Too close for comfort? Distinguishing between team intimacy and team cohesion

Lisa Rosh a,⁎, Lynn R. Offermann b,1, Rhonda Van Diest c,2

a Department of Management, Yeshiva University, New York, NY 10016, USA
b Department of Organizational Sciences and Communication, The George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052, USA
c SeKON Enterprise, Inc., Herndon VA 20171, USA

ABSTRACT

The authors examine theory and research on team intimacy and team cohesion, and argue that the two have often been confused, merged, and used interchangeably in recent theoretical, empirical, and applied work on team effectiveness. The authors propose distinct definitions to clarify and distinguish between team intimacy and team cohesion, and suggest areas that will aid research and application. Their examination provides a framework for understanding the inconsistent findings in team effectiveness and team building research and thus helps to improve human resource management (HRM) interventions.

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Keywords:
Cohesion
Intimacy
Team performance

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⁎ Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 516 375 2147.
E-mail addresses: lrosh@yu.edu (L. Rosh), lro@gwu.edu (L.R. Offermann), rhonda.vandiest@sekon.com (R. Van Diest).
1 Tel.: +1 202 994 8507.
2 Tel.: +1 703 463 31297.

1053-4822/S – see front matter © 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.hrmr.2011.11.004
1. Introduction

Cohesion and intimacy are both widely cited and investigated variables related to the small-group process (Gillette, 1990; Gully, Devine, & Whitney, 1995). Although evolving from distinct psychological traditions in the study of groups, these concepts appear to have merged in recent theoretical, empirical, and applied inquiries into team effectiveness. The concepts of cohesion and intimacy both have “fuzzy boundaries” separating members from nonmembers, and lack a clear set of defining features (Laughlin, 1993; Prager, 1995; Rosch, Mervis, Gray, Johnson, & Boyes-Braem, 1976). Added to their fuzzy definitions are their origins from a diverse set of group literatures with different psychological traditions (Hunt, 1993) that have developed simultaneously. As studies of groups have become increasingly multidisciplinary endeavors (McGrath, 1997), these process variables have become increasingly confused with one another, and their related components have been misattributed. Integration of the diverse fields of group studies (i.e., group dynamics, intergroup relationships, group psychotherapy) has helped us understand effective and ineffective groups (Rossman, 1993) and has provided a rich lens for understanding team functioning (McGrath, 1997). However, integration has come at a cost. We have taken related concepts and used them interchangeably, obfuscating our understanding of group behavior.

Our purpose in this article is to examine the theoretical and applied integration of the concepts of cohesion and intimacy. To that end, we develop conceptual definitions, suggest areas to aid in research and application, and bring conceptual clarity to the concepts. The demystification of these psychological constructs will help us understand small group effectiveness, explain inconsistencies in the research on team effectiveness (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Cohen & Bailey, 1997), and further the development of appropriate HRM team-building interventions.

To set the context, in the first section of this article we briefly review the team performance literature, delineating key process variables and their relationship to performance. In the second section we review the concepts of team cohesion and team intimacy. Our scope here prohibits an exhaustive review of the vast literature that examines each concept. Rather, we endeavor to define each variable through its components, trace its conceptual origins, and examine how each relates to team performance. Building on the definitions generated, we review research examining the relationship between cohesion and intimacy, either implicitly or explicitly. Then we highlight areas in the team performance and team building literature that misrepresent the concepts. Finally, we develop future directions for research and practice related to team cohesion and team intimacy.

2. Team performance

The literature has widely explored the topic of team performance (Bettenhausen, 1991; Campion et al., 1993; Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Salas, Cooke, & Rosen, 2008; Salas, Stagl, & Burke, 2007). Customarily, team effectiveness has been measured either through unidimensional models of effectiveness (i.e., objective measures of team performance, real productivity) or through multidimensional models that examine effectiveness as more than productivity (i.e., member attitude, behavior outcomes) (Pina, Martinez, & Martinez, 2008). The most common measurements of team effectiveness are performance effectiveness (i.e., quantity and quality of outputs), member attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction, trust), and behavioral outcomes (i.e., turnover, absenteeism). The three effectiveness criteria are not equally important to all teams; their weight depends on the values and activities of the team (Pina et al., 2008).

The myriad studies that have examined team effectiveness components have used either “input–process–output” or theoretical “meta” frameworks (Salas, Stagl, & Burke, 2004; Salas et al., 2007). Variables in both models are similar; they differ in the importance allocated to each variable and their relationship with one another (Gil, Alcover, & Peiro, 2005). Common variables in these models include environmental factors (e.g., turbulence); task design factors (e.g., autonomy, interdependence), group composition (e.g., size, tenure), and group psychosocial traits (e.g., norms, shared mental models) (Cohen & Bailey, 1997).

In team performance models, cohesion and intimacy are traditionally categorized as process variables within the subset of group psychosocial traits. Differences lie in how team performance models categorize psychosocial traits. Some models see them as process variables (Antoni & Hertel, 2009), whereas others view them as separate but closely related to process variables (Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). In this article, we agree with Marks et al.’s (2001, p. 358) argument that psychosocial traits are not process variables because “they do not describe the nature of member interaction.”

