The Consequences of Sports Fan Identification

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One of the most interesting aspects of sports fans is their degree of involvement and affiliation with their favorite sports team. Indeed, perusal of the popular press suggests that sports fans reveal their connection to a favorite team in interesting ways, including wearing team apparel, displaying bumper stickers on their cars, and engaging in celebratory behaviors that range from fairly passive (e.g., cheering) to utterly destructive (e.g., tearing down goalposts). For some fans of sports, their level of involvement is relatively low key, whereas for other sports fans, they seem to live and breathe for their favorite team. What accounts for the differences in these fans? The answer likely lies in their level of sports fan identification, or their psychological attachment to a sport or a team. Some sports fans identify particularly strongly with a team, and this psychological connection can have many consequences. The purpose of this chapter is to review the affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences of identifying as a sports fan. However, before reviewing these consequences of sports fan identification, we review the definition of a group as well as social identity theory, which provides the basis for the study of sports fan identification. We also discuss the various conceptualizations of sports fan identity, how it is measured, as well as why fans identify with a team.

It is important to be clear about the distinction between fans and spectators. Sports fans are those who actively follow a sports team or sport, while sports spectators are those who physically witness a sporting event (i.e., attend a sporting event, watch one on television, listen to one on a radio; Wann, 1995, 1997). Sports fans establish a psychological connection with the team, whereas spectators merely observe a sporting event. Most sports fans are also sports spectators. Clearly, both fans and spectators are equally important for a variety of reasons. However, the focus of this chapter is on sports fans.
Group Identification

To understand group identification, it is necessary to discuss what is meant by a group. In fact, there is little consensus about what characteristics of a collective make a group. Although most social psychologists would agree that a group is a collection of people who are perceived to belong together and are dependent on one another, there are other ways to conceptualize groups. For example, Moreland (1987) discussed “groupiness” or social integration as a quality that every collection of individuals possesses to some degree. As the level of social integration increases, people start to think and act more like a group than a collection of individuals. Other social psychologists (Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999; Lickel et al., 2000) maintained that the perception of a collection of people as being bonded is important. This perception, named entitativity, refers to the extent to which a collection of people is perceived as a coherent entity. Some groups, such as people in line at a bank, are perceived as being low in entitativity. Other groups, such as members of a family or members of a professional sports team, are perceived as being high in entitativity.

As discussed previously, some sports fans possess a stronger connection to a team or sport than others, presumably due to their degree of group or social identification with a sport or team. Social identity is defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his [her] knowledge of his [her] membership in a social group (groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Tajfel and Turner (1979) summarized this theory with three theoretical principles. First, group members strive to maintain a sense of positive social identity. Second, group members base this social identity on favorable comparisons that can be made between members of their own group and members of another group. Third, members will attempt to leave their group or join a more positively valued group when their social identity is not satisfactory to them. Applied to the study of sports fans, social identity theory suggests that some fans identify with a team or sport more strongly than others, presumably to feel good about themselves (at least to the extent that their perceptions of the team or sport allow such feelings).

Sports Fan Identification

Most fans of sports can easily name their favorite team or teams. They are equally likely to be able to readily report the strength of their connection to a team, or their level of sports fan identification. Generally, sports fan identification refers to the degree to which a fan feels a psychological connection to a team or sport (Murrell & Dietz, 1992). More complex conceptualizations of sports fan identification exist. For example, Dimmock, Grove, and Eklund (2005) provided evidence to suggest that sports team identification can best be
conceptualized by including cognitive (e.g., knowledge of group membership) and evaluative (e.g., value of group membership) aspects of identification. Recently, Jacobson (2003) advised sports-fan researchers to consider the interpersonal (e.g., the network of fans) and symbolic (e.g., attachments to successful others) factors that comprise a fan’s identification with a team, arguing that both types of factors contribute equally to sports fan identity. Regardless of how sports fan identification is defined, there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that it exerts a strong influence on sports fans’ affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to sports, which is the focus of this chapter.

