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Exclusionary cohesion? Rethinking the nexus between social cohesion and xenophobic violence in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on nearly two decades of multi-case and comparative qualitative research, this article examines the relationship between social cohesion and xenophobic violence in South Africa. Echoing emerging scholarship, it challenges the conventional wisdom that social cohesion is inherently a panacea for violence. It demonstrates that, under certain conditions, social cohesion, enacted through collective efficacy, is linked to xenophobic violence, not as a solution but as a driver. The article argues that intersections between migration-induced diversity, severe socio-economic deprivation, and local governance deficits turn existing bonding cohesion into "exclusionary cohesion," thereby rendering aspects of social cohesion (i.e., social cohesion itself) a driver of xenophobic violence in South Africa. It makes a three-fold scholarly contribution: i) it introduces the concepts of "exclusionary cohesion" and "deprivation-induced cohesion" (an extension of Weber's 'social closure') which capture the essence of aspects of social cohesion making it a driver of xenophobic violence; ii) it provides empirical evidence that supports calls to reconceptualise social cohesion as its conventional understandings become increasingly anachronistic; and iii) it extends the debate on the social cohesion – violence nexus by beginning to identify factors linking specific forms of cohesion to specific forms of violence.

KEYWORDS
Migration; social cohesion; xenophobia; xenophobic violence

Introduction

As Marlise Richter et al. (2026) observe, the May 2025 deadly xenophobic attacks in Addo, Eastern Cape are a reminder that xenophobic violence continues to pose a serious threat to migrants' lives, livelihoods and well-being in South Africa. Indeed, as discussed later, xenophobic violence – which generally refers to any acts of violence targeted at foreign nationals because of their being foreign (Dodson 2010) – has become a regular and increasingly unremarkable feature of post-apartheid South Africa.

Interventions to address xenophobic violence in South Africa by government and civil society have focussed almost exclusively on promoting social cohesion in affected areas. Notable examples include the Nelson Mandela Foundation's community dialogues, the International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s "ONE" Movement and its Diversity,

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Inclusion and Social Cohesion Initiative with UNHCR, Freedom House's Social Cohesion Programme, Afesis's Kagisano Programme, multiple initiatives by government at national, provincial and local levels as well as innumerable small scale, community-level initiatives (more on this in Misago 2016, 2024). These interventions, some ongoing, are evidently informed by the implicit assumption that social cohesion is an effective solution to xenophobic violence. Yet, the persistence of violence indicates their limited success. As I argue elsewhere (Misago 2016), these interventions have not been effective because they are not evidence-based, i.e., are not informed by an accurate understanding of the violence's complex layers of causality. The shortcomings of these interventions suggest that, among other things, the relationship between social and xenophobic violence may not be adequately understood.

Drawing on extensive, multi-case and comparative qualitative data from nearly two decades of ongoing research, this article interrogates the nexus between social cohesion and xenophobic violence in South Africa. Echoing emerging scholarship, it challenges the conventional understanding that social cohesion is inherently a "panacea" for violence (see also Barolsky 2016a). It demonstrates that under certain conditions, social cohesion is linked to xenophobic violence, not as a solution but as a driver. More specifically, this article argues that the intersections between i) migration-induced diversity (and associated xenophobic attitudes); ii) deprivation-induced collective discontent against foreign nationals (and the resulting social closure or deprivation-induced cohesion); and iii) governance deficits (that provide the necessary micro-political opportunity structures), turn already pervasive bonding cohesion into "exclusionary cohesion," thereby rendering aspects of social cohesion (i.e., social itself) a driver of xenophobic violence.

After briefly discussing the data sources and methodological approach, the article proceeds through three main sections. First, it outlines the conceptual and contextual understandings of social cohesion and xenophobic violence. Second, it provides a brief discussion on the general perspectives on the nexus between social cohesion and violence. Third, it discusses the factors linking social cohesion and xenophobic violence in South Africa. The last and concluding section summarises the article's main arguments and their implications.

Methodological approach and data sources

This article draws on extensive and comparative qualitative data from ongoing research (hereinafter "the study") on xenophobic violence in South Africa beginning in 2006. Conducted by the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), the study systematically investigates the nature, drivers, responses and implications of xenophobic violence in the country. To this end, the study employs a comparative multi-case study design and the "most similar systems" approach, selecting both violence-affected and non-affected communities with similar socio-economic characteristics. The approach is informed by the understanding that "no enquiry into riots [in this case xenophobic violence] should fail to account for their absence" (Horowitz 2001, xiv). In a similar vein, Ashutosh Varshney (2002, 6) insists that " . . . until we study ethnic peace, we will not be able to have a good theory of ethnic conflict." This "most similar systems" approach allows the study to identify the most distinguishing factors that account for the presence of the violence in certain places and its absence in others.

Further, the study privileges a micro-level analytical approach, focusing on the micro-level, everyday relations of power and competing affiliations and interests among actors. This allows the study to move beyond broad generalisations and correlations often produced by macro-level, quantitative and ecological analyses and to reveal the most proximate variables and processes that combine to trigger or prevent xenophobic violence. Blending a micro-level analysis of people's spatio-temporal socio-economic subjectivities with broader insights into institutional regimes of control and regulation allows the study to identify specific determinants of the violence. The micro-level analytical approach provides an in-depth understanding of situational dynamics, individual motivations and group processes and how and when these lead to xenophobic violence.

