

Cohesion Perception of Tunisian Elite Sport Children

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to examine perceptions of team cohesiveness in Tunisian sport elite children aged 9 to 12 years. Eighty-one young Tunisian athletes (43 males, 38 females) age 10.34 ± 1.87 years, from four elementary schools in the city of Tunisian voluntarily participated in this study. This work is designed to examine participants' perceptions of (a) the definition of cohesion and indicators of cohesive and no-cohesive groups and (b) methods used to attempt to develop cohesion in their groups. Overall, the results demonstrated that Tunisian sportive children understand the concept of cohesion and comprehend the phenomenon known as cohesion. Specifically, participant distinct to both task cohesion and social cohesion, describe the characteristics of cohesive and non-cohesive teams and identify methods used to attempt to develop cohesion in their groups.

Keywords: Cohesion; Children; Sports team

¹ *The order of appearance of the first and second authors was determined at random: both should be considered first authors.*

Introduction

In the field of sport psychology, the study of group dynamics has increased our understanding with regard to the nature and measurement of various group constructs including cohesion (e.g. Carron, Widmeyer and Brawley, 1985). Team cohesion is one of the key concepts within sport teams that have received substantial research attention over the last three decades (Carron and Eys, 2012; Spink, 2011). Cohesion 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 member affective needs” (Carron, Brawley, and Widmeyer, 1998, p. 213). Team cohesion is directly associated with other main sport measures (Delorme et al., 2011) such as collective efficacy (e.g., Spink, 1990), performance, adherence to team goals (Tauber and Sassenberg 2012) and achievement. In addition, Carron, Widmeyer, and Brawley (1985) suggested that there are two types of cohesion within sport teams: task and social. Task cohesion relates to team members’ unity toward achieving their collective performance goals whereas social cohesion pertains to the quality of the social interactions and the tendency for members to spend time with one another.

In the sport setting, preliminary results indicate the presence and importance of cohesion for younger populations (Martin et al., 2011). The research investigated with youth samples also demonstrated cohesion to be the main predictor of athlete satisfaction (e.g., Paradis and Loughead, 2012; Spink, Nickel, Wilson, and Odonokon, 2005). Overall, a vast number of studies in sport and physical activity contexts have provided support for this contention. However, the conceptualization and examination of cohesion have predominately been oriented toward adult populations (Eys et al., 2009; Martin et al, 2011). Recent research with younger populations (ages 9 to 17), however, contributes to the suggestion that youth do not necessarily perceive cohesion in the same way as adults (Eys et al., 2009a; Eys et al., 2009b). More recently, for several reasons, researchers are considering the nature of cohesion in younger populations.

The first reason is the belief that many of the benefits of cohesion found for adults should also be expected for younger populations. For example, it is suggested that the “need to belong,” and the concurrent desire for interpersonal attachments, is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). It is also suggested that this need can lead to multiple psychological benefits if satisfied throughout one’s lifespan (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). The second argument arises from research with variables closely aligned with cohesion (e.g., social relationships, affiliation) that demonstrate the benefits derived from social interactions. For example, children consistently report affiliation,” “to play as part of a team,” and “to make new friends” as reasons for participating in sport (Ewing and Seefeldt, 1996; Weiss and Petlichkoff, 1989). The third argument supporting the importance of cohesion in younger age groups relates to preliminary findings within and external to sport. Research in non-sport related social contexts such as the family has identified cohesion as important for youth development.

Furthermore, most studies in the group cohesion literature have examined amateur or semi-professional adult athletes. The purpose of the current study was to garner an understanding of what cohesion means to Tunisian young elite sport participants with the regard to the Tunisian culture (Boughattas and Kridis, 2016; 2017) and in comparison with the other culture (Eys et al., 2009a; 2009b; Martin and al., 2011; 2012). It would be important to examine whether the perceptions of cohesion can be used with elite young athletes with regard to children specifically (ages 9-12).

Method

Participants

81 young Tunisian athletes (43 males, 38 females) age 10.34 ± 1.87 years, from four elementary schools in the city of Tunisian participated in the present study. The participants engaged in two varieties of interactive sports. These included soccer player and handball. All participants had been competing with the national team for at least 3 years, and the training sessions lasted between 3 and 5 h per week. A heterogeneous sample of sports was sampled to ensure that the results were not sport-specific. The relatively equal balance of males and females was deliberate to ensure that the results were not gender-specific.