Rosen (1989, p. 80) defined process as “how the group members relate to each other interpersonally in structuring themselves and performing the assigned or chosen task.” Process variables generally include internal interactions with team members and external interactions with outside constituents—interactions that include conflict, collaboration, and communication (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992). Group psychosocial traits are shared beliefs, emotions, or understandings—both inputs and proximal outcomes associated with team processes that include, for example, norms, affect, cohesion, and intimacy (Marks et al., 2001). Given that cohesion is relatively stable in groups that share extensive relationships (Mullen & Cooper, 1994), we agree with Cohen and Bailey’s (1997) perspective that shared beliefs, emotions, or understandings are relatively stable psychosocial traits, rather than Marks et al.’s (2001) view that they are emergent and dynamic cognitive and emotional states (Antoni & Hertel, 2009).

3 As in Cohen and Bailey’s (1997) work, we use the terms teams and groups interchangeably. Therefore, we define teams and groups using Alderfer’s (1972, p. 230) definition, “as a collection of individuals who have significantly interdependent relations with each other, who perceive themselves as a group, reliably distinguishing members from nonmembers, whose group identity is recognized by nonmembers acting alone or in concert, have significantly interdependent relations with other groups, and whose roles in the group are therefore a function of expectations from themselves, from other group members, and non-group members.” In some cases groups or teams will have high task interdependence and shared common goals (Dyer, 1984).

4 Fuzzy boundaries pertain to a reduction of constraints on membership of categories that are “cognitive classes of objects” (Laughlin, 1993, p. 18).
3. Cohesion

3.1. Definition

Cohesion is one of the most widely studied concepts in small-group performance and intra- and intergroup relations (Chiocchio & Essiembre, 2009; Evans & Dion, 1991; Gully et al., 1995; Mullen, Anthony, Salas, & Driskell, 1994; Mullen & Cooper, 1994), with conceptual roots in social psychology (Lewin, Lippit, & White, 1939). Although researchers have paid considerable attention to the concept, they have failed to clearly define it, and its relationship to group performance is somewhat uncertain. Cohesion has been described as “elusive” (Mullen et al., 1994), “a concept in search of a definition” (Beeber & Schmitt, 1986), and “a spectacular embarrassment in group theory research” (Kaul & Bednar, 1985). The confusion has been traced to the difficulty in defining, measuring, operationalizing, and experimentally manipulating cohesion (Bednar & Kaul, 1978; Bettenhausen, 1991; Carron & Brawley, 2000; Evans & Jarvis, 1980; Gully et al., 1995).

Researchers have defined cohesion in a variety of ways (Back, 1951; Cartwright, 1968; Gross & Martin, 1952; Libo, 1953; Lott, 1961; Organ & Hamner, 1982), and debate has abounded concerning cohesion’s conceptual boundaries. Despite differing opinions, most researchers have generally agreed that cohesion is a group-level variable (Gully et al., 1995) and have used Festinger’s (1968, p. 185) seminal definition of cohesion: “the total field of forces that acts on members to remain in the group.” Research on group cohesion has typically focused on identifying the sources of cohesion and examining its effect on group behavior and performance in work teams (Bettenhausen, 1991).

Festinger (1950) viewed cohesion as a product of group pride, interpersonal attraction, and commitment to the group task. Historically, studies of disagreement have focused on the dimensionality of group cohesion (Back, 1951; Schacter, Ellertson, McBride, & Gregory, 1951). Although some researchers have approached group cohesion as a unitary construct, others have emphasized its multidimensionality.

Initially, researchers formulated cohesion as a unidimensional concept (Lewin, 1935; Seashore, 1954; Van Bergen & Koekebakker, 1959). Others continued this thinking (Goodman, Ravlin, & Schminke, 1987; Hogg, 1992; Langfred, 1998, 2000; Lott & Lott, 1965; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 2002; Piper, Marrache, Lacroix, Richardson, & Jones, 1983). These unitary concepts of cohesion clearly and concisely define and outline the concept’s parameters, separating it from related constructs such as group norms or group performance orientation (Cota, Evans, Dion, Kilik, & Longman, 1995; Langfred, 2000), and differentiating it from its antecedents and consequences (Lott & Lott, 1965; Piper et al., 1983). Unitary definitions of cohesion, however, are deficient in that they focus more on individuals and less on groups (Casey-Campbell & Martens, 2009; Mudrack, 1989). Frequently they fail to differentiate between group tasks and social aspects (Mikalachi, 1969). Their narrow and diverse definitions limit their usefulness to one type of group and make it difficult to integrate findings (Cota, Evans, Dion, Kilik, & Longman, 1995).

Alternatively, multidimensional models posit that many factors influence group cohesion, factors that operate differently for each type of group. This perspective allows various components of cohesion to be related to different processes and outcomes, and thus provides superior predictive power (Dion, 2000). These multidimensional models are supported by factor-analytic studies (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985; Hagstrom & Selvin, 1965) and research that has explored the effectiveness of using cohesion to reduce conformity. Specifically, Bernthal and Insko (1993) established that the symptoms of groupthink depend on the levels of task and social cohesiveness. They found reduced groupthink tendencies with lower social cohesion levels and higher task cohesion levels, indicating that cohesion is not a unitary concept. Although those findings are compelling, groupthink research has failed to find adverse performance outcomes related to cohesion under groupthink conditions (Turner & Pratkanis, 1998). Accordingly, additional work is necessary.

