

Die-Hard and Fair-Weather Fans: Effects of Identification on BIRGing and CORFing Tendencies

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated that people are capable of strategic self-presentation; they decrease the distance between themselves and successful groups with which they have only the most trivial of associations, and strive to increase the distance between themselves and groups viewed negatively as a result of some perceived failure. These two processes, termed basking-in-reflected-glory (BIRGing) and cutting-off-reflected failure (CORFing) respectively, assist in the maintenance of self-esteem. The current study investigated the extent to which allegiance to a group would modify these general processes. In support of the hypotheses, higher fan identification resulted in increased tendencies to BIRG and decreased tendencies to CORF. In contrast, persons moderate or low in identification were less likely to BIRG and showed an increased likelihood to CORF. Discussion focuses on the role of identification with a group in terms of how it moderates coping with threats to an identity and its impact on self-esteem.

Two self-esteem related processes and their application to sports spectators have been identified. The potential moderation of these processes by the degree to which an individual is identified with or attached to a particular team is the focus of the current investigation.

The first process of basking-in-reflected-glory (BIRGing) reflects individuals' desire to increase their association with successful others. Theoretically, it serves an ego enhancement function. Cialdini *et al.* (1976) examined the extent to which university students wore clothing which identified their association with the school (operationalized as names, insignias, and/or emblems) on the Monday following a Saturday football game. The results, tabulated across seven universities from various athletic

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conferences, indicated that students tended to wear identifying apparel significantly more often following a victory than a defeat. In a second study, subjects were telephoned and asked to participate in a survey concerning students' knowledge of campus affairs. During this conversation, half of the respondents were asked to recall information about a previous university football game where their team had won, while the other half were asked to recall a game where their team had lost. Outcomes involving success were described in terms of "we" (i.e., "we won") more often than were losses. Outcomes that were unfavorable for the subjects' team were phrased in terms of "they" (e.g., "they lost"). These data (as well as subsequent research--see Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980) lead the researchers to conclude that individuals desire an affiliation with successful others as a means of increasing self-esteem.

Subsequent research and theorizing (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980; Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983; Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986) indicated that in addition to increasing their association with successful others (BIRGing), people also tend to increase the distance between themselves and unsuccessful others. This latter process of cutting-off-reflected-failure (CORFing) serves an ego protective function.

In order to simultaneously examine the BIRGing and CORFing phenomena, Snyder *et al.* (1986) assigned individuals to groups where they performed a task and then received either success, no information, or failure feedback. All subjects were told that they were members of the "Blue Team", and that their group would be asked to make a presentation to a panel of judges when the task was completed. As a measure of desire to associate themselves with their team, subjects were asked to indicate the extent to which they wanted to be present during their group's presentation. To assess their desire to disassociate themselves from the group, subjects indicated how much they wished not to be present when the judges evaluated them.

Individuals whose team had received the success feedback showed a greater preference to be present for the presentation than did persons in the negative feedback condition. These subjects took the opportunity to BIRG. Persons receiving negative feedback were significantly more desirous of not attending the presentation than were persons in the no information or success feedback conditions. These individuals displayed a fairly strong tendency to CORF. On the behavioral level, subjects who received the negative feedback were less likely to take and wear the team badge than were subjects who received no information or positive feedback. Based on these results, Snyder *et al.* (1986) concluded that individuals engage in a

complex process of psychological distancing toward or away from groups (both BIRGing and CORFing), depending on whether self enhancement of self protective motives are paramount.

Much recent theorizing and research demonstrates that affective involvement alters information processing strategies and social behavior in a variety of domains (Branscombe & Cohen, in press; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). We expected that affective involvement, or amount of identification with a group, would moderate individuals distancing tendencies. When applied to sports spectators, prior research suggests that all fans BIRG when their team is successful, and when their team has suffered a defeat they lessen their association in order to CORF. However, sports fans vary in their allegiance or psychological attachment to a team. Degree of identification with a team may be an important moderator of BIRGing and CORFing processes. Some teams have a long history of losing sporting contests (*e.g.*, the Chicago Cubs in professional baseball), yet there is a large cadre of fans who remain loyal and continue to root for these teams "through thick and thin." Branscombe and Wann (1991, forthcoming) have found that identification with a sports team is unrelated to that team's professional record. Self-esteem, however, is positively related to degree of identification with various sports teams. Fans who are high in identification, as opposed to those low in identification, also respond with greater physiological arousal during exposure to a competition where that identity is implicated, regardless of whether their group ultimately wins or loses (Branscombe & Wann, 1990).

