

# The Essentials of Social Cohesion: A Literature Review

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**Abstract** The social cohesion literature repeatedly criticizes a lack of consensus regarding the theoretical conceptualization of the construct. The current paper attempts to clarify this ambiguity by providing a literature review on the recent approaches. By taking a bird's eye view on previous conceptualizations of social cohesion we emphasize that in the majority of approaches there is in fact more overlap in the concept than has so far been assumed. In particular, we suggest three essential dimensions of social cohesion: (1) social relations, (2) identification with the geographical unit, and (3) orientation towards the common good. Each dimension is further differentiated into several sub-dimensions. We argue that additional elements identified in the literature (shared values, inequality, quality of life) are rather determinants or consequences of social cohesion, but not constituting elements. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

**Keywords** Social cohesion · Social relations · Identification · Orientation towards the common good

## 1 Introduction

Over the last 20 years, social cohesion has received enormous attention in academia, as well as the political sphere (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Chan et al. 2006; Chiesi 2004; Hulse and Stone 2007; Jenson 1998, 2010). Typically, social cohesion is seen as a desirable

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feature of a social entity (i.e., community or society), but also as a feature that is currently deteriorating (Council of Europe 2005; Jenson 1998; Schmeets and te Riele 2014). In Germany, for example, a recent survey found that a majority of the population agrees with statements such as “Cohesion in Germany is in danger” and “The society is increasingly falling apart (54 and 74 % respectively; Zick and Küpper 2012). The reasons for the alleged decline of social cohesion can be subsumed under the following four observations: (1) The process of globalization and its associated economic changes are assumed to undermine social cohesion (Chan et al. 2006; Chiesi 2004; Hulse and Stone 2007; Jenson 2010; Mitchell 2000; Touraine 2000); (2) global migration movements and growing ethno-cultural diversity is seen by many as a threat to social cohesive societies (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Chan et al. 2006; Cheong et al. 2007; Hulse and Stone 2007; Niessen 2000; Putnam 2000; for recent reviews see Ariely 2014; Harell and Stolle 2014; Wickes et al. 2014; Huntington 2004). Related to this increased ethno-cultural diversity, severe social and ethnic unrests, such as in the United Kingdom in 2011, have put the preservation of social cohesion high on the political agenda (see Cheong et al. 2007; House of Commons 2004, 2008; Ratcliffe 2011); (3) the development of new information and (computer-based) communication technologies change social relationships, which are considered to be constitutive for social cohesion (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Ferlander and Timms 1999); and (4) in the context of the European Union, the inclusion of additional member states is viewed as challenging national (id)entities and requiring the integration of different welfare systems (Chan et al. 2006; Hulse and Stone 2007; Hunt 2005).

Scholars of social cohesion argue, however, that—beyond the emphasis on social cohesion as a desirable characteristic of a community, and the common narrative of social cohesion being in decline—there is little agreement on what social cohesion precisely entails. Subsequently, various authors suggested new definitions and frameworks of social cohesion, which in turn were picked up and criticized by other protagonists in the field (e.g., Ariely 2014; Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Bernard 1999; Bollen and Hoyle 1990; Chan et al. 2006; Dicks et al. 2010; Hulse and Stone 2007; Jenson 1998, 2010; Klein 2013; Novy et al. 2012). As a result, Bernard (1999) described social cohesion as a “quasi-concept, that is, one of those hybrid mental constructions that politics proposes to us more and more often in order to simultaneously detect possible consensuses on a reading of reality, and to forge them” (p. 2). Furthermore, Bernhard argues, it is the vagueness of such a hybrid construction that makes it adaptable to various situations, but also what makes it difficult to pin down what is exactly meant by the construct. Indeed, more than 15 years later, there seems to be a consensus most notably about the lack of a clear definition and conceptualization of social cohesion.

Despite this lack of consensus, recent decades have seen an inflationary use of the concept by scientists and policy makers as an instrument to monitor societal development and to adapt policies to face societal challenges, such as globalization or diversity. However, in order to do so, a precise theoretical understanding of the concept is indispensable. Only if we have a common idea of what the concept contains we can empirically monitor the state and development of social cohesion in different societies, test the common assumption that social cohesion is in decline, identify weak spots, and develop policy recommendations. The goal of the current contribution is therefore to define the essentials of social cohesion, based on a literature review of recent approaches. We will show that, although different approaches stress different elements of social cohesion based on certain ideologies or concerns of agents from particular policy fields, the majority of the approaches eventually capture similar core dimensions. In other words, there is in fact more overlap between the approaches than the above described disagreement implies. We

identified three core dimensions of social cohesion that the majority of social cohesion approaches agree on: social relations, sense of belonging, and orientation towards the common good. Three other, often incorporated, components of social cohesion—(in)equality, quality of life, and shared values—we argue, should however be treated as antecedents or consequences of social cohesion, rather than inherent essential components.

## 2 Uncovering the Essentials of Social Cohesion

### 2.1 Procedure

The starting point was the immanent need for clarity regarding the meaning of social cohesion in order to standardize measurement. This need is evident among social scientists, policy makers and policy advisors (e.g., foundations or think tanks). We aimed to identify essential elements of social cohesion as discussed in the literature that need to be assessed in order to monitor cohesion in a society and to develop policies for improvement. In order to establish a comprehensive collection of approaches to social cohesion, we conducted a search of English and German publications. We limited the search to the recent literature on social cohesion (since the 1990s), because this is the time during which social cohesion became prominent as a policy-relevant construct (e.g., Jenson 1998). Our review was ‘configurative’ in nature, meaning that it explored a theoretical construct—social cohesion—in order to develop an understanding of what the construct means to scientists and policy makers who use the term (Gough et al. 2013). We synthesized the literature in an inductive way by determining a set of relevant social cohesion dimensions (and their joint appearance) based on how they are being used in the literature.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the construct is used both by policy makers and scientists had an impact on the criteria for publications to be included in the review. Our literature review had to cover both of what Chan et al. (2006) have termed the academic and the policy discourse on social cohesion (see Sect. 2.2 for a description of the field). Hence, the reviewed literature comprised articles, working papers, reports, books, conference proceedings, speeches, newspaper articles etc. We mainly searched for English language publications, however, in order to broaden the scope we also included German language literature, published since 1990. Substantial inclusion criteria were: (1) social cohesion was explicitly named as a major (sub-) topic in the title or in the abstract; (2) the publication focused on social cohesion on a conceptual level; (3) the publication suggested indicators of social cohesion; or (4) the publication documented empirical findings on the level of social cohesion within or across countries.

