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## **Social Cohesion in Europe: How the Different Dimensions of Inequality Affect Social Cohesion?**

### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper my concern is the analysis of the connection between social cohesion and social inequalities at European level. The paper is build around three main issues. The first one regards the definition and measurement of the concept of social cohesion. The second problem consists in the identification of the factors that shapes the overall level of social cohesion. Finally, the last issue is about the comparative analysis that will be introduced following the welfare regime approach. More specifically, the core of my work consists of two main hypotheses: the first one argues the existence of a direct negative association between economic inequality and social cohesion. The second one states that this connection is influenced by other factors which include the individuals' position in the stratification system. Turning to the comparative analysis, I suppose that welfare state is relevant because it influences both the relationship between social class and economic inequality and the link between social cohesion and economic inequality. In the first case, it is consider as a set of formalised social policy arrangements that protects against the risks related to the uneven distribution of material rewards. In the second case, following the moral economy approach, welfare state institutions comprise also collective patterns of institutionalised solidarity and social justice beliefs. Data from the "European Quality of Life Survey" carried out by the European Foundation in 2003 have been analysed by means of structural equation models in order to obtain a measurement of social cohesion and in order to estimate the direct and indirect effects exerted by the different dimensions of inequalities.

**Key words:** Social cohesion, poverty, social class, welfare regimes, Europe.

## **1. What is Social Cohesion, and Why Do We Care?**

The social cohesion theme raises two distinct problems. Firstly, I have to deal with a conceptual difficulty, which regards the definition, in fact, in the scientific debate there is not an agreement about what social cohesion is. Generally, it is possible to distinguish between two main families of definition. The first one, considers social cohesion as a process that helps the building of a common sense of belonging to the same community (Canadian Heritage 1995). On the contrary, the second approach is static and social cohesion is defined as a state of affairs concerning the interactions among members of a society, interactions that take place in various domains of human associated life (Chan et al. 2006). Despite these differences, an agreement seems to arise in relation to its multidimensional nature, but it disappears when the attention is on the different dimensions considered. In particular, the main point concerns the role of social inequality. In fact, some scholars consider it as a dimension of social cohesion (Jenson 1998; Berger-Schmitt 2000; Jeannotte et al. 2002; Chiesi 2004), while others criticize this approach arguing that the inequalities' sphere has to be thought as a factor that could influence social cohesion (Chan et al. 2006; Whelan and Maître 2005b).

Moreover, a distinction has to be made between objective and perceived level. Following Bollen and Hoyle (1990), whose approach is based on the small group theory, the objective level looks at the relationships within the social groups, while the perceived level considers the sense of belonging to a particular group. Extending these arguments to the whole of society, the objective level refers to the individual's behaviours, while the perceived level regards various attitudes towards different life's spheres.

The second problem arises considering the measurement issue. In fact, social cohesion has been measured by means of both aggregated and individual data. In the first case, social cohesion is seen as a property of the social system and as a consequence the measurement takes place at the macro level. The main indicators used were: criminality rates, unemployment rates, levels of education, individuals' proportion with racist attitudes, indexes of income inequality, diffusion of social benefits, voting participation, newspaper readership or number of cultural voluntary associations (Wilkinson 1996; Berger-Schmitt 2000; Rajulton et al. 2007). In the second case, applying an individualistic perspective, the overall level of social cohesion is due to attitudes and behaviours that occur at the micro level (Whelan and Maître 2005b; Chan et al. 2006) and to the social interactions (Sampson 1991; Lee 2000 and Villarreal; Friedkin 2004; Silva 2006). In the heterogeneous field of social cohesion's definitions, I am oriented toward a multidimensional one. I believe that this could be a profitable way to consider social cohesion, given its double nature, objective and perceived, and considering the different areas of social life in which it is possible to

