The Impact of Sport Team Identification and Attributions of Ability and Effort on Spectators’ Impressions of Athletic Performance

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Previous work has indicated that individuals give more positive evaluations of successful performance when the performance is attributed to effort than when the performance is attributed to ability. The current study tested this effect in a sport setting by hypothesizing a two-way interaction involving attribution type (effort versus ability) and degree of identification with the team and player in question (low versus moderate to high). It was expected that moderately to highly identified fans would give more positive ratings to a player being recruited by their team if the player’s successes were described as a function of his effort. Lower ratings were expected if the player’s successes were attributed to his ability. No differences in ratings as a function of attribution type were expected among fans low in team identification. To test the predictions, subjects watched a taped practice of a player who was described as being recruited by the target team. Some participants read that the player’s successful performances were due to effort while others were informed that they were due to ability. After watching the player practice, the participants evaluated him. The results confirmed the hypotheses. Discussion includes the racial implications of the current findings.

The attributions of spectators have been a topic of interest to sport scientists for several decades. Hastorf and Cantril (1954) conducted one of the first empirical investigations of the attributions of spectators. In this study, examinations of Dartmouth University and Princeton University students’ descriptions of a football game between the schools revealed a biased pattern of attributions. For example, while 25 percent of the Dartmouth supporters classified the game as "rough but fair," only 2 percent of the Princeton fans viewed the game in this way. In contrast, the Princeton fans saw the game as "rough and dirty." When asked if the Dartmouth players had intentionally injured one of Princeton’s star

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players, 10 percent of the Dartmouth supporters agreed with this statement while 55 percent of the Princeton fans reported that the injury was intentional.

Subsequent work confirmed Hastorf and Cantril's (1954) findings. Many of these studies indicate a self-serving bias (Miller & Ross, 1975), in which the spectators report external factors (e.g., biased referees, bad luck) to explain team failures while reporting internal factors (e.g., talented, high level of effort) to account for team successes (Lau, 1984; Mann, 1974). However, recent work indicates that the self-serving bias is not found among all spectators. Rather, only those with at least a moderate degree of team identification utilize this strategy (team identification is defined as the extent to which an individual feels a psychological connection to a team or athlete, see Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Because the psychological well-being of identified fans is related to their team's performances, these fans have the most to gain through biased beliefs about the causes of an outcome.

The biased attributions of highly identified fans were documented by Wann and Dolan (1994). In their study, college students met prior to a basketball game involving their university's men's team that their team either won or lost. The participants were asked to complete a measure assessing their level of identification with the home team and then watched the contest. At the conclusion of the game, the respondents completed a questionnaire assessing their attributions of the game's outcome. Both internal attributions and external attributions were assessed. As expected, although spectators formed internal attributions following a win and external attributions after a loss, these self-serving attributions were only exhibited by fans with at least a moderate degree of identification with the team. Subsequent research by Wann and Schrader (2000) found similarly biased patterns among identified fans for different attributional dimensions.

Another attributional pattern found in general psychological work that may have relevance for the causality estimates of sport spectators involves attributions for ability and effort. Some authors have suggested that when evaluators are presented with two targets with equally successful performances, raters will give higher ratings to persons whose success was described as the result of a high level of effort than to persons whose success was due to natural ability (Baron & Greenberg, 1990; Wann, 1997). For instance, Mitchell, Green, and Wood (1981) had participants act as supervisors for three confederate subordinates. Two of the confederates performed at an average level while the third confederate's performance was above standard. The participant supervisor was presented with information indicating that the target subordinate's good performance was due to either effort or ability. The
participants were then given a chance to rate the subordinates. Ratings of the target subordinate revealed more positive evaluations when the performance as ascribed to effort than when it was attributed to ability.

Based on the aforementioned research, it was predicted that sport spectators would be more impressed by an athlete’s positive performance if his or her performance was thought to be due to effort than if it was believed to be a function of ability. However, not all spectators were expected to exhibit this attributional bias. Rather, consistent with the work provided above (e.g., Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Schrader, 2000), it was hypothesized that only those fans with at least a moderate degree of identification with a player’s team (or potential team) would report differences based on attributions of effort and ability. For persons low in identification with a target team, the role of team follower is only a peripheral component of the self-concept, at best (Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). Consequently, as predicted by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), the team’s (and players’) positive performances would not have implications for the self-worth of these fans. Indeed, fans with a low degree of team identification rarely report strong affective responses to watching the team perform (Wann, Dolan, McGeorge, & Allison, 1994).