In order to capture both the academic and policy-oriented literature (i.e., not formerly published ‘grey’ literature), we combined searches of academic literature data bases (including Google Scholar, Web of Science, PsychInfo, and the German WISO data base)<sup>2</sup> with regular Google searches. Searched key words were ‘social cohesion’ as well as the German equivalents ‘Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt’, ‘Sozialer Zusammenhalt’ and ‘Soziale Kohäsion’. We combined full-text searches with those that listed only publications

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<sup>1</sup> The alternative would be a more deductive ‘aggregative’ approach which collects information within the framework of a particular theory in order to test hypothesis or synthesize findings with regard to a particular phenomenon (Gough et al. 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Most of the searches were performed with Web of Science since it covers more disciplines than specialized data bases.

where the term appeared in the title or the abstract.<sup>3</sup> In addition, we identified relevant publications as they were cited in the publications we scrutinized. The literature search resulted in around 350 articles, books, reports, policy papers or public positions by social scientists and political stakeholders. This body of literature was given a first screening mainly based on abstracts and executive summaries to sort out irrelevant publications (e.g., publications that use the term social cohesion but in fact dealt with a broader or different topic, or papers that dealt with the term cohesion apart from its social context). Subsequently, we applied a quasi-inductive synthesizing procedure. We first obtained an overview of the academic and policy field that deals with the social cohesion construct (involved academic disciplines and policy stakeholders, main area of interest of the stakeholders, geographical concentration etc.). In other words, we obtained a ‘map’ of the research field on social cohesion and an overview of its nature (see Gough et al. 2013). Section 2.2 below describes the field. Following a committee approach, both authors then scrutinized the material and identified relevant text sections that contain definitions and descriptions of dimensions. These text sections were synthesized to a set of commonly appearing dimensions which was continuously discussed, revised and reorganized over the course of the literature review. The process was continued until the authors judged the set of relevant dimensions as theoretically saturated. Since social cohesion is considered by many scholars to be a multidimensional construct, the definitions were also discussed in terms of their simultaneous reference to more than one dimension. By doing so we identified overlap between dimensions often found in the publications.

## 2.2 The Research Field on Social Cohesion

Our review of the recent literature on social cohesion covered both of what Chan et al. (2006) have termed the academic and the policy discourse on social cohesion. The academic discourse takes predominantly place within and between the disciplines of Sociology, Political Science, and Psychology (among others Bollen and Hoyle 1990; Dickes and Valentova 2012; Etzioni 1995; Gough and Olofsson 1999; Hulse and Stone 2007; Janmaat 2011; Lockwood 1999; Putnam 2000; Paxton 2002; Rajulton et al. 2007) and is focused on a conceptual and analytic understanding of social cohesion (see Chan et al. 2006). The policy discourse, on the other hand, is more problem-orientated and looks at current needs and developments within national contexts or trans-national unions. In this discourse, the term social cohesion is used in a rather all-encompassing way, as a “catchword” (Chan et al. 2006, p. 277) for all types of social challenges the society faces. Policy-orientated research is mainly initiated by sociopolitical institutions in different countries (governments, think tanks, foundations) and by trans-national entities. Prominent agents are Canada (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Bernard 1999; Jackson et al. 2000; Jeannotte et al. 2002; Jenson 1998, 2010; Maxwell 1996; Policy Research Sub-Committee on Social Cohesion 1997; Stanley 2003; Toye 2007), the European Commission (Berger-Schmitt 2000; European Commission 1996, 2001, 2007) and the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 1998, 2005; European Committee for Social Cohesion 2004), but also Australia (e.g., Jupp et al. 2007) or the United Kingdom (e.g., Home Office Community Cohesion Unit 2003).

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<sup>3</sup> It would be impossible to go through all publications that turned up in our search (e.g., Google Scholar gives almost 4000 hits for the term ‘social cohesion’ in titles). As a rule of thumb, we checked the first 100 entries of each list, sorted by relevance. Depending on the relevance of the articles listed at later pages, we sometimes included more or less pages.

One reason for the difficulty to reach consensus regarding the conceptualization of social cohesion is that the nature of the policy discourse is often politicized and driven by the concerns of agents from particular policy fields. The World Bank, for example, addresses social cohesion with a focus on economic development and poverty reduction (see Ritzen 2001; Easterly et al. 2006), the European Union and the Council of Europe address social cohesion against the background of economic instabilities (Hulse and Stone 2007; Jeannotte 2000), and the UK against the background of increasing cultural diversity (Cheong et al. 2007). In national political debates agents with different, and sometimes even opposing political ideologies use the social cohesion term to promote their views, for example by being in favour or oppose cultural diversity, promoting value homogeneity or acceptance of value diversity, or the return to traditional values and nationalism (Boucher and Samad 2013; Cheong et al. 2007; Laurence 2009; Yuval-Davis et al. 2005). From a social-democratic view, equality and solidarity might be emphasized as an essential ingredient for social cohesion whereas from a nationalist view the shared national history and traditional values might be emphasized. Liberal views, in turn, might stress the importance of equality in terms of individual opportunities (Green et al. 2009; Green and Janmaat 2011).

### 2.3 Early Roots and Contemporary Major Conceptualizations of Social Cohesion

As we have pointed out above, most scholars agree that social cohesion is a (desirable) characteristic of a social entity (such as a community or society), hence, it is not an individual trait. Furthermore, social cohesion is typically seen as a multidimensional construct consisting of phenomena on the micro (e.g., individual attitudes and orientations), meso (features of communities and groups), and macro (features of societal institutions) level.

Before taking a bird's eye perspective on social cohesion concepts, we begin our review with a brief sketch of the historical roots of social cohesion debates as well as the most prominent multi-dimensional approaches to social cohesion that emerged during the last two decades.

Social cohesion is not a contemporary construct but is rooted in a long history of theoretical debates on the question what constitutes social order in a society and why it can be maintained even in times of social changes (Green and Janmaat 2011; Green et al. 2009). Both early and contemporary social cohesion discourses often emerged from events of social change that seemed to undermine social fabric and weaken established authorities and social order (e.g., industrialization, emergence of capitalism, or globalization; Green and Janmaat 2011; Green et al. 2009; Jenson 1998; Norton and de Haan 2013). Early protagonists of social cohesion discussions came from sociology, political science and political philosophy. The early schools of thought differ in their perspectives on what constitutes social cohesion in a society. The British liberalism movement, for example, which emerged in the seventeenth century and still exists (primarily in the context of market economy) today, viewed societal processes as the simple sum of individual actions. In this view, the individual's interests and goals precede the society's common interests; the role of the state is reduced to protecting individuals' rights and freedom. Social cohesion and order emerges automatically from the natural harmony of individual interests (desire to exchange goods and cooperate which eventually benefits all). Social cohesion is, so to say, an unintended by-product of individual behavior (Green and Janmaat 2011; Green et al. 2009; Jenson 1998). As a response to this view, French sociologists and

political philosophers, with their major protagonist Émile Durkheim (1893), promoted the idea of society as an integrated system with shared principles and values and emphasized the role of solidarism. Social cohesion is not a by-product of individual behavior but rather based on solidarity, shared loyalties, cooperation and mutual action (for reviews see Chiesi 2004; Council of Europe 2005; Green and Janmaat 2011; Green et al. 2009; Jenson 1998). Durkheim distinguished between solidarity that is based on shared collective values, beliefs, traditions and life styles (mechanical solidarity in more traditional societies) and a type of solidarity that emerged in the course of industrialization and division of labor, which is based on mutual dependencies between individuals due to their specialized roles in society (organic solidarity). Related to this stream of thought, sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) critically addressed modernity and individualization by introducing the differentiation between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Whereas the former is a group of individuals who are socially connected and act for the sake of the community, the latter is a group of individuals who are living together geographically but are socially more isolated and only connected instrumentally. A third school of thought can be located in Germany of the late eighteenth century and can be described as romantic conservatism (Green and Janmaat 2011; Green et al. 2009). From this view, cohesive societies are durable social hierarchies that are bound together by cultural traditions and by deference of the individual to the social order and the acceptance of their position in the society. There is no distinction between individuals and society because both are merged in an organic entity, bound together by the same language, culture and traditions.

