Attributions of Highly Identified Sports Spectators

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ABSTRACT. Previous research examining the tendency for sports spectators to internalize team successes while externalizing team failures has been inconsistent. Several studies have found support for this success/failure attributional bias, but others have not. The current study tested the hypothesis that the success/failure bias would be found among American spectators who were high in identification with a target team but that spectators low in identification would be only minimally biased in their attributions concerning competition outcome. The results of a study testing 90 basketball fans varying in degree of identification supported the hypothesis.

BEGINNING WITH HEIDER’S (1958) theory, the examination of causal attributions has been a major focus of social psychological research, a portion of which has sought to identify and understand the attributions of sports spectators. Work on the attributional processes operating within sports fans originated in 1954 with Hastorf and Cantril’s investigation of the differential attributions of supporters of a victorious college football team (Princeton) relative to followers of the losing team (Dartmouth). They noted that the fans for the two teams seemed to have been observing a different game, with each blaming the other for the rough and dirty play characterizing the contest.

Research on the attributions of sports fans was continued by Mann (1974), who also examined the reactions of spectators following their team’s victory or defeat. Consistent with the findings reported by Hastorf and Cantril (1954), sup-

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porters for the two sides seemingly witnessed a different game. Mann found that supporters of the losing team, relative to both fans of the winning team and neutral spectators, overestimated the number of free kicks given to the opponent, felt that the outcome was due more to external factors (such as poor officiating or luck) than to internal factors (such as skill or effort), were more critical of the officiating, and were more likely to perceive the play as being dirty.

These studies highlight the well-documented social psychological finding of a success/failure attributional bias in which persons tend to internalize successes while externalizing failures (Miller & Ross, 1975). However, research aimed at verifying this bias within sport settings has been inconsistent. As noted by Grove, Hanrahan, and McInman (1991), numerous studies have found support for the bias, but many others have found no attributional differences based on competition outcome. Grove et al. found that spectators did form more stable and controllable attributions following wins rather than losses, but they did not report significantly more internal attributions following victory, although they did indicate that there was a tendency to do so. Grove et al. argued, as have others (Mark, Mutrie, Brooks, & Harris, 1984; Scanlan & Passer, 1980), that a responsibility norm exists in sport settings that forces individuals to accept responsibility for a loss. Hence, they form internal attributions even subsequent to a defeat. However, the participants in Grove et al.'s study were simply asked to view a recreational basketball game and, as such, were most likely less than highly identified with the target team. Had Grove et al.'s participants been highly identified, their tendencies toward internalizing successes and externalizing failures might have reached significance. This prediction was the primary focus of the current investigation.

Certainly, recent research has found that degree of team identification is a major predictor of a variety of spectator behaviors, including affective reactions (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992; Wann & Branscombe, 1992; Wann, Dolan, McGeorge, & Allison, in press), aggression (Branscombe & Wann, 1992b; Simons & Taylor, 1992), arousal (Branscombe & Wann, 1992a), and tendencies to increase or decrease associations with the target team (Wann, 1993; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). The current investigation attempted to extend these findings to spectator attributions.

Specifically, the following hypotheses were derived from the aforementioned research. First, due to the responsibility norm found in sports, we hypothesized that higher agreement ratings would be given to internal attribution items than to external items. Second, we hypothesized that a significant interaction involving degree of identification, game outcome, and attribution type (internal or external) would emerge. Highly identified persons were expected to show the greatest variability in forming attributions, reporting strong beliefs in internal attributions following a win but believing in external attributions subsequent to their team's defeat, thus demonstrating the success/failure bias. Individuals are motivated to protect and maintain a positive social identity (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The role of sports spectator is likely to be quite central to the identity of
individuals who identify strongly with a team, and so the successes and failures of the team should have strong implications for their feelings of self-worth. They should be motivated to protect their identity through the use of the success/failure attributional bias. We predicted that participants who were not highly identified with a team would follow the same pattern as did participants in Grove et al.’s (1991) research: They would show only a small (relative to highly identified subjects) trend toward the success/failure bias because the game was only minimally relevant to their social identity (Crockier & Major, 1989; Harter, 1986). Five different types of attributions were studied: internal attributions directed toward the home-team players and fans and external attributions directed toward the opposing team, the referees, and fate.

