



Group specific conditions for success in sport with special reference to handball teams

A. Definition of groups

In sociology, a group is usually defined as a collection of humans who share certain characteristics, interact with one another, accept expectations and obligations as members of the group, and share a common identity.

While an aggregate (e.g. number of visitors at a concert) comprises merely a number of individuals, a group in sociology exhibits **cohesiveness** to a larger degree. Characteristics that members in the group may share include **interests**, **values**, ethnic/linguistic background, and **kinship** ties.¹

Muzafer Sherif (1916-1982), one of the most prominent founders of social psychology, formulated a more technical definition with the following elements: a social unit consisting of a number of individuals interacting with each other with respect to:

- Common motives and goals,
- An accepted division of labour, i.e. roles,
- Established status (social rank, dominance) relationships,
- Accepted norms and values with reference to matters relevant to the group,
- Development of accepted sanctions (praise and punishment) if and when norms are respected or violated.²

Sherif's research formed a basis for most of the understanding we have today about the nature of groups and their members. One famous theory, developed by Sherif in 1961, became known as the Realistic Conflict Theory, which accounts for inner group conflict, negative prejudices, and stereotypes as a result of actual competition between groups for desired resources. Sherif validated his theory in one his most famous experiments, "The Robber's Cave (Cialdini, Kenrick, Neuberg, 1999³)"⁴:

In 1954, Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif studied the origin of prejudice in social groups in a classic study called the Robbers Cave Experiment. He conducted his research in a 200 acre (0.8 km²) Boy Scouts of America camp which was completely surrounded by Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma. During the study, Sherif posed as a camp janitor. The study team screened a group of 22 eleven year-old boys with similar backgrounds. They were picked up by two buses

¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_\(sociology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_(sociology))

² <http://www.muskingum.edu/~psych/psycweb/history/sherif.htm>,

³ Cialdini, R., Kenrick, D., Neuberg, S., (1999), pp 403-404.

⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_\(sociology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_(sociology)) ,



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carrying eleven boys each. Neither group knew of the other's existence. The boys were assigned to two living areas far enough apart that each group remained ignorant of the other's presence for the first few days. The Sherifs had broken up pre-existing friendships to the extent they could, so that each boy's identification with his new group could happen faster. Asked to choose names for their groups, one chose "The Rattlers", the other "The Eagles." Within two or three days, the two groups spontaneously developed internal social hierarchies. The experiment was broken into three phases.

1. In-group formation, as described above.
2. A Friction Phase, which included first contact between groups, sports competitions, etc.
3. An Integration Phase (reducing friction).

None of the boys were previously acquainted before the experiment, but hostility between the groups was observed within days of first contact. Phase Two activities proceeded as planned, but soon proved overly successful. Hostility between the groups escalated to the point where the study team concluded the friction-producing activities could not continue safely. Phase Two was terminated and Phase Three commenced.

To lessen friction and promote unity between the Rattlers and Eagles, Sherif devised and introduced tasks that required cooperation between the two groups. These tasks are referred to in the study as super-ordinate goals. A super-ordinate goal is a desire, challenge, predicament or peril that both parties in a conflict need to get resolved, and that neither party can resolve alone. Challenges set up by the Sherifs included a water shortage problem, a "broken down" camp truck that needed enough "man" power to be pulled back to camp, and finding a movie to show. These and other necessary collaborations caused hostile behavior to subside. The groups bonded to the point that, by the end of the experiment, the boys unanimously insisted they all ride back home on the same bus.

B. Ways of differentiating groups⁵

1. Size

1.1 **Small group**: members know one another and have direct contact.

1.2 **Extended group**: members, in most cases, do not know one another personally. Meeting one another has usually a formal reason (e.g. to be summoned to the annual general meeting of a company).

⁵ Cachay, K.: pp 256-299



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2. The way of social relations within the group

2.1 Primary group

- Strong personal contact between members
- “Face-to-face” relationship
- Relatively strong emotional bond
- “We” feeling
- High degree of integration of the individual into the group

Example: family, peer groups etc.

