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Does Social Cohesion Determine Motivation in Combat?

An Old Question with an Old Answer

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Based on a new Army War College study of unit cohesion in the Iraq War, Wong et al. argue that successful unit performance is determined by social cohesion (the strength of interpersonal bonds among members) rather than task cohesion (a sense of shared commitment to the unit's mission). If correct, these conclusions have important implications for scholarship as well as for numerous U.S. military policies such as the Unit Manning System. However, this article disputes their contentions. Wong et al. ignore a large body of empirical research on military and nonmilitary groups showing that social cohesion has no independent impact on performance. They provide no evidence for the representativeness of the interview quotes they cite as evidence or for the reliability or validity of their measures. Their methodology fails to meet social science standards for causal inference (e.g., ruling out causal rival factors).

Keywords: ***military; unit cohesion; morale; Iraq War***

A Fresh Look at Unit Cohesion?

In their recent Army War College study *Why They Fight*, Leonard Wong and his coauthors take on an ambitious and important task.[1] They seek to explain the U.S. military's overwhelming victory over the Saddam Hussein regime during the initial combat operations, and they conclude that "cohesion, or the strong emotional bonds between soldiers, continues to be a critical factor in combat motivation" and that "U.S. soldiers continue to fight because of the bonds of trust between soldiers."[2] Their findings are intriguing because they appear to contradict long-standing research in organizational theory and sociology on the relationship between cohesion and performance,

as well as more-recent studies of unit cohesion and military effectiveness. If correct, their findings might have enormous implications for scholarship and for policy: sociologists often explore the determinants and outcomes of combat motivation when they study organizational effectiveness, socialization, and retention; historians sometimes attribute battle outcomes to fighting conditions, discipline, morale, and other factors closely related to motivation in combat; and a wide range of initiatives, programs, and laws including the Unit Manning System depends on assumptions about motivations in combat.[3]

Wong and his colleagues must be congratulated for having completed a brave research project. Under dangerous conditions, they conducted over eighty interviews with Iraqi Regular Army prisoners of war, U.S. combat troops, and journalists embedded with coalition forces. As important as their study could be, however, problems in its design and execution limit any attempt to draw conclusions from it. The question of the causal role of cohesion is an empirical one that dozens of studies have systematically addressed. Wong and his colleagues fail to identify serious deficiencies in the existing literature, and they ignore basic scholarly guidelines for sound causal inference. We briefly review these methodological problems of *Why They Fight*.

Defining and Operationalizing Unit Cohesion

Recent comprehensive reviews of the cohesion literature, including Robert MacCoun's chapter in a well-known RAND corporation report as well as Elizabeth Kier's later analysis, emphasize the importance of distinguishing social cohesion from task cohesion.[4] Neither MacCoun nor Kier invented this distinction. Several teams of investigators studying cohesion using different methodologies, settings, and populations independently discovered it.[5]

MacCoun offered the following definitions:

> Social cohesion refers to the nature and quality of the emotional bonds of friendship, liking, caring, and closeness among group members. A group is socially cohesive to the extent that its members like each other, prefer to spend their social time together, enjoy each other's company, and feel emotionally close to one another. Task cohesion refers to the shared commitment among members to achieving a goal that requires the collective efforts of the group. A group with high task cohesion is composed of members who share a common goal and who are motivated to coordinate their efforts as a team to achieve that goal.[6]

Social cohesion, in other words, refers to whether group members like each other, while *task cohesion* refers to whether they share the same goals.

The importance of distinguishing task cohesion from social cohesion is that scholars have found the distinction to have profound consequences for predicting and influencing unit performance. Researchers have repeatedly found that (1) task cohesion has a modest but reliable correlation with group performance, whereas (2) social cohesion has no reliable correlation with performance and, at high levels ("clubbi-

ness"), can even undermine task performance.[7] In their analysis of sixty-six cohesion-performance correlations from forty-nine studies, Mullen and Copper found that the relationship between cohesion and performance was "due primarily to commitment to task rather than interpersonal attraction or group pride."[8] This meta-analytic review found, in other words, that to the extent that there is a relationship between cohesion and performance, it is task cohesion—not social cohesion—that correlates with performance. In addition, the review found that the causal relationship differs from what is commonly assumed: the link from performance to cohesion is stronger and more reliable than the link from cohesion to performance.

