

# The concept of social cohesion fit for co-operative studies: the health care co-operatives in Québec

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**SUMMARY** • Over the past decades we have seen the concept of social cohesion reemerge in the social sciences. It has contributed in helping us grasp the many complex changes that globalization has bestowed upon the social, political and economical spheres, and in making sense of other concepts such as social equality and social justice. Going back to the sociological roots of the concept of social cohesion, this article aims at consolidating what has so far been gathered in terms of theoretical definitions of the concept, with the ultimate goal of pinpointing its reach, for its practical application in the field of co-operative studies. The focus is on health co-operatives in Quebec.

**RESUMEN** • En el transcurso de los últimos decenios, el concepto de cohesión social ha sido rehabilitado en la familia de las ciencias sociales. Este concepto se ha revelado como muy útil para comprender mejor la complejidad de los cambios provocados por la globalización en las esferas económicas, sociales y políticas, al tiempo que facilita la comprensión de conceptos como la igualdad social y la justicia social. Revisando las raíces sociológicas del concepto de cohesión social, este artículo busca reforzar la definición teórica del concepto teniendo como marco de referencia su aplicación práctica en los estudios cooperativos. El caso analizado aquí es el de las cooperativas que funcionan en el sector de la salud en Quebec.

**RESUMO** • Ao longo das últimas décadas, o conceito de coesão social foi reabilitado na família das ciências sociais. Esse conceito revelou-se extremamente útil no sentido de melhor compreender a complexidade das mudanças ocasionadas pela globalização nos âmbitos econômico, social e político, ao mesmo tempo em que facilitou a compreensão de conceitos, tais como igualdade social e justiça social. Reavaliando as raízes sociológicas do conceito de coesão social, este artigo busca reforçar a definição teórica do conceito, tendo como escopo sua aplicação prática no âmbito dos estudos cooperativos. O caso selecionado foi o das cooperativas que atuam no setor da saúde no Quebec.

**RÉSUMÉ** • Au cours des dernières décennies le concept de cohésion sociale a été réhabilité dans la famille des sciences sociales. Ce concept s'est avéré fort utile pour mieux comprendre la complexité des changements provoqués par la globalisation dans les sphères économiques, sociales et politiques tout en facilitant la compréhension de concepts tel l'égalité sociale et la justice sociale. Revisitant les racines sociologiques du concept de cohésion sociale, cet article cherche à renforcer la définition théorique du concept avec comme cadre de référence son application pratique dans le cadre d'études coopératives. Le cas retenu est celui des coopératives évoluant dans le secteur de la santé au Québec.

### INTRODUCTION<sup>3</sup>

Far from being a new and innovative concept, the concept of social cohesion bears a long theoretical history, emerging every so often, each time social order is questioned or sudden changes menace the normative, economic or social bases of society. Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, each in their own way, brushed upon the concept precisely in a time of great transformations. Today, the concept of social cohesion is back on the social sciences' agenda, brought about by globalization, speedy technological development, etc., helping us to make sense of these new changes, and to better understand how social cohesion per se can be achieved or maintained, thus ensuring social order, equality of chances, social inclusion, democratic participation and so on.

But to measure or define social cohesion is not an easy task; thus the vagueness and ambiguity of the concept. This amplexity, however convenient and bearer of great theoretical potentialities, lacks in precision and conciseness. "This vagueness explains why it is so difficult to determine exactly what is meant by social cohesion" (Bernard, 1999: 2).

The need for clear and precise tools to evaluate social cohesion, specifically oriented toward co-operative studies, is therefore imperative. What is intended by social cohesion and how does its definition or dimensions directly relate to co-operatives? To modestly contribute to the conception of such theoretical tools will be the object of this article. This research paper being part of our larger research project, Co-operative Membership and Globalization: Creating Social Cohesion Through Market Relations.

For the large part inspired by previous research done at the CRISES (Research center on social innovations in the social economy) from 2000 to 2002 on social cohesion and financial co-operatives (Mager, 2001; Huot, 2001; Camus, 2001; Chouinard *et al.*, 2001) and still unpublished works on a theoretical definition of the concept (De Bortoli), our theoretical framework will be rooted in five specific dimensions, applied and

tested in earlier case studies on these financial co-operatives. These concepts are those of **territoriality**, **accessibility**, **employability**, **democracy** and **connectedness** (Malo *et al.*, 2002).