2.2 Secondary groups

Relationship regulated by formal acts (statutes, rules etc.)

- Relationship relatively impersonal
- Strongly target orientated

Example: political parties, companies, etc

2.3 Formal groups

- Characteristics like secondary groups, but higher organisational character, therefore referred to as “organisations”.

2.4 Informal groups

- Informal groups often develop within teams (e.g. handball)

C. Sociometric methods of sounding out social relationships within groups

1. Sociogram
2. Sociomatrix
3. Bar diagrams
4. Sociometric status
5. Group cohesion

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C.1 Sociogram⁶

Is a trainer-made device that is used to provide additional information regarding a player and how he/she interacts with team mates. It is a valuable tool for determining how a player is viewed by his/her co-players. Players respond to a trainer-provided direction such as:

"List the two team mates with whom you would most like to play amongst the basic seven",

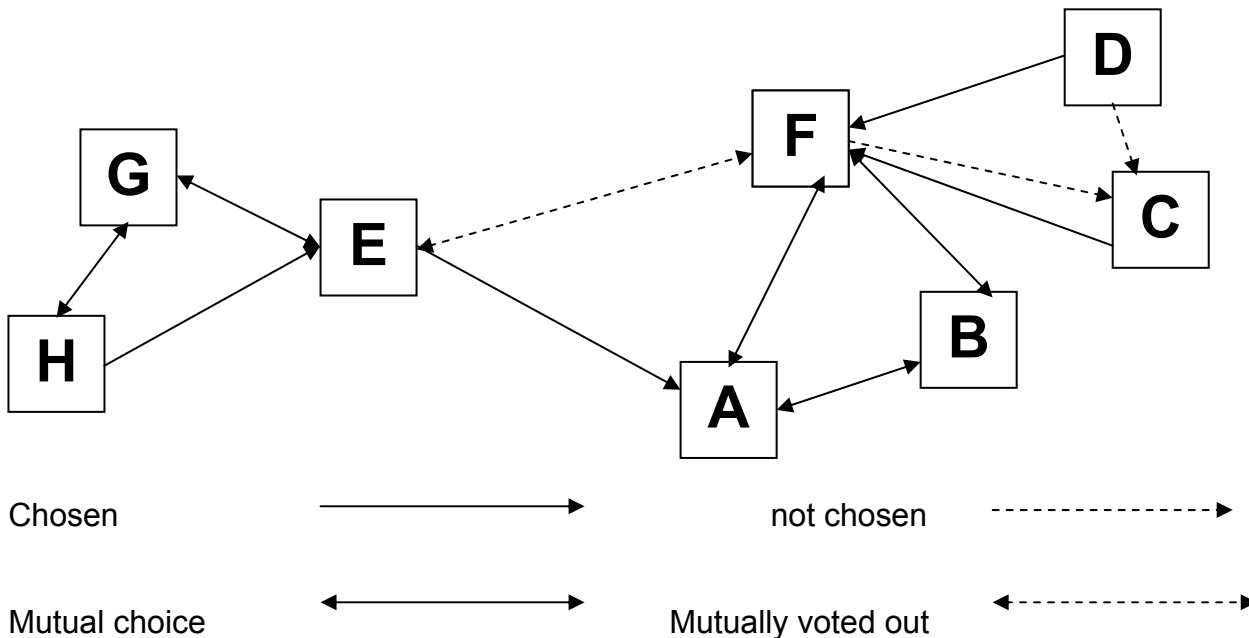
One might also assess interaction and social perceptions using negatively worded statements or questions such as:

"Who would you not want to play with during a game?"

The results are then tabulated to determine how many times each player was chosen and by whom. This information is graphically plotted to identify social isolates, popular players, etc.

Example:

Players of a male junior handball team were asked to choose **two** team mates they would like most to play with amongst the basic seven. The number of players they would not like to play with was not limited.



