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## **The Social Psychology of the Creation of a Sports Fan Identity: A Theoretical Review of the Literature**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A gap exists in the current literature on identity formation with regards to sports fans, as the current literature base does not adequately address the creation of fan identity. Instead, social scientific research focuses largely on the effects of fandom, for example, the violence and aggression associated with being a fan. A fan identity, as with any group identity, is beneficial to the individual in that it may provide a sense of community. Following the symbolic interactionism traditions, identity theory (Stryker, 1987) aims to understand why people do what they do, or why they make the choices that they do. Therefore, sports fandom is an appropriate venue for identity theory. Identity creation is discussed in terms of socialization and relational factors.

### **Introduction**

A gap exists in the current literature on identity formation with regard to sports. The current sociology of sport literature does not adequately address the creation of fan identity. Social science research on sport fans focuses largely on the effects of fandom, for example, the violence and aggression, which may result from being a fan. Little is known, however, about the process of becoming a fan. This therefore raises a compelling question, how do individuals form sport fan identities? More specifically, this review examines the issues and theoretical concepts surrounding the ways in which individuals develop and maintain fan identities. An examination of identity formation among sport fans is beneficial in that it unites two previously unrelated literature bases, namely identity formation and sport sociology. Furthermore, this application will stretch the bounds of identity theory by testing its limits, which should account for a more comprehensive theory.

A fan identity, as with any group identity, is beneficial to the individual in that it may provide a sense of community. Zillmann, Bryant and Sapolsky (1989) highlight other benefits of fandom, including the development of diverse interests, the minimal skill level necessary for participation, and the low cost. They also note that fandom brings activities, such as football, to more sectors of society, including the very young, the very old, the ill, and those who simply lack the necessary athletic ability required for participation. Fandom allows individuals to be a part of the game without requiring any special skills (Branscombe & Wann, 1991a). In addition, fandom offers such social benefits as feelings of camaraderie, community and solidarity, as well as enhanced social prestige and self-esteem (Zillmann et al.). Sports fandom further affects individual personal development by helping people learn to cope with emotions and feelings of disappointment (Branscombe & Wann, 1991a). "It appears that sports fandom can unite and provide feelings of belongingness that are beneficial to individuals and to the social setting in which they live" (Zillmann et al., p. 251). However, sport fans have not generally been portrayed positively, especially in social science research. This is especially true of males, who are often stigmatized because of their fandom (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). Fans are criticized for their apparent lack of physical fitness as well as for being passive or lazy (Zillmann et al.), to the high levels of violence among fans, including, but not limited to hooliganism and riotous victory celebrations (Kutcher, 1983; Levy, 1989; Gantz and Wenner, 1995). Debates on the benefits of fandom are ongoing, however research has failed to completely address the questions as to why and how someone initially becomes a fan.

## **Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory**

Within social psychology, there are two dominant theory of identity – identity theory (Stryker, 1977; Burke, 1980) and social identity theory (Tajfel 1970; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Identity theory is a direct derivation of McCall and Simmons (1978) role-identity theory, which suggests that individuals will base their actions on how they like to see themselves and how they like to be seen by others. Therefore, the role-identity requires two components, specifically, the role itself and the identity to be associated with that role (Petkus, 1996). With this in mind, identity theory is rooted in the concept of roles and role-identities. Social identity theory, however, is based on Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which suggests that individuals will strive to attach themselves to other individuals who are similar or slightly better. Social identity theory, therefore, focuses on the ways in which individuals perceive and categorize themselves, based on their social and personal identities. Rather than emphasizing role and role behaviors, social identity theory emphasizes group processes and inter-group relations. Both of these theories posit that, theoretically, the self is multifaceted, dynamic, and is generally responsible for mediating the relationship between social structures and individuals behavior (Hogg et al, 1995). However, the social identity theory has come to dominate the study of intergroup relations (Brown and Capozza, 2000), while identity theory focuses on the concept of role identities.