Sloan (1979), in a discussion of the functions that sports serve for spectators notes that "...some fans always admitted their association with the team, even in a loss, suggesting a stronger bond to the team..." (p. 255). Apparently, these persons did not demonstrate the protective CORFing that might be expected based on past research. Instead, possibly due to their high levels of identification with the team, these persons maintained allegiance in the face of defeat. Nevertheless, identification was not measured, so this hypothesis remains untested, although several researchers concerned with fan reactions have suggested that identification may be important in modifying spectator behaviors and affect (see Guttman, 1986; Mann, 1979; Schurr, Ruble, & Ellen, 1985; Schurr, Wittig, Ruble, & Ellen, 1988; Smith, 1983; Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1979).

The consequences of identification with a group more generally have received considerable attention in the work of Tajfel (1981; 1982) and his colleagues (Breakwell, 1986; Turner, 1975; 1978; see also Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is clear that identification with a group has important implications for self-esteem (Crocker &

Luhtanen, 1990; Dion, Earn, & Yee, 1978; Oakes & Turner, 1978). Yet associations with different groups may vary in the degree to which they have evaluative implications for the self. Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) have argued that responses in the minimal intergroup situation, where subjects lack a strong identification with the group, may be unrelated to esteem needs. When, however, association with a group has evaluative implications, then self-esteem needs can play a critical role. Spectators at sporting events are all too aware of the evaluative implications of their team's performance and can experience the elation of victory or agony of defeat as intensely as the participants (Zillmann *et al.*, 1979).

The logic employed in our research is that people do not bask in the success of all groups, only those that are at least moderately important to their self-identities (*e.g.*, Do Americans bask in a Russian victory at the Olympics?). In addition, people are not able to, and do not seem to want to, cut off their association with all groups that have experienced defeat or failure (see Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956). Those who are highly identified with a team may be less likely than persons moderate or low in allegiance to increase the distance between themselves and the team following defeats. Because identification with a particular team is so central to their identity, highly identified persons will maintain their allegiance against all adversity (for example, the Chicago Cubs 'Die-Hard Fan Club'). On this basis, it was hypothesized that persons high in identification would demonstrate a reduced tendency to CORF relative to persons low or moderate in allegiance to a team. Conversely, persons highly identified with a team should be more likely to BIRG following success, compared to persons low or even moderate in identification. Persons moderately identified with the team are expected to fall in between those low and high on both the BIRGing and CORFing measures.

METHOD

Subjects and Design

Undergraduates (75 male; 133 female) at the University of Kansas participated in this study as partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course. The design employed was a 2 (subject sex) X 3 (level of identification with the University of Kansas Men's Varsity Basketball team "the Jayhawks"--low, moderate, or high) X 2 (BIRGing or CORFing with the team) mixed factorial design, where the last variable was within-subjects.

Identification Measure

Subjects completed a seven-item questionnaire designed to measure their identification with the University of Kansas Men's Varsity Basketball Team. Responses to the items shown in Table 1 were averaged to create an overall measure of level of identification with the Jayhawks basketball team. Previous research (Wann & Branscombe, 1990) has demonstrated that the scale is reliable, consists of a single factor, and possesses predictive validity.

