

The Dialectic of the Social and the Self: Reconciling Cohesion and Self-Actualization in Sociological Theory

Ahumuza Audrey¹, Asimwe Isaac Kazaara²

1,2 Metropolitan International University

Abstract

The tension between social cohesion and individual self-actualization represents a foundational dialectic in sociological theory, with classical and contemporary perspectives often treating these as competing or mutually exclusive dimensions of social life. This study employed a mixed-methods research design integrating systematic theoretical analysis with empirical investigation to examine whether and how this dialectic could be reconciled. The theoretical phase involved critical analysis of how major sociological traditions from Durkheim to contemporary structuration theory conceptualized the relationship between social integration and individual autonomy, revealing persistent theoretical bifurcation between cohesion-privileging and autonomy-privileging frameworks. The empirical phase collected primary data through structured questionnaires administered to 450 respondents selected via stratified random sampling, measuring social cohesion (social trust, community participation, collective efficacy), self-actualization (personal autonomy, self-expression, goal achievement), and potential mediating variables (social capital, institutional trust, identity formation). Data analysis proceeded through univariate analysis examining variable distributions, bivariate correlation analysis exploring inter-construct relationships, and structural equation modeling testing competing theoretical frameworks. Univariate results demonstrated that both social cohesion ($M=3.36$) and self-actualization ($M=3.71$) existed at moderate levels with substantial individual variation, while bivariate analysis revealed significant positive correlations ($r=.43$, $p<.001$) contradicting opposition models. Structural equation modeling definitively demonstrated that a mediated complementarity model achieved superior fit ($CFI=0.958$, $RMSEA=0.051$) compared to opposition, independence, or simple complementarity models, with social cohesion exerting strong positive effects on social capital ($\beta=0.78$) and identity formation ($\beta=0.46$), which in turn significantly predicted self-actualization ($\beta=0.34$ and $\beta=0.52$ respectively). Mediation analysis revealed that approximately 81% of social cohesion's total effect on self-actualization ($\beta=0.63$) operated indirectly through these mediating pathways. These findings challenged theoretical frameworks positing fundamental incompatibility between collective integration and individual development, instead supporting synthesis perspectives suggesting that particular forms of social cohesion—those generating social capital and enabling pluralistic identity formation—actually facilitate rather than constrain self-actualization. The study contributed to reconciling classical sociological tensions by empirically demonstrating that robust communities and self-actualized individuals represent mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory outcomes, provided that social integration operates through mechanisms respecting individual dignity while providing resources and recognition frameworks necessary for personal development. Recommendations emphasized integrating social capital development into community-building initiatives, developing educational frameworks balancing integration and autonomy, and refining sociological theory through mechanism-focused research on conditions determining whether the cohesion-actualization relationship becomes complementary versus antagonistic in diverse social contexts.

Key Words: Cohesion, Self-Actualization and Sociological Theory

Introduction

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The tension between individual autonomy and social integration represents one of sociology's most enduring theoretical challenges. Since the discipline's inception, sociologists have grappled with fundamental questions about how societies maintain coherence while simultaneously fostering individual development, and conversely, how individuals pursue self-actualization within the constraints of social structures (Danquah & Ouattara, 2023; Moustakas, 2023; Packer & Ungson, 2024). This dialectical relationship between the social and the self cuts across classical and contemporary sociological thought, from Durkheim's concerns about anomie and solidarity to Giddens' structuration theory and beyond (Zahnow, 2024).

Contemporary society intensifies this dialectic in unprecedented ways. The expansion of individual rights, the proliferation of identity politics, the erosion of traditional community bonds, and the rise of digital networks have all reconfigured the relationship between individual agency and collective life. While some theorists celebrate the emancipatory potential of individualization, others warn of fragmentation, isolation, and the dissolution of social bonds necessary for collective action and mutual support (Lalot et al., 2022; Sakketa, 2025; Sestito, 2025). This study seeks to examine how major sociological theoretical traditions conceptualize this tension and to explore whether reconciliation between social cohesion and individual self-actualization is theoretically possible or empirically observable. By engaging with classical theories of social integration, symbolic interactionist perspectives on self-formation, critical theories of autonomy, and contemporary network approaches, this research aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of how the social and the self-interpenetrate rather than oppose one another (Fonseca et al., 2019; Fowler Davis & Davies, 2025; Jennings & Bamkole, 2019). Such an understanding is crucial not only for theoretical advancement but also for addressing practical questions about community building, social policy, educational philosophy, and the cultivation of both individual flourishing and collective wellbeing in pluralistic, rapidly changing societies.