These early schools of thought were highly influential to later sociologists and political scientists working on the understanding of social order and social cohesion (e.g., the functionalism approach around Talcott Parsons or Robert Merton), and the early dissonance between the theorists is still mirrored in contemporary political views on social cohesion, such as liberal, republican or social-democratic views (Green and Janmaat 2011; Green et al. 2009). Twentieth century sociology addressed, among others, the topic of social integration. Social cohesion is present when individuals and groups with different cultures, values, beliefs, life styles, and socio-economic resources have equal access to all domains of societal life and live together without conflict (e.g., Gough and Olofsson 1999; Lockwood 1999). Lockwood (1999) received considerable attention with his distinction between social integration (relationships between individuals or groups) and system integration (relationships between functional parts of a society). The former distinguishes social cohesion (strength of networks) and civic integration (institutional order of a society) and is based on shared values and other similarities (for reviews see Berman and Phillips 2004; Giardiello 2014). The role of social networks for the functionality and problem solving capability of societies is also emphasized by the social capital approach (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 2000; Paxton 2002; Coleman 1988).

Compared to the early schools of thought, contemporary approaches to social cohesion are more strongly circled around its operationalization and usability for policy makers. One of the most prominent recent frameworks was developed by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (Jenson 1998), which suggested five dimensions of social cohesion: (1) Belonging/isolation (i.e., shared values, collective identities in the social entity), (2) economic inclusion/exclusion (e.g., in the labor market), (3) participation and involvement of the society's members in public affairs, (4) recognition versus rejection of diversity and pluralism, and (5) the degree of legitimacy of societal institutions. Bernard (1999) further developed Jenson's approach by classifying her dimensions according to three particular domains (economic, political, or socio-cultural) and the type of social involvement (attitudinal or behavioral; see also Acket et al. 2011), resulting in altogether six dimensions.

Other authors have followed different approaches. For example, Chan et al. (2006) distinguished between subjective (trust, attitudes, identification) and objective (participation rates, crime rates etc.) components of social cohesion, which apply to both horizontal relations (between members of society) and vertical relationships (between individuals and institutions). A recent work by Dickes and colleagues integrates both Bernard (1999) and Chan et al.'s (2006) frameworks (Acket et al. 2011; Dickes and Valentova 2012; Dickes et al. 2010), suggesting four main dimensions of social cohesion: legitimacy versus illegitimacy (i.e., institutional trust), acceptance versus rejection (i.e., solidarity, and concern for the common good), political participation, and socio-cultural participation (Dickes and Valentova 2012).

## 2.4 Six Common Dimensions of Social Cohesion

The above sketched approaches have received much attention, yet, they do by far not cover the diversity of social cohesion approaches in the literature. Instead of discussing each individual approach, we now continue by taking a bird's eye perspective on the various approaches, definitions and operationalizations. Our review allowed us to abstract from individual approaches and to distill six distinguishable dimensions of social cohesion that we found to commonly appear in publications (Fig. 1, see also Table 1 for example definitions): *Social relations*, *identification*, *orientation towards the common good*, *shared values*, *quality of life*, and *(in)equality*. To reflect the multidimensionality of social cohesion, some of the dimensions in Fig. 1 overlap, indicating that they are jointly referred to in the definitions. Most of these dimensions can subsequently be further subdivided into more concrete empirically assessable components, and are discussed in more detail below.

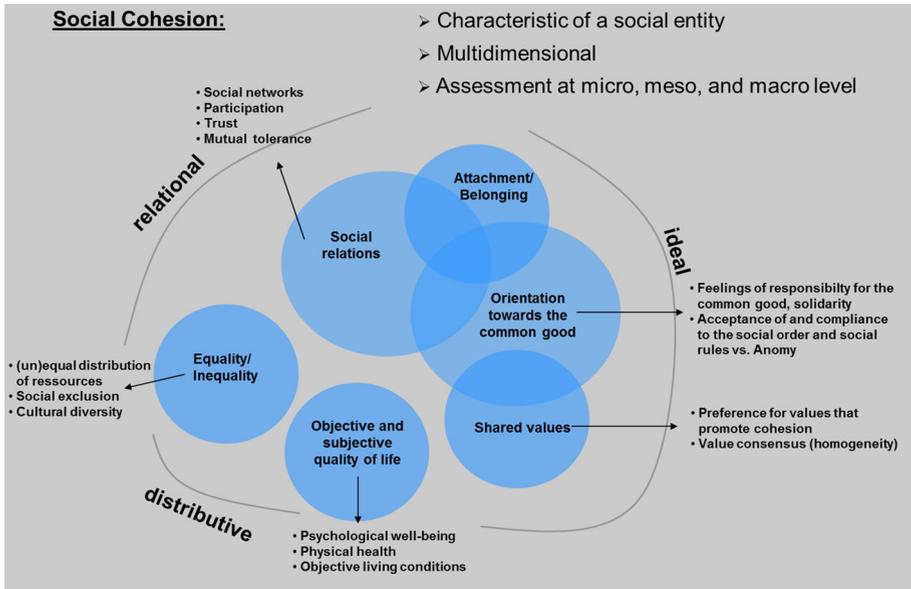
Four out of the six dimensions fit under what Moody and White (2003) as well as Janmaat (2011) have labeled the *ideational* and *relational dimension* of social cohesion. The ideational dimension comprises cognitive and affective facets such as norms, values, and identification; the relational dimension encompasses the relationships and ties between individuals. The remaining two dimensions, quality of life and (in-)equality, can be subsumed under a third general dimension which we label the *distributive dimension*, encompassing the (un)equal distribution of physical, economic, social, and cultural resources.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.4.1 Social Relations

Social relations between groups and individuals are the most prominent aspect of social cohesion. From a classical social-psychological perspective, this component emphasizes a group's attraction to its members; social relations make people continue to stay in the group (Friedkin 2004). Definitions of social cohesion that refer to social relations are for example "[...] the quality and strength of people's relationships and bonds with others—their family, friends and the wider community—are important ingredients of the level of social cohesion" (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, p. 19), "[...] characteristic of a society dealing with the connections and relations between societal units such as

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<sup>4</sup> A clear assignment of the six components to one of the three dimensions is, however, not always possible. Cooperation, for example, can be conceptualized as cooperative behavior (i.e., relational dimension) or as the subjective value of cooperating with others (ideational dimension; see also Moody and White 2003). Similarly, social exclusion contains relational (negative relations between groups) as well as distributive (e.g., social exclusion through disadvantages on the labor market) aspects.



**Fig. 1** Core dimensions and appertaining components of social cohesions

individuals, groups, associations as well as territorial units” (Berger-Schmitt 2000, p. 2, with reference to McCracken 1998), or “[...] state of affairs concerning both the vertical and horizontal interactions among members of society [...]” (Chan et al. 2006, p. 290).

One of the components associated with social relations are *social networks*, i.e., the quality and quantity of social interactions with family members, friends, and acquaintances, measured via, for example, frequencies of mutual visits in the neighborhood or of phone calls (see Villarreal and Silva 2006). This resembles the concept of *social capital* as proposed by Bourdieu (1986) and more recently by Putnam (2000; see Council of Europe 2005; Jenson 2010; Kearns and Forrest 2000; for a comparison of the social cohesion and social capital approach see Klein 2013). Putnam (2000) defines social capital as “[...] connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). Berger-Schmitt (2000) views social capital as one of the main pillars of social cohesion. The World Bank (Grootaert and van Bastelaer 2001; Serageldin and Dasupta 2000) uses the term social capital and social cohesion interchangeably (Ritzen 2001).