Wong and his coauthors' conclusions, if valid, would challenge the conventional wisdom about cohesion by showing that contrary to the consensus findings of the vast literature, the distinction between social and task cohesion is irrelevant. As Wong and his coauthors argue, "attempting to dissect cohesion into social or task cohesion and then comparing correlations with performance is best left to the antiseptic experiments of academia."[9] Because the importance of distinguishing task from social cohesion has been confirmed in so many studies, however, Wong and his coauthors must explain the deficiencies in the literature to demonstrate the plausibility of their argument.

Far from showing that prior studies on the distinction between task and social cohesion are incorrect, however, Wong and his coauthors dismiss the entire literature on the basis of mischaracterizations. For example, contrary to what Wong and his coauthors imply, the distinction between task and social cohesion is not an artifact of "academic" studies. Ten of the estimates in the Mullen and Copper meta-analysis come from military research, and the Mullen and Copper analysis was conducted under contract to the Army Research Institute. MacCoun and Kier cite considerable military evidence in support of the social-task distinction. Moreover, the 1993 RAND report detailed how evidence from military experiences with racial desegregation, foreign militaries, and police and fire departments supported MacCoun's conclusions about social and task cohesion.

Because they dismiss the importance of distinguishing between task and social cohesion, and also fail to provide a clear definition of *cohesion*, Wong and his colleagues cite many examples of "social cohesion" that are arguably better conceptualized as task cohesion. For example, Wong and his coauthors note that among Iraqi troops, "interviews uncovered no evidence of higher order concepts such as commitment to national service or the Arabic obligation to withstand (*Sumoud*) among the Iraqi soldiers interviewed. The soldiers never invoked Iraqi nationalism nor the need to repel Americans as an invading army in response to questions about why they were in the army, or what would cause them to try their hardest at battle."[10] This seems to indicate that Iraqi troops lacked task cohesion. To the extent that the Iraqi military defeat resulted from low cohesion, Wong and his coauthors' evidence seems to indicate that battlefield failure could have resulted from low task cohesion, a finding that is consistent with the existing literature and contrary to their conclusions.[11]

Wong and his coauthors similarly conflate social and task cohesion in their discussion of U.S. military units. For example, they note that "soldiers feel that although

their individual contribution to the group may be small, it is still a critical part of unit success and therefore important."[12] Later, they provide another example of the importance of task cohesion as a motivating factor in combat: "in the present study, many soldiers did respond that they were motivated by idealistic notions. Liberating the people and bringing freedom to Iraq were common themes in describing their combat motivation."[13] This conflation of social and task cohesion limits the potential for determining cohesion's causal role in combat performance. It is impossible to determine if the level of performance follows from task cohesion, as the existing literature concludes and as some of Wong and his coauthors' evidence shows, or from social cohesion, as they believe.

Reliability and Validity of Self-Reports

Wong and his coauthors provide many quotes from U.S. military personnel who are clearly referring to social rather than task cohesion—for example, "fighting for my buddies." One Bradley commander, for example, said, "You have two guys in the back who are not seeing what is going on, and they are putting all their trust into the gunner and the BC. . . . Having that trust . . . I guess that is one thing that kept me going."[14] This and numerous other quotes that Wong and his coauthors present are emotionally powerful and intuitively compelling, and it is evident that many soldiers firmly believe that social cohesion is an important motivation in combat. Despite these strong beliefs, however, there are several problems in the leap from this evidence to the causal claim that social cohesion is an important determinant of combat performance.

First, Wong and his colleagues provide no indication that these quotes are statistically representative. We are not told how many soldiers espoused such views or whether any soldiers endorsed different views. Nor are we told the questions that soldiers were asked. We do not know, for example, whether any leading questions or prompts were used nor whether the interviewers were blind to the hypotheses or expectations of the authors. Scholars have demonstrated that experimenter expectancy can significantly bias results and that asking leading questions can lead to significant bias as well.[15]

Even if the quotes are statistically representative, they provide weak evidence for causation. There is broad agreement among social scientists that people are often unable to reliably and validly perceive and report on the causes of their behavior. People are not fully aware of the causes of their behavior—not because of Freudian psychodynamics but simply because most cognitive processes occur below the level of awareness.[16] According to Nisbett and Wilson, when people attempt to explain their behavior, "they do not do so on the basis of any true introspection."[17] Nisbett and Wilson showed that research participants repeatedly failed to detect experimental factors that were demonstrably influencing their behavior. At the same time, research participants routinely cited "causes" for their behavior that were in fact uncorrelated with their responses. Nisbett and Wilson argued that their participants' "explanations" were based not on introspective access but on a priori, implicit causal theories about

whether a particular stimulus seems plausible as an account of their behavior. In other words, self-attributions reflect not direct perception of the causes of one's behavior but rather "common sense" or "lay theories" about what those causes might be.

