

## General Belongingness and Social Connectedness as Predictors of Group Cohesion in Adolescents' Participation in Team Sports

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### Abstract

**Background:** The emotional bonds that develop between the coach-athlete and the athlete-athlete in team sports, such as loving each other, mutual trust, respect and appreciation, are effective in the success of the team. The individual's feeling of commitment to the team ensures that coaches and athletes maintain a good relationship. In order to increase the performance of the athlete, it is necessary to work together in a harmonious and motivating way. This study aims to examine whether the group cohesion of adolescents who play team sports is related to social connectedness and general belonging variables and whether it is predicted by these variables.

**Methods:** This is a relational study that aims to determine if general belonging and social connectedness levels predict group cohesion in adolescents who participate in team sports. A total of 344 athletes, 115 (33.4%) girls and 229 (66.6%) boys, from sports clubs competing in football, basketball and volleyball branches in Istanbul in the 2021-2022 season participated voluntarily. Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R), General Belongingness Scale and Group Environment Questionnaire were used in the study. Multiple linear regression was used in data analysis.

**Results:** When the results of the regression analysis are examined, it is seen that the general belonging and social connectedness variables are significant predictors of group cohesion in terms of their contribution to the variance. It is seen that the variables of general belonging and social connectedness explain 22% of the total variance. The social connectedness variable makes the most contribution to the model.

**Conclusion:** The increase in the level of general belonging and social connectedness in adolescent individuals participating in team sports increases the group cohesion of individuals.

**Key Words:** Adolescents, General belonging, Group cohesion, Social connectedness.

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## 1- INTRODUCTION

From past to present, people have come together for certain reasons and lived in communities. However; a group of people must interact with one another in order to be considered a group. This interaction is possible by sharing feelings, thoughts and tasks among group members. The term of group cohesion, which explains these interactions, has been the subject of active research in all other disciplines dealing with behavior such as social psychology, educational psychology, clinical and counseling psychology, military psychology, sports psychology (1). Carron defined cohesion 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" (2). Coaches, athletes, applied sports psychologists, and sports scientists work with or within groups. These individuals are positively or negatively affected by relationships with teammates, friends or co-workers. In sports, this effect of interpersonal processes is also valid for team sports (3).

However, staying together and united is a necessary but not sufficient condition for cohesion in most groups. Each group has its own purposes or reason for existence, and these are closely related to the development of the group. Cohesion is generally divided into two as social and task cohesion. While task cohesion refers to group members working together to achieve their common goals and duties, social cohesion refers to the interpersonal attraction between group members (4). Task cohesion is when athletes work together to achieve the team's common goals. Social cohesion, on the other hand, determines how much each athlete on a team likes and interacts with each other.

Sports teams, by their very nature, can create cohesion. In the model of Carron (2), cohesion is considered as a four-

dimensional concept: individual attraction to group-task, individual attraction to group-social, group integration-task, group integration- social. "Group integration-task" refers to group integration to achieve its goals and objectives, "group integration- social" refers to strengthening and maintaining social relationships in the group, "individual attraction to group-task" refers to the attractiveness of achieving group goals and objectives, "individual attraction to group-social" is participation in group social activities expresses his desire (5). The measure of cohesion of a team is an indicator of how well the group effect is working. That is In other words, high cohesion represents the maximum effect of the group.

It is concluded that the larger the cohesion, the stronger the group. It is stated that group cohesion facilitates performance, productivity and success in groups (6). Mullen and Copper reported that the strongest relationship between cohesion and group success was found in sports teams, followed by military groups and then non-military groups (2). Groups are social units, and cohesion is the structure utilized to reflect the group's social bonding strength. As a sense, the social connectedness of people in teams is equally significant.

Social connectedness is accepted as a feature of the self that reflects cognitions related to the social world and interpersonal cohesion (7). This sense of closeness is a critical component of one's sense of belonging. It is based on the collective experiences of close and distant relationships (e.g.; parents, friends, peers, strangers, communities, and society) (8). Using psychoanalytic theory of self psychology, Lee and Robbins defined this form of belonging (or due to lack) as a feeling of social affiliation (7).

A sense of social connectedness emerges early in life and develops throughout life (9). In adolescence, peer relationships and group membership allow individuals to identify with others in their appearance, interests, and abilities (10). People with high connectedness are in potential of feeling very close with other people, identify easily with others, and participate in social groups and activities (7). People with low connectedness tend to feel indifferent from the world in general. They often see themselves as strangers, feel misunderstood by others, have difficulty relating to the social world, and are uncomfortable in social situations.

Social connectedness may be characterized by a pattern of active, reliable interpersonal behaviours, while social disconnection may be characterized by a more passive or insecure pattern of interpersonal behaviours (10).

