Controllability and Stability in the Self-Serving Attributions of Sport Spectators

DANIEL L. WANN
MICHAEL P. SCHRADER
Department of Psychology
Murray State University

ABSTRACT. Spectators often attribute their athletic team’s victories to internal causes and its losses to external causes (e.g., A. H. Hastorf & H. Cantril, 1954; R. R. Lau, 1984; L. Mann, 1974). This self-serving attributional pattern is most common among fans with a strong psychological attachment to their team (D. L. Wann & T. J. Dolan, 1994). The authors examined the relationships among identification, game outcome, and controllable and stable attributions. Their 1st hypothesis was that high-identification fans after a victory, compared with high-identification fans after a loss and low-identification fans after either outcome, would be more likely to exhibit self-serving attributional patterns by attributing their team’s successes to controllable and stable causes. Their 2nd hypothesis was that high-identification fans would be more likely than low-identification fans to attribute their team’s successes to internal causes and its failures to external causes. U.S. college students high and low in identification first watched their university’s men’s basketball team win or lose a contest and then completed measures of identification and attribution. The results confirmed the hypotheses.

THE ATTRIBUTIONS OF SPORT SPECTATORS have long been of interest to social scientists (Wann, 1997). Much of the interest has focused on the degree to which spectators view a cause as internal or external. Earlier (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Mann, 1974) and more recent investigators (Lau, 1984; Lau & Russell, 1980; Tanner, Sev’er, & Ungar, 1989; Ungar & Sev’er, 1989) found that spectators tend to display self-serving attributional patterns by using internal attributions to explain their teams’ (and players’) successes and external attributions to account for their teams’ and players’ failures.

Additional research (Wann & Dolan, 1994) indicates that spectators’ degree of team identification is an important determinant of their use of self-serving attributions. Team identification refers to a spectator’s involvement with and psy-
chological connection to a sport team (Wann, 1997). For high-identification fans, the role of team follower is a central component of their social identities (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979); hence, the team’s performances are relevant to their feelings of self-worth. For low-identification fans, the role of team follower is only a peripheral component of their self-concepts (Crocker & Major, 1989; Harter, 1986); hence, the team’s performances have little consequence for these fans’ self-images.

Because the role of team follower is central to the identities of high-identification fans, high-identification persons may be expected to exhibit the most intense reactions to the team’s performances. Consistent with this logic, some investigators have found that, compared with low-identification fans, high-identification fans exhibit more intense emotional reactions (Wann & Branscombe, 1992; Wann, Dolan, McGeorge, & Allison, 1994), are more likely to behave aggressively (Branscombe & Wann, 1992a, 1992b, 1994), are more likely to try to influence the outcome of a game (Wann et al., 1994), and are more likely to become anxious when watching their teams compete (Wann, Schrader, & Adamson, 1998). Wann and Dolan (1994) extended this research to the attributions of sport fans. Because the team’s performance is so important to high-identification fans, these persons should be particularly likely to use self-serv ing attributions to account for the team’s efforts. To test this line of reasoning, Wann and Dolan asked high- and low-identification basketball fans to watch their team win or lose a contest. As expected, high-identification fans used internal attributions to explain their team’s success and external attributions to account for their team’s failure. The attributions of low-identification fans were not affected by the outcome of the competitions. Thus, it appeared that the attributions of sport spectators tended to be self-serving, but only if the spectators were highly identified with the team.

Although most sport research on attributions has targeted internal and external attributions, locus of causality is only one attributional dimension that may reflect self-serving motives. Two other dimensions that may be involved are controllability and stability. The controllability dimension concerns the extent to which an individual attributes an outcome to controllable causes. The stability dimension concerns the extent to which a person attributes an outcome to stable forces. The belief that an outcome was controllable, stable, or both may reflect a self-serving bias. For example, the perception that a team performed well because the members put forth a high level of effort (a controllable cause) or because they are talented (a stable attribution) frames the team’s performance positively. Conversely, the belief that a team performed poorly because the members were ill (an uncontrollable cause) or because they were tired from a long road trip (an unstable cause) provides an excuse for the team’s poor play.