analyse it. More precisely, for Chan et al. (2006, 290) “Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations”. Following Whelan and Maître (2005b), the principal domains are identified by three dimensions: micro, meso and macro. The micro-level regards the relationships within primary groups. The meso-level is the strength and nature of relationship within secondary groups. Finally, the macro-level is related to the common sense of belonging of the society and to the institutional trust. The definition mentioned above are operational definitions strictly directed toward the measurement issue and they are not connected with the broader theoretical discourse. In general, the concept of social cohesion, although it could be traced from the work of Emile Durkheim (Pahl 1991), did not receive a particular attention in the sociological debate. In any case, it could be connected to concepts that received a major attention and that have a stronger tradition as: solidarity and integration (Lockwood 1992 and 1999). Following the line drawn by Lockwood (1999), I propose to conceptualise social cohesion as a subdivision of social integration made up by two interconnected conceptual axes: civic integration and relational density. More precisely, the first dimension regards attitudes and behaviours connected to the core institutional order, the second one, considers the inclusion or exclusion in social network<sup>1</sup>.

Despite the problems outlined, there is a wide interest toward the topic of social cohesion both in political sphere and in the academic discourse. More in general, the interest toward social cohesion could be seen as sign of the re-emergence of the theory of integration and differentiation (Gough and Olofsson 1999). While in the fifties the focus was on the topics of: industrialisation, modernisation and democratisation, now this attention is due to the effects of globalisation, the re-emergence of nationalism and ethnicity, long-term unemployment and social exclusion. In this way, it is possible to connect “the inequality question and the cohesion question that have been tied to different traditions in sociology, with Marx as the person around whom proponents of historical materialism rallied when addressing questions about societal inequalities, and Durkheim as the founder of structural functionalism studying societal cohesion” (Ultee 2006, 386).

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Whelan and Maître (2005b) could be subsumed in this approach. In fact, the macro dimension as an approximation of the civic integration, while the micro and meso dimensions could be include in the inclusion/exclusion in social network. The same is true for the contribute of Chan et al. (2006). In this case the vertical interactions are very close to civic integration, while the horizontal ones to relational density.

## 2. Research questions

As mentioned above my aim is the analysis of the relationships between social cohesion and inequalities at European level. My empirical contribution tries to answer to the following research questions: does economic inequality exert a direct and negative impact on social cohesion? Is the individual position in the stratification system able to influence the relationships between social cohesion and economic inequality? Are institutional arrangements able to mediate the relationships between social cohesion and economic inequality?

The first question regards the connection between poverty and social cohesion. It can be analysed following two different approaches (Fahey et al. 2005). The first approach assumes, without deep consideration, the existence of a direct and negative connection between social cohesion and poverty. The second one analyses this link in a deeper way, presupposing a causal chain that starts from objective disadvantages and arrives at social cohesion passing through the concept of relative deprivation (*sensu* Runciman 1966). More precisely, the measurement of poverty using also subjective indicators is a way to gather the deprivation's elements that enter in the relationships among social cohesion and poverty. The connection between social cohesion and economic inequality is related with the idea that a lack of economic resources could lead to an inability to take part in the community social life that implies a decline in the trust towards the well-functioning whole of society.

Turning to the second research question, I will consider social class and education as a proxy for the individual position in the stratification system. I believe that social class and education play a crucial role through its influence across the life-chances. Indeed, shaping the individual life-chances, they exert an impact on attitudes and behaviours connected with social cohesion. In summary, I will try to assess the total effect of the stratification factors on social cohesion. The differentiation between an economic basis (social class) and a cultural basis (education) of stratification is not a purpose of this work<sup>2</sup>.