They have since been redefined to be applied to health and solidarity<sup>4</sup> co-ops in Québec (Girard and De Bortoli, 2004). Today, we will try to briefly render an account of this evolution, by defining these five dimensions and showing how they can adequately relate to co-operatives providing services in the field of health care and to a certain extent to co-operative studies at large, and illustrate as best we can their adequacy in face of the specifics of two health care co-operatives in Québec to which they will eventually be applied, being those of Les Grès in Saint-Étienne-des-Grès and Robert Verrier in St-Cyrille-de-Wendover. But first, let us take a closer look at the health care co-operative sector in Québec.

## 1. INNOVATIVE COLLECTIVE MODELS: HEALTH CARE CO-OPERATIVES

To better our analytical tools, it would be wise to first have a good understanding of the field or object we will precisely apply them to. In our case, health care co-operatives in Québec.

Since the end of the 80's, a new generation of collective enterprises, co-operatives and non-profit organizations (OBNL), came to be in the field of health care and social services. These organizations differentiate themselves from traditional non-profit organizations, both by the services they provide as well as by the composition of their membership.

In the case of the co-operatives, at the end of the 1980's, a first group of enterprises came to be in the paramedic sector. These co-operatives, strongly supported by the CSN, one of Québec's most influential trade unions, were born out of the intention to "civilize" a sector known for its harsh working relations (Comeau, 1991). Today, six of these workers' co-operatives exist in Québec, in five different regions, and have together significantly strengthened the sector. After expanding to the adjacent communities, they now constitute, notwithstanding the paramedic services in Montreal (Urgence-santé), the largest paramedic service in the province of Québec.

In the mid 90's appeared the first home care co-operatives, in part as a result of their growing interest and need in face of an aging population. Set as a priority by the Québec Summit on Economy and Employment in 1996, it gave the movement the recognition it needed, with the creation of a governmental aid program, the PEFSAD or fiscal exoneration program. This program allowed for the creation of a hundred or so social economy enterprises in the home care services sector, 60% of which have

a non-profit organization status and the other 40% as co-operative enterprises. Thousands of citizens belong to one or another of forty co-operatives active in the home care sector mainly involved in household upkeep and maintenance for seniors who wish to remain at home. Of these, twenty-eight are solidarity co-operatives, three are worker co-ops, and the rest are consumer co-ops. These co-operatives too manifest great innovative potential, not just in terms of their commitment to quality service, but in the other services they offer, like the purchase and development of a senior's residence or services for households without special needs. In 1996, these co-operatives regrouped on a more formal bases, by means of a provincial federation, the Fédération des coopératives de services à domicile du Québec<sup>5</sup>.

In another example, the initiative of the residents of the St-Étienne-des-Grès locality, in 1995, allowed for the development of an innovative concept of health care co-operatives, which has had an unprecedented impact. Indeed, following its creation, some other co-operatives of this same type were founded. Other organizational models have also been developed but have not yet been reproduced. Lastly, except for the home care co-operatives which came to be within the framework of a particular governmental program, the PEFSAD, these other co-operatives were born primarily from the will and engagement of local community members, generally reinventing the co-operative approach, specifically in terms of the services rendered. Table 1 presents the profile of the currently active co-operatives in the field of health care and social services.

**TABLE 1**  
Co-operatives in the health and social services sector  
Québec 2003

Field of activity	Types of co-operatives (number)
Health care co-operatives	Users: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health care co-operatives (1)</li> </ul> Solidarity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nursing care co-operatives (1)</li> <li>• Health care co-operatives (3)</li> </ul> Workers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alternative medicine co-operatives (1)</li> <li>• Paramedic co-operatives (6)</li> <li>• Long term care co-operatives (1)</li> </ul>
Social services co-operatives	Users: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home care co-operatives (11)</li> </ul> Solidarity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home care co-operatives (27)</li> </ul> Workers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home care co-operatives (3)</li> </ul>

But for now, two of these innovative health care co-operatives particularly interest us in regards to their impact on social cohesion: Les Grès and Robert Verrier.

