

From fragmentation to Social Cohesion: Potentialities of the Comrades Marathon in South Africa



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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examined the Comrades Marathon as a complex nation-building event that operates as a significant site of social cohesion and democratic renewal in South Africa. Employing a critical autoethnographic methodology, the analysis is grounded in reflexive engagement with lived experience, affective memory, and social positioning related to participation in the marathon. The study is informed by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, Social Cohesion Theory, and Social Network Theory. These frameworks enabled a nuanced understanding of how ritualized events operate as affective and symbolic spaces that mediate collective identity and solidarity. Findings revealed that the Comrades Marathon generates liminal spaces in which entrenched social hierarchies, particularly those based on race, class, and gender, are temporarily suspended. The symbolic act of crossing the finish line, coupled with communal celebration, constitutes a performative moment that transcends individual accomplishment and cultivates horizontal social bonds and mutual respect across difference. The paper argued that ritualized sporting events such as the Comrades Marathon function as critical platforms for social integration and cohesion, reinforcing democratic legitimacy and fostering values such as inclusion, accountability, and civic engagement. The study recommends that scholars and policymakers conceptualize social cohesion not only as a response to historical injustice, but also as essential to sustaining and deepening democratic governance. This paper contributes to the scholarship of social cohesion by offering an embodied, affect-driven analysis of sport as ritual, expanding theoretical discussions of nation-building and social integration. It demonstrates how sports events can serve as transformative arenas for democratic resilience in pluralistic societies.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa's contemporary socio-political landscape continues to be marked by deep structural and psychological scars inherited from its colonial and apartheid past. Despite the democratic transition in 1994 and the moral vision of a "Rainbow Nation" championed by Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the ideals of social cohesion and inclusive nation-building remain fragile, fragmented, and unevenly realised. Enduring fractures along the lines of race, class, and identity, exacerbated by rising socio-economic inequality and recurring bouts of xenophobic and political violence, underscore the contested and incomplete nature of post-apartheid reconciliation. At the heart of this fragility lies the enduring legacy of apartheid's institutionalised racism, which produced spatial, economic, and psychological structures that continue to reproduce inequality and separation in the present. The Group

Areas Act of 1950, among other apartheid laws, embedded racial segregation into the fabric of South African cities and towns, creating patterns of settlement that remain largely intact today. As Seekings and Class demonstrate, access to quality education, healthcare, employment, and safe environments is still heavily determined by race and geography, reflecting the long tail of apartheid urban planning.¹ Similarly, Terreblanche has argued that the negotiated settlement of the early 1990s privileged political over economic transformation, thereby allowing capital accumulation and structural inequality to persist under a new democratic regime.² This produced a paradoxical social order, formal political equality alongside deep material exclusion.

In response to apartheid's legacies, the post-apartheid state launched transitional justice mechanisms, most notably the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), aimed at national healing and moral restoration. While the TRC succeeded in surfacing individual narratives and fostering symbolic reconciliation, many scholars have criticised its failure to deliver economic redress and systemic transformation.³ By limiting its scope to civil and political violations, the TRC arguably left untouched the economic architecture of apartheid, thereby deepening the divide between the promises of democracy and the lived reality of post-apartheid citizens. As Ramphela observes, the post-1994 order risks being seen as “freedom without substance” by younger generations for whom poverty, unemployment, and disillusionment remain constant features of life.⁴ This disaffection manifests in a range of civic expressions: from service delivery protests and student-led activism, to violent xenophobic episodes that reflect a broader crisis of belonging in the democratic state.⁵ Globally, scholars have explored the integral relationship between peace and social cohesion, particularly in post-conflict and transitional contexts. Nesterova and Galtung argue that sustainable peace must go beyond the mere absence of conflict, instead demanding the presence of equitable, just, and inclusive social relations.⁶ Their perspective resonates with Johan Galtung's seminal distinction between negative peace, the cessation of physical violence and positive peace, which entails the removal of structural violence and the creation of systems that promote human dignity, equity, and participation.⁷ Betty Reardon further insists that peace should be rooted in the realisation of universal human rights, arguing that societies failing to guarantee basic dignity and justice cannot claim to be truly peaceful.⁸ This conceptual lens provides a crucial analytic framework for understanding the persistence of inequality and exclusion in South Africa as indicators of an absence of positive peace.