Generally, according to identity theorists, social identity "refers to the ways in which individuals and collectives are distinguished in their social relations with other

individuals or collectives” (Jenkins 1996:4). Social identity is our understanding of “who we are”. One of the first things we do when we meet someone is “locate them on our social map” – or identify them. Social identities can also be considered social selves. These social selves are socially constructed and categorized in ways that are accepted by individuals as descriptive of themselves or their peer group (Thoits and Virshup 1997). On the other hand, personal identities are “self descriptions referring to unique or highly specific details of [an individual’s] biography” (Thoits and Virshup 1997:107). Identity theory (Stryker 1987) is derived from the symbolic interactionist perspective of role choice behavior. This theory seeks to understand why people do what they do, or why they make the choices that they do. Therefore, the most appropriate applications of this theory are ones in which alternative actions are available to the subject, however he/she may only choose one of the alternatives. Identity theory recognizes that social structure and social interaction are both equally constant in limiting, rather than determining, human action (Borgatta and Borgatta 1992:871).

Identity is defined as “a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or situation defining what it means to be who one is” (Burke 1991: 837). Choices in roles are seen as a consequence of identity salience, which is a specification of the general category of self. Furthermore, identity salience is a consequence of commitment. Therefore, commitment impacts the identity salience, which impacts role choice (Borgatta and Borgatta 1992:873). Identity is based on the categorizations that others have for an individual as well as the individual’s acceptance of this categorization (Stryker 1968). Furthermore, identities exist only insofar as individuals are participants in structured social interaction (Stryker 1968). It can be suggested that identities are tied to roles, or positions, in organized social relationships. As individual identities are hierarchically organized, these identities will vary in terms of which is the most salient. Consequently, the self is organized based on this salience hierarchy. Therefore, choices are based on the salience of an identity, which is then positioned in the identity hierarchy.

One of the main components of identity theory is the ability of the self to take itself as an object, thereby classifying or categorizing itself in relation to other classifications or categorizations (Stets and Burke, 2000; Hogg et al. 1995). In identity theory, this is referred to as identification, and “the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role”(Stets and Burke, 2000:2 of 14). It is through the process of identification that an identity is formed. Identification of people and things in the social world, and subsequent definitions of their meanings, is a key component of symbolic interactionism, and for human interactions (McCall and Simmons 1966). Identification then incorporates the meanings and expectations associated with roles and performances, which ultimately forms a set of guidelines for behavior.

Identification encompasses two types of identity. Social identity is identification in terms of broader social categories, while personal identity is defined in terms of categories that are more unique to the individual. In other words, “personal identities serve as the pegs upon which social identities can be hung” (McCall and Simmons 1966: 65). The personal identity can also be seen as the set of meanings that are tied to the self and help to sustain it, and these self-meanings carry across roles and situations (Stets and

Burke, 2000). Personal identities also penetrate social identities and carry into the group and into group identities. Furthermore, Strauss (1959) noted that identification requires an organized link to others, either formally or symbolically.

A concern of identity theorists is the effect of individual position within the larger social structure, in an effort to understand which identity an individual will activate (Stets and Burke, 2000). Identity commitment (or identity salience) is composed of the number of networked ties an individual has as well as the strength of these ties (Stets and Burke, 2000). Stryker (1968), in addressing identity salience, hypothesized that individuals will seek out opportunities to enact a highly salient identity. This hypothesis suggests that identities require more than simply a situational activation, however that the individual must also have the desire to activate them.

Social identity theory suggests that identities are tied to group membership. “Social identity theory is intended to be a social psychological theory of intergroup relations, group processes and the social self” (Hogg et al, 1995: 259). The basic premise of this theory is that identity is formed based on group membership (Hogg et al, 1995; Brown, 2000: 746-747). Tajfel (1981; see also Tajfel and Turner 1979) suggests that identity is also a function of the value and emotional attachment placed on a particular group membership. Moreover, individuals strive to maintain positive social identities, which are primarily derived from favorable comparisons to group members and non-members. Social identity theory has three primary components – categorization, identification, and comparison.

What we referred to as identification under identity theory (the process by which an identity is formed), is known as self-categorization under social identity theory. Social categorization can be seen as a “system of orientation which helps to create and define the individual’s place in society” (Tajfel, 1981: 255, see also Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In other words, we categorize individuals to better understand and relate to them. Keeping in mind that an individual can be a member of many different groups, he/she is likely to have a social identity for each group. That is to say that the specific group one is interacting with at any given time will dictate their current social identity. Social identity theory further suggests that upon joining a group, individuals will think of that group as superior to any other group (or out-group), thereby enhancing their own self-image.