Design and Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained to conduct the study and permission was subsequently granted from the principals of secondary schools to solicit volunteers to participate. Each participant was given verbal information on the purpose of the investigation and signed an informed consent before taking part in the study, and obtained permission from apparent/guardian to participate. An interview guide was based on suggestions by Krueger and Casey (2000), Martin et al., (2011) and Eys et al., (2009)a. A moderator who posed questions and probed response. In addition to the above, the moderators were trained to use probing questions to allow participants to expand upon responses (Krueger and Casey, 2000). This interview guide contained (a) introductory questions (i.e., questions to encourage participation and conversation between the participants), (b) transition questions (i.e., questions designed to move the discussion toward the critical subject), (c) four key questions (i.e., questions designed specifically for the purposes of the current study), and (d) an Concluding questions (i.e., designed to close discussion but also to allow any further thoughts/concerns to emerge). The four key questions were concerned with understanding participants' perceptions of (a) the definition of cohesion (b) indicators of cohesive and no-cohesive groups (questions one to three), (c) method of cohesion's development. In the present study, focus groups were comprised of five participants. Each session lasted an average of 45 minutes and took place in a classroom.

Introductory questions: The goal of these questions was to stimulate conversation between the moderator and participants and among participants (e.g. are you plain now in a team? Have you participate in a competition with your team?). 2. Transition questions: The purpose of these questions was to direct attention towards the participants' teams (e.g. since how long time you belong to this team, do you know all players?). 3. Key questions: The aim of these questions was to gather information on individuals' perceptions of the indicators of cohesive teams, the indicators of non-cohesive teams, as well as methods in which cohesion could be developed within teams (e.g. 'Thinking back to your team, why do you believe your team was cohesive? What goes on in a cohesive group? What goes on in a non-cohesive group? How could you increase the cohesion of your group?'). It was assumed that having respondents focus on the team (cohesive, no-cohesive) would direct attention to the group integration manifestations of cohesiveness from the Carron et al. (1985) model. Concluding questions: The goal of these questions was to terminate the session while also allowing for any final thoughts on the topic (e.g. that is the end of our discussion, is there anything you would like to add?).

Results

For this study, four proposes are undertaken based on the literature: 1/cohesion's perception, 2/ indicators of cohesive teams, 3/ indicators of no-cohesive teams and 4/ method of cohesion's development in teams. For each axis, all responses are classified into two categories: task cohesion and social cohesion. Figures 1, 2,3 and 4 present an overview of the responses to each of the four key questions and the number of meaning units for each category are presented in parentheses. It is important to note, however, that the frequency with which a particular category was discussed in the focus groups is not necessarily an indication of importance; it is just a frequency indicator of quotation of the topic in verbatim. (Krane et al., 1997).

Axe 1: Perception of cohesion

For this first axis of our study, one obtained in total 172 quotations: 103 for task cohesion and 69 for social cohesion.

Task cohesion

The participants' responses (103 meaning units) were represented by five themes related to the perception of task cohesion: 1-play together, 2-help and support, 3-positive communication, 4-respect other's abilities, 5- a total engagement in the team. We noted that the Tunisian sporting children operational cohesion means "play together". For example, subject 73 indicates, "as long as a team plays together correctly, as long as it is cohesive". In addition, a number of participants discussed the concept of "total engagement" in the team, "respected the other's abilities, and help/support. These three themes are an indicator to team's unit: respect between players, give all importance to team's object before individual goal and respect capacities' of each player. Subject 63 explain: "to be in a team it is like being in a family, and in a family or you should be completely engaged completely or you are". Also, subject 40 affirms: "the team functions only if each player gives 100% of his effort"

Social cohesion

For social cohesion, 69 units are obtained for 5 categories: 1- have friends in the team, 2- know all team's memberships, 3- respect /accept coach and team's memberships, participate in the team's activity, 5- lack of conflict. The responses of the participants are concentrated on the first three themes. Its replicate the principal characteristic of the group's cohesion: the social exchange between team's members, accepting all the difference between them and respecting the personality of each one.

Subjects 80 explains: "*the coach learned us how to us to respect ourselves mutually, for this reason, our team functions correctly*".

Subject 65 indicates: "*everyone must know all the players of the team and we must be friendly with everyone to be able to play together*".

The final two categories reflected typical behaviours and social aspect of cohesive groups that included: participate in team's activity and lack of conflict.