The coexistence of formal democracy with widespread inequality in South Africa exemplifies this dilemma. As Du Toit argues, the “surface calm” of post-apartheid South Africa belies a deeper structural violence that marginalises vast segments of the population from meaningful participation in economic and social life.⁹ Reardon links this directly to human rights discourses, asserting that peace must be understood as the structural and cultural conditions that enable human flourishing.¹⁰ The UNESCO Declaration on a Culture of Peace and subsequent global policy frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 16, which promotes inclusive societies and access to justice, reinforce the view that

¹ J. Seekings and Nicoli N. Class, *Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

² S. Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652–2002* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2002).

³ M. Mamdani, “The Legacy of Colonialism in African Religion and Christianization,” *African Studies Review* 39, no. 2 (1996): 49–75. Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); André du Toit, “The Moral Foundations of the South African TRC: Truth as Acknowledgment and Justice as Recognition,” in *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: The Fundamental Documents*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (Claremont, South Africa: David Philip, 2004), 122–40.

⁴ Mamphela Ramphela, *Laying Ghosts to Rest: Dilemmas of the Transformation in South Africa* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2008).

⁵ Suren Pillay, “Violence, Citizenship and the Making of Post-Apartheid Publics,” in *State of the Nation: South Africa 2016–2017*, ed. Mucha Musemwa and Naidoo Mogobe (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2017), 291–316; Malose Langa, *Youth in South Africa: Agency, Political Engagement, and Social Change* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017).

⁶ Yulia Nesterova and Jae-Bok Kim Galtung, *Sustainable Peace and Inclusive Societies: Rethinking Social Cohesion in Transitional Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2024).

⁷ Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91; J. Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 291–305.

⁸ Betty A. Reardon, *Educating for Human Dignity: Learning About Rights and Responsibilities*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

⁹ du Toit, “The Moral Foundations of the South African TRC: Truth as Acknowledgment and Justice as Recognition.”

¹⁰ Reardon, Betty A. *Educating for Human Dignity: Learning About Rights and Responsibilities*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997

sustainable peace and cohesion require structural transformation, not simply the absence of war or repression.¹¹

In this context, social cohesion must be reimagined as a dynamic, relational, and participatory process, rather than a static state of harmony. Jenson defines social cohesion as the ongoing capacity of societies to ensure the well-being of all their members while fostering trust, shared values, and inclusion.¹² Similarly, Chan et al. emphasise the importance of equitable access, relational trust, and civic participation in sustaining cohesive societies.¹³ Nesterova and Galtung further contend that social cohesion in divided societies requires intentional efforts to deconstruct inherited systems of exclusion, while constructing new forms of shared identity and intergroup solidarity.¹⁴ This requires engaging not only with institutional reforms but also with the cultural, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of belonging. As Pruitt and Du Bois assert, the struggle for inclusion is not just about material equity but also about symbolic recognition, the affirmation of one's place and worth in the collective national imagination.¹⁵

This broader understanding of social cohesion also finds roots in pre-modern political philosophy. Ibn Khaldun, writing in the 14th century, introduced the concept of 'asabiyyah' (social solidarity) as a core principle of state formation and societal strength. For Khaldun, societies rise and flourish through internal cohesion and shared purpose, but begin to decline when elites become disconnected from the collective.¹⁶ Contemporary scholars such as Alatas and Khaldunian, and Hassan et al. have re-engaged Khaldunian theory to critique the failure of modern states, especially in post-colonial or post-conflict settings, to build inclusive and resilient identities.¹⁷ As Dragolov et al. have noted, the erosion of social cohesion in transitional societies can often be traced to elite capture of power, growing inequality, and the failure to cultivate meaningful solidarities among citizens.¹⁸ In South Africa, these warnings remain prescient: without rebuilding substantive connections across race, class, and cultural divides, the legitimacy of the democratic project itself may be imperilled.

It is within this multi-layered and historically grounded context that this study contextualizes the Comrades Marathon as a potential site for social cohesion in South Africa. Although primarily recognised as a prestigious ultramarathon, the Comrades Marathon constitutes a unique socio-cultural ritual: a rare public space where individuals from different racial, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds come together in pursuit of a shared physical and symbolic goal. The event's scale, visibility, and emotional resonance offer fertile ground for examining the relational possibilities of empathy, solidarity, and mutual recognition.