The study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of communities' overall "way of life" (Barolsky 2016a,8), or socio-cultural, economic and political life worlds, and how these relate to xenophobic violence. As such, the study consists primarily of in-depth qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with local citizens; foreign nationals; perpetrators and victims of the violence; relevant government officials; the police and other local law enforcement bodies such as Community Policing Forums (CPFs); formal and informal community leaders; and other key informants including representatives of different civil society, faith-based and community-based organisations and self-help groups operating in the study areas. Thus far, the study counts 51 case studies (conducted mainly in provinces most affected by xenophobic violence namely Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal, Eastern Cape and Limpopo) and more than 1212 participants. The research supplements original empirical data with secondary accounts (scholarly and policy literature) that provide additional backgrounds and insights.

Social cohesion and xenophobic violence: conceptual and contextual understandings

Social cohesion: anachronistic understanding and calls for reconceptualisation

Due to its complex and multidimensional nature, the social cohesion concept has proven difficult to pin down (Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert 2012). Literature presents social cohesion as an "open concept," with different meanings for different people and societies (Monson et al. 2012), and as a "*problématique*," with often competing aspects within its socioeconomic, cultural, ecological and political dimensions (Cassiers and Kesteloot 2012; Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert 2012).

Despite this multiplicity of meanings and dimensions, conventional conceptualisations generally refer to social cohesion as " … the vertical and horizontal relations among members of society and the state that hold society together. Social cohesion is characterised by a set of attitudes and behavioural manifestations that includes trust, an inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good" (Leininger et al. 2021, 3). It encompasses "common values and a civic culture; social order and social control; social solidarity and reduced wealth disparity; social networks and social capital; and territorial belonging and identity" (GCRO 2019, 28). As such, common attributes of social cohesion include common identity, shared values, inclusion, trust, equality, solidarity, political and social participation,

legitimacy of institutions and orientation towards the common good (Barolsky 2016a; Desai 2015; McKenna et al. 2018; Monson et al. 2012; Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert 2012; Schiefer and Noll 2017).

While this conventional understanding persists, there is a growing recognition that it is being outpaced and rendered anachronistic by the lived realities of the increasingly diverse, heterogeneous and fluid urban world. There are mounting calls for reconceptualisation, as conventional definitions are increasingly seen as inadequate for explaining the complex realities of contemporary societies (Barolsky 2016a; Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2018). Xavier Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier (2018, 15) for example argue, and I agree, that "[c]urrent definitions of social cohesion do not cover the multiplicity of values and cultures found in current societies, and, as a result, current societies might be governed and shaped around a construct that can also contribute to substantial/chronic conflict" by attempting to force "similarity of mind." Albrekt Larsen (quoted in Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2018, 245) argues that the increasingly globalised multiculturalism works against the idea of similarity of mind and the shared values required to establish social cohesion as currently understood.

In a similar vein, Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO (2019), 21) argues that "social cohesion [as currently conceptualised] is arguably not the natural state of any society." GCRO explains that even close-knit communities have divisions and power structures. Societies can function well without strong social bonds, and the absence of these bonds does not mean that a society is deteriorating. Calls for more social cohesion often assume common values or homogeneity, which is unrealistic and undesirable in diverse societies. Expecting everyone to assimilate into a dominant culture disregards minority cultures and diverse perspectives, and this is neither realistic nor desirable in a context of high diversity (GCRO (2019), 21). As discussed later, this is certainly observed in post-apartheid South Africa where, as Ashwin Desai (2015, 105) argues, the principles of social cohesion are "replete with contradictory impulses. To develop a national consciousness is to create boundaries with outsiders. To pursue race-based redress that uses apartheid categories is to work against non-racialism."

As a result of these contestations, there are now emerging conceptualisations of social cohesion, which, according to Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier (2018, 2) "better match the multicultural nature of current societies and their multiplicity of values." These authors for example define social cohesion as "the ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures and granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society" (16; see also UNDP 2009). In a similar vein, Andreas Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert (2012,1974) offer what they term a "generic but helpful approximation" by defining social cohesion as "the capacity of people to live together differently or [...] to have the opportunity to be different and yet be able to live together." Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert (2012) note that, as the capacity to live together differently, social cohesion is a "*problématique*" that requires addressing difficult questions and challenges including how to live together differently without being homogenised or excluded; how to be at the same time entitled to be different and to receive equal treatment; how to tackle unity and diversity, difference and equality, autonomy and inclusion; and how to reconcile tensions between cooperation and competitiveness.

Meanings and dimensions of social cohesion in the South African context

In post-apartheid South Africa, social cohesion has become – perhaps unsurprisingly given the country's political history – a prominent and important construct (Barolsky 2016a; Palmary 2015). Its meaning largely corresponds to the conventional understanding outlined above, but with distinctive local emphases. In policy documents and discourse, social cohesion is commonly framed in terms of unity in diversity, solidarity, the aspiration towards "a safer, caring, more equal and harmonious national society" (Struwig et al. 2011, 2) and consensus in the realm of values, coherence, unity, functionality, cooperation, social integration and compact (Barolsky 2016a).

Analysts however observe that in South Africa, social cohesion "is uniquely understood as a project of nation building" (Palmary 2015, 63) in terms of a "common South African identity based on citizenship and civic nationalism" (Barolsky 2016a, 8) while addressing past socio-economic imbalances particularly those linked to race and class (Freemantle 2015). Along a similar conceptualisation, the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI) "recently released South African social cohesion Index (SASCI), . . . built on three pillars: demographic integration, extent of connectivity to the country, and sense of community [. . .]. These pillars respond to the three dimensions of social cohesion as argued by Langer et al. namely inequality, trust, and identity" (Bergsteedt and Swanepoel 2025, 2).

