Theories of Group Cohesion

It’s quite clear that groups can be “more than the sum of their parts” and that people can change when they are put into groups – refer to Reicher & Haslam’s 2006 prison simulation: There are two explanations for this:

1. **Dispositional explanations** look at how some people are “made for each other” while others are “chalk and cheese”. If people have complementary traits, then when you put them together you get SYNERGY and everyone works better than they would on their own. If people have conflicting characteristics, they’ll never function as a team.

2. **Situational explanations** look at how groups have a life of their own, separate from the individuals in the group. Groups develop through certain stages, regardless of the personalities or goals of the people involved.

**Bruce Tuckman (1965)** proposed his very influential forming-storming-norming-performing model of how groups develop. This study came out of a Naval Research think-tank where Irwin Altman had collected 50 studies on small group psychology which he turned over to Tuckman for analysis. Tuckman looked for a pattern that would explain the behaviour in all the groups and hit on this model:

1. **Forming:** team members get to know each other, work out their roles and where they stand in relationship to one another. Crucially, Tuckman points out how people at this stage test their relationships (rivalries begin, etc.).

2. **Storming:** conflict and polarisation brews and there may be a rebellion against the leader; members jockey to establish their own roles and status. This is usually an unhappy time for the group, but it is a vital stage in the group’s development.

3. **Norming:** cooperation replaces conflict as members work towards common goals: this is where GROUP COHESION occurs, increasing mutual respect. People feel comfortable expressing intimate personal opinions in his stage.

4. **Performing:** roles become flexible and functional. Relationships have stabilised and the main goal now is group success.

The “storming” phase is particularly important for establishing a “team spirit” and Tuckman argues it always occurs, though it may not be obvious. Coaches and captains who try to avoid “storming” can be over-controlling or end up stifling interaction.

In 1977, **Tuckman and Mary Ann Jensen** proposed a fifth stage which they called **Adjourning**. This is when a group ends. This could be planned or unplanned and examples include players leaving to join other clubs or the goal that brought the team together in the first place (eg winning Olympic gold) being accomplished. Whether the circumstances are
happy or sad, the Adjourning phase is always stressful and can feel like mourning for a deceased loved one. However, this can be a time for self-evaluation.

Tuckman’s model was hugely influential and was cited in hundreds of other studies within a few years of publication. Tuckman admits that the rhyming titles might have had something to do with the popularity of the theory. All of Altman’s original 50 studies were in business or educational settings, none of them were sport-specific. However, it has been made use of by sports psychologists to explain the dynamics of teams. (NB. in Tuckman’s theory, “team” means any strong group, not necessarily a sporting one).

The model is particularly useful for coaches. In the Forming phase, the group needs to be directed because it has no purpose or motivation of its own. During the troublesome Storming phase, coaches need to encourage tolerance and appreciation of each other’s strengths. The coach can allow the team greater and greater freedom during the Norming phase and participates with the players rather than directing them. Delegation is the key to the Performing phase, since the team should be able to run itself.

Altman’s original studies all looked at small groups of less than half a dozen. This might not generalise to larger groups like Olympic squads or even football teams. Although Tuckman insists on a linear (straight-line) progression through the stages, this might be too reductionist. Perhaps some groups are able to “skip” a stage? Why should everyone in the group be at the same stage? And although Tuckman’s rhyming labels are cute and memorable, are they really the best descriptions of each stage? The Storming Phase, in particular, can be so different for different groups, that it might be hopelessly simplistic to give it the one label. For example, one group’s Storming Phase might involve screaming rows, walk-outs and fights. Another might involve sulks, back-biting and moaning. Tuckman’s emphasis on autonomy and the importance of productive conflict probably reflect his American bias, which makes the model ethnocentric.

View this web page for a more detailed summary and evaluation of Tuckman's theory. There's a shorter, simpler summary on this web page from Chimaera Consulting.