Following John Paul Lederach's notion of the "moral imagination" the capacity to envision and enact new relational possibilities beyond entrenched divisions, this study considers how the Marathon might function as a civic ritual through which South Africans can negotiate identity, overcome inherited boundaries, and construct new modes of national belonging.¹⁹ As Reardon and Galtung contend, the cultivation of positive peace is not only institutional but also interpersonal and symbolic.²⁰ The Comrades Marathon, then, may offer a microcosm of reconciliatory potential, where notions of unity and shared purpose are not imposed from above but emerge through collective effort and embodied participation. This study aims to contextualize the Comrades Marathon as a distinctive cultural, historical, and social phenomenon capable of contributing to social cohesion in a fragmented and unequal South African society. Specifically, the objective is to:

¹¹ UNESCO, "Declaration on a Culture of Peace & Building Peace through the SDGs," 1999.

¹² Jane Jenson, *Mapping Social Cohesion: The State of Canadian Research* (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 1998).

¹³ Joseph Chan, Ho-Pong To, and Elaine Chan, "Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research," *Social Indicators Research* 75, no. 2 (2006): 273–302.

¹⁴ Nesterova and Galtung, *Sustainable Peace and Inclusive Societies: Rethinking Social Cohesion in Transitional Contexts*.

¹⁵ Lisa Pruitt, *The Politics of Belonging: Race, Identity, and Citizenship in a Divided Society* (London: Routledge, 2013); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

¹⁶ Ibn Khaldun, "The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History," *The Anthropology of Climate Change: An Historical Reader*, 2014, 55–66.

¹⁷ S. F. Alatas and A. Khaldunian, "The Concept of Social Cohesion in Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37, no. 3 (2006): 367–82; S. M. Hassan, J. Dragolov, and H. Ibn, "Historical Perspectives on Social Cohesion: The Legacy of Ibn Khaldun," *International Review of Sociology* 16, no. 2 (2006): 209–23.

¹⁸ Georgi Dragolov et al., *Social Cohesion in the Western World: What Holds Societies Together: Insights from the Social Cohesion Radar* (Springer, 2016).

¹⁹ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Reardon, *Educating for Human Dignity: Learning About Rights and Responsibilities*; Galtung, "Cultural Violence."

- To critically situate the Comrades Marathon as a performative and affective space through which contested notions of nationhood, belonging, and social cohesion are enacted, negotiated, and potentially reimagined in post-apartheid South Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Social Cohesion Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Social Network Theory to examine the Comrades Marathon as a performative social space where unity, belonging, and shared purpose are enacted. The Social Cohesion Theory by Durkheim provides the foundation for understanding how shared values and collective rituals foster solidarity, positioning the marathon as a symbolic act of integration that momentarily bridges historical divides in pursuit of a common goal.²¹ Social Identity Theory offers insight into how individuals form group affiliations that shape self-perception and social dynamics; within the marathon, roles such as runners, volunteers, and spectators generate in-groups and out-groups, illustrating both the potential for unity and the ongoing negotiation of inclusion.²² Complementing these perspectives, Social Network Theory introduces a structural lens that highlights the relational ties formed through participation, fostering trust, empathy, and social capital that extend beyond the event itself.²³ Taken together, this theoretical framework positions the Comrades Marathon not merely as a metaphor for national unity but as a tangible site of embodied social cohesion.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a critical autoethnographic methodology grounded in reflexive engagement with lived experience, memory, emotion, and social positioning in relation to the Comrades Marathon. Drawing on Ellis, Adams, and Bochner's conception of autoethnography, personal narrative is treated not as anecdotal but as a politically situated form of knowledge that reveals broader cultural and structural dynamics.²⁴ The researcher's positionality as a South African anthropologist embedded within the uMgungundlovu Municipality anchored the analysis in Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledges and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's decolonial ethic, resisting extractive research practices while foregrounding local, embodied epistemologies.²⁵ This methodological stance was further enriched by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and social fields, which enables a structural reading of the Marathon as a public ritual where forms of capital (cultural, symbolic, and social) shape differential access to visibility, legitimacy, and belonging.²⁶ The Affect theory, particularly as articulated by Sara Ahmed, provides tools to analyze how emotions such as pain, hope, solidarity, and euphoria circulate during the event, temporarily reshaping social proximities and enabling fleeting, yet potent, moments of cohesion.²⁷ Bell Hooks' emphasis on the pedagogical and political value of personal memory validates the inclusion of familial reflections, such as watching the race with a late parent as counter-memory that challenges dominant narratives of reconciliation.²⁸ While the study did not involve interviews or primary data collection, it drew from lived experience, existing literature, and public discourse to examine the Marathon not merely as a race, but as a symbolic and performative space of social negotiation. Framed through a decolonial, intersectional, and affective lens, the Comrades Marathon emerged as a ritualized site of collective endurance, emotional intimacy, and contested nation-building where fleeting acts of solidarity, such as sharing water or carrying each other to the finish line, illuminate both the promise and the limitations of social cohesion in post-apartheid South Africa.