A cohesive society would not be possible without a certain degree of *trust*—not only between people, but also towards institutions (Chan et al. 2006; Dickes et al. 2010; Uslaner 2012), which is another component we assigned to the dimension of social relations. Larsen (2013), for example, views social cohesion as the “belief—held by citizens in a given nation state—that they share a moral community, which enables them to trust each other” (p. 3). Trust, or the expectancy that other persons’ behavior is predictable and is in principal lead by positive intentions (Morrone et al. 2009), is a moral resource of solidarity (Delhey 2007) and strengthens cooperation, unity, and identification. Moreover, it is considered to be crucial for social development (Morrone et al. 2009; OECD 2011) and an essential element of social capital (Adam and Roncevic 2004; Morrone et al. 2009), since it enhances economic exchange, improves the efficiency of public institutions and provides

**Table 1** Definitions of social cohesion (selection)

	Dimension*					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
The connections and relations between societal units such as individuals, groups (and) associations' (Berger-Schmitt 2000, p. 2, following McCracken 1998); it is the 'glue' that holds communities together. Cohesiveness is created from connections based on a shared sense of belonging and attachment, similar values, trust and a sense of 'social solidarity' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005, p. 40)	■	■	■	■		
Social cohesion basically refers to the presence of structural and attitudinal mechanisms of solidarity, co-operation and exchange between citizens in a society. These constituting networks can be either material or structural (exchange of goods, economic interactions) or immaterial (informal relations, shared identities) (Botterman et al. 2012)	■	■	■	■		
The tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its goals and objectives (Carron 1982, p. 124)	■	■	■	■		
State of affairs concerning both the vertical and horizontal interactions 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 behavioral manifestations (Chan et al. 2006, p. 290)	■	■	■	■		
Cohesion is principally the process that must happen in all communities to ensure different groups of people get on together (Commission on Integration and Cohesion 2007, p. 38)	■	■	■	■		
Society's ability to secure the long-term well-being of all its members, including equitable access to available resources, respect for human dignity with due regard for diversity, personal and collective autonomy and responsible participation. (Council of Europe 2005).	■	■	■	■		
Social cohesion comes in to describe a society which offers opportunities to all its members within a framework of accepted values and institutions. Such a society is therefore one of inclusion. People belong; they are not allowed to be excluded (Dahrendorf et al. 1995, p. vii)	■	■	■	■		
Positive mutual perceptions and attitudes, sense of community and we-feeling, and the extent such we-feeling translates into supportive action(Delhey 2004)	■	■	■	■		
The quality of relations between Member states' populations, measured as trust (Delhey 2007)	■	■	■	■		
Interdependence between members of society, shared loyalties and solidarity (Durkheim 1893)	■	■	■	■		
The nature and extent of social and economic divisions within society (Easterly et al. 2006)	■	■	■	■		
The degree to which individuals and groups within a particular society are bound by common feelings of consensus, share common values and goals and relate to one another on a co-operative basis (European Commission 2001)	■	■	■	■		
Cohesive society as a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing common goals by democratic means (European Committee for Social Cohesion 2004)	■	■	■	■		
The total field of forces which act on members to remain in the group (Festinger et al. 1950)	■	■	■	■		
The willingness of people to cooperate and engage in voluntary partnerships (Jackson et al. 2000)	■	■	■	■		
The ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity amongst all Canadians (Jenson 1998)	■	■	■	■		
a set of social processes that help instil in individuals the sense of belonging to the same community and the feeling that they are recognised as members of that community' (Commissariat générale du Plan 1997, cited in Jenson 2010, p. 6)	■	■	■	■		
A society in which the members share common values which enable them to identify common aims and objectives, and share a common set of moral principles and codes of behavior through which to conduct their relations with one another (Kearns and Forrest 2000)	■	■	■	■		
The state of strong primary networks (kinship, local voluntary organisations) at communal level (Lockwood 1999)	■	■	■	■		
A network in which all possible interpersonal ties are present (Luce and Perry 1949)	■	■	■	■		
The processes of building shared values and communities of interpretations, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community (Maxwell 1996)	■	■	■	■		
A characteristic of a society dealing with the relations between societal units such as individuals, groups, associations as well as territorial units (McCracken 1998).	■	■	■	■		
New Zealand becomes an increasingly socially cohesive society with a climate of collaboration because all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy (Peace et al. 2005, p. 13)	■	■	■	■		
State of affairs in which a group of people demonstrates an aptitude for collaboration that produces a climate for change that, in the longer run, benefits all (Ritzen 2001)	■	■	■	■		
Building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges and that they are members of the same community (Rosell 1995, p. 78)	■	■	■	■		
In a socially cohesive society people take some responsibility for each other even if they do not share any personal links (Wickham 2002, p. 9)	■	■	■	■		

*Note.* \*The columns on the right resemble the social cohesion dimensions: 1 = Social relations, 2 = Identification/Belonging, 3 = Orientation towards the common good, 4 = Shared values, 5 = Objective and subjective quality of life, 6 = (In-)Equality. Definitions that span across more than one column refer to all of the respective dimensions

the ground for collective action (Larsen 2013). According to Fukuyama (1995) trustful relationships between individuals in a society (above and beyond close ties in smaller units such as families) are a prerequisite of economic prosperity and growth because they lower transaction costs.

Social relations also encompass relations between various groups within a society, may it be cultural, ethnic, or groups with a certain life style or sexual orientation. This aspect often emerges in debates around social cohesion, with the basic tenor that a cohesive society requires *mutual tolerance* between such groups. Especially minority groups need to be socially included. Jenson (1998) and Bernard (1999) already captured this aspect in their acceptance/rejection dimension of social cohesion (see also Dickes et al. 2010). Attention should be paid, not only to relations and networks within a group (cf. ‘bonding social capital’), but also to networks and ties that go across group boundaries, cf. ‘bridging social capital’ (Cheong et al. 2007). The claim for tolerance of diversity is more located in the social-democratic political field whereas diversity is seen as rather detrimental for cohesion from a nationalist point of view (Green and Janmaat 2011; Green et al. 2009).

A final important component of social relations is *participation*, or civic engagement (see Acket et al. 2011; Berger-Schmitt 2000; Bernard 1999; Chan et al. 2006; Chiesi 2004; Dickes et al. 2010; Jenson 1998; Klein 2013; Rajulton et al. 2007). Participation in the public life reflects sense of belonging, solidarity and the readiness for mutual cooperation in the pursuit of common goals (Berger-Schmitt 2000; European Commission 2001). Furthermore, social interactions in associations, political parties, unions, or non-governmental organizations strengthen shared values, sense of belonging, and trust (European Commission 2001; Jeannotte et al. 2002). Nevertheless, a differentiation between forms of engagement is necessary to pinpoint their effects: Engagement in a sports club might strengthen the social ties within the society to a different degree compared to engagement in a charity organization, and the degree to which activity in a political party promotes cohesion depends on the latter’s political orientation and agenda. Participation is one aspect of social cohesion that can in fact be ‘observed’, for example through membership in sport or cultural associations or voluntary work (i.e. socio-cultural participation), and through voter turnout, signing petitions, participation in demonstrations and campaigns, or citizens’ inquiries to the parliament (i.e., political participation).

