

Social cohesion in exercise groups may change over time but how and why? A letter to the editor regarding Dunlop et al. (2013)

Dunlop, Falk, and Beauchamp (2013) looked for changes over time in perceived group cohesion in group exercise classes given the connection between group cohesion and adherence to group exercise programs (Estabrooks & Carron, 1999). Group cohesion was measured using self-reports of social and task cohesion. Social cohesion included the participants' attraction to the group and perceived unity. Task cohesion was the group's interest in the classes and participants' perceived agreement in the group around the activities in the classes. Dunlop et al.'s (2013) study added to the field of health psychology and exercise by finding that social cohesion did indeed change over time, while task cohesion remained constant. While this article is a step toward a better understanding of group exercise dynamics, which can improve adherence rates, questions remain regarding the nature of group cohesion.

Though Dunlop et al.'s (2013) results are helpful, some of their conclusions may be misleading. Dunlop et al. (2013) conclude that given that social cohesion was more variable than task cohesion that it would be "more amenable to change through intervention" (p. 1243). However, the data in this study only focused on perceived social and task cohesion and not how each of these variables would react to interventions. Additionally, the conclusion that social cohesion changed as expected is also problematic. Previous studies (Carron & Brawley, 2000) expected that group cohesion in exercise classes would change over time by taking time to build. Dunlop et al. (2013) were the first to test this assumption and though they found that social cohesion did change, the results showed that social cohesion *decreased* in the early classes and *then*

increased slightly before the end of the program. Dunlop et al. (2013) neglect to mention how these results differed from the expectation that group cohesion builds over time. No hypotheses were provided on what this decrease means for group cohesion and more importantly, adherence to group exercise programs. Overall, though Dunlop et al.'s (2013) results are promising as they revealed the multidimensional nature of group cohesion (with social cohesion changing and task cohesion remaining static), we cannot yet deduce the precise nature of group cohesion, if it does in fact "require time to initially develop" (Carron & Brawley, 2000, p. 95), what the initial decrease in perceived social cohesion may suggest, the precise relationship to adherence, and the effect of interventions on social and task cohesion. Further exploration of these missing pieces will help Dunlop et al.'s (2013) study inform the public, researchers, and care providers in improving adherence to group exercise programs.

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