Interpretation:

F = star in the team, chosen by most of the members

2 cliques recognizable, A B F und E G H

⁶ Cp. Wikipedia, <http://wik.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/Sociogram>



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D is not noticed at all

C is a complete outsider, two negative choices and no positive choice

C.2 Simple sociomatrix

	Passive choice									
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	$\Sigma +$	$\Sigma -$
Active choice										
ALFRED		+				+			2	
BERT	+					+			2	
CHRISTIAN						+			1	
DIETER			-			+			1	1
ERWIN	+					-	+		2	1
FRANZ	+	+	-		-				2	2
GEORG					+			+	2	
HANS					+		+		2	
$\Sigma +$	3	2			2	4	2	1		
$\Sigma -$			2		1	1				
+ = choice										
- = voted out										

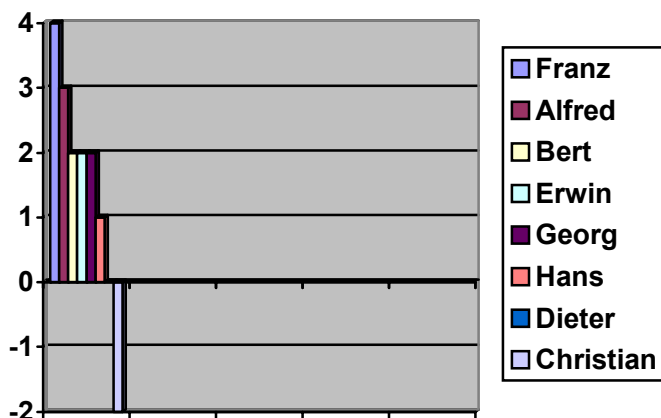
Interpretation:

Number of choices (Christian only 1x)

Number of voted out (Franz, e.g. 2x)

Number of “received” choices (Franz 4x = highest number of choices)

Number of “received” voted outs (Christian 2x)



C.3 Bar diagram



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Simple interpretation:

Franz is the most popular player in the team. Christian is the most unpopular group member, and Dieter is simply ignored.

C.4 Sociometric status (= SS)

Can be calculated by the following formula

$$SS = \frac{\text{Number of choices}}{\text{Number of team/group members} - 1}$$

C.5 Group cohesion (= GC)

$$GC = \frac{\text{Number of mutual choices}}{\text{Total of possible mutual choices}}$$

The number of mutual choices can be found in the sociomatrix. The total number of choices can be calculated in the following way:

If the number of choices is not limited and there are N members in the group

$$GC = \frac{N(N-1)}{2}$$

If there are x given choices

$$GC = \frac{X \cdot N}{2}$$

Sociometric methods/data enable us to register preference, sympathy and antipathy amongst group/team members, thus forming the basis for conclusions referring to:

- the position of the individual member within the team
- the relationship between the team members and
- the degree of integration of the individual.



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If aspects such as social status and group cohesion are applied to a handball team, and are then related to its competition efficiency, the following questions can be asked:

- Is a consensus on the distribution of roles, in particular on the question of leadership, more effective in regard to the results aimed at?
- Or will conflicts in regard to the distribution of roles foster better results in the long run?
- Is the distribution of passes (question of “power”- some positions on the field have more power to distribute passes than others) influenced by sociometric preferences and/or by like and dislike?

James Davis⁷ and others (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954⁸) developed a number of propositions on the general topic of group homogeneity. One recurrent theme in Davis' paper was the assumption that positive bonds follow from similarity. He stated that where there is internal differentiation, mutual bonds will tend to develop among subsets, and liking will be greater within cliques than between clique members and the rest of the group.⁹

Following the proposition Stanley Eitzen¹⁰ formulated two hypotheses:

- The greater the homogeneity of a group on selected social characteristics, the smaller the probability of cliques, and
- The greater the homogeneity of a group, the greater the probability of goal attainment and winning games by the group.

The study which was carried out on a number of basketball and American football players demonstrated that team homogeneity was related to goal attainment. The explanation for this relationship was found in the absence of cliques. The general conclusion was that team heterogeneity increased the chances of clique formation and that the **presence of cliques reduced the chances of winning**. Moreover, the study showed that **the sociometric structure** of a team had an immediate influence upon communication patterns during games, and the frequency with which players passed the ball to other players during games. Both of these activities were found to have an influence on the outcome of games.¹¹

⁷ Davis J.A. pp. 74-101.

