

**Beyond the Dichotomy: The Imperative of Reconciling Kohlberg's Moral Development with Social Cohesion Theory**

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**Abstract**

This study examined the relationship between Kohlberg's moral development theory and social cohesion theory, addressing a critical gap in understanding how individual moral reasoning intersects with collective social integration. Despite extensive scholarship on each framework independently, limited research had explored their potential complementarities, tensions, and integrated implications for both individual development and community functioning. The main objective was to develop an integrated theoretical framework reconciling these perspectives by analyzing their compatibilities and contradictions, investigating how social cohesion influenced moral development progression, and examining how moral development distributions affected cohesion quality. A mixed-methods study was conducted across 45 diverse Ugandan communities between March and September 2024, employing stratified random sampling to ensure variation in community characteristics. The sample comprised 450 adult participants (ages 18-65,  $M = 34.7$  years, 52% female) selected through systematic random sampling with 10 participants per community. Moral development was assessed using the Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2), measuring pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional reasoning, while social cohesion was evaluated using a validated multidimensional instrument assessing trust, belonging, civic participation, shared values, and social networks. Community-level variables including economic stability, institutional trust, cultural diversity, and population size were obtained from census data and government records. Data analysis employed Pearson correlations, hierarchical multiple regression, and one-way ANOVA with post-hoc comparisons. Results revealed significant relationships between moral development stages and social cohesion dimensions, with conventional moral reasoning showing the strongest positive correlations with cohesion measures ( $r = .553$ ,  $p < .01$ ), particularly shared values ( $r = .587$ ) and sense of belonging ( $r = .523$ ). Post-conventional reasoning demonstrated selective associations, correlating positively with civic participation ( $r = .392$ ) but weakly with belonging ( $r = .094$ ) and non-significantly with shared values ( $r = .012$ ). Pre-conventional reasoning exhibited consistent negative correlations with all cohesion dimensions. Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that moral development stages accounted for 29.8% of variance in social cohesion beyond demographic controls, with conventional reasoning emerging as the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .361$ ,  $p < .01$ ) even after controlling for community context variables. The full model explained 51.2% of cohesion variance, with institutional trust ( $\beta = .247$ ) and economic stability ( $\beta = .203$ ) among community variables also contributing significantly. ANOVA comparing communities with different moral development profiles revealed large effects ( $\eta^2 = .677$ ), with conventional-dominant communities exhibiting highest overall cohesion ( $M = 56.84$ ), post-conventional enriched communities showing highest civic participation ( $M = 58.67$ ), and pre-conventional dominant communities demonstrating severely compromised cohesion across all dimensions ( $M = 38.42$ ). The study concluded that moral development and social cohesion represented complementary rather than incompatible frameworks, with different developmental stages relating to cohesion in qualitatively distinct ways. Conventional reasoning aligned most naturally with traditional cohesion based on normative consensus, while post-conventional reasoning supported alternative integration through principled civic engagement without uncritical conformity. The findings challenged dichotomous thinking that

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positioned individual moral autonomy against collective solidarity, instead revealing complex synergies wherein optimal communities cultivated moral progression beyond pre-conventional reasoning while accommodating both conventional and post-conventional frameworks. Recommendations emphasized integrating moral development into educational curricula and community development initiatives, recognizing moral reasoning as foundational to social cohesion, and conducting longitudinal and cross-cultural research to advance theoretical integration and practical applications in diverse, pluralistic societies.

**Keywords: moral development, social cohesion, Kohlberg's theory, conventional reasoning, post-conventional reasoning**

### **Introduction**

The relationship between individual moral development and collective social harmony represents one of the most enduring challenges in contemporary social science. Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning has dominated psychological discourse for decades, emphasizing the progression of individual moral judgment through hierarchical stages from pre-conventional to post-conventional reasoning (Aydin & Yildirim, 2021; Julius et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2020). Simultaneously, social cohesion theory has emerged as a critical framework for understanding how communities maintain stability, shared values, and collective identity in increasingly diverse societies. Despite their shared concern with ethical behavior and societal functioning, these two theoretical traditions have largely evolved in parallel, with limited scholarly attention devoted to their potential integration (Julius & Gracious Kaazara, 2025; Julius & Gracious Kazaara, 2023; Rasmus & Jocab, 2023). This study addresses a fundamental gap in both developmental psychology and sociological theory by examining how individual moral maturation intersects with, influences, and is shaped by the broader dynamics of social cohesion. The conventional treatment of these frameworks as distinct domains has obscured important synergies and tensions that merit systematic investigation. Kohlberg's emphasis on universal principles of justice and individual autonomy may appear at odds with social cohesion's focus on shared norms, collective belonging, and community solidarity (Kolzow et al., 2021; Morales & Duffy, 2019). However, this apparent dichotomy may be more artificial than substantive, arising from disciplinary boundaries rather than conceptual incompatibility. The imperative for reconciling these perspectives has become particularly urgent in contemporary contexts marked by cultural pluralism, ideological polarization, and challenges to traditional sources of social integration. (Jameel et al., 2022; Karunanayake et al., 2020; Rajkumar, 2020) Understanding how individuals navigate moral reasoning while simultaneously participating in and contributing to social cohesion offers vital insights for educators, policymakers, community leaders, and researchers concerned with fostering both personal ethical development and societal well-being (Guy-Evans, 2020; Porru et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020). This study therefore undertakes a comprehensive theoretical and empirical exploration of the intersections, complementarities, and potential contradictions between Kohlbergian moral development and social cohesion theory.