Social identity theory suggests that individuals use social groups and group membership to maintain and support their personal and collective identities (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tajfel 1981; Funk 1998). As stated earlier, personal identities within identity theory are self-descriptions referring to specific, biographic, personal details (Thoits and Virshup 1997). Within social identity theory, personal identities are derived from self-classifications, which in turn are based on interpersonal similarities and differences with other group members (Funk 1998). However, similarly to identity theory, these personal identities are private and unique to the individual. The social identities within identity theory are comparable to the collective identities within social identity theory. Collective identities represent self-classification in terms of comparisons

with members of certain categories, such as race, class, etc. (Brown and Truner 1981; Funk 1989).

As Hogg et al (1995) note, both theories address the structure and function of a self that is socially constructed, however they do so in very different ways. Identity theory focuses more explicitly on the structure and function of an individual's identity as they relate to the behavioral roles they play in society. On the other hand, social identity theory focuses on the structure and function of identities as they relate to group membership (Hogg et al 1995). Therefore, while the social identity theory perspective is concerned with intergroup relations and group processes, identity theory is more concerned with the roles individuals play in society and the identities that these roles confer (Hogg et al 1995).

Most sport fan researchers have focused exclusively on social identity theory; however, I argue that identity theory should be used as well. Within identity theory, the process of identity formation requires the individual to define him/herself in terms of the social relationship. In the creation of a fan identity, the individual will develop either a personal identity, a social identity, or both. Identity theory suggests that individuals have choices and it examines why they make the choices they do. The questions that arise and remain to be answered are, why, and how have they chosen a specific team? Furthermore, if identity is created through interaction, what types of interaction led the individual to make the choices he/she made?

## **Sports and Sport Fan Research**

Recent literature on sport fans has addressed possible reasons as to why individuals find sports to be enjoyable. These reasons include benefits associated with self esteem, an escape from everyday life, entertainment, economic factors, aesthetic or artistic qualities, group affiliation and family needs; however, why one particular team is chosen over another, and how this affiliation forms, is still not adequately addressed. Wann (1995) explores this notion to a degree. He focuses on college students and recreational softball players and attempts to determine what motivates people to become fans. Notably, Wann does state that his attempt to understand the motivations of individuals to become sport fans is a preliminary study.

Much of the existing research on sport fans focuses predominantly on college sports, as opposed to professional sports (Wann & Dolan, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c; Branscombe & Wann, 1991a; Hirt et al., 1992; Wann, Royalty & Roberts, 2000; Wann and Branscombe, 1990; Hocking, 1982; Madrigal, 1995; Deegan & Stein, 1978). Wann (1995) interviewed university students and recreational softball players regarding their feelings towards sports in general, without distinguishing between professional and college level. Miller (1976) used the same methodology and target population (university students). Madrigal (1995) focused on fan satisfaction during college basketball games. Finally, Wann, Tucker, and Schrader (1996) allowed respondents to freely choose either a professional or amateur team in their interviews. Focus on professional sports and specifically professional football does exist, but is less common than research on college students (see

for example, Wann and Schrader 1996; Jones 1997a; Lewis, 2001; Lindsay, 2000). This distinction is necessary in that it can be hypothesized that college students will form natural, although possible temporary allegiances, which are not necessarily seen at the professional level.

Although a number of studies have been carried out on sport fans and sports spectators, few of them conceptualize fan or spectator, and any conceptualizations that are provided are not used with any consistency. This is problematic in that spectators may not necessarily be fans. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for researchers to use the terms interchangeably, as does Smith (1988), for example, which could result in further confusion. Any research that examines sport fans or spectators must first define fan and spectator to avoid any ambiguity and confusion. This is especially important when exploring the reasons for team identification, as there are different degrees of fandom or spectatorship.

