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# Understanding social cohesion: The case of a demographically changing community in the United States

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## Κατανοώντας την κοινωνική συνοχή: Η περίπτωση μιας δημογραφικά μεταβαλλόμενης κοινότητας στις ΗΠΑ

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### ABSTRACT

Social cohesion is associated with community welfare and its members' wellbeing and quality of life. Studies have provided mixed answers to the question of whether ethnic diversity erodes social cohesion. This study contributes to this body of literature by adapting, testing, and refining an instrument that measures social cohesion in a rural ethnically homogenous region of the Northeast United States; and by using the validated instrument to assess the effects of nascent diversity on community members' perceptions of social cohesion. We predicted that diversification would activate dynamics of social inequality and dominance, consistent with Social Dominance theory. Comparison of perceptions of multiple groups showed that male participants and Black residents reported lower level of trust and that culturally diverse residents are less likely to display high level of social cohesion and more likely to feel isolated.

**KEY WORDS:** Social cohesion, community, ethnic diversity, cultural diversity, Social Dominance theory.

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η κοινωνική συνοχή συνδέεται με την ευημερία της κοινότητας και την ευημερία και την ποιότητα ζωής των μελών της. Μελέτες έχουν δώσει ανάμεικτες απαντήσεις στο ερώτημα εάν η εθνοτική ποικιλομορφία διαβρώνει την κοινωνική. Η παρούσα μελέτη συμβάλλει σε αυτό το σύνολο βιβλιογραφίας προσαρμόζοντας, δοκιμάζοντας και βελτιώνοντας ένα εργαλείο που μετρά την κοινωνική συνοχή σε μια αγροτική εθνικά ομοιογενή περιοχή των βορειοανατολικών Ηνωμένων Πολιτειών και χρησιμοποιώντας το επικυρωμένο εργαλείο για την αξιολόγηση των επιπτώσεων της νεοσύστατης ποικιλομορφίας στις αντιλήψεις των μελών της κοινότητας για την κοινωνική συνοχή. Προβλέψαμε ότι η διαφοροποίηση θα ενεργοποιούσε τη δυναμική της κοινωνικής ανισότητας και κυριαρχίας, σύμφωνα με τη θεωρία της Κοινωνικής Κυριαρχίας. Η σύγκριση των αντιλήψεων πολλαπλών ομάδων έδειξε ότι οι άνδρες συμμετέχοντες και οι μαύροι κάτοικοι ανέφεραν χαμηλότερο επίπεδο εμπιστοσύνης και ότι οι κάτοικοι με πολιτισμική ποικιλομορφία είναι λιγότερο πιθανό να επιδεικνύουν υψηλό επίπεδο κοινωνικής συνοχής και πιο πιθανό να αισθάνονται απομονωμένοι.

**ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ:** Κοινωνική συνοχή, κοινότητα, ΗΠΑ, εθνοτική ποικιλομορφία, πολιτισμική ποικιλομορφία, θεωρία της Κοινωνικής Κυριαρχίας.

# 1. Introduction

**S**ocial cohesion is a multidimensional concept that evokes disagreements about its definition and its measurement (Ariely, 2014). Scholars have debated its nature, the elements that make up the concept and how to measure it (Botterman et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2006; Dickes et al., 2010; Hulse & Stone, 2007; Jenson, 2010). Different scholars have conceptualized social cohesion as achieving a sense of socio-economic integration and political inclusion as members of a society (Harell & Stolle, 2010). Others suggested that social cohesion is defined by the level of interactions between members of a community where there are norms of trust, belonging, and care for the collective good (Chan et al., 2006). Social cohesion elicited different definitions in different contexts and countries. Vergolini (2011) shows the different connotations of cohesion in the Canadian context which underscores sense of belonging and the association of cohesion with a process of inclusion. There is no consensus on what constitutes social cohesion (Ariely, 2014). Variations are caused by dimensions of social cohesion included in a study and whether it is conceptualized as inclusive of interpersonal trust, and/or civic engagement, sense of belonging, and attitudes.

## *Purpose and Goal of the Study*

The purpose of the study is twofold: (a) measure social cohesion using the validated instrument in a rural ethnically homogenous region of the Northeast United States; and (b) assess the dynamics of a community that is experiencing demographic diversification.

Accordingly, we seek to answer the following research questions:

- a. How do residents in a rural homogenous community differ in their perceptions of social relations, emotional connectedness and orientation to the common good?
- b. To what extent does social marginalization based on race, gender, and nativity status affect their perceptions of social cohesion?
- c. How does the intersection of multiple marginalized identities influence these perceptions?
- d. How do residents in the majority group react to changes in the demographic profile of their community?

## *Why Measure Social Cohesion*

The United States is experiencing unprecedented diversification of its population. Considering rapid demographic changes in the United States, social cohesion becomes a critical goal since many communities are experiencing diversification of its population. Differences, some argue can interfere with the process of building social cohesion in a physically defined geographic community. While some urban areas are accustomed to diversity, other areas may lack familiarity with diversity. Many communities are not used to welcoming diverse neighbors, nor have the expertise to integrate them effectively in the social, economic and political fabric of the communities. Fear of differences as Putnam (2007) argues can make us retreat in our shells, “hunker down”, and experience a sense of alienation and isolation from one’s out-group and in-group.

Feeling alienated from one’s community has negative consequences on social capital which is critical to political and civic engagement, sense of belonging, confidence in institutions, tolerance and interpersonal trust. Lack of social capital and presence of social distance hinder solidar-

ity within and across groups (Putnam, 2007). Lack of social cohesion can produce fragmented communities that are not invested in their own welfare because of the erosion of a shared social identity, a sense of community and the feeling of “we” (Putnam, 2007). When individuals lose a sense of community, they also lose a sense of political efficacy and pride in community (Nannestad, 2008; Newton, 2007; Uslaner, 2002). Economic deterioration and depopulation can be a natural outcome of affective and actual disinvestment.