Subjects were classified into three groups: low ($n = 60$), moderate, ($n = 61$), or high ($n = 67$) in identification with the team, based on their overall identification scores. Mean identification scores were 4.64, 6.36, and 7.46 in the low, moderate, and high

Table One: Team Identification Questionnaire

Item

How important is it to YOU that the K.U. basketball team wins?
(Not Important/Very Important)

How strongly do YOU see YOURSELF as a fan of the K.U. basketball team?
(Not At All a Fan/Very Much a Fan)

How strongly do your FRIENDS see YOU as a fan of the K.U. basketball team?
(Not At All a Fan/Very Much a Fan)

During the season, how closely do you follow the K.U. basketball team via ANY of the following: a) in person or on television, b) on the radio, c) televised news or a newspaper? (Never/Almost Every Day)

How important is being a fan of K.U. basketball to YOU?
(Not Important/Very Important)

How much do YOU dislike K.U. basketball's greatest rivals?
(Do Not Dislike/Dislike Very Much)

How often do YOU display the K.U. basketball team's name or insignia at your place of work, where you live, or on your clothing?
(Never/Always)

NOTE: Responses for each item were on a one to eight scale and the anchors for the response scales appear in parentheses following each item.

conditions, respectively. These differences are reliable, $F(2, 187) = 272.4$, $p < .0001$, with all of the comparisons between the means significantly different at the .001 level. Although the low identification group is not without any allegiance to the team (the basketball program at the University of Kansas has a long and illustrious history), we can still test our theoretical point concerning how involvement moderates distancing tendencies using essentially the upper half of the involvement distribution.

The three groups did not significantly differ in either age or number of semesters as a student at the University of Kansas (p 's $> .15$). Persons in the identity groups differed in the length of time they had been fans of the team, as would be expected. Those who were highly identified were fans for 7.4 years, those who were moderately identified reported being fans for 5.0 years, and those with low identification had been fans for 4.0 years. This reliable difference, $F(2, 187) = 9.95$, $p < .0001$, between the three groups in length of time they have supported the team provides corroborative evidence for the measure of identification with the team.

BIRGing and CORFing Measures

As a measure of subjects' tendencies to BIRG in the team's success, respondents indicated on a one to eight scale how much enjoyment they experienced by following K.U. basketball when the team is successful. To assess tendencies to CORF from the team's failure, subjects responded on an eight point scale to an item concerning how much enjoyment they experienced by following the K.U. basketball team when they are NOT successful. So that both of these dependent measures would reflect the appropriate underlying distancing dimensions--movement toward the team under success conditions and movement away from the team under failure conditions--the enjoyment of the team when they are not successful item was reverse scored. Across all subjects, a low but significant negative correlation between these two measures was obtained ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$).

RESULTS

It was hypothesized that subjects high in identification would demonstrate a stronger tendency to BIRG in their team's success, relative to persons low in identification. The reverse was anticipated for CORFing; persons high in identification should CORF less than those low in identification. Those moderately identified with the team were expected to fall in between those high and low in

allegiance. In order to examine this hypothesis, a 3 (level of identification) X 2 (sex of subject) X 2 (enjoyment under success and failure conditions) mixed multivariate analysis of variance was performed and the outcome of this analysis is displayed in Table 2.

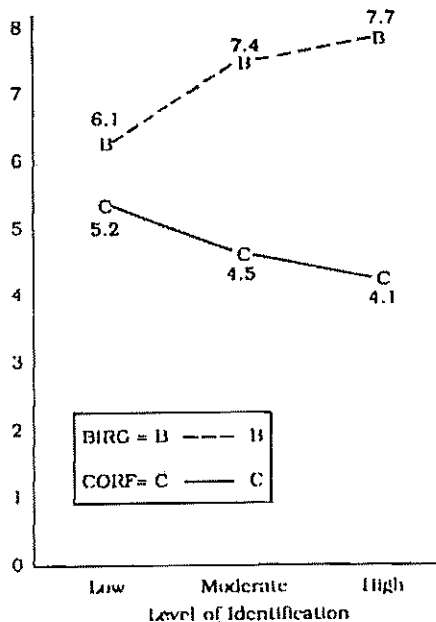
Table 2: Analysis of Variance Summary Table