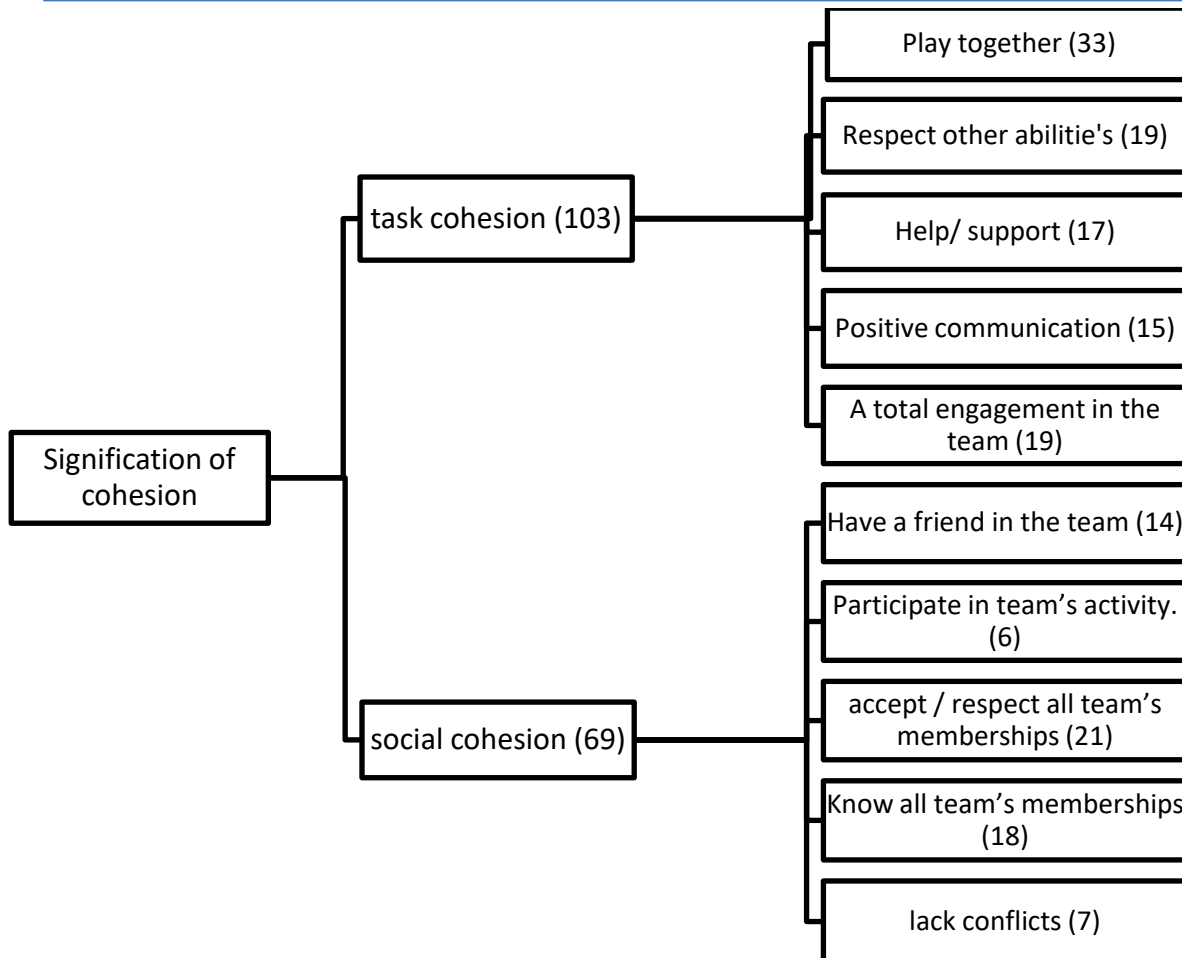


Figure 1. A conceptual framework for perceptions of cohesion by Tunisian sports children. (Number of meaning units in parentheses)

Axe 2: Indicators of a cohesive team

Overall, 83 meaning units were obtained. In terms of the meaning units associated with task cohesion, five themes emerged. These were: 1-play together, 2-respect coach, 3-support team's memberships, 4-correct and help other players, 5- cooperation in competition. For social cohesion, three themes emerged. These were: 1- resolve conflict, 2-good climate, 3-effective communication.

Task cohesion

An important number of participants discussed two concepts of 'play together' and "respect coach" as an indicator of task cohesion. For example, subject 67 say: "...if players respect the coach and play together, the team wins all match".