The empirical evidence on whether diversity negatively affects social cohesion is mixed. The outcome differs depending on the methodological and conceptual ways that social cohesion is defined (Portes & Vickstrom, 2011). Different definitions yield different results. Support for Putnam’s theory contends that those who live in a diverse community retreat from social and civic life and are less likely to engage socially or civically in their community’s life. They are less likely to have trust in each other or in institutions of government and less likely to give to charity, and less likely to have social cohesion (Dincer, 2011; Hawes & Rocha, 2011; Hero, 2007; Reeskens & Wright, 2013; Stolle et al., 2008). Similarly, Lancee and Dronkers (2011) show that religious diversity negatively affects social relationships and trust. On the other hand, studies by Tolsma et al. (2009), Kazemipur (2006), Coffe and Geys (2006) and Dinesen, (2011) found that ethnic diversity fosters trust and tolerance. Inter-ethnic trust increases with neighborhood heterogeneity (Laurence, 2011). Other studies demonstrate the association of increased diversity with sense of belonging (Wu et al., 2011). Others found no relations between diversity, trust, and social cohesion (Gesthuizen et al., 2009). Studies have also argued that ethnic, racial, or religious heterogeneity of a social setting may not be the culprit in reducing levels of generalized or interpersonal trust and social cohesion, but other factors may be at play including segregation, linguistic isolation, and community status (Anderson & Paskeviciute, 2006; Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2010; Letki, 2008; Uslaner, 2012). The findings also differ by country and negative or positive association of diversity with trust and social capital, and cohesion is a function of where the study takes place. Lower levels of income inequality and the existence of multicultural policies decrease the negative effects of diversity (Kesler & Bloemraad, 2010). This conclusion is however, contradicted by another study that shows that integration policies do not have a positive effect on trust and social relations (Reeskens, 2010).

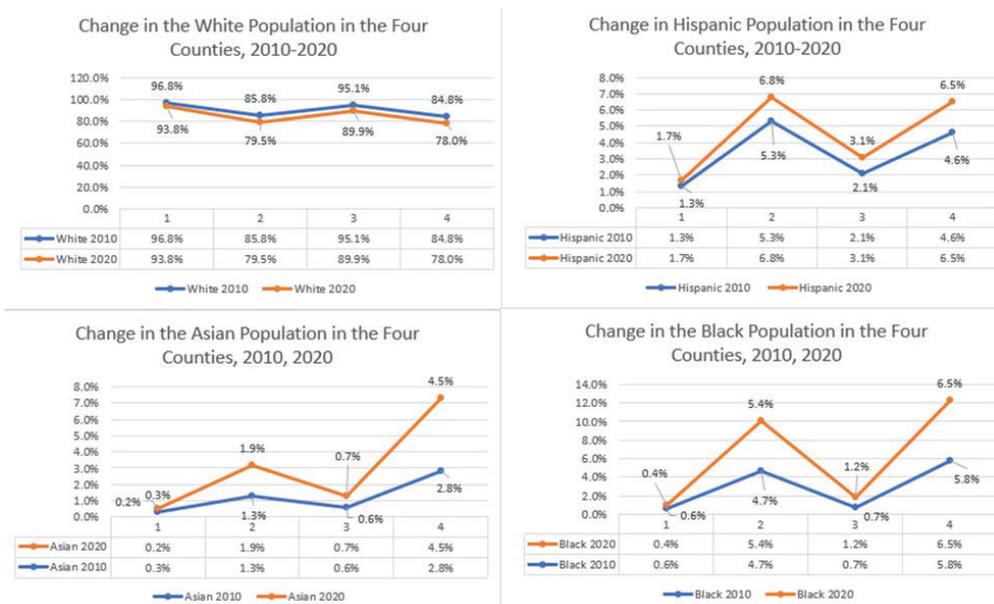
### *Context of the Study*

A community in the Northeast region of the United States provides an ideal laboratory for studying the impact of diversification on social cohesion. Like many communities in the U.S., this community is in the process of diversification characterized by loss of its native population and replacement with newcomers who are demographically different from the group that is native to the region. Such context allows us to compare residents’ perceptions of social relations, emotional connectedness, and orientation to the common good and to examine how each group experience being members of the community. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to assess the context of reception and dynamics of relations experienced by minoritized groups.

According to the American Community Survey, the study’s region is one that is generally losing population with a 1.62 percent overall population drop in the last 10 years. It is also experiencing a slow demographic change, losing its traditional homogenous population and slowly diversifying. It is a region where density ranges from one person per square mile to 212 people per square mile (with an overall density of 49 people per square mile. The median age of 44 is higher than the statewide and national medians.

It is a region made up of four counties. White, Non-Hispanic population has decreased in all four counties by 4.9% in County 1, 6.9% in County 2, 8.9% in County 3 and 9.2% in County 4. However, the Hispanic population has increased consistently in all 4 counties by 28.9%, 30.1%, 41.7% and 40.4%, respectively. The Black and Asian populations experienced a loss of 39.4% and 9.7% in County 1, respectively. But in Counties 2, 3 and 4, they increased. The increase for the Black population was 14.5%, 58.9%, 9.6% in counties 2, 3, and 4. While for the Asian populations the increase in Counties 2, 3, and 4 was 49.2%, 22.7%, and 61.3%, respectively. Additionally, 1.2% of residents in County 1 are foreign-born, while they constitute 4.5% in County 2, 8.4% in County 3, and 2% in County 4.

**Figure A displays demographic changes over the past decade.**



The percentage of families whose income in the past 12 months was below the poverty level was 9.2%, 8.8%, 10.1%, and 12% in counties 1-4, respectively. Table B shows the educational attainment in the counties that constitute the study's region.

**Table B: Educational Attainment in the Region**

County	Less than bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Graduate or professional degree
County 1	81.2%	10.9%	7.9%
County 2	75.7%	14.3%	10.0%
County 3	73.8%	14.9%	11.3%
County 4	79.3%	11.9%	8.9%

The study's region is typical of many U.S. regions that are experiencing slow diversification. While the White population is still the majority, historical homogeneity is slowly changing and to maintain its population, the region must draw on a pool of nontraditional residents and attract them to the region. A region that is slowly becoming heterogeneous is an ideal laboratory to test the effects of diversity as it slowly takes root within an otherwise homogeneous community. It is a moment in time that provides a window to study the effects of nascent heterogeneity on the concept of social cohesion.

