

# Can High Group Cohesion Be Harmful? A Case Study of a Junior Ice-Hockey Team

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## **Can High Group Cohesion Be Harmful? : A Case Study of a Junior Ice-Hockey Team**

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# Can High Group Cohesion Be Harmful?

## A Case Study of a Junior Ice-Hockey Team

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High group cohesion is considered to be beneficial and lead to better performance. This qualitative case study describes a case in which high social cohesion led to a deterioration in a team's performance. The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationships between performance in a team sport and social psychological group phenomena such as cohesion, conformity, groupthink, and group polarization. The participants were members of a junior-league ice-hockey team, consisting of three adult coaches and 22 players aged 15 to 16 years. The data were derived from an interview with the main coach, continuous observation by the principal researcher, and a diary based on observations during one ice-hockey season. The Group Environment Questionnaire was used to assess group cohesion quantitatively. The qualitative data were analyzed by identifying themes that illuminated the research problem. In this study, the team did not perform as expected, and their performance deteriorated during the autumn. Social cohesion was high. In addition, the need to evaluate performance declined because of increased pressure to conform. Pressure to conform, groupthink, and group polarization increased owing to the high level of social cohesion which in turn was associated with the deterioration in the group's performance. Based on the findings it appears that high group cohesion may not

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always be beneficial to the team and does not necessarily lead to better performance in all situations.

**Keywords:** *group dynamics; qualitative; case study; sports teams*

According to the definition by Carron, Brawley, and Widmeyer (1998), group cohesion is “a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in its pursuit of instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of members’ affective needs” (p. 213). The definition incorporates the concepts of task and social cohesion. As a group is usually founded to accomplish a purpose, task cohesion plays a fundamental role in the functioning of every group. Another cohesive force which often develops in time is that of social cohesion among the group’s members.

### Positive Outcomes of Cohesion

The relationship between cohesion and performance has been studied extensively (Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002; Mullen & Copper, 1994). According to a meta-analysis by Carron et al. (2002), the connection between cohesion and performance is reciprocal: High cohesion increases the group’s performance and successful performance increases cohesion. Both task and social cohesion are related to group performance. Promoting both dimensions of cohesion through coaching thus seems warranted.

There are also other possible reasons for promoting cohesion. It has been found that adherence behavior (Prapavessis & Carron, 1997), adherence to training schedules (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1988), conformity to group norms (e.g., Shields, Bredemeier, Gardner, & Boston, 1995), assuming responsibility for negative outcomes (e.g., Brawley, Carron, & Widmeyer, 1987), tolerance of the negative impact of disruptive events (e.g., Brawley, Carron, & Widmeyer, 1988), and collective efficacy (e.g., Paskevitch, Brawley, Dorsch, & Widmeyer, 1999) relate to greater cohesion. Weak cohesion has been found to be connected to weak training intensity (Prapavessis & Carron, 1997).

There are ways of improving cohesion. Cohesiveness is greater in smaller groups (Widmeyer, Brawley, & Carron, 1990). Cohesion is also boosted by altruism (Prapavessis & Carron, 1997), participation in team goal setting (Brawley, Carron, & Widmeyer, 1993), and democratic leader behavior (e.g., Kozub, 1993; Westre & Weiss, 1991). The relationship between cohesion and satisfaction (Williams & Hacker, 1982) would appear to be reciprocal.

## Disadvantages of Cohesion

Cohesion may not always lead to more effective group performance. Paskevich, Estabrooks, Brawley, and Carron (2001) suggested that cohesion may be associated with pressure to conform, groupthink, and deindividuation. However, studies on the potential harmfulness of group cohesion in the area of sport psychology are few. According to Paskevich et al. (2001), one reason for the relative lack of research on the negative consequences of cohesion might be that researchers, coaches, and athletes take it as axiomatic that cohesion is always beneficial and thus should be encouraged whenever possible.