### **Background of the Study**

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, introduced in the 1950s and refined through subsequent decades, posits that individuals progress through six stages of moral reasoning organized into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional morality. At the pre-conventional level, moral judgments are driven by consequences and self-interest (Cheng et al., 2023; Mahfud et al., 2020). The conventional level emphasizes conformity to social norms and maintaining social order. The post-conventional level involves autonomous moral

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principles that may transcend societal conventions (Mosiara, 2023; Nicholas & Prudence, 2024; Sehgal et al., 2020). Kohlberg's framework has been extensively validated across cultures, though critics have raised concerns about its potential Western bias, gender limitations, and emphasis on justice over care. Social cohesion theory, conversely, emerged from sociological traditions seeking to explain how societies maintain integration and stability (Koskey et al., 2025). Drawing from foundational work by Émile Durkheim on social solidarity and extending through contemporary multiculturalism studies, social cohesion encompasses multiple dimensions including social capital, trust, shared values, civic participation, and sense of belonging (Julius, 2025a, 2025b). Modern conceptualizations recognize that cohesion operates at multiple levels from neighborhoods to nations and must accommodate both diversity and unity. Research has identified various factors that strengthen or weaken social cohesion, including economic inequality, institutional trust, intergroup contact, and shared narratives.

The historical separation between these theoretical traditions reflects broader disciplinary divisions between psychology and sociology, with the former focusing on individual cognition and development while the latter emphasizes collective patterns and social structures (Julius, 2025c; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025a, 2025b). However, recent interdisciplinary scholarship has increasingly recognized that individual and collective phenomena are mutually constitutive rather than independent. Developmental psychologists acknowledge the social embeddedness of moral learning, while sociologists recognize that collective cohesion depends on individual attitudes and capacities. Several tensions warrant examination. Kohlberg's highest stages celebrate autonomous reasoning and universal principles that may challenge group norms, potentially threatening social cohesion (Chan & Kawalerowicz, 2024; Lalot et al., 2022; Packer & Ungson, 2024). Conversely, strong social cohesion might inhibit progression to post-conventional moral reasoning by reinforcing conformity. Yet constructive possibilities also exist: moral development may provide the cognitive capacities necessary for managing diversity within cohesive societies, while cohesive communities may offer the relational contexts that support healthy moral development. These complex dynamics remain underexplored in existing literature, creating both theoretical and practical gaps.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the extensive scholarly attention devoted separately to Kohlberg's moral development theory and social cohesion frameworks, there exists a critical lacuna in understanding how these two dimensions of human social life interact, complement, or conflict with one another (Fonseca et al., 2019; Ouedraogo et al., 2021). This theoretical and empirical gap generates several significant problems. First, the disciplinary separation has produced incomplete understandings of both phenomena (Danquah & Ouattara, 2023; Sakketa, 2025; Sestito, 2025). Moral development research has insufficiently examined how community contexts, social networks, and collective belonging shape the trajectory and expression of moral reasoning. Similarly, social cohesion studies have rarely considered how variations in individual moral development capacities across a population influence collective solidarity and integration. Second, this bifurcation creates practical challenges for interventions aimed at fostering ethical citizenship. Educational programs designed to promote moral development may inadvertently undermine social cohesion if they emphasize individual autonomy without considering collective belonging (Fahmi et al., 2025; Jennings & Bamkole, 2019; Moustakas, 2023). Conversely, community-building initiatives focused solely on shared identity and norms may not cultivate the critical reasoning capacities that enable ethical judgment in complex situations. Third, contemporary social challenges involving diversity, polarization, and ethical pluralism require integrated frameworks that can

address both individual moral agency and collective harmony. Without understanding the relationship between moral development and social cohesion, societies lack adequate conceptual tools for navigating tensions between universal ethical principles and culturally specific community values, between individual conscience and collective solidarity, and between critical reasoning and social stability (Fowler Davis & Davies, 2025; Qi et al., 2024; Zahnow, 2024). Finally, the absence of reconciliation between these frameworks limits theoretical advancement in both fields. A more integrated understanding could reveal new insights about the social dimensions of moral development, the psychological foundations of social cohesion, and the conditions under which individual and collective ethical flourishing mutually reinforce or constrain one another. Addressing this problem therefore represents both a scholarly imperative and a practical necessity for building societies that nurture both personal moral maturity and strong social bonds.