Effect	df	F	p-values
Sex	1	2.64	.106
Success/Failure	1	153.57	.001
Identification	2	0.54	.586
Identification x Success/Failure	2	16.48	.001
Sex x Identification	2	0.14	.867
Sex x Success/Failure	1	1.13	.289
Sex x Identification x Success/Failure	2	0.00	.997
Residual	182		

The sex of subject main effect was not significant, nor were any interactions involving this variable close to significant. The significant main effect for type of dependent measure indicated that the respondents were overall more likely to enjoy the team when they were successful ($M = 7.11$) than when they failed ($M = 4.58$). As predicted, this main effect for enjoyment under success and failure conditions was qualified by a significant two-way interaction between the type of dependent measure and level of identification. The means for this interaction are shown in Figure 1.

Simple effects tests on the BIRGING measure revealed that the low identified subjects were significantly less likely to BIRG than were the moderately identified individuals, $t(119) = 5.38$, $p < .0001$, or the highly identified participants, $t(125) = 6.87$, $p < .0001$. Furthermore, the moderately identified individuals

Figure 1: Mean Scores of BIRGing and CORFing for Low, Moderate, and High Levels of Identification With the Team.



Note: The scale ranges from 1 to 8 with higher numbers representing more of that dimension. BIRGing or CORFing.

exhibited less BIRGing compared to those high in identification, $t(126) = 2.50, p < .01$.

An examination of the simple effects for the CORFing measure indicated that those low in identification were more likely to CORF than were persons moderate in identification, $t(119) = 2.07, p < .04$, or those who were highly identified, $t(125) = 2.85, p < .005$. Persons moderate versus high in identification were not reliably different in their tendencies to distance themselves from team failure, $t < 1.0$.

Using polynomial contrasts, the BIRGing and CORFing measures were also subjected to trend analysis. The BIRGing variable showed a significant quadratic trend, $F(1, 185) = 6.67, p < .02$. On the CORFing measure, although the linear trend was significant, $F(1, 185) = 7.81, p < .01$, the quadratic trend was not, $F < 1.0$. Finally, within each of the levels of identification, subjects were more inclined to enjoy "their" team when it was successful

(BIRG) than when it was not successful (CORF); all p values were less than .01.

DISCUSSION

It was hypothesized that amount of identification with a team moderates the degree to which individuals display BIRGing and CORFing tendencies. The results clearly demonstrate support for this notion. Persons high in identification showed an increased tendency to bask in the glow of victory, relative to persons moderate or low in allegiance. In addition, persons highly identified with the team appeared to maintain their association with the team and continued to enjoy them even when faced with defeat, thereby showing a reduction in the tendency to CORF relative to those low in identification. Based on these results, it is apparent that when investigating spectator behaviors it is important not to assume that the team is equally important to all fans. Rather, for some persons the team and their exploits take on a larger meaning as being a fan has greater implications for that individual's self identity. It is these persons which we have labeled highly identified.

The results of this study shed light on two phenomena commonly found in the world of sports: 'die-hard fans' and 'fair-weather fans'. Die-hard fans will persevere with their chosen team through almost anything, including years of defeat. Often, being a fan of a particular team leads to ridicule from others. While many individuals will increase the distance between themselves and a team during such hard times and negative social feedback, others remain steadfast. The results of the current investigation suggest that these persistent individuals are highly identified with the team. Fair-weather fans are persons who seem to join in the fun when the team is performing well (i.e., they take advantage of the association and bask in its successful glow). It appears that anyone at least moderately involved with the team will demonstrate this tendency, although high identification strengthens it. Taken together, these two variables help explain why spectator attendance fluctuates, often increasing the year following a successful season, but decreasing the year after the team has performed poorly (Canes, 1974; Demmert, 1973; Greenstein & Marcum, 1981; Noll, 1974). We believe low identified fans, who showed the strongest tendency to CORF, are responsible for these fluctuations, especially those occurring after a poor season.