However, some evidence of the harmful aspects of cohesion in sport teams has been presented. Carron, Prapavessis, and Grove (1994) studied the connection between cohesion and self-handicapping behavior. They found that when the social dimension of group cohesion was high, athletes with strong self-handicapping traits made more excuses before an important competition. By excuses Carron et al. (1994) referred to cushioning and defensive comments in which the person would identify factors that can have the potential to hinder or impede performance (e.g., work, school, weather, family or personal problems, effects of alcohol, and influenza). When task cohesion was low, the athletes made fewer excuses. When discussing their results, Carron et al. (1994) considered cohesion to be both beneficial and harmful for a team. In a close group, athletes with a strong self-handicapping trait are salient. They may feel responsible for their performance, not wanting to let their teammates down, and consequently tend to make excuses for their failure.

In a highly unified team, teammates may feel the pressure of not to criticize social loafers (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). Ignoring social loafing would help to preserve feelings of team unanimity. Athletes in more cohesive groups may therefore experience greater pressure to conform. The Carron et al. (1994) study also found signs of athletes experiencing pressure to act according to group members' wishes. Maintaining harmony is not always a good thing.

Different aspects of cohesion and performance-related norms are important in relation to perceptions of social loafing. In their study with 118 junior-league soccer players, Hoigaard, Säfvenbom, and Tonnessen (2006) found that when high social cohesion is combined with low task cohesion and the performance norm is low, the level of perceived social loafing is at its highest. However, when there is an increase in the performance norm, the level of perceived social loafing decreases appearing at its lowest level when combined with a high level of task cohesion and a high level of social cohesion. In addition, athletes seem to be aware of the possible disadvantages

of task and social cohesion in a team. Similarly Hardy, Eys, and Carron (2005) also investigated a heterogeneous sample of 105 athletes. The results from the analyses revealed that 56% of athletes reported potential disadvantages in developing high social cohesion, whereas 31% reported disadvantages with respect to high task cohesion.

## **Multidimensional and Dynamic Cohesion**

Previous cohesion studies have mainly used on a quantitative research methodology. Finding associations in cohesion research is difficult for two main reasons: multidimensionality and the dynamic nature of group phenomena (Paskevich et al., 2001). Many factors contribute to group cohesiveness and these factors vary depending on the nature of the group. A group that has been close in the past will not necessarily be a close group in the future. The factors influencing cohesion in a group that is in the stage of formation may differ from those in a more established group. In a newly formed group, the force maintaining group cohesion is the group's task. Normally, the developing of social relationships between group members begins only when the group is performing a task.

According to Brawley (1990), the question "Does cohesion affect performance?" might be more meaningfully rephrased as "How does cohesion come about and affect performance?" Widmeyer, Carron, and Brawley (1993) also saw studies that take account of the dynamic nature of cohesion as more important than one-off snapshot studies. There is a need for longitudinal and qualitative studies; the factors that contribute to cohesion should be studied more closely in authentic real life situations (Hoigaard et al., 2006; Widmeyer et al., 1993).

The present study is in the form of a qualitative case study. It describes a case in which high social cohesion led to a deterioration in the group's performance. The aim was to investigate the relationships between sport performance and social psychological group phenomena such as cohesion, conformity, groupthink, and group polarization.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants were members of a junior-league ice-hockey team, consisting of three adult coaches and of 22 players 15 to 16 years of age. The main informant, the head coach, had 11 years experience in coaching

at the junior and elite level. On average, the players had been playing ice hockey for 9 years. The club team played at the highest level in the national league. During the competition season the team practiced four or five times and had one or two games a week. The principal researcher had 25 years experience of team sports as a player and doctoral-level training in sport and exercise psychology.

## Procedure and Design

The present study was based on part of a larger team-building intervention program, which aimed at creating a team that performed its tasks well and at the same time was highly cohesive. The methods used were group and individual goal setting, role clarifying, and team cohesion-enhancing strategies. Within the individual goal setting and role clarifying programs, the method of performance profiling (e.g., Butler & Hardy, 1992) was used. The program was implemented during one ice-hockey season.