Tuckman's theory comes from the Social approach, which looks out how people are shaped by their social circumstances. For example, British researcher Meredith Belbin (1981) took a very different dispositional approach by looking at the 8 ROLES people fill in a team; for example SHAPERS challenge the team to improve while MONITORS analyse the options and CO-ORDINATORS act as an umpire during decision-making.

This web page from MindTools has an excellent summary of Belbin's theory. There's a shorter summary on the ChangingMinds website.
Social Loafing

“Synergy” is the name given to the constructive power of teamwork, when *the group is greater than the sum of its parts*. In fact, this doesn’t always occur and quite often groups are less effective than the sum of all the individual effort going on. This was first tested in the early 20th century by Max Ringelmann (1927), who set up tug-o’-war teams to pull a rope attached to a strain gauge.

Ringelmann found that three contestants pulled with only 2½ times the average individual force; eight contestants pulled with less than 4 times the average individual force. Theories of Arousal tell us that people ought to be more effective in groups, especially at simple or well-learned tasks, so what is going on here?

- One theory is that people actually put in less effort when they realize they are in a group, because they think others will take up the slack. Professor Latané calls this SOCIAL LOAFING.
- Another explanation involves CO-ORDINATION ERRORS. The more people involved, the more likely they are to get in each other’s way or pull at different times.

Ringelmann’s study doesn’t make it clear which explanation is correct, so Bibb Latané set about recreating Ringelmann’s study but with some additional controls.

Prof. Bibb Latané (1979) created a similar lab experiment to Ringelmann’s, but wanted to avoid co-ordination errors. He recruited eight groups of male psychology students to do a simple task: clapping or cheering out loud, with a machine to measure sound pressure placed a few metres away. The students believed they were being asked to judge how much noise the others were making. The participants were allowed to practice for a while and then Latané carried out 36 trials of yelling and 36 trials of clapping, using single students, pairs or groups of 4 or 6.

The noise increased with group size, but not in proportion: people averaged 3.7 dynes/cm² alone, 2.6 in pairs, 1.8 in foursomes and 1.5 in groups of six. The participants put less effort into clapping and shouting when there were more of them taking part!

It’s still possible the drop in performance was not due to lack of motivation, but due to co-ordination errors or poor group efficiency. To investigate this, Latané replicated the experiment with new groups of male students. The participants were blindfolded with headphones: some were told they were shouting alone, others as part of a group. In fact, all were shouting alone.
When people believed one other person was shouting with them, they yelled 82% as intensely as when alone; if they thought five others were joining in, yelling was at 74%. These results make it clear that social loafing isn’t produced by co-ordination problems in groups, but by a drop in motivation when people believe they are taking part in a group task.

Social loafing is a very important idea for Sport Psychology, because coaches are trying to get the best out of their teams and a team with players who aren’t pulling their weight will lose to one where social loafing has been reduced. There are various techniques for combatting social loafing. J. Dan Rothwell offers solutions for social loafing in his book In The Company Of Others (2004); these are the “3 Cs”:

1. **Collaboration** gets everyone involved by giving each individual a special, meaningful task that is important to the group’s success.
2. **Content** involves singling out each individual’s contribution to the group, so they feel valued.
3. **Choice** enables team members to choose their roles, rather than have these “handed down” to them.

Latané et al. (1980) put ideas like these to the test. They set up a simulated swim meet featuring individual and relay events and the laps were timed. If the lap times were not announced, contestants swam slower in relay than in individual events; when lap times were announced, they swam faster in relay. This goes to show that monitoring individual effort reduces social loafing.

An interesting view of social loafing involves the effects of culture. P Christopher Earley (1989) compared Americans with Chinese participants. He found that while the Americans lost motivation in larger groups, the Chinese did not. Earley terms this **SOCIAL STRIVING**. It may be explained by the competitive, individualistic culture in America that downplays the importance of group efforts, whereas China has a collectivist culture that puts the group above the individual. Other studies suggest that social loafing may affect men more than women.