The third question regards the role played by the institutional arrangements. More precisely, I will follow the welfare regimes perspective (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999), understood as the different way in which is declined the idea of social citizenship. Following Gallie and Paugam (2000) welfare regimes are systems of public regulation that assure protection and the conservation of social cohesion through the public intervention in different spheres of human life. According to regime theory, welfare regimes comprise not only formalised social policy arrangements, but also collective patterns of institutionalised solidarity and social justice beliefs. These solidarity and

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<sup>2</sup> Obviously, I am not denying that analysing class and education separately could be interesting, but that this is not the purpose of this work. It could be the topic of a future work.

social justice principles are seen as historically and culturally embedded in welfare state institutions which continuously shape public discourse and individual values (Mau 2004). Welfare regimes perspective should be relevant for the aim of this work. First of all, it shapes, as shown by Whelan and Maître (2005a), the relationships between social class and economic inequality. Moreover, it could influence the relationships between social cohesion and economic inequalities. Indeed, following Mau (2004) the different criteria of social justice embedded in the welfare regimes would mediate this connection. But this mediation could happen in according to a further mechanism according to which individuals, who live in system that guarantee protection against risks connected with market economy, will show positive attitudes and a generalised trust toward the society's institutions. In the first case the institutional context affects the acceptability of inequalities, while in the second case it influences the individual's perception of his own opportunity structure.

The preceding discourse regards the stratification effects on social cohesion across Europe. The underlying question is whether the traditional demarcations have an impact or whether social cohesion has to be seen as an "individualised" phenomenon. It has been argued that that the individuals' social positions in the society has become less relevant in the development of attitudes, values and lifestyles (Beck 1986; Pakulsky and Waters 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

### **3. Data, variables and methods.**

In this paper I use data from the *European Quality of Life Survey* (EQLS), collected by the *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions* (Eurofound) in 2003. The survey is based on 23,939 individuals belonging to 28 European countries. The aim is the collection of a set of information about: working condition and quality of life.

In particular, I will consider four countries according to their belonging to a particular welfare regime. The countries are: Italy (Mediterranean), Germany (Conservative), Sweden (Social Democratic) and United Kingdom (Liberal).

#### **3.1. Dependent variables**

Social cohesion has been measured combining the work of Whelan and Maître (2005b) and of Chan et al. (2006). More precisely, I use the following items (see Table 1 for the descriptive statistics):

1. *Confidence in social benefit system*: interviewees were questioned about their confidence in the social benefit system. Responses were measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (a great deal of trust) to 3 (no trust at all).
2. *Perceived inter-group tensions*: respondents were asked about their perception of levels of tension in relation to five social groups: 'poor and rich people', 'management and workers',

‘men and women’, ‘old and young people’ and finally ‘different racial and ethnic groups’. Responses were measured on a 3-point Likert scale from 1 (a lot of tension) to 3 (no tension).

3. *Perceived quality of public services*: interviewed persons rated the quality of public services with a scale going from 1 (very poor) to 10 (high quality). The public services evaluated were: health services, education system, public transport, social services, state pension system.
4. *Alienation*: respondents were asked to express the extent of their agreement with the following statements: ‘in order to get ahead nowadays you are forced to do things that are not correct’, if they ‘feel left out of society’, if ‘good luck is more important than hard work for success’ and if ‘life has become so complicated that they almost can’t find their way’. Responses were measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (agree completely) to 3 (disagree completely).
5. *Participation in voluntary activities*: interviewed persons answer about the participation on a meeting of a voluntary organisation and about the work done for a voluntary organisation.
6. *Participation in political activities*: respondents were asked about the involvement in political activities (meeting, demonstration, petition) and about the contacts with politicians.