To a large extent, BIRGing and CORFing appear to be driven by the desire to maintain a positive self identity. This is an intricate balancing process whereby enhancement of the self image is accomplished by increasing one's association with a positive other

(e.g., Cialdini *et al.*, 1976), or by protection of the self concept by increasing the distance between oneself and an unsuccessful other (e.g., Snyder *et al.*, 1983; 1986). Because people are, for the most part, motivated to create and maintain a positive self concept (Tajfel, 1981), they may attach or detach themselves strategically to certain teams that they have little identity invested in, as a means of moderating their public self image and/or self-esteem. While it might appear that the uncertainty of the outcome (winning versus losing) makes identifying with a sports team a rather risky business, research has shown that this uncertainty (termed 'eustress' or euphoric stress) is attractive to many sports fans and, in fact, may be why they attend sporting events (Elias & Dunning, 1970; Harris, 1973; Koppett, 1981; Sloan, 1979).

CORFing is of special interest to a discussion concerning self-esteem maintenance because it can be considered a coping strategy that is employed when trying to ward off a threat to one's self identity. The threat in this situation is a loss by the team that the individual is a fan of, and its consequent implications for the self. Breakwell (1986) notes that while threats are typically thought of as being at the individual level, they quite often involve group memberships. Hence, if a person derives part of her or his self-esteem from a group membership, any devaluation of that group will constitute a threat to that person's identity. In fact, in the social identity literature, a threat is often operationalized as a failure on the part of one's group (e.g., Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wagner, Lampen, & Syllwasschy, 1986). Only under rare circumstances, that of very strong identification with a group, does failure of that group not produce a reduction in attraction to the group and reduced in-group cohesion (Turner, Hogg, Turner & Smith, 1984).

Breakwell (1986) defines a coping strategy as, "...any thought or action which succeeds in eliminating or ameliorating threat...whether it is consciously recognized as intentional or not" (p. 79). In her model of coping, CORFing would be viewed as an intra-psychic strategy in which the individual re-evaluates the value of an identity. Our research suggests that low identified persons are most likely to make use of this strategy. CORFing is not, however, the only coping mechanism used in adjusting to group failure. Other reactions that previous research has pointed out include anger, hostility, and aggression (Coakley, 1978; Gaskell & Pearton, 1979; Harrell, 1981), depression (Athey, 1979), and cognitive adjustments in perceptions of the sporting contest itself, or alterations in the outcome's importance (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Lau & Russell, 1980; Mark, Bryant, & Lehman, 1983). Such

reactions may be most expected in persons who are highly identified, or even the actual game participants whose emotional reactions may be similar (Vinokur, 1988; Zillmann *et al.*, 1979). Highly identified persons, unable or unwilling to reduce their association with the unsuccessful team, may be forced into choosing another coping mechanism rather than CORFing, such as one of these reframing techniques. We are currently investigating this possibility by examining out-group derogation and aggression when an important identity is threatened in individuals who are strongly or weakly identified with the group who wins or loses. Highly identified fans, when threatened by a loss, may be more likely to aggress than those low in identification. They cannot cope by distancing themselves as low identified persons can.

Finally, the results of this study may generalize beyond the sports world. That is, high identification with any group (such as race, religion, nationality, or gender) may reduce the possibility of employing the CORFing tactic. Low identification with these other groups is likely to prevent BIRGing because the group is not a part of these individuals' self concept and thus has little in the way of evaluative implications. Research on political identification (see Conover, 1984) and nationalism (Bronfenbrenner, 1961) has indicated that high identification can indeed lead to more extreme reactions to potential gains or losses, as well as polarization in responses toward in-group and out-group members. It would be interesting to assess in future research whether fans who differ in identification with a team do differentially perceive others who employ BIRGing and CORFing tendencies. In addition, the actual self-esteem functions of BIRGing and CORFing should be directly measured.

Identification with any group, including sports teams, seems to alter the relative balance between defensive and assertive impression management motives (Schlenker, 1980). However, the actual behavioral manifestations of BIRGing and CORFing in group members who differ in their level of identification could usefully extend the current work where self-reported feelings of enjoyment of the team was employed. The general phenomenon of die-hard and fair-weather fans implies that individuals' behavior do follow the same pattern as we observed for feelings of enjoyment.

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