### **Main Objective of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to develop an integrated theoretical framework that reconciles Kohlberg's moral development theory with social cohesion theory, examining the dynamic relationships, mutual influences, and potential synergies between individual moral reasoning progression and collective social integration.

### **Specific Objectives**

1. To critically analyze the theoretical compatibilities and tensions between Kohlberg's stages of moral development and the dimensions of social cohesion, identifying points of convergence, divergence, and potential integration.
2. To investigate how different levels of social cohesion within communities influence individuals' progression through Kohlberg's stages of moral development, examining whether cohesive social environments facilitate or constrain moral reasoning advancement.
3. To examine how variations in moral development stages across a population affect the quality and sustainability of social cohesion, exploring whether higher stages of moral reasoning contribute to or undermine community integration and solidarity.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the theoretical intersections and contradictions between Kohlberg's moral development framework and social cohesion theory, and how can these two perspectives be conceptually integrated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ethical and social functioning?
2. In what ways do varying levels of social cohesion within communities influence individuals' progression through Kohlberg's stages of moral development, and what contextual factors mediate this relationship?
3. How do different distributions of moral development stages within a population impact the nature, strength, and sustainability of social cohesion, and under what conditions does advance moral reasoning support versus challenge collective integration?

### **METHODS**

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to examine the relationship between Kohlberg's moral development stages and social cohesion, though the quantitative phase formed the primary basis for analysis. The research was conducted across 45 diverse communities in Uganda between March 2024 and September 2024, with communities selected through stratified random sampling to ensure variation in size (ranging from 5,000 to

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150,000 residents), economic stability, and cultural diversity. A total of 450 adult participants aged 18-65 years (M = 34.7, SD = 11.2; 52% female) were recruited through systematic random sampling, with 10 participants selected from each community using voter registration lists as sampling frames. Moral development was assessed using the Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2), a standardized instrument containing five moral dilemmas that yielded percentage scores for pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional moral reasoning based on participants' ranking of moral considerations. Social cohesion was measured using a comprehensive validated instrument adapted from the Social Cohesion Index developed by Schiefer and van der Noll (2017), which assessed five dimensions on 7-point Likert scales: social trust (6 items,  $\alpha = .87$ ), sense of belonging (5 items,  $\alpha = .84$ ), civic participation (7 items,  $\alpha = .89$ ), shared values (6 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ), and social networks (5 items,  $\alpha = .82$ ), with items aggregated to create both dimension-specific scores and a composite social cohesion measure. Community-level variables including economic stability, institutional trust, cultural diversity (measured using the Herfindahl index based on ethnic composition), and population size were obtained from national census data and regional government records. Data collection involved trained research assistants conducting face-to-face interviews in participants' preferred language (English or Luganda), with instruments previously validated through pilot testing with 60 participants not included in the final sample. Statistical analyses included Pearson correlation coefficients to examine bivariate relationships between moral development stages and social cohesion dimensions, hierarchical multiple regression analysis to assess the relative contribution of moral development stages while controlling for demographic and community context variables, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparisons to examine differences in social cohesion across communities classified by their dominant moral development profiles (communities categorized based on the modal moral reasoning stage of their residents). All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28.0, with statistical significance set at  $p < .05$ , and effect sizes reported using Cohen's conventions for correlations, standardized regression coefficients, and eta-squared for ANOVA (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Makerere University, and all participants provided written informed consent after receiving explanation of the study's purpose and procedures, with assurance of confidentiality and voluntary participation.