²¹ Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*. Translated by W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1997).

²² Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 7–24.

²³ S. Wasserman and K. Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

²⁴ C. Ellis, T. E. Adams, and A. P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011).

²⁵ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective 1," in *Women, Science, and Technology* (Routledge, 2013), 455–72; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples," 2012.

²⁶ P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

²⁷ Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (August 1, 2007): 149–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139>.

²⁸ Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Identifying the Gap and Linking to the Title

While a substantial body of literature explores South Africa's enduring socio-political fragmentation, particularly the legacies of apartheid, persistent inequality, and the limits of transitional justice, there remains a significant gap in scholarship concerning everyday, cultural, and symbolic practices that may contribute to social cohesion outside formal political or policy-driven frameworks. Existing studies have focused extensively on institutional responses to division, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, legal reforms, and public policy.²⁹ However, less attention has been paid to how ordinary citizens encounter and negotiate differences in shared social spaces, particularly through national events that blend sport, ritual, and collective memory.

Historically, the Comrades Marathon, as one of the country's oldest and most widely celebrated mass participation events, presents an underexplored yet highly relevant site for examining the micro-dynamics of unity, resilience, and belonging. Unlike state-led initiatives, the Marathon operates as a bottom-up, experiential space where diverse South Africans engage in symbolic and physical acts of endurance, solidarity, and mutual recognition. Despite its wide public resonance, scholarly analysis of the Comrades Marathon in relation to social cohesion, peacebuilding, or nationhood remains sparse.

This study addresses that gap by contextualizing the Comrades Marathon not merely as a sporting event but as a potential social cohesion mechanism for relational transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Framed by theories of positive peace,³⁰ moral imagination,³¹ and civic ritual, the research explores how the Marathon may offer possibilities for healing fragmentation and fostering a more inclusive national identity.

This manuscript is structured as follows: it begins by outlining the background and research gap and rationale, followed by a comprehensive literature review and a discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The methodology section details the research design and data collection methods. This is followed by a critical discussion of the findings, culminating in a conclusion that reflects on the implications of the study and suggests directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the aspirations embedded in South Africa's democratic transition, the country continues to grapple with profound structural inequalities and persistent divisions that undermine efforts toward social cohesion. Research consistently identifies South Africa as one of the most unequal societies in the world, with disparities sharply drawn along racial, class, and gender lines. These inequalities not only persist but also actively challenge attempts to foster a united and cohesive society. Initiatives such as the National Strategy on Social Cohesion and the Nation Building Compact have sought to address these challenges. However, their impact has been limited. National social cohesion indices show declining levels of trust in public institutions and diminishing adherence to shared social norms. Moreover, growing political polarization, high-profile corruption scandals, and the erosion of institutional credibility have further weakened the foundation for collective nation-building.

At the heart of this crisis is a growing disillusionment with the democratic project itself. Although South Africa is still considered a young democracy, it bears the visible and psychological scars of its colonial and apartheid past, which have contributed to the democratic dispensation that has failed to redress the injustices of the past. Fragmentation is evident in South Africa. The historical injustices of segregation, land dispossession, and racial exclusion have not been adequately addressed in the post-apartheid era, resulting in what many scholars now recognize as a crisis of legitimacy. The post-1994 dispensation, though symbolically transformative, has failed to produce substantive social and economic change for the majority of South Africans, particularly the historically marginalized. Malesela contends that racial dynamics in contemporary South Africa still mirror the logic of apartheid, casting doubt on the authenticity of a democratic order that purports to guarantee equality for all.³²

²⁹ Mamdani, "The Legacy of Colonialism in African Religion and Christianization"; Seekings and Class, *Race, and Inequality in South Africa*.

³⁰ Galtung, "Cultural Violence."

³¹ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*.

³² M. Malesela, "Racial Dynamics and the Enduring Legacy of Apartheid in South Africa," *Journal of African Studies* 48, no. 1 (2022): 42–60.