In addition, other indicators of task cohesion were "cooperation", "help/correction other players" and "support team's membership". Subject 17 explain: "for me the first sign of the cohesion of the team it is the co-operation and the assistance during the match, without this criterion the team cannot gain".

These themes reflect, for the Tunisian sports children, the capacity of the members of the team to discuss together, to solve the problems, to be supported by the other players and the cooperation during the training and the competitions. Subject 54 explain: "when we are in a

team, we should help other players, correct them, to have a better game's strategies in the match”

Social cohesion

For social cohesion, the 26 answers collected of verbatim are classified, as cited, in 3 themes only: 1- resolve conflict, 2-good climate, 3-effective communication. The Tunisian children consider that solve problem and to have a good climate in the team is a sign of social cohesion. Also, these participants focus on the effective communication. This theme reflected the capacity of the players to, not just discuss, but to their capacity to build a positive project starting from this discussion.

For example, subject 20 indicates: “in my team, we learn how to discuss our mistakes during the competition and we start from this discussion in order to make a strategy to correct our game. Our team is the best, and I think that it is an indicator of cohesion”.

Subject 15 affirms: “the exchange and the discussion between the players make it possible to avoid any misunderstandings and conflicts, and this is a sign of social cohesion”.

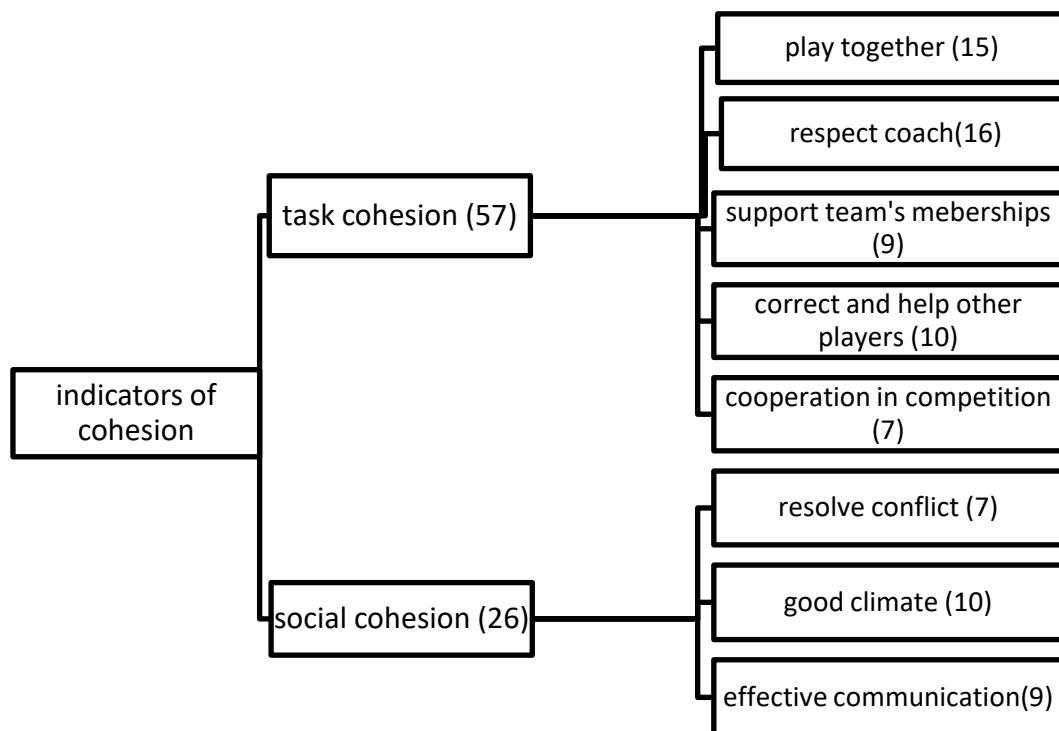


Figure 2. Indicators of cohesive team_by Tunisian sports children. (Number of meaning units in parentheses)

Axe 3: Indicators of no-cohesive teams

In response to the question about the indicators of non-cohesive teams, 88 units emerged. For task cohesion, the five themes were 1-do not play together, 2-negative critics, 3- problem/conflict, 4-jealousy, 5- selfishness. As for social cohesion, the three themes were; the 1-create problem, 2-no communication, 3- no respect for coach and team's players. Figure 3 detailed the frequency of each theme.

Task cohesion

These participant’s responses suggest that individual character (jealousy, selfishness and negative critics) may be an initial contributing factor to creating problems and conflict in the team. Therefore, these themes represent an indicator of no-cohesive teams.

