

Chapter 1

An Introduction to Group Cohesion in Sport¹

United we stand, divided we fall (Aesop, 550 B.C.)

Slogans, such as “Players play but teams win” and “There is no ‘I’ in team,” can be found in locker rooms of teams participating in a wide variety of athletic activities from the Little League level to professional sport. Such expressions reflect coaches’ beliefs that group unity is an essential aspect of any team. Indeed, coaches actively promote group closeness through such practices as establishing athletic dormitories, having athletes wear clothing that identifies them as members of the team, organizing team social activities, and involving athletes in team goal setting. All of these activities require time and energy from the coach, and often they have associated financial costs. Is the establishment of team cohesion worth this investment?

As the quotation used to introduce this chapter illustrates, the importance of group unity was expressed as early as 550 B.C. when Aesop formulated his well-known phrase. The notion that this phrase is still relevant is demonstrated by military generals, politicians, and corporate presidents through their constant and often elaborate attempts to develop what they refer to as “morale” or “team spirit” among their followers.

1. Much of what is presented in this monograph appeared originally in other publications including in chronological order Carron et al. (1985), Widmeyer et al. (1985), Brawley et al. (1987), Carron et al. (1998), and Carron and Brawley (2000).

The property of group unity is referred to as group cohesion or group cohesiveness. An adhesive substance is one that sticks to something else, whereas a cohesive substance is one that sticks together (i.e., to itself). Thus, it is not surprising that “stick togetherness” is the notion most people hold for the term *cohesiveness*. Other synonyms have been used “unitedness,” “oneness,” and “close-knittedness.” It is often easier to visualize properties of the physical world, rather than those of abstract or theoretical constructs. In this regard, cement and toffees are quickly recognized as cohesive substances, whereas balsa wood and dry soda crackers are seen as substances that easily crumble and break up. Also, despite the fact that cohesion is an abstract construct, most people can visualize either extremely cohesive or extremely noncohesive work groups, military units, families, and athletic teams.

According to Lewin (1935), cohesion is the basic requisite of group maintenance—one of the two major processes occurring within any group. The other process, locomotion, is the activity by which groups attempt to reach their objectives. Cattell (1948) pointed out that these two major group functions are stochastic—without group maintenance there can be no group locomotion. Thus, these two properties, maintenance and locomotion, are inextricably linked in the definition of group cohesion.

Definitions

Definitional clarity is a prerequisite for effective communication. Although it is somewhat tangential to our main purpose, it may be useful to initially outline what we mean by a group.

Group

Readers of the group dynamics literature recognize that the term *group* has been used to represent a large number of social aggregates, including minimal groups (Robinson, 1996). The groups to which we refer in our writing are not minimal groups. Also, they are not what McGrath (1984) referred to as *artificial aggregates* (i.e., statistical groups formed on the basis of a common property such as age, sex, social class). Nor are they what McGrath referred to as *unorganized aggregates*—audiences or crowds in physical proximity and/or attending

to a common set of stimuli. Rather, the groups that are the bases for our discussion of group cohesion are those social aggregates

of two or more individuals who possess a common identity, have common goals and objectives, share a common fate, exhibit structured patterns of interaction and modes of communication, hold common perceptions about group structure, are personally and instrumentally interdependent, reciprocate interpersonal attraction, and consider themselves to be a group. (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998, pp. 13–14)

Cohesion

The construct used to represent the coherence of these types of groups is cohesion. We consider cohesion to be “a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs” (Carron, Brawley & Widmeyer, 1998, p. 213). This definition reflects the nature of cohesiveness as it is manifested in most groups—including, we believe, sport teams, work groups, military units, fraternity groups, and social and friendship groups.