⁸ Berelson B.R., Lazarsfeld P.F. and McPhee W.N.

⁹ Eitzen, Stanley, p.7

¹⁰ Eitzen, Stanley, pp 7 ff.

¹¹ Eitzen, Stanley, pp 8ff



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The most remarkable result, however, was that the influence of the sociometric structure decreased the stronger the opposing team was. The stronger the opposing team was the less the influence of sociologic preference on ball circulation.

D. Social conflicts in groups/ teams

D.1 What is a social conflict?

Conflicts in everyday language are arguments/ clashes between individuals without distinguishing between emotional reasons or other factors.

Social conflicts result from the structure of social units, they transcend the individual¹².

D.1.1 Genuine conflicts

Genuine conflicts serve as a means to achieve a certain end, e.g. there is more than one candidate for a particular playing position in the game.

D.1.2 "False" conflicts

False conflicts are forms of confrontation in which previously generated anger is triggered off, and are not the results of differing aims of rivalling group members.

D.2 Structural conditions for social conflicts¹³

Structural conditions for social conflicts can be found in the following fields:

- Rules of the game
 - If a player in soccer, for example, dribbles endlessly (the rules permit him to do so) and his team mates are therefore excluded from the game.
- Tactics
 - Because of various tactical systems some players have to perform certain given tasks which are less attractive than others. Social conflicts are the inevitable result.¹⁴
- The way results are assigned to different players
 - If the media again and again report the number of goals scored by the left back in handball and the achievement of the team is neglected, a social conflict is inevitable.

D.3 Differentiation of playing positions and conflicts in handball

¹² Dahrendorf, R. p.202, in Cachay, pp 276ff.

¹³ Cachay, K.: pp 280ff

¹⁴ Cp „Case study handball



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Tactics in handball demand different ways of acting from the individual player on a particular position. As a consequence there is a hierarchic structure of the individual positions, because players should not block one another whilst coping with the various tactical tasks. This ranking of positions is inevitably connected with the question of **power**, of **dominance** of certain playing positions. The importance of a particular position can be gauged by its **responsibility**, by its **influence on the development of the game**.

Dominance /power can be measured by the following factors:

- Whether the player on a particular position can delegate and check tasks.
- How many positions can be directed from one position within the framework of the rules.

Which position has authority to issue directives?

In offence it is undoubtedly the back player. He determines:

- the tactical moves,
- the distribution of passes,
- the speed of the game,
- communication in regard to complex systems of attack, and
- he has the right to decide whether he himself should shoot, pass to the pivot player, execute a 1:1 action, initiate a transition sequence for a change from 3:3 to 2:4, or to pass to another back player.

The back player can:

- evaluate the actions of his co-players,
- sanction them verbally when basic positions are not manned, or necessary actions are not carried out with adequate speed,
- refuse to pass, and
- can dominate 5 players maximum.

In defence it is the centre according to the system played at the given moment, or, in some cases, the goal keeper who has the say.

D. 4 How can social conflicts be controlled?

D.4.1 Authoritative approach/sanctions:



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- reducing the playing time of a player,
- putting the player in on a less attractive position,
- not putting him in at all,
- financial sanctions,
- excluding him from training sessions etc.

Very often these measures show little effect - the player in question is not dispensable because of the limited number of players in the squad, or taking out a player might necessitate a change of tactics.

D.4.2 Solutions based on the nature of the conflict – more effective:

If the conflict resulted from a structural problem, e.g. the attempt of a player to expand his position specific dominance (number of shots, initiative beyond the tactical frame agreed on, neglect of other positions, etc.), several positive measures might work. These elements to control/solve a conflict within the team are best demonstrated against the background of a CASE STUDY.