The multidimensional perspective also has some limitations. Research comparing these models and integrating related findings is difficult given the volume and diversity of cohesion components (Cota, Evans, Dion, Kilik, & Longman, 1995). In addition, issues related to implementation of factor analysis techniques in the multidimensional cohesion literature have compromised the quality of individual empirical pieces and have made it difficult to credibly integrate the research (Cota, Longman, Evans, Dion, & Kilik, 1995). Cota, Longman, Evans, Dion, and Kilik (1995) specify four issues concerning factor analysis technique implementation that have damaged the quality of cohesion research: (a) reliance on individual group members as the unit of analysis rather than alternative analyses (e.g., intact groups, aggregate variables), which compromises the stability of the factor solutions; (b) selection of methodologies that cause over-extraction when “choosing the ‘correct’ number of factors or components to retain” (p. 309); (c) lack of replication on factor structure, which inhibits a thorough model evaluation; and (d) lack of systematic work on external correlates of factor solutions, which impedes an examination of the value and usefulness of the model.

Nevertheless, given these multidimensional models’ predictive power and the associated research support, we agree with Cota, Evans, Dion, Kilik, and Longman (1995, p. 576): “Multidimensional models have more potential than unidimensional models to accommodate what is known both empirically and theoretically about cohesion.” Thus, we use Festinger’s original and widely used conceptualization that operationalized cohesion using three components: interpersonal attraction (i.e., enjoying friendship, liking the group, getting along together, feeling a sense of “belongingness”), commitment to the task (i.e., gaining enjoyment from the task, being personally involved in team activities), and group pride (i.e., perceiving that the group compares favorably with others of its kind, feeling pride in belonging to the group, believing the group is important to the success of the broader organization) (Mullen & Cooper, 1994). Implicit in this definition of cohesion are both task and interpersonal components.

Some research has suggested that the task and interpersonal dimensions are not components of a singular concept, but are rather a type of cohesion. Building on the work of Parsons and Bales (1953), some studies have suggested that groups enjoy both task-oriented and social-emotional-oriented types of cohesion (Tziner, 1982a, 1982b; Brawley, Carron, and Widmeyer (1993, p. 248) defined social-emotional-oriented cohesion as “a general orientation toward developing and maintaining social
relationships within the group”; whereas the task aspect involves “a general orientation toward achieving the group’s goals and objectives.” Social cohesion is similar to the interpersonal attraction component of cohesion, and task cohesion is similar to the commitment component.

3.2. Cohesion–performance effect

Research examining the relationship between cohesion and performance has a long history (Schacter et al., 1951; Seashore, 1954). In fact, much of the research addressing cohesion has examined its predictive nature on group performance (Mullen et al., 1994). In this literature, performance has referred to effectiveness measures such as quality, innovation, efficiency, productivity, response times, and customer satisfaction, or to behavioral measures such as safety, turnover, and absenteeism (Cohen & Bailey, 1997). Researchers have examined many components that influence the relationship between cohesion and performance within groups, including group interaction and group size. Our review concentrated on research that has explored the strength and direction of relationship between these two constructs (e.g., Mullen et al., 1994) and the relative contribution of the different components of cohesion to performance (Mullen & Cooper, 1994).

Many meta-analyses have been conducted on the cohesion–performance relationship (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003; Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002; Chiocchio & Essiembre, 2009; Evans & Dion, 1991; Evans & Jarvis, 1980; Gully et al., 1995; Mullen & Cooper, 1994; Mullen et al., 1994; Oliver, Harmon, Hoover, Hayes, & Pandhi, 1999). Using experimental data from both field and laboratory studies, each of these analyses has indicated a moderately strong positive relationship between cohesion and performance. The Mullen et al. (1994) meta-analysis focused specifically on group cohesiveness effects on the quality of group decisions. Cohesion was found to impair decision making when the operationalization of cohesion entailed more interpersonal attraction. When the operationalization of cohesion entailed more commitment to task or group pride, decision making improved. This is consistent with other research that has suggested that task cohesion is related to performance, whereas social cohesion is related to groupthink (Tziner, 1982a, 1982b).

Mullen and Cooper (1994) also found support for the idea that cohesion has both task and interpersonal relationship components. Their meta-analysis examined cohesion–performance relationships using multiple components of cohesion. Most significant in their analysis was the finding that high performance was primarily related to the commitment to task rather than to interpersonal attraction or group pride.

In measuring cohesion, Gully et al. (1995) considered level of analysis and task interdependence and supported a positive relationship between performance and cohesion. Studies that used a group level of analysis and teams with highly interdependent tasks showed more robust results (Cohen & Bailey, 1997). Oliver et al. (1999) found similar results when examining group cohesion in military units. Their study found a disparity between the relationship of group performance and individual performance with cohesion; group performance had a stronger and more stable relationship.

In contrast to Mullen and Cooper’s (1994) findings, Beal et al. (2003) disconfirmed the primacy of task cohesion; they found all three components of cohesion to be positively related to performance with “a stronger correlation between cohesion and performance when performance was defined as behavior (as opposed to outcome), when it was assessed with efficiency measures (as opposed to effectiveness measures), and as patterns of team workflow become more intensive” (p. 989). However, the researchers lacked studies for examining each criterion variable in relationship to each cohesion component.

