The Effect of Team Cohesion on Social Loafing in Relay Teams

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The purpose of this study was to investigate to what extent team cohesion influences social loafing in a 30-meter sprint relay. Thirty-nine male college sport students competed under high and low identifiable conditions in which the differences between sprint times were recorded. Faster running times under the identified condition than under the non-identified condition was seen as indicative of social loafing. In order to create variability in cohesion, the participants were randomly divided into ten teams, and half of the team participated in a team-building exercise. The results indicated that participants in the cohesive groups tended to perform equally well under identified and non-identified conditions, whereas those participants in the non-cohesive teams ran more slowly under the non-identified condition than under the identified condition. The results support our expectation that group cohesion reduces participants’ willingness to engage in social loafing.

**key words:** Group dynamics, social loafing, team cohesion, sport

Introduction

In competitive sport, maximizing performance or “winning” is often regarded as the main objective or goal (Lordanoglou, 1993), and the individual team members’ invested efforts would seem crucial for team success. However, research has found that effort and performance often are of a smaller magnitude than might be expected, given the individual’s abilities and potential. For individual activity in a team to be transformed into a group product, communication, coordination, and interaction are necessary. These factors can be relatively ineffective, and losses in efficiency may occur. In Steiner’s (1972) group effectiveness model it is noted that
actual group productivity often falls short of potential productivity owing to faulty group processes. Steiner has identified two main sources of reduced productivity: 1) co-ordination losses, comprising the group’s failure to optimally co-ordinate the contributions of the individual members, and 2) motivation losses, due to the members not exerting maximal effort in group settings. In the latter case, motivation losses appear to be due to the fact that, under some circumstances, individuals reduce their efforts when working in groups compared to when they work alone. This reduction in effort caused by motivation losses has been termed social loafing (Latané, 1986). Latané, Williams, and Harkins (1979) have described social loafing as a social disease which has negative consequences for individuals, groups, and society. Karau and Williams’ (1993) meta-analysis on social loafing showed that social loafing is evident for both genders, and across a number of group-oriented tasks. Moreover, social loafing seems more likely to occur when working with strangers, on tasks perceived as low in meaningfulness or personal involvement, or when a group-level standard is not available, and when individual outputs cannot be evaluated publicly. In particular, public evaluation or identifiability (e.g. making public each member’s contribution to the total group output) has been highlighted as a key situational factor that inhibits social loafing, and some researchers have explained social loafing as a motivational loss caused by reduced identifiability or evaluation (e.g., Hardy, 1990; Harkins, 1987; Kerr & Bruun, 1983; Latané et al., 1979).

Yet another factor that is seen as reducing social loafing is team cohesiveness. Team cohesiveness can be defined as: “…a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of members’ affective needs” (Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998; p. 213). Cohesion is viewed as a multi-dimensional construct, and especially the distinction between task cohesion and social cohesion has proven to be important in order to understand cohesion, and its effect on team performance (Cota, Longman, Evans, Dion, & Kilik, 1995; Mudrack, 1989; Mullen & Copper, 1994). In a meta-analysis on cohesion and team performance Mullen and Copper (1994) found that commitment to task (analogous to task cohesion) was significantly related to performance. Further, Carron, Colman, Wheeler, and Stevens (2002) in their meta-analysis on cohesion and performance found that both task and social cohesion are associated with performance. Despite some equivocal findings in the research into cohesion and performance, Carron et