People spend significant time maintaining existing friendships, developing new relationships, and participating in group activities. These social experiences reflect our daily attempts to meet and maintain one of the most basic psychological needs, the need for belonging (9, 11).

A sense of belonging is defined as the experience of personal participation in a system or environment, so that people feel themselves as an integral part of that system or environment. This system may be a social relationship or an organization (12).

People prefer successes that are approved, recognized and valued by others to successes achieved alone. Therefore, there may be an important interpersonal component behind the need for achievement. Needs for approval and affiliation are prerequisites for forming and maintaining social bonds (11).

A sense of belonging or being supported and accepted by others is also critical to the success of adolescent teams. Support from friends, peers, and teachers have all been found in the literature to support

higher motivation and engagement. Acceptance and support from a wider peer group can affect school participation, prosocial behavior and academic achievement (13, 14, and 15). Socially rejected students may have higher levels of academic and behavioural problems (8, 16). A lack of belonging to the group often results in a range of signs and symptoms, including few friendships, lack of participation in the group, and even lack of connection with society (8).

Kohut (1984) suggested that people with low connectedness fail to develop the appropriate interpersonal attitudes necessary to maintain relationships later in life or, on the contrary, develop dysfunctional interpersonal behaviours. Individuals with high connectedness have more appropriate interpersonal behaviours and these appropriate behaviours cause less psychological distress (7).

Adolescence is a period in which the individual gains independence and social productivity, and also experiences emotional fluctuations. In this context, the emotional fluctuations in question; anxiety and restlessness, the desire to be alone, unwillingness to work and getting excited quickly. On the other hand, adolescence can also be defined as a developmental period between the beginning of adulthood, which is the period of taking responsibility in social life. Adolescents can manage their emotional oscillations like being alone and not willing to undertake social responsibilities by participating in sports. Participation in team sports is important for the socialization of individuals during adolescence. Adolescents' feeling of belonging to a group and being approved by others will positively affect their social and psychological development.

Considering this situation, the aim of this study is to examine whether the group cohesion of adolescents who play team sports is related to social connectedness and general belonging variables and

whether it is predicted by these variables. Individuals with high social connectedness and general belonging are expected to have high team cohesion. For this reason, this study is important in terms of revealing the sense of belonging to the team and the success of the team in team sports that are of interest today. In this sense, it is expected that the study will make an important contribution to the literature.

## 2- METHOD

This is a relational study that seeks to determine if general belonging and social connectedness levels predict group cohesion in adolescents who participate in team sports. Relational researches are studies in which cause-and-effect relationships cannot be established due to their nature, and where change or control cannot be made or partially conducted due to practical reasons (17).

### 2.1. Participants

In the 2020-2021 season, a total of 344 athletes, 115 (33.4%) girls and 229 (66.6%) boys, from sports clubs competing in football, basketball and volleyball branches in Istanbul participated voluntarily.

### 2.2. Data collection tools

Three different measurement tools and a Personal Information Form prepared by the researchers were used to obtain the research data. Permission was obtained from the people who developed the measurement tools for the use of the scales. Descriptive information about measurement tools is presented below.

### 2.3. General Belongingness Scale

The scale, which was developed by Malone (18) and adapted into Turkish by Duru (19) consists of a total of 12 items. The general belongingness scale has two sub-dimensions: acceptance and exclusion (rejection). The scale has a 7-point Likert

type rating (1-Strongly Disagree, 7-Strongly Agree). By reversing the General Belongingness Scale's exclusion subscale scores, the general sense of belonging total score is measured, and the scores can also be used for two sub-dimensions, acceptance and exclusion, without being reversed. As the scores obtained from the scale increase, it can be concluded that the individual's sense of belonging is higher. The internal consistency coefficient of the General Belongingness Scale was found to be .92. The internal consistency coefficient of the acceptance/inclusion subscale was calculated as .89, and the internal consistency coefficient of the rejection/exclusion subscale was calculated as .91 (19). In this study, Cronbach's alpha values were evaluated in two sub-dimensions. The acceptance sub-dimension was found to be .88, and the exclusion sub-dimension as .89.

This scale was developed for university students. For this reason, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was applied to check whether the scale provides model-data fit in adolescents. When the fit indices were checked, it was determined that the model and the data matched. Therefore, the scale can be used in adolescent individuals (NFI=0.96, RMSEA=0.08, CFI=0.97, GFI=0.92, AGFI=0.89 ve SRMR=0.04)

### 2.4. Group Environment Questionnaire

This scale is used to evaluate the cohesion level of the players in the team. The scale, which was developed by Carron, Widmeyer and Brawley (1985), was adapted to Turkish culture by conducting reliability and validity studies by Ocel and Aydın (5).