In the most recent meta-analytic review of cohesion and performance, Chiocchio and Essiembre (2009) chose to differentiate the cohesion–performance correlations according to team type (e.g., project, service, production) and setting (e.g., academic or organizational). Their findings indicated 33 cohesion–performance correlations, with team type and team setting acting as moderators. They found that task cohesion was more strongly related to performance than was social cohesion but only in academic-project teams and in outcome performance rather than behavioral performance, which clarified the disparate findings of Mullen and Cooper (1994) and Beal et al. (2003) concerning task and relationship cohesion.

Research examining the direction of the relationship between cohesion and performance has produced contradictory results (Levine & Moreland, 1990; Mullen & Cooper, 1994; Staw, 1975). Mullen and Cooper (1994) concluded in their meta-analysis that cohesion does, in fact, produce better performance; however, they found stronger evidence that performance produces cohesion. Their study has been criticized for its small sample size (Chang & Bordia, 2001) and methodological issues (Gully et al., 1995). Chang and Bordia (2001) also found a reciprocal relationship between cohesion and performance but found stronger evidence that cohesion produces performance. Given their small sample and contradictory findings, they aptly called for additional research investigating this relationship.

Group norms that are “standards that regulate group members’ behavior” (Forsyth, 1999, p. 121) have been shown to moderate cohesion’s effect on performance. Group research examining the effects of cohesion and group norms on performance has consistently demonstrated that group cohesion determines the energy and effort group members expend; group norms determine the direction they will take (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Hoigaard, Säfvenbom, & Tonnessen, 2006; Langfred, 1998; Mullen & Cooper, 1994).

In sum, cohesion is currently viewed as a multidimensional construct involving group pride, task commitment, and interpersonal attraction. Recent research has supported a positive relationship between team cohesion and performance, where the effect is primarily because of task commitment rather than interpersonal attraction. As discussed above, group pride is sometimes, but not always, related to performance. When group pride is based on successful past performances, the group may reflect collective efficacy, or what Guzzo and Shea (1992) called potency related to performance expectations and, ultimately, to performance itself. Feelings of pride that are unrelated to team performance efficacy would not be expected to relate to future performance. Social cohesion elements such as interpersonal attraction and generic group pride may be relevant organizational correlates, but
they appear to be unrelated to performance outcomes. In fact, some empirical evidence indicates that social elements of cohesion relate to team viability rather than performance (Chang, 1999), often a desirable end alone.

4. Intimacy

4.1. Definition

Intimacy refers to relationships between pairs, and has been traditionally studied at the interpersonal level (Horvath & Van Diest, 1998; Prager, 1995). The group development literature, however, has examined intimacy on the group level (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Bion, 1961; Dunphy, 1964; Kaypers, Davies, & Glaser, 1986; Levine, 1979; Mills, 1964; Schultz, 1958) as being important for promoting group awareness (Barker, 1991). However, even in the group development literature, group-level intimacy, like cohesion, has been rarely defined and has been inconsistently named. References to this concept have been labeled, for example, concern for affection (Dunphy, 1968), member orientation toward intimacy (Bennis & Shepard, 1956), and psychological closeness (Shambaugh, 1978). As Gillette (1990, pp. 87–88) said in his review of the intimacy literature, “the theoretical work that has been done on intimacy in work groups has been at best unclear and at worst misleading.”

The study of group intimacy originated in psychotherapy, which views psychological problems as the result of intra-psychic conflicts, unconscious motivations, and the interplay of external demands with components of the personality structure (Hunt, 1993). Group intimacy has mostly been explored in relationship to self-development, understanding, and exploration in therapy groups. These self-study groups have failed to consider the task and the larger contextual environments that teams face in work organizations (Gillette, 1990).

Thus, intimacy shares with cohesion the distinction of being difficult to define. Researchers have different opinions about its precise components (Prager, 1995). However, unlike cohesion, intimacy has been traditionally seen as an interpersonal attribute, and little work has examined group level intimacy. Most theorists have agreed that intimacy is an emotional state in which people care about and trust one another. Erikson (1963) purported that intimacy involves a willingness to compromise and sacrifice one’s being for the partner’s benefit or for the relationship itself, if necessary. Amidon and Kavanaugh (1981) defined intimacy as a focus on familiarity or closeness with another or others. Egan (1970) defined intimacy as an interpersonal experience characterized by self-disclosure and the giving and receiving of feedback. Prager (1995, p. 67), in the most comprehensive work to date on intimacy, defined it as a “a positively cathected psychological relationship between two or more people in which partners share that which is private and personal with one another.” Intimacy therefore involves both intimate interactions and intimate relationships.

Partners in intimate interactions share personal and private information, feel positively about each other and themselves, and perceive a mutual understanding. They share regular intimate interactions, feel affection for one another, trust one another, and enjoy cohesiveness. The concept of cohesion is therefore imbedded within the concept of intimacy, which is dynamic and requires continuing mutual engagement (Sexton & Sexton, 1982). Trust and self-disclosure are essential to the development of intimate relationships (Horvath & Van Diest, 1998). In addition, intimacy is a basic human need that involves our innermost selves (Gillette, 1990). Developing private, personal relationships with others is a basic motivator (Sullivan, 1953). Thus, intimacy is a fundamental component of human nature.

