.3.3 The National Level

There may be several reasons for choosing the national level as the most appropriate level for analysing social cohesion. One reason is that in a political context the state is the most important political institution, and social cohesion policies are mainly initiated and/or implemented at the government level (Chan et al.: 2006). But as we have already emphasised, social cohesion is not necessarily “spatially homogeneous” (Maloutas & Pantelidou-Malouta: 2004, 452), in the sense that the level of social cohesion in one urban neighbourhood need not correspond to the level of social cohesion in other neighbourhoods; high levels of social cohesion at this level may not necessarily be accompanied by a high level of cohesion at the city level, which in turn may not correspond to a high level of social cohesion at the national or societal level. But the way the concept has been specified in this chapter, including a horizontal and a vertical dimension, helps to link the macro and the micro levels, though primarily through institutions such as the labour market (cf. Dimeglio et al.: 2013).

At this level of society the role of the media is worth mentioning. They can take on different roles in a situation of social tension and conflict, contributing to increasing – or reducing or resolving – tensions and conflicts (Cottle: 2006; Puddephatt: 2006). In this way media presentations can have an effect on social

cohesion. In the case of Norway, for instance, voices have been raised in the national media to present a more nuanced picture of the situation in the city districts in Oslo most often associated with negative characteristics, as “myths” and media logic may contribute to labelling and segregation undermining social cohesion (Edvardsen: 2020; Eilders: 2006; Nærland: 2014).

#### 4.3.4 Social Cohesion and the Role of the State

To return briefly to the political perspective, the preoccupation with social cohesion during the past two decades may be understood as a consequence of changes in dominant political and economic ideologies; neoliberalism has gained momentum in Western Europe and North America, along with processes of economic globalisation. Growing disillusion with the political system and the politicians arising from things like a widening income gap in the populations, persistently high levels of unemployment, and widespread social exclusion are some of the factors behind the growing disenchantment. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is among the international institutions that have been concerned about this situation (Keeley: 2015; OECD: 2011; cf. Putnam: 2004).

The OECD (1997) and Jenson (1998), combined, propose three different overriding political strategies to come to terms with the problems identified above related to social cohesion, strategies based on: a) neoliberal ideology (market-based and individually oriented); b) public institutions and shared values (collectively oriented); and c) certain versions of democratic socialism (post-war Christian democracy and positively oriented liberalism). What these strategies have in common is that they see social order as a result of “an active government, capable of redistributing income, in a well-functioning, productive economy and in democratic public institutions dedicated to overseeing the whole” (Jenson: 1998, 12). Conflicts between persons and groups are supposed to be resolved through collectively made choices in a democratic system of decision-making.

From a social science perspective, the three strategies presented above correspond well with the way Green and Janmaat have analysed social cohesion discourses in European and North-American policy discourses more generally (Green & Janmaat: 2011). They identify three main discourses on social cohesion in their analyses of political documents:

- “Liberal discourse”: the strongest emphasis is on an active civil society, citizens’ participation, especially at the local level;
- “Republican discourse”: most emphasis is on the state rather than civil society. A key concept is “social partnership”, which refers to the importance of representative civil society organisations for conflict intermediation;

- “Social democratic discourse”: shares most of the characteristics of the republican discourse, including “social partnership”, but with a more fundamental stress on equality.

In the South African political discourse on social cohesion the emphasis is often placed on addressing inequalities, exclusions and disparities that hinder the formation of a cohesive society and the full participation of citizens in achieving such shared goals (cf. DAC: 2012). This corresponds with the strong emphasis on civil society agency to be found in North American and in some European discourses. However, in practice, there is often a tension in South Africa between the formal political discourse with its emphasis on a participatory citizenry, and the reality of a more top-down, statist approach. In the Nordic countries, in comparison, more emphasis is placed on the role of the state – in cooperation or partnership with civil society – for structures and enabling processes to maintain or strengthen social cohesion and social and economic equality. Thus, the three discourses on social cohesion identified by Green and Janmaat are relevant as environments for understanding the role of civil society organisations – including FBOs – in processes to strengthen social cohesion at various levels of society.

And yet, we cannot but heed the caution of Desai (2015) in the context of the South African debate on social cohesion. The co-option of social cohesion by a “reformist agenda”, emphasising reconciliation and good governance at the expense of more fundamental structural and systemic change, could result in deepened inequalities and exclusions, and even a greater lack of cohesion instead of the opposite.

#### 4.4 Related Concepts

The many ways of defining social cohesion provide easy access to other related concepts or terms that are invoked in pursuing the same goal or concern. In both a political and a social science context, the distinction between means-end approaches and approaches based on identification of constituent elements may be helpful (cf. Section 4.2.3). In her analysis of the concept and its operationalisation, Berger-Schmitt (2000, 4ff) introduces two principal goal dimensions: integration and social capital. The former is associated with social equality (or lack thereof) and social inclusion. The latter is associated with social networks and trust. Both goal dimensions are closely related to the various conceptions of social cohesion in the research literature. In research on the effect of diversity on social cohesion, social capital and trust are among the most frequently used indicators (Letki: 2008; Fieldhouse & Cutts: 2010; Lancee & Dronkers: 2011; Larsen: 2013).