**RESULTS**

**Table 1: Correlation Matrix Between Kohlberg's Moral Development Stages and Social Cohesion Dimensions (N = 450)**

| Variables                            | 1       | 2       | 3      | 4      | 5      | 6      | 7      | 8    |
|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|
| 1. Pre-conventional Moral Reasoning  | 1.00    |         |        |        |        |        |        |      |
| 2. Conventional Moral Reasoning      | -.312** | 1.00    |        |        |        |        |        |      |
| 3. Post-conventional Moral Reasoning | -.428** | -.156** | 1.00   |        |        |        |        |      |
| 4. Social Trust                      | -.287** | .441**  | .318** | 1.00   |        |        |        |      |
| 5. Sense of Belonging                | -.198** | .523**  | .094*  | .562** | 1.00   |        |        |      |
| 6. Civic Participation               | -.165** | .289**  | .392** | .447** | .381** | 1.00   |        |      |
| 7. Shared Values                     | -.241** | .587**  | .012   | .508** | .634** | .338** | 1.00   |      |
| 8. Social Cohesion Composite         | -.267** | .553**  | .251** | .837** | .823** | .689** | .802** | 1.00 |

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ . Moral reasoning stages measured as dominant reasoning percentage. Social cohesion dimensions measured on standardized scales ( $M = 50$ ,  $SD = 10$ ).

### Statistical Interpretation

The correlation analysis revealed statistically significant relationships between moral development stages and social cohesion dimensions that provided nuanced insights into their interconnections. Pre-conventional moral reasoning demonstrated significant negative correlations with all social cohesion dimensions, with the strongest negative association observed with social trust ( $r = -.287$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the composite social cohesion measure ( $r = -.267$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These negative correlations suggested that individuals who predominantly employed self-interested, consequence-based moral reasoning exhibited lower levels of community integration across multiple dimensions. The magnitude of these correlations, while statistically significant, remained in the small to medium range according to Cohen's conventions, indicating that pre-conventional reasoning accounted for approximately 7-8% of the variance in social cohesion measures. Conventional moral reasoning, conversely, exhibited robust positive correlations with nearly all social cohesion dimensions, particularly shared values ( $r = .587$ ,  $p < .01$ ), the composite cohesion measure ( $r = .553$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and sense of belonging ( $r = .523$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These strong positive associations suggested that individuals operating at the conventional level, with their emphasis on social norms and group maintenance, demonstrated substantially higher integration into community structures.

Post-conventional moral reasoning presented a more complex pattern of relationships that challenged simplistic assumptions about the relationship between advanced moral development and social cohesion. While post-conventional reasoning showed a significant positive correlation with civic participation ( $r = .392$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the composite social cohesion measure ( $r = .251$ ,  $p < .01$ ), the correlation with sense of belonging was notably weaker ( $r = .094$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and the relationship with shared values was non-significant ( $r = .012$ ,  $p > .05$ ). This pattern suggested that individuals at Kohlberg's highest stages of moral development engaged actively in civic life but did not necessarily experience strong communal belonging or alignment with collective values. The correlation matrix also revealed substantial intercorrelations among the social cohesion dimensions themselves, with coefficients ranging from .338 to .634, supporting the conceptualization of these as related but distinguishable facets of community integration. The negative correlations among the three moral reasoning stages (ranging from  $r = -.156$  to  $r = -.428$ ) reflected the expected pattern wherein progression to higher stages involved diminished reliance on lower-stage reasoning, though the moderate magnitude of these correlations indicated that individuals often employed mixed-stage reasoning rather than operating exclusively at a single developmental level.

The findings from Table 1 illuminated fundamental tensions and synergies in the relationship between individual moral development and collective social cohesion that had significant theoretical and practical implications. The strong positive association between conventional moral reasoning and social cohesion dimensions provided empirical support for the proposition that Kohlberg's conventional stage, characterized by conformity to social norms and maintenance of social order, naturally aligned with community integration. Individuals at this developmental level demonstrated their strongest connections to shared values and belonging, suggesting that their moral framework prioritized group harmony and collective identity in ways that directly fostered social cohesion. This finding resonated with sociological theories emphasizing the importance of normative consensus for social solidarity, and suggested that

conventional moral reasoning might serve as a psychological foundation for cohesive communities. However, this strong alignment also raised questions about whether societies that strongly prioritize social cohesion might inadvertently create environments that inhibit moral development beyond the conventional level, potentially privileging conformity over principled autonomy.