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive statistics for the social cohesion’s items**

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	(N)
Tension between poor and rich people	1,86	0,617	1	3	(1733)
Tension between management and workers	1,82	0,577	1	3	(1733)
Tension between men and women	2,23	0,603	1	3	(1733)
Tension between old people and young people	2,21	0,618	1	3	(1733)
Tension between different racial and ethnic groups	1,66	0,600	1	3	(1733)
Optimistic about the future	2,87	0,828	1	4	(1733)
In order to get ahead nowadays you are forced to do things	2,80	0,948	1	4	(1733)
I feel left out of society	3,56	0,732	1	4	(1733)
Good luck is more important than hard work for success	2,79	0,946	1	4	(1733)
Life has become so complicated today	3,03	0,970	1	4	(1733)
Quality of health services	6,41	1,972	1	10	(1733)
Quality of education system	6,49	1,824	1	10	(1733)
Quality of public transport	6,27	2,127	1	10	(1733)
Quality of social services	6,06	1,894	1	10	(1733)
Quality of state pension system	5,23	2,119	1	10	(1733)
Trust in state pension system to deliver	2,29	0,889	1	4	(1733)
Trust in social benefit system to deliver	2,52	0,863	1	4	(1733)
Attended meeting of charitable or voluntary organisation	0,19	0,390	0	1	(1733)
Served on committee or done voluntary work for voluntary organisation	0,16	0,367	0	1	(1733)
Attended trade union, political party or political action group meeting	0,23	0,418	0	1	(1733)
Contacted politician or public official	0,12	0,323	0	1	(1733)

These items<sup>3</sup> have been analysed by means of principal component analysis (PCA) (table 3). From the analysis result six different dimension that could be named: tension, alienation quality, trust, voluntary participation and political participation. Looking at the correlation matrix between the factors highlighted by the PCA (table 4), it is possible to notice two “areas” in which the correlations are stronger.

**TABLE 2**  
**Results of the Principal Component Analysis**

	Communalities	Components					
		1°	2°	3°	4°	5°	6°
Tension between poor and rich people	0.512	0.689					
Tension between management and workers	0.525	0.706					
Tension between men and women	0.548	0.734					
Tension between old people and young people	0.529	0.725					
Tension between different racial and ethnic groups	0.371	0.587					
Optimistic about the future	0.337		-0.473				
In order to get ahead nowadays you are forced to do things	0.412		-0.580				
I feel left out of society	0.506		-0.699				
Good luck is more important than hard work for success	0.409		-0.623				
Life has become so complicated today	0.585		-0.752				
Quality of health services	0.704			0.836			
Quality of education system	0.699			0.835			
Quality of public transport	0.626			0.774			
Quality of social services	0.749			0.851			
Quality of state pension system	0.686			0.709			
Trust in state pension system to deliver	0.811				-0.896		
Trust in social benefit system to deliver	0.738				-0.853		
Attended meeting of charitable or voluntary organisation	0.794					0.888	
Served on committee or done voluntary work for voluntary organisation	0.794					0.887	
Attended trade union, political party or political action group meeting	0.631						0.792
Contacted politician or public official	0.631						0.784
Eigenvalues		2.614	2.576	3.803	2.771	1.753	1.483

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis.  
Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.  
Factor loadings less than 0,40 are not reported.

<sup>3</sup> The variables are coded in a way by which high values means for all the variables high level of social cohesion.

**TABLE 3**  
**Correlation matrix between factors**

	Tension	Alienation	Quality	Trust	Voluntary	Political
Tension	1					
Alienation	0.241**	1				
Quality	0.197**	0.361**	1			
Trust	0.167**	0.269**	0.461**	1		
Voluntary	0.032**	0.128**	0.082**	0.105**	1	
Political	0.016*	0.085**	0.040**	0.066**	0.283**	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

This lead to the supposition of a more complex structure of the data. I will test this supposition using a second-order confirmatory factor analysis<sup>4</sup> (table 4).

The confirmatory factor analysis confirms the results obtained with the PCA and it is also corroborated the supposition about the more complex data structure. More precisely, the first four sets of items regard the macro-subjective dimension, while the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> consider the meso-objective dimension.

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<sup>4</sup> The model has been estimated using Amos 7.0.