## 2. AN OVERVIEW OF LES GRÈS AND ROBERT VERRIER HEALTH CARE CO-OPERATIVES<sup>6</sup>

Situated near the city of Trois-Rivières, halfway between Montreal and Québec city, the municipality of Saint-Étienne-des-Grès was confronted in the beginning of 1990 with the departure of its sole practicing medical doctor, leading to an urgent need of finding a permanent on-location practitioner. The problem strongly affecting the elderly with mobile deficiencies and young active households for whom the constant traveling to Trois-Rivières was a waste of time, gave birth to a petition signed by over one-thousand citizens, urging the municipality to find a solution to its shortcoming. The hypothesis of trying to attract a medical doctor with an individual practice soon appeared as obviously unrealistic, as did that of seducing a privately owned polyclinic. The recent budgetary cutbacks at the expense of the health care system in Québec also rendered chimerical the idea that the public clinic (CLSC) of Trois-Rivières could ever alleviate the municipality's problems by opening a nearby clinic. Deadlocked, the Caisse populaire's (Credit Union) general manager proposed an unprecedented solution, that of a user type collective enterprise which would have the objective of managing a clinic by renting its spaces to diverse health care professionals. The co-operative opened its doors in the spring of 1995 strong of one-thousand members. Faced with an incommensurable success – in a few years time, the number of medical charts nearing twelve-thousand – the co-operative opened in 1999 a small health care service center in the nearby village of St-Élie-de-Caxton, some twenty kilometers from St-Étienne. In the year 2000, the co-operative also took in charge the management of an elderly home, numbering nineteen units and having to its credit five employees. Today the co-operative rents its spaces to six medical doctors, a pharmacist, an optometrist, a psychologist and a dentist. It still takes in charge the rendering of physiotherapy services. The co-operative's membership today nears three-thousand members and its medical charts now reach twenty-thousand. Formally a user type co-operative, Les Grès adopted in 2003 a solidarity co-operative status.

The Robert Verrier health care co-operative, a consumer type co-operative situated in Saint-Cyrille-de-Wendover, some fifteen kilometers from Drummondville, originally shared the same predicament as that of St-Étienne, knowingly the lack of on-location health care services. Strong

of a citizen and community leader mobilization, the project came to be at the end of 1998 and the founding assembly was held in July 1999, the co-operative reaching in September of the same year one-thousand members. As in the case of St-Étienne, the project would never have come to be if it wasn't for the unprecedented role and the generous contribution of the local Caisse populaire and of the municipality. Today, the co-operative leases its spaces to two medical doctors, a pharmacist, a dietician, a psychologist and two physiotherapists. Notwithstanding some recent financial difficulties, the co-operative's membership now nearly reaches two-thousand and has an equivalent number of medical charts.

### 3. THEORETICAL INSPIRATIONS

The social object or field of research to which our dimensions will be applied to having been briefly specified, it now seems appropriate, if not imperative, to walk down the path of the theoretical inspirations that have shaped those five dimensions.

Firstly, as we have mentioned in our introduction, these five concepts were first defined and applied at the CRISES, in the context of social cohesion and financial co-operatives. It is precisely for that reason, that of having been conceptualized for and applied to the co-operative field, that we felt they could be most adequate to help us in our own research project. They were fit for co-operative studies.

That being said, we felt it useful, if not necessary, to refine them, digging deeper in theory, to enrich them by specifying their reach, rendering them even more fit for co-operative studies.

To do so, we firstly turned to the works of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, each respectfully putting the emphasis on two principal aspects of social cohesion, which in our view encapsulate its essence. On the one hand, social cohesion insured by resemblance and a common adhesion to a set of beliefs and values, which is characteristic of traditional societies, where a strong "moral density" ensures consensus; and a social cohesion more common to modern societies, which is based on individualism and the promotion of differences where a "polytheism of values" supersedes a uniform collective conscience, leaving room for conflicts and the necessity for their regulation by intermediary social institutions, thereby securing social cohesion.

Having brought out those two principal theoretical axis, we most importantly went looking for works that had already attempted a general definition of social cohesion, which was in many ways faithful to Durkheim's and Weber's analysis of the concept. This time, we turned to Jenson (1998) and Vertovec (1997), as well as official documents published by the

OECD (1996), by the Government of Canada's Policy Research Initiative, Social Cohesion Research Workplan (POLICY, 1997) and by the Commissariat general du Plan (PLAN, 1997), all of which were also closely looked at by Jenson.