In the military context, these commonsensical notions may involve a belief in the importance of social cohesion. The works of S. L. A. Marshall and Shils and Janowitz remain classics of military literature, still assigned in military academies, ROTC programs, and military sociology courses throughout the United States.[18] Popular military historian Stephen Ambrose noted that "unit cohesion, teamwork, the development of a sense of family in the squad and platoon, are the qualities most World War II combat veterans point to when asked how they survived and won. That is the theme of almost all my writing about the military, from Lewis and Clark to George Armstrong Custer to Eisenhower to D-Day."[19]

The view of unit cohesion as an emotional bond has long saturated Hollywood depictions of war. The Internet's *Movie Cliches List* notes that "no one will shoot the hero and the battle will even come to a stand still while the hero cries in agony and curse that 'it should've been him' when his best friend steps on the land mine/get blown up/dies charging the machine gun nest. The battle will resume as soon as the hero gets over his grief and gets angry. The hero will be victorious within 45 seconds of becoming angry."[20] According to Cynthia Fuchs, "Boys-becoming-men-together is probably the most conspicuous theme and frequently used plot device in U.S. films about the Vietnam War and its stateside aftermath. While it might look a lot like Standard War Movie Cliche #101A, male bonding is something else in a post-Vietnam context. Ostensibly, it means breaking boundaries, going outside the law to effect moral order as personal loyalty."[21]

These observations do not mean that social cohesion is irrelevant to understanding group performance, only that most soldiers have been told—formally in the classroom and informally in popular culture—that little is more important than loyalty to the group. Because the importance of social cohesion is common sense in the military, and because there is broad agreement that when people try to explain their own behavior, they often (inaccurately) draw on common sense, Wong and his colleagues' evidence is insufficient for showing that social cohesion is a determinant of combat performance. Even though soldiers believe, in other words, that social cohesion explains their own motivations in combat, these beliefs in and of themselves are not proof of their own accuracy. The soldiers may simply be telling us what they have been told in the past. Additional steps are needed to test the accuracy of these claims, and while many of the forty-nine studies reviewed by Mullen and Copper do take these steps, Wong and his coauthors' study does not.

Correlation and Causation

The authors of *Why They Fight* are skeptical about social science methodology. As noted above, they dismiss decades of careful research on the relationship between unit cohesion and combat performance. We agree that social scientists can become too

enamored of their methods or use fancy methodologies to hide empty results and that skepticism is inherent in the scientific method. That said, Wong and his colleagues' failure to follow basic methodological guidelines undermines the plausibility of their causal claims about the relationship between cohesion and performance.

Every scholar recognizes the important distinction between correlation and causation: if two phenomena occur together, that does not mean that one is the cause of the other. To determine whether two phenomena are causally related, there are straightforward guidelines that scholars adopt. It is these guidelines that the authors of *Why They Fight* fail to follow. We concur that social cohesion and performance may be correlated: American soldiers displayed high degrees of social cohesion and fought effectively, and Iraqi soldiers displayed low degrees of social cohesion and fought much less effectively. Even though social cohesion and combat performance were correlated, however, there is little reason to believe that the degree of social cohesion was causally related to combat effectiveness. Consider two basic methodological guidelines that the authors ignore.

First, the authors never acknowledge that other factors may explain their outcome variable, combat effectiveness. For example, American military effectiveness and Iraqi ineffectiveness may have resulted from differences in military power. Iraqi troops knew that they would lose the war, and Americans knew that they would win, and this knowledge influenced their morale and combat performance. Or perhaps differences in the legitimacy of the two political systems affected combat performance. Several studies argue that the civil-military pathologies that Saddam Hussein intentionally structured into the Iraqi armed forces to minimize the risk of a coup explain Iraqi military ineffectiveness in the first Gulf War.[22] Poor Iraqi performance may reflect these factors rather than low social cohesion. Indeed, the demoralizing implications of Hussein's coup-proofing strategies may have led to low social cohesion.[23]

Because military effectiveness results from many factors, the authors need to address at least some central alternative explanations to show that the outcome of the war against Iraq reflected social cohesion not some other factor. Instead of drawing a causal inference from the comparison between high-cohesion, high-performing Americans and low-cohesion, low-performing Iraqis, the authors could have controlled for these factors and provided more-persuasive evidence in support of their conclusions by establishing that U.S. troops with high cohesion outperformed U.S. troops with low cohesion and that Iraqi troops with high cohesion outperformed Iraqi troops with low cohesion.