### *Operationalizing Social Cohesion*

In this study, we understand social cohesion as the culmination of a process that is characterized by the richness of affirming local social relationships which in turn produce a sense of identification, belonging, and trust and may lead to civic engagement and actions to preserve the collective good of a community. Social cohesion has been recognized as integral to quality of life (Abbott & Wallace, 2012). Social cohesion is made of bonds that hold a community together. These bonds create harmony and guard against social cleavages that can lead to community fragmentation and conflict. In a socially cohesive community, residents who share a physical space demonstrate three attributes: (a) social relations, reflected as connections, social networks that are based on trust in each other, acceptance of one another and cultivation of social capital (Wallace, Vincent, Luguzan, Townsend, & Beel, 2017); (b) emotional connectedness, expressed as a sense of belonging, commitment, loyalty, affinity, identification, trust in social institutions, and perceptions of fairness (Guibernau, 2013); and (c) orientation to the common good, operationalized as "civic mindedness" and agency that make individuals work for the welfare of the community (Putnam, 2000).

We operationalize the concept of social cohesion using Dragolov et al.'s (2013) Social Cohesion Radar, an instrument that measures social cohesion that proposes three overarching dimensions, social relations, connectedness, and orientation to the common good. The domain of social relations is operationalized through four measures: (a) social networks (i.e., the degree to which individuals believe in the importance of friends, frequency of socialization, and confidence in receiving support and advice); (b) trust in people (i.e., sense that most people can be trusted, most try to be fair and are helpful); (c) individual acceptance of diversity (i.e., openness to having racially, culturally, and religiously diverse neighbors, and belief that cultural diversity is enriching); and (d) group acceptance of diversity (i.e., the belief that ethnic/racial or religious tensions in the region are low, belief that LGBTQ groups, people with disabilities and immigrants are welcomed and accepted in the region. There are three dimensions under the domain of connectedness: (a) sense of belonging (i.e., degree to which one likes living in the country, in the state and in the region and intention to stay permanently); (b) trust in institutions (i.e., confidence in law enforcement, local justice system, local government, and healthcare system and fear of reporting crimes or asking for police assistance); and (c) perception of fairness. The domain of orientation to the common good focuses on (a) respect for social rules (belief in following laws, rules, and social norms); (b) helpfulness (including charitable donations, volunteerism and service to community); and (c) civic participation (interest in politics and political actions).

**Table A: Social Cohesion (Dragalov et al., 2013)**

<b>Social Relations</b>	<b>Emotional Connectedness</b>	<b>Orientation to the Common Good</b>
Social networks	Sense of belonging	Respect for social rules
Trust in people	Trust in institutions	Helpfulness
Acceptance of diversity	Perception of fairness	Civic participation

### *Conceptual Framework*

There is no doubt that achieving social cohesion is an important goal to avoid social isolation, political alienation, disengagement, and fragmentation in communities. Does nascent heterogeneity in a community changes community members' perceptions of social cohesion? Community diversity may activate dynamics of social inequality and dominance. According to Social dominance theory, there is persistent intergroup inequalities, social hierarchies, and power imbalance in society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Interactions among community members of diverse background can produce discriminatory behaviors because of such power imbalance. Social dominance orientation is the attitude one has toward socially constructed identities and is driven by assumptions about their place on the social ladder. A high orientation to social dominance creates intergroup social distance and reinforces discriminatory attitudes at the individual, institutional, and behavioral levels. Social dominance and social closure create hierarchical structures and leads to the development of ideologies that legitimize discrimination against different groups in terms of access to opportunity structures (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius et al., 2001).

### *Social Identities Marginalized by Gender, Race or Nativity Status*

There is no doubt that individuals with marginalized social identities can face implicit and unconscious bias. People of color, women, and foreign-born individuals may experience negative perceptions that are rooted in historical inequities and inequalities. Progress in eradicating implicit biases rooted in racial and gender differences has been limited in the United States. "In contexts such as politics and employment, people's behavior and decision making are greatly influenced by race and gender" (Ogungbe, Mitra, & Roberts, 2019, p. 1).

Studies have documented preference of serving White patients by physicians (Green et al., 2007; Oliver et al., 2014; Puumala et al., 2016; Sabin et al., 2009), prevalence of stereotypes (Moskowitz et al., 2012), and persistent negative impacts on treatment and health outcomes (Hausmann et al., 2015; Oliver et al., 2014; Sabin et al., 2012). Bias also affected the quality of communications and relationships between providers and patients as well as the ratings of care (Blair et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2012). Negative perceptions in turn create a sense of alienation, distrust, and withdrawal among both minoritized and non-minoritized members of the community.

Gender discrimination has been linked to poor mental health including depression, sense of vulnerability, stress, anxiety, rage, and alienation (Jagsi et al., 2016; Taccanelli et al., 2012). Research has also documented income inequality facing immigrants in the U.S. because of their status as foreign-born. Immigrants are treated differently even when they have identical productive assets to their native-born counterparts. Studies document the range of discriminatory practices that are experienced by foreign-born workers including underage hiring, sexual harassment, safety violations, workplace dangers, and higher rates of workplace injuries and fatalities (Leon-

ard, 2008). Access to opportunity structures is shaped by a foreign-born person's demographic characteristics including sex, age, national origin, and race (Rivera-Batiz, 1999). A comparison between Hispanic native and foreign-born workers shows a strong difference in earnings and labor force outcomes (Bell, Kwesiga, & Berry, 2010). After 2000, all immigrants in the U.S. experienced a changing political landscape that is characterized by lower returns on human capital, discriminatory practices, and erosion of labor rights (Massey & Gelatt, 2010).

Therefore, we propose Hypothesis 1: Individuals whose identities are marginalized because of race, gender, and nativity will experience lower levels of social cohesion (i.e., social relations, emotional connectedness, and orientation to the common good) than those with dominant identities.

