

The importance of team cohesion under threatening circumstances: Do all members benefit equally?

R. Delahaij & W. Kamphuis

roos.delahaij@tno.nl

In high-risk professions, teams are considered an important resource for dealing with stressful events. Team cohesion buffers the effects of all kinds of operational stressors by providing emotional and instrumental support and thus helping team members maintain mental health. The question is, however, whether all team members benefit to the same extent from being part of such a cohesive team. The current study investigated to what extent the buffering effect of team cohesion on the relation between job demands and individual vitality is dependent upon the social competence of team members. Participants were service members part of the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan and the NATO Anti-Piracy Mission Atalanta in the gulf of Aden (n=400). During pre-deployment training (T1) and actual deployment (T2) questionnaires measuring team cohesion (T1), social competence (T1), operational threat (T2), and individual vitality (T2) were administered. Regression analyses were conducted to determine how vitality during deployment was predicted by operational threat, team cohesion and social competence. As expected, results showed a three-way interaction in which high team cohesion predicted an increase in vitality, regardless of the amount of threat experienced, but only for socially competent individuals. Socially less competent individuals who experienced high operational threat did not benefit from highly cohesive teams but instead scored lowest on vitality. These results indicate that not every team member benefits from the buffering effects cohesive teams. Leaders could use these insights to design better tailored approaches to preparing professionals to deal with stressful events.