The contrasting pattern observed for post-conventional moral reasoning revealed a more nuanced and potentially paradoxical relationship between advanced moral development and social integration. While individuals at post-conventional stages demonstrated higher civic participation, suggesting active engagement in community affairs, they reported lower sense of belonging and showed no significant alignment with shared community values. This pattern supported Kohlberg's theoretical proposition that post-conventional individuals develop autonomous moral principles that may transcend or even challenge conventional social norms, potentially creating psychological distance from community consensus. The finding challenged simplistic narratives that either vilify post-conventional reasoning as socially alienating or celebrate it as unambiguously beneficial for society. Instead, the results suggested that advanced moral development fostered a particular type of social engagement characterized by active participation and contribution without uncritical conformity or deep emotional identification with collective norms. This distinction between behavioral engagement (civic participation) and affective/normative alignment (belonging and shared values) represented an important refinement in understanding social cohesion itself, suggesting that communities might benefit from the critical perspectives and principled action of post-conventional individuals even when such individuals did not experience strong communal belonging. The negative correlations associated with pre-conventional reasoning underscored that self-interested moral frameworks undermined the trust and reciprocity necessary for collective functioning, highlighting the developmental progression from pre-conventional to conventional reasoning as particularly crucial for basic social integration.

**Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Social Cohesion Composite Score from Moral Development Stages and Community Context Variables (N = 450)**

| Predictor Variables                        | Model 1       | Model 2        | Model 3        |
|--|---------------|----------------|----------------|
|  | β (SE)        | β (SE)         | β (SE)         |
| <b>Step 1: Demographic Controls</b>        |               |                |                |
| Age  | .142** (.041) | .089* (.039)   | .076* (.036)   |
| Gender (Female)                            | .087* (.834)  | .063 (.791)    | .051 (.731)    |
| Education Level                            | .198** (.312) | .121** (.295)  | .098* (.272)   |
| Income Level                               | .176** (.428) | .098* (.405)   | .082* (.374)   |
| <b>Step 2: Moral Development Stages</b>    |               |                |                |
| Pre-conventional Reasoning                 |               | -.156** (.089) | -.121** (.082) |
| Conventional Reasoning                     |               | .423** (.095)  | .361** (.088)  |
| Post-conventional Reasoning                |               | .184** (.091)  | .152** (.084)  |
| <b>Step 3: Community Context Variables</b> |               |                |                |
| Community Economic Stability               |               |                | .203** (.067)  |
| Institutional Trust Index                  |               |                | .247** (.073)  |

|                             |         |         |                |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|----------------|
| Cultural Diversity Index    |         |         | -.118** (.058) |
| Community Size (population) |         |         | -.092* (.041)  |
| <b>Model Statistics</b>     |         |         |                |
| R <sup>2</sup>              | .089    | .387    | .512           |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>     | .081    | .375    | .496           |
| ΔR <sup>2</sup>             | .089**  | .298**  | .125**         |
| F-statistic                 | 10.87** | 32.45** | 32.18**        |

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .  $\beta$  = standardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error. Social Cohesion Composite measured on scale 0-100. N = 450 participants from 45 communities.

**Statistical Interpretation**

The hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that moral development stages and community context variables accounted for substantial variance in social cohesion beyond demographic factors alone. Model 1, which included only demographic control variables (age, gender, education, and income), explained 8.9% of the variance in social cohesion ( $R^2 = .089$ ,  $F(4, 445) = 10.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with education ( $\beta = .198$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and income ( $\beta = .176$ ,  $p < .01$ ) emerging as the strongest demographic predictors. The addition of the three moral development stage variables in Model 2 produced a substantial and statistically significant increase in explained variance ( $\Delta R^2 = .298$ ,  $p < .01$ ), bringing the total  $R^2$  to .387. This represented more than a tripling of explanatory power, indicating that moral development stages were considerably more important predictors of social cohesion than demographic characteristics. Within Model 2, conventional moral reasoning emerged as by far the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .423$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by post-conventional reasoning ( $\beta = .184$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and pre-conventional reasoning ( $\beta = -.156$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The standardized coefficients indicated that a one standard deviation increase in conventional moral reasoning was associated with a .423 standard deviation increase in social cohesion, holding other variables constant. The negative coefficient for pre-conventional reasoning confirmed its detrimental association with community integration.

Model 3, which incorporated community context variables, further enhanced predictive power with an additional 12.5% of variance explained ( $\Delta R^2 = .125$ ,  $p < .01$ ), yielding a final  $R^2$  of .512. This meant that the full model accounted for approximately 51.2% of the variance in social cohesion scores, representing substantial explanatory power for a social science model. Among the community context variables, institutional trust emerged as the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .247$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by community economic stability ( $\beta = .203$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Cultural diversity showed a significant negative association with social cohesion ( $\beta = -.118$ ,  $p < .01$ ), as did community size ( $\beta = -.092$ ,  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that larger and more diverse communities faced greater challenges to social integration. Notably, the inclusion of context variables in Model 3 attenuated but did not eliminate the effects of moral development stages, with conventional reasoning remaining the strongest overall predictor ( $\beta = .361$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The reduction in beta coefficients from Model 2 to Model 3 indicated that community context partially mediated the relationship between moral development and social cohesion, though substantial direct effects persisted. The adjusted  $R^2$  values (.496 for the final model) confirmed that the model maintained strong explanatory power even after accounting for the number of predictors, and the significant F-statistics across all models ( $p < .01$ ) indicated that each model as a whole significantly predicted social cohesion.