4.2. Intimacy–performance effect

Most work relating group intimate behavior to performance has concentrated on the power of intimacy to increase awareness and knowledge of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functioning of the self and others. Shadish (1984) identified that intimate behavior indicated beneficial outcomes for clinical groups. Amidon and Kavanaugh (1979, 1981), Holt and Miller (1977), and Kavanaugh and Holt (1980) suggested that intimacy indicated effective functioning for clinical groups (e.g., encounter, sensitivity, therapy, behavioral skills). Barker (1991) found that intimate behaviors enhanced group awareness for self-analytic groups and enhanced effectiveness of self-study groups.

In related studies on intimacy and the group context, some researchers have examined adult intimate dyadic relationships in social networks (Wilier & Anderson, 1981). Some have shown that network relationships are arranged in a hierarchy of centrality or importance. Important relationships in an adult’s network, particularly romantic relationships, affect the amount of intimacy in friendships (Morgan, 1990; Surra, 1985); an increase in intimate behaviors with romantic partners decreases intimacy with friends.

One study explicitly examined the effect of self-disclosure and team performance. In a lab study, Munoz (2003) hypothesized that self-disclosure of personal information would create a sense of oneness, and this closeness would cause team members to perform better, but found no relationship between self-disclosure and team performance. The author suggested that a weak self-disclosure manipulation might have caused the findings.

In sum, intimacy is currently viewed as a basic individual need that is characterized by intimate interactions and intimate relationships. Because it is so basic, we assume that at least some people will seek and value intimacy in their work relationships as they do in their other relationships. Although intimate relationships have been shown to increase interpersonal and self-knowledge in study-group settings, their link with performance outcomes in work relationships such as those in work teams is unclear.
5. Methodological issues

Although researchers have focused more on measuring cohesion in group settings than on measuring intimacy, both constructs face similar methodological issues. The two most significant measurement concerns are the dimensionality of the constructs and the level of analysis suitable for measuring each concept (Bagarozzi, 1997; Casey-Campbell & Martens, 2009; Gist, 1987; Lindsley, Brass, & Thomas, 1995).

Dimensionality is a conceptual issue that is reflected in measurement choices. As addressed previously in regard to cohesion, researchers have viewed these two concepts differently. Some have believed they are unitary constructs (Alford, 1982; Guerney, 1977; Miller & Lefcourt, 1982; Seashore, 1954); others have seen them as being multidimensional (Carron et al., 1985; Schaefer & Olson, 1981). These diverse conceptualizations are reflected in measurement choices such as the number of scales and questionnaire items (Dion, 2000; Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003). For example, Seashore (1954), viewing group cohesion as a unitary construct, designed a five-item scale that evaluated members’ attraction to their group. Carron et al. (1985), with a multidimensional perspective, developed the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ), an 18-item questionnaire that measured four factors of group cohesion: how the team functions on a social level, how the team functions to achieve team goals, how attracted the members are to the team’s social environment, and how attracted the members are to the team’s goals.

Likewise, for intimacy, Miller and Lefcourt (1982) developed the Miller Social Intimacy Scale (MSIS) as a one-dimensional measure, although factor analytic studies failed to support this contention (Hook et al., 2003). Schaefer and Olson (1981) developed the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR), a multidimensional instrument that examined the actual and ideal levels of intimacy in five distinct areas.

The other major methodological issue facing these two constructs revolves around deciding which level of analysis is suitable to measure each concept. As reflected in our conceptual discussion, although team cohesion and intimacy are group level constructs, they are most often defined and operationalized at the individual level for cohesion and at the interpersonal level for intimacy (Casey-Campbell & Martens, 2009; Dion, 2000; Hook et al., 2003). As Lindsley et al. (1995, p. 648) indicated, “there are certain cognitions that group and organizational members have which are quite different and distinguishable from the beliefs they experience as individuals in isolation, or in other contexts outside the group or organization. These cognitions are collective, group-based beliefs, arising from an individual’s ability to cognitively consider social entities larger than him or herself. They are emergent properties of the social system rather than the individual, and they cannot be reduced to their constituent parts.”

Four primary methodologies are available to measure group-level constructs. The team cohesion and intimacy literature (Casey-Campbell & Martens, 2009; Dion, 2000; Gist, 1987; Hook et al., 2003; Lindsley et al., 1995) most often use group members or aggregate group variables as the unit of analysis and measure the construct through aggregating or averaging individual perceptions (Gist, 1987; Lindsley et al., 1995). Both methodologies treat the group as an entity. In one approach, group members collectively respond to a survey requiring them to reach a consensus on their responses. In another approach, group members report their group’s collective beliefs (Gist, 1987; Lindsley et al., 1995).

Because aggregate variables are more reliable than data from individuals, and considering that alternative units of analysis potentially provide different dimensions and construct perspectives (Cota, Longman, Evans, Dion, & Klik, 1995), future research on cohesion and intimacy will benefit from using multiple units of analysis in data collection as well as data analytic techniques such as hierarchical linear modeling that allows researchers to examine relationships within and across hierarchical levels (Dion, 2000).