### *Marginalization Rooted in Intersecting Social Identities*

Individuals typically hold multiple minoritized social identities. Intersectionality theory deepened our understanding of the impact of holding more than one marginalized social identity and the influence of such intersections on shaping experiences, opportunity structures, and perceptions (Crenshaw, 1989). When two or more marginalized identities intersect in the lives of people, vulnerabilities intensify, and such intersections create different experiences from those experienced by individuals holding only one marginalized social identity. Women of color have different experiences than White women; experiences shaped by the intersections of gender and race in their lives (Williams, 2014). "Double jeopardy" and "double disadvantage" are terms suggested to describe the combined experiences of marginalization (Chappell & Havens, 2016; Williams, 2014).

The intersection of race and ethnicity in the lives of foreign-born Americans limits access to opportunity structures and leads to lower wealth attainment (Painter, 2013). Minority status was a powerful predictor of underemployment for immigrants who are faced with "a double burden" of being foreign-born and a member of a minoritized group (De Jong & Madamba, 2001). Foreign-born workers have an earning penalty when they have darker skin. Lighter skinned immigrants earned more than their darker skinned counterparts, when controlling for factors such as English proficiency, educational attainment, occupation in country of origin, family background, ethnicity, race, country of birth, and market characteristics. Lighter skinned immigrants earned 17% more on average than their darker skinned counterparts (Hersch, 2008). Those with lightest skin were shown to earn an average of 16-23% more than their darker skinned counterparts (Hersch, 2011). Non-white Cuban immigrants have lower return on educational attainment than their White Cuban counterparts. There is a 4% unexplained wage gap between the two cohorts when controlling for productive assets and human capital. This racial wage gap does not narrow significantly with time (Zavodny 2003). White South African immigrants earn more than their black counterparts from other parts of Africa even when controlling for length of stay, language, and productive assets (Moore & Amey, 2010). Despite their socio-economic achievement and the view that they are a model minority, racial inequality affects them adversely in how they are perceived. The stereotype of the model minority also masks the reality that poverty rates for Asians are higher than their White counterparts (Sakamoto, Goyette, & Kim, 2009). Hispanics are also affected by race and ethnic stereotype of the outsider (Alcoff, 2003). As for the effect of gender, Donato, Piya, and Jacobs (2014) reported that immigrant women have had the lowest labor force participation rates compared to native women and men, and immigrant men at each level of education since 1960. Boyd (1984) also described the double disadvantage that immigrant women experience in labor market outcomes.

Therefore, we propose Hypothesis 2: Individuals whose identities have two or more minoritized dimensions will express lower levels of social cohesion than counterparts with only one minoritized dimension.

The study addresses gaps in the literature related to examining the impact of intersectional forces of race, gender, and nativity status on those whose identities deviate from the mainstream. The treatment of social identities of gender, race, and nativity status as separate is a common trend in the literature. In this work, we acknowledge the effect of intersectionality of different social identities on people's lives and how such intersections often intensify vulnerabilities and shape the lives of people.

In the next section, we discuss materials and methodology used in the study. We discuss study design, data collection methods, participants, and analytical and statistical approaches used to analyze the data. Then, in the sections that follow, we examine results and provide a discussion of findings and how these findings support or refute the study hypotheses. We analyze the findings and compare them to previous studies. We then discuss limitations and offer conclusions.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1 Study Design

The authors adapted the Social Cohesion Radar, a multidimensional instrument developed by Dragolov et al. (2013) based on the structure of social cohesion that was suggested by Schiefer et al. (2012). Using the social cohesion model by Dragolov et al. (2013), a total of 43 items were included under social relations, emotional connectedness, and orientation to the common good.

The study comprised two phases. Phase 1 included adaptation of the instrument, conduct of a pilot study to collect evidence of validity and reliability, and refinement of the instrument. Phase 2 included collection of primary data from residents of the region and analysis of data. Institutional Review Board approval for the conduct of the study was secured.

### 2.2 Phase 1: Instrument Adaptation, Pilot Study and Instrument Refinement

Content experts were invited to serve as an expert panel to review the original items. They were composed of representatives of the community who are citizens of the Region and served in an advisory capacity at a community-based organization. All content experts assessed how well the items represented social cohesion and how clear each item was. Based on the feedback received from the experts, we modified several items based on expert panel advice on the appropriate use of phrasing in the region.

Participants were recruited through community events and local organizations to complete the survey. The survey was administered via Qualtrics. During the community events, participants were able to complete the survey using an iPad.

Participants were comprised of a convenience sample of 250 residents of the region. Among the 250 participants, 126 participants identified themselves as female, and 122 participants identified as male. Most participants reported that they are White ( $n = 228$ ; 91.2%). A summary of respondents' characteristics is found in Table C.

**Table C. Phase 1 Respondents' Characteristics**

Variables		Frequency		Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	126		50.4
	Female	122		48.8
	Prefer Not to Answer	2		0.8
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian or Alaskan Native	6		2.4
	Asian	3		1.2
	Black/African Heritage	4		1.6
	Hispanic/Latino	1		.4
	Two or more races	8		3.2
	White	228		91.2
Nativity Status	Native-Born	246	98.4	
	Foreign-Born	4	1.6	

The instrument was adapted, and the evidence of reliability and validity was collected to ensure the integrity and quality of the survey instrument and to afford making accurate conclusions about social cohesion of residents. Differences in mean scores of each dimension of social cohesion were compared to understand if there would be differences due to race, gender, or nativity status or their intersections.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation analyses were conducted. Since the instrument was adapted from Dragolov's model (Dragolov et al., 2013), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted. Internal consistency analyses (Cronbach's alpha) were computed to test homogeneity of the scale.

Factor analysis and reliability analyses were conducted to examine the validity and reliability of the original instrument developed by Dragolov et al. (2013). Based on the results from the factor analysis and reliability analysis, we proposed a new factor structure that seems to be more appropriate to the population. In our proposed structure of social cohesion, levels of acceptance of diversity were divided into two different types: Individual-level and group-level (Arant et al., 2021). Our proposed structure of social cohesion dimensions contains both levels of acceptance of diversity to avoid the oversimplified operationalization of social cohesion.