Subject 14 affirms: *“one time, we play with a bad team, the player is very selfish and don’t cooperate together. I think that this way created problem in the team”*.

Subject 42 explain: *“the egoist players do not respect the others and create conflicts in the team”*.

Social cohesion

Participants’ responses were represented by three categories reflecting the social character of the Tunisian perception of the non-cohesive team. A number of participants discussed the concept of “no communication”. Subject 50 affirms: *“no communication, no game, no team, it’s related”*. In addition, the theme “no respect for coach and team’s players” represent an important cause of the non-cohesive team. Subject 48 support: *“if we don’t respect our coach, we can’t respect and applique his instructions”*

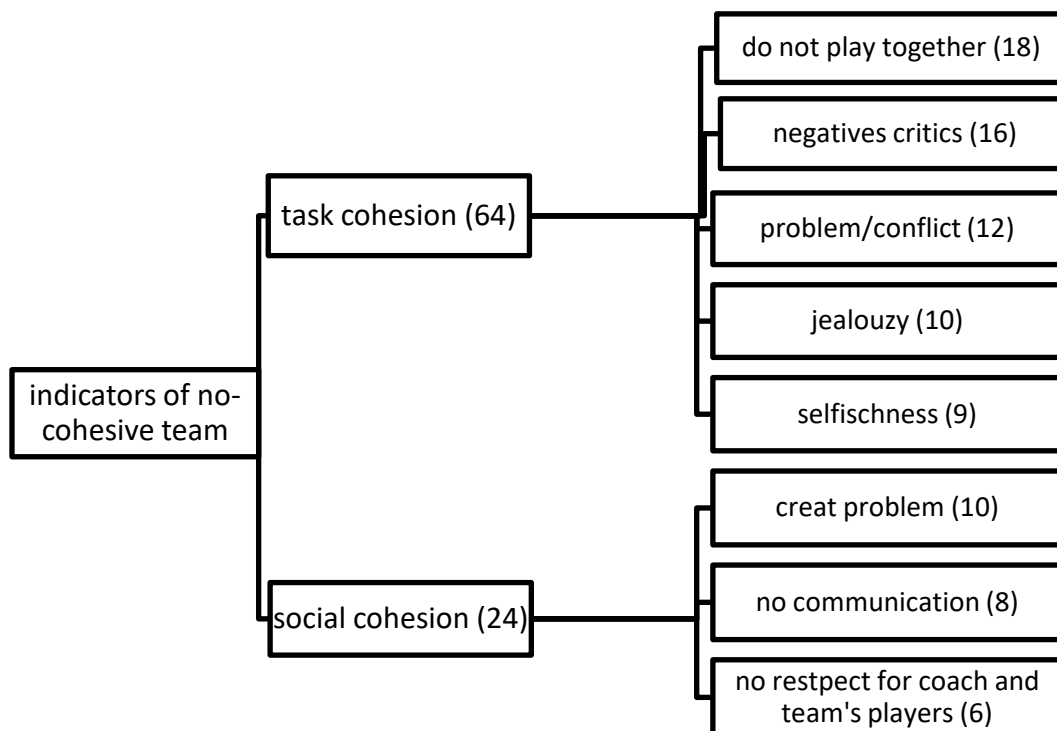


Figure 3. Indicators of the non-cohesive team by Tunisian sports children. (Number of meaning units in parentheses)

Axe 4: Method of cohesion’s development in teams

For this propose, we collect 98 responses: 52 for task cohesion and 46 for social cohesion. The responses resulting from questions concerning the procedures for developing task cohesion are classified into five themes and for developing social cohesion into four themes.

Task cohesion

The participants’ responses were represented by five categories related to the development of task cohesion. They are 1-positive attitude, 2-positive critics, 3-priority for the team,

4- punishing for players with negative attention and 5- share game's task. An important number of participants discuss the concept of “positive attitude” and “accept critics”. Subject 70 explain: “*if we remain positive and we accept critics of the coach and of the other players, it will not have conflicts in the team*”.

However, the Tunisians children consider other themes like “punishing for players with negative attention”. This theme refers to a specific conception of the method of development of task cohesion. Subject 41 explain: “*if we let certain intrigues and actions malicious develop, the conflicts will be multiplied. It is necessary to act directly and punish all player which tries to create a problem*”.