The self-serving nature of controllable and stable attributions has been noted in a number of studies among athletes. In the results of studies involving table-
tennis players (McAuley & Gross, 1983), basketball players (Grove, Hanrahan, & McInman, 1991), gymnasts (McAuley, 1985), and squash players (Mark, Mutrie, Brooks, & Harris, 1984), the winners formed more stable and controllable attributions than the losers did. Furthermore, Grove et al. found that the attributions of spectators also formed a self-serving pattern on the controllability and stability dimensions. Spectators watching a team win were more likely than were spectators watching a team lose to attribute the outcome to controllable and stable causes.

In the present study, we extended the Wann et al. (1994) and Grove et al. (1991) research by examining the relationship among identification level, game outcome, and tendencies to form self-serving controllable and stable attributions. Grove and his colleagues suggested that spectators often report a self-serving attributional pattern by attributing successes to controllable and stable causes. Wann and Dolan (1994) suggested that attributional biases are more common among high-identification fans than among low-identification fans. Consideration of the aforementioned studies combined led us to test the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** High-identification fans would be more likely to attribute the team's success to controllable and stable causes after a victory than would high-identification fans after a loss and low-identification fans after either outcome (victory or loss).

In addition, we attempted to replicate the Wann and Dolan (1994) research in the second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** High-identification fans would be more likely than low-identification fans to attribute the team's successes to internal causes and the team's failures to external causes.

**Method**

**Participants and Design**

The participants (mean age = 20.97 years, SD = 3.21) were 114 (59 women, 55 men) undergraduate student volunteers from a university in the midsouthern region of the United States. They earned extra credit in their psychology courses in exchange for participation. The design was a 2 (level of identification: high or low) × 2 (game outcome: won or lost) between-subjects factorial.

**Procedure**

The study took place during the 1994–1995 and the 1995–1996 college basketball seasons. The participants met in a testing room approximately 45 min before one of two basketball games involving the university's men's team (each
student participated in only one outcome condition). We selected the games according to the likelihood that the home team would win (Game 1) or lose (Game 2). The outcomes of both games occurred as expected: The home team won the first game (83–57) and lost the second contest (80–65).

After the participants arrived at the testing session, we asked them to read and, if they so chose, to sign and return consent statements. We then told the participants that they would be escorted to the basketball arena to watch a contest involving the men’s basketball team. In addition, we informed them that after the game, they would meet in a predetermined location inside the arena to complete short questionnaires. Each student received a diagram describing the location of the postgame meeting. After all participants understood the procedure, they were escorted to the arena (they were free to sit wherever they desired).

Following the game, the participants completed questionnaire packets containing three sections. The first section contained demographic items (e.g., the participant’s age and gender). The second section contained the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The SSIS contains questions designed to measure involvement with and psychological connection to a sport team on a Likert-type scale (1 = not at all, 8 = very much). Results of previous research have documented the strong reliability and validity of this scale (see Wann, 1997; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The third section contained six items designed to measure the participants’ attributions regarding the outcome of the contest on a Likert-type scale. The items in the third section were developed from the Wann and Dolan (1994) research. Two of the items involved internal attributions: The participants stated the extent to which they believed that the outcome of the contest was due (a) to the ability of the home team’s players and (b) to the cheering of the crowd. Two other items dealt with external attributions: The participants stated the extent to which they believed that the outcome was due (a) to the ability of the opposing team and (b) to luck. The final two questions assessed the controllability and stability dimensions and were developed specifically for the present study. The participants rated the extent to which they believed that the outcome was attributable (a) to circumstances that the home team could control and (b) to circumstances that were stable over time (1 = not at all, 8 = very much). Completion of the questionnaire took approximately 10 min. After the participants had finished and returned their questionnaires, we debriefed them about the nature and hypotheses of the research.