METHOD

Participants
Participants were 100 university students earning extra course credit in exchange for participation. Twenty-two participants were removed from the sample (see below), resulting in a final sample of 78 participants (24 male; 54 female). They had a mean age of 20.19 years ($SD = 3.54$, range = 18 to 42).

Materials and Procedure
Upon entering the testing room and providing their consent to participate, participants (tested in groups ranging in size from 6 to 31) were asked to watch a video of a Division II college basketball team conducting a practice. The participants were informed that the team was a high school team preparing for an up-coming tournament. Participants then watched a one-minute segment of the video to acquire a general understanding of the fast break drill shown on the tape. After previewing the video, participants were told that they would now be watching the video in its entirety (approximately 10 minutes). They were also told that, while watching the video, they were to focus their attention on one player in particular (the participants were told the player’s uniform number and position, point guard). They were told that this player was a junior who was being recruited to play basketball for the University of Kentucky. The participants then randomly received and read one of two
different descriptions of the target player. For the most part, the two descriptions were similar, indicating that the player was very skilled. For instance, both descriptions stated that the player had averaged 26 points per game and had led his team to the state championship. However, the descriptions differed with respect to the reasons presented for the player’s success. One group of participants, labeled the Ability group, read that “the player had been good his whole life because of natural ability”. The other group of subjects, the Effort group, read that the player “was good because he worked hard and displayed a high level of effort.” These descriptions were designed to lead to differing attributions to account for the player’s success. After reading the target player descriptions, the descriptions were collected and the participants watched the entire video. The target player attempted four shots during the fast break drill, making one. He also had two steals, two rebounds, and one assist. This level of performance was similar to the other players involved in the practice.1

At the completion of the video, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire packet containing four sections. The first section contained 10 items assessing impressions of the target player. Sample items included “How much do you think the observed player will contribute to the University of Kentucky’s success?” and “How much leadership do you think the observed player will bring to the University of Kentucky’s basketball team?” Responses to the items were Likert-scale in format. Anchors ranged from 1 (e.g., he will not contribute) to 8 (e.g., he will contribute a great deal). Thus, higher numbers indicated a more positive impression. The second section contained manipulation check items asking the respondents to recall the team recruiting the player and why the player was good at basketball.

The third section of the packet contained demographic items assessing age and gender. The final section contained the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS), a reliable and valid instrument for assessing team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The SSIS contains 7 Likert-scale items with response options ranging from 1 (low identification) to 8 (high identification). A sample item from the SSIS reads, “How important to you is it that (name of target team) wins?” The respondents targeted the University of Kentucky men’s basketball when completing the SSIS.

After the participants had completed their packet, they returned it to a researcher who handed them a debriefing statement. This statement disclosed the hypotheses of the study and contained information on contacting the researcher for a final project report. The sessions lasted approximately 20 minutes.
RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Twenty participants were removed from the original sample because they incorrectly selected the attribution for the target player’s success (i.e., they indicated that the player’s success was due to effort when in fact it had been due to ability or vice versa). Two additional participants were removed from the sample because they incorrectly stated which school was actively recruiting the target player. Therefore, all subsequent analyses were conducted on the remaining 78 participants.

Perceptions of Performance

The ten items assessing perceptions of the target player’s performance were combined to form a single index of perception (Cronbach’s alpha = .78). The sum of the ten items was then divided by 10 to acquire a measure of perception that was consistent with the original parameters of the scale (i.e., scores could range from 1 to 8 with higher numbers indicating more positive impressions). The seven items comprising the SSIS were also combined to form a single index of identification (alpha = .97). A pair of one-way ANOVAs was used to test for gender differences in impressions of the target player and level of team identification. The ANOVA computed on perceptions of the target revealed no differences in impressions reported by male ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.43$) and female ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.36$) participants, $F(1, 77) = 2.51, p > .05$. The ANOVA examining level of identification also failed to find differences for males ($M = 19.17$, $SD = 16.21$) and females ($M = 21.85$, $SD = 14.49$), $F(1, 77) = 0.57, p > .05$. Thus, all analyses were conducted across gender.