Jenson's synthesis of the concept, which abridges and embodies the essential elements of other similar works, is comprised of five principal dimensions, briefly defined here by Herman (2003), to which he added a sixth dimension, conceptualized by Bernard (1999):

***Belonging . . . . . Isolation***

*This dimension fits best within the sociocultural sphere and embodies values and collective identities. Isolation from the community is a clear threat to social cohesion.*

***Inclusion . . . . . Exclusion***

*This economic dimension relates directly to involvement in the market-place, examining whether individuals are meaningfully engaged in the workings of the market to which they are inevitably subjected. Practices or mechanisms that exclude or deter inclusion in market activity are a threat to social cohesion.*

***Participation . . . . . Noninvolment***

*This dimension falls within the political sphere and examines participation in governance, particularly at the local level. Barriers to involvement, apathy, or noninvolvement can threaten social cohesion. Political disenchantment and the resulting backlash are likely indications of a lack of social cohesion.*

***Recognition . . . . . Rejection***

*This dimension examines the extent of recognition and tolerance for pluralistic value systems. The existence and promotion of institutions or groups that recognize and celebrate diversity serve to mediate differences over power, resources, and values. The presence of institutions or groups that undermine the recognition of pluralism hint at a lack of social cohesion. This dimension fits most closely within a sociocultural sphere, but could arguably be placed in either the political or economic spheres quite readily.*

***Legitimacy . . . . . Illegitimacy***

*This dimension, from the political sphere, is closely related to the last. In this case it is legitimizing the public and private institutions that provide the mediation role, described above, that is important. Expressions of cynicism, doubt, and negativity regarding these institutions put social cohesion in jeopardy.*

***Equality . . . . . Inequality***

*The sixth and final dimension, added to the mix by Paul Bernard, falls within the economic sphere. Closely related to inclusion/exclusion from the market-place, it makes the subtle yet important distinction between equality of opportunities and equality of conditions. It considers whether citizens, in reality, can access opportunities to become engaged in the market-place, or if they are hindered from doing so because of the conditions in which they exist.*

What emerges from these dimensions is that social cohesion is a social process which instills in individuals a sense of belonging to a community of shared values and common goals; a community opened to diversity, working at minimizing social and economic inequalities as well as insuring a stable and just political climate.

But to this typology of dimensions there seems to be, in our view, a missing link. It is in this sense that we propose a seventh dimension:

*Safeguard . . . . . Loss*

If our field research has taught us anything is that co-operatives of various kinds, but especially solidarity co-operatives, have played a central role in regards to social cohesion, in preserving the community's social, economic and political assets. This seventh dimension could best be defined as the many institutions, social innovations and collective projects that enable a community to keep or safeguard its most essential social assets, thus insuring a minimum of social cohesion.

This classification, although undoubtedly an essential analytical tool for anyone wishing to better measure and understand social cohesion is, in our view, unable to completely grasp the specifics of our object: the co-operative reality. To do so, we felt we needed more specifically oriented dimensions, which nonetheless encapsulated these seven dimensions, as shown in Table 2.

This table actually shows how our five dimensions, territoriality, accessibility, employability, democrativity, and connectedness (Girard and De Bortoli, 2004) meet those defined by Jenson, Bernard and De Bortoli, and how more significantly, they give them a widened practical use, on the one hand by better orienting them toward a specific object, and on the other, by enhancing their analytical potentialities, those directly related to the social economy and the co-operative field.

TABLE 2

Dimensions	Internal	External
Territoriality	Belonging/Isolation Legitimacy/Illegitimacy	Belonging/Isolation Legitimacy/Illegitimacy
Accessibility	Belonging/Isolation Equality/Inequality	Inclusion/Exclusion Equality/Inequality Recognition/Rejection Safeguard/Loss
Employability	Inclusion/Exclusion	Inclusion/Exclusion Recognition/Rejection Equality/Inequality Safeguard/Loss
Democrativity	Participation/Noninvolvement Recognition/Rejection	Participation/Noninvolvement Legitimacy/Illegitimacy
Connectedness	Legitimacy/Illegitimacy Recognition/Rejection	Legitimacy/Illegitimacy Safeguard/Loss

In fact, what distinguishes our dimensions from those of Jenson's, Bernard's and De Bortoli's is their applicability at different levels of analysis. To be able to measure the impact of co-operatives on social cohesion, it is important, in our minds, to see how the "internal" social cohesion of the co-operative, or in some ways its "co-operative specificity" can affect by its functioning, the "external" social cohesion of the community. How for example, the co-operative, within its membership, its own democratic structure, etc. generates values, rules, ways of doing, etc. that not only ensure the "internal" cohesion favorable to the enterprise, but which have inevitable externalities (its example alone, the values it instills in its members, etc.) that positively affect other organizations and the community at large.