Results

The male and female participants (Ms = 4.98 and 4.49, SDs = 1.67 and 1.64, respectively) did not differ in their levels of team identification, t(112) = 1.56, p > .10. Furthermore, no main effects or interactions involved gender on the attributional analyses hereinafter reported. All analyses, therefore, were computed across gender. We divided the participants into high- (M = 6.09, SD = 0.70, range =
TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Ratings of the Attribution Items,
by Level of Team Identification and Game Outcome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribution item</th>
<th>Low identification</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>High identification</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Game won</td>
<td>Game lost</td>
<td></td>
<td>Game won</td>
<td>Game lost</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability of home team</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheering of home team fans</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability of opposing team</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luck</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controllability</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Within each row, means sharing a common subscript are not significantly different (Newman–Keuls test).

5.14–7.86) and low- (M = 3.32, SD = 1.11, range = 1.00–5.00) identification groups by using a median split on their SSIS scores. According to the results of a t test, the high- and low-identification groups were significantly different in their levels of team identification, t(112) = 15.97, p < .001.

The initial analysis of the predicted pattern of self-serving attributions involved a 2 (level of identification: high or low) × 2 (game outcome: won or lost) × 6 (attribution item: ability of home team, cheering of home team fans, ability of opposing team, luck, controllability, and stability) multivariate analysis of variance. The first two variables were between subjects, whereas the third variable was within subject. This analysis revealed a significant Identification Level × Game Outcome × Attribution Item interaction, F(5, 550) = 8.11, p < .001. Because of the significant three-way interaction, the six attribution items were analyzed in a series of 2 (level of identification: high or low) × 2 (game outcome: won or lost) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs; for means, see Table 1).

Internal Attributions

We performed the first pair of ANOVAs on the internal attribution items (i.e., the ability of the home team and the cheering of the home-team fans). The analysis of the ability of the home team revealed a significant main effect for identification level, F(1, 110) = 6.48, p < .05. The high-identification participants (M = 6.17, SD = 1.66) were more likely to attribute the outcome to the ability of the home team than were the low-identification participants (M = 5.27, SD = 1.65). The main
effect for game outcome was also significant, $F(1, 110) = 19.08, p < .001$. The participants were more likely to attribute the outcome to the ability of the home team after a win ($M = 6.53, SD = 1.56$) than after a loss ($M = 5.16, SD = 1.58$). The two main effects were qualified by a significant Identification $\times$ Outcome interaction, $F(1, 110) = 6.49, p < .05$. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, high-identification participants who had watched their team win were the most likely of all the participants to attribute the outcome to the team’s ability.

In addition, the ANOVA on cheering by the fans revealed a significant main effect for identification level, $F(1, 110) = 12.89, p < .001$. The high-identification participants ($M = 5.71, SD = 1.90$) were more likely to attribute the outcome to the cheering of the home-team fans than were the low-identification participants ($M = 4.32, SD = 2.26$). The main effect for game outcome was not significant, $p > .50$. The Identification $\times$ Outcome interaction was again significant, $F(1, 110) = 7.17, p < .01$. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, the high-identification participants who had watched their team win were the most likely of all the participants to attribute the outcome to the cheering of the home-team fans.

**External Attributions**

We performed the second pair of ANOVAs on the external attribution items (i.e., the ability of the opposing team and luck). The analysis of the ability of the opposing team did not reveal a significant main effect for identification level, $p < .15$. However, the main effect for game outcome was significant, $F(1, 110) = 11.02, p < .01$: The participants were more likely to attribute the outcome to the ability of the opposing team after a loss ($M = 6.06, SD = 1.48$) than after a win ($M = 4.89, SD = 2.13$). The Identification $\times$ Outcome interaction was also significant, $F(1, 110) = 6.27, p < .05$. The high-identification participants who had watched their team lose were the most likely of all the participants to attribute the outcome to the ability of the opposing team. Post hoc Newman–Keuls tests revealed that the high identification–loss condition was not significantly different from the low identification–loss and the low identification–win conditions; rather, the significant interaction stemmed only from the participants in the high-identification–win condition, who were less likely to attribute the outcome to the lack of ability of the opposing team.