Background of the Study

The relationship between individual and society has been central to sociological inquiry since the discipline emerged in response to the transformative social changes of modernity. Classical sociologists approached this relationship from different angles, yet all recognized its fundamental importance. Émile Durkheim emphasized society's primacy in shaping individual consciousness through collective representations and moral regulation, warning that excessive individualism could lead to anomie and social disintegration (Amato et al., 2020). Conversely, Max Weber focused on meaningful individual action as the building block of social reality, while acknowledging how rationalization processes increasingly constrain individual freedom. Georg Simmel explored the creative tension between individual differentiation and social forms, suggesting that modern life simultaneously enables and threatens selfhood. The twentieth century witnessed various attempts to bridge the individual-society divide. Symbolic interactionists like George Herbert Mead demonstrated how the self emerges through social interaction, arguing that individual identity is fundamentally social in origin (Campbell, 2021; Fahmi et al., 2025; Reiss, 2020). Talcott Parsons sought systematic integration through his action theory, attempting to show how individual motivations and social systems mutually constitute one another. Critical theorists from the Frankfurt School critiqued how capitalist societies create the illusion of individual freedom while systematically constraining genuine autonomy and self-realization.

Contemporary sociology has seen renewed interest in this dialectic through various theoretical developments. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory posits that structure and agency are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional. Pierre

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field demonstrate how individuals internalize social structures that then guide their practices, while simultaneously reproducing or transforming those structures (Fernandes et al., 2020; Kikooma et al., 2023; Okwanga & Mwesigwa, 2022). Communitarian and liberal debates in political sociology continue to contest the proper balance between collective obligations and individual rights. Meanwhile, empirical research on social capital, civic engagement, and mental health reveals practical consequences of how societies negotiate the relationship between social integration and individual autonomy. Despite these theoretical advances, sociology still lacks a comprehensive framework that adequately reconciles the tension between social cohesion and self-actualization. This gap becomes particularly significant as contemporary societies face challenges that simultaneously demand both stronger collective coordination (climate change, pandemics, inequality) and respect for diverse individual identities and aspirations (multiculturalism, identity movements, personal authenticity). Understanding whether and how this dialectic can be resolved remains a pressing theoretical and practical concern.

Problem Statement

Sociological theory has historically oscillated between emphasizing social cohesion and prioritizing individual self-actualization, often treating these as competing or mutually exclusive goals. Functionalist approaches traditionally privilege social integration and stability, sometimes at the expense of recognizing individual agency and the legitimacy of personal autonomy. Conversely, individualist and interpretivist traditions emphasize subjective meaning and personal development but struggle to account for the necessity and mechanisms of social solidarity. This theoretical bifurcation creates several problems (Koskey et al., 2025; Taiwo et al., 2023). First, it limits sociology's ability to adequately explain contemporary social phenomena where collective and individual dimensions are inseparably intertwined, such as identity movements that simultaneously demand group recognition and individual authenticity, or digital communities that enable both connection and isolation (Chan & Kawalerowicz, 2024). Second, it hampers the development of coherent normative frameworks that could guide social policy, as recommendations based on cohesion-focused theories may undermine individual flourishing, while those based on self-actualization models may erode social bonds. Third, this theoretical divide obscures potential synergies between social integration and individual development, preventing recognition of how robust communities might actually enable rather than constrain self-realization, or how individuated persons might contribute to rather than detract from collective life (Audrey & Julius, 2023; Janet & Julius, 2023). The persistence of this unresolved dialectic in sociological theory suggests either a fundamental incompatibility between social cohesion and self-actualization, or an inadequate conceptualization of their relationship. Without addressing this theoretical tension, sociology risks offering incomplete analyses of contemporary social problems and limited guidance for constructing societies that honor both collective wellbeing and individual flourishing.

Main Objective

To critically examine the dialectical relationship between social cohesion and individual self-actualization across major sociological theoretical traditions and to develop a theoretically grounded framework for understanding whether and how these dimensions can be reconciled in contemporary social life.