CFA was conducted with the data collected from 250 participants to test the proposed factor structure. The analysis was performed in Mplus version 8.6 (Muthen & Muthen, 1998-2017). The fit indices of the analysis were as follows: CFI = 0.89, TLI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.063, and SRMR = 0.07. As Hu and Bentley (1999) suggested, the recommendation for model fit cutoff criteria was that CFA should be at least .95, RMSEA < 0.08, and SRMR < 0.08. Based on the recommendation, this model is a fair fit.

Cronbach's alphas for all dimensions were .799 (Social Network), .825 (Trust in People), .856 (Individual Level Acceptance of Diversity), .769 (Group Level Acceptance of Diversity), .653 (Sense of Belonging/Identity), .815 (Trust in Institutions), .78 (Helpfulness), and .715 (Political Participation). Since the dimension of "Respect for Social Rules" only contained a single item, which is "I believe we should all follow laws, rules, and social norms", the Cronbach's alpha could not be computed. The Overall Cronbach's alpha was .866.

### 2.3 Phase 2: Data Collection & Analysis Using Refined Instrument

With the support from the local community college research center, randomly selected landline phone numbers, cellular phone numbers and publicly available email addresses for residents of the region were acquired and used to invite participation. Like Phase 1, the online survey was distributed via random email invitation. Additionally, the survey data were collected by live-telephone interviews.

With a new set of data that was collected, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were conducted. After, t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to compare variances across the means of different groups. Both were performed using the SPSS statistical program. If the difference was statistically significant, a pairwise test was used to determine which group would be different from each other.

Initially, 745 responses were collected. After deleting incomplete responses or responses with missing answers, 490 responses remained and were used for the analysis. Characteristics of respondents are shown in Table D.

**Table D: Phase 2 Respondents' Characteristics**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	
Gender	Male	239	48.8
	Female	245	50
	Non-binary	4	0.8
	Prefer Not to Answer	2	0.4
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian or Alaskan Native	5	1.0
	Asian	4	0.8
	Black/African Heritage	6	1.2
	Hispanic/Latino	5	1.0
	Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	1	0.2
	White	449	91.6
Prefer Not to Answer	20	4.1	

### 3. Results

In Tables E and F, mean and standard deviation of each dimension as well as the correlations between each dimension for Phase 1 and Phase 2 are presented.

**Table E: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Social Cohesion Dimensions (Phase 1)**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
SN	3.93	0.71	—								
TP	3.62	0.65	.406**	—							
AD	3.37	0.50	.216**	.417**	—						
Identity	3.94	0.80	.439**	.387**	.228**	—					
TI	3.76	0.73	.414**	.500**	.374**	.453**	—				
PF	3.71	0.50	.409**	.237**	.252**	.306**	.334**	—			
S&H	3.75	0.48	.394**	.331**	.256**	.328**	.273**	.375**	—		
R	4.06	0.57	.247**	.328**	.140*	.311**	.454**	.277**	.286**	—	
CP	3.42	0.64	.220**	.318**	.187**	.177**	.298**	.177**	.454**	.233**	—

Note. SN = Social Network; TP = Trust in People; AD = Acceptance of Diversity; TI = Trust in Institutions; PF = Perception of Fairness; S&H = Solidarity and Helpfulness; R = Respect for Social Rules; CP = Civic Participation

**Table F: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Social Cohesion Dimension (Phase 2)**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
SN	4.12	0.78	—								
TP	3.52	0.80	.417**	—							
IAoD	3.63	0.81	.249**	.264**	—						
GAoD	3.20	0.76	.191**	.201**	.042	—					
SB	3.79	0.78	.308**	.323**	.192**	.136**	—				
TI	3.66	0.77	.328**	.428**	.144**	.307**	.407**	—			
R	4.22	0.80	.163**	.187**	.120**	.051	.264**	.314**	—		
H	3.68	0.86	.316**	.216**	.157**	.050	.221**	.240**	.237**	—	
PP	3.61	0.96	.164**	.163**	.242**	.006	.113*	.106*	.105*	.217**	—

Note. SN = Social Network; TP = Trust in People; IAoD = Individual level of Acceptance of Diversity; GAoD = Group level of Acceptance of Diversity; SB = Sense of Belonging; TI = Trust in Institution; R = Respect for Social Rules; H = Helpfulness; PP = Political Participation

### 3.1 Influence of Gender on Perceptions of Social Cohesion

Table G shows mean scores of each dimension by gender. The results indicate that there are statistically significant differences between gender on social network ( $F(3,485) = 5.040$ ,  $p = .007$ ), trust in people ( $F(3,485) = 5.535$ ,  $p = .004$ ), individual level of acceptance of diversity ( $F(3,485) = 8.413$ ,  $p = .000$ ), group level of acceptance of diversity ( $F(3,485) = 3.273$ ,  $p = .039$ ), and helpfulness ( $F(3,485) = 3.086$ ,  $p = .047$ ).

**Table G: Mean Scores for Each Dimensions by Gender**

SN	TP	IAoD	GAoD	SB	TI	R	H	PP	
Male	4.0377	3.4045	3.4854	3.2854	3.8033	3.6477	4.2176	3.5858	3.5690
Female	4.2095	3.6422	3.7806	3.1102	3.7850	3.6849	4.2286	3.7741	3.6667

Note. SN = Social Network; TP = Trust in People; IAoD = Individual level of Acceptance of Diversity; GAoD = Group level of Acceptance of Diversity; SB = Sense of Belonging; TI = Trust in Institution; R = Respect for Social Rules; H = Helpfulness; PP = Political Participation

A Tukey post-hoc test revealed significant pairwise differences between male and female with an average difference of  $-.17187$  scores for social network. This indicates that male participants scored less on social network than female participants, and the difference was significant.

Similarly, a significant pairwise difference between male and female was found for trust in people (difference of  $-.23771$ ), individual level of acceptance of diversity ( $-.29526$ ), and helpfulness ( $-.18838$ ). Men scored less on social network, trust in people, individual level of acceptance of diversity and helpfulness, as compared to women.