Social cohesion

The four themes resulting from questions concerning general procedures for developing social cohesion were 1-resolve conflict, 2-have friends in the team, 3- talk together and exchange ideas, 4- share positive/good moment/activity of the team. This classification suggests that social acceptance “have friends in the team” and “share positive/good moment/activity of the team” may be an initial contributing factor that develops social cohesion. This is consistent with the others themes “resolve conflict, talk together, and exchange ideas. Subject confirm “in our team, we are friends, we discuss all time with our team, and we share so many happy moments together...”

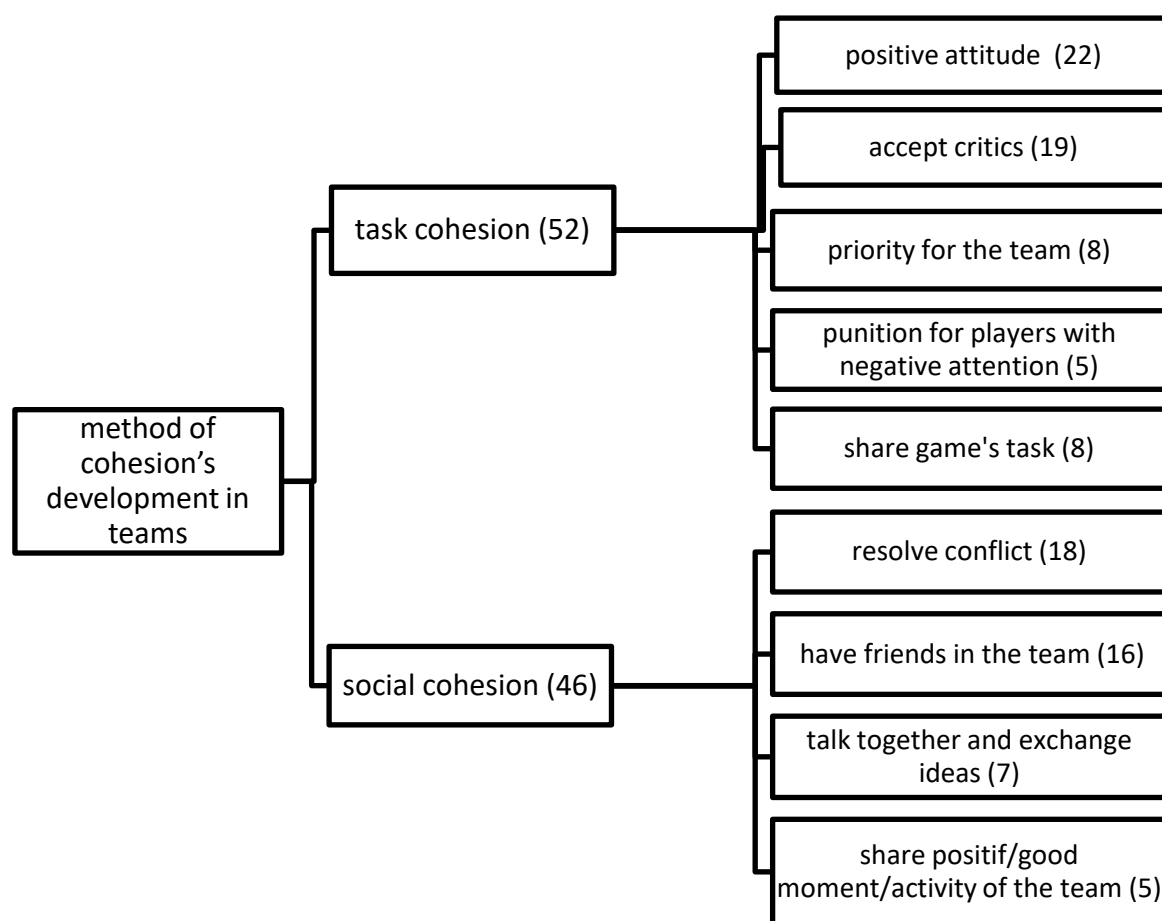


Figure 4. Perceptions of the method of cohesion’s development in teams by Tunisian sports children (Number of meaning units in parentheses).

Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this current study was to examine perceptions of team cohesiveness in Tunisian sport elite children aged 9 to 12. Three axes were undertaken: the first was to examine the meaning of cohesion for the Tunisian children, second, to inspect the indicator of team cohesion and the indicator of the no-cohesive team and their perceptions of how it develops in their teams. Several issues pertaining to the current findings warrant further discussion.