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze how classical and contemporary sociological theories conceptualize the relationship between social integration and individual autonomy, identifying key points of tension and potential complementarity across different theoretical traditions.
2. To evaluate existing theoretical attempts to reconcile or transcend the opposition between social cohesion and self-actualization, assessing their explanatory adequacy and normative implications for understanding contemporary society.
3. To synthesize insights from diverse theoretical approaches to propose conceptual pathways for reconciling social solidarity with individual flourishing, examining the conditions under which these dimensions might be mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

Research Questions

1. How do different sociological theoretical traditions conceptualize the relationship between social cohesion and individual self-actualization, and what underlying assumptions shape their treatment of this dialectic?
2. What are the theoretical strengths and limitations of existing frameworks that attempt to reconcile or transcend the tension between collective integration and individual autonomy in sociological thought?
3. Under what theoretical and empirical conditions might social cohesion and individual self-actualization be mutually constitutive rather than oppositional, and what implications does this have for contemporary sociological theory and social organization?

Methods.

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrated theoretical analysis with empirical investigation to examine the dialectical relationship between social cohesion and individual self-actualization in sociological theory. The research was conducted in two distinct but complementary phases. The first phase utilized systematic literature review and critical theoretical analysis to examine how classical sociological theorists (Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Mead) and contemporary scholars (Giddens, Bourdieu, Habermas, Taylor) conceptualized the relationship between social integration and individual autonomy. This involved thematic coding and comparative analysis of primary theoretical texts to identify convergences, divergences, and points of potential reconciliation across different theoretical traditions. The second phase involved primary data collection through a structured questionnaire administered to 450 respondents selected through stratified random sampling from urban and rural communities, measuring key constructs including social cohesion (assessed through indicators of social trust, community participation, and collective efficacy), individual self-actualization (measured via personal autonomy, self-expression, and goal achievement scales), and potential mediating variables such as social capital, institutional trust, and identity formation. Data analysis proceeded through multiple stages: univariate analysis examined the distribution, central tendency, and dispersion of individual variables related to social cohesion and self-actualization; bivariate analysis employed correlation coefficients, chi-square tests, and independent t-tests to explore relationships between social cohesion indicators and self-actualization measures, testing whether these constructs were negatively correlated (suggesting opposition), positively correlated (suggesting complementarity), or independent; and structural equation modeling (SEM) was utilized to test complex theoretical models specifying the directionality and mediation pathways between social cohesion, self-actualization, and intermediary constructs, allowing for simultaneous examination of multiple relationships and the evaluation of competing theoretical frameworks about how the social and the self-

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interpenetrate. Model fit was assessed using indices including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), with path coefficients and significance levels determining which theoretical reconciliation pathways received empirical support (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). The integration of theoretical analysis with quantitative empirical testing enabled both deep engagement with sociological theory and rigorous evaluation of whether theoretical propositions about reconciling cohesion and self-actualization found support in contemporary social patterns, thereby addressing all three research objectives through methodologically appropriate and complementary analytical strategies.

Results.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Univariate Analysis of Social Cohesion and Self-Actualization Variables (N=450)

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Social Cohesion Dimension							
Social Trust	3.42	1.18	-0.34	-0.52	1.00	5.00	0.84
Community Participation	2.98	1.26	0.15	-0.78	1.00	5.00	0.79
Collective Efficacy	3.67	1.09	-0.48	-0.31	1.00	5.00	0.87
Overall Social Cohesion	3.36	0.98	-0.22	-0.45	1.00	5.00	0.91
Self-Actualization Dimension							
Personal Autonomy	3.89	1.02	-0.61	0.18	1.00	5.00	0.82
Self-Expression	3.71	1.14	-0.42	-0.35	1.00	5.00	0.85
Goal Achievement	3.54	1.08	-0.28	-0.48	1.00	5.00	0.80
Overall Self-Actualization	3.71	0.94	-0.44	-0.18	1.00	5.00	0.89
Mediating Variables							
Social Capital	3.28	1.15	-0.18	-0.61	1.00	5.00	0.86
Institutional Trust	2.87	1.22	0.22	-0.69	1.00	5.00	0.83
Identity Formation	3.76	1.06	-0.52	0.09	1.00	5.00	0.88

Note: All variables measured on 5-point Likert scales (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)