The Group Environment Questionnaire consists of 18 questions. Items 5, 9, 10, 12, 15, and 16 in the group cohesion scale are summed up by straight scoring, while items 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, and 18 are reverse scored. The higher the

scores obtained, the higher the group cohesion. There are 4 sub-dimensions of group cohesion (individual attraction to group-task, individual attraction to group-social, group integration-task, group integration-social). As a result of the study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged between 0.79 and 0.69. In our study, the Cronbach's alpha value of the scale ranged from 0.35 to 0.72. The scale used in our study was developed for university students.

### **2.5. Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R):**

The SCS was developed by Lee and Robbins (9) to measure an individual's sense of belonging, especially during and after adolescence. SCS consists of eight items. In each item of the scale, a situation that indicates feelings and thoughts about social relations is presented and individuals are asked to evaluate how often they experience this situation, on a six-point scale ranging from "Totally Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". The high score to be obtained from the scale is accepted as an indicator of a high sense of belonging (9). The 20-item form of the scale is scored as in the original scale. As a result of EFA, it was determined that 20 items of the scale were included in a single factor and explained 46% of the total variance. The internal consistency coefficient calculated for the revised version of the scale was .92; the correlation coefficient calculated with the UCLA Loneliness Scale was reported as -.80 (7). The adaptation of the revised scale to Turkish culture was done by Sahin and Duy (20). As a consequence of the analyses, the SCS-R's 20-item and single-factor structure was validated. The internal consistency coefficient calculated within the scope of reliability studies was .93; test-retest reliability was calculated as .84 and split-half reliability was calculated as .88. In our study, the internal consistency coefficient was calculated as .87. The scale

used in our study was developed for university students. For this reason, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was applied to check whether the scale provides model-data fit in adolescents. When the fit indices were checked, it was determined that the model and the data matched. Therefore, the scale can be used in adolescent individuals (NFI=0.92, RMSEA=0.07, CFI=0.95, GFI=0.89, AGFI=0.86 and SRMR=0.05 ).

### **2.6. Analysis of Data:**

Before beginning the analysis, missing data and outliers were evaluated to see whether there were any incorrect data entries in the data set. The data collection contained no missing or empty data. With the help of Mahalanobis distance values, it was evaluated whether the extreme values in the data set and the multivariate normality assumption were met, and 7 extreme values were removed from the data set. When the kurtosis and skewness coefficients were examined, it was seen that the coefficients of the variables were between +1 and -1. In this context, it was concluded that the variables met the assumption required for normal distribution (21).

After preliminary analysis, multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine whether general belonging and social connectedness variables predicted group cohesion. Within the framework of the regression analysis assumptions, the multicollinearity between the variables, the normality of the autocorrelation problem, the linearity and the equal distribution of the error variances were examined (22, 23). Whether the dependent variable is linear or not was examined by means of scatter plots and it was seen that the linearity assumption was met. The relationship between the variables for the Pearson correlation coefficient and the multicollinearity assumption was considered, and it was observed that the values obtained were lower than the level

of 0.80, which is an indicator of multicollinearity (22). Within the scope of regression analysis, multicollinearity was also examined by looking at variance inflation factor (VIF) and Tolerance (TOL) values. After testing the assumptions, it was decided that the data set was suitable for regression analysis.

### 3- RESULTS

Product-Moment Correlation coefficients used to analyze the association between adolescent athletes' group cohesion, general belonging, and social connectedness are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** The Correlations between the adolescent athletes' group cohesion, general belonging and social connectedness

| Variables               | 1     | 2     | 3 |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|---|
| 1.Group Cohesion        | -     | -     | - |
| 2.General Belongingness | 0.422 | -     | - |
| 3.Social Connectedness  | 0.451 | 0.673 | - |

When **Table 1** is examined, it is seen that there is a positive and moderate relationship between group cohesion and general belongingness of the participants, a positive and moderate relationship

between group cohesion and social connectedness, and a moderate and positive relationship between social connectedness and general belongingness.

**Table 2:** Multiple linear regression analysis on the prediction of group cohesion of adolescent athletes by general belongingness and social connectedness

| Variable              | B     | Std. Error | $\mu$ | t      | p     |
|-----------------------|-------|------------|-------|--------|-------|
| Constant              | 2.144 | 0.148      | -     | 14.535 | 0.000 |
| General Belongingness | 0.100 | 0.030      | 0.217 | 3.373  | 0.001 |
| Social connectedness  | 0.209 | 0.044      | 0.305 | 4.738  | 0.000 |

R=0,479      R<sub>2</sub>=0,224      F<sub>(2-341)</sub>=50,636      p=0,00

When the results of the regression analysis are examined, it is seen that the general belonging and social connectedness variables are significant predictors of group cohesion in terms of their contribution to the variance. It is seen that the variables of general belonging and social connectedness explain 22% of the total variance (R=.48, R<sub>2</sub>=.22, P<.00).