To briefly explore some of the existing definitions of sport fans, sports involvement can be seen as revolving around the concept of perceived interest and the personal importance of sports to an individual (Shank & Beasley, 1998). Jones (1997b) suggests that spectators will observe a sport and then forget about it, while fans will have more intensity and will devote parts of every day to the team or the sport itself. Fanship has also been defined as “an affiliation in which a great deal of emotional significance and value are derived from group membership” (Hirt, Zillman, Erickson & Kennedy, 1992: 725). Spinrad (1981) defines a fan as “the person who thinks, talks about and is oriented towards sports even when [the fan] is not actually observing, or reading, or listening to an account of a specific sports event” (354). Pooley (1978) suggests the need to differentiate between a fan and a spectator, claiming that the difference is a matter of degree of engrossment and passion. Madrigal (1995) suggests that fans represent an association that provides the individual with a great deal of emotional and value significance. Lastly, Anderson (1979) notes that since it is derived from the word ‘fanatic’, a fan can be defined as an ardent devotee of sport, or as an individual possessed frequently by an excessive enthusiasm for sport. In perhaps the most definitive conceptualizations, Wann, Melnick, Russell and Page (2001) outline the differences between a fan and a spectator as well as the differences between highly and lowly identified fans. They define a sport fan as “individuals who are interested in and follow a sport, team, and/or athlete. Sport spectators ... are those individuals who actively witness a sporting event in person or through some form of media (radio, television, etc.)” (Wann et al., 2001, 2). This sampling of conceptualizations shows the wide range of definitions as well as the similarities and overlap. Those researchers who do differentiate between spectators and fans agree that the difference is in the degree of devotion to the team or a player. Those who do not differentiate between these terms tend to refer to the fan (or spectator) in highly devoted terms.

## **Sports and Identity**

To better understand sports, sport fandom and identity, it is necessary to understand these factors on two distinct theoretical levels. The first of these levels is an interpersonal

or network level and include the influences of friends and family member on identity. Also included in this level are the effects of the community, including the possibility that geographic areas may tend to force local teams on the residents. The second level is a symbolic level. Included in this level are the team specific factors, such as personnel and unique factors, including the team name, logo, colors, and fight song.

### **Interpersonal/Network Level of Identity**

Among the hypothesized factors of identity formation and maintenance is the concept of socialization. It is not at all unreasonable to assume that individuals become fans through socialization, primarily by friends and family . It is possible that this socialization can be traced back to childhood sports socialization. While it once would have been fair to say that sport fans were predominantly male, it is not necessarily true today. However, boys especially are traditionally socialized into sports at a young age (Chorbajian, 1978; Smith, 1979). Boys are introduced to athletics at early ages, through both parental influences and marketing means, such as bedding and clothing, which are likely to have athletic themes or emblems on them (Chorbajian, 1978). Other socialization agents which make a strong contribution to sport socialization include the community, toys, peers and role models (Giuliano, Popp & Knight 2000). Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End and Jacquemotte (2000) found that women were more likely to be sport fans because they attended or watched games with friends and family while men were fans because they played sports. Therefore, female fan identity may be, at least in part, dependent on her network of friends and family.

In addition to socialization, individuals could become fans as a way to achieve group membership or be a part of a collective unit. Collective behavior can be loosely defined as the behavior of two or more individuals who are acting collectively, whereby each influences the actions of the other (Blumer, 1969). Furthermore, Blumer suggests that there is a need to differentiate between the collectivities in small groups as well as from culturally defined behavior, especially since a group is more than just a collection of individuals. Therefore, collective behavior could be thought of as specific to larger groups with intent.

A primary benefit of collective behavior is the sense of belonging that arises with group identification. Collective identities are known for their ability to give individuals a sense of belonging to a group. One dominant purpose of collective identities is to define borders by differentiating between “us” and “them,” thereby creating both opponents and solidarities (Snow & Oliver, 1995). In addition, the sense of the collective supports, reinforces, influences, inhibits, or suppresses actions taken by an individual (Blumer). Boire (1980) reinforces this by noting that the fan considers him/herself to be a part of the team, sharing in its glory and agony of defeat.

Crowds are often studied as organizations of collectives, especially in terms of sports. For example, when the game begins, the crowd becomes a collective unit (Allison, 1979). Furthermore, the sports crowd can be seen as a regular, scheduled group of partisan and neutral supporters with relatively predictable actions, who are frequent

participants in collective behaviors (Mann, 1989). Aveni (1977) defines a crowd simply as a collection of individuals and notes that crowd behavior is largely understood within the context of individual behaviors as part of a crowd. Zillmann et al., (1989) expand on the notion of crowds and collective behavior by relating them to sport fans. They suggest that sportsfanship can unite individuals and provide them with feelings of belongingness and solidarity. Melnick (1993) agrees, noting that sports crowds allow fans to enrich their social psychological lives through quasi-intimate relationships and a sense that they truly belong to the group. A sports crowd is unique in that the group already possesses commonalties (allegiances and loyalties to the team) even before becoming a collective unit.