On the other hand, male participants scored higher than the female on group level of acceptance of diversity with an average difference of  $.17515$ . Group level of acceptance of diversity was the only dimension for which men scored higher than women, and the difference was significant.

### 3.2 Influence of Race/Ethnicity on Perceptions of Social Cohesion

Before performing an ANOVA, 21 responses were removed as (a) there was only one participant who was Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, and (b) there were 20 responses with "Prefer Not to Answer". After removing those responses, mean scores by different race/ethnicity groups were computed and can be found in Table H. ANOVA results show that there were statistically significant differences between race/ethnicity groups on trust in people ( $F(4,464) = 4.029$ ,  $p = .003$ ), trust in institution ( $F(4,464) = 4.737$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and political participation ( $F(4,464) = 2.585$ ,  $p = .036$ ).

**Table H: Mean Scores by Race/Ethnicity Group**

SN	TP	IAoD	GAoD	SB	TI	R	H	PP	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	3.2000	2.8000	3.8000	2.8400	3.5333	2.8400	4.200	3.5333	2.7333
Asian	4.0000	3.6667	3.8125	3.0500	3.7500	4.2000	4.000	3.9167	2.7500
Black/African Heritage	3.7222	2.4444	4.3333	3.1000	3.1667	2.7333	3.500	3.2222	4.2778
Hispanic/Latino	4.1333	3.6667	3.9500	3.2000	3.4667	3.3600	4.200	3.7333	3.5333
White	4.1359	3.5523	3.6303	3.2076	3.8159	3.6976	4.2361	3.6912	3.6258

Note. SN = Social Network; TP = Trust in People; IAoD = Individual level of Acceptance of Diversity; GAoD = Group level of Acceptance of Diversity; SB = Sense of Belonging; TI = Trust in Institution; R = Respect for Social Rules; H = Helpfulness; PP = Political Participation

A Tukey post-hoc test revealed a significant pairwise difference between Black and White in trust in people (difference of  $-.35556$ ), and trust in institution (difference of  $-.96422$ ). This finding shows that Black respondents are less likely to trust in people and trust in institutions, as compared to their White counterparts.

Additionally, there was a significant difference between Black and Asian with a mean difference of  $-1.46667$  for trust in institution. This shows that Asians are more likely to trust in institutions, as compared to the Black respondents.

Finally, there was a marginally significant pairwise difference between Black respondents with American Indian or Alaskan Native with a mean difference of  $1.54444$  ( $p = .064$ ) for political participation.

### *3.3 Influence of Nativity Status on Perceptions of Social Cohesion*

As there were only two groups for this category, a t-test was performed to compare the mean scores of native-born and foreign-born. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between native-born ( $M = 3.1926$ ,  $SD = .76189$ ) and foreign-born ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = .35777$ ) on group level acceptance of diversity,  $t(5.578) = -2.714$ ,  $p < .05$ . Native-born scored less on the group level acceptance of diversity, which revealed that native-born residents were more likely to be skeptical about level of the acceptance of diversity in the region.

**Table I: Mean Scores for Foreign-born and Native-born**

SN	TP	IAoD	GAoD	SB	TI	R	H	PP	
Native-born	4.1219	3.5213	3.6276	3.1926	3.7893	3.6636	4.1660	3.6770	3.6061
Foreign-born	3.9444	3.7222	3.8750	3.6000	3.9444	3.7333	4.1667	4.0000	4.1667

Note. SN = Social Network; TP = Trust in People; IAoD = Individual level of Acceptance of Diversity; GAoD = Group level of Acceptance of Diversity; SB = Sense of Belonging; TI = Trust in Institution; R = Respect for Social Rules; H = Helpfulness; PP = Political Participation

### 3.4 Influence of Intersectionality on Perceptions of Social Cohesion

To examine the influence of intersectionality on perceptions of social cohesion, multiple regression was conducted for each dimension of social cohesion. First, the result showed the significant interaction between race and gender ( $b = -1.198$ ,  $SE = 0.416$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This means that the effect of race on the social network depended on one's gender. Specifically, if the person is non-white woman, her score on the social network is expected to decrease by 1.198. If the person is white woman, her score on the social network is expected to increase by .156 ( $b = .156$ ,  $SE = .097$ ). Compared to white woman whom we would identify as individual with only one minoritized dimension, non-white woman would express lower levels of social network.

Similarly, there was a significant interaction between race and nativity status ( $b = -2.314$ ,  $SE = 1.180$ ,  $p < .05$ ) on trust in people. This reveals that the effect of race on trust in people depended on nativity status. The score of non-white foreign-born person on trust in people is expected to decrease by 2.314. The score of white foreign-born person is expected to increase by 1.524 ( $b = 1.524$ ,  $SE = .795$ ) and the score of non-white native-born person is expected to decrease by .020 ( $b = -.020$ ,  $SE = .370$ ). Compared to non-white native-born individuals and white foreign-born people, non-white foreign-born people would express the lowest level of trust in people.

Furthermore, significant interaction between race and gender ( $b = -.914$ ,  $SE = .424$ ,  $p < .05$ ) on individual level acceptance of diversity indicated that the scores of non-white women would decrease by .914 while the scores of white women would increase by .388. Similar to what has been shown in the other dimensions, individuals with two or more minoritized dimensions would express lower levels of individual level acceptance of diversity.

On the other hand, a significant interaction between women and newcomer status ( $b = .370$ ,  $SE = .183$ ,  $p < .044$ ) indicated that the score of female newcomers to this region would increase by .370 in political participation.

## 4. Discussion

**I**n this study, we adapted an instrument for measuring social cohesion to a community in the Northeastern region of the U.S. The instrument included eight dimensions: Social Network, Trust in People, Individual Acceptance of Diversity, Group Acceptance of Diversity, Sense of Belonging, Trust in Institutions, Helpfulness and Political Participation. Measuring social cohesion in the study region using the instrument yielded results discussed below.