The study was a mixed method case study. It can be regarded as an intrinsic qualitative case study, as it aimed to illustrate and understand particular issues and the detailed structures of specific events within a specific group of people in a natural situation (Dobson, 2001; Stake, 2005). In addition, this could also be considered an instrumental case study because it aimed at the refinement of theory.

Abductive content analytical procedures were used (Magnani, 2001). The approach can be considered abductive (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005), in that the analysis was guided by knowledge about cohesion derived from earlier research. In addition, theory development (the Conceptual Model of Group Performance Deterioration) was based on the findings concerning the target group and is thus the outcome of a dialogue between the data and theory.

The data were collected over the course of an entire ice hockey season starting at the end of April and ending in the April of the following year. The data were derived from continuous observation, a diary based on the observations, and an interview conducted in November with the main coach. The principal researcher kept a diary of all the team's events and all his contacts with the team. He was also present at the team training camp during the summer training season and observed most of the team's home matches. The 105-page (single spaced) diary produced by the principal researcher contained the following: descriptions of the actions of the team; summaries of discussions with the team members and other researchers with regards to their opinions, assumptions, suggestions, and preliminary interpretations; theoretical considerations; and feelings and emotions. The

video-recorded interview (later transcribed verbatim, 15 single spaced pages) with the main coach was concerned with the team processes.

In addition, quantitative data were collected. To assess group cohesion, the 18-item Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ; Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985) was used. Measurements were taken four times during the season. Because the results of this study concern the beginning of the season, only the baseline measurement was used. The GEQ items were assessed on a 9-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (9). The questionnaire was based on a conceptual model in which cohesion is regarded as a multidimensional construct containing both individual and group aspects. Each aspect has a task and a social orientation. Thus, the GEQ assesses four manifestations of cohesion: (a) Individual Attraction to the Group-Task (ATG-T), (b) Individual Attraction to the Group-Social (ATG-S), (c) Group Integration-Task (GI-T), and (d) Group Integration-Social (GI-S). ATG-T (4 items) and ATG-S (5 items) were used to evaluate the individual team member's perception and personal involvement with the group's task and goals, and also their social involvement within the group. GI-T (5 items) and GI-S (4 items) were used to evaluate the magnitude of an individual member's perceptions concerning similarity and bonding around the group's task and the group as a social unit. Previous research has indicated that the GEQ possesses good factorial validity and moderate internal consistency with Finnish data (Salminen & Luhtanen, 1998).

## Data Analysis

Central themes were identified from the research diary kept by the main researcher. Next, the interview with the coach was analyzed. In the first round, different themes and the times of their occurrence on the videotape were marked. In the second round accurate notes were made. In the third round, the observations surrounding the central themes were recorded. Three themes in the data caught the attention of the researchers: (a) a sudden and considerable rise in the team's level of performance after one feedback meeting, (b) poor team performance despite high group cohesion, especially social cohesion, and (c) the reluctance of the players to reveal their true personal opinions within the group. To understand these three unexpected findings, the researchers directed their attention to the changes in level of performance (winning, losing, practicing), group cohesion (social and task dimensions), group behavior, and individual players' behavior in the group (especially players' evaluation of the group's performance).

During the process of analyzing and writing the report, the researchers continuously referred to the theoretical literature and previous research.

This enabled conclusions to be drawn about the influence of the changes in level of performance, team cohesion, and group phenomena on players' evaluation of the team's performance. The impact of the narrative analytical method (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1995) can be seen in the analysis and reporting of the present study. This type of analysis is common in case studies (Stake, 2005). It is especially suited to the study of an ongoing process at the group level. According to the practice of reporting qualitative research, the theory and earlier empirical research findings are presented in the results section, and not only in the discussion.