The idea of the "Rainbow Nation" popularized by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and initially adopted to promote unity in diversity has come under increasing scrutiny. Nkondo argues that the Rainbow Nation has remained more of a political slogan than a lived reality.³³ Sall similarly critiques and contradictions have emerged, particularly towards deep racial inequalities that persist and fuel everyday tensions.³⁴ According to Yende and Yende, the Rainbow Nation has become a mythic narrative, disconnected from the lived experiences of most South Africans.³⁵ Even as the language of diversity and reconciliation dominates public discourse, social life remains deeply racialized and segregated.

These critiques are supported by historical and legal analyses that trace the roots of contemporary divisions to enduring apartheid legacies. Pirtle and Maylam highlight the institutionalization of racial segregation through legislation such as the Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950, which codified racial identity and laid the groundwork for systemic discrimination.³⁶ Although repealed, the legacy of such laws continues to shape social relations and policy discourse in the post-apartheid South Africa. Pirtle further argues that the post-apartheid state's continued use of racial categories ostensibly for redress may inadvertently reinforce the very divisions it seeks to eliminate.³⁷

Modiri takes the argument further by suggesting that the post-apartheid Constitution, while symbolically powerful, has failed to dismantle the material and institutional foundations of inequality.³⁸ Legal reforms have been implemented, but these have often been superficial. Beneath constitutional promises, entrenched patterns of racialized poverty, spatial segregation, and unequal access to education and economic opportunity continue to shape lived realities. For many, especially within historically marginalized communities, the ideals of democracy remain largely unfulfilled. Masipa and Gumede note that this continued exclusion has diminished the symbolic and emotional resonance of the Constitution, particularly among the Black majority who have yet to witness substantive improvements in their quality of life.³⁹ Nyathi et al. further confirm that these structural inequities hinder social cohesion, as individuals and communities struggle to meet basic needs.⁴⁰ This has contributed to growing social fragmentation and a weakening sense of national belonging.

Together, these scholars highlight the fragility of South Africa's democratic project. Their work reveals how unresolved historical injustices, combined with the limitations of legal and policy reforms, continue to undermine the nation's vision of unity and equity. Although social cohesion is central to the country's constitutional values and political discourse, it has become increasingly elusive, no longer embraced as a shared goal, but rather perceived by many as an unattained ideal. This paper arises in response to the urgent need for a renewed vision of a socially cohesive South Africa, one that future generations can inherit with hope. It is offered as a critical intervention aimed at confronting the fractures inherited from colonialism, apartheid, and the disappointments of the democratic era. Supporting this position, Burn et al. argue that if social cohesion is considered both important and valuable in a democratic society, then efforts must be made to define it clearly and pursue it meaningfully.⁴¹ From this standpoint, this study argues that rejecting or neglecting social cohesion leaves South Africa without a viable alternative for nation-building. In the absence of a coherent substitute, this study calls on citizens, scholars, and political analysts to engage with and commit to the social cohesion agenda. Moustakas emphasizes that social cohesion is fundamental to sustainable development and social

³³ Malose Nkondo, *Nation-Building in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Political Rhetoric and Social Realities* (Johannesburg: University of South Africa Press, 2017).

³⁴ Eric Sall, *The Rainbow Nation Revisited: Race, Inequality, and Identity in South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2018).

³⁵ Thabo Yende and Zinhle Yende, *Myth and Reality of the Rainbow Nation: Understanding Post-Apartheid Social Divides* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2021).

³⁶ Whitney Pirtle, *Racial Inequality and Public Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Paul Maylam, *South Africa's Racial Past: The History and Historiography of Racism and Apartheid* (London: Longman, 2001).

³⁷ Pirtle, *Racial Inequality and Public Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa*.

³⁸ J. Modiri, "Constitutional Promises and Persistent Inequalities in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Constitutional Journal of Africa* 29, no. 1 (2019): 99–117.

³⁹ T. Masipa, "Social Exclusion and the Diminishing Impact of the South African Constitution," *Critical Legal Studies Review* 24, no. 4 (2018): 310–28. William M. Gumede, *South Africa: The Present and Future of the Democratic Project* (Johannesburg: Tafelberg, 2013).

⁴⁰ Siphon Nyathi, Thandiwe Moyo, and Lindiwe Dlamini, *Structural Inequalities and Social Cohesion in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2024).