**Aspects of Group Cohesion**

Cohesion is the “glue” that binds a group of people together. A cohesive group acts together and sees itself as unified. A non-cohesive group pulls in different directions and sees itself as a collection of individuals. Several factors influence group cohesion:

- **Group size**: small groups are more cohesive than large groups (see Social Loafing).
• **External threats:** external threats force members (the IN-GROUP) to ignore internal divisions and unite against a common enemy (the OUT-GROUP).

• **Homogeneity:** cohesiveness increases if members have similar skill, age, experience, etc. The opposite is **heterogeneity** when the group members have little in common. The New Zealand rugby team’s Haka dance would be a good example of something that promotes a sense of homogeneity.

• **Stability:** it takes time for relationships to develop in a group; a group which has been in existence for a long time without changes in its make-up will be cohesive (think about the Tuckman Model).

• **Success:** successful performance is related to high group cohesion, but which causes which? Are cohesive groups successful, or does success make a group cohere?

Early research into this was uni-dimensional because it focused only on the emotional side of group cohesion. For example, Rainer Martens devised the **Sports Cohesiveness Questionnaire (SCQ)** in 1971 but most of the questions focused on how much team-mates liked each other.

Prof. Albert Carron (1982) is one of the main researchers into sport cohesion and proposes a multi-dimensional model of cohesion that makes a distinction between:

- **Social cohesion:** this reflects the emotional side of cohesion, which is how much the players like their team-mates and how much pleasure and pride they take in the group. Teams with high social cohesion might socialise together away from the sport, but this can lead to problems.

- **Task cohesion:** this is the players’ commitment to shared goals, the degree to which they are focused on the same thing and are working together for a common end (winning a tournament or breaking a record). Players with high task cohesion don’t have to like each other very much, but they will probably respect each other’s abilities.

Albert Carron suggests task cohesion affects performance more than social cohesion, especially in interactive sports like soccer – although players usually give social cohesion as one of their main motivations for sport.

**Carron et al. (1985)** devised the **Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ).** This questionnaire uses 18 Likert scale items to measure four dimensions of group cohesion: the individual’s perception of the group’s social cohesion, his attraction to the group’s social cohesion, the individual’s perception of the group task and the individual’s personal attraction to the group task.

Carron’s argument is that cohesiveness is “a dynamic process, which is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its goals and objectives.” Because cohesion is dynamic it is always changing and can’t be relied on just to appear or stay in place: it needs constant encouragement.

Albert Carron has been very persuasive in distinguishing between different types of cohesion and most sport psychologists now accept this. The implication of his research is that coaches should assess team cohesion and develop team-building strategies to improve task cohesion. Specifically, coaches could work on making sure that team members are clear about and happy with team goals and the level of shared commitment. They could also work on
developing good team communication and shared responsibility - developing the ‘we’ mentality.

Carron’s ideas are based on a meta-analysis of various studies of cohesion from the 1970s. A meta-analysis reviews previously published research and looks to find correlations between different authors’ findings. Carron brought a scientific framework to bear on this topic and swept away a lot of warm fuzzy thinking about group cohesion.

It’s not hard to produce sporting examples to support Carron’s model. In the 1980s the British rower Steve Redgrave won three Olympic golds with Andy Holmes despite the fact the two had a frosty personal relationship. In the 1990s, Redgrave was paired with Matthew Pinsent [right]; the two had a much warmer friendship but were just as focused on the task, winning three more gold medals.

Similarly, the Chicago Bulls dominated American basketball in the 1990s, though it was said the players were not even on speaking terms away from the court. However, after the England cricket team lost its World Cup match in the Caribbean, captain Andrew Flintoff was suspended after getting drunk and commandeering a pedalo – seemingly too much social cohesion, not enough task cohesion. Carron’s research into cohesion is ongoing. His studies suggest that cohesion affects women’s performance more than men’s and there may well be cultural differences or individual differences in how players perceive cohesion and how it affects their performance.