**TABLE 4**  
**Standardised factor loadings for the second-order confirmatory factor analysis**

	First-Order factors						Second-Order factors	
	Tension	Alienation	Quality	Trust	Voluntary	Political	Macro	Meso
Tension between poor and rich people	0.721							
Tension between management and workers	0.652							
Tension between men and women	0.347							
Tension between old people and young people	0.349							
Tension between different racial and ethnic groups	0.362							
Optimistic about the future		0.465						
In order to get ahead nowadays you are forced to do things		0.403						
I feel left out of society		0.576						
Good luck is more important than hard work for success		0.434						
Life has become so complicated today		0.620						
Quality of health services			0.662					
Quality of education system			0.627					
Quality of public transport			0.648					
Quality of social services			0.819					
Quality of state pension system			0.696					
Trust in state pension system to deliver				0.722				
Trust in social benefit system to deliver				0.850				
Attended meeting of charitable or voluntary organisation					0.925			
Served on committee or done voluntary work for voluntary organisation					0.686			
Attended trade union, political party or political action group meeting						0.422		
Contacted politician or public official						0.707		
Tension							0.419	
Alienation							0.582	
Quality							0.712	
Trust							0.693	
Voluntary								0.781
Political								0.464
Model fit: N=1,733; Chi-square=551.529; d.f.=174; RMSEA=0.035								

### 3.2. Independent variables

Following Whelan et al. (2001), Fahey et al. (2005) and Whelan and Maître (2006), I think about material inequalities in terms of economic vulnerability. It is considered as a latent trait whose indicators are: income, material deprivation, and economic stress. More precisely, income has been measured by means of the household total net equivalent income using the modified OECD equivalence scale and adjusting for the purchase power parity. This scale, first proposed by Haagenars et al. (1994), assigns a value of 1 to the household head, of 0.5 to each additional adult member and of 0.3 to each child<sup>5</sup>.

Economic stress is a subjective measure of the perceived economic condition, more precisely it is based on the following question: is your household's disposable income enough for you to get through the month? In this way I am able to distinguish those households that have "difficulty" or "great difficulty" in getting through the month from all others.

The measure of material deprivation try to capture exclusion from participation in 'ordinary living' in a manner generally identified as appropriate in the relevant community. Three types of items are employed. The first set of items considers the absence and affordability of some elements that are incorporated in the following question: "There are some things many people cannot afford even if they would like them. Can I just check whether your household can afford these if you want them"

The following six items were administered in this fashion:

1. Keeping your home adequately warm.
2. Paying for a week's annual holiday away from home.
3. Replacing any worn-out furniture.
4. Buying new, rather than second-hand clothes.
5. Eating meat, chicken or fish every second day, if you wanted to.
6. Having friends or family for a drink or meal at least once a month.

For the second set of items respondents were asked if the household possessed the items and in the negative case if it was because they could not afford it. The three items are:

1. A car or van.
2. A home computer.
3. A washing machine.

A final item dealt with the experience of debt and is constructed from information relating to the experience of arrears in the previous 12 months in relation to utility bills. The deprivation measure is then constructed as the simple sum of the deficits on these 10 items.

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<sup>5</sup> An individual will consider to be adult if his age is greater than 14.

Finally, in table 5 are reported the descriptive statistic for the independent variables used in the analysis.

**TABLE 5**  
**Descriptive statistics for the independent variables**

Categorical variables			
<i>Education</i>		<i>Economic Stress</i>	
None	0,5	With great difficulty	2,7
Primary	13,5	With difficulty	3,8
Secondary	58,1	With some difficulty	16,0
University	27,9	Fairly easily	32,1
Total	100,0	Easily	30,2
(N)	(1733)	Very easily	15,2
		Total	100,0
<i>Welfare regime</i>	17,4	(N)	(1733)
Italy	19,4		
Germany	31,6		
Sweden	31,6		
United Kingdom			
Total	100,0		
(N)	(1733)		
Quantitative variables			
	Mean	Std. dev.	(N)
<i>Current life-style deprivation</i>	9,3	1,46	(1733)
<i>Equivalent Income (PPP)</i>	1391,0	907,45	(1733)
<i>Status (Treiman index)</i>	38,6	8,13	(1733)