### 4.1 Perceptual Differences by Gender

Men recorded lower scores than women on social network, trust in people, individual level acceptance of diversity and helpfulness, a finding that does not support hypothesis 1: Individuals whose identities are marginalized because of gender will experience lower levels of social cohesion than those with dominant identities. The findings, however, are supported by the literature which argues that compared to women, men reported lower scores on social network, trust in people, and individual level acceptance of diversity, and helpfulness. In many studies, men have reported smaller social networks (McLaughlin et al., 2010), and were less likely to build strong relationships of trust. Haselhuhn et al. (2015) have showed in their social experiment that men were less likely to trust others. In the experiment, men lost trust in people quickly and were less likely to collaborate.

Because men were less likely to regularly socialize with their neighbors and build the strong relationships with others, they were more likely to be influenced by the racial and ethnic character of their neighbors (Stolle et al., 2008).

Furthermore, Maddux and Brewer (2005) have demonstrated that trust for women heavily depends on both direct and indirect relationships while trust for men heavily depends on group membership. Men reported lower scores on social network due to relatively smaller social networks, and a tendency to socialize based on group membership. In terms of helpfulness, men may score lower because the items specifically asked for informal volunteering (e.g., volunteering in community organizations) that women tend to engage more in.

Results supported the well-known patterns from previous research that being female is associated with higher levels of trust, larger social network and more willingness to accept diversity as women were more influenced by the direct and indirect social relationships that were developed through frequent social interactions.

#### *4.2 Perceptual Differences by Race*

The findings related to differences in perceptions of social cohesion of different racial groups support hypothesis 1: Individuals whose identities are marginalized because of race will experience lower levels of social cohesion than those with dominant identities. Results are supported by previous research that non-white individuals were less likely to have trust in people and trust in institution (Abascal & Baldassarri, 2015). Abascal and Baldassarri (2015) have argued that the relationship between diversity and trust can be understood when differences between communities and their residents in terms of race/ethnicity, residential stability, and economic conditions are considered. The study's region is white-dominated and is primarily homogenous. Therefore, racial minorities constitute an out-group who are experiencing the impacts of social subordination.

The findings also support literature that provides evidence pertaining to Black political participation. The findings show that Blacks are more likely to participate in politics and express interest in the political system. Macías Mejía (2023) for instance, shows that "linked fate" or the sense that one's individual wellbeing is tied to group wellbeing is associated with political participation of Blacks and Latinos but not Asian Americans. Anoll (2018) provides a consistent finding showing that Black Americans are more likely to believe that voting has a positive impact on their lives and community than Whites. Black Americans may strongly believe that participating in politics and having their voices heard do make their lives better as well as their community.

#### *4.3 Perceptual Differences by Nativity Status*

The findings reveal that native-born score lower on group acceptance of diversity. Compared to foreign-born residents, they have lower levels of certainty that ethnic, racial, and religious tensions are low, that people of diverse backgrounds including immigrants, LGBTQ communities and people with disabilities are accepted and valued. This finding is consistent with national poll surveys that find most Americans (56%) indicating that race relations in the U.S are generally bad (Pew Research Center, 2019) and that some form of discrimination exist against Blacks, Hispanics, and Latinos (Pew Research Center, 2021). The views differ largely by race. In a survey of perceptions of discrimination conducted in 2007, foreign-born outnumbered native born in believing that discrimination against Latinos is a major problem (Pew Research Center, 2007).

#### *4.4 Perceptual Differences of Individuals with Intersecting Minoritized Identities*

Not all dimensions of social cohesion were influenced by the intersectionality of individuals' minoritized identities.

However, the results of non-White foreign-born residents supported the hypothesis that individuals whose identities have two or more minoritized dimensions are expected to express lower levels on some dimensions of social cohesion. Non-White women whose nativity status intersect with gender have lower levels of social networks and lower levels of trust in people. Similarly, women whose race intersect with gender have decreased perception of how their community is accepting of diversity. This is consistent with the literature that supports the negative association of ethnic diversity and social trust. Dinesen, Schaeffer & Sonderskov (2020) posit that social trust decreases in ethnically diverse contexts and "Proximity to interethnic others is an important facilitating condition that accentuates the negative relationship between ethnic diversity and social trust." (Dinesen et al., 2020, 461).

#### *4.5 Limitations & Directions for Future Research*

This study has several limitations. As the study's region is typical of many U.S. regions that are experiencing slow diversification, the participants were mostly Whites and native-born. Therefore, we could only measure the social cohesion status of limited numbers of immigrants, or newcomers to this region.

The study did not explore all factors that may explain diverging perceptions. For example, as several scholars argued, traditional communities that rely on geographic location and physical proximity are being replaced by virtual communities (Wallace et al., 2013). Social relations are no longer embedded in geographic communities (Giddens, 1991). Communities of choice and personal communities which are less likely to be locational (Pahl and Spencer, 2004). Digital communication technologies have enabled the creation of new communities of interest which are not localized (Rainie and Wellman, 2012), are available 24/7 at the click of a mouse or poke of a touch pad (Turkle, 2013; Wallace et al., 2013).

Moreover, limitations of the study also include data collection approaches. Phase 1 of the study relied on several methods of data collection which included online and in-person surveys, while phase 2 relied on phone interviews. In both instances there has been an overreliance on individuals who are already connected to institutions of society and who are engaged with these institutions who tend to be the dominant groups. Also, reliance on land lines for conducting phone interviews tend to limit the scope to demographics who still use land lines and who tend to be older. The limitations of the data collection methods are reflected in the demographics of the respondents who although representative of the make-up of the community, does not provide a balance between minority and majority respondent groups.

Future research needs to incorporate complementary qualitative data collection approaches to further contextualize perceptions of residents in similar communities. Without understanding the forces that shape individual members' responses, our understanding of social cohesion in any community remains limited. Future research needs to ensure that the voices of newcomers in a new community is contextualized within the socio-political and economic dynamics of a community.