What our dimensions enable us to do is to precisely pinpoint the crucial elements of our object of research by combining one or many of Jenson's, Bernard's or De Bortoli's dimensions, hence strengthening the definition of social cohesion adequate to our project.

But to better understand their analytical potential, it would be interesting, at this point, to define each of them in regards to our two co-operatives: Les Grès and Robert Verrier, leaving us the liberty to go much beyond them and show the applicability of our dimensions to the co-operative field at large.

#### 4. TERRITORIALITY

This dimension refers to many important aspects found in the definition of social cohesion as explained above, but this time specifically oriented toward co-operatives and the social economy.

As elsewhere in North America, territory is being defined in new ways. In the past, the parish of the local Catholic Church, what we call a "micro local territory of reference," with a more or less homogeneous population, was central. It is now being replaced by a wider territory ("supra local") corresponding to the regional county municipality (MRC)<sup>7</sup> with a heterogeneous population. What then has become the defining "territorial reference" of the co-operatives we want to study, and how, through it have they evolved and defined their action?

If we take the examples of Les Grès and of Robert Verrier, we can see that both started off with a micro local problematic, that of the absence of health care services on a specific local territory, still defined by its parochial characteristics and homogeneous population. Soon, they came to be confronted with a supra local reality: on the one hand having to deal with a clientele coming from outside their initial "territorial reference," namely because of a lack of medical services elsewhere, and

on the second hand, by the fact that other organizations, like the CLSCs and the Public Health Board have adopted a “supra local territory of reference”.

What we see here can be understood from the stand point of “values,” that is to say, as we have seen with Durkheim (1994), that social cohesion can result from shared values and beliefs. It is precisely what Jenson describes in her dimension *Belonging/Isolation*. On the one hand, the redefinition of borders and the integration of a new community, “interest-based” (Halseth, 1998), within the whelm of a micro local territory entails the production of new collective values strongly related to the community’s (“place-based”) collective identity, potentially embroiling the distinction between “established” and “outsiders” (Elias, 1997). Secondly, it is interesting to see if the co-operative did in fact adopt a supra local territory of reference as have other organizations, or instead is still deeply rooted in a micro local reality, thus intensifying a parochial identity.

Such a situation would have for consequence, “internally,” not only the composition of the membership, but also of its Board of Directors. To whom should the co-operative give precedence to, the “established” or the others coming from the vicinity? How to conciliate the interests of the ones and the others? An “external” dilemma this time, concerning the community as a whole.

Also, a project of the kind is likely to mobilize various social actors, and is also likely to instill a feeling of pride (in the event that the project succeeds) or on the contrary of despair (in the event that the co-operative project fails), thus having a considerable impact on the sense of belonging of the members of the community to an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) or to the territory; again, an impact on social cohesion not to be neglected.

Finally, and more from the standpoint of “regulation” this time (Weber), the adoption by the co-operative of a supra local territory of reference would mean an institutional adjustment to other organizations and institutions, whether they be local/regional or provincial/federal, that have for the most part adopted a supra local territory of reference, that of the MRC. Such an adjustment would result in granting the co-operative significantly greater legitimacy, thus increasing its chances of success, as much by internal effects (greater engagement and participation of the members) than external ones (social recognition, subsidies, donations, etc). We are, to say the least, in Jenson’s *Legitimacy/Illegitimacy* dimension, but once again fitted to the reality of co-operatives.

## 5. ACCESSIBILITY

The level or ease of accessibility of the co-op's services is a key element of this research. Starting from Vienney's (1994) view that co-operatives are intended to be a response to needs that are not met or not adequately met, and are aimed at actors with relatively little power, the research seeks to describe this accessibility.

First of all, in the case of Les Grès, it is strongly correlated with the concept of territoriality for it aims at answering the precise needs of a specific clientele, territorially defined, namely that of the elderly population with mobile deficiencies (who wishes to stay and get medical care in its community) and active households with young children (for whom the constant traveling to the nearest urban center for health care has become time consuming and problematic). The need for accessible and close-by health care services is in fact at the heart of what inspired the co-operative project in the first place and subsequently, in the case of Les Grès, of their initiative to take in charge the management of the elderly home. That is also the case for their need of a small health care center in St-Élie-de-Caxton, to answer the strong demand of an extraterritorial clientele, one which exceeded the limits and initial expectations of the population/territory they wanted to grant their services to.