### 4- DISCUSSION

Within the scope of this study, it was concluded that the group cohesion of adolescent athletes increased as the general

belongingness increased, and likewise, it increased as the level of social connectedness increased. As a result of the realized analyzes, it was observed that the variables of general belonging and social connectedness had a significant role in predicting the group cohesion of adolescents. These variables together predict 22% of group cohesion. The variable that contributes the most to the model is the social connectedness variable. Although less than social connectedness; general belonging also predicts group cohesion of adolescent athletes. In other words, it is seen that both the feeling of

belonging to the group and their social participation in the group are effective in the group cohesion of adolescent athletes.

When studies on group cohesion are examined, team cohesion and success (2, 24), leadership (25), sport satisfaction (26), coaching skills (27), time (28), and performance (2, 24, 29, 30) stated that there is a positive relationship between them. Again, group cohesion and self-efficacy (31), motivational climate (32), athlete satisfaction with personality interaction (33), performance (34), psychological skill training (35), perception of success(36), life satisfaction (37), collective efficacy, motivational climate and perceived coach behavior (38), motivation (39) have been the subject of research.

When other studies were examined, it was concluded that positive sports experiences among young athletes can predict social and task cohesion (40). In addition, studies have shown that social connectedness and optimism (41), resilience (42), hope (43), support (44), and subjective well-being (45) revealed a positive and significant relationship between social connectedness (46). Physical exercise and social connectedness are closely correlated. Physical exercise has been shown in studies to improve social connectedness, while social connectedness has been shown to boost physical activity (47). Another study shows the importance of social connectedness, which contributes greatly to the quality of life of middle-aged and older adults (48). Individuals with poor social connectedness experience maladaptive behavioural and emotional problems and poor relationships with others (49). Research on adolescents has indicated that adolescents with a high level of social connectedness can effectively adapt to their environment (50). Depression rates among adolescents are alarmingly high. The results of a study point out that general belongingness is one

of the adolescent depressive symptoms (51). The results lead to consideration of general belonging in the assessment, treatment and prevention of adolescent depression. In another study, the relationships between school atmospheres, school belonging and school burnout in secondary school students were examined. The findings of the study show that the school climate and sense of belonging of secondary school students are high, and their school burnout level is moderate.

When the studies were examined, no study was found on the prediction of group cohesion by general belongingness and social connectedness. The fact that group cohesion is predicted by general belonging and social connectedness is not the subject of research in our country or in the literature, which reveals the originality of this research. This research will reveal a guiding program to eliminate the deficiencies about how to increase group cohesion, which is an important performance component in the sports psychology literature.

In our study, it is seen that as general belonging increases, group cohesion also increases. One of the most important conditions for an individual to be psychologically healthy, productive and highly motivated is belonging (52). According to Kohut (1984), people have a subjective sense of connection or belonging and need to be part of something to ward off feelings of loneliness. For this reason, feeling of belonging to a group and moving away from the egocentric approach, which is one of the characteristics of adolescence, may have increased group cohesion. Chipuer (53), stated that individuals who do not have a sense of community are at great risk of experiencing feelings of social isolation and alienation, and this may lead to feelings of loneliness.

The term of social connectedness is expressed as the experience of being in contact and being in a relationship with

others in interpersonal relationships, and the individual's ability to feel himself as a meaningful part of society (54). A basic psychological desire is to belong or feel linked to a group, a location where associations are developed (9), and belonging is the foundation of human motivation (55). The need for belonging and love is the step in the hierarchy developed by Maslow, which is concerned with people's feeling of safety and belonging to a group. If the needs at this level are not met, the problems of the individual experience such as exclusion, rejection, and incompatibility. Lee and Robbins (9) stated that individuals meet their need for belonging through identification by being included in their social environment. The need to belong arises because individuals feel obliged to be together and establish social relations, and it highlights the concept of social connectedness (56). Changes in the mood of adolescents can be observed for many different reasons, such as adapting to the physical changes of adolescence, coping with increased anxiety, problems in their social relationships in general, beliefs and attitudes. Due to these changes, their anxiety about exclusion decreases when they are socially connected to a group. It would be beneficial for individuals to do team sports, especially to overcome the emotional conflicts of adolescence without any problems. In our study, it is seen that as the level of social connectedness increases, group cohesion increases. In this situation, we can say that the physical and psychological well-being of the individuals participating in the study increases in an environment where they feel socially connected, and therefore they work in harmony with the team.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this study, group cohesion of adolescents and general belonging and social connectedness characteristics that are thought to predict this were examined. In team sports, the athlete needs to adapt to

the group and be motivated to succeed. Participation of individuals in team sports is effective, especially to eliminate emotional conflicts and feelings of loneliness experienced during adolescence. It is predicted that group cohesion in adolescents may also vary according to gender and branch. For this reason, it is thought that it will be useful to conduct research to determine the group cohesion of individuals in different branches in future studies.

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