Second, Wong and his colleagues neither define nor measure combat performance, and they conflate victory in combat with combat effectiveness. If victory in combat is equivalent to combat effectiveness, the authors must claim that the Iraqi military was highly effective during its conquest of Kuwait. The authors would also need to claim that all American units performed effectively and that all Iraqi units performed poorly. Evidence from the war, however, suggests that this was not necessarily the case.[24] Similarly, because the authors produce no evidence of low American cohesion or high Iraqi cohesion, we must assume that all American units displayed high social cohesion and that all Iraqi units displayed low cohesion. As a result, we are unable to explain

high-cohesion, low-performing American units or low-cohesion, high-performing Iraqi units. We acknowledge that combat performance and military effectiveness are difficult to define and measure.[25] But to show that social cohesion drives combat performance, the authors must operationalize unit performance more directly. Simply observing a correlation between high social cohesion and victory, on one hand, and low social cohesion and defeat, on the other, does not mean that social cohesion is the cause of combat performance.

Conclusion

By challenging the notion that social cohesion is important for effective performance, we are not disputing that social bonds are profoundly important in soldiers' lives. Many soldiers—especially in wartime—form intense friendships with members of their units, bonds that may last a lifetime. These relationships are often sincerely felt, but Charles Moskos has suggested that bonding in combat is sometimes "instrumental and self-serving," a temporary and situational adaptation to danger. He writes that "in most cases, nothing more is heard from a soldier after he leaves the unit. Once a soldier's personal situation undergoes a dramatic change—going home—he makes little or no effort to keep in contact with his old squad. Perhaps even more revealing, those still in the combat area seldom attempt to initiate mail contact with a former squad member. The rupture of communication is mutual despite protestations of lifelong friendship during the shared combat period."[26]

Regardless of the sincerity or depth of these bonds, our point is that the accumulated evidence fails to support any causal relationship between social cohesion and combat effectiveness in a large body of research involving military and nonmilitary tasks. We see nothing in this new study that challenges that conclusion. Given the long-standing popularity of this alleged relationship, it would be irresponsible to refrain from drawing policy makers' attention to the evidence against it. All of the evidence indicates that military performance depends on whether service members are committed to the same professional goals, not on whether they like one another. What remains unclear is why some military audiences resist accepting what remains, to our minds, a robust social scientific finding.

Notes

1. Leonard Wong, Thomas A. Kolditz, Raymond A. Millen, and Terrence M. Potter, *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003).

2. Ibid., 23, 25.

3. For examples of the importance of unit cohesion and combat motivation in various scholarly literatures on the military, see Joseph Allan Frank, "Profile of a Citizen Army: Shiloh's Soldiers," *Armed Forces & Society* 18 (1991): 97-110; David K. Vaughan and William A. Schum, "Motivation in U.S. Narrative Accounts of the Ground War in Vietnam," *Armed Forces & Society* 28 (2001): 7-31; Peter C. Boer, "Small Unit Cohesion: The Case of Fighter Squadron 3-V1.G.IV," *Armed Forces & Society* 28 (2001): 33-54; and

Leora N. Rosen, Paul D. Bliese, Kathleen A. Wright, and Robert K. Gifford, "Gender Composition and Group Cohesion in U.S. Army Units: A Comparison across Five Studies," *Armed Forces & Society* 25 (1999): 365-86.

4. See Robert J. MacCoun, "What Is Known about Unit Cohesion and Military Performance," in *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1993), 283-331; and Elizabeth Kier, "Homosexuals in the U.S. Military: Open Integration and Combat Effectiveness," *International Security* 23, no. 2 (1998): 5-39.