Furthermore, since, as we have mentioned before, the concept of accessibility points to the services rendered per se, it is important to closely look at the "nature" and the "efficiency" of these services in relation to the urgency of the needs of the population. Firstly, to measure to what extent or how well the services rendered by the co-operatives answer to this demand or this deficiency (in terms of the nature of the need) and secondly to see in what proportion they are able to respond "efficiently" to these needs (in terms of their capability to answer quantitatively and qualitatively to the demand).

It is also worthwhile to see how these organizations develop new services, not to deal with non-members, but, as described in Desforges' typology of co-operative development strategies (1979-1980), to broaden the range of services offered to members, and thus strengthen their ties to the co-op. We are undeniably, from an "internal" perspective, describing Jenson's *Belonging/Isolation* dimension. A good example is the case of Les Grès, with the management of the elderly home allowing people to remain in their community. This seems at first glance to have a direct and positive effect on social cohesion, from an "external" point of view this time, namely the safeguarding of one of the community's most significant social assets: its elderly population (*Safeguard/Loss*).

We can also analyze accessibility by correlating it with connectedness (which will be discussed later) by looking at the ways in which the

arrival of the co-operative in the area had an impact on the services rendered by other community organizations such as those of the CLSC, in regards to the accessibility to their services. We can also measure the impact of the connections the co-ops have with other organizations on the accessibility of the services of the co-op itself, by seeing for example how the accessibility of the co-op's services is increased or diminished according to whether the co-op is or is not strongly connected to local community organizations.

Here, the limits of Jenson's Inclusion/Exclusion dimension can be pushed further, situating the applicability of the dimension not at the individual level, but at an institutional one, by seeing how the co-operative by offering services in a complementary matter with other local organizations is able to integrate a social network that will better its chances to succeed as an enterprise and, by sustaining durable ties with these organizations, will contribute to strengthening the community's social cohesion as a whole.

Finally, the accessibility to services can also be understood in light of a concern for parity and the compromise made (if there is a compromise) by the co-operatives between the specific interests of individuals, the collective interests of members and the general interest of the population as a whole, regarding the accessibility to the services offered (special hours for treating patient-members, the continuous specific demands by members, etc.). In this case, the dimension conceptualized by Bernard, Equality/Inequality, is particularly pertinent: from an "internal" view point, by precisely conciliating the diverse interests of the different categories of members, and from an "external" perspective, in answering the question of who is eligible to benefit from these services.

Lastly, by means of its services rendered, the co-operative can instill in its members ("internally") co-operative values (Belonging/Isolation) to which these persons would not have been exposed to if not for the co-op, and that subsequently could also have a beneficial impact, "externally," on the whole of the community (Recognition/Rejection).

## 6. EMPLOYABILITY

The concept of employability can be interpreted differently depending on the sector of activity of the co-ops. In certain cases this element is secondary, for example the co-ops offering a number of services to a community that does not have a grocery store, post office, bank, etc. In other cases, employability is central, for example, for a co-op working under programs for the reintegration of marginal populations into the workforce. In which case, we see again the importance of the Inclusion/Exclusion dimension, "externally," naturally, where people excluded from

the marketplace can reintegrate it and also benefit from the social externalities that a “reaffiliation” (Castel, 1995) to social networks brings.

In the same manner, by means of these institutional mechanisms, job creation revitalizes the social environment or at least preserves a certain degree of its socio-economic activities (Safeguard/Loss). These programs, of which the co-operative is bearer, also reaffirm the community’s will to safeguard or promote values of equality of opportunities, by giving people who otherwise would not have had the chance, the opportunity to reintegrate the marketplace (Equality/Inequality). Furthermore, it should be mentioned that all that concerns voluntary work is counted for in this dimension. These activities contribute to “developing “transversal aptitudes” or “generics” or even “general capabilities” that can be referred to as social qualifications (or competencies)” (Alaluf, 1999).