⁴¹ D. Burn, D. Gellner, and D. McDonald, "Social Cohesion in South Africa: A Critical Assessment," *African Affairs* 115, no. 460 (2016): 357–77.

stability.⁴² It is typically defined as a set of shared traits and behaviours, including positive social relationships, a strong sense of identity and belonging, and a commitment to the common good. A cohesive society seeks the well-being of all its members, reduces disparities, and avoids marginalization.

According to the OECD, social cohesion comprises three core dimensions: fostering networks of trust and identity among diverse groups; addressing discrimination, exclusion, and severe inequalities; and enabling upward social mobility.⁴³ The United Nations Development Programme, drawing on Berger-Schmitt, similarly identifies two main pillars of social cohesion: reducing inequality and social exclusion, and strengthening interpersonal and institutional relationships.⁴⁴ The UNDP also underscores the importance of tolerance and respect for diversity across religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, political views, gender, age, and sexuality as both a societal and institutional imperative.

DISCUSSION

In a world marked by persistent historical injustices, political disillusionment, and growing social fragmentation, this paper contends that the Comrades Marathon in South Africa offers a rare and concrete manifestation of social cohesion. Despite prevailing critiques that view social cohesion as an elusive ideal, particularly given the enduring socio-economic inequalities that many South Africans experience as the unfulfilled promises of democracy, this manuscript positions the marathon as a powerful communal event embodying togetherness. The convergence of thousands of individuals across racial, economic, and geographical divides on the same road, collectively enduring hardship and supporting one another toward a shared goal, represents more than symbolic solidarity; it constitutes a lived experience of unity that resonates deeply with participants and spectators alike. When a South African athlete triumphs, irrespective of race, gender, or class, a shared sense of national pride emerges that transcends entrenched divisions. This phenomenon, far from metaphorical, is tangible and profoundly humanizing, suggesting that social cohesion can be actualized through collective ritual and shared endeavor.

Moreover, within the global context of rising nationalism, xenophobia, and inequality, the Comrades Marathon offers a compelling model of collective dignity and inclusive identity. The moment of unity not only fosters but also strengthens internal social bonds and projects a positive image of South African cohesion to the international community. While some may argue that this unity is temporary and merely suspends underlying divisions, this paper challenges such a view by advocating for the sustained cultivation and institutional support of such social cohesion. The Comrades Marathon exemplifies how inclusive spaces can be created and maintained even within societies still grappling with the legacies of structural violence and fragmentation. Consequently, this event should be recognized not as an isolated occurrence but as a critical pathway through which South Africa can progress toward genuine, everyday social cohesion.

The contribution of this paper is that the Comrades Marathon should be recognized as more than a sports event; it is a microcosm of the democratic ideals that many societies claim to pursue but often fail to realize. It stands in contrast to the dysfunction of many political institutions, which remain burdened by inefficiency, corruption, and exclusivity. One must ask: if the organizers of the Comrades Marathon can create a system that treats every runner with fairness, dignity, and care regardless of background, why do so many governments fail to do the same for their citizens? The marathon offers more than inspiration; it offers a working model of inclusion, accountability, and shared purpose. The critical contribution of this paper is to assert that social cohesion and national unity are not optional ideals or aspirational goals, but the rightful inheritance of all members of society. These foundational principles should not be treated as privileges granted by political leadership or reserved for the historically dominant; rather, they belong equally to every citizen, regardless of race, class, or background. In societies shaped by historical injustices and ongoing inequality, the promise of unity must be actively reclaimed as a shared legacy. Events like the Comrades Marathon bring this inheritance to life by creating a space where collective purpose transcends social divisions, even if temporarily. Through the physical and symbolic act of running side by side, individuals participate in a lived expression of what unity can look like. Social cohesion,

⁴² Clark Moustakas, *Social Cohesion and Sustainable Societies: Foundations for Development and Stability* (London: Routledge, 2023).

⁴³ OECD, "Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World" (Paris, 2012).

⁴⁴ UNDP, "Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding: A Conceptual Framework and Selected Programming Practices" (New York, 2009); R. Berger-Schmitt, "Social Cohesion as an Aspect of the Quality of Societies: Concept and Measurement," 2000.

therefore, is not merely an abstract political value, but a civic and moral responsibility, a collective birthright that must be nurtured, enacted, and preserved across generations.