#### 2.4.2 Identification

What becomes clear, especially in reference to the element of participation, is the importance of *feeling attached to or identify with the social entity* (a group, region, country, or a trans-national entity such as the European Union) for social cohesion. The Commissariat Générale du Plan for instance, views social cohesion as “[...] a set of social processes that help instill in individuals the sense of belonging to the same community and the feeling that they are recognized as members of that community” (see Jenson 2010, p. 6). In their definition, Chan et al. (2006) list sense of belonging together with social interactions, trust, and willingness to participate and help. They argue that without the aspect of identification with the geographical space in which social interactions take place, the other components may just as well reflect peoples’ general humanitarianism. It is the identification aspect that makes these concepts reflections of social cohesion. For Kearns and Forrest (2000) the emotional attachment to a geographical entity is an expression of shared values, lifestyles and socialization contexts. It provides security and self-worth which strengthens the willingness for participation and social networking. Jenson (1998), Bernard (1999), and Dickes et al. (2010) incorporate the sense of belonging in their

multidimensional approaches to social cohesion. Novy and colleagues (2012) subsume the identity aspect (together with the shared-values aspect, see below) under the cultural perspective on social cohesion. Touraine (2000) warns that in the course of economic globalization societies lose their role as a source of identification and a provider of cultural norms and institutional arrangements that give structure and orientation to their citizens. As a result, citizens turn to smaller identity-establishing social units such as ethnicity or religion which subsequently further fragments a society's unity.

There is a strong conceptual overlap between this dimension and the dimension of social relations. However, attachment and identification with a social unit is, in our view, qualitatively different from relations between individuals of that group. It refers to a more abstract entity which has a historical dimension (Sani et al. 2007), more abstract symbols, and different psychological mechanisms compared to relations between individuals (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 1986). Yet, most definitions that incorporate attachment list this dimension together with other social relation aspects (e.g., Chan et al. 2006; Delhey 2004; Peace et al. 2005). We therefore decided to conceptually differentiate between these two dimensions, yet, acknowledge their mutual relation (see Fig. 1).

### 2.4.3 Orientation Towards the Common Good

Many definitions furthermore emphasize the *orientation towards the common good* as a constituent of social cohesion. This orientation entails feelings of responsibility for the common good and the compliance to social rules and order. Historically, this emphasis as with the emphasis of shared identity and values, can be traced back to the French Republican view (Durkheim and others) on social cohesion in terms of interdependency and solidarity (Green et al. 2009; Green and Janmaat 2011).

The necessity of people's *feelings of responsibility for the common good* has been emphasized by a number of authors. A cohesive society needs a minimum degree of commitment to the community and the willingness to subordinate personal needs under the welfare of the social environment. The Council of Europe (European Committee for Social Cohesion 2004), for example, views a cohesive society as "a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means" (p. 3), and claims for a "new ethic of social responsibility" (p. 12). The World Bank views social cohesion as "a state of affairs in which a group of people (delineated by a geographical region, like a country) demonstrates an aptitude for collaboration that produces a climate for change that, in the longer run, benefits all" (Ritzen et al. 2000, p. 297). Chan et al.'s (2006) and Dickes et al.'s (2010) multidimensional frameworks capture this aspect as well. A closely related term is *solidarity*, which means caring for the other, regardless of whether one knows the person or not. Solidarity manifests itself on the institutional level, for example in social welfare systems and subvention programs (European Commission 1996, 2001), but also on the individual level in peoples' willingness to give to others (e.g., blood donations and charity).

Being oriented towards the common good also entails the *acceptance of the social order* and the *compliance to social rules and norms*. Institutions regulating and monitoring the social order must receive a sufficient degree of legitimacy of the public (see Jenson 1998; Kearns and Forrest 2000). According to Wrong (1994, cited in Kearns and Forrest 2000) a social order is the basis on which individuals and groups can cooperate to reach common goals. The lack of compliance to social order manifests in anomy, which Merton (1957) described as the state of a society in which societal members' goals (e.g., welfare, success) no longer correspond with the legitimate means of reaching these goals (see Bohle et al.

1997; Claßen 1997). Compliance to the social order and anomy is often operationalized by using crime statistics (e.g., the corruption index, see Green et al. 2009; Jackson et al. 2000) but also by survey-based data on the tolerance of norm-violating behavior (see Knack and Keefer 1997).

We too perceive the compliance to social order as an aspect of social cohesion. However, we emphasize that this aspect is not without problems. Assuming social order as a necessity for social cohesion overlooks the fact that modern, pluralistic societies see conflicting values, as well as the questioning of social order as legitimate constituents of political and public life (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Kearns and Forrest 2000). Hence, the degree to which compliance to norms and order are enforced in a society needs to be carefully observed.

#### 2.4.4 Shared Values

We extracted *shared values* as one of the six components from the literature, because it is often mentioned in definitions, most often in combination with orientation towards the common good. The Policy Research Sub-Committee on Social Cohesion in Canada, for example, defined social cohesion as “the ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians” (Jenson 1998, p. 4). According to Maxwell (1996, p. 13), social cohesion “involves building shared values and communities of interpretation”, and Kearns and Forrest (2000) view a cohesive society as “one in which the members share common values” (p. 997). It has been argued that shared values are essential for social cohesion because they enable the societal members to identify common goals and plans and structure social interactions by means of shared behavioral codes (Botterman et al. 2012; Kearns and Forrest 2000). Mann (1970) already mentioned “consensus theorists” (p. 423), who argue that democratic societies can only be successful when they share a set of “general political and prepolitical values” (p. 423).

However, the role of shared values for social cohesion is ambiguous for two reasons. The first refers to the necessity of value *homogeneity* (Council of Europe 2005; Jenson 1998). Value consensus, it is often assumed, smoothens social interactions due to common mutual norms of interaction. However, a qualitative shift is visible in the conceptual debates around social cohesion; from an emphasis on consensus regarding life style, beliefs, and values as an essential element of social cohesion to the notion that cohesion strongly relies on the acceptance of, and constructive dealing with diversity and respective conflicts (Council of Europe 2005; see e.g., Jeannotte et al. 2002; Spoonley et al. 2005). Opponents of the homogeneity claim argue that instead of a value consensus, a society should promote (and value) the constructive coexistence of individuals who differ in their values (Council of Europe 2005; European Committee for Social Cohesion 2004; Jeannotte et al. 2002; Spoonley et al. 2005; Stanley 2003).

The second issue builds forth upon this: If value homogeneity is indeed considered to be necessary, the question arises what these values should entail. In other words, what values are necessary for maintaining a cohesive society (Jenson 1998; Mann 1970). Values such as respect, tolerance, or humanity (i.e., self-transcendence values à la Schwartz 1992) are often proposed. The Council of Europe (2005) promotes such values by stating that social cohesion encompasses the “society’s ability to secure respect for human dignity with due regard for diversity, personal and collective autonomy” (p. 23). However, cohesion can theoretically also be established in societies endorsing values of conformity and submission to authorities, which has more the form of a coerced social cohesion with suppressed

individual freedom (Botterman et al. 2012; Jenson 1998). Already Mann (1970) pointed to the deviating views among theorists regarding which values, beliefs and norms members of a society need to adhere to in order to maintain cohesion. Furthermore, the demanded values usually stay rather vague and different political and ideological protagonists even refer to similar values (Mann 1970). Some values such as achievement or power can even undermine cohesion because they highlight the benefits of one individual at the cost of another (Mann 1970).

#### 2.4.5 (In)equality

A fifth dimension often referred to in definitions of social cohesion is the *degree of (in)equality* between individuals and groups within a society. Novy et al. (2012) call this the “socioeconomic perspective” (p. 1878), and Botterman et al. (2012) summarize it as “structural mechanisms” (p. 186) of social cohesion. Easterly et al. (2006), representatives of the World Bank, describe a lack of social cohesion as the “nature and extent of social and economic divisions within society” (p. 105). Similar approaches have been put forward in recent debates in Great Britain (e.g., Cheong et al. 2007), as well as the Canadian context (Maxwell 1996). According to Maxwell (1996), “social cohesion involves shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income [...]” (p. 13). Jenson (1998) and Bernard (1999), by using the terms inclusion/exclusion to describe the degree of (un)equal opportunities for societal members, also consider this to be a descriptor of social cohesion (see also Dickes et al. 2010).