In the case of the co-operatives that particularly interest us, Les Grès and Robert Verrier, this dimension can somewhat enlighten us on some aspects of social cohesion, namely by looking at how the few jobs created compare in terms of working conditions to similar ones in private clinics or CLSCs. The socio-economic characteristics of the people employed could also reveal a more or less significant influence on social cohesion in seeing if the co-ops employ less economically advantaged people, people on welfare, women, youth and so on. All of the above are particularly pertinent in the case of Les Grès and the elderly home, when looking at the before and after picture, pre and post acquisition (number of employees before/after, working conditions before/after, etc.).

In the case of a favorable outcome concerning these comparisons, we can see how the co-operative can be of those institutions who believe in preserving certain values essential to the social cohesion, those of a pluralist and open community, and thereby prove its indispensability to the community’s social development (Recognition/Rejection).

## 7. DEMOCRATIVITY

The notion of democrativity refers, on the one hand, to the nature of the democratic process in the enterprise (namely, the choice of representative, direct or deliberative<sup>8</sup> democracy) and secondly, to the institutional or composite form of its structure, by means of concepts such as “social democracy” and “plural democracy”. The distinction between the two is fundamental. In the first case, the “nature of the democratic process” refers to the practice per se of democracy, that is, in its operational or dynamic sense. The “institutional or composite form of its structure,” on the other hand, refers to the composition of the enterprise’s democratic structure, that is to say, who are the people in the Board of Directors, do

other specialized comities exist, what is its socio-economic composition and so on. It is here that we find the concept of “plural democracy,” referring to the territorial, institutional or socio-economic origins of the administrative comity’s members or other instances of the enterprise’s democratic structure, and the concept of “social democracy,” that refers to the symmetrical representation of local or supra local populations amidst this democratic structure (Lévesque, 2001). The importance of having an equilibrium in regards to the representation of all different populations in the decision making instances of the enterprise is capital for social cohesion.

Participation to the co-operative’s democratic instances and the values that encourage this democratic implication, “internally,” are most significant (Participation/Noninvolvement). And in the instance that the co-operative enterprise distinguishes itself from other community organizations, its example alone (“externally”) could be of considerable worth, and contribute to enriching and encouraging democratic behavior or participation in general as well as soften up the expression of cynicism toward democratic institutions today, by giving them a new legitimacy (Legitimacy/Illegitimacy).

The “democratic process” (the choice between different types of democracy) as well as the “institutional and composite form of its democratic structure” are mechanisms that contribute to preserving and recognizing plurality inside the enterprise. On the one hand, by allowing ideas, opinions, and conflicting values to exist, to be voiced, and on the other, by ensuring symmetrical an equilibrated democratic representation.

These two elements of the enterprise’s democratic sphere correspond to Jenson’s dimension of Recognition/Rejection.

## 8. CONNECTEDNESS

Finally, the concept of connectedness can be defined as the relations between different social actors whether they be individuals or collectivities forming networks, generating social capital (values of confidence and reciprocity) which encourages co-operation and contributes to the strengthening of social cohesion (Putnam, 2000). This notion will enable us to see, amongst others, in what the degree of connectedness of the initiators of the co-operative projects played a significant role in the success of their becoming. In fact, one of the most significant impacts of an important stock of social capital by the initiators of projects is to bring a certain amount of legitimacy to the venture, that will resonate in the degree of confidence that community members, individuals as well as institutions, will invest in the belief that these projects will or will not come to be. Although Jenson shows in her Legitimacy/Illegitimacy

dimension the importance of the role played by institutions, the impact of individual social actors, well connected and/or with a strong symbolic capital, is not to be neglected.

Furthermore, we will closely look at the nature of those relations, of this connectedness, to see if they coincide with what Granovetter (1985) defined as “strong” or “weak” ties and in what way one or the other influence social cohesion.

Then, and strongly correlated with the concept of democrativity, we will take a look at what we called the influence of the “charismatic personality” of social actors on the creation of social relations bearer of potentialities in terms of contributing to the success of the co-operative projects. In other words, we will try to see how local social actors, with strong symbolic capital (whether they be the mayor, general director of the local Caisse populaire, etc.) are able, from this strong symbolic capital, to tie social relations that will facilitate the success of their respective projects (Legitimacy/Illegitimacy), notwithstanding nonetheless, the impact of such strong influence on the democratic process and the components of the enterprises’ democratic structure.