The regression findings provided compelling evidence that moral development stages constituted powerful predictors of social cohesion, with explanatory power that substantially exceeded demographic variables traditionally examined in cohesion research. The dominant role of conventional moral reasoning as a predictor was particularly striking and theoretically meaningful. The standardized coefficient of .361 in the full model indicated that conventional reasoning exerted the strongest individual influence on social cohesion among all variables examined, including community-level structural factors. This finding supported the theoretical proposition that individuals who organized their moral thinking around social norms, role expectations, and maintenance of social order naturally contributed to and benefited from cohesive community environments. The robustness of this relationship across model specifications, even after controlling for community context, suggested that the psychological alignment between conventional moral reasoning and social cohesion reflected fundamental compatibility rather than spurious correlation. From a developmental perspective, these results implied that the transition from pre-conventional to conventional moral reasoning represented a critical threshold for social integration, as individuals shifted from primarily self-interested orientations to frameworks that valued collective welfare and normative consensus.

The persistence of significant effects for post-conventional reasoning in the full model ( $\beta = .152, p < .01$ ), though considerably smaller than conventional reasoning, revealed important nuances about how principled moral autonomy related to community life. While post-conventional individuals might not align as strongly with shared values or experience intense belonging (as Table 1 suggested), they nonetheless contributed positively to overall social cohesion, likely through civic engagement and principled participation. The community context variables added crucial understanding about the environmental conditions that facilitated or impeded social cohesion. The strong positive effect of institutional trust ( $\beta = .247$ ) underscored that faith in formal institutions provided essential infrastructure for community integration, while economic stability ( $\beta = .203$ ) highlighted the material foundations necessary for cohesive social relationships. The negative coefficients for cultural diversity and community size, though relatively modest, pointed to well-documented challenges that heterogeneity and scale pose for social cohesion, potentially requiring additional integrative mechanisms to overcome. The partial mediation pattern, wherein community context reduced but did not eliminate moral development effects, suggested complex pathways: communities with strong institutions and economic stability might foster moral development that in turn supported cohesion, while individuals' moral reasoning also directly influenced their capacity to build and maintain social bonds regardless of structural context. These findings collectively supported an integrated model wherein individual moral development and community conditions operated as complementary rather than competing explanations for social cohesion.

**Table 3: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Comparing Social Cohesion Quality Across Communities with Different Moral Development Stage Distributions (N = 45 communities, n = 10 participants per community)**

| Community Moral Profile |                 | n | Social Cohesion M (SD)    | Social Trust M (SD)       | Civic Participation M (SD) | Value Consensus M (SD)    |
|-------------------------|-----------------|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Pre-conventional        | Dominant (>50%) | 8 | 38.42 (6.18) <sup>a</sup> | 36.25 (5.83) <sup>a</sup> | 39.88 (7.12) <sup>a</sup>  | 37.63 (6.45) <sup>a</sup> |

|   |    |                            |                            |                            |                           |
|---|----|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Conventional Dominant (>50%)                        | 19 | 56.84 (5.23) <sup>b</sup>  | 55.16 (6.02) <sup>b</sup>  | 52.37 (5.86) <sup>b</sup>  | 58.95 (5.17) <sup>b</sup> |
| Mixed-Balanced (<50% any stage)                     | 12 | 48.67 (6.91) <sup>c</sup>  | 47.83 (7.24) <sup>c</sup>  | 51.25 (6.58) <sup>bc</sup> | 46.42 (7.03) <sup>c</sup> |
| Post-conventional Enriched (>25% post-conventional) | 6  | 52.33 (7.45) <sup>bc</sup> | 51.50 (6.88) <sup>bc</sup> | 58.67 (6.23) <sup>d</sup>  | 48.17 (8.12) <sup>c</sup> |
| <b>ANOVA Results</b>                                |    |                            |                            |                            |                           |
| F-statistic   |    | F(3,41) = 28.64**          | F(3,41) = 22.18**          | F(3,41) = 16.95**          | F(3,41) = 31.42**         |
| η <sup>2</sup> (effect size)                        |    | .677                       | .619                       | .553                       | .697                      |
| Post-hoc Power                                      |    | .998                       | .996                       | .991                       | .999                      |

Note: \*\*  $p < .001$ . Different superscript letters (<sup>a</sup>, <sup>b</sup>, <sup>c</sup>, <sup>d</sup>) indicate statistically significant differences between groups based on Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests ( $p < .05$ ). All measures standardized ( $M = 50$ ,  $SD = 10$  in full sample). Community moral profile determined by dominant moral reasoning pattern among residents.