## Results

### Performance

During the preseason, the team had not performed well for several weeks. In the last of the preliminary matches, the team lost to an opponent with a much lower ranking. After losing the game, the coach held a meeting with the team to review the progress made toward achieving their common goals. The aim of the meeting was to remind the players of their collectively set goals, such as "preparing for training and matches" and to strengthen the players' commitment to those goals. The statistics from the game showed that the players had performed their individual duties poorly. According to the coach, the discussion about the team's goals appeared to energize the team so that after the meeting performance in training was substantially improved. The researcher's (first author) diary entry for October 5 read: "'going all the way,' with respect to their common goals had really materialized for the players. For the first time in a long time the training session was imbued with the spirit of action." Later, the main coach (November 10) noted,

After the meeting, the problem seemed to have vanished. Group goals are tools that can be used if the team is underperforming. Our willpower wasn't low—we just noticed that we could perform even better. If a player learns to act in a goal-oriented way, he will notice how much room for growth he has. There is no limit to what one can achieve in these things.

The improvement in the level of performance was clearly visible in the succeeding games as well. Such a significant increase in performance simply as the outcome of a single feedback meeting was interesting. Although the principal researcher has played soccer for 25 years, he had never in all that time witnessed such a sudden and notable rise in a team's level of

performance. This was one of the three important themes that contributed to the researchers' interest in this phenomenon.

The poor performance of the team in the early part of the season was not temporary (i.e., the result of a bad day), but originated further back in time. In fact, the research diary from the preceding month (September 17) revealed that the main coach had regarded the team's training as not up to standard on several occasions. Also, the data from the first feedback meeting showed that perceptions of the team's achievement of its common goals were lower among the coaches than among the players. The mean score given by the 22 players for achievement of the team's 17 goals was 8.4 (scale 1 to 10) whereas that given by the three coaches was 6.5. "This difference between the coaches and the players was the greatest surprise. The players rated the team's achievement of its goals higher than did the coaches" (Research diary, August 19).

## High Cohesion

Another interesting observation was that high group cohesion did not lead to better performance. This was the second important unexpected theme. The GEQ indicated that cohesion was clearly high during the early months of the season. The mean values and standard deviations (in parentheses) were: ATG-T, 7.82 (.85); ATG-S, 7.23 (.92); GI-T, 7.1 (1.02) and GI-S, 6.24 (1.19). All the means were above the mid-point of the 9-point scale. The measurements from the first month of the ice-hockey season indicated high personal involvement (ATG-T, ATG-S), especially with respect to task involvement (ATG-T, GI-T). Naturally, early on in the season, the group was not as integrated as a social unit (GI-S). In contrast to past studies, the performance of the group deteriorated, despite a high level of team cohesion.

The qualitative assessments were in line with the quantitative measurements. As the season progressed, the qualitative data pointed to an increase in social cohesion. During the summer and autumn the main coach reported high social cohesion in the team. This was also supported by players' comments on the internal relations in the team: "folks begun to chat with absolutely everyone" (July 20) and "it had a certain openness in it" (August 15). Communication relationships in the team appeared to be open and interconnected.

## Conformity

What factors, then, contributed to the team's descent to a relatively poor level of performance? Higher social cohesion may have led to greater

conformity (i.e., pressure to conform). Conformity is defined as submission to perceived group pressure where a direct request to conform has not been presented (Deaux, Dane, & Wrightsman, 1993). Conformity may have resulted from, in particular, normative influence, but informational influence may also have played a role (Deaux et al., 1993). Normative influence is defined as an individual's adaptation to the attitude of the majority in order to gain acceptance by the group. A situation in which an individual accepts the majority's attitudes as valid information is referred to as informational influence.

The principal researcher obtained crucial evidence of the pressure to conform and normative influence in the autumn when a high-status player (captain of the team) revealed that he had difficulties in giving critical feedback to his teammates (Research diary, September 14). He was afraid that this would negatively affect his position in the team. Also, extracts from the research diary (below, September 27) showed that the players hesitated to share their true personal opinions in the feedback meeting held in the autumn. Difficulties of the players to openly express their thoughts was the third theme that attracted of the researchers' interest in the phenomenon.

We had a round of talks where the players could assess the team's progress in the achievement of its goals. It appeared that many of the players didn't give their honest opinion. Nearly all of these players gave short answers and used the same words as many other players had used. It seemed that their only objective was to give the floor to the next player as soon as possible. The players who spoke at the beginning of the discussion were mainly those who spoke out during the season anyway.