Future research needs to unpack what social cohesion means within the context of communities that may no longer define itself by geographic location and physical proximity. It needs to examine the extent to which gender, race, and nativity status affect perceptions of social cohesion within the boundaries of these communities. Research questions also include implications

of the blurred boundaries of communities within physically defined spaces on the ability of these communities to remain integrated, organized, civically engaged and collectively interested in its development and the wellbeing of its members. Individual-level characteristics may also have an impact on perceptions of social cohesion and need to be examined. For example, to what extent does socio-economic status and educational attainment affect perceptions of social cohesion?

#### 4.6 Implications of Findings

The study's findings have wide implications. Minoritized groups who settle in homogenous regions will experience the impact of social dominance and imbalance of power dynamics, which will possibly affect their sense of trust and sense of belonging. Community interventions that narrow the distance between residents of a community and dismantle walls of isolation and alienation will shatter fear and promote mutual understanding.

### 5. Conclusion

**I**n this study, we adapted and validated the instrument that measured the social cohesion of a community. Using the instrument, we examined social cohesion in a community that is homogenous dominated by White Americans. As the study's region is experiencing slow diversification, it offers a window into the attitudes of residents from dominant and minoritized groups toward one another and examine the way they are experiencing their communities. After comparing between multiple groups, our results showed that male participants and Black residents reported low level of trust and those who are less likely to interact with others especially culturally diverse people are less likely to display high level of social cohesion and more likely to feel isolated.

The study contributes to filling a gap in the literature about communities that are in the process of diversification. It draws attention to the need to assess the context of reception of newcomers who are resettling in historically homogenous communities and to the need to recognize how residents with intersecting social identities can experience such context differently. It also deepens our understanding about the state of social cohesion in these communities.

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## Biographical Notes

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**Rukhsana Ahmed** is Professor of Communication, Faculty Associate at the Center for the Elimination of Minority Health, and Faculty Fellow at the Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany, State University of New York, New York, USA. She is the Co-Founder and Co-Director of the Health and Equity Justice Lab at UAlbany and Georgia State University. Her research examines the role of communication, culture, media, and technology in shaping health outcomes among marginalized communities and promoting broader organizational and social changes and innovations in local, national, and international health contexts. She is the Chief Editor of the *Health Communication* section of *Frontiers in Communication*. Her recent co-edited book is titled *Theory and Application of Health Acculturation: A Communication Perspective* (2024; Lexington Books). She received the Eastern Communication Association 2024 Distinguished Research Fellows Award.

**Jeanette Altarriba** is Professor of Psychology and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University at Albany, State University of New York, Albany, New York, USA. She is the Founder and Director of the Cognition and Language Laboratory at UAlbany. Her most recent publications include: El-Dakhs, D. A. S., Ahmed, M. M., Altarriba, J., & Sonbul (2024), Differential Emotional Expression in Autobiographical Narratives: The case of Arabic-English Bilinguals, *International Journal of Bilingualism*; and Toglia, M., Otgar, H., Altarriba, J., Erikson, W. B. (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Advances in Understanding Adaptive Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2024). Her research interests focus on bilingualism, emotion, adaptive and survival memory, and cohesion and adaptability of various demographic groups.

**Dr. Kyung Hyun Park** specializes in educational psychology, with a focus on gifted education and talent development from a lifelong perspective. Her research primarily focuses on racially, ethnically, and culturally marginalized and underrepresented talented young people. Currently, she is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Medical Education, Yonsei University College of Medicine in Seoul, South Korea.

## Appendix A: Social Cohesion Instrument

### *Social Network*

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
o	o	o	o	o

1. I believe friends are important in life
2. I socialize more than twice a week with friends, relatives, and colleagues
3. I feel I can count on receiving support if needed and advice in serious personal or family matters

### *Trust in People*

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
o	o	o	o	o

1. I believe most people can be trusted
2. I believe most people try to be fair
3. I believe most people are helpful

### *Individual Level Acceptance of Diversity*

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
o	o	o	o	o

1. I would like to have neighbors who are racially different from me
2. I would like to have neighbors who are culturally different from me
3. I would like to have neighbors who have different religious beliefs than mine
4. I believe that the country's cultural life is enriched by having different cultures and diverse background

### *Group Level Acceptance of Diversity*

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
o	o	o	o	o

1. I believe ethnic/racial tensions in the region do not exist or are very low
2. I believe religious tensions in the region do not exist or are very low
3. I feel that the LGBTQ+ community is welcomed and accepted
4. I believe people with intellectual and Developmental Disabilities are accepted and valued in my community
5. I agree that the region is good place for immigrants and people of different cultural backgrounds

***Sense of Belonging***

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
o	o	o	o	o

1. I like living in the U.S.
2. I like living in NY
3. I like living in the region and do not desire to move permanently to another region

***Trust in Institutions***

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
o	o	o	o	o

1. The local law enforcement makes me feel safe in my community
2. I generally have confidence in the local justice system
3. I generally have confidence in local government institutions
4. I generally have confidence in the healthcare system that I use
5. I am not fearful of reporting crime and seeking police assistance

***Respect for Social Rules***

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
o	o	o	o	o

1. I believe we should all follow laws, rules, and social norms

***Helpfulness***

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
o	o	o	o	o

1. I donate to charity
2. I volunteer in the community
3. I serve on committees and/or volunteer in community organizations

***Political Participation***

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
o	o	o	o	o

1. I believe politics is important to one's life
2. I have an interest in the political system
3. I sign petitions

## Demographic Information

1. I am a resident of (choose one):
  
2. I identify as:
  - (a) Female
  - (b) Male
  - (c) Non-binary
  - (d) Prefer not to answer
  
3. Age:
  - (a) 18-24
  - (b) 25-29
  - (c) 30-39
  - (d) 40-49
  - (e) 50-59
  - (f) 60-69
  - (g) 70-79
  - (h) 80 and over
  
4. I identify as: (check all that apply)
  - (a) American Indian or Alaskan Native
  - (b) Asian
  - (c) Black/African Heritage
  - (d) Hispanic/Latino
  - (e) Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander
  - (f) White
  - (f) Two or more races (Please Specify) -----
  
5. Location of Birth