Sports fan identification can be measured both directly and indirectly. Direct measures typically include instruments constructed specifically to measure sports fan identification. The most widely and extensively used tool for measuring sports fan identification is the seven-item Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Other, less-frequently used measures of sports fan identification include the Connection to a Team Scale (CTS; Trail & James, 2001), and the Psychological Commitment to a Team Scale (PCT; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000). These latter two measures have been mostly used to predict the marketing behavior of sports fans. Recently, Wann and Pierce (2003) compared the SSIS with the PCT and found both measures to be highly correlated and predictive of a number of sports fan behaviors.

Indirect measures of sports fan identification also exist. For example, measuring the frequency of attendance at sporting events or number of sporting events viewed on television can provide information about a fan’s level of identification (Murrell & Dietz, 1992). Similarly, marketing behavior such as the amount of money spent on sports fan apparel and paraphernalia can serve as a proxy measure for sports fan or team identification. Of course, indirect measures of the sort described here are often used as indicators of the consequences of sports fan identification.

Finally, it is worth asking how fans come to identify with a particular sport or team. One of the most interesting investigations about the origins of team identification was conducted by Wann, Tucker, and Schrader (1996). The results of their study showed a variety of reasons for original interest in a team, including (in order of importance) parental interest in a team, talent of the team players, geography and the influence of friends, and the success of the team. Other investigations (e.g., Jones, 1997a) find similar reasons for identifying with a particular team, although not necessarily in the same order as Wann, Tucker, and Schrader. For example, Jones (1997a) found that geographical location was the predominant reason given for being a fan of a team. End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, and Jacquemotte (2002) found that the success of a team was the primary reason for team identification.

There are clearly a number of reasons why fans decide to become attached to a particular team or sport. Despite the differences in their reasons for involve-
ment with a particular team, it seems that some fans have a stronger psychological attachment to a team than do other fans. In fact, the level of identification with a team or sport can range from quite weak to extremely strong. A wealth of research on the consequences of sports fan identification suggests that this psychological attachment can exert powerful influences on affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. In the remainder of this chapter, we review the research on these consequences of sports fan identification, paying particular attention to the positive and not-so-positive consequences of sports fan identification.

Affective Consequences of Sports Fan Identification

When sports fans identify strongly with a team, they tend to experience more extreme feelings than those who identify weakly with a team. Among the affective consequences of sports fan identification that have been investigated are level of arousal, sympathy, post-game affect, and enjoyment. Research shows that fans who report being strongly identified with a specific team or sports display more heightened levels of arousal than fans who weakly identify with a team or sport. For example, Branscombe and Wann (1992a) found that strongly identified American fans had higher blood pressure readings after watching a boxing match between a U.S. and a Russian boxer than before the match, while those weak in identification showed no changes in blood pressure. Similarly, Wann, Schrader, and Adamson (1998) found, among other things, that strongly identified fans of a team were more likely than weakly identified fans to report increases in anxiety as an important competition approached.

An interesting and timely investigation about the sympathy expressed by sports fans was recently conducted by Wann and Waddill (2007). Following the fatal crash of Dale Earnhardt, Sr., NASCAR fans reported their level of identification with their favorite driver and attitudes toward Earnhardt’s crash. They found that evaluations made by fans of Dale Earnhardt reflected greater sympathy than fans of other drivers, although the pain expressed by strongly identified Earnhardt fans was only a bit higher than weakly identified Earnhardt fans.

One of the most widely examined affective reactions of sports fans are the emotions they express following a sporting event. In an early investigation of the emotions experienced by strongly identified fans, Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, and Kennedy (1992) found that following a win by their favorite basketball team, strongly identified fans reported more severe emotions (i.e., higher levels of elation and depression following a win and a loss, respectively) than weakly identified fans. Wann, Royalty, and Rochelle (2002) found that team identification was positively correlated with positive affect (e.g., happy, pleased, satisfied) expressed by fans of a basketball team following a win by the team.
Most recently, Crisp, Heuston, Farr, and Turner (2007) examined the emotions felt by fans of soccer following a loss. They found that strongly identified fans reported feeling angry, but not sad, whereas those weakly identified fans reported sadness but not anger.

