

## How do people perceive social cohesion, and are their perceptions in line with "reality"?

Social relationships are indispensable in our everyday lives. We depend on our friends, family and acquaintances for a great deal of support. We ask them for advice, to help us with practical tasks or to listen to our sorrows. However, the extent to which our social contacts will actually be helpful depends - at least in part - on whether our perceptions of them are accurate. If we need someone to talk to, we better choose a friend who is empathic. If we need someone to babysit our child, we better know that the friend is trustworthy. Accurately perceiving our social connections has enormous advantages and not doing so can have tremendous consequences.

Based on previous research, we have reason to believe that people's perceptions of their social relationships might be biased. In this paper we asked: How do people perceive their social relationships, and are their perceptions in line with "reality"? To answer this question, we focused on how people perceive one important feature of their own personal networks, namely social cohesion. Social cohesion is the stickiness of a group and it captures the trust and belonging that group members experience. We asked more than a hundred people to come to the lab and to allow us to extract their Facebook friendship networks. We applied an algorithm to divide their networks into meaningful groups (e.g., friends, acquaintances, and family). We then asked people about their subjective perceptions of these groups with regard to different aspects of social cohesion. They answered questions such as "To what extent do people in this group like each other?" or "To what extent do people in this group trust each other?".

We compared these subjective measures of cohesion with objective measures of cohesion, which we were able to compute because we had access to rich social network data. We considered two objective measures of cohesion, namely group size and group density (i.e., number of social connections within a group). Social network researchers typically consider groups to be more cohesive if they are smaller and better denser or better connected. Our results showed that people perceived groups to be more cohesive if they were smaller. But they did not perceive groups to be more cohesive if they were better connected.

This finding has important implications for the field of social network research. Social cohesion can be measured subjectively by asking people how they perceive their social groups. Or it can be measured objectively by measuring observable features of social groups. However, it is still unclear to what extent subjective and objective measures of social cohesion overlap or whether there is a misfit. Social network researcher might blindly rely on a few observable features, such as group size or group density to measure cohesion. In this paper, we find that relying on group density as a measure of cohesion might lead to inaccurate conclusions. Group size, however, might be a useful heuristic for social cohesion.

Also for individuals, this finding is of relevance. Our perceptions are not perfect, and it seems that

our perceptions can be flawed even when something is as close and important to us as our own social relationships. We have developed a range of heuristics that allow us to quickly process a vast amount of information with little cognitive effort. Even though these heuristics are not perfect, the negative consequences of our misperceptions are typically rare or not severe. Thus, the good news is that despite occasional errors, our perceptions of our social relationships do a very good job overall.

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## **Publication**

[Perceived group cohesion versus actual social structure: A study using social network analysis of egocentric Facebook networks.](#)

Tulin M, Pollet TV, Lehmann-Willenbrock N  
*Soc Sci Res. 2018 Aug*