D.4.3 CASE STUDY¹⁵

- A second division team wanted to go up to the first division in the country.
- To reach that aim the club decided to engage a new Spanish left back.
- Before that the players had mutually agreed on the necessity of reinforcement.
- The Spanish player was a member of the Spanish National Team.
- Throughout the season the new player shot disproportionately often at the opponent's goal.
- The ex-left back was given less playing time, or was nominated as left wing.
- As a consequence the regular left wing also had less playing time.
- The longer the season lasted the higher the number of attempts at shooting by the Spaniard in order to present himself in the media (TV and local press).
- The new left back wanted to show that he was worth the money invested in him, and he wanted to convince the Spanish national coach that he was still a good choice for the national team.

¹⁵ Cachay, K.: pp 288 ff



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- Because of his egotistic way of playing the “right” side of the team was neglected.
- In the middle of the season the conflict became apparent.
- The left wing tried to obstruct the left back:
 - shot, sometimes without the slightest chance of scoring,
 - blocked and hindered tactical moves initiated by the left back,
 - thus the speed of attack was increased,
 - attack was no longer organised,
 - the team was prone to counter attack, and
 - even when the team was in the lead, it was difficult to win the game.
- During the training sessions the standard left wing “sabotaged” the Spanish left back.
- Consequently a team meeting was called by the club manager and the coach:
 - the standard left back of the previous season demanded to be again nominated as back player,
 - since the left back position was “occupied”, he demanded to be assigned to the centre back position,
 - in doing so he competed with the traditional centre back,
 - the centre back was a long term player on that position,
 - since the club management did not fulfil the left wing’s demands promptly, the left wing no longer cooperated during the game,
 - the left wing started criticizing the centre back throughout the training sessions,
 - as a consequence the centre back left the training sessions foaming with anger.
 - **From that moment on the team lost every game.**

- **In the second half of the season the conflict culminated.**
- The wings and the pivot played “against” the left back.
- They argued that they had to carry out blocking actions to provide shooting opportunities for the left back.
- Finally all the other players also criticized the left back.
- In a home game the left back was twice prevented from executing a 7m shot although nominated by the coach.
- The left wing argued that he did not see the necessity for the left back to execute the 7m shot, as he had had enough shooting opportunities throughout the game.
- At the end of the season some players refused to play in the team any longer.



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- Although he was the top scorer the Spaniard's playing time was reduced by the coach
- Nevertheless the other players tried to push themselves to the forefront.
- **Finally the team did not reach the objective of the season (to go up to the first division) but finished only fourth.**

D.4.4 The situation of the Spanish left back

- The club had paid a high transfer fee.
- In addition, he was entitled to a car, a flat of his own, and two return flights to Spain, at Christmas and Easter.
- The club had guaranteed a minimum income plus a bonus for each victory.
- The player wanted to play in the top league in the next season.
- Since he was a member of his national team, which was at that moment qualifying for the Olympic Games, he wanted good publicity on TV and in the print media.
- He wanted to show how important he was to the team.

D.5. Possible ways to solve the problems described in the above case study

1. Re-establishment of the original power structure on a new level.
2. Redefinition of the areas of responsibility by the coach, the player in question, and his team mates.
3. Reduction of shooting attempts of the left back.
4. Reduction of shots from bad positions.
5. More ball contacts for the other players.
6. Extension of the organisation phase in attack.
7. Confidence building for the other playing positions.
8. Enhancing the status of the other positions in the media.
9. Reward for "assists".
10. Reward for well executed blocks, etc.

Conclusions from the case study quoted above:

- It is of utmost importance to observe and influence group processes in due time.



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- Conflicts because of structural problems can only be solved by returning to the roots of the conflict and re-establishing a new level of dominance on the individual positions.
- Authoritative methods will not work in the long run.
- The greater the homogeneity of a group, the smaller the probability of clique formation, and, therefore, the greater the probability of goal attainment by the group and of winning games.

Cohesion (i.e., togetherness, team spirit, closeness, teamwork, team unity) is an important positive element in interacting teams. Thus in interacting sports, success depends upon appropriately combining each player's diverse skills in an interdependent pattern of teamwork.

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