Fans’ Reactions to their Team Victories: An Exploratory Look at the COFFING Process in Elite Sport Fandom

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The goal of this study was to provide preliminary data pertaining to the identity management process of COFFing (i.e., Cutting of Future Failure; Wann, Hamlet, Wilson, & Hodges, 1995) within the realm of sport fandom. When COFFing, fans who support a low or middle status team (i.e., relatively poorly ranked) tend to hold out enthusiasm about their team victories as a self-protective strategy against the likely advent of future failures. The present mixed sample was comprised of 93 highly involved rugby fans showing allegiance to either a middle status or a high status team. Results first revealed that, compared to fans of high status team, fans of middle status team were less likely to BIRG and were less optimistic about their local team future performances when controlling for team identification level. Secondly, with respect to the role of team identification in the COFFing process for fans of middle status team, a positive correlation was found between team identification, BIRGing and prediction of future performances.

Keywords: Group processes, identity management strategies, sport fans, victory

In a seminal series of experiments, Cialdini and collaborators (1976) revealed that people tend to ostensibly publicize their association with successful groups in order to manage their social identity in the most favorable way. This process was coined Basking in Reflected Glory (i.e., BIRGing). More specifically, Cialdini et al. (1976) found that, following victories, fans supporting university

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football teams were more likely to wear their favorite team’s attire and more extensively used the pronoun “we” when discussing their team’s performance than they did following defeats. Subsequent replication studies dealing with the BIRGing process were conducted in a various life domains and sometimes yielded mixed results.

For instance, in an experiment dealing with politics (i.e., 1992 North American presidential election), Wann, Hamlet, Wilson, and Hodges (1995) found that supporters of the winning candidates (i.e., Clinton/Gore) were no more likely than supporters of the losing candidates (i.e., Bush/Quayle) to wear badges displaying their political orientation. In order to clarify this unexpected finding, the authors underscored that, at the time of their experiment, Clinton and Gore were elected unexpectedly, for the very first time, thus shedding uncertainty about their subsequent political performances. That is, with no clear guarantee of future reelection, supporters of Clinton and Gore may have refrained their enthusiasm and display of political membership (i.e., BIRGing) as a way to protect their social identity from potential damages. Wann and collaborators (1995) labeled this self-protective tendency the Cutting of Future Failure process (i.e., COFFing).

To further ascertain the COFFing process, Wann et al. (1995) conducted a second study involving a bogus competition between two groups on creativity contests. Participants were led to believe that they were competing against a more creative and skilled group (i.e., art majors) and, upon completing a first creativity contest, they all received successful feedback concerning their performance (i.e., they beat the art majors). But, whereas participants of the first condition were told that no other contest would follow, those of the second condition were led to believe that a second contest would be held thus shedding doubt about further successful performances. In line with expectations, Wann et al. (1995) found for instance that those participants were less excited about socializing with art majors at the end of the competition and enjoyed the task to a lesser extent than those of the first condition. Consistent with the COFFing process, participants of the second condition refrained their enthusiasm in order to protect their future social identity probably because they expected to be unsuccessful in the second competition.

In light of the above, it seems people react to their group successes with different patterns of reactions depending on the likelihood of similar successes in the future. According to the social identity approach (SIA; Haslam, 2004), a key variable to explain those differences is that of group status (e.g., Dimmock, & Gucciardi, 2008; Doosje, Spears, de Redelijkheid, & van Onna, 2007). In other words, when one identifies with a successful group (i.e., high status), one
feels more secure about one’s social identity and show more confidence about the likelihood of renewed group success. In turn, this translates into managing one’s social identity by ostensibly publicizing one’s affiliation with that successful group (i.e., BIRGing). Conversely, one’s identification with a group showing only random and unreliable success (i.e., low or middle status) would yield one’s to rely on the COFFing process. In other words, one would then tend to strategically hold enthusiasm and treat success as being unrepresentative of one’s group of reference.

While classical BIRGing has motivated much research interest in the past (e.g., Bernache-Assollant, Lacassagne, & Braddock II, 2007; Boen, Vanbeselaere, & Feys, 2002; End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, & Jacquemotte, 2002) that of COFFing has received only scant attention. Yet, a number of scientists have repeatedly underscored the relevance of COFFing within sport fan populations (e.g., Bryant & Cummins, 2010; Dietz-Ulher & Lanter, 2008; Wann, 2006 for reviews). Furthermore, and to the best of our knowledge, it seems that no prior investigation has explored this issue in the realm of sport fandom and in a real setting. Yet, in a hierarchic context such as that of competitive sport (where teams are unambiguously ranked in readily comprehensible performance statistics), one can legitimately ask if fans supporting low or middle status teams (i.e., losing teams) would react to victories in the same manner as those fans supporting high status teams (i.e., winning teams). This question is at the core of the current investigation.