6. The relationship between cohesion and intimacy

Few researchers have directly examined the relationship between cohesion and intimacy, although the two experiences are generally accepted as overlapping but different. The definitions developed in the previous sections reveal that intimacy requires cohesion, but cohesion may or may not include intimacy (Prager, 1995). Cohesive experiences may lead to intimacy but often do not. In his work on psychotherapy groups, Corey (1981) showed that identification with others eventually brings closeness, which allows group members to help each other work through fears related to intimacy. Once intimacy is developed, however,
it can produce deeper cohesion if other factors such as trust, self-disclosure, and mutual understanding are present (Horvath & Van Diest, 1998; Prager, 1995).

Humans have a need for intimacy that leads to deeper interpersonal and intrapersonal understanding. By contrast, they presumably enjoy cohesion, but it is not essential to their human experience. Cohesion is related most frequently to productivity on a task level. To date, the research examining the link between the two constructs has been scarce and mostly limited to the context of marriage and friendship (Beach, Mendolia, & Tesser, 1992; Beach, Sandeen, & O’Leary, 1990; Beach & Tesser, 1988). In terms of these personal domains, research has indicated that cohesion and intimacy can be distinguished on the dimension of depth of the relationship and emotional intensity.

A visual representation of the proposed relationship between the concept of cohesion and intimacy is presented in Fig. 1. As shown, intimacy and cohesion overlap, but each has distinguishing characteristics. Both intimacy and cohesion involve interpersonal attraction and group pride; members of both intimate and cohesive groups like each other and wish to maintain affiliation with their valued group. This sector represents what is often termed social cohesion, and is the part of cohesion that is probably less related to task performance but more related to team viability (Chang, 1999). Intimacy also requires intimate interaction, interpersonal affection, and primary commitment to the relationship, whereas cohesion requires primary commitment to tasks.

However, interpersonal affection and interpersonal attraction are separated by more than depth of feeling. Interpersonal affection is generally regarded as a fundamental human need (Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972) that develops over time and is not innate or easily evoked; it is conditioned and target-specific, regardless of the setting (Floyd, 2006). Alternatively, interpersonal attraction is “an individual’s tendency or predisposition to evaluate another person or the symbol of the person in a positive (or negative) way” (Berscheid & Walster, 1978, p. 2). Interpersonal attraction is an attitude; unlike affection, it can be innate, visceral, and can occur without fondness, usually during task performance (Floyd, 2006). Interpersonal attraction and interpersonal affection are different constructs; their relationship depends on situational components. Interpersonal attraction may indicate a desire to establish intimacy with another, or it may simply indicate a desire to initiate contact (Graziano & Bruce, 2008; Simpson & Harris, 1994).

Research is needed within organizational contexts to examine the relationships between cohesion and intimacy. Table 1 presents a proposed framework for organizational research in these areas; the framework differentiates cohesion and intimacy on the basis of the depth, intensity, and origin of relationships. It also suggests a continuum of relationship depth between the entry state of individuals first confronted with a group task, through the development of cohesion typified by high task focus and task performance and moderate intimacy and interpersonal sharing, to a state of true intimacy where relationship maintenance overtakes task commitment as the primary group goal.

As shown in Table 1, individuals typically enter new groups tentatively; unsure of their roles and potential contributions and of the roles other group members will play. They may be more or less optimistic about the prospective group, based on past experience and knowledge of others in the group; in any case they initially focus more on themselves than on others. Much of what we know about how individuals behave when they enter groups has come from social psychological work in laboratory settings. The cohesion and intimacy literatures described earlier examined groups that shared a history. We suggest that groups develop increasing intimacy over time, and that task-related sharing and disclosure are positive and necessary if teams are to be productive and successful. When groups form a collective mind but fail to develop values, openness, and disclosure, we find what Weick (1993) and Weick and Roberts (1993) called combined undeveloped-group-developed mind. These group situations are built from what Eisenberg (1990, p. 60) called nondisclosive intimacy that “stresses coordination of action over alignment of cognitions, mutual respect over agreement, trust over empathy, diversity over homogeneity, loose over tight coupling, and strategic communication over unrestricted candor.”

The interpersonal attraction, task commitment, and group pride characteristics of high cohesion are likely to be associated with optimal task performance. Under cohesion, however, trust and disclosure are moderate and focused on task relevance; cohesive relationships may be good but not necessarily deep. Cohesive teams are optimally bounded both psychologically and physically

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<td>Tentative</td>
<td>Interpersonal attraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical base</td>
<td>Social psychology</td>
<td>Social Psychology: Illinois School (McGrath, 1997)</td>
<td>Psychotherapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Lab setting</td>
<td>Work teams</td>
<td>Therapy groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective orientation</td>
<td>Individual (self)</td>
<td>Team</td>
<td>Subgroups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Self trust</td>
<td>Task: high</td>
<td>Interpersonal trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure</td>
<td>Task: low</td>
<td>Task: high</td>
<td>Task: moderate to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interpersonal: low</td>
<td>Optimaly bounded</td>
<td>Interpersonal: high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>Not bounded</td>
<td></td>
<td>Over or under-bounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill utilization focus</td>
<td>Task: limited, unfocused</td>
<td>Task: high</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance outcomes</td>
<td>Individual performance</td>
<td>Relationship: limited, unfocused</td>
<td>Relationship: high</td>
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<td></td>
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Table 1
Distinguishing characteristics between cohesion and intimacy.
for suboptimization. Weick and Roberts (1993, p. 375) saw this as contributors into fully functional teams, yet the continued development of intimacy beyond the point of cohesion is a recipe has specifically examined intimacy under groupthink conditions. No work has found no evidence that cohesion in groupthink conditions negatively influences outcomes (Turner & Pratkanis, 1998). No work has specifically examined intimacy under groupthink conditions. Building more intimate relationship-oriented behaviors (i.e., trust, sharing) is essential in changing groups of independent contributors into fully functional teams, yet the continued development of intimacy beyond the point of cohesion is a recipe for suboptimization. Weick and Roberts (1993, p. 375) saw this as “a combination of a developed group-undeveloped mind.” These situations lead to “a subordination to a system that is envisaged carelessly” and in which “contributions are made thoughtlessly.”