The ANOVA on luck also did not reveal a significant main effect for identification level, $p > .50$. However, once again the main effect for game outcome was significant, $F(1, 110) = 23.71, p < .001$. The respondents were more likely to attribute the outcome to luck after a loss ($M = 4.36, SD = 2.11$) than after a victory ($M = 2.55, SD = 1.80$). The Identification $\times$ Outcome interaction was significant, $F(1, 110) = 8.72, p < .01$. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, high-identification participants who had watched their team lose were the most likely of the participants to attribute the outcome to luck.
Controllable Attributions

We performed the next ANOVA on the controllability item. This analysis did not reveal a significant main effect for identification level, \( p > .35 \). The main effect for game outcome was significant, \( F(1, 110) = 9.96, p < .01 \). The participants were more likely to attribute the outcome to variables that the home team could control after a victory \((M = 6.57, SD = 1.68)\) than after a loss \((M = 5.43, SD = 1.95)\). The Identification \(\times\) Outcome interaction was significant, \( F(1, 110) = 5.18, p < .05 \). As predicted in Hypothesis 1 and consistent with the self-serving nature of spectator attributions, the high-identification participants who had watched their team win were most likely to attribute the outcome to causes that the home team could control.

Stable Attributions

We computed the final ANOVA on the stability item. This computation did not indicate a significant main effect for identification level, \( p > .10 \). However, the main effect for game outcome was again significant, \( F(1, 110) = 4.93, p < .05 \). The participants were more likely to attribute the outcome to stable causes after a victory \((M = 6.30, SD = 1.83)\) than after a loss \((M = 5.51, SD = 1.64)\). The Identification \(\times\) Outcome interaction was significant, \( F(1, 110) = 4.45, p < .05 \). Again, consistent with Hypothesis 1 and the self-serving nature of spectator attributions, high-identification participants who had watched their team win were the most likely of all the participants to attribute the outcome to stable causes.

Discussion

The results confirmed the hypothesized pattern of effects: High-identification student spectators at a U.S. college attributed their team's victory to internal, controllable, and stable causes and their team's loss to external causes. The self-serving attributional pattern was not evident among low-identification college fans. The data involving the locus of causality dimension (i.e., internal and external attributions) replicated the results of Wann and Dolan (1994).

With the exception of luck, the self-serving bias of high-identification fans was more evident in the victory condition than in the loss condition (see Table 1). It was possible for fans to exhibit self-serving attributional patterns following both victories and losses. Although the perception that a team's success was attributable to internal, controllable, and stable causes is self-serving, so, too, is the belief that the team's failure was attributable to such causes. The finding that high-identification fans exhibited self-serving attributional patterns after the victory rather than after the loss suggests that the participants were interested primarily in ego enhancement rather than in ego protection. Individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to be interested in strategies that enhance their egos.
than in tactics that protect their egos (Tice, 1993). Because there is a positive relationship between sport team identification and self-esteem (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wann, 1994), the finding that high-identification participants used the self-serving bias as an ego enhancement tactic is not surprising.

The analysis of the cheering of the home-team fans was one of only two analyses to reveal a significant main effect for identification level. The high-identification participants reported more agreement on this item than did the low-identification participants. This finding is consistent with the results of Wann et al. (1994), who found a positive correlation between level of identification and attempts to influence the outcomes of sporting events. Apparently, not only are high-identification fans more likely to attempt to influence the outcomes of athletic contests, they also are more likely to believe that the crowd was a causal force in an outcome.

In conclusion, the results revealed that the high-identification sport spectators in the present U.S. college sample displayed self-serving attributions to explain their team’s performances. Specifically, the present participants attributed their team’s success to internal, controllable, and stable causes. Such an attributional pattern suggests an attempt to enhance, rather than to protect, one’s self-esteem, a pattern consistent with the positive levels of self-esteem found in many high-identification fans. Because the present sample was limited to U.S. college students, future researchers should attempt to replicate this finding with other groups.

REFERENCES


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