Two components can be assigned to the (in)equality dimension. First, and foremost is the *(unequal distribution of (accessible) material and immaterial resources* across all members of a society, i.e., across regions, urban and rural areas, and various social, economic, and cultural groups (e.g., Berger-Schmitt and Noll 2000; Bernard 1999; Chiesi 2004; Council of Europe 2005; European Commission 2001; Jackson et al. 2000; Jupp et al. 2007; Kearns and Forrest 2000; Novy et al. 2012; Rajulton et al. 2007). Resources can, for example, be employment, income, education, health care, social welfare, and legal means. A related term often used is social exclusion, described as the isolation of individuals or groups from the social and cultural life as a consequence of an unequal distribution of resources or their accessibility (Berger-Schmitt and Noll 2000; Jeannotte et al. 2002; Jenson 2010).

The second component is the (in)equality between people in terms of *cultural, ethnic, religious, and social background*. This has been termed composition, or fractionalization (Easterly et al. 2006) (for elaborations on the term see Alesina et al. 2003). The degree of (in)equality in terms of socio-cultural background as an objective circumstance fits into the (in)equality dimension that is proposed here. Social diversity has been discussed by various authors as being a potential threat to social cohesion, because it erodes shared cultural values, beliefs and practices (for a review see Green and Janmaat 2011; Letki 2008). Huntington (2004), for example, argues that the recent influx of immigrants into the United States undermines the common American identity that is rooted in shared Protestant values, the English language and individualistic ways of life. Whereas early immigrants and settlers had assimilated into this identity, recent immigrants tend to maintain their culture of origin, which eventually undermines cohesion. Others have argued that cultural diversity negatively affects trust and social networks. However, this view is opposed by the argument that it is not so much the actual degree of (in)equality that is discussed in relation to cohesion, but rather the way societies deal with it. For example, the House of Commons (2004) views a cohesive community as “one where [...] the diversity of people’s different

backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued”, and that is able to “integrate people from different ethnic backgrounds so that they can relate together [...]” (p. 7). Uslaner (2012) argued that it is not diversity per se but rather segregation that undermines cohesion. Letki (2008) showed that it is rather socio-economic status than culture of origin that erodes the ties between people.

As Fig. 1 shows, definitions of social cohesion that capture the notion of (in)equality typically do not co-occur with other components such as social relations or attachment.

#### 2.4.6 Objective and Subjective Quality of Life

Finally, a number of definitions highlight aspects that can be summarized as *objective and subjective quality of life*. The Council of Europe (European Committee for Social Cohesion 2004), for example, views social cohesion as the “[...] society’s ability to secure the long-term well-being of all its members” (p. 23). Well-being, in turn, is conceptualized by the authors as equality (regarding access to resources), dignity (regarding diversity), autonomy, and participation. The Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (2005) as well as the German KfW Bank Group (2010) view social cohesion as one pillar of welfare, in addition to economy, environment, and health.

The dimension of objective and subjective quality of life can be subdivided into psychological well-being, physical health, and objective living conditions, which are debated in terms of their (un)equal distribution across individuals, groups, or regions. Conceptually, this dimension of social cohesion reveals the greatest lack of clarity. Concepts such as social cohesion, quality of life, and welfare are either used interchangeably, or are related differently to one another. Some authors view both social cohesion and (physical and psychological) well-being as components of quality of life and welfare (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005; Berger-Schmitt and Noll 2000; KfW Bankengruppe 2010), others use the terms quality of life and well-being synonymously and view it as components of social cohesion (see Council of Europe 2005), yet others views social cohesion as a source of well-being (see also the discussion below).

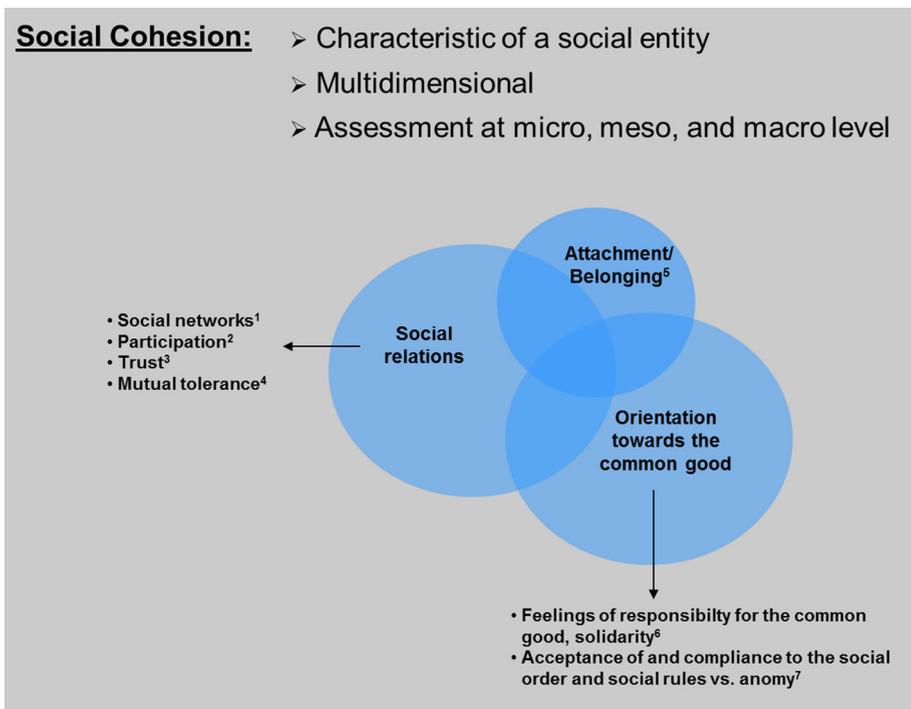
## 2.5 Back to the Core: Suggesting an Essentialist Approach to Social Cohesion

Our review of the literature revealed six dimensions that are often referred to in relation to social cohesion. Most approaches to social cohesion combine some of these dimensions, most notably social relations, identification, and responsibility for the common good. The definition by Chan et al. (2006) can serve as an example, by stating that “Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and horizontal interactions 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 behavioral manifestations” (p. 290).

Summarizing the literature, the essential elements of social cohesion are social relations, identification, and orientation towards the common good. Subsequently, we define social cohesion as *a descriptive attribute of a collective, indicating the quality of collective togetherness*. Following this definition, a cohesive society is characterized by close social relations, pronounced emotional connectedness to the social entity, and a strong orientation towards the common good. We conceptualize cohesion as a *gradual* phenomenon, meaning that societies may exhibit greater or lesser degrees of cohesion. This degree of cohesion manifests itself in the attitudes and behaviors of all individuals and groups within the society and comprises both ideational and relational components.

We thus focus on three of the six identified dimensions. Figure 2 illustrates these dimensions, their overlap, and their particular sub-components. Although definitions and conceptualizations of social constructs can never be right or wrong, they can be more or less conclusive and useful. Following Chan et al. (2006) as well as Green and Janmaat (2011), we advocate a rather ‘slim’ approach to social cohesion as opposed to a catch-all concept. By focusing on the three essential elements of social relations, identification, and orientation towards the common good, we provide an analytically clear and empirically meaningful understanding of social cohesion that allows for differentiating between components, antecedents, and consequences.