An analytical review of the framing of – and strategies for – social cohesion in South Africa reveals an overarching focus on nation-building, fostering a cohesive citizenry and redressing racialised socio-economic disparities. Iriann Freemantle for example notes:

> The main strategic focus of South Africa's current social cohesion initiatives remains on issues of race and class. As such, the strategy has two primary objectives: firstly, to reduce poverty and economic inequality between black and white citizens, and secondly to foster national unity and a shared sense of identity and belonging amongst all citizens regardless of background. (Freemantle 2015, 4)

Similarly, Ingrid Palmary (2015, 66) observes that social cohesion in South Africa "is conceptualized as centrally about the making of citizens and the invention of a citizen identity." However, these analysts argue that, by limiting its focus on race and class, fostering nation building and strengthening the institution of citizenship over other forms of membership, the framing of social cohesion in South Africa suffers from significant blind spots (Freemantle 2015). For instance, it i) fails to recognise and design approaches to address other forms of social tension such as those based on ethnicity, nationality, migration and human mobility, political affiliation, gender and sexuality; and ii) implicitly excludes non-nationals from the social cohesion project at the time of increasingly pervasive xenophobic exclusion (Freemantle 2015; IJR 2018; Palmary 2015). This framing is indeed already a foundational basis for foreign nationals' (violent) exclusion, which (as discussed below) has become a permanent feature in the country.

Confirming that attributes of the conventional conceptualisation of social cohesion are only aspirational and not realistic or attainable, research demonstrates that, even among South Africans, "social cohesion in South Africa has not made sufficient progress post-Apartheid. In fact, the level of cohesion has declined of late . . . " (Bergsteedt and Swanepoel 2025, 1). Numerous studies indeed reveal that "trust [used as important indicator of social cohesion] amongst the various groups is worryingly low (3; see also IJR (2018), 2023). Indeed, a 2023 South African reconciliation barometer report (IJR

2023) presents national survey data indicating that most South Africans believe that the country remains a divided society due to the fact that South Africans "remain deeply distrusting of others," "associate strongly with identity groups based on language and race . . . " (37) and that "migrants from other African countries continue to be among the least trusted groups in society today"(viii). Further on migrants, the report indicates that

> Successive survey rounds since 2017 have found migrants from other African countries to be among the least trusted groups in society. In 2017, 40% or more of South Africans indicated that they would be likely or very likely to take action to prevent African migrants from moving into their neighbourhood, operating a business in their area, or accessing jobs or government services. [. . .] In 2023, more than a quarter of South Africans still agreed that they are likely or very likely to take these actions (IJR 2023, 32).

Considering the above, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR 2018, 7) notes that "South Africans exhibit strong 'bonding' trust and weak 'bridging' and decreasing 'linking' trust [. . .]. 'bonding' trust can be understood as intragroup relations – such as at the familial, communal, intra-ethnic level. 'bridging' trust refers to intergroup relations – such as between communities, race groups, and socio-economic classes [. . .]." Birgit Eriksson refers to bonding and bridging trust as bonding and bridging social cohesion respectively and cites Hanka Otte to note that:

> The crucial distinction between bonding and bridging is thus between an internal social cohesion based on coherence, homogeneity and consensus, and a more external social cohesion based on heterogeneity, shared dissensus and mutual understanding between different (groups of) people. The internal cohesion requires a bonding cohesive behaviour – of people who "are oriented towards people with whom they have things in common and who move in homogenously composed networks." The external cohesion calls for a bridging cohesive behaviour – of people who enter into relations with people who are less like them and think differently. (Eriksson 2023, 29)

While Roger Patulny and Gunnar Svendsen (cited in Eriksson 2023, 30) caution against the widespread binary interpretations labelling bonding cohesion as negative and bridging cohesion as inherently positive, asking, "is bonding always bad," Hanka Otte (cited in Eriksson 2023, 30) notes that " . . . internal [bonding] social cohesion at a micro- or meso-level [. . .] will easily lead to the exclusion of others, and thereby to the opposite of social cohesion at the macrolevel of society." This discussion shows that, in South Africa as elsewhere, social cohesion exists in various forms and at different levels. While bonding cohesion may not align with traditionally prescribed standards, it is social cohesion nevertheless albeit in the form that challenges conventional expectations of what cohesive societies should look like.

Using the micro-level analytical approach discussed earlier, the study looks beyond abstract conceptualisations, policy documents and general aspirations to focus on communities where meanings and lived experiences of social cohesion can be observed and understood. As discussed below, its findings provide additional empirical evidence to the emerging scholarship demonstrating that standard understandings of social cohesion are no longer fit for purpose. The study consequently lends voice to mounting calls for its reconceptualisation.

Like other studies in the same or similar South African places (see for example Barolsky 2016a; L. Landau 2014; Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert 2012), the study finds

that, in its research areas, social cohesion and sociality, in general, are informed by pragmatism and a utilitarian logic rather than shared values, trust, common good or imagined common future (L. Landau 2014). Indeed, L. B. Landau and Freemantle (2016, 933) find that, in these areas, "conviviality is rooted in utilitarian extraction, not a desire for shared identity or enduring bonds." As a consequence, sociality in these places entails both solidarity and exclusion. It ranges from " … radical forms of exclusion to remarkable modes of accommodation that enable people to extract usufruct rights" (L. Landau 2014, 359). Similarly, Vanessa Barolsky (2016a, 13) finds that such places are milieus of deep relationality and solidarity but where "the substantive terms of the common good are profoundly disputed" and where " … collective, informal, and sometimes violent forms of social order […] shape forms of sociality that offer both extraordinary support and the possibility of spectacular violation (1). Like similar cities elsewhere, these places are spaces of multiple dynamics and " … their drive towards competitiveness within the urban hierarchy fosters both greater internal socio-cultural cohesion and growing antagonism between diverse social groups at one and the same time" (Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert 2012, 1877).

