



Group cohesion and adherence in unstructured exercise groups



Kevin S. Spink^{a,*}, Jocelyn D. Ulvick^a, Alyson J. Crozier^a, Kathleen S. Wilson^b

^a University of Saskatchewan, College of Kinesiology, 87 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, Canada, S7N 5B2

^b California State University, Fullerton, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 July 2013

Received in revised form

20 November 2013

Accepted 26 November 2013

Available online 17 December 2013

Keywords:

Cohesion
Adherence
Exercise
Context

ABSTRACT

Objectives: Previous research has reported a positive relationship between perceptions of cohesion and adherence within structured exercise settings. Given that the social determinants of adherence can vary across situations, this study aimed to examine the cohesion–adherence relationship in unstructured exercise settings.

Design: This study employed a cross-sectional design.

Methods: Young adults ($N = 125$) recalled an unstructured exercise group where they had been participants, and then rated their perceptions of cohesion with respect to that group as well as reported the number of times/month they had been active in that group.

Results: Regression results revealed that cohesion was significantly related to adherence. Individuals who reported higher levels of task and lower levels of social cohesion, with both dimensions of cohesion reflecting the perceptions of the group as a totality, attended more sessions.

Conclusions: These findings extend research reporting that the cohesiveness perceived in a structured exercise group is related to adherence. However, there were two findings that were not consistent with previous research. The failure of the task dimension associated with satisfying personal needs and objectives to emerge as well as the emergence of a negative relationship with one of the social dimensions of cohesion suggest that the relationship between cohesion and adherence may play out differently in an unstructured versus structured setting with young adults.

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A growing body of evidence indicates that individuals' exercise participation is influenced by those around them. For instance, numerous studies have shown that perceptions about the cohesiveness of an exercise group impacts whether or not individual members adhere to the group (cf. Burke, Carron, & Shapcott, 2008). Exercise researchers have spent the last two decades examining the construct of cohesion across a wide range of populations, including youth (Bruner & Spink, 2011), adults (Kwak, Kremers, Walsh, & Brug, 2006), and older adults (Watson, Martin Ginis, & Spink, 2004). For the most part, these cohesion studies have focused on individuals exercising within structured groups (e.g., fitness classes). However, what is absent from this body of literature is the consideration that not all people who exercise with others do so in structured settings (cf. Spink et al., 2006).

This void is notable given the popularity of the unstructured exercise context. For example, among Canadian adults, more than half (56%) are active in unstructured settings (Canadian Fitness & Lifestyle Research Institute, 1997). Similarly, the United States

Department of Labor (2008) listed Americans' most "popular" forms of exercise as activities that are presumably conducted in unstructured settings, such as walking, weight lifting, and using cardiovascular equipment. Given its popularity and prevalence, examining physical activity in an unstructured setting appears warranted.

Not only is the lack of attention paid to unstructured exercise groups an apparent oversight, but also it is possible that the nature of the relationship between group cohesion and individual adherence to the group is situation-specific. As argued by Reis (2008) on a broader social level, basic processes of social behavior are not acontextual, and he suggests that it would not be wise to examine them in this way. Not only has this sentiment underscored the importance of distinguishing between different contexts (e.g., structured versus unstructured group settings), but also within physical activity settings, this particular distinction appears to result in different outcomes. Spink et al. (2006) found that the psychosocial correlates associated with activity participation differed across structured and unstructured activity settings. Insofar as the group is concerned, previous research also indicates that group variables play out differently as a function of varying exercise contexts. For instance, it was found that task dimensions of

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 306 966 1074.

E-mail address: kevin.spink@usask.ca (K.S. Spink).

cohesion were related to exercise participation in university settings whereas it was the social measures of cohesion that were related to adherence in private fitness clubs (Spink & Carron, 1994).

In terms of the structured/unstructured comparison, there also would appear to be some key distinctions that might suggest that cohesion could differ by context in the activity setting (Spink et al., 2006). One distinction concerns how the two groups typically form within each setting. Specifically, structured exercise groups (e.g., fitness class at a gym, running club) are ones in which the type, time, place, and frequency of exercise participation are predetermined by someone else outside of the group. In contrast, unstructured exercise groups (e.g., lifting weights with coworkers, walking with family or friends) are characterized by the fact that the type, time, place, and frequency of exercise participation are set by individual group members. Whereas members of a structured exercise group simply have to show up to a pre-scheduled exercise class, members of an unstructured exercise group have to cohere around factors related to group involvement in order to ensure that the group will meet and what will be done (e.g., choosing a time and place, agreeing on the specific activity). This implies a much greater degree of interdependence in that individuals will likely be influencing each other's activities and outcomes right from the outset of the proposed activity interaction (Reis, 2008). With this greater interdependence in unstructured settings, it is possible that the perceptions that members hold toward the cohesiveness of the group will align more with the group as a totality. This would contrast with exercising in a structured setting, where adhering to the group may be more associated with satisfying individual needs and objectives. This separation of the group as a totality versus individual needs has been a longstanding distinction made in the group literature (Zander, 1971).