### **Symbolic Level of Identity**

In addition to the interpersonal method, fandom can also be created by the desire to be a part of the environment created by a winning team – “jumping on the bandwagon”. Stemming from Heider’s (1958) “balance theory,” fans relate to a team using Social Identity Theory processes known as BIRGing (basking in reflected glory) and CORFing (cutting off reflective failures). The primary assumption of this theory is that individuals will seek to resolve attitudes that are not balanced or equitable. With this in mind, he notes that balanced relationships are more satisfactory than unbalanced or inequitable relationships (Heider). Both BIRGing and CORFing stem from Heider’s balance theory, which focuses on interattitudinal and interpersonal consistency. This theory suggests that individuals will organize their thoughts about others in a balanced way and that they will strive to restore balance in unbalanced situations (Snyder et al., 1986; Ciadini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman and Sloan 1976).

Fandom, as a way to relate to a team, is also a way of relating to others, and when relating to others, individuals generally tend to surround themselves with others who are known to be successful (Snyder et al., 1986). BIRGing can be defined as the tendency of individuals to publicize their connection with successful others, when they have not contributed to the other’s success (Hirt et al., 1992; Ciadini et al.). In relating BIRGing to athletics, Ciadini et al. have noted that more students exhibited an affiliation with a university sports team after a victory as opposed to a defeat. Therefore, balance is ensured because the team has done well and the fan is happy with that result. If the fan felt differently, then the situation would be more unbalanced or more inequitable. A second form of relating to a team is CORFing, which refers to the tendency of others to avoid being connected to unsuccessful others. This avoidance typically involves individuals distancing themselves, physically, mentally or emotionally, with the intent of avoiding any negative relationships with the unsuccessful others (Hirt et al.; Snyder et al., 1986). Therefore, BIRGing is an enhancement tactic while CORFing is more of an image protection tactic (Hirt et al.). Researchers have noted that these concepts also serve as ego-enhancement or protection techniques, which is to say that they can be used to boost self-esteem (Wann & Branscombe, 1990, Wann, 1993).

BIRGing and CORFing have been predominately examined in university settings and could possibly reflect more of an attachment to the school than the team. Therefore, it is



necessary to test these on attachments to professional sports teams that are not necessarily connected to other attachments, such as location of the university. Madrigal (1995) noted that fans of college women's basketball teams were more likely to BIRG if they self described themselves as being highly identified. He further found that BIRGing was not directly related to post-game satisfaction, as the BIRG state itself could be considered more a sense of pride. Mahony et al. (2000) studies undergraduate students to examine BIRGing and CORFing tendencies and found that spectators were more likely to BIRG and be fans of winning teams. One of the few researchers to apply these concepts to professional sports, End (2001) applied the theories of BIRGing and CORFing to NFL fans on the Internet. His results indicated that fans do use the Internet to publicly relate to an NFL team, and that this use increases with teams that show consistent success during the season and overall success, especially in the post-season. Research further notes that fans often attempt to protect their identity by 'blasting' fans of unsuccessful opponents (End, 2001; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980).

## **Conclusion**

Fandom is both a public and private experience, and the two types of identity explored above contribute equally to both of these experiences. Individuals tend to incorporate both public and private fandom from each level when creating and maintaining a fan identity. Although these levels were explored in the social science literature with regard to sports, they are not all examined in terms of fandom. It is important to note here that while both of these identity factors have unique contributions to identity creation and maintenance, they also work together to create a complete identity.

While the sociology and social psychology of sport is now beginning to grow and expand, it is important not to ignore fandom, which is increasingly emerging in the social science literature. This article is only a small portion of the available literature, and yet is a vital link between sport studies and fandom research. Perhaps more importantly, this theoretical literature review explores sport and fandom from a social psychological and identity theory perspective. Future research should continue along these lines, in the hopes of bringing other aspects of social psychology into sport and fandom studies.

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