The univariate analysis revealed several statistically important patterns in the distribution of key study variables. The overall self-actualization measure (M=3.71, SD=0.94) demonstrated a higher mean score compared to overall social cohesion (M=3.36, SD=0.98), suggesting that respondents reported moderately higher levels of individual self-actualization than social cohesion in their communities. Within the social cohesion dimension, collective efficacy exhibited the highest mean (M=3.67, SD=1.09), followed by social trust (M=3.42, SD=1.18), while community participation showed the lowest mean (M=2.98, SD=1.26), indicating that respondents felt their communities could achieve collective goals and maintained reasonable trust levels, but actual participatory engagement remained relatively modest. The negative skewness values for most variables, particularly personal autonomy (-0.61) and collective efficacy (-0.48), indicated distributions skewed toward higher values, suggesting that most respondents clustered toward agreement rather than disagreement on these constructs. All constructs demonstrated acceptable to

excellent internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.79 to 0.91, well above the conventional threshold of 0.70, confirming that the measurement instruments reliably captured the intended theoretical constructs. The relatively moderate standard deviations across all variables (ranging from 0.94 to 1.26) indicated substantial individual variation in both social cohesion and self-actualization experiences, which was theoretically important as it suggested these were not uniformly experienced across the sample.

The distributional characteristics provided initial insights relevant to the study's theoretical concerns. The fact that self-actualization measures consistently showed higher means than social cohesion indicators aligned with theoretical perspectives suggesting that contemporary society privileges individual development over collective integration, though the moderate rather than extreme differences suggested these dimensions coexisted rather than one completely dominating the other. The particularly low mean for community participation (2.98) relative to other cohesion indicators raised questions about whether passive forms of social connection (trust, perceived collective efficacy) were replacing active engagement, a pattern consistent with concerns raised by communitarians like Robert Putnam about declining civic participation. Conversely, the relatively high scores on personal autonomy (M=3.89) and identity formation (M=3.76) suggested that respondents felt considerable freedom in self-definition and personal choice, which could either complement or compete with social cohesion depending on how these variables interrelated. The mediating variable of institutional trust showed the lowest overall mean (M=2.87), indicating moderate skepticism toward formal institutions, which had potential implications for understanding how individuals navigate between self-actualization and social integration when institutional frameworks provide limited mediation. These univariate patterns established that both social cohesion and self-actualization existed at moderate levels within the sample, creating empirical conditions where their relationship could be meaningfully examined rather than one dimension being so dominant or absent that their dialectical relationship would be obscured.

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations Between Social Cohesion, Self-Actualization, and Mediating Variables (N=450)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Social Trust	1									
2. Community Participation	.62***	1								
3. Collective Efficacy	.58***	.54***	1							
4. Overall Social Cohesion	.86***	.84***	.82***	1						
5. Personal Autonomy	.34***	.28***	.41***	.38***	1					
6. Self-Expression	.31***	.36***	.38***	.39***	.67***	1				
7. Goal Achievement	.29***	.32***	.44***	.39***	.61***	.59***	1			

8. Overall Self-Actualization	.35***	.36***	.46***	.43***	.87***	.87***	.84***	1		
9. Social Capital	.71***	.69***	.63***	.76***	.42***	.45***	.41***	.48***	1	
10. Institutional Trust	.48***	.41***	.52***	.53***	.26***	.24***	.31***	.30***	.55***	1
11. Identity Formation	.37***	.33***	.42***	.41***	.64***	.68***	.56***	.70***	.49***	.32***

*Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; $p < .05$

The bivariate correlation analysis revealed a critically important pattern that directly addressed the central theoretical question of this study: social cohesion and self-actualization demonstrated statistically significant positive correlations rather than the negative relationships that would indicate fundamental opposition between these constructs. The overall social cohesion measure correlated positively and significantly with overall self-actualization ($r=.43$, $p<.001$), indicating a moderate positive association whereby individuals reporting higher levels of social integration also tended to report higher levels of personal self-actualization. Examining specific dimensions provided more nuanced insights: collective efficacy showed the strongest correlation with overall self-actualization ($r=.46$, $p<.001$), followed by community participation ($r=.36$, $p<.001$) and social trust ($r=.35$, $p<.001$). Among self-actualization dimensions, goal achievement demonstrated the strongest relationship with social cohesion indicators, particularly collective efficacy ($r=.44$, $p<.001$), suggesting that communities perceived as capable of collective action may facilitate individual goal attainment. Personal autonomy, while positively correlated with all social cohesion measures, showed its strongest association with collective efficacy ($r=.41$, $p<.001$) rather than the negative relationship that strict individualist theories might predict. The mediating variables showed theoretically meaningful patterns: social capital demonstrated strong correlations with both overall social cohesion ($r=.76$, $p<.001$) and overall self-actualization ($r=.48$, $p<.001$), positioning it as a potential bridge construct, while identity formation correlated strongly with self-actualization ($r=.70$, $p<.001$) and moderately with social cohesion ($r=.41$, $p<.001$).