As stated earlier, individuals in highly cohesive teams may feel pressure not to criticize their teammates for social loafing (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). Ignoring social loafing can assist in preserving a feeling of unanimity within a team. In addition to cohesion, the large size of the group (see Deaux et al., 1993) and young age of the players (Costanzo, 1970) may have increased the pressure to conform in the present case.

## Groupthink

High social cohesion and pressure to conform may have led to the phenomenon of groupthink. Groupthink is a group process that emphasizes the need for unanimity. Its manifestations are a lowered willingness to detect options, moral complacency, and self-censorship, and it leads to the deterioration of decision making in the group (Deaux et al., 1993). The research

diary excerpts quoted above indicate that the players did not share their true opinions in the goal assessment meeting and that the coaches had a lower perception of the team's level of performance than did the players. These factors reflect over-estimation by the players of the team's performance and an unwillingness to openly identify and discuss problems. According to the groupthink model by Janis (1972; Deaux et al., 1993), high levels of cohesion and conformity are factors that lead to groupthink. Bernthal and Insko (1993) found that a group with high social cohesion was more susceptible to groupthink than a group with high task cohesion.

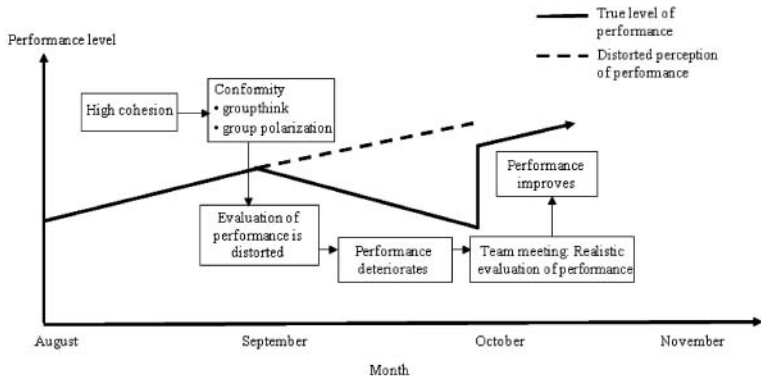
### **Group Polarization**

The team showed symptoms of group polarization as well. Group polarization is defined as a shift towards the opinion of the majority in the group's decision-making process (Deaux et al., 1993). The development of group polarization was expected as it is assumed to be caused by normative and informational influence, as in the case of conformity (Jones & Roelofsma, 2000). Critical assessment of the teammates' performance decreased, whereas cohesion, especially social cohesion, and normative pressure to conform and maintain harmony increased. During the autumn, this was shown in the conformist comments made by the players when assessing the team's performance (short answers, use of same words of others). Finally, in the meeting held after their defeat, the players realized the true level of their training and playing. A significant change in the level of performance showed that the group's assessment of its performance had become too positive during the autumn.

### **Model of Group Performance Deterioration**

It may be that high social cohesion led to a deterioration in group performance. A team with high social cohesion may be unaware of how it is performing. That was the case in this study. The team's performance deteriorated during the autumn and lasted several months. The field observations of this chain of events are combined in Figure 1, which illustrates the deterioration in the performance of the junior league ice-hockey team and the players' over-evaluation of the level of the team's performance in both training and games. Conformism, groupthink, and group polarization explain the illusion of unanimity—a collective misconception of reality—sustained by the players and why the deficient training and performance of their teammates was not criticized or the training tightened up. Pressure to conform, groupthink,

**Figure 1**  
**Model of Group Performance Deterioration**



and group polarization increased because of the high social cohesion in the team. Finally, the players' unwillingness to evaluate the team's performance realistically led to further deterioration in performance.

## Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationships between performance in a team sport and social psychological group phenomena such as cohesion, conformity, groupthink, and group polarization. Group cohesion has nearly always been considered a positive quality and there has been a tendency to seek to enhance it whenever possible. Numerous previous studies (see Carron et al., 2002; Paskevich et al., 2001) have shown that high cohesion is indeed associated with better performance. The performance of a group is better if its members are united and feel attraction towards one another and to the task they are performing. In the present case study, contrary to most previous research, high social cohesion was identified as a factor contributing to deterioration in group performance. The idea that of high cohesion can be harmful for effective group functioning has been supported in only a few earlier studies (e.g., Carron, 1994; Hardy et al., 2005; Hoigaard et al., 2006).

The present case study described how the performance of a team deteriorated during the autumn season, and the role played by group cohesion and other group factors in this process (Model of Group Performance

Deterioration, Figure 1). As the season unfolded, three main observations or themes directed the investigation: (a) a sudden and considerable increase in the quality of the team's performance as an outcome of a single feedback meeting; (b) a deterioration in performance despite high levels of group cohesion, especially social cohesion; and (c) the reluctance of the players to reveal their true personal opinions within the team. The emergence of these events prompted the researchers to seek the underlying explanations for these occurrences on the basis of a number of data gathering methods, including field observations and research diaries, an interview with the head coach, and quantitative measurements.

A connection was identified between high social cohesion and deterioration in group performance. This finding conflicts with most of the previous research on the cohesion–performance relationship (Carron et al., 2002; Paskevich et al., 2001). In this case, high social cohesion was associated with a number of harmful group processes, including pressure to conform to norms revolving around the maintenance of unanimity, the reluctance of team members to express critical opinions regarding their teammates, and an unrealistically positive evaluation of the team's performance. In this respect, the team showed symptoms of groupthink and group polarization. These observations possibly explain the negative relationship observed between cohesion and performance.

Although high social cohesion in this case was found to have a negative impact on the team's performance, it can not be concluded that group leaders should reduce social cohesion or promote only task cohesion. In practice, the two aspects of cohesion are not separable. Coaching actions that aim to increase the attractiveness of a task also have implications for the social attractiveness of the group and vice versa. It continues to remain important to promote team cohesion. However, group leaders should be aware of the potential negative consequences associated with high social cohesion. Because of the combined pressure to conform to team norms and remain loyal to the group, team members may be unwilling to evaluate group performance critically. The main responsibility for assessing the team's performance lies with the group leader. When necessary, the group leader has to create space where the group members can safely and realistically evaluate the group's performance. Promoting a group environment in which communication is open and honest is an important aspect of the leader's role.

Collecting both qualitative and quantitative data in this study seemed to be an effective strategy. The qualitative data, such as the researcher's field observations, the video interview with the coach, and the collected notes of the discussions with the players enabled greater insights into the underlying processes into changes in cohesion and overall performance. Quantitative

measures of cohesion supported the perceptions of the players and the interpretations of the researchers. The present study incorporated previous recommendations (e.g., Hoigaard et al., 2006; Widmeyer et al., 1993) that the observation of group phenomena should be long-term, preferably spanning a season or more, and involve both qualitative and quantitative methods. The strength of the present study was that the analysis focused on an ongoing process and on the activity of the group and the individuals. The study bears out the view of cohesion as dynamic and multidimensional in nature.

As the results were based mainly on the perceptions of the principal researcher and the main coach, the outcome of this study cannot be generalized to all team sports in all situations. To verify the relationships and processes identified here, we need more research on the influence of cohesion (both beneficial and harmful) on group functioning and performance. Further qualitative and quantitative research is necessary to identify the conditions under which cohesion has a positive or negative impact on performance and, most important, the group-related factors which contribute to this relationship.

As this study showed, high social cohesion may turn against itself. Cohesion may increase pressure to conform, groupthink, and group polarization, which in turn may impair the group's performance. Being cohesive may become such a strong norm, that group members lose their individuality (deindividuation), disappear into the crowd, and act in accordance with the hidden norms rather than in accordance with the task of the team. This way complex human-relationship networks may influence the decision-making process and behavior of individual group members. These findings possibly explain why a team may shift from a series of victories to a series of defeats. High group cohesion may not always be beneficial to the team and does not necessarily lead to better performance in all situations.

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