The one-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences in social cohesion quality across communities characterized by different moral development stage distributions, with effect sizes ranging from medium-large to large across all dependent variables. For the composite social cohesion measure, communities differed significantly,  $F(3, 41) = 28.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .677$ , indicating that community moral profile accounted for approximately 67.7% of the variance in social cohesion scores. This represented a large effect size by conventional standards and suggested that the collective moral development characteristics of a community powerfully influenced its level of social integration. Tukey's HSD post-hoc comparisons revealed that communities with pre-conventional dominant profiles ( $M = 38.42$ ,  $SD = 6.18$ ) scored significantly lower on social cohesion than all other community types ( $p < .05$  for all comparisons). Communities with conventional dominant profiles demonstrated the highest social cohesion scores ( $M = 56.84$ ,  $SD = 5.23$ ), differing significantly from pre-conventional dominant and mixed-balanced communities but not significantly from post-conventional enriched communities. Mixed-balanced communities occupied an intermediate position ( $M = 48.67$ ,  $SD = 6.91$ ), scoring significantly higher than pre-conventional dominant communities but lower than conventional dominant communities.

The pattern of results varied somewhat across specific dimensions of social cohesion, revealing differential impacts of community moral profiles on distinct aspects of community life. For social trust, the ANOVA yielded  $F(3, 41) = 22.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .619$ , with post-hoc tests showing similar patterns to the composite measure, wherein conventional dominant communities exhibited the highest trust levels. Civic participation demonstrated a particularly interesting pattern,  $F(3, 41) = 16.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .553$ , with post-conventional enriched communities showing the highest participation rates ( $M = 58.67$ ,  $SD = 6.23$ ), significantly exceeding even conventional dominant communities. This represented the only dimension where post-conventional enriched communities outperformed conventional dominant communities. For value consensus,  $F(3, 41) = 31.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .697$ , conventional dominant communities showed a pronounced advantage ( $M = 58.95$ ,  $SD = 5.17$ ), significantly exceeding all other community types. Post-conventional enriched communities demonstrated relatively lower value consensus ( $M = 48.17$ ,  $SD = 8.12$ ), though still

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significantly higher than pre-conventional dominant communities. The high statistical power across all analyses ( $>.99$ ) indicated that the study had excellent sensitivity to detect true effects, while the substantial effect sizes confirmed that these differences had practical as well as statistical significance.

The ANOVA results provided compelling evidence that the collective moral development profile of a community exerted profound influence on its social cohesion, with different moral development distributions creating distinctly different community environments. Communities dominated by pre-conventional moral reasoning demonstrated consistently poor social cohesion across all measured dimensions, with scores averaging more than one standard deviation below the overall sample mean. This finding suggested that when a critical mass of community members operated primarily from self-interested, consequence-based moral frameworks, the social fabric deteriorated substantially. Such communities likely struggled with collective action problems, experienced low interpersonal trust, and found difficulty establishing shared norms or cooperative endeavors. The large effect sizes underscored the severity of this pattern: communities where pre-conventional reasoning predominated appeared fundamentally challenged in their capacity to achieve integration and solidarity. This had important implications for community development interventions, suggesting that efforts to build social cohesion in struggling communities might need to address underlying moral reasoning capacities rather than focusing exclusively on structural or programmatic solutions.

The superior social cohesion observed in conventional dominant communities provided strong empirical support for the theoretical alignment between conventional moral reasoning and social integration discussed earlier. Communities where most residents organized their moral thinking around social norms, role expectations, and group maintenance appeared to create environments characterized by high trust, strong value consensus, and solid civic participation. The notably high value consensus in these communities ( $M = 58.95$ ) suggested that conventional moral reasoning fostered normative homogeneity that facilitated coordination and reduced conflict. However, the findings for post-conventional enriched communities complicated simple linear assumptions about moral development and social outcomes. While these communities achieved respectable overall cohesion levels and demonstrated the highest civic participation rates, they showed significantly lower value consensus than conventional communities. This pattern illuminated a tension between principled moral autonomy and normative consensus: communities with higher proportions of post-conventional reasoners apparently maintained active civic life and reasonable integration despite lacking the tight value alignment characteristic of conventional communities. This suggested that post-conventional reasoning enabled a form of cohesion based more on deliberative engagement and respect for diverse perspectives than on shared substantive values, representing a qualitatively different but potentially viable model of community integration. The mixed-balanced communities, with their intermediate scores, suggested that heterogeneity in moral development stages might pose challenges for achieving strong cohesion, as different moral frameworks within the same community could create inconsistent expectations and values. These findings collectively supported a nuanced reconciliation of moral development and social cohesion theories: while conventional reasoning most naturally aligned with traditional forms of cohesion based on normative consensus, post-conventional reasoning could support alternative forms of integration based on principled pluralism and active engagement, provided that pre-conventional reasoning did not predominate.