These bivariate findings carried substantial theoretical implications for reconciling the dialectic between the social and the self. The consistent positive correlations across all dimensions contradicted theoretical frameworks that posit social cohesion and individual self-actualization as zero-sum or mutually exclusive phenomena, instead supporting perspectives like those advanced by communitarian theorists such as Charles Taylor or Amitai Etzioni, who argue that robust communities provide the conditions necessary for meaningful individual freedom and self-realization. The moderate rather than weak correlation magnitudes (ranging from .26 to .46 between primary constructs) suggested that while social cohesion and self-actualization were related, they remained sufficiently distinct constructs rather than mere reflections of a single underlying dimension, confirming that the theoretical distinction between these concepts remained valid even as their empirical relationship proved complementary. The particularly strong correlation between collective efficacy and goal achievement provided empirical support for theoretical arguments that communities perceived as effective in collective action create environments where individuals feel empowered to pursue and achieve personal objectives, possibly through providing resources, modeling efficacy, or creating opportunity structures. Conversely, the relatively weaker correlations between institutional trust and self-actualization measures

($r=.24$ to $.31$) suggested that formal institutional frameworks may play a less central role in mediating the cohesion-actualization relationship than informal social mechanisms captured by social capital and identity formation. These patterns indicated that the relationship between social and individual dimensions operated through multiple pathways requiring more sophisticated multivariate modeling to fully understand the causal structures and mediation processes.

Table 3: Structural Equation Modeling Results Testing Theoretical Models of Social Cohesion and Self-Actualization Relationships (N=450)

Model Specification	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR	Interpretation
Model 1: Opposition Model							
(Social Cohesion → Self-Actualization)	287.34***	98	0.874	0.851	0.098 [0.085, 0.112]	0.089	Poor fit
Model 2: Independence Model							
(No direct paths between constructs)	312.56***	102	0.851	0.823	0.106 [0.093, 0.119]	0.095	Poor fit
Model 3: Complementarity Model							
(Social Cohesion ↔ Self-Actualization)	156.78***	97	0.946	0.935	0.056 [0.042, 0.069]	0.048	Good fit
Model 4: Mediated Model							
(SC → Social Capital → SA)	142.23***	95	0.958	0.949	0.051 [0.037, 0.064]	0.043	Excellent fit
(SC → Identity Formation → SA)							

Path Coefficients for Best-Fitting Model (Model 4):

Path	Standardized β	SE	p-value	95% CI
Social Cohesion → Social Capital	0.78	0.042	<.001	[0.698, 0.862]
Social Cohesion → Identity Formation	0.46	0.051	<.001	[0.360, 0.560]
Social Capital → Self-Actualization	0.34	0.048	<.001	[0.246, 0.434]
Identity Formation → Self-Actualization	0.52	0.045	<.001	[0.432, 0.608]
Social Cohesion → Self-Actualization (direct)	0.12	0.056	.032	[0.010, 0.230]
Indirect Effects:				
SC → Social Capital → SA	0.27	0.039	<.001	[0.194, 0.346]
SC → Identity Formation → SA	0.24	0.036	<.001	[0.170, 0.310]
Total Effect (SC → SA)	0.63	0.047	<.001	[0.538, 0.722]

*Note: SC = Social Cohesion; SA = Self-Actualization; $**p < .001$; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual

The structural equation modeling analysis provided definitive evidence regarding competing theoretical frameworks for understanding the relationship between social cohesion and self-actualization. Model comparison statistics clearly demonstrated that models positing opposition (Model 1) or independence (Model 2) between these constructs showed poor fit to the observed data, with CFI values below the conventional 0.90 threshold (0.874 and 0.851 respectively) and RMSEA values exceeding 0.08, indicating substantial discrepancies between these theoretical specifications and empirical patterns. In contrast, the complementarity model (Model 3) demonstrated good fit (CFI=0.946, RMSEA=0.056), but was surpassed by the mediated model (Model 4), which achieved excellent fit across all indices (CFI=0.958, TLI=0.949, RMSEA=0.051, SRMR=0.043). The mediated model's superior performance indicated that the relationship between social cohesion and self-actualization was best understood not as a simple direct correlation, but as operating through intermediary mechanisms captured by social capital and identity formation constructs. Examination of path coefficients in Model 4 revealed that social cohesion exerted a very strong positive effect on social capital ($\beta=0.78$, $p<.001$) and a moderate positive effect on identity formation ($\beta=0.46$, $p<.001$), which in turn significantly predicted self-actualization ($\beta=0.34$ and $\beta=0.52$ respectively, both $p<.001$). The direct path from social cohesion to self-actualization remained significant but modest ($\beta=0.12$, $p=.032$), indicating partial mediation whereby most of the effect operated through the mediating variables while a small direct effect persisted.

The decomposition of effects provided crucial insights into the mechanisms linking social cohesion to self-actualization. The total effect of social cohesion on self-actualization was substantial ($\beta=0.63$, $p<.001$), with the indirect effect through social capital ($\beta=0.27$) and identity formation ($\beta=0.24$) accounting for approximately 81% of this total effect, while the direct effect contributed only 19%. This pattern supported theoretical perspectives, particularly those articulated by Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, suggesting that social integration facilitates individual development primarily through accumulation of social resources (social capital) and through providing contexts for coherent identity construction. The particularly strong path from identity formation to self-actualization ($\beta=0.52$) aligned with symbolic interactionist theories, especially George Herbert Mead's arguments that the self emerges through social processes, and with communitarian philosophers like Charles Taylor who argue that identity formation requires recognition within communities of shared meaning. The robust path from social cohesion to social capital ($\beta=0.78$) empirically demonstrated that integrated communities generate networks, norms, and trust that individuals can leverage for personal development, rather than social integration constraining individual possibilities. These findings suggested that the classical sociological tension between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, or between Durkheimian social solidarity and individual autonomy, may be partially resolved through recognizing that certain forms of social cohesion—particularly those that generate social capital and support identity formation—actually enable rather than suppress self-actualization.

The structural equation modeling results fundamentally challenged theoretical frameworks that treat social cohesion and individual self-actualization as opposing forces requiring difficult trade-offs, instead providing empirical support

for synthesis perspectives that view these dimensions as potentially mutually reinforcing under specific conditions. The failure of the opposition model carried important implications for critiques of community that emphasize its constraining effects on individual freedom, suggesting that while certain authoritarian or rigidly conformist forms of social organization may indeed suppress self-actualization, the broader construct of social cohesion—encompassing trust, participation, and collective efficacy—showed positive rather than negative associations with individual development. This pattern resonated with Amitai Etzioni's communitarian arguments that individuals are not autonomous atoms preceding society but are fundamentally constituted through social relationships, and that communities respecting individual dignity can enhance rather than diminish personal autonomy. The mediation through social capital provided empirical specification for how this occurs: cohesive communities create dense networks providing information, support, and opportunities that individuals mobilize for personal goal achievement, suggesting that Robert Putnam's concerns about declining social capital have implications not only for collective goods but also for individual flourishing. The mediation through identity formation supported recognition theories advanced by scholars like Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor, demonstrating that the social provision of stable identity frameworks—far from constraining authentic selfhood—actually enabled the coherent self-understanding necessary for meaningful self-actualization, as individuals require social validation and shared meaning systems to develop robust identities from which to pursue personal goals.

However, these findings also warranted critical interpretation regarding their scope and limitations. The positive relationship between social cohesion and self-actualization observed in this study likely depended on particular qualities of social cohesion that the measurement instruments may not have fully differentiated—specifically, whether cohesion operates through pluralistic, voluntary, and rights-respecting mechanisms versus homogenizing, coercive, or exclusionary ones. The relatively weak direct effect ($\beta=0.12$) suggested that social cohesion does not automatically produce self-actualization but requires translation through specific mechanisms, implying that policy interventions aimed at building community must attend to how cohesion is achieved and what forms of social capital and identity possibilities are generated. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the data precluded strong causal claims; while the model tested directional paths from cohesion to actualization through mediators, reciprocal causation remained plausible whereby self-actualized individuals contribute to building cohesive communities, or where unmeasured third variables simultaneously promote both outcomes. The moderate rather than extremely high total effect ($\beta=0.63$) also indicated that substantial variance in self-actualization remained unexplained by social cohesion and its mediators, suggesting that individual psychological factors, material resources, institutional opportunities, and other dimensions not captured in this model also significantly influence self-actualization. Nevertheless, these results provided robust empirical evidence that sociological theories need not choose between emphasizing social integration or individual development, but should instead investigate the specific social conditions and mechanisms through which these dimensions become mutually constitutive rather than antagonistic, thereby advancing theoretical reconciliation of this classical dialectic through empirically grounded specification of mediating pathways.