Although (in)equality is often mentioned in relation to social cohesion, we consider it rather an antecedent of social cohesion. A cleavage between the poor and the rich might weaken cohesion due to perceived deprivation and inequality, as well as having limited opportunities for societal participation, or for acting in favor of the common good (see e.g., Bjørnskov 2008 regarding the relationship between unequal income distribution and trust). However, the division between rich and poor in a society does *in itself* not tell us anything about the state of social cohesion of that society. In a similar vein, quality of life, or well-



<sup>1</sup>Quantity and Quality of social relations and social networks.

<sup>2</sup>Political Participation (e.g., voters turnout) and sociocultural participation (civic engagement).

<sup>3</sup>Horizontal (between individuals), vertical (in institutions).

<sup>4</sup>Intergroup attitudes, social distance.

<sup>5</sup>Self-perception as an integral part of the group, perception of the social group as an important part of one's self/identity.

<sup>6</sup>Act for the needs and benefits of the group, while restraining one's own personal needs and goals.

<sup>7</sup>Acknowledgement of societal institutions and compliance to the 'rules of the game' of living together (as well as the rules for changing the social order) versus deviance and norm violation.

**Fig. 2** The essentials of social cohesion

being is not an inherent component of social cohesion: A society is not cohesive *because* their members live in good conditions and feel well, but a stronger societal cohesion *might contribute* to the well-being of the society's members, either as a direct antecedent (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Delhey and Dragolov 2015; Jenson 2010; Putnam 2000), or as a moderator that buffers negative effects of poor living conditions such as unemployment and poverty (Phipps 2003; Upperman and Gauthier 1998). Equality, cohesion, and quality of life can thus be put in a causal chain: When individuals and groups have equal access to resources, this will strengthen their trust in others and in institutions, enable them to participate and network, and facilitate a positive sense of belonging. This, in turn, contributes to their well-being and health, which in turn increases their general quality of life.

Furthermore, as outlined above, the requirement for value homogeneity for social cohesion is ambiguous and too simplistic (Chan et al. 2006; Council of Europe 2005; Jenson 1998; Mann 1970). A major debate in this area is what values might contribute to, and what values might undermine social cohesion (Jenson 1998; Mann 1970). The question remains whether a society needs a consensus *per se* about the basic values that individuals endorse as guiding principles, or whether it needs consensus regarding specific values such as egalitarianism or those that give precedence to the needs and goals of the group over those of the individual (Hofstede 2001; Schwartz 2006). This is a question that needs to be investigated empirically. We second Chan et al.'s (2006) doubt that social cohesion depends on any particular type of values. We therefore recommend treating values and value homogeneity as separate concepts that may contribute to social cohesion; a society with a higher level of value homogeneity may foster social cohesion. The only value-related aspect that we view as constitutional of social cohesion is the general openness towards and support of diversity within the society, which we assigned to the social relations component.

Our framework of social cohesion is much in line with the approach by Chan et al. (2006), and indeed we see their approach as resembling best what we have identified as the common core. However, their approach might be slightly too narrow. In particular, their concept does not comprise the quality and quantity of social networks as such, nor does it include the acceptance and compliance of social order and rules (albeit the latter might be captured by their subjective vertical component of trust in public figures), two aspects we identified as common to many works.

### 3 Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to review the literature on social cohesion in order to distill the essential elements of the concept. Based on academic as well as policy-oriented publications, we highlight that in the majority of approaches to social cohesion there is, in fact, more overlap on the definition and conceptualization of social cohesion than is assumed in many literature reviews. This does not mean that the various approaches themselves are more similar than assumed. In fact, many stress certain aspects based on a particular ideology or agenda which can eventually lead to inconsistent evaluations of the state of social cohesion in different contexts and thus different implications in terms of policy development. Our attempt is to sharpen the construct by highlighting the core elements with which the different approaches are in line, which points to the core essence of the construct.

Our extensive review identified six core dimensions of social cohesion: Social relations, identification, orientation towards the common good, shared values, equality/inequality, and subjective/objective quality of life. However, we argued that the last three dimensions of (in)equality, quality of life, and shared values, represent antecedents and consequences of social cohesion, instead of constitutive elements. We thus define social cohesion as a descriptive, multifaceted and gradual phenomenon attributed to a collective, indicating the quality of collective togetherness. The essential features of social cohesion are (1) the quality of social relations (including social networks, trust, acceptance of diversity, and participation), (2) identification with the social entity, and (3) orientation towards the common good (sense of responsibility, solidarity, compliance to social order).

The claim to treat social cohesion as a multidimensional construct and to clearly define social cohesion is not new. The innovative element of our conceptual suggestion is, however, that it is based on what has been identified as often reappearing in the literature of the past decades. This can help to standardize measurement and make the construct more efficient as an instrument for policy makers. Especially the sub-components underlying the three broad dimensions are empirically assessable and have been the subject of empirical studies before. Standardization of measurement is essential first of all, to assess the degree of social cohesion within a society and to monitor its development, especially against the background of the common claim that social cohesion is in decline. Moreover, a society's level of social cohesion can only be properly evaluated when it is possible to compare social cohesion across countries. A comprehensive measurement of social cohesion should therefore span across time and across an adequate set of societies. Clearly defined sets of comparison countries need to be agreed upon. A possible comparison can be OECD, or EU countries, or countries within continents. Comparing Germany to, for example, India or a central African country is difficult.

Having an adequate set of social cohesion measures enables the concept to be used by policy makers throughout the world. The sub-components (such as trust, participation, acceptance of diversity, identification, etc.) can be continuously empirically monitored in order to identify 'weak spots' or problematic developments (e.g., Botterman et al. 2012). For example, one might find that although the quantity of social relations as well as the level of trust in a society remains stable across time, social exclusion of particular minority groups increases. This would unveil the necessity to further develop integration policies to avoid group conflicts in the society. Likewise, one might identify a particular decrease in civic engagement and develop strategies (e.g., campaigns) to enhance common good orientation among citizens. An actual example is the rather low level of national identification that can be found in Germany (Dragolov et al. 2013; Noelle-Neumann and Köcher 1987; Schmidt-Denter 2011), which has often been interpreted with reference to the negative role of the country during National Socialism. Attempts to enhance public debates that constructively address the self-understanding of Germans against the background of their history, or school-policies that demand this topic to be implemented in political education classes would be possible strategies to face this issue.

In this article we suggest a set of core components that we found to commonly appear in the literature. However, a number of questions with regard to assessing social cohesion empirically remain. First, although the dimensions we identified are commonly mentioned in the literature, research shows that they are not necessarily empirically associated to one another (Green et al. 2006; Janmaat 2011). Whereas trust, civic cooperation, and crime, for example, have been shown to be interrelated (Green et al. 2006) trust and participation have been shown to be unrelated across countries (Green et al. 2006; Knack and Keefer 1997; Norris 2001; Newton and Norris 1999). There is also ample evidence that in-group

identification and acceptance of cultural out-groups—both elements claimed to be constitutive for social cohesion—can be *negatively* related (see, e.g., Duckitt et al. 2005; Mullen et al. 1992). As Janmaat (2011) states: “It is important to explore this since we need to know whether some proposed version of social cohesion refers to an actual real-life phenomenon or merely to a hypothetical state of affairs” (p. 62). This raises a key question that needs to be further discussed: Can social cohesion be viewed as a *reflective* or should it be viewed as a *formative* construct? The reflective approach assumes a latent (not observable) construct (here: social cohesion) to manifest itself in different observable characteristics (here: trust, identification, etc.) in the same or similar way. A change in the level or degree of the construct (higher or lower cohesion) is similarly reflected in the change of all observable indicators. In a formative approach, in contrast, a phenomenon (such as social cohesion) and its facets are theoretically derived. It is formative because based on theoretical reasoning a particular set of components is purposefully selected, and only the very combination of all components ‘forms’ the phenomenon. The components do not necessarily need to be interrelated, however, it is assumed that all of them need to be consulted to describe the phenomenon as a whole (see Bollen and Lennox 1991; Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001; Dragolov et al. 2013). According to such an approach, social cohesion would be viewed as manifesting itself differently in different societies which would be observable by the respective profiles of all components. A popular example is the Human Development Index (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>) which combines life expectancy, level of education and income per capita.