5. See A. V. Carron, W. N. Widmeyer, and L. R. Brawley, "The Development of an Instrument to Assess Cohesion in Sports Teams: The Group Environment Questionnaire," *Journal of Sport Psychology* 7 (1985): 244-66; J. H. Davis, *Group Performance* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969); J. Griffith, "Measurement of Group Cohesion in U.S. Army Units," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 9 (1988): 149-71; P. E. Mudrack, "Defining Group Cohesion: A Legacy of Confusion?" *Small Group Behavior* 20 (1989): 37-49; B. Mullen and C. Copper, "The Relation Between Group Cohesiveness and Performance: An Integration," *Psychological Bulletin* 115 (1994): 210-27; G. L. Siebold and D. R. Kelly, *Development of the Combat Platoon Cohesion Questionnaire* (Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1988); A. Tziner and Y. Vardi, "Effects of Command Style and Group Cohesiveness on the Performance Effectiveness of Self-Selected Tank Crews," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 67 (1982): 769-75; and S. J. Zaccaro and M. C. McCoy, "The Effects of Task and Interpersonal Cohesiveness on Performance of a Disjunctive Group Task," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 18 (1988): 837-51.

6. MacCoun, "What Is Known," 291.

7. Ibid., 283-331; and Kier, "Homosexuals in the U.S. Military," 5-39.

8. B. Mullen and C. Copper, "The Relation between Group Cohesiveness and Performance: An Integration," *Psychological Bulletin* 115 (1994): 210.

9. Wong et al., *Why They Fight*, 23.

10. Ibid., 9.

11. At the time of their writing, Wong et al. could not have known that there would be a resurgence of combat in Iraq almost a year after their report was completed. Still, with the benefit of hindsight (in spring 2005), we can raise the possibility that task cohesion is indeed higher among Islamic insurgents in Fallujah than among conventional Iraqi armed forces, posing greater difficulties for coalition forces.

12. Wong et al., *Why They Fight*, 10.

13. Ibid., 17-18.

14. Ibid., 10.

15. See R. Rosenthal, *Experimenter Effects in Behavioral Research: Enlarged Edition* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1976); and Roger Tourangeau, Lance J. Rips, and Kenneth A. Rasinski, *The Psychology of Survey Response* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

16. See John A. Bargh and Melissa J. Ferguson, "Beyond Behaviorism: On the Automaticity of Higher Mental Processes," *Psychological Bulletin* 126 (2000): 925-45; and Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

17. R. C. Nisbett and T. D. Wilson, "Telling More than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes," *Psychological Review* 84 (1977): 231.

18. Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1948): 280-315; and S. L. A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (New York: William Morrow, 1947).

19. Cited in Richard D. Trefry, "World War II: The Shadows Lengthen," *Parameters* 28 (Summer 1998): 129-36. Interestingly, Ambrose goes on to cite the importance of task cohesion: "Civil War soldiers were accustomed to using words like duty, honor, cause, and country. The GIs didn't like to talk about country or flag and were embarrassed by patriotic bombast. . . . Nevertheless, as much as the Civil War soldiers, the GIs believed in their cause. They knew they were fighting for decency and democracy and they were proud of it and motivated by it. They just didn't want to talk or write about it."

20. *Movie Cliches List*, http://www.moviecliches.com.

21. Cynthia Fuchs, "Buddy Counts," *Viet Nam Generation Journal & Newsletter* 3, no. 3 (1991), http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Texts/Reviews/Fuchs_Buddy_Counts.html.

22. See S. Biddle and R. Zirkle, "Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19 (1996): 171-212; and Aaron Belkin et al., "When Is Strategic Bombing Effective? Domestic Legitimacy and Aerial Denial," *Security Studies* 11 (2002): 51-88.

23. See J. T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24 (1999): 131-65.

24. For example, Ayers refers to the "willingness of some Iraqi military elements to continue to fight, even when they must have known there was no hope for the survival of the regime"; Cynthia E. Ayers, "Iraqi Resistance to Freedom; A Frommian Perspective," *Parameters* 33 (2003): 69. For American casualties resulting from accidents and friendly-fire, see, for example, Amy Goldstein, Jonathan Weisman, and Margot Williams, "Casualties: Low Number, Many Causes; Nearly 40 Percent of U.S. Deaths Were Not at Enemy's Hand," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2003, A25; and Daniel Williams, "U.S.-Kurdish Convoy Hit by Mistaken Airstrike," *Washington Post*, April 7, 2003, A17.

25. Richard K. Betts, *Military Readiness: Concepts, Choices, Consequences* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1995).

26. Chales Moskos, quoted in D. H. Marlowe, *Cohesion, Anticipated Breakdown, and Endurance in Battle: Considerations for Severe and High Intensity Combat* (Washington, DC: Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, 1979).

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