“Social integration” is often connected with and measured at the individual level in terms of position in the labour market or in education (Berger-Schmitt: 2000; Cassiers & Kesteloot: 2012; Portes & Fernández-Kelly: 2015) – which links it directly to the NEET category discussed in Chapter 2 of this book. In turn, “social inclusion” is usually constructed as a complex, multidimensional concept, including both spatial, relational and functional aspects in the literature (Jeannotte: 2008; Oxoby: 2009; Fieldhouse & Cutts: 2010). It may be constructed as a process, a collective agency, an institutionalisation process, and also as a policy perspective. In the literature on the problems of social cohesion, it is frequently the opposite of social inclusion that is in focus (Levitas: 2005; Moulaert: 1996; Moulaert et al.: 2007). It is likely that processes of systematic social exclusion in the long run increase chances of tensions or conflicts arising by generating increased social differences and accompanying frustrations.

In Berger-Schmitt’s framework (2000) “social capital” is a dimension of social cohesion in what we categorised earlier in this chapter as a “means-end approach”. What most definitions of social capital have in common is that they focus on social relations that have some benefits; in other words, social capital represents resources linked to the availability of social relations (Bourdieu: 1986), “networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Powell: 2001, 67). By implication, lack of social capital may therefore reduce the chances of success in the education system or the labour market (social integration). In rapidly changing societies the connections may be less obvious, but nonetheless important. Socio-cultural assets not previously acknowledged or embraced as assets may be turned into real assets.

Putnam’s emphasis on “trust” as an aspect of social capital finds resonance in Larsen’s work on social cohesion. Larsen (2013, 6), in his interesting book on the rise and fall of social cohesion in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, takes trust as his indicator for social cohesion. He defines the latter as “the belief held by citizens of a given nation state that they share a moral community, which enables them to trust each other.”

From a South African perspective, De Beer (2014, 1) argues that one should address “on the one hand, the question of diversity and participation, social inclusion, healing and reconciliation as well as citizenship and participation and, on the other hand, the question of equity and justice, namely social justice, restitution, land distribution and spatial transformation.” Without a comprehensive understanding of social cohesion that also addresses the root causes of social fragmentation and upheaval, a narrower understanding will be unable to facilitate sustainable cohesiveness in society.

#### 4.5 Conclusion: Approaching and Operationalising Social Cohesion

When it comes to the question of how to operationalise social cohesion, our starting point is our definition of the concept and the corresponding five components: mutual trust, help and cooperation; mutual acceptance and respect of others, different from oneself; a shared sense of belonging to or identification with the social system in question; manifestation of these values, attitudes and feelings in the way people behave; and high levels of social and political participation. We should keep in mind that in the case studies presented in later chapters in this book the respective authors do not aim to measure degrees or levels of social cohesion in the societies and case study locations. The overall and underlying goal instead is to study whether and how religion or FBOs contribute to one or more of the five conditions in their interactions with young people in a difficult life situation. To this end, using a qualitative research strategy, we should thus investigate how the interactions between the young people and the FBOs contribute, most realistically, to shaping, maintaining or strengthening the subjective components connected with the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of social cohesion captured in Table 4.2: mutual trust, help and cooperation; mutual acceptance and respect of others, different from oneself; and a shared sense of belonging to or identification with the social system in question. Since the case studies involve FBOs as mediators, it will be important to study aspects of social cohesion at an organisational level in a means-end perspective. Such a perspective implies a study of whether and how the FBOs contribute to several aspects of social cohesion, be it trust relationships, integration in inter-organisational networks, and processes of inclusion or exclusion, both in the FBOs' relations with young people and in a wider societal perspective.

The concept of social cohesion has been the focus of much criticism. In current political debates one of the recurrent issues is ethnic and religious diversity and their consequences in society. This is highly relevant to this book, since the case studies presented have taken place in widely diverse localities, both ethnically and religiously. We have referred to research on the effect of diversity on social cohesion, which suggests a rather complex interplay. If Berger and his research colleagues are correct (Berger: 1998, 353) that no modern society should aspire to a unified system of norms, then “pluralism becomes not just a fact but a virtue – to wit, the ideal of people with different beliefs and values living together in a state of civic peace,” but not necessarily in harmony. Social tensions and conflicts are not necessarily threatening the integration of a society, and conflict and cohesion are not antonyms. As Coser suggests, conflict tends to be dysfunctional only for social structures in which there is insufficient tolerance or institutionalisation of conflict. Social structures are not threatened by conflict as such; it is rather their rigid character that may put them in jeopardy (Coser: 2001 [1956]). The seeds for (positive) change often lie in disharmony and social protest, and they should

therefore not be conceived as being in opposition to a vision for social cohesion (cf. de Beer: 2014, 2). Labonte (2004, 116) cautions that greater threats to social cohesion are the economic and social structures of exclusion and injustice that evoke disharmony or protest. Thus, to the extent that relevant conflicts are identified, it is of interest to study how local communities cope with or handle conflict – as a way of taking responsibility to deal with fault lines or social exclusions, and of ensuring the necessary structural changes in order to address conflicts that have surfaced.