The Nature of Cohesion in Groups

It is useful to point out several aspects of the nature of cohesiveness that the definition either explicitly or implicitly highlights. One is the *multidimensionality* of the construct. Two of those dimensions, at least, are task cohesion and social cohesion. Consider the following quotation (taken from Carron & Hausenblas, 1998, p. 230):

As the New York Yankees wrapped up dress rehearsals and took their sideshow north for the opening of the 1988 campaign, all of your favorite characters were in midseason form . . . yes sports fans, another season of mudslinging and enmity is here . . . [however] the Yankees—and this has been overlooked amid all the lovely verbiage—went 22-10 this spring and are confident that this is their year . . . “What irks me is we’ve got really good chemistry on this team” says [player Dave] Winfield. (Swift, 1988, pp. 36–38)

Good chemistry coexisting with mudslinging and enmity? Is it possible? If both Swift's and Winfield's descriptions of the New York Yankees are at all accurate, they undoubtedly reflect a multidimensional form of unity—cohesiveness existing in relation to some group processes but not others.

A multidimensional view of group cohesiveness has a long-standing tradition in social psychology. For example, in their classic definition of cohesion, Festinger, Schachter, and Back (1950/1963) referred to the field of forces drawing members to the group. Subsequently, Gross and Martin (1952) criticized the Festinger et al. definition and suggested that cohesion is better conceived as the resistance of the group to disruption. Although the Gross and Martin definition focuses on the group rather than on individual members, it seems unlikely that they would assume that a group's resistance to disruption is based on a single factor, consideration, or motive.

Our definition also highlights the *dynamic* nature of the construct. Again, consider a quotation taken from Carron and Hausenblas (1998, p. 230):

The chemistry of that team is something that will never go away . . . The next year wasn't the same. We were looking for a leader, and we were thinking about our individual stats and the NBA. The chemistry wasn't what it was during that championship season. (University of Louisville basketball player Jerry Eaves, quoted in Wolff, 1995, p. 43)

Cohesion is not a trait. Cohesion in a group changes over time in both its extent and its various forms (e.g., task cohesiveness, social cohesiveness) throughout the process of group formation, group development, group maintenance, and group dissolution. On the other hand, cohesion is not as transitory as a situation-specific state. Although the dimensions of cohesion that are most salient to the group and/or individual members likely change over time, that change is also likely gradual.

Cohesion has an *instrumental* basis. Carron and Hausenblas (1998, p. 243) provided an excellent quotation from Eric Cantona, formerly of the Manchester United football team (soccer to North Americans), which highlights the instrumental nature of cohesion:

The secret of football, and of team performance, is harmony. True harmony is equivalent to perfection, to beauty. Think of the movement of a champion gymnast, or the perfect synchrony of a whole symphony orchestra playing together. Harmony can be everywhere: in music, in the mind and the body, in a football team's will to succeed; and it's the perfect understanding, this combining of forces that makes winning possible. Harmony in a team means everybody playing together and thinking as one. In the end it's all about getting the ball in the back of the net, about having the perfect touch when you have possession. This can only come from the combined efforts of all players. (Cantona & Fynn, 1996, p. 33)

All groups—musical groups, work groups, sport teams, and committees—form for a purpose. Even groups that may be considered purely “social” in nature have an instrumental basis for their formation. For example, acquaintances who choose to form a social club to develop or maintain better friendships are cohering for instrumental reasons.

Finally, cohesion has an *affective* dimension. The social bonding and/or task unity that develops in groups is pleasing to individual group members. A description of Jackie Robinson's early days with the Brooklyn Dodgers serves to illustrate the impact of being socially excluded or ostracized: “Those early days were awfully tough on Jackie. I remember times on the train when nobody would sit with him or talk with him” (Bobby Bragan, quoted in Allen, 1987, pp. 102–103).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) pointed out that the need to belong is a fundamental human motive. As a consequence, “the formation of social bonds is associated with positive affect” whereas “being . . . excluded . . . leads to potent negative feelings (e.g., anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness)” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 505, 508). In both highly task-oriented groups (e.g., work crews, sport teams, military units) as well as more socially oriented groups (e.g., fraternities, families), the unity/cohesiveness that develops produces positive affect.

