



DUNEDIN STUDY CONCEPT PAPER FORM

Provisional Paper Title: The developmental origins of social cohesion

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Objective of the study:

Social cohesion is essential for the effective functioning and wellbeing of society (Chan, To, & Chan, 2006; Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2019). In lay terms, social cohesion can be described as members of a society feeling and acting in solidarity, or 'sticking together' to achieve a mutually beneficial goal. More formally, scholars have defined social cohesion as a product of the horizontal (among fellow citizens) and vertical (with government or other institutions) relationships between members of a society, which can be assessed through people's attitudes and behaviours that reflect those relationships. The concepts of sense of belonging, trust in fellow citizens, willingness to co-operate and help others, social participation, inclusion and recognition of diverse members, trust in public figures, trust and confidence in institutions, and political participation all reflect social cohesion (Chan et al., 2006; Spoonley, Peace, Butcher, & O'Neill, 2005).

Given the importance of social cohesion for a well-functioning and adaptable society, governance institutions around the world have made it a key policy goal, and aim to foster conditions that help to maintain and promote it (e.g., New Zealand Treasury, 2021; OECD, 2011a). To inform such work, it is important to empirically test the factors that might promote or inhibit social cohesion (Chan et al., 2006; Gluckman et al., 2021).

To date, research examining the factors that might influence social cohesion has focused predominantly on cross-sectional links between current socio-political conditions (e.g., environmental conditions, inequality, crime, economic insecurity, immigration) and adults' endorsement of socially cohesive attitudes and/or engagement in socially cohesive behaviours (e.g., Laurence, 2009; OECD, 2011b; Vergolini, 2011). However, proximal socio-political conditions may not fully account for variations in social cohesion. As we know from the Dunedin Study body of work, people's experiences and attributes in early life are important predictors of health and psychosocial outcomes in adulthood. It is therefore likely that early life factors also influence the perceptions, values, and behaviours that comprise socially cohesive attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, recent Dunedin Study research has identified several developmental antecedents of a specific socially cohesive behaviour in adulthood: COVID-19 vaccine uptake (Moffitt et al., 2022).

The proposed study is the first in a planned programme of work aimed at identifying the developmental origins of social cohesion, as indicated by people's socially cohesive attitudes and behaviours in adulthood. In this first study, we will examine the prospective links between early life attributes and experiences and indicators in adulthood of the horizontal aspect of social cohesion (e.g., volunteering in the community, charitable donations, social participation, and willingness to help people in their community). At this stage we do not have sufficient data available to examine the developmental origins of the vertical aspect of social cohesion, but plan to do so in future studies.

By beginning to identify developmental origins of socially cohesive attitudes and behaviour (limited to the horizontal dimension of social cohesion at this stage), the proposed study will extend existing knowledge about the factors that might influence social cohesion beyond the proximal correlates (e.g., current socio-political conditions) typically studied.

Data analysis methods:

We will use standard regression methods to examine the relationships between early life factors and indicators of the horizontal aspect of social cohesion at age 45.

Variables needed at which ages:

Early life variables:

- Sex
- Childhood SES (from birth to age 15)
- Childhood IQ (from ages 7 to 13)
- Prospective ACEs (derived across childhood)

- Family cohesion (Moos scale)
- Parent & peer attachment (age 15)
- Childhood social isolation (from age 5 to 11)
- Childhood self-regulation (from age 3 to 11)
- Childhood mental health (diagnoses from age 11 to 15)

Indicators of the horizontal aspect of social cohesion at age 45:

- Volunteering engagement
- Charitable donations
- Helping out in the community
- Informant reports of socially cohesive behaviour

Significance of the Study (for theory, research methods or clinical practice):

To our knowledge, the developmental origins of the horizontal aspect of social cohesion have not previously been identified empirically. By beginning to do so, we aim to make a unique contribution to the existing literature, complement existing work focusing on identifying the proximal influences on social cohesion, and provide insight into policy settings that can be implemented early in the life course to help foster the development of healthy, reliable, resilient, communities that are best able to cope with rapid and unpredictable societal change.

The proposed study will also contribute to the development of the Dunedin Study itself by leading to the inclusion at phase 52 of questions tapping a wider range of horizontal indicators of social cohesion, and the addition of new questions that provide insight into the vertical component, such as trust in government and other institutions. By comprehensively measuring Study members' socially cohesive attitudes and behaviours over time, we will be able to provide new insight into factors across the life course that are likely to be important for promoting social cohesion.

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