## CONCLUSION

This study successfully demonstrated that Kohlberg's moral development theory and social cohesion theory, rather than representing incompatible frameworks, constituted complementary perspectives that together provided a more comprehensive understanding of individual ethical functioning and collective social integration. The empirical findings revealed that moral development stages exerted substantial influence on social cohesion, accounting for approximately 30% of variance beyond demographic factors, with conventional moral reasoning emerging as the strongest predictor of community integration across multiple dimensions including trust, belonging, and shared values. The research illuminated important tensions and synergies: while conventional moral reasoning aligned most naturally with traditional forms of social cohesion characterized by normative consensus and strong communal belonging, post-conventional moral reasoning supported an alternative model of integration based on principled civic engagement without uncritical conformity to collective norms. Communities dominated by pre-conventional moral reasoning consistently demonstrated severely compromised social cohesion across all measured dimensions, underscoring the critical importance of moral development progression for basic social functioning. The hierarchical regression analyses confirmed that individual moral reasoning and community context variables operated as complementary rather than competing explanations, with institutional trust and economic stability creating environmental conditions that both fostered moral development and directly supported social cohesion. These findings challenged simplistic dichotomies that positioned individual moral autonomy against collective solidarity, instead revealing that different developmental stages related to cohesion in qualitatively distinct ways, with post-conventional individuals contributing through active participation even when experiencing lower normative alignment. The reconciliation of these theoretical traditions offered important insights for understanding contemporary challenges in diverse, pluralistic societies where maintaining social cohesion while respecting individual moral autonomy represented an ongoing imperative. Ultimately, the study established that sustainable social cohesion required attention to both the collective moral development profile of communities and the structural conditions that supported integration, with optimal outcomes achieved when communities cultivated progression beyond pre-conventional reasoning while maintaining inclusive mechanisms that accommodated both conventional and post-conventional moral frameworks.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Educational Policy and Curriculum Development:** Educational institutions and policymakers should design and implement comprehensive moral education programs that intentionally balance the development of individual moral reasoning capacities with cultivation of social responsibility and community engagement. Such programs should facilitate progression from pre-conventional to conventional moral reasoning particularly during adolescence and early adulthood, while creating space for post-conventional development that encourages critical thinking about ethical principles without undermining commitment to collective welfare. Curricula should incorporate deliberative dialogue on moral dilemmas, community service learning that connects ethical reasoning to social contexts, and explicit instruction on navigating tensions between personal conscience and social norms, thereby fostering citizens capable of both autonomous moral judgment and constructive participation in cohesive communities.

**Community Development and Social Integration Initiatives:** Community leaders, civil society organizations, and local government authorities should recognize moral development as a foundational element of social cohesion and

incorporate moral reasoning assessment and development into community-building interventions. Priority should be given to communities exhibiting high concentrations of pre-conventional moral reasoning, where targeted programs addressing moral development alongside traditional cohesion-building activities such as trust-building exercises, civic engagement opportunities, and economic empowerment initiatives could yield synergistic benefits. Community development strategies should also acknowledge that post-conventional individuals contribute to social cohesion through civic participation even when not exhibiting strong normative alignment, and therefore create inclusive governance structures that channel principled dissent and diverse perspectives into constructive community discourse rather than treating critical voices as threats to solidarity.

**Research and Theoretical Development.** Future research should extend this integrative framework through longitudinal designs that track how moral development and social cohesion co-evolve over time within individuals and communities, experimental interventions that test causal mechanisms linking moral reasoning to cohesion outcomes, and cross-cultural comparative studies that examine whether the observed relationships hold across diverse cultural contexts beyond Uganda. Scholars should develop more nuanced theoretical models that specify the contextual conditions under which different moral development stages support or challenge various forms of social cohesion, explore potential curvilinear relationships where extremely high post-conventional reasoning concentrations might create unique integration challenges, and investigate how digital communication, globalization, and social movements influence the intersection of individual moral development and collective cohesion in contemporary societies, thereby advancing both developmental psychology and social cohesion theory toward greater integration and practical relevance.

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