Method

Subjects and Design

The subjects were 90 (48 male, 42 female) psychology student volunteers earning extra credit in their psychology course in exchange for participation. The design was a 2 (high or low identification) × 2 (game won or lost) between-subjects factorial.

Procedure

During the 1992–1993 basketball season, study participants were asked to meet in a testing room 1 hr prior to one of two men’s basketball home games at Murray State University. The games were selected because they had the possibility of being a victory (in Game 1) and a loss (in Game 2) for the Murray State team, as was in fact the case in two close contests.

Upon arriving at the testing session, participants read, signed, and returned a consent statement. They were then asked to complete the Sports Spectator Identification Scale, an instrument with strong reliability and validity (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). This questionnaire contains seven Likert-scale items with responses ranging from 1 to 8 (larger numbers indicate higher levels of identification). After completing the scale, participants were given instructions concerning the procedure for the remainder of the study. First, they were told that they would be escorted to the basketball arena, where they were to watch the entire game. They were allowed to sit anywhere in the arena they desired. To ensure that they did not leave the game only to return again when it was finished, they were asked to report to the researcher during half-time (at a predetermined location inside the arena). Participants were further instructed to meet at a specific section of the arena following the game to complete a final questionnaire.

The final questionnaire contained 15 items designed to assess the participants’ attributions about the basketball game. Questions focused on one of five
attributional aspects of the contest: (a) internal attributions directed toward the Murray State players and coaches (e.g., “To what extent did the skill of the M.S.U. players influence the outcome of the game?”); (b) internal attributions directed at the Murray State fans (e.g., “To what extent did the fans influence the outcome of the game?”); (c) external attributions directed at Murray State’s opponent (e.g., “To what extent did the skill of the players on M.S.U.’s opponent influence the outcome of the game?”); (d) external attributions directed toward the referees (e.g., “To what extent did the referees influence the outcome of the game?”); and (e) external attributions directed toward fate (e.g., “To what extent did fate influence the outcome of the game?”). To match their pregame identification scores with their postgame attribution scores while maintaining anonymity, we gave participants index cards with a subject number and asked them to write this number at the top of each questionnaire. Once it was assured that all participants understood the instructions and procedures, they were escorted to the arena. Following the game and after they had completed the attribution scale, the participants were debriefed.

Results

All participants reported to the half-time check-in, and all completed the attribution scale. No gender differences were found on any of the analyses, and consequently, all analyses were conducted across gender. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on the identification measure confirmed that the two identification groups were significantly different, $F(1, 88) = 364.38, p < .0001$, as the high-identification group ($M = 5.72$) was indeed higher in allegiance than the low-identification group ($M = 2.62$).

The four items composing the player attribution index were combined (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$), as were the two fan items ($\alpha = .71$), the four opponent items ($\alpha = .82$), the two referee items ($\alpha = .55$), and the three fate items ($\alpha = .82$). The two internal indexes (player and fan) and the three external indexes (opponent, referee, and fate) were further combined to form measures of total internal ($\alpha = .83$) and total external attributions ($\alpha = .78$).

Magnitude of Internal and External Attributions

To test the predictions that (a) participants would form more internal than external attributions and (b) a significant three-way interaction would emerge, we examined participants’ total internal and external scores in a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (high vs. low identification) $\times$ (game won vs. lost) $\times$ (total internal vs. total external attributions) mixed-factor ANOVA. The first two variables were between subjects, and the third variable was within subjects.