Evidently, the parameters of lived socialities in these places render the conventional conceptualisations of social cohesion increasingly outdated. It is indeed unrealistic to expect shared values and efforts to work towards common good and goals in places where high mobility and fluidity mean that values, cultures, norms and goals are as much in transit as their presumed custodians. Nevertheless, cohesion and sociality abundantly exist, albeit in forms that defy the prescriptive expectations of prevailing frameworks. The study's findings therefore contribute to a growing body of scholarship calling for a reconceptualisation of social cohesion, one that reflects – and keeps pace with – the complexity and variability of the current and rapidly shifting parameters of social life in South Africa and elsewhere. As Barolsky's (2016a, 20) analysis reveals, there is a "need to fundamentally reconceptualise our understanding of social cohesion […] and to fundamentally question some of the premises on which these conceptions of social life are constructed."

Xenophobic violence in South Africa

As acts of violence targeted at foreign nationals because of their being foreign, xenophobic violence is an explicit targeting of foreign nationals for violent attacks despite other material, political, cultural or social forces that might be at play (Dodson 2010). As Steven Gordon (2024, 1) notes, "[x]enophobic violence has become an increasingly commonplace [and unremarkable] occurrence in democratic South Africa" (see also Misago and Landau 2022). Indeed, "foreign nationals are routinely attacked in their residences, workplaces, business premises, private and public transport, or just walking on the streets" (Misago, Kabiri, and Mlilo 2021). The deadly attacks in Addo, Eastern Cape, in May 2025 serve as a reminder that xenophobic violence continues to pose a serious threat to migrants' lives, livelihoods, well-being and rights in South Africa (Richter et al. 2026).

As I observe elsewhere (Misago, Kabiri, and Mlilo 2021, 4), xenophobic violence in South Africa is generally a collective violent act or "a type of collective violence carried out by groups (large or small) of ordinary members of the public, often mobilised by local

leaders (formal or informal) and influential groups to further their own political and economic interests." The violence is generally characterised by murder, assaults, looting, vandalism and appropriation of property as well as displacement (Gordon 2024; Misago, Kabiri, and Mlilo 2021). While xenophobic violence is spread across the country, it is mainly concentrated in townships and informal settlements in the periphery of the country's major cities, particularly Johannesburg, Cape Town, eThekwini, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni and Gqeberha. As discussed later, these areas (in which the study's research sites are located) are characterised by high levels of migration/mobility-induced diversity and severe socio-economic and political deprivation.

As indicated earlier, interventions to stop and prevent this violence have largely focused on promoting social cohesion, informed by the conventional wisdom that social cohesion is a solution to this type of violence. The interventions have not succeeded, suggesting a lack of accurate understanding of the relationship between social cohesion and xenophobic violence. By examining and shedding light on this relationship, this paper intends inform more effective interventions or at least help stop/refine those (interventions) likely to do more harm than good.

The social cohesion – violence nexus: general perspectives

As Barolsky (2016a, 1) notes, "more recently the concept of social cohesion has been linked to the question of violence through the theory of collective efficacy, which sees social cohesion enacted in support of the 'common good' as functioning as a critical 'protective' factor against violence." The conventional wisdom is that social cohesion "relates to a foundational concern about the constitution of the social fabric and the terms on which enough solidarity may be maintained to prevent a 'war of all against all' [i.e., violence]" (Barolsky 2016a, 21). Developed by Robert Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997), collective efficacy is a concept that refers to the ability of a community to organise and act together to maintain social control and promote the well-being of its members. It is specifically defined as "social cohesion among neighbours combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good" (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997, 918).

Collective efficacy was originally developed as a framework for community-based crime prevention and examined "how social cohesion is activated in communities as informal social control" to prevent crime and violence (Gearhart 2022, 1). Informal social control refers "to the capacity of a group to regulate its members according to desired principles [and] to realize collective [. . .] goals" without reliance on formal institutions such as the police and courts (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997, 918; see also Snethen 2010). Michael Gearhart (2022, 1) argues that the relationship between social cohesion and informal social control is often mediated by mutual efficacy, which refers to "group members' perceptions that collective action can be successful." Mutual efficacy increases the motivation of group members to participate in the collective action as " . . . groups with a stronger belief in their effectiveness are more likely to act" (Gearhart 2022, 1).

The concept (collective efficacy) has since evolved and now generally refers to "trust among community members and their willingness to be mobilised for cooperative interventions for the 'common good' of the community" (Lamb 2019, 369) or the ability

of community members to work collectively for the common good, be it addressing common problems or achieving common goals (Freedom House 2017). As such, collective efficacy "is neither an inherent positive nor negative group aspect. Rather, the overall [common] goal may be positive or negative" (Snethen 2010, 43). Its concern is the group's ability to achieve this goal (Snethen 2010) regardless of its implications, particularly for other groups. This raises a critical and yet rarely asked question: in the notion of the "common good," what/who does "common" refer to, in other words, good for whom?

Drawing from the analytical agreement that all inclusion is partial, that "inclusion has a limit" (Hansen 2011, 89), and that exclusion is "an internal part of inclusion processes" (89), I argue that, in increasingly diverse societies, the "common" does not automatically mean that everyone living in the same space is included. This is particularly so in the South African context, characterised by strong bonding (internal cohesion) and weak bridging (external) cohesion, and where foreign residents are generally considered as outsiders and not community members (Lamb 2019, see also earlier discussion). This is in line with Deepa Narayan's (cited in Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert 2012, 879) conclusion that "[s]trong ties within a community can be accompanied by discrimination and exclusion of those who do not naturally belong to that community." The common good, intended or achieved through collective efficacy (or social cohesion in action) by one group may not be a good or positive outcome for other groups. In fact, as discussed below, one group's "common good" includes the outcomes of violent acts against other groups and individuals, particularly those perceived as a threat to the group's or community's well-being.