Implications From the Definition of Cohesion

There are a number of implications that emanate from the definition of cohesion. These implications pertain to the conception of cohesion, and they influence (a) the measurement of the cohesion, (b) the development of hypotheses about the relative importance of cohesion dimensions throughout the history of a group, and (c) the development of hypotheses about the relationship of various dimensions of cohesiveness to other constructs.

It is important to reemphasize that one implication of a multidimensional perspective of cohesion is that there is more than one factor that could cause any group to stick together and remain united. However, accepting the proposition that cohesion is a multidimensional construct does not involve accepting the premise that all dimensions are equally present across different groups to the same extent and at the same time in a group's life. Consider the dimensions of task versus social unity. It seems reasonable to assume that although social and task factors contribute to cohesion in work teams, the latter should be more salient—particularly in the early stages of group formation. Conversely, it also seems reasonable to assume that although social factors and task factors contribute to cohesion in fraternities and other social groups, the former would be more salient—again, especially in the early stages of group formation (cf. Sherif & Sherif, 1969)

Also, to accept the proposition that cohesion is a multidimensional construct does not involve acceptance of the premise that any specific dimension is present in equal amounts in similar types of groups. For example, it is not unreasonable to expect that one work team might be highly united around its task objectives and yet be in open conflict from a social perspective. Conversely, a second apparently similar work team might be very cohesive socially but completely lack task unity.

Further, accepting the proposition that cohesion is multidimensional (and dynamic) does not involve accepting the premise that all dimensions are equally salient throughout the life history of a group (i.e., throughout the group's development). Group dynamics theoreticians endorse different models of group development. Independent of whether a linear model (i.e., groups go through successive stages in their development; e.g., Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), a pendular model

(i.e., group cohesiveness fluctuates throughout the life of the group; e.g., Budge, 1981), or a life-cycle model (i.e., as groups develop, members psychologically prepare for their dissolution; e.g., Garland, Kolodny, & Jones, 1965) is endorsed, no group dynamics theoreticians would predict that task and social unity would always be present and/or equally salient throughout the life of a group. For example, a work team composed of strangers might develop and initially remain united for task reasons. However, once the task basis for group interaction and unity was stabilized (after an extended period of time and group development), and members believed the group was functioning well, they might take the time to interact in more social ways, become familiar with members beyond what they contributed to work, and thus develop heightened aspects of social cohesion.

Measurement Issues

Although it might be relatively easy to achieve consensus on a constitutive definition of cohesiveness, translating that definition into a conceptual model and operational definition is always a challenge. Nevertheless, the operationalization of theoretical constructs is at the heart of scientific progress. Researchers across different areas of group dynamics—counseling psychology, military psychology, sport psychology, and so on—are intrigued by/concerned with a variety of issues associated with group cohesion. What is its nature? What are the important antecedents that lead to its development? What are the important consequences that stem from its presence? In order to consider any of these issues, the development of an operational definition of cohesion becomes an essential first step.

Conceptual Bases for the GEQ

A fundamental difficulty associated with the measurement of theoretical constructs—constructs such as group cohesion, individual intelligence, and personality, for example—is that they are abstractions that are not directly observable. In order to develop a suitable instrument to assess any nonobservable abstraction, it is necessary to begin with a clear understanding of that construct's basic nature. Certainly it would not be reasonable to assess human intelligence by measuring the strength people need to lift a weight. Such a test would be incompatible with general understandings of intelligence and its manifestations.

Similarly, a researcher interested in developing a test of group cohesion should proceed from a base that includes an understanding of what is meant by this construct, the nature of the basic properties, and how it is manifested. In short, the researcher should proceed from a base established through a conceptual model or framework. This is referred to as a *theory-driven approach* to test construction. It stands in contrast—and is superior to—a *data-driven approach*.

In the case of a theory-driven approach, the underlying conceptual understanding of the construct provides the impetus for the development of the scales and their items. The researcher develops a large battery of items that are considered to reflect situations in which the construct is manifested. After this battery of items is given to an appropriate target sample, the results are analyzed statistically (using factor analysis, for example). Those items that group into distinct clusters or factors consistent with the conceptual model are retained; the items that do not are discarded.