It is clear that for the latter aspect, which directly refers, “internally,” to the dimension of Recognition/Rejection, the plurality of opinions and values may easily be compromised. Here again, the impact of individuals is neglected by Jenson’s classification.

Furthermore, this concept will enable us to explore, as we have mentioned before, to what degree the connectedness of the enterprise is facilitated or not by the fact that it adopted or not in its functioning the new institutional territory of reference, supra local, as the CLSCs for example have. The fact that the enterprise is in synchronization with other community organizations enables it to gain in legitimacy, which might contribute to its success, and its success, in return, legitimizing moreover these same organizations, thus strengthening all institutions sharing a common pluralist view of society. These ties are what makes a community stronger, more able to put forward innovative social ideas and projects, thus at least safeguarding its most essential assets (Safeguard/Loss).

## CONCLUSION

The concept of social cohesion has, in the past few years, enjoyed a strong popularity, and this mostly due to its ambivalence and its extraordinary suppleness. This vagueness, although theoretically convenient, soon came to hide a lack of conciseness, the notion absorbing any such meaning and being applied to any such object, without the felt necessity of specifying its reach.

Consequently, “if we wish to develop research and policy aimed at fostering or promoting social cohesion, we should develop clearer notions as to what it might look like and entail” (Vertovec, 1997). This was precisely the aim of this article; to limit and specify the reach of the concept of social cohesion, taking into consideration the context to which it will be applied to, and drawing up a definition, or theoretical tools, *faits sur mesure*, that is to say, fit for co-operative studies.

To do so, we deemed it important to firstly define our object of study: health care co-operatives and specifically those of St-Étienne-des-Grès and Robert Verrier as well as co-operatives at large, within the context of the social economy. Haven taken a closer look at these two co-ops enabled us to more precisely pinpoint the essential elements of their specific context important to social cohesion, and hence better adjust our theoretical framework.

Then, we felt it necessary to go back to the classics, to Durkheim and Weber in particular. From them, we kept, roughly, the notions of “values” and “regulation”; these two theoretical axis serving as the general frame of our definition from which we went looking for all the essential elements of what has become a general consensus of what the concept of social cohesion means (Vertovec, 1997; Jenson, 1998; Bernard, 1999). Hence, we have worked with Jenson’s and Bernard’s dimensions, adding one more, a “theoretical missing link,” in our view, that of Safeguard/Loss, inspired by our most recent field research. These seven dimensions, although still too large and vague to be directly applied to the context of social economy and co-operative studies, were an essential part of the conceptualization, or rather the fathoming of our own five principle dimensions: territoriality, accessibility, employability, democrativity and connectedness. Through these, two more variables, “internal” and “external,” helping us better precisely grasp the impact of co-operatives on social cohesion.

Finally, less than a precise and concise definition of this vague but rich concept, a frame of a definition, inspired by a theoretical heritage and an overview of the state of the situation of this field of research. A structure, rich in concepts, fitted for a precise research object: co-operatives. A modest effort, which we hope, will serve to generally stimulate the debate on the definition of social cohesion, still pushing forward the need to specify its reach; but above all, specifically, hoping that it will contribute to enrich the thought process, from within our large research team, enabling us to fashion a valuable and precise theoretical tool that will allow us to better invest the subtleties and the principal stakes of a subject that strongly interests us: the impact of co-operatives on social cohesion.

## NOTES

1. Student, Master's degree at Syracuse University in Marriage and Family Therapy.
2. Associated researcher, IRECUS, Université de Sherbrooke.
3. The authors would like to thank very much Geneviève Langlois for her kind collaboration in the review of this paper.
4. Since 1997, Québec legislation allows for the creation of multi-membership co-operatives called *coopératives de solidarité* (solidarity co-operatives). The law recognizes three categories of members: users of the services provided by the co-op, workers in the co-op and any other person or organization that has an economic or social interest in the goal of the co-op. This last category is called *membre de soutien* or sustaining member.
5. Formerly known as the Fédération des coopératives de services et de soins de santé du Québec.
6. The information about those co-operatives was drawn from co-op profiles produced by the authors, unpublished.
7. This is a new territorial division created by the government of Québec in the 1980s, mainly to facilitate regional development.
8. Deliberative democracy is particularly significant, in the fact that it is an innovative form of democracy, leaving room for debate and conflicting opinions in the objective of obtaining a general consensus by means of deliberation.

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