The above sits incongruently with the above-mentioned conventional wisdom that social cohesion is a de facto protector against violence. Indeed, growing research evidence shows that the relationship between social cohesion and violence "is not as clear-cut" (Barolsky 2016b) and is rather 'multifaceted and complex (Lamb 2019). Researchers indeed present evidence that, while social cohesion can prevent violence, it can also be a driver of collective violence particularly in societies with high levels of deprivation and inequality and where the state is absent from the regulation of daily live (Barolsky 2016b). Similarly, Amiad Diman and Dan Miodownik's research on social cohesion and collective violence in East Jerusalem found that "[w]hile cohesion can facilitate collective action that aids violent mobilisation, it can also strengthen social order that contributes to the group's capability to control and prevent unrest" (2022, 1). They found that neighbourhood social cohesion may influence intergroup violence and riots especially in divided cities where tensions with other groups and dissatisfaction with institutions are pronounced. Confirming Ted Gurr's argument that "cohesion is needed for violent mobilization" (cited in Diman and Miodownik 2022, 6), the authors argue that "[c]ohesiveness may therefore actually strengthen violent mobilisation by supporting the group's ability to organise effectively" (6). Further, Varshney's research on ethnic conflict and civil society in India found that intraethnic networks or cohesion (also known as bonding cohesion) play a significant role in ethnic conflict and violence (Varshney 2001). Varshney (363) argues that " … if communities are organized only along intraethnic lines and the interconnections with other communities are very weak or even nonexistent, then ethnic violence is quite likely."

In South Africa, research also shows that, in poor urban communities, social cohesion "coexists with violence and can either prevent or increase it" (Barolsky 2016b, 2) and " . . . . can take violent and non-violent forms" (2). For example, research in Khayelitsha reveals two sides of the relationship between social cohesion and violence (Barolsky 2016b). On the one hand, social cohesion manifests as civic cooperation, while on the other, civic cooperation manifests as vigilantism against those perceived to threaten community identity or peace (usually a suspected criminal or "foreigner") and in gang violence. "Vigilante acts are an assertion of local forms of justice based on community norms" (Barolsky 2016b, 7). Indeed, as I argue elsewhere (Misago 2016, 14), " . . . collective violence is often seen as a legitimate attempt to protect or restore 'threatened' social, structural, and material orders."

In a similar vein, Guy Lamb (2019, 376) notes that "the literature on vigilantism, violent protests and xenophobia in poor communities in South Africa has suggested that such violence may have been facilitated by perverse forms of social cohesion that emerged out of common grievances about community well-being, particularly in relation to inadequate delivery of government services and resources." The author further indicates that published research has shown that " . . . in certain circumstances, community cohesion may result in violent outcomes. This has particularly been the case in relation to protest violence, vigilantism and xenophobia [i.e., xenophobic violence]" (12). Further, Barolsky (2016b, 2) provides evidence that "while social cohesion can assist communities cope with violence when it manifests as civic co-operation, it can also become a source of violence when it manifests as a vigilante and gang violence."

Research by Freedom House (2017) provides further evidence that social cohesion through collective efficacy plays a critical role in collective violence, particularly violent community protests, mob justice and collective violent attacks on those whose presence is perceived as a threat to residents' lives and livelihoods. The research cites a Diepsloot resident saying, "[. . .] once a street committee says we have a problem, people are being mugged, then the message is spread across the community and then people come out to solve that problem. Most of the things happen because people work as a collective" (Freedom House 2017, 25) In these cases, social cohesion is enacted through collective violence to exert social control and in the pursuit of a common good.

Factors shaping the nexus between social cohesion and xenophobic violence in South Africa

Drawing on study findings, this section discusses three factors whose intersection links social cohesion to xenophobic violence in South Africa. These factors are i) migration-induced diversity and its association with xenophobic attitudes, ii) deprivation (socio-economic and political) which, through scapegoating, results in collective discontent against foreign nationals, and iii) governance deficits that create the necessary political opportunity structure enabling the mobilisation of this discontent into xenophobic attacks. I argue that these factors and their interconnections turn bonding cohesion into exclusionary cohesion and, by doing so, render aspects of social cohesion a driver of xenophobic violence. The following provides a brief discussion of these factors and their interconnections.

Diversity, conflict and xenophobic attitudes

The study areas host heterogeneous population groups with high racial, ethnic, gender, age, sexuality, class, national, religious, political, linguistic and cultural diversity (Freedom House 2017). Notwithstanding the common identity-based forms of difference (gender and sexuality, religion, class, political affiliations, age etc), diversity in these areas is primarily due to migration and human mobility, i.e., to residents' different origins within and beyond South Africa. Migration-induced diversity generally denotes differences based on ethnicity and nationality and brings new socio-cultural, economic and political identities to places of destination.

While not inherently conflictual, diversity, which generally refers to "the presence of differences among members of a social unit" (Osita-Ejikeme 2016, 1), has the propensity to cause conflict and tensions in communities if not properly managed (Osita-Ejikeme 2016). Conflict generally refers to "the discord that arises when the goals, interests or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible and those individuals or groups block or thwart one another's attempts to achieve their objectives" (Jones and George cited in Osita-Ejikeme 2016, 1). As such, conflict is often seen as inevitable in diverse communities. Indeed, as Tzofnat Peleg-Baker (2015, 1) notes, "[. . .] conflicts are an inevitable outgrowth of diversity [. . .] Diversified environments of different interests, opinions, values, and approaches unavoidably bring about conflicts."