The social cohesion witnessed at the annual Comrades Marathon is not merely a fleeting event but an ongoing, yearly commitment that fuels anticipation among runners and fosters sustained community engagement. The shared experience of the race inspires participants to eagerly register for the next edition, while local communities and volunteers consistently dedicate themselves to supporting the event's success. This cyclical commitment extends to government sectors, which engage in continuous planning and logistical coordination. However, despite these efforts, there remains a failure to fully recognize and promote the marathon as a powerful symbol of social cohesion rather than just a temporary spectacle. Acknowledging the event as a momentary phenomenon risks underestimating its potential as a foundational model for building a more enduring and inclusive global community. If the values and practices embodied by the Comrades Marathon can be understood beyond the race day itself, this marathon could inform broader strategies to cultivate sustained social unity and collective responsibility on both national and international scales.

From an anthropological perspective and within the frameworks of Social Cohesion Theory and Social Network Theory, the Comrades Marathon transcends its identity as a mere sporting event to become a vital social institution fostering community bonding and societal integration. Anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* highlights how collective rituals create a sense of egalitarian social bonding among participants, temporarily dissolving social hierarchies and fostering solidarity.⁴⁵ The marathon functions as such a ritual, uniting individuals from diverse racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds in a shared experience that transcends daily social divisions and reinforces a collective identity.

Social Cohesion Theory, as articulated by Durkheim, emphasizes the role of shared norms, values, and mutual trust as the foundation for societal stability. The Comrades Marathon embodies these principles by promoting fairness, perseverance, and respect among runners and spectators alike. Importantly, the inclusive recognition of every participant who crosses the finish line reflects a societal ideal that personal effort and endurance are worthy of honor, regardless of competitive ranking. This act aligns with empirical research by Putnam, who demonstrates that social trust and civic engagement are bolstered by participation in communal events and shared rituals.⁴⁶

Social Network Theory further elucidates the role of interpersonal connections and the flow of social capital in sustaining cohesive communities.⁴⁷ The networks formed among runners, volunteers, and supporters during the marathon foster social support and strengthen cross-cutting ties across South Africa's historically divided society. Empirical studies, such as those by Smith and Christakis, reveal how participation in collective physical activities enhances social integration and well-being. Spectators' unconditional celebration of all finishers, irrespective of race, gender, or finishing time, exemplifies the operation of these social networks by affirming shared humanity over social difference.⁴⁸

Together, these theoretical and empirical insights demonstrate that the Comrades Marathon is more than an athletic competition; it is a living symbol of social cohesion and nation-building. Amid increasing political polarization and socio-economic inequality, the marathon offers a practical model for fostering trust, empathy, and collective identity. By celebrating all participants, the event illustrates that recognition need not be limited to the elite but can and should extend to all who contribute. This tangible embodiment of social cohesion and networked belonging resonates not only within South Africa but also provides valuable lessons for global communities striving for unity amidst diversity.

⁴⁵ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969).

⁴⁶ R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁴⁷ Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (May 1973): 1360–80, <https://doi.org/10.1086/225469>; Ronald S. Burt, *The Network Structure of Social Capital. Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol. 22 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2022).

⁴⁸ Kirsten P. Smith and Nicholas A. Christakis, "Social Networks and Health," *Annual Review of Sociology* 34, no. 1 (August 1, 2008): 405–29, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134601>.

Anthropological scholarship has critically demonstrated that phenomena such as racism and hatred are socially constructed and historically contingent, rather than inherent or biologically determined.⁴⁹ This recognition underscores that social divisions are fundamentally human-made and, therefore, subject to transformation through deliberate cultural and institutional interventions.⁵⁰ By elucidating the processes through which identities are constructed and contested, anthropologists contribute to a deeper understanding of how social cohesion can be cultivated.⁵¹ The Comrades Marathon serves as a compelling case study wherein ritualized collective participation facilitates the temporary suspension of social hierarchies, enabling inclusive social bonding and the renegotiation of collective identity.⁵² These insights affirm the possibility of fostering cohesive societies through intentional practices that challenge exclusionary narratives and promote solidarity. Consequently, anthropological perspectives are vital for informing policies and initiatives aimed at dismantling systemic inequalities and advancing sustainable nation-building efforts grounded in social cohesion.⁵³

This paper invites South Africans, as both citizens and voters, to recognize the Comrades Marathon not merely as a national sporting event but as a powerful sociocultural phenomenon with global resonance. Embedded within its physically demanding and symbolically rich terrain lies a compelling narrative: that social cohesion is not a utopian abstraction nor a nostalgic echo of post-apartheid aspirations, but a tangible process enacted by ordinary individuals united in purpose. The collective spirit demonstrated by both participants and spectators exemplifies the potential for transcending entrenched divisions of race, class, and historical trauma. These expressions of solidarity, though temporally bounded, provide important empirical insights into the lived potential for national unity.