Dragolov et al. (2013) performed an empirical application of (a slightly adapted version of) our model and combined the reflective and formative approach to describe social cohesion in different societies based on secondary data. They followed the reflective approach to operationalize the sub-components (such as participation or acceptance of diversity) and the formative approach to create the higher-order dimensions (e.g., social relations) and an overall score. Hence, the reflective approach seems valid for the sub-components whereas the formative approach seems more plausible for the concept of social cohesion as a whole. In terms of measurement, societies should therefore not be compared using their overall score of social cohesion but rather by their dimensional profiles. Identical levels of social cohesion in two societies could otherwise be misinterpreted since they are based on different constellations and thus exhibit rather different qualities (Janmaat 2011). Furthermore, as mentioned above, a profile perspective enables researchers and policy makers to detect specific weak spots.

Secondly, monitoring the level and development of social cohesion across time and societies requires assessable indicators. These must be thoroughly chosen in order to capture social cohesion. For example, identification with the nation (in terms of a positive emotional attachment) might be constituent of social cohesion. However, assessing national identification in terms of national pride and superiority might also capture a weak spot in social cohesion, namely the exclusion of individuals of different languages, cultures, or religions that do not belong to “us”. Numerous studies document the relationship between nationalism and xenophobia. Furthermore, whether civic engagement promotes societal cohesion depends on the type of engagement. To give another example, empirical studies often choose membership in political parties as an indicator of cohesion, but what if one is a member of a right-wing extremist party that promote an authoritarian monocratic society? Hence, one might hypothesize that membership in political parties or civic associations are good for cohesion only under certain circumstance. Likewise, memberships in associations do not tell much about social cohesion if the type of association (e.g., recreational vs. charity association) is not clearly defined. Furthermore, most studies use

self-report measures and lack non-reactive indicators. This reduces objectivity. For example, the average degree of a society's individual's willingness to donate money for charity purposes (as an indicator for an orientation towards the common good) might not reflect in actual donation statistics. Another challenge in the development of indicators of social cohesion will be that different indicators refer to different levels. For example, the quality of social networks, referring to friends and acquaintances, address a more local social cohesion, whereas aspects such as trust in institutions are more abstract. An open question is furthermore to what extent social cohesion requires identification with the national entity, or whether identification with the local community or region also fosters social cohesion. The different levels that can point at social cohesion and their respective indicators need to be integrated in a meaningful way.

Although aspects such as equality, shared values and quality of life have often been claimed as being constitutive elements of social cohesion, we suggest removing them from the construct and rather view them as different concepts that are empirically related to social cohesion as antecedents and consequences. Given the diversity and politicized nature of the debate around social cohesion, this suggestion might not satisfy everyone. Our claim is, however, not politically but scientifically motivated. We do not suggest to exclude equality because we assume the warranty of equality to be irrelevant to cohesion (as classic liberalism might argue; see Green et al. 2009). We also do not suggest the exclusion of shared values from the cohesion concept because we reject the notion that (certain) shared values might be important for social cohesion (as some politically left views might tend to). Instead, we argue for conceptual clarity in terms of what constitutes social cohesion, what has an influence on it and what are its consequences. We thus regard equality, and a certain set of core values as empirically related to social cohesion, instead of constituting. This debate is not new (see Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Green et al. 2009), however, it is still not resolved. In that sense, our approach to extract common elements from the literature that form the essential core of social cohesion is also meant to de-politicize the social cohesion debate.

We see a need for further scientific discussion and empirical testing especially with regard to the role of shared values. We would in fact agree with many other authors that values such as tolerance of diversity, human equality, or individual freedom and rights are crucial for a cohesive, conflict-free society. However, including such rather concrete values as a core constituent of social cohesion is, in our view, too much of a normative claim. Others might, for example, as well argue that valuing hierarchically structured power relations and deference to authorities are preconditions of a functioning cohesive society. In addition, it is not self-evident that certain values promote cohesion. Freedom of speech, for example, might be viewed as a constitutive value of social cohesion, however, when it is used or interpreted as the "freedom to offend", it might also deteriorate cohesion. If values were to be viewed as a constituent of social cohesion at all, they should be conceptualized as rather basic motivational goals (Schwartz 1992) that are free of political orientations or specific agendas. For example, an basic individual "other-orientation" (i.e., the individual believe that other peoples' needs are relevant in addition to one's own needs and that welfare of all is as important as one's personal well-being) might be indispensable to social cohesion no matter who uses the concept. In the view of value theorist Schwartz (1992) this would be the value of universalism or benevolence, in the work of Triandis et al. (1985) it would be allocentrism (vs. idiocentrism). A certain degree of "other-orientation" is the motivational basis for least two of the components that we identified as essential elements of social cohesion, namely feeling and acting responsible in terms of the common good and accepting diversity in cultures and life styles. Again, the role of values,

may they be basic or concrete, is in our view an empirical question and need to be further investigated across societies.

A limitation of the current study regards to the fact, that we developed our set of dimensions in a continuous process of reading, reflection and discussion between the authors but did not perform qualitative coding of each individual definition and text fragment. The latter would have provided the opportunity to use, for example, interrater-reliability measures to further support the plausibility of the identified dimensions. Although we believe that in principle our approach to base the conceptualization of social cohesion on the ‘common ground’ in the literature helps to clarify the debate, future studies should perform qualitative coding (e.g., Thomas 2006) of the text material to further consolidate our understanding of the essentials of social cohesion. Furthermore, additional steps suggested for systematic reviews (see Gough et al. 2012, 2013) should be included. This comprises the involvement of experts and agents whose questions and perspectives form the starting point for the review question (the ‘need’, see Gough et al. 2013, p. 11) or the detailed coding of study characteristics to validate the ‘mapping’ of the research field and the involved key players and to better evaluate the quality of the publications involved.

Taken together, in this article we suggest a multi-dimensional framework for assessing the social cohesion of societies which we identified as often reappearing in the majority of different academic and policy-oriented agents. Such a model can form the basis for standardized measurement of the level of social cohesion across time and societies, with its multi-dimensionality allowing to detect potential vulnerabilities. As an outlook, we propose a regular reporting of social cohesion in different societies based on a standardized, agreed-upon set of indicators such as the one we presented here. Such a ‘Cohesion Radar’ can be based on existing empirical studies on particular (sets of) indicators, or be based on a data set that merges indicators from different sources. The usability of our approach for such a ‘Cohesion Radar’ is documented in ongoing empirical research in Germany which is based on our literature review. Dragolov et al. (2014) described the level and development of social cohesion in Germany based on the essential dimensions and sub-components identified in our literature review. Furthermore, Delhey and Dragolov (2015) used the model to evaluate the relationship between social cohesion and well-being across 27 European Union countries.

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