First, decided to use a deductive strategy and group responses into either task- or social-related categories based on theoretical perspectives advanced in sport cohesion literature (e.g., Carron et al., 1985; Eys et al., 2009a; Martin et al., 2011).

However, the first result relates to Tunisian sportive children's understanding of the concept of cohesion. Our results demonstrated the participants comprehend the phenomenon known as cohesion. Specifically, participants distinct between to both task cohesion and social cohesion, describe the characteristics of cohesive and non-cohesive teams, and identify methods used to attempt to develop cohesion in their groups.

This finding parallels those with the results from previous research of Martin et al. (2011) who affirmed that "children begin to understand complex constructs and differentiate among them at different stages". Martin's study found also, that children as young as nine years understand the phenomenon known as cohesion. They can discuss the group as a totality and they can, in fact, differentiate between task and social cohesiveness. In addition, the study of Eys et al. (2009a) highlighted the ability of youth sport participants to distinguish between task and social cohesion: children are not only attracted to the social aspect of their teams but also understand and enjoy the closeness of a task-oriented group.

The second finding is related to the perception of cohesion by Tunisian sports children. The result demonstrates that our participant's considerate task cohesion as play together, respect other's abilities, help/ support, positive communication and a total engagement in the team. These themes focused on the group attraction as an indicator of task cohesion. This result are partial consistent with Eys study's (2009a) whose provides the same themes for task cohesion, in addition with other categories like coach's behaviour: for Eys's population, task cohesion is associated with the question of whether the task subcategory, Coach Relationship with Team, is considered as a separate and primary dimension of cohesion. Thus, horizontal cohesion refers to cohesion experienced within the group whereas vertical cohesion reflects relations between leaders and followers (Dion, 2000). In the other hand, our results are in contradiction with the conclusion of Martin's study (2011) who provided task cohesion as a phenomes base on an individual social character like "eliminate conflict", "be unselfish", share the blame" and "talk things out".

For the perception of social cohesion, the number of themes is the same as task cohesion as social cohesion but the number of citation is important for task cohesion then social cohesion. This result indicates that the Tunisian sports children appreciate task cohesion more than social cohesion. This conclusion confirms the literature provided by Eys et al. (2009) as it demonstrated that the young athletes (13-17 years) cited ten categories for task cohesion and only seven categories for social cohesion. This conclusion is in contradiction with Martin et al. (2011) who found that children (9-12 years) appreciate social cohesion than task cohesion. They also precise that the source of attraction to the group is social as the conclusion advanced by Baumeister and Leary (1995), Donkers et al. (2014).

Further, consistent with the results from previous research (Martin et al., 2011), the perception of Tunisian children (9-12 years) for social cohesion is based on the individual attraction to the group like have a friend in the team, know all players, participate in team's activity.

On the other hand, although our results confirm in part those of Eys's study (perception of task cohesion more than social cohesion), our conclusions are in contradiction with those of the same study with regard to the categories cited: the participant of Eys's study considerate the coach relationship to the team as a principal indicator of social cohesion.

The third issue for this study is related to the indicators of cohesion and non-cohesion team. Tunisian sports children cited as an indicator of cohesion team: "play together", "respect coach", "support team's memberships", "correct and help other players" and "cooperation in competition". Those themes support, as the study of Martin et al. (2011), that a cohesive team has necessary decreased levels of interpersonal conflict. Our participants give importance to help, support and respect between coach and players as an indicator of cohesion. In addition, the importance attached to conflict appeared with the indicator of social cohesion: Tunisian participants cited "resolve conflict", "good climate" and "effective communication" in contradiction with Martin's study which gives more importance to team attraction as an indicator of social cohesion (for example, have team events, make new friendships).

Interestingly, the indicators of the no-cohesiveness team seem contrary to those quoted as an indicator of the cohesive team: for example, for task cohesion, Tunisian participants cited "do not play together" and "conflict". For social cohesion, they mentioned "created problem" and "no communication". Regardless, another point to consider is that our sample gives importance to individual factors as an indicator of no cohesiveness team (example: jealousy and selfishness). Interestingly, it seem that Tunisian children distinguish between "individual attractions to the group" and "the groups integration" in contradiction with the literature: recent study with younger populations suggests that children and adolescents (ages 9-17) do not distinguish between individual attractions to the group and the groups' integration, but rather, simply perceive cohesion as encompassing task and social orientations, a two-dimensional construct (Eys et al., 2009a, 2009b; Martin et al., 2011). This will be explained by cultural context and the nature of Tunisian sport's team: the study of Boughattas and Kridis (2016) suggest that the Tunisian sportive team show an important interest to players' responsibility, punishment if players do not assume their responsibility, and give importance to task cohesion more than social cohesion. This way can explain the tendency of our sample to the cited individual as an indicator of the no-cohesiveness team. This suggests also, that we should investigate more study in these axes to understand more the perception of cohesion by the younger population.