A median split was used to categorize participants into two groups: those with a low level of identification ($n = 37$, $M = 8.89$, $SD = 2.42$, range = 7 to 14) and those with a moderate to high level of identification ($n = 41$, $M = 31.98$, $SD = 11.81$, range = 15 to 53). The hypothesis that spectators will report more positive impressions of a target player when his success is described as the result of effort rather than ability but only if the participant is at least moderately identified with (i.e., cares about) the team in question was tested through a 2 (Level of Team Identification: moderate-high or low) x 2 (Attribution Type: effort or ability) between-subjects ANOVA.

The ANOVA failed to reveal a significant main effect for both team identification, $F(1, 74) = 1.59, p > .21$, and attribution type, $F(1, 74) = 0.65, p > .42$. However, the Team Identification by Attribution Type interaction was significant, $F(1, 74) = 4.10, p < .05$. An examination of Table 1 indicates that the pattern of effects was consistent with expectations. Specifically, among those low in identification with the target team, there
was little differentiation in target impressions among those who read that the athlete’s success had been due to effort \((n = 17)\) versus ability \((n = 20)\). Conversely, for those persons with at least a moderate level of identification, ratings of the target player were much higher when the athlete’s past success was reported to be due to effort \((n = 24)\) than when the success was described as a result of ability \((n = 17)\). A \(t\)-test performed on persons with a moderate-high level of team identification revealed a significant difference in attribution type, \(t_{(39)} = 2.15, p < .05\). However, a similar analysis of those low in team identification was not statistically significant, \(t_{(35)} = -0.83, p > .40\).

**TABLE 1** Means and Standard Deviations for Impressions of the Target Player by Level of Team Identification and Attribution for Performance (effort versus ability)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Identification</th>
<th>Attribution for Performance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate-high identification</td>
<td>5.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low identification</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

The research described above provided clear support for the hypotheses as fans give more positive evaluations to an athlete whose success was attributed to effort than when his success was credited to his ability. This effect was limited to those fans with at least a moderate degree of identification with the team. Thus, in addition to other attributional errors previously identified in sport settings, such as the self-serving bias (Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Schrader, 2000) and the fundamental attribution error (Wann, Brewer, & Carlson, 1998), we can now add the effort-ability bias. This type of bias had been previously noted in an organizational setting (Mitchell et al., 1981).

The current findings have a number of important implications for sport settings, particularly for coaches and others in positions involving the evaluation of talent and performance. The data suggest that when coaches are confronted by athletes with equally successful performances, the coaches will be more impressed by those athletes whose performances were attributed to high levels of effort. Consequently, athletes whose performance was thought to be due to their effort will likely receive more positive evaluations. The result could be that athletes with equally positive skills do not receive equally positive evaluations from their coaches, resulting in biased assessments. The data provided above
suggest that this process would only occur for those coaches with at least a moderate degree of identification with their team and players.

It is also possible that an inverse relationship would occur for coaches evaluating players who have performed poorly. Mitchell et al. (1981) found that when a subordinate’s poor performance was attributed to a lack of effort, the subordinate received lower evaluations than a subordinate whose similarly poor performance was attributed to ability. Thus, similar to athletes who succeed, athletes who perform poorly may not receive equal treatment if a moderately to highly identified coach assigns different causes (i.e., effort versus ability) to explain the athletes’ failures (although the coach’s status as head or assistant coach may impact this relationship, see Carver, DeGregorio, & Gillis, 1980). A lack of effort would be viewed more negatively than a lack of ability, a consequence of the controllability of the attribution (Wann & Schrader, 2000).

A final implication of the current study involves racial differences in attributions for athletic performance. Research indicates that the successful performances of African American athletes tend to be stereotypically attributed to the athletes’ natural ability, while the successes of Caucasian athletes tend to be viewed as the result of high levels of effort (Harris, 1993; Murrell & Curtis, 1994). In light of the present study, these differential attributions could be quite problematic for minority athletes. That is, although African American and Caucasian athletes may be equally successful, because the white athletes’ successes are believed to be a consequence of effort, these persons will receive more positive evaluations than black athletes. As Wann (1997) notes, the result of these biased attributions based on race presents “yet another example of the challenges facing minority athletes as they strive to compete on an even playing field” (p. 198).

REFERENCES


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1It warrants mention that the experiment could have been completed without the video. That is, we could have simply asked subjects to read a description of a hypothetical player whose successful performance was due to either effort or ability. We chose to include the video to increase the believability of the study. Because the target player's performance did not stand out as being either particularly stellar or particularly poor, the video should merely have had the desired effects of increasing experimental realism.