Conclusion

This study systematically examined the dialectical relationship between social cohesion and individual self-actualization across sociological theoretical traditions and empirically tested competing frameworks for understanding their interrelationship. The theoretical analysis revealed that classical sociology established an enduring tension

between collective integration and individual autonomy that has persisted through contemporary debates, with functionalist perspectives privileging social solidarity while interpretivist and critical approaches emphasized personal agency and self-realization. However, the empirical investigation provided compelling evidence that this theoretical opposition did not reflect actual social patterns, as both univariate and bivariate analyses demonstrated that social cohesion and self-actualization coexisted at moderate levels and exhibited positive rather than negative correlations. Most significantly, structural equation modeling definitively rejected both opposition and independence models, instead supporting a mediated complementarity framework wherein social cohesion facilitated self-actualization primarily through generating social capital and enabling identity formation, with these mediating pathways accounting for approximately 81% of the total positive effect. These findings suggested that the classical sociological dialectic between the social and the self represented not an irresolvable contradiction but rather a failure to adequately theorize the mechanisms through which particular forms of social integration—specifically those characterized by trust, participatory engagement, and collective efficacy—create conditions enabling individual flourishing by providing networks of support, resources for goal achievement, and frameworks for coherent identity construction. The study therefore contributed to reconciling this theoretical tension by demonstrating empirically that robust communities and self-actualized individuals need not be antagonistic outcomes requiring difficult trade-offs, but could emerge as mutually reinforcing dimensions when social cohesion operates through mechanisms that generate social capital and respect diverse identity formations. Future sociological theory should move beyond framing the individual-society relationship as fundamentally oppositional and instead investigate the specific qualities of social organization, forms of solidarity, and institutional arrangements that transform potential contradiction into productive complementarity, enabling societies to simultaneously honor collective wellbeing and individual dignity.

Recommendations

Integrate Social Capital Development into Community-Building Initiatives: Policymakers and community organizations should design social cohesion interventions that explicitly focus on building bridging and bonding social capital rather than merely promoting conformity or shared identity. This involves creating opportunities for diverse participation in voluntary associations, facilitating network formation across social boundaries, and establishing trust-building mechanisms that respect individual autonomy while fostering collective efficacy. Programs should be evaluated not only on collective outcomes such as community solidarity but also on whether they enhance individual capacity for goal achievement and self-expression, recognizing that effective communities enable rather than constrain personal

Develop Educational Frameworks that Balance Social Integration and Individual Identity Formation: Educational institutions should adopt pedagogical approaches that simultaneously cultivate social responsibility and individual self-actualization by creating learning environments where students develop both communal belonging and authentic self-expression. This requires moving beyond curricula that emphasize either pure individualistic competition or uncritical group conformity, instead implementing collaborative learning models that teach students to negotiate individual aspirations within collective contexts, develop identities through social recognition while maintaining critical autonomy, and contribute to community wellbeing while pursuing personal goals, thereby preparing individuals for the dialectical navigation of social and self-actualizing imperatives in contemporary pluralistic societies.

Refine Sociological Theory Through Mechanism-Focused Research on Cohesion-Actualization Pathways:

Future sociological research should move beyond debating whether social cohesion and individual self-actualization are compatible and instead investigate the specific mechanisms, conditions, and contexts under which their relationship becomes mutually reinforcing versus antagonistic. This requires longitudinal studies examining causal directionality, comparative research identifying which forms of social organization (voluntary versus coercive, pluralistic versus homogenizing, democratic versus authoritarian) produce complementarity versus opposition, and qualitative investigations exploring how individuals subjectively experience the navigation between collective belonging and personal autonomy, thereby developing more nuanced theoretical frameworks that specify conditional rather than universal relationships between the social and the self.

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