Only one between-subjects main effect, identification level, reached statistical significance, $F(1, 86) = 6.18, p < .02$. Highly identified participants ($M =$
tended to form more attributions, regardless of locus and competition outcome, than did lowly identified participants ($M = 5.57$). In support of the prediction and consistent with past research, the within-subjects main effect also was significant, $F(1, 86) = 35.41, p < .001$. Spectators reported greater agreement with the internal items ($M = 6.68$) than the external items ($M = 5.16$). Furthermore, although the two-way interaction between game outcome and type of attribution was significant, $F(1, 86) = 46.33, p < .001$, it was qualified by the predicted three-way interaction between identification level, game outcome, and type of attribution, $F(1, 86) = 6.20, p < .02$. As depicted in Figure 1, the highest amount of internal attributions were given by highly identified subjects following the win, and the highest level of external attributions were given by the same group subsequent to their team’s defeat, thus demonstrating the success/failure bias. Although the lowly identified subjects also tended to form more internal attributions after a win (relative to a loss) and more external attributions after a loss (relative to a win), these effects were much less pronounced in comparison with the attributions reported by the highly identified participants. No other interactions reached significance (all $ps > .25$).

*Internal Attributions Directed Toward the Home-Team Players and Fans*

To test further the hypothesized effects, we analyzed each of the five attribution indexes in a 2 (high vs. low identification) × 2 (game won vs. lost) between-subjects ANOVA incorporating a priori contrasts representing the predicted pattern of effects (e.g., internal attributions following a win and external attributions following a loss, with each effect found most intensely among the highly identified fans). The ANOVA performed on the player index revealed a main effect for level of identification, $F(2, 86) = 5.70, p < .05$, and game outcome, $F(1, 86) = 15.24, p < .001$. More player attributions were reported by highly identified persons ($M = 7.42$) than by lowly identified subjects ($M = 6.66$), and more internal attributions were given following the win ($M = 7.48$) than subsequent to the loss ($M = 6.22$). However, as predicted, the greatest percentage of internal attributions directed toward the Murray State players were formed by participants high in identification with the team following the win, $F(1, 86) = 20.70, p < .001$. This pattern of effects is depicted in Table 1.

The ANOVA examining the fan attribution index also revealed main effects for both level of identification, $F(2, 86) = 3.98, p < .05$, and game outcome, $F(1, 86) = 23.66, p < .001$. Consistent with the pattern for the player index, those participants high in identification with the team reported more internal attributions ($M = 6.73$) than did the minimally identified participants ($M = 5.91$), and more fan attributions were reported after a win ($M = 7.03$) than after a loss ($M = 5.00$). Furthermore, and again in support of the hypothesis, the highest level of fan attributions were found among highly identified subjects following the win, $F(1, 86) = 28.84, p < .001$. 

External Attributions Directed Toward the Opposing Players, the Referees, and Fate

The ANOVA computed on the opponent index revealed no significant main effects ($ps > .10$). Similarly, the analysis using a priori contrasts found only a marginally significant relationship, $F(1, 86) = 2.47, p = .12$. However, as shown in Table 1, the means were in the predicted direction, with the highest proportion of external attributions being reported by highly identified fans after their team's defeat.

As for the index measuring external attributions directed toward the referees, the ANOVA indicated a significant game outcome main effect, $F(1, 86) = 10.07, p < .01$. More referee-directed attributions were reported after the loss ($M = 5.97$) than after the win ($M = 4.54$). The identification-level main effect was not significant ($p > .15$). The contrast analysis found support for the predicted pattern of effects, $F(1, 86) = 7.84, p < .01$. As depicted in Table 1, the greatest number of external attributions directed toward the referees were generated by highly identified spectators subsequent to their team's loss.

The ANOVA computed on the fate index found only a marginally significant game-outcome main effect, $F(1, 86) = 2.87, p = .09$. Participants tended to report
TABLE 1
Means for the Five Attribution Indexes, by Game Outcome and Identification Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Low identification</th>
<th>High identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Game won</td>
<td>Game lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal attributions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>5.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External attributions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponent</td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td>6.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referee</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>5.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fate</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means sharing a common subscript do not differ significantly (p < .05, Newman-Keuls). Cell sizes range from 15 to 30.

more external attributions concerning fate after the loss (M = 4.64) than after the win (M = 3.80). The identification-level main effect was not significant (p > .15). The analysis using planned contrasts confirmed the hypothesized pattern of effects, F(1, 86) = 4.93, p < .05, as the greatest amount of external attributions directed toward fate were given by highly identified participants subsequent to the Murray State team’s defeat (see Table 1).