The last issue for this study is focused on the method of development of team's cohesion. As the other axes (perception of cohesion, indicators of cohesive team and indicators of the no-cohesiveness team), it seems that children are more concentrated on individual cases as an important factor of development of team's task cohesion: for example "positive attitude", and "accept critic". In addition, our sample quoted tow method related to the group: "priority for the team" and "punishing for players with negative attention. As was mentioned in the results section, it is not possible to confer importance to certain ideas simply based on the frequency with which they were discussed. The development of an operational measure of cohesion for children would critically assist in determining the salience of these categories. However, we can suppose that the specific nature of the sample may have contributed to this result as cited in the study of Boughattas and Kridis (2016). With regard to the literature (Eys et al., 2009a;

2009b), the method for development of task cohesion is totally different; Eys affirmed that ‘the participants’ responses to how individuals (e.g., coaches) have developed cohesion in their groups represent a very narrow perspective of the many avenues through which this group property can be improved”. Moreover, there are a number of avenues to pursue the development of group cohesion cited by Eys, to which the Tunisian participants in the current study did not refer (e.g. coach’s behaviours and practice structure). Eys and colleagues explain that “this is not a statement on the quality of their responses but rather their exposure to methods devoted to developing group cohesion”. For social cohesion, Tunisian participants quoted methods related to the group attraction like “talk together/exchange idea” and “have friends in the team” in adequacy with Eys’s and colleagues study. This category refers to the participant shave developed cohesion in their groups. It represents a very narrow perspective of the many avenues through which this group property can be improved, Eys et al. (2009a).

These findings suggest that having more cohesive sport teams may provide children with greater opportunities to be satisfied with their sport experiences, more confident in their abilities to complete a task, and less anxious prior to attempting that task. Further, consistent with the results from previous research, individual factors attracting children to sport teams (and, therefore, contributing to cohesion) include being with friends and being affiliated with others (Ewing and Seefeldt, 1996; Weiss and Petchlickoff, 1989). The fact that children seemingly begin to understand complex constructs at young ages (e.g., Hall et al., 2007; Passer, 1996; Scanlan et al., 2005). The present results contribute to a suggestion that by the age of nine, children understand the concept of cohesion as it relates to their sport teams (Martin et al., 2011). In addition to understanding the concept, our results suggest that children have the cognitive ability to distinguish between task and social aspects of cohesion. This is an important finding; it suggests that children are not only attracted to the social aspect of their teams but also understand and enjoy the closeness of a task-oriented group.

Overall, this study demonstrated that Tunisian children (9 to 12 years) understand the concept of cohesion along with the advantages associated with its presence and the disadvantages associated with its absence. They also can discuss how to develop cohesion in their team. It seems that children’s perception of cohesion is very different from the adult’s perception. In addition, our sample presented a bi-dimensional conceptualisation of cohesion (task/social cohesion) inadequacy with the literature. Although, this study provides same new result concerning the nature of perception of cohesion related to the Tunisian culture and the specific character of Tunisian sport team. Moreover, this study highlights the importance of the group for children especially cohesion. For the contradictory results between our study and literature, a greater investigation in this subject should be engaged to examine more the cohesion’s conceptualisation in young sport participants. Therefore, a necessary next step is to develop a cohesion inventory specifically tailored for Tunisian sport children. A greater conceptual understanding of this construct with a young population will likely serve to prompt the development of a useful measure.

To summarize, children populations understand the concept of cohesion as it pertains to their sport team and respond to queries about the concept based on task and social orientations of the group. Given the important role cohesion seems to play in sport and physical activity contexts in older populations including both performance (e.g., Carron et al., 2002) and adherence (e.g., Spink and Carron, 1994), a greater conceptual understanding of this construct with a children population, will likely serve to prompt the development of a useful measure, spur greater research interest in the area, and foster increased enjoyment and participation in physical activity through effective, evidence-based methods to enhance group functioning.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have not declared any conflicts of interest.

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