A second distinction relates to differences that may exist in terms of the member interaction that occurs within the two exercise contexts. It is possible that members in the unstructured group may have more interaction with each other simply based on the fact that there is more necessity to interact. In unstructured settings, typically multiple interactions are required to allow the activity session to run efficiently and for the goals of the activity to be realized. Whether it is the reciprocity required to use the equipment in the gym, the need to decide which trail to take, or even the decision to end the session, all of these activities require interaction between members. While some structured exercise groups might support interaction and communication among individual group members (e.g., circuit classes, boot camps, run clubs), the norm is that many offer little to no opportunity for group member interactions (e.g., step aerobics, indoor cycling, yoga, Pilates). Once again, this assumed increased communication and interaction found in unstructured activity settings might heighten the interdependence among members in this group environment, and possibly change how members perceive the cohesiveness with the group (i.e., focusing on group versus individual perceptions of cohesion).

In recognizing that there may be contextual differences between structured and unstructured groups insofar as the salience/emergence of different cohesion perceptions, the current study sought to extend previous research by examining the relationship between cohesion and exercise adherence in unstructured exercise groups. Carron, Widmeyer, and Brawley's (1985) conceptual model of cohesion has been used as a framework for understanding cohesion in the exercise setting, and one of the model's assumptions captures the interdependence distinction highlighted above. Specifically, the cohesion model suggests that the cognitions that members hold about the cohesiveness of their group relate to perceiving the group in terms of satisfying personal needs and objectives as well as perceiving the group as a totality. The former

construct (related to personal needs) is captured by the group member's attraction to the group (ATG); the latter construct (related to group totality) is captured by member's perceptions of group integration (GI). Studies with young adults examining group cohesion from this perspective in a structured exercise setting typically find that individuals who report greater adherence to the group are the ones who perceive cohesiveness more in terms of satisfying personal needs and objectives (ATG factors) than perceiving the group as a totality. This finding has emerged across a number of adherence outcomes, including attendance (e.g., Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1988), dropout (Spink & Carron, 1994), and lateness (e.g., Spink & Carron, 1992, 1993).

However, as noted above, no studies have examined this relationship in an unstructured exercise setting. Given the proposition that there may be increased interdependence among members in an unstructured setting, it might be assumed that the member's perceptions of the activity group as a totality could be more important than a member's personal reasons when formulating perceptions of cohesiveness. Thus, it was predicted that the group integration (GI) factors would be more salient in unstructured exercise groups, and consequently, better predictors of adherence, than attraction to the group (ATG) factors.

Another key assumption made in the Carron et al. (1985) conceptual model of cohesion is the need to separate the task- versus socially-oriented concerns of groups and their members. The task concerns of a group are associated with task accomplishment while the social concerns have to do with developing and maintaining social relationships. In terms of the task/social distinction, the task aspect of cohesion appears to be more salient in structured exercise settings. Specifically, it has been found that an individual's attraction to the group's task (ATG-Task) typically is the cohesion factor most strongly associated with adherence in a structured exercise setting (Annesi, 1999; Spink & Carron, 1992, 1993). However, whether this focus on task concerns would translate to an unstructured setting is less clear.

In terms of possible scenarios, it could be argued that the task elements of the group would relate to adherence as they have in structured exercise groups, given that the members of the group are ostensibly coming together for task reasons (e.g., to increase fitness). However, the alternative, that the social aspects of the group may feature more prominently, also is a possibility given that members in unstructured exercise groups are likely to interact more, which would provide greater opportunity for social relationships to develop (Carron & Brawley, 2008). Given these equally probable outcomes, no specific *a priori* hypotheses were advanced concerning whether task or social dimensions would underpin the cohesion perceptions most associated with adherence in the unstructured exercise setting.

Methods

Participants and design

Individuals in this study were part of a larger online study ($N = 581$) examining physical activity behavior across a number of different settings. Only individuals (average age = 25.1 years) who reported participating in an unstructured exercise setting with others in the last six months ($N = 125$) were included in the current study. The majority (62.7%) of participants was female. The study was cross-sectional in design.

Procedures

Ethical approval was granted by the University Institutional Ethics Review Board. Participants were recruited via class

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