#### 4. Results

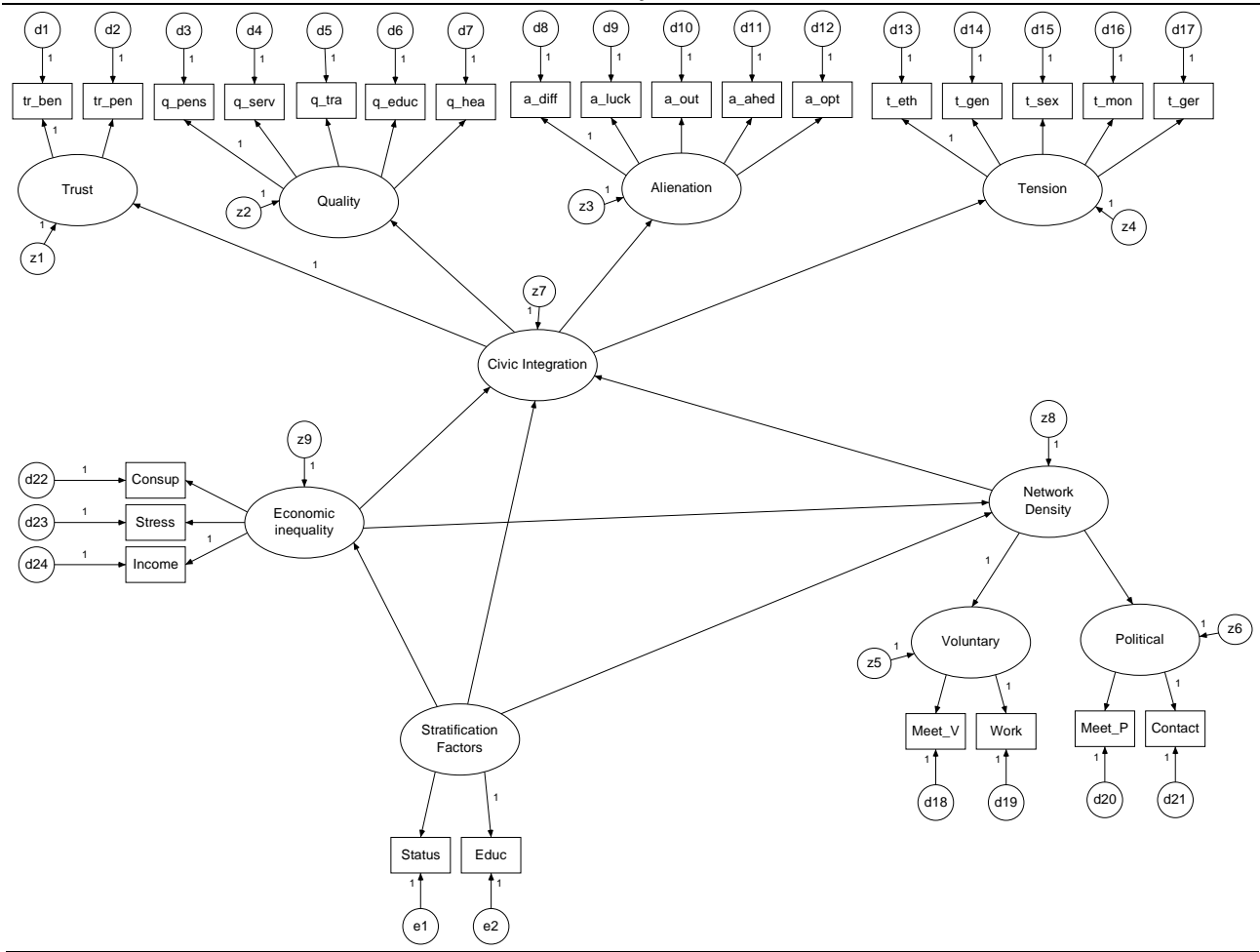
On the basis of the research question highlighted in the second paragraph I have developed a structural model in order to evaluate the role played by economic inequality and status (figure 1).