In a similar vein, other analysts argue that "population diversity at the national or subnational level may contribute to intergroup as well as intra-group conflicts through several mechanisms" (Arbatli et al. 2020, 728). These authors explain that, first, diversity may lead to the erosion of mutual trust and social capital. Second, due to "divergence in preferences for public goods and redistributive policies, highly diverse societies may find it difficult to reconcile such differences through collective action, thereby intensifying their susceptibility to conflict" (728).

The study certainly finds group conflicts and tensions in the study's highly diverse research areas, also characterised by severe socio-economic hardships and weak governance. While conflicts among local (South African) population groups exist, the most acute and common group conflict and tensions across all study areas are between South African citizens (locals) and foreign nationals. In all our study areas, the presence of foreign nationals is perceived as a threat to the locals' lives and livelihoods. Largely informed by political scapegoating (see discussion below), these perceptions manifest in negative attitudes (commonly known as xenophobic attitudes (IJR 2018), resentment and hostility towards foreign nationals. Locals accuse foreign nationals of i) undermining their socio-economic prosperity by "stealing" jobs and business opportunities, ii) "illegitimately" burdening the local public services, and iii) being responsible for various forms of social ills including high levels of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution, and moral decay amongst others. A Mamelodi respondent, for example expressed feelings shared by many:

> The issue of economy, our people are now saying these people are taking our jobs, our spaza shops are now owned by people from outside the country. Then there is this issue of services because; we are too many, they are using our clinics and hospitals; we don't have access to our facilities like we used to previously. There is also this issue of crime, most of the time

> I see them on the TV they are pastors and scamming our people and all those things that also contribute to the tension. (Interview with a Mamelodi resident; Mamelodi, April 07, 2022)

As other studies demonstrate (see for example UNHCR (2015) and HRW 2020), xenophobic attitudes result from – and are in turn reinforced by – constant scapegoating by public officials and political leaders who blame foreign nationals for service delivery failures, and for most of the country's socio-economic ills and hardships described below. As I note elsewhere (2025), scapegoating is a well-documented source of xenophobic attitudes in South Africa (see also HRW (2020); Crush et al. 2008). As the scapegoating theory predicts, "if a majority group encounters difficult economic conditions, they often feel threatened by minorities, especially if they are foreign" (Muswede and Mpofu 2020,276).

The findings align with the national trends regarding social cohesion and trust among different population groups in the country: strong bonding cohesion and weak bringing cohesion (see earlier discussion). They indeed confirm that migrants are the least trusted group in the country. They also indicate that xenophobic attitudes are a consequence (or manifestation) and cause of (or, at least, amplification for) the bonding cohesion amongst locals. This links social cohesion with xenophobic violence, because, as discussed later, xenophobic attitudes (linked to bonding cohesion), in combination with other factors, result in incidents of xenophobic violence in all the study areas. As I argue elsewhere, xenophobia (or xenophobic attitudes) is, by definition, a psychological raw material for xenophobic violence (Misago 2025).

Deprivation and collective discontent against foreign nationals

The study finds that xenophobic violence occurs mostly in poor and economically marginalised informal settlements and townships where citizens (many of whom are themselves internal migrants) and immigrants meet amidst poor living conditions characterised by severe and chronic socio-economic deprivation or hardships. These include: i) shortages of public services (e.g., housing, electricity, water and sanitation, health care, road infrastructure etc) due to poor services delivery, ii) high unemployment rates and resulting poverty, iii) high and rising crime rates betraying the lack of adequate policing, iv) violence and gangsterism and v) drug and alcohol abuse particularly among the unemployed youth (see details in Freedom House 2017; Misago 2024).

Perhaps not surprisingly, these hardships result in fierce competition for scarce resources and opportunities, which often leads to tensions and conflicts among individuals and groups, particularly between citizens and foreign residents. While these hardships are largely a result of service delivery failures, they are often blamed on the presence of foreign nationals mainly due to political scapegoating and pervasive xenophobic populism. Political leaders and officials of the national, provincial and local government often blame foreign nationals for the systemic failures to deliver basic services, fulfil political promises and satisfy the growing citizenry's expectations (Neocosmos 2008; Tshitereke 1999). The result is that many South Africans have become increasingly convinced that foreign nationals are to blame for all their socio-economic deprivation (Misago 2024).

Respondents indeed indicated that political scapegoating is one of the main drivers of violent xenophobic exclusion in their communities. A South African respondent in Diepsloot for example stated when asked about the causes of violence against foreign nationals in the area:

> I think the main drivers are politicians. Because they want to rule, they look for different ways of gaining public attention and support and one of the reasons would be blaming outsiders for the problems faced in this community. It is all about power. Politicians will always tell you want you want to hear even if it is not true. We also have to remember that not all of us tolerate foreigners. Some people do not. So, it's most likely that once they hear negative messages from some of these politicians about foreign nationals, they are quick to support them and start violence. The community members will start supporting them when they say foreigners must go. These are the kind of statements that are likely to breed hate and incite violence. (Interview with a Diepsloot resident. Diepsloot, November 11, 2017)

Echoing research findings elsewhere (see for example Dodson 2010), this study finds that under conditions of severe hardships and competition for resources, citizens often evoke their entitlement to their spaces and resources held within, and demand that the "illegitimate" competition from foreign nationals be eliminated or at least minimised by any means necessary. Indeed, as Belinda Dodson (2010, 5) argues, this resented competition produces an "ethnicised political economy in which microeconomic friction is displaced into hate-filled nationalism." Other scholars have similarly identified (real or perceived) deprivation as one of xenophobic violence causal factors. For example, Devan Pillay (cited in Fauvelle-Aymar and Segatti 2011, 59) observes that "legitimate expectations and unmet basic needs create that specific type of frustration conducive to identifying immediate soft targets in foreigners whenever service delivery issues emerge."