Finally, research in this area has investigated the level of enjoyment reported by strongly and weakly identified fans. For example, Madrigal (1995) found that team identification was positively correlated with enjoyment while attending a women’s basketball game. Similarly, Wann and Schrader (1997) found that strongly identified fans reported greater enjoyment while watching their team win than those who identified less strongly.

In sum, this brief review of the effects of sports fan identification on affective responses suggests that sports play a powerful role in the emotional reactions of sports fans, especially those who identify most strongly. For those with a deep psychological attachment to a team, emotions such as enjoyment, happiness, satisfaction, and anxiety can fluctuate dramatically depending on the success or failure of the highly-valued team.

Cognitive Consequences of Sports Fan Identification

Like affective reactions, there are a variety of cognitive consequences of identifying with a sports team. Some of the cognitive consequences studied to date include team knowledge, perceptions of teams and fans, and attributions. In an investigation of the knowledge of a team in a particular sport and sports in general, Wann and Branscombe (1995) found that strongly identified fans of a men’s basketball team reported more knowledge of the team and of the sport than those weakly identified. In a highly interesting study of the language of sports fans, Wann et al. (1997) reported a strong, positive correlation between strength of sports fandom and understanding of sports terminology. Strongly identified sports fans, not surprisingly, appear to possess greater knowledge of sports in general and of their favorite teams in particular than those weakly identified.

It is also not surprising that strongly identified fans appear to be biased in their perceptions of their favorite teams as well as in their perceptions of the fans of their own and opposing teams (e.g., Hastorf & Cantril, 1954), perhaps as a self-esteem maintenance strategy. In an investigation of the evaluations of past, present, and future performance of a team, Wann and Dolan (1994) reported that strongly identified fans made more “team-serving” evaluations of their favorite team than did weakly identified fans. Sports fans also have been shown to be biased in their evaluations of fellow and rival fans. For example, after reading a fictional scenario about a fellow and a rival fan, strongly identified fans reported more positive evaluations of the fellow fan than the rival fan (Wann & Dolan, 1994). With regard to overall evaluations of a team,
strongly identified fans of both football and basketball were more likely than weakly identified fans to report positive evaluations (e.g., based on how much they liked the team, how successful they thought the team would be, and how good the team was relative to other teams) of the teams (Murrell & Dietz, 1992). Of course, all of these consequences can be predicted from social identity theory, which argues that to maintain a positive view of our own group, our evaluations of our own group and its members will be more favorable than evaluations of another group and its members, and this generally holds true even when there is evidence to the contrary.

Likewise, social identity theory would predict that the attributions made by strongly identified group members would be biased in a manner that supports the ingroup and its members. Briefly, attributions refer to the explanations made for behavior. Sometimes, the perceived causes of behavior are internal, such as personality traits or ability. At other times, the perceived causes of behavior are external, such as the weather or other people’s actions. In the case of sports fans, one would expect that strongly identified fans would make more internal attributions (e.g., “We really played well”) following a victory, but more external attributions (e.g., “The referees were clearly against us”) following a loss. Wann and Dolan (1994) found that following a college men’s basketball game, strongly identified fans expressed more internal attributions about the team’s performance after a win, but more external attributions about the team’s performance after a loss. Strongly identified fans of college football report similar attributions. Dietz-Uhler and Murrell (1999) found that strongly identified fans were more likely than weakly identified fans to evaluate a football team more favorably after wins than losses, after game outcomes that were expected rather than unexpected, and after games receiving more positive than negative media coverage.