Discussion

The results extend previous research on the attributions of sport spectators (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Lau, 1984; Lau & Russell, 1980; Winkler & Taylor, 1979) and in particular the work of Grove et al. (1991). Participants high in identification with the Murray State University men’s basketball team did in fact demonstrate the success/failure attributional bias by forming more internal attributions following the team’s success and more external attributions subsequent to its defeat. Similar to the participants tested by Grove et al., the lowly identified participants in this study reported attributions in the direction of the success/failure bias but to a lesser degree. Previous work on attributions in sports stadiums has indicated that supporters of opposing teams perceive different games (Russell, 1993). The data reported here seem to indicate that supporters of the same team who differ in level of identification also see different games. These results are not contradictory to the arguments and data presented by Grove et al. Rather, support for the hypothesis that the success/failure bias operates primarily in persons strongly allegiant to the team was found. Participants in Grove et al.’s study were at best moderately
identified with the team and as such would not be expected to show the bias as intensely as our highly identified participants.

The data also support the view that a norm is present in sport settings that encourages spectators to accept responsibility for both positive and negative outcomes (Mark et al., 1984; Scanlan & Passer, 1980). The spectators in the present research indicated stronger agreement with the internal items relative to the external items across the game-outcome and identification-level variables. A significant two-way interaction involving identification level and attribution type was not found; apparently, highly and lowly identified participants were equally aware of the responsibility norm.

Evidently, highly identified participants strategically manipulated their attributions after a loss in an attempt to protect their self-esteem. Lowly identified participants were less bothered by the team’s defeat and as such were less motivated to use these strategies. This finding is consistent with past research finding that highly identified spectators, relative to lowly identified spectators, are less likely to distance themselves after the team’s defeat (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Because highly identified persons maintain their allegiance even in trying times, they must develop other strategies, such as selective attributions, to maintain their positive social identity, whereas those low in identification are less likely to use these strategies because they simply “jump ship” subsequent to negative outcomes.

Similarly, our highly identified study participants, relative to the less identified participants, were especially likely to form internal attributions after a victory. This strategy appears to have been directed at enhancing their self-esteem. According to Weiner (1982), persons may experience feelings of pride and self-esteem when others with whom they are identified experience success. Research has found that highly identified spectators experience strong positive affective reactions to their team’s successes (Wann et al., in press). Furthermore, spectators may attempt to increase their mood by taking partial credit for the team’s success, as was indicated in this study by the fan attribution index.

An inspection of Figure 1 reveals that, although the difference between the means for the attribution types when the team won did indicate greater variability for highly versus lowly identified participants, the greatest contrast between the two identification groups was found when the team lost. Here, the means for the highly identified participants indicate a cross-over interaction, which was not found among lowly identified participants. Reactions to the defeat best highlighted the attributional differences between highly and lowly identified participants, a finding that is consistent with recent research on the affective reactions of spectators by Wann et al. (in press), who found that emotional responses to a loss best distinguished high- and low-identification groups.

The current research thus sheds light on the equivocal results from past research investigating the success/failure bias of sports fans. Research finding support for the success/failure bias (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Mann, 1974; Miller &
Ross, 1975) most likely used subjects higher in identification than research not supporting the bias. Thus, when conducting research investigating group-level attributions and attributional bias, researchers would be wise to include level of identification in their analyses. On the basis of the results presented here, one would expect highly identified fans to demonstrate the bias to a large extent and lowly identified fans to exhibit the bias in a much less intense manner.

Finally, the current research was conducted in a field setting. As indicated by Duncan and Brummett (1989), reactions to viewing sporting events in person may be different from reactions to viewing televised events. As such, the field study reported here has the advantage of examining spectators' actual attributions, an advantage unavailable in contrived laboratory research.

REFERENCES


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