Basically, with a data-driven approach, the researcher develops a large pool of items considered to be manifestations of the construct. It is assumed that the scales (i.e., subcomponents) and a conceptual model will emerge through statistical associations within the pool of items. Nunnally (1978) has suggested that the data-driven approach to instrument development represents a shotgun approach to test construction.

The Nature of Conceptual Models

A conceptual model is an organized, systematic representation of a phenomenon or construct. As was pointed out by Henry (1968), scientific knowledge is generally viewed as a hierarchy. The foundation of this hierarchy is the *hypothesis*, a prediction relating to the relationships among a set of variables. With increasing levels of knowledge, a *theory* evolves—a comprehensive set of definitions and predictions that specify the relationships among a set of variables. Finally, a *law*, a well-defined, repeatedly verified theory, resides at the apex of the hierarchy.

Within the hierarchy of scientific knowledge, a conceptual model falls midway between a hypothesis and a theory. That is, a conceptual model presents a more elaborate representation of the relationship among variables than does a hypothesis, but it is not as well devel-

oped and the variables are not as well defined as is the case with a theory. Like a theory, however, a conceptual model “is a set of propositions consisting of defined and interrelated constructs . . . [it] sets out interrelationships among a set of variables . . . [and it] explains phenomena” (Kerlinger, 1973, p. 9).

The development of the Group Environment Questionnaire was based on a conceptual model for cohesion.

Conceptual Model for Cohesion

The conceptual model that forms the basis for the development of the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) evolves from three fundamental assumptions. The first, based on research on social cognitions (cf. Bandura, 1986; Kenny & Lavoie, 1985; Levine & Moreland, 1991; Schlenker, 1975; Schlenker & Miller, 1977; Zander, 1971), is that cohesion—a group property—can be assessed through the perceptions of individual group members. In short, we believe that

- A group has clearly observable properties, such as an organizational structure of role and status relationships.
- Members experience the social situation of their group, are socialized into it, and develop a set of beliefs about the group.
- These beliefs, like other social cognitions, are a product of the member’s selective processing and personal integration of group-related information.
- Perceptions about the group held by a group member are a reasonable estimate of various aspects of unity characteristic of the group.
- The social cognitions about cohesion can be measured.

Theoreticians in the group dynamics literature have emphasized the need to distinguish between the group and the individual (cf. Cattell, 1948; Van Bergen & Koekebakker, 1959; Zander, 1971). Thus, our second assumption is that the social cognitions that each group member holds about the cohesiveness of the group are related to the group as a totality and to the manner in which the group satisfies personal needs and objectives. These social cognitions are labeled

- Group Integration, which reflects the individual’s perceptions about the closeness, similarity, and bonding within the group as a

whole, as well as the degree of unification of the group field.

- Individual Attractions to the Group, which reflect the individual's perceptions about personal motivations acting to attract and to retain the individual in the group, as well as his or her personal feelings about the group.

Theoreticians in the group dynamics literature also have emphasized the need to distinguish between the task-oriented and socially oriented concerns of groups and their members (cf. Festinger et al., 1950/1963; Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Mikalachki, 1969). Thus, our third assumption is that there are two fundamental focuses to a group member's perceptions:

- A task orientation representing a general orientation or motivation

Table 1.1
Specific Constructs Constituting Perceived Cohesiveness
in Sport Groups.

Construct	Definition	Sample Item
Group Integration-Task (GI-T)	Individual team member's feelings about the similarity, closeness, and bonding within the team as a whole around the group's task	Our team is united in trying to reach its goals for performance
Group Integration-Social (GI-S)	Individual team member's feelings about the similarity, closeness, and bonding within the team as a whole around the group as a social unit	Members of our team do not stick together outside of practices and games
Individual Attractions to the Group-Task (ATG-T)	Individual team member's feelings about his or her personal involvement with the group's task, productivity, and goals and objectives	I do not like the style of play on this team
Individual Attractions to the Group-Social (ATG-S)	Individual team member's feelings about his or her personal acceptance and social interactions with the group	Some of my best friends are on this team