We propose that the literature’s failure to differentiate cohesion and intimacy can explain previous conflicting results on team effectiveness and team building interventions. In the next section we examine how differentiation of the two concepts can help us better understand the dynamics of group process in work teams.

7. The confounding of cohesion and intimacy

The literature on team effectiveness and team-building has shown both conceptual and practical areas in which the concepts of intimacy and cohesion appear to be confounded. The literature has shown that efforts aimed at creating highly cohesive environments have often used interventions associated with the development of intimacy.

7.1. Conceptual issues

Research seeking ways to best create cohesive team environments has often used and examined intimate behaviors. A small body of research has suggested self-disclosure for creating cohesion, although self-disclosure is an intimate behavior that creates intimacy, not cohesion (Prager, 1995). One purpose of self-disclosure is to grow, continue, or perpetuate trust, which is key to intimacy (Zand, 1997). Self-disclosure allows individuals to know one another and is important in personal and interpersonal growth (Jourard, 1958). On the other hand, self-disclosure in a group may be alienating; members may prefer to associate with those who withhold personal information to those who reveal too much too quickly (Query, 1964). In two-person encounters in which each is forced to disclose personal information, greater mutual liking is a likely result. However, in group situations where members can avoid disclosure, early self-disclosure may alienate others, although several group sessions may reduce those feelings (Ribner, 1974).

Studies examining environments with high intimate interactions have found no correlation with cohesion. Rainey and Schweickert (1988) found that a 10-day road trip failed to foster cohesion among members of a college baseball team. However, compared with the players who stayed home, those who went on the trip reported higher social attraction and lower task integration. We may understand these results through a cohesion/intimacy framework. Experiences such as road trips provide environments for the expression and development of emotionally intense experiences, which lead to intimacy but not cohesion. Therefore, such experiences will foster self-knowledge and interpersonal knowledge, but not performance. However, when environments stimulate task enjoyment, group pride, and interpersonal liking, both cohesion and performance are enhanced (Alexander, 1986; Banning & Nelson, 1987; Duncan & Feisal, 1989). Humor, for example, may increase bonds of sociability and foster cohesion, without necessarily developing intimacy. This confusion in operationalization is also evident in the literature regarding consequences of excessive cohesion. Researchers have long hypothesized that beyond a certain point, high cohesion may become dysfunctional. Fisher and Ellis (1994, p. 60) stated, “As a group approaches extremely high cohesiveness, it tends to decrease productivity.” Similarly, Hill (1975) suggested that moderate group tension, rather than total harmony, increases productivity. Shepherd (1964, p. 124) stated, “Cohesion is an internal product which in a successful group is likely to be high. Productivity is partly an external product, the contribution of output of a group, which is also likely to be high in a successful group.” Shepherd contended that cohesion and productivity share a complex relationship. In some circumstances, cohesion and productivity are directly related; in others, they are inversely related; and in still other situations, they are curvilinear.

In an often-quoted study, Schacter et al. (1951) found no necessary relationship between cohesiveness and high productivity. Yet research that has examined the relationship between highly cohesive environments and performance has produced mixed results (Fisher & Ellis, 1994). One explanation for the discrepancies may be that these experiments manipulated different variables. We suggest that at times researchers may have studied highly cohesive groups; at other times they may have studied highly intimate groups; and at other times they may have studied both. Nevertheless, studies have failed to prove that high intimacy is related to work-group task performance. In fact, some researchers have argued that the maintenance of intimate relationships takes time and energy that decreases the resources available to focus on performance (Bion, 1961). Maintaining a group’s emotional life and task life is difficult and sometimes impossible. Therefore, the effects of high intimacy might confound the findings surrounding highly cohesive groups.
7.2. Practical issues

Team building is “a long-term, data-based intervention in which an intact work group experientially learns to increase its skills for effective team work by utilizing a structured agent, usually with the aid of behavioral-science consultants” (DeMeuse & Liebowitz, 1981, p. 359). Beer (1976) outlined four models of team building: (a) goal-setting model, (b) interpersonal model (communication and conflict resolution), (c) role model, and (d) managerial grid model.

The interpersonal model is based on the assumption that an interpersonally competent team is more effective. Some of these interventions, touted to increase cohesion and performance, state that their goal is to open communication by increasing mutual trust and interpersonal cooperation. However, they may in reality increase intimate behaviors and relationships by fostering self-disclosure, emotional closeness, and intense relationships (French, Bell, & Zawacki, 1978).