As I argue elsewhere (Misago 2025), a combination of severe socio-economic deprivation and the xenophobic, political scapegoating used to blame this deprivation on foreign nationals, leads to collective discontent towards foreign nationals living in affected areas. Collective discontent refers to a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction and anger shared by a group of people about certain aspects of their lives, and particularly about similar, longstanding and unresolved societal issues. In this case, the unresolved concern and the object of the collective discontent is the presence of foreign nationals perceived as a real and increasing threat to locals' lives and livelihoods. One Khayelitsha resident for example stated:

> [. . .] most of our people are unemployed; people who work are foreign nationals. Like the people of Zimbabwe or Lesotho. I would say that the people in charge of the jobs are foreigners. I don't want to hide that fact. That is the problem. That is why we were saying let's minimise these people [. . .] So, they live a comfortable life. These are painful things for people. That can make a mess at any time. (Interview with a local ward committee member. Khayelitsha, April 06, 2022)

As the study reveals, deprivation-induced collective discontent against foreign nationals results in what Max Weber (1978) terms "social closure," which, as Albiston and Green (2018, 2) explain,

> [. . .] is a process for drawing boundaries, constructing identities, and building communities to monopolize scarce resources for one's own group and exclude others from using them.

> Social closure both constructs the boundaries of groups and privileges some groups over others. When it falls along socially salient lines like [nationality], race and sex, social closure is a form of discrimination. (Albiston and Green 2018, 2)

As a boundary making mechanism, social closure creates or strengthens already existing bonding cohesion, and as such is "deprivation-induced social cohesion." In the study areas, social closure is achieved (or at least attempted) through violent mobilisation against foreign nationals (or xenophobic violence). As discussed later, this mobilisation succeeds when social closure (or deprivation-induced social cohesion) is enacted through collective efficacy, another aspect of social cohesion. This further helps explain the link between social cohesion and xenophobic violence in South Africa.

Local governance deficits as micro-political opportunity structures for xenophobic violence

For present purposes, local governance deficits refer to shortcomings in effective and trusted leadership resulting from the inability or unwillingness of local public institutions and elected officials to effectively assume their roles and responsibilities in i) protecting people's rights, ii) providing mandatory public services, iii) implementing policies and achieving set goals, and iv) addressing challenges and conflicts in a timely and effective manner (see also OECD (2006) on weak governance).

In all areas, these governance deficits manifest in poor service delivery and the inability of official governance structures to prevent or address the socio-economic hardships (discussed earlier), especially their inability to use available systems of controls to resolve conflicts and prevent rising crime and violence. These deficits have eroded public trust in these institutions and their representatives at community level, especially ward councils and the police. Respondents cited corruption and incompetence, particularly the inability to provide quality basic services and prevent crime and violence, as the main reasons why they do not trust the local institutions of authority and leadership (see details in Misago 2024).

These findings align with national trends. Indeed, a IJR (2023) report reveals a "concerning" and growing lack of public trust in different governance institutions and leaders. The report reveals that "In 2003 and 2013, only about a fifth of South Africans agreed that it was difficult to trust leaders to do the right thing. [. . .] this figure has nearly quadrupled over the past decade, with 79% of South Africans agreeing in 2023 that leaders are untrustworthy (13). The report further reveals low levels of confidence in key institutions such as the national government with 32%, provincial government with 34%, local government with 32%, SAPS with 38%, and the legal system with 33% (13).

In the study areas, these governance deficits have created leadership vacuums that give rise to violent informal governance structures that have become de-facto community leadership groups, such as the "Dunoon Taxi Association" in Dunoon, the "Big 5" in Makause and "Mamelodi Concerned Residents" and "Boko Haram" in Mamelodi (detailed discussion on these groups and others in Misago 2024). As Tamlyn Monson (2011, 172) argues, " . . . these new custodians of local governance create new social controls and new enforcement mechanisms by either 'making the law, breaking the law or taking the law into their own hands.'" With no trusted, effective official conflict

resolution mechanisms, residents either turn to these informal leadership groups for help or take matters into their own hands. Residents often use mob justice to deal with criminals because they do not trust the police and the justice system. This has normalised violence as an effective mechanism to resolve conflicts and restore order.

The study finds that these local governance deficits provide what I term favourable "micro-political opportunity structures" (micro-POS) for xenophobic violence (Misago 2019). Micro-POS generally refer to formal and informal social and political conditions that facilitate or constrain the mobilisation for collective violence (Misago 2019; see also Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1978). The study finds that xenophobic violence generally occurs in places where local governance deficits provide favourable micro-POS that facilitate the occurrence of the xenophobic violence in two ways: i) in many cases, official local authority (community leadership) facilitates – and is directly involved in – the violence, and ii) in areas where official authority is weak or absent, the above mentioned violent leadership groups (also known as violence entrepreneurs [Misago 2025]) are provided with an opportunity to act.

In many violence-affected areas, local authorities and leadership structures (police, CPFs, ward/street committees etc) facilitate xenophobic violence. They do so by directly organising or participating in attacks, colluding with perpetrators, passively tolerating violence or failing to act despite warning signs. Through commission or omission, these institutions create socio-political opportunities for violence. Using their authority and leadership positions, they legitimise xenophobic attacks as collective self-defence, secure community sanction and participation, and reduce (attacks' costs while amplifying their perceived benefits. All these are acts of xenophobic violence facilitation, characteristic of favourable micro-POS (see also Misago 2019).