The analysis presented in this paper suggests that the Comrades Marathon serves as a microcosm of an inclusive and socially cohesive South Africa, illustrating the capacity of shared civic rituals to foster belonging and mutual recognition. The challenge, however, lies in translating this temporary unity into sustained political and social practice. In the current context, characterised by the decline of the African National Congress as the dominant political force and the emergence of the Government of National Unity (GNU), the imperative for a cohesive society becomes increasingly urgent. A socially cohesive citizenry, grounded in collective values and participatory engagement, is best positioned to demand accountability, ensure equitable governance, and revitalise the democratic project.

Engagement with the Comrades Marathon exemplifies how civic participation can strengthen democracy by nurturing trust, social capital, and collective responsibility among citizens. The shared experiences and solidarities forged through this event create a model for how diverse South Africans might engage in democratic processes beyond race, fostering greater public accountability, transparency, and inclusive governance. When citizens witness and participate in equitable, respectful treatment regardless of background during the marathon, they are inspired to expect and demand the same from their political leaders and institutions. This, in turn, can deepen democratic legitimacy and encourage active citizenship, critical for sustaining South Africa's democracy amid contemporary challenges.

Ultimately, the Comrades Marathon affirms that national unity does not necessitate uniformity, but rather a shared commitment to common goals. If South Africans, as both citizens and voters, begin to view themselves not as disparate identities but as co-constructors of a shared future, the ideal of social cohesion can be reclaimed from abstraction and embedded into the everyday fabric of civic life. In doing so, social cohesion may come to serve not only as a democratic ideal but as a structural force capable of reinforcing constitutional integrity, restoring public trust, and guiding South Africa through its current political transition with renewed purpose and solidarity. The Comrades Marathon stands as more than a

⁴⁹ E. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁵⁰ F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1969); A. Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵¹ V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969); E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, ed. Translated by K. E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁵² Catherine M Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 1997).; Alessandro Falassi, *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

⁵³ Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*; C. Tilly, *Trust and Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

symbolic event; it represents an enduring pathway toward genuine social cohesion in South Africa. Far from being a temporary moment of unity, the solidarity and collective commitment demonstrated through this event reflect a deeper, lived reality of what a socially cohesive nation can embody. It reveals how South Africans, despite their diverse backgrounds and historical divisions, can come together with shared purpose, transcending fragmentation to build a collective identity grounded in mutual respect and common goals. This event thus serves as a vital context through which social cohesion is not contested or idealized but actively practiced and embraced. In light of South Africa's evolving political landscape, with the Government of National Unity reflecting the country's racial and social diversity, the Comrades Marathon offers a powerful blueprint for how inclusive participation and collective responsibility can strengthen democracy and accelerate the fulfillment of the democratic promise. Recognizing and investing in such contexts of cohesion can transform South Africa's social fabric, turning potential into sustained progress and enabling citizens to hold their government accountable while nurturing a shared vision for the nation's future.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes by asserting that the Comrades Marathon is not merely a sporting event but a potent ritual that facilitates the negotiation of social cohesion and national identity in post-apartheid South Africa. It serves as a tangible expression and framing of social cohesion, demonstrating that South Africans can achieve unity and collective purpose within the broader agenda of social cohesion. The Comrade Marathon creates a unique space where entrenched social divisions are temporarily suspended, allowing participants and spectators to engage in a collective experience of struggle, triumph, and celebration. Through this process, the Marathon exemplifies how social cohesion can be advanced not solely through top-down political initiatives but through grassroots practices that unite people around a shared sense of purpose and identity.

The study further argues that events like the Comrades Marathon play a critical role in strengthening South Africa's democracy. Beyond institutional reforms, democratic resilience is nurtured through practices that promote inclusion, mutual respect, and collective solidarity. The spirit of camaraderie embodied in the Marathon offers a means for South Africans to cultivate a democratic future rooted in these values. By emphasizing social cohesion as a lived and participatory experience, this paper highlights how cultural and social practices such as the Comrades Marathon serve as vital tools in advancing democratic consolidation, healing the wounds of the past, and fostering a cohesive society committed to democratic ideals.

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