**Behavioral Consequences of Sports Fan Identification**

Perhaps the most widely investigated and certainly the most easily observable consequences of sports fan identification are behavioral. In this section, we review research on such behavioral consequences as self-presentational strategies, loyalty, aggression, prosocial behavior, and psychological well-being. In one of the earliest investigations of sports fans, Cialdini et al. (1976) identified an interesting self-presentational strategy, which they termed Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing). They found that university students were more likely to wear university apparel following a victory (rather than a loss) by the school’s football team. Students were also more likely to use collective pronouns when describing a team victory than a team loss. Subsequent research has shown that, indeed, sports fans have a tendency to identify more strongly with winning rather than losing teams (End et al., 2002; Wann & Branscombe,
In a recent investigation of this self-presentational strategy on the World Wide Web, End (2001) found that fans did not BIRG by providing more links to successful than unsuccessful teams from their home pages. However, they did BIRG when using the team's electronic message board by praising winning teams and derogating losing teams. There have, of course, been other self-presentational strategies identified in the behavior of sports fans, all of which appear to serve the role of protecting a valued sports fan identity and maintaining positive self-esteem. For example, CORFing is when a sports fan Cuts off Reflected Failure by disassociating with a losing team (Wann & Branscombe, 1990a; Wann, 1993). COFFing, Cutting off Future Failure, occurs when someone dissociates from a person or team that they believe is likely to lose in the future (Wann, Hamlet, Wilson, & Hodges, 1995).

All of the literature on strongly identified sports fans suggests that they are loyal to their team, to its players, and to a sport. In a study examining the depth and breadth of that loyalty, Dietz-Uhler, End, Demakakos, Dickirson, & Grantz (2002) asked participants to read a hypothetical scenario of a player from their favorite team who had engaged in criminal activity. Results showed that strongly identified fans reported more favorable evaluations of the athlete and the team than did less strongly identified fans. When a social identity is threatened, such as when a player from one’s favorite team engages in illegal behavior, those who identify most strongly with a group often feel the strongest need to defend it. In a similar line of research, Wann and his colleagues have examined the relationship between team identification and willingness to assist a team in illegal behavior. Their results show that strongly identified fans are more likely than weakly identified fans to express a willingness to engage in illegal activities for their favorite team (Wann, Hunter, Ryan, & Wright, 2001), to consider anonymous acts of violence (Wann, Haynes, McLean, & Pullen, 2003), and to be more willing to engage in violent acts after a team loss than a team victory (Wann et al., 2005). These studies report on sports fans’ willingness to support illegal behavior and willingness to consider engaging in illegal activity. A question to consider is whether or not strongly identified fans would actually engage in negative behavior.

Some research on aggression among sports fans suggests that strongly identified sports fans are no more likely to be aggressive than fans who are less strongly identified. For example, Wann, Fahl, Erdmann, & Littleton (1999) found no relationship between fan identification (e.g., the psychological importance of being a sports fan in general) and trait aggression. Wann, Peterson, Cothran, & Dykes (1999) did find a positive relationship between team identification (e.g., the psychological importance of being a fan of a particular team) and aggression. Strongly identified fans reported a willingness to anonymously injure a star player or coach of a rival team, although there were no effects of team identification on willingness to anonymously murder someone. Other research suggests that there is a relationship between team identification and
aggression. Wann, Shelton, Smith, & Walker (2002) found that sports fandom and trait aggression were positively related, although only among male participants.

In the popular media, sports fans are often depicted as being highly aggressive, particularly when their team is losing, or — most surprisingly — following an especially important win. In fact, picture and video footage abound of fans tearing out goalposts, setting garbage cans and cars on fire, and even overturning police cars. Work by Lanter (2000) on celebratory violence suggested that team identification may play a role in expressions of aggressive behavior. Strongly identified fans of a college basketball team reported engaging in more celebratory violence following an important team victory than those less identified with the team.