Further, the study finds that absent or weak official local authority also constitutes a favourable micro-POS for xenophobic violence. More specifically, the official leadership vacuum creates the opportunity for the emergence of violent informal leadership groups (such as those mentioned above) that mobilise community members for xenophobic violence to further their economic and political interests. This alternative governance by violent non-state actors "defines new forms of social control and authority that sees violence as not only a tool to consolidate their power and legitimacy, but also as 'legitimate' means of protecting or restoring threatened local socio-economic and political orders" (Misago 2019). To confirm the critical role played by governance deficits, the study provides evidence that xenophobic violence does not generally occur in areas where, despite similar social-economic conditions, governance does not provide the favourable micro-POS discussed above (Misago 2019). In these areas, mobilisation for xenophobic violence does not succeed because local governance constrains rather than facilitates the occurrence of violence. I have previously presented detailed evidence showing that:

> [. . .] local authority and community leadership are instrumental in preventing xenophobic violence in potentially volatile areas by not only discouraging potential perpetrators from within but also and most importantly by successfully mobilising communities to stand against actions and influence from outside violent elements. (Misago 2016, 141)

In a similar vein, Monson (2011, 189) finds that:

> [...] the spread of [xenophobic] violence appeared to depend on the strength of leadership institutions in the surrounding areas. Arguably, more strongly democratic forms of leadership created firebreaks against the conflagration, while adjacent areas of weakly institutionalised leadership presented softer boundaries, more easily penetrated by instigators.

In sum, by providing the necessary micro-POS, local governance deficits enable the derivation-related collective discontent to be mobilised and eventually succeed in triggering xenophobic violence. For aggrieved groups and their leaders, xenophobic violence is a collective efficacy action attempting to address a common problem – and achieve a common good in "social closure" (see earlier discussion). This clearly links social cohesion (trough collective efficacy) to the occurrence of xenophobic violence.

In sum, we learn from the discussion above that, first, migration-induced diversity results in conflict and xenophobic attitudes. These attitudes and resentment towards foreign nationals are a cause and consequence of the bonding cohesion amongst locals and a psychological raw material for xenophobic violence. Second, severe socio-economic hardships blamed on foreign nationals (through entrenched xenophobic attitudes and political scapegoating) result in "deprivation-related collective discontent" against foreign nationals, which in turn results in "social closure." Social closure also creates and/or strengthens already existing bonding cohesion, which makes it "deprivation-induced cohesion." Social closure is achieved (or at least attempted) through violent, collective mobilisation against foreign nationals (or xenophobic violence), a collective efficacy act. Third, local governance deficits provide the necessary micro-POS for the collective efficacy act to take place and succeed.

We therefore learn that the intersection of the three factors above (namely i) migration-induced diversity and associated xenophobic attitudes; ii) deprivation-induced collective discontent against foreign nationals and the resulting social closure; and iii) local governance deficits providing the necessary micro-POS), turns already pervasive bonding cohesion into "exclusionary cohesion." In areas affected by xenophobic violence, bonding cohesion becomes exclusionary cohesion when it moves from being intragroup, inward-looking and accepting of the coexistence with other social groups, to being outward-looking by intentionally and actively working to violently exclude other groups, in this case the foreign population. By turning bonding cohesion into exclusionary cohesion, these factors and their interconnections render aspects of social cohesion a driver of collective violence in South Africa.

Conclusion

Drawing on extensive multi-case and comparative qualitative data from nearly two decades of ongoing research, this article examines the nexus between social cohesion and xenophobic violence in South Africa. Echoing emerging scholarship, it challenges the conventional understanding that social cohesion is inherently a "panacea" for violence (see also Barolsky 2016b). Instead, it demonstrates that interconnections between three factors, namely migration-induced diversity, severe socio-economic deprivation and local governance deficits, link social cohesion to xenophobic violence in South Africa. More specifically, this article argues that the intersections between i) migration-induced diversity and associated xenophobic attitudes; ii) deprivation-induced collective discontent against foreign nationals

and the resulting social closure or deprivation-induced cohesion; and iii) governance deficits that provide the necessary micro-political opportunity structures, turn already pervasive bonding cohesion into "exclusionary cohesion," thereby rendering aspects of social cohesion (i.e., social cohesion itself) a driver of xenophobic violence.

The article makes three scholarly contributions. First, it introduces two concepts – "exclusionary cohesion" and "deprivation-induced cohesion" (an extension of social closure) – that capture the essence of aspects or forms of social cohesion linking it to xenophobic violence in South Africa. Second, it advances two ongoing debates: i) it lends voice to calls for reconceptualising social cohesion by providing additional empirical evidence that its conventional understandings have become increasingly anachronistic, and ii) it extends the debate on the relationship between social cohesion and violence by beginning to identify factors and conditions that link specific forms of cohesion to specific forms of violence. Third, it responds to Lamb's (2019,377) call for further research on the relationship between social cohesion and violence in South Africa, while also providing evidence for his hypothesis that perverse forms of cohesion may facilitate collective violence, affirming that indeed " … in certain circumstances, community cohesion may result in violent outcomes" (376).

Practically, this article joins voices (see for example Barolsky 2016b) cautioning policymakers against "romanticising" social cohesion as a straightforward solution to violence, as "doing so risks overlooking how social ties can be both a protective factor and a driver of violence" (Barolsky 2016b,8). The persistence of xenophobic violence in South Africa despite years of social cohesion-building initiatives underlines the need to rethink the relationship between social cohesion and xenophobic violence both in theory and practice. To succeed, interventions should not only promote non-violent, non-exclusionary forms of social cohesion (e.g., bridging cohesion), but also and perhaps more importantly address the underlying conditions (severe deprivation, governance deficits and the political scapegoating of migrants) that make exclusionary cohesion possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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Ethical clearance

The study was approved by the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Non-Medical). Ethics clearance certificate number: H22/08/18.

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