I focus my attention on the structural parameters, in particular I am interested on the total effects (table 7)<sup>6</sup>.

I can notice that while stratification factors have a stronger impact on the meso level of social cohesion, the economic inequality affects deeper the macro level of social cohesion.

<sup>6</sup> I report, in table 6, the standardised regression coefficients regarding the latent exogenous factors.

**FIGURE 1**  
**General analytical model**



**TABLE 6**  
**Validation of the latent variable**

	Economic Inequality	Stratification Factors
CLSD	0.687	
Stress	0.828	
Income	0.449	
Status (Treiman)		0.687
Education		0.537

**TABLE 7**  
**Standardised total effect**

>>>	Economic Inequality	Network density	Civic Integration
Stratification factors	0.473	0.393	0.229
Economic Inequality	-	-0.056	0.523
Network density	-	-	0.117

Model fit: N=1,733; Chi-square=1,447.61; d.f.=283; RMSEA=0.049

#### 4.1. Multi-group model

A rigorous test of the existence of differences between the welfare regimes can be entertained in the frame of a multi-group model of the pooled data which allows a statistical comparison of effects across the four subgroups (table 8).

**TABLE 8**  
**Standardised total effect (Factor loadings constrained multi-group model)**

	Stratification >>> Econ. Ineq.	Stratification >>> Network	Stratification >>> Civic Integr.	Econ. Ineq. >>> Network	Econ. Ineq. >>> Civic Integr.	(N)
General model	0.473	0.393	0.229	-0.056	0.523	(1733)
Italy	0.530	0.206	0.209	0.067	0.505	(337)
UK	0.566	0.683	0.064	-0.267	0.529	(302)
Germany	0.552	0.355	0.334	-0.033	0.581	(547)
Sweden	0.197	0.201	0.132	-0.053	0.446	(547)
Model fit: N=1,733; Chi-square=2570; d.f.=1186; RMSEA=0.026						

First of all, it is possible to notice that the general picture, according to which stratification factors exert a stronger impact on the meso level and economic inequality affects deeper the macro level, is confirmed also in the multi-group model. Some differences arise looking at the relationships between stratification factors and cohesion and between economic inequality and cohesion across the geographical areas. In particular, my attention is focused on the institutional effects connected with the welfare regimes. As a consequence I am interested in the influences played by the different dimensions of inequalities on the macro dimension of social cohesion regarding the civic integration's sphere. In fact, I believe that welfare state is linked with the area of civic integration. Looking at the results, I notice, obviously, that the impact of the stratification factors on the economic inequality in Sweden is the smallest one. Moreover, it is possible to see how the impact of economic inequality on civic integration is always weaker in Sweden. The situation slightly changes for the effect played by stratification factors on civic integration. In fact, the country with the lower effect is the United Kingdom.

#### 5. Conclusion

The first main result is that the different types of inequalities influence the level of social cohesion. In general, I found that people in better structural positions are inclined to show higher level of social cohesion, with few exception. Moreover, it was possible to notice how the diverse types of inequalities play different roles in the definition of social cohesion. More precisely, the effect of stratification factors is larger on network density (meso level of social cohesion), while economic inequality is strongest on civic integration (macro level of social cohesion). The rising picture show that material deprivation tend to weaken the recognition and identification of the individuals in the

whole society and in its institutions. While a social position characterised by less opportunity and with worse life chances tend to expose the actors to the risk of social isolation.

Finally, looking at the differences between welfare regimes, identified with four countries, it is possible to detect how the belonging to a social democratic country lead to a weakening in the relationships between inequality and social cohesion.

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