Painting an equally ambiguous picture of the positive and negative aspects of sports fan identification is work on the role of team identification in prosocial behavior. Platow, Durante, Williams, Garrett, Walshe, Cincotta, Lianos, & Barutchu (1999) examined the impact of a variety of factors on contributions of money to charity workers before and after football games. Fans contributed more money to charity workers who identified themselves as supporters of the fans’ favorite team than of the opposing team.

Recently, Wann, Dimmock, & Grove (2003) examined the role of sports fan identification on social connections and psychological well-being. In a study of fans of Australian Rules Football, team identification was found to be positively related to social, but not personal, well-being (Wann, Dimmock, & Grove, 2003). Additional support for the Team Identification–Social Psychological Health Model is found in a study showing that team identification was positively related to social well-being (Wann & Pierce, 2005). Most recently, Wann (2006a) advanced this model to suggest that both enduring and temporary forms of social connections are enhanced by sports team identification. Indeed, the social connection to a university, as well as to the identification with the team, increased after the university’s men’s basketball team won the national championship (Lanter & Blackburn, 2004). The effects of team identification on social well-being clearly support one of the more positive consequences of strongly identifying as a sports fan.

Conclusion

This review, although not exhaustive, of the role of identification on affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of sports fans suggests, at the least, that this type of identity is worthy of investigation. Not only does this research highlight the importance of groups to people’s lives, it also helps to explain the importance that so many people place on their teams. Starting with social identity theory, it is clear that groups serve an important purpose for most people. In addition to providing people with a sense of belonging and a sense of self,
identifying with a group can serve an important psychological function. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), that psychological function is self-esteem. Put simply, to the extent that one’s group compares favorably with another, relevant group, people feel good about themselves. The research reviewed here certainly supports this perspective; sports fans accrue more positive benefits following team wins than losses, including more favorable moods (e.g., Wann, Royalty, & Rochelle, 2002), higher self-esteem (e.g., Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992), and more confidence (e.g., Murrell & Dietz, 1992).

At the same time, there is evidence for the stability of team identification (e.g., Wann, 2006b). The strength of sports fan identification tends not to wane following a team loss. Again, this outcome can be explained by social identity theory. When an important social identity is threatened, as in the case of a team loss, group members adapt and adjust to the threat by engaging in a variety of behaviors that still allow them to maintain a positive view of their group and, as a consequence, of themselves. Again, the research reviewed here suggests that sports fans engage in a host of behaviors that allow them to maintain a positive view of their team, including holding positive evaluations of their team, making team-serving attributions for their team’s performances, engaging in more favorable behavior and holding more positive attitudes towards fellow than rival fans, and displaying fierce loyalty to their team.

In short, to fully understand sports fans, it is essential to view their affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions from the perspective of the group. Of course, one can call into question the exact nature of the sports fans’ group membership. In other words, do sports fans accrue typical group benefits as a result of identifying as a sports fan, or as a member of the team? Research on self-presentational strategies, most notably BIRGing, suggests that sports fans seem to perceive themselves as actual members of the team (e.g., “We played really well yesterday”; “I like how we held them off in the ninth inning”). Obviously, sports fans did not “play well” nor did they “hold them off in the ninth inning.” It could be argued that sports fans benefit from two types of group membership; one as an actual group member of the group of sports fans, the other as a virtual group member of the sports team.

It would be interesting to examine the levels of identification with the actual group of fans and the virtual team. An examination of the most typical sports fan identification measure, the SSIS, reveals that team identification is construed as a psychological connection to the team, not as a connection to the group of fellow fans, nor as a virtual member of the team. Perhaps the differences in the levels of sports fan identification that have been observed, which consequently influence affect, cognition, and behavior, can be explained by these different, yet unmeasured, types of identification. That is, perhaps those who score highest on the SSIS, and thus experience the strongest affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences, identify strongly with sports fans as well as with the team.
Of course, identification of various dimensions of group identity is not novel. For example, Hinkle & Brown (1990) proposed that social identity consisted of two dimensions or components, (a) individualistic versus collective and (b) relational versus non-relational. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (e.g., Brewer, 1991) suggests that social identity can be construed along two dimensions, the need for assimilation (to be like others) and the need for differentiation (the need to be different from others). Among sports fan researchers, Dimmock et al. (2005) suggested that sports team identification can best be conceptualized by including both cognitive and evaluative dimensions, while Jacobson (2003) encouraged sports fan researchers to consider the public and private dimensions of sports fan identity. Perhaps a consideration of these or other dimensions of sports fan identity would allow for a richer, more predictive understanding of the differences in levels or types of sports fan identification.