Woodman and Sherwood (1980a, 1980b) reviewed the empirical team-building literature and categorized team-building evaluation studies using Beer’s (1976) model. This review of studies that used strong research designs included 30 articles: 4 using the interpersonal approach, 12 involving the goal-setting approach, 3 employing the managerial grid model, and 1 using the role model approach. The review found that the goal-setting and interpersonal models were most commonly used; the goal-setting model was most effective in improving performance; and the interpersonal interventions were the least effective. The studies included in the review, however, have been criticized for their imprecise operational definitions and poor methodology (Buller, 1982, 1986; DeMeuse & Liebowitz, 1981).

Klein et al. (2009) conducted the most comprehensive investigation into the effectiveness of team building to date. They examined four specific team-building components (goal setting, interpersonal relations, problem solving, and role clarification) on process, affective, cognitive, and performance outcomes. They found a positive moderate effect across all outcomes, with affective and process outcomes most strongly related to team building. Consistent with past research, they found goal-setting and role clarification components the most effective interventions for improving team function, and interpersonal relations and problem-solving components least effective.

This evidence significantly shows the weakness of interpersonal interventions. These studies used interventions that typically call for self-disclosure and emotionally laden interactions, which may have unwittingly stimulated intimate environments rather than cohesive ones.

8. Implications for practice and research

The research reviewed previously indicated that organizational development practitioners must be vigilant when creating environments for high-performing teams. We suggest that interventions have often hoped for cohesion but instead created intimacy. Most work on team-building activities (Beer, 1976; Dyer, 1977; French et al., 1978) has tended to focus on establishing trust, intense relationships, and open and honest communication. These interventions are behaviors and relationships related to intimacy, although research has never proven that intimacy relates to group productivity. In fact, Lewicki, McAllister, and Bies (1998) argued that extreme trust and active obstruction of distrust may be related to groupthink. As stated previously, this is consistent with the groupthink literature that demonstrates when cohesion has been studied under groupthink conditions it has not adversely influenced outcomes (Turner & Pratkanis, 1998). Thus far, the relationship between intimacy and team outcomes has not been explored under groupthink conditions.

Creating a cohesive environment without creating an intimate environment may be difficult because, as we have shown, the two processes are related. Team-building practitioners may want to suggest activities that stimulate components of cohesion that are not directly related to intimacy; specifically, they may choose to develop a group’s task commitment and task-based sense of collective efficacy. In fact, as we review the literature on team building, we see that the most effective team-building efforts are task-based approaches related to goal and role clarity (Woodman & Sherwood, 1980a, 1980b). Goal and role clarity are related to non-permeable psychological boundaries (Alderfer, 1980) and therefore create an environment conducive to the development of cohesion, not intimacy (Prager, 1995).

As a universal human need, intimacy is expressed wherever people interact. Current trends in the work environment, such as the increase in group structures (McGrath, 1997) and the blurring of work and private lives (Marks, 1994), have individuals interacting longer and more intensely. Thus, workplace intimacy may be more widely expressed in today’s work environment than ever before. Organizational development practitioners would be prudent to develop structures, processes, and interventions to help individuals effectively manage the related behaviors and emotions that correlate with the expression of intimacy.

Research has clearly indicated that intimacy and cohesion are separate but related concepts. Recently, the group-level cohesiveness literature has delineated clear components of the concept of cohesion—a positive step, in our view. Efforts to define group-level intimacy are scarce and fall short of developing a comprehensive paradigm encompassing its many elements. More concerted efforts are needed to confirm the components of group cohesion and clarify their relation to the constituents of group intimacy. In addition, it is imperative that we understand how cohesion and intimacy are related in work groups and how, in turn, they are related to productivity. Although some research has examined these concepts separately, no research has as yet determined how they affect one another and how they influence productivity in organizationally based work groups rather than therapy groups.

Egan (1970) suggested that the group, by its nature, gives its members permission to engage each other at deeper and more intimate levels of interaction than they experience in day-to-day interactions.
Finally, we suggest that more work is needed to examine the relationship between identity group memberships (Alderfer, 1977) and the expression and management of intimacy in work groups. Individual-level research in these areas has suggested that intimacy may be different for men and women, which has implications for the development of intimate relationships (Erikson, 1963; Gilligan, 1982) that may then affect group performance.

Further research is also needed to determine the effect of individual differences on the expression of intimacy and cohesion and to help us unravel the mysteries of high-performing teams. In addition, research that delineates team-building activities as they relate to the development of intimacy and/or cohesion may help us implement effective team-based systems and manage intimacy in work groups.

9. Conclusion

Closer examination of the process of cohesion demonstrates that it is closely related to the process of intimacy. We believe that the literature’s failure to adequately differentiate between cohesion and intimacy has led to conflicting research and ineffective intervention techniques. We propose a theoretical distinction between the two concepts and call for additional research, particularly on the effects of team intimacy on team performance. Distinguishing the boundaries and bridges between cohesion and intimacy is critically important: to develop a team, it is essential to build intimate behaviors, but to optimize team performance, it is essential to avoid overdeveloped intimacy. Our most difficult but critical feat is finding a delicate balance between the two.

Acknowledgments

We gratefully thank Dr. John E. Delery and two anonymous reviewers for their thorough and helpful comments and suggestions.

References

