Does social cohesion determine motivation in combat?

An old question with an old answer

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May, 2004

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In *Why They Fight*, Leonard Wong and his co-authors take on an ambitious and important task. They seek to explain the U.S. military’s overwhelming victory over the Saddam Hussein regime in the recent war in Iraq, 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.” Their findings are intriguing because they appear to contradict longstanding 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 implications for several important policies, such as the Unit Manning Initiative and the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell law, that are based on the promotion and maintenance of unit cohesion.

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 in *Why They Fight* and then discuss the relevance of the work on cohesion and performance in evaluating U.S. military policy toward gays and lesbians.

**Defining and operationalizing unit cohesion**

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

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.” 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 (a) task cohesion has a modest but reliable correlation with group performance, whereas (b) social cohesion has no reliable correlation with performance, and at high levels (“clubbiness”), can even undermine task performance. In their analysis of 66 cohesion-performance correlations from 49 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.” This meta-analytic review found, in other words, that to the extent there is a relationship between cohesion and performance, it is task – 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 co-authors’ 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
corporate 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.” Because the importance of distinguishing task from social cohesion has been
confirmed in so many studies, however, Wong and his co-authors must explain the
deficiencies in the existing literature in order 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 co-authors dismiss the entire literature on
the basis of mischaracterizations. For example, contrary to what Wong and his co-authors
imply, the distinction between task and social cohesion is not an artifact of “academic”
studies. Ten of the estimates in the Mullen-Copper meta-analysis come from military
research, and the Mullen-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 co-authors 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." 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 co-authors' 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.10

Wong and his co-authors 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.”11 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.”12 This conflation of social and task cohesion limits the potential for determining cohesion’s causal role in combat performance by making it impossible to determine if the level of combat performance follows from task cohesion, as the existing literature concludes and as some of Wong and his co-authors’ evidence shows, or from social cohesion, as they believe.

Reliability and validity of self reports

Wong and his co-authors do provide many quotes from U.S. military personnel who are clearly referring to social rather than task cohesion; e.g., “fighting for my
buddies.” One Bradley Commander, for example, said that “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.” This as well as numerous other quotes that Wong and his co-authors 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 the evidence presented by Wong and his co-authors 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, nor 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. Many scholars have demonstrated that experimenter expectancy can significantly bias results, and many others have shown that asking leading questions can lead to significant bias as well.

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. According to Nisbett and Wilson, when people attempt to explain their behavior, “they do not do so on the basis of any true introspection.” Drawing on past studies and new experiments, 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 rather 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 well involve 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 country. Popular military historian Stephen Ambrose notes 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.”

The view of unit cohesion as an emotional bond has long saturated Hollywood depictions of war. 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.” 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

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 nothing is more important to military effectiveness.
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) simply 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 themselves have been told in
the past. Additional steps are needed to test the accuracy of these claims, and while many
of the 49 studies reviewed by Mullen and Copper do take these steps, Wong and his co-
authors’ do 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 with 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 noted above that Wong and his colleagues never explain why the extensive academic literature on the relationship between cohesion and performance is incorrect, or acknowledge that this literature draws heavily on non-academic research, including military studies. Because they fail, in addition, to follow simple guidelines that are necessary for distinguishing correlation from causation, one can have no confidence in their claim that social cohesion is a determinant of combat effectiveness. We agree that the two may be correlated: American soldiers displayed high degrees of social cohesion and they 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 civil-military pathologies that Saddam Hussein intentionally structured into the Iraqi armed forces in order to minimize the risk of a coup explain Iraqi military ineffectiveness in the first Gulf war.\(^{21}\) Hussein purged and executed effective officers to
prevent them from developing rival power bases that might challenge his authority. 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.\textsuperscript{22} And as we discuss above, differences in task cohesion may have contributed to differences in combat performance.

The bottom line is that military effectiveness results from many factors, and the authors need to address at least some of the most important alternative explanations in order to show that the outcome of the recent 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.\textsuperscript{23} 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. 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 the one hand, and low social cohesion and defeat on the other, does not mean that social cohesion is the cause of combat performance.

**Policy implications**

Understanding the motives of combat soldiers is important to many different areas of scholarship and policy. With respect to scholarship, military historians sometimes attribute battle outcomes to fighting conditions, discipline, morale, and other factors closely related to motivation in combat. And, military sociologists often explore the determinants and outcomes of combat motivation when they study organizational effectiveness, socialization, and retention.

With respect to policy, assumptions about motivations in combat are critical for a range of initiatives, programs and laws including the Unit Manning System and, of course, the “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy that prohibits gays and lesbians who acknowledge their sexual orientation from serving in the U.S. military. The rationale for “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which is articulated in Congressional statute, emphasizes the deterioration to unit cohesion that would follow from the presence of acknowledged homosexuals in the ranks. Congress found that because heterosexual service members do not like gays and lesbians and cannot trust them with their lives, heterosexuals and homosexuals cannot form bonds of trust that are necessary for combat effectiveness. They cannot, in other words, develop social cohesion.

Following the passage of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” several studies questioned the central rationale for the policy by concluding that social cohesion is not related to combat performance. Wong and his colleagues suggest, however, that because social cohesion is
an important determinant of combat performance, experts who wish to challenge the gay ban should adopt an alternative strategy. They argue, “For those interested in overturning the DoD homosexual conduct policy, it may be prudent to choose a strategy other than questioning the linkage between cohesion and combat performance.”29 For example, perhaps it makes more sense to argue that heterosexual service members can form bonds of trust with acknowledged gays and lesbians, and that social cohesion can be preserved after the lifting of the ban.

Nevertheless, the accumulated evidence simply fails to support any causal relationship between social cohesion and combat effectiveness, and we see nothing in this new study that challenges that conclusion. Given the longstanding popularity of this alleged relationship, it would be irresponsible to refrain from drawing policy makers’ attention to the evidence against it. There are ample grounds for expecting that the transition to a policy of integration will be manageable even if the attitudes of some service members remain hostile. Many heterosexuals and acknowledged gays and lesbians will form bonds of trust, but even in those units that do not develop high levels of social cohesion, performance will depend 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.
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ENDNOTES


2 Ibid., 23, 25.


5 MacCoun, “What is Known about Unit Cohesion and Military Performance,” 291.


8 Wong, *Why They Fight*, 23.

9 Ibid., 9.

10 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 2004), 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.

11 Ibid., 10.

12 Ibid., 17-18.

13 Ibid., 10.


Cited in Richard D. Trefry, “World War II: The Shadows Lengthen,” *Parameters* (Summer 1998): 129-136. 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.”


Movie Cliches List; available from http://www.moviecliques.com; Internet.


28 See MacCoun; and Kier.

29 Wong and others, 23.