A potentially more relevant consideration than the dimensions of group identity is research on types of groups. Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier (1995) identified five types of social identities, including personal relationships, vocations/avocations, political affiliations, ethnic/religious groups, and stigmatized groups. These five types of identities were derived from analyses of the perceived similarities of various social identities. Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale (1994) distinguished between common-bond and common-identity groups. In common-bond groups, the bonds and levels of attraction are primarily between group members. In common-identity groups, the attachment and attraction is to the group. Groups based on friendships are categorized as common-bond groups, while those organized around a common interest or activity are categorized as common-identity groups.

Similarly, Gardner & Gabriel (2004) discussed collective (i.e., group bonds) and relational (i.e., interpersonal bonds) interdependence in groups, and found gender differences in these types of interdependence. Females reported higher levels of relational interdependence, whereas males reported greater collective interdependence. Taking these results into consideration may help to further explain discrepancies between the reasons males and females considered themselves sports fans (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000). Females reported being a fan of sports for social reasons such as watching or attending a sporting event to spend time with family or friends. For males, sports fandom seems to serve a less-relational function. They reported being a fan because they enjoy the excitement of following sports and seeking information about sports.

It would be interesting to consider viewing sports fans using the common-bond/relational interdependence and common-identity/collective interdependence group typology. It may be the case that sports fan identity serves a common-bond/relational function for some group members. If so, then one would expect this group to be more interested in their relationships with other
sports fans. Fans whose sports fan identity serves a common-identity/collective function would be expected to be more concerned with the team and the sport. This investigation could also provide more information about gender issues in sports fans.

Another interesting group typology to consider is the functions of various types of groups. For example, Johnson et al. (2006) recently investigated the various social motivation functions of a variety of different types of groups. Their research focused specifically on three types of groups. Intimacy groups, such as families and friends, have high levels of interaction, similarity, and importance to their members. Task groups, such as study groups and juries, have a high degree of interaction and are typically characterized as sharing common goals and working toward specific outcomes. Social categories, such as women and Hispanics, usually have low levels of interaction and similarity. Focusing on the motivational principles identified by Mackie & Smith (1998), they found that intimacy groups were most associated with affiliation needs, task groups with achievement needs, and social categories with identity needs. Applied to sports fans, it would be interesting to investigate the various needs served by being a sports fan. Perhaps sports fan identification serves different needs for different types of fans, which might account for the different affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to sports.

There is also research on gender differences in sports fans (discussed above) which shows that sports fandom serves different functions for male and female fans (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000). Interestingly, these gender differences exist even though males and females report similar levels of identification with a team and similar levels of perceiving themselves as sports fans (Dietz-Uhler, End, Jacquemotte, Bentley, & Hurlbut, 2000).

Future research might consider focusing on various dimensions and typologies of sports fan identity, as well as the various needs served by those dimensions or types. It would be interesting to gain a better understanding of why some fans identify more strongly with a team than do others, as well as why the affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences differ. For example, why do some fans engage in celebratory violence while other, but equally identified, fans refrain from such activity? Why do some fans report greater despair following a team loss than other, but equally identified, fans? The answer might lie in the manner in which sports fan identification is measured and conceptualized (i.e., identification with sports fans and virtual identification as a team member), or it may lie in a host of other potential mediators, such as the functions that sports fandom serves. This is an issue that might be fruitful for sports fan scholars to explore.