The present investigation was based on a set of four hypotheses. First, we predicted that fans supporting a relatively poorly ranked team (i.e., middle status) would be less likely to display BIRGing (i.e., COFFing) following team victories than fans supporting a high status team when controlling for team identification level. Indeed, prior research in sport psychology has demonstrated that team identification, defined as the extent to which an individual feels a psychological connection to a particular team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), constitutes a strong driver for numerous affective, cognitive and behavioral reactions in domains such as attributions for team performance (Sherman, Kinlas, Major, Kim, & Prenovost, 2007; Wann & Dolan, 1994), evaluations of ingroup and outgroup members (Dimmock, Grove, & Eklund, 2005; Wann & Grieve, 2005) and the memory of ingroup information (Doosje et al., 2007; Wann & Branscombe, 1995). In regard to the BIRGing phenomenon, Bizman and Yinon (2002) showed that highly identified spectators, relative to those low in identification, demonstrated a greater tendency to publicly associate themselves to the basketball team of Tel-Aviv following a win (see also Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Second, in line with the theoretical conceptualization of COFFing proposed by Wann and collaborators (1995), we expected that fans supporting middle status
teams would be less positive about future team success than fans supporting a high status team, after controlling for team identification level. Third, and still in line with the work of Wann and collaborators, we expected that fans of middle status teams who would refuse COFFing would also be more highly identified to their team than those who did resort to this strategy. Henceforth, we anticipated a positive correlation between team identification scores and BIRGing for fans of middle status team. In a complementary manner, we anticipated a significant positive correlation between team identification scores and favorable predictions of future performances for those fans.

**Method**

**Participants.** All of the respondents \( (N = 93; M \text{ age} = 39 \text{ years}) \) were regular rugby fans of two professional rugby teams belonging to the French elite championship (i.e., Top 14). More specifically, 45 participants supported the Clermont-Ferrand city [Association Sportive Michelin (ASM) club] while 48 supported Paris city [Stade Français (SF) club]. The sample was comprised of more men \( (n = 74) \) than women \( (n = 19) \). On average per year, they attended 14 home games \( (M = 13.89, SD = 4.67) \) and 2 road games \( (M = 2.31, SD = 1.98) \), and they watched 14 TV games \( (M = 14.16, SD = 9.22) \). These statistics did not differ between fans of those two clubs with the exception that SF fans attended more home games than ASM fans \( [M = 14.83 \text{ vs } M = 12.65), F(1, 92) = 4.01, p = .048, \eta^2_p = .04] \).

**Status of the teams.** In order to support the notion that the teams selected have a middle or high status position in the elite French rugby championship and in line with Doosje and collaborators (2007) procedure, we collected data from the results of the matches of the last 10 seasons before this research was carried out. Between the 2001 and 2005 seasons, the elite French rugby championship consists of 16 clubs, for the 2000-2001 season, 21 clubs and before 2000, 24 clubs.

**SF team.** The mean ranking of the SF team at the end of the season was very high, namely 3. During the regular season these last 10 years, the SF team won a mean of 45 points and reached the play-offs 8 times. More importantly during this 10-year period, the SF team won 4 titles of the elite French rugby championship (12 in all). Finally, the season before this research took place, it had finished in 2nd place (out of 16) in the first national division. Consequently, the SF team can reasonably be considered as a high status team in the elite French rugby championship.

**ASM team.** The mean position of the ASM team at the end of the season was relatively low, namely 6.38. During the regular season these last 10 years,
the ASM team won a mean of 41.38 points and reached the play-offs 5 times. More importantly, the ASM club never won the elite French rugby union championship. Finally, the season before this research took place, the ASM team had finished in 8th place (out of 16) in the first national division. Consequently, the ASM team can reasonably be considered as a relatively low status team (i.e., middle status) in the elite French rugby championship.

**Procedure.** Presidents of the fan clubs for both the SF and ASM teams were contacted and mailed a package composed of questionnaires, postage-paid reply envelop and a letter explaining the purpose of the investigation (i.e., to better understand rugby fans’ behaviors).

The questionnaire consisted in a two page booklet entailed “rugby spectators survey” that was handed out the rugby fans along with verbal instructions from the presidents of fan clubs regarding the rating scales described below. The instructions also underscored: (a) the anonymous and confidential nature of the survey as well as the fact that there was no right or wrong answers, (b) that the questionnaires should be completed independently without conversing with other fans, and (c) each participant had to write down the target game and the score of this game on the top of the first questionnaire sheet. Informed consent forms were provided and completed. All questionnaires were completed following a team victory and during the first-half of the season this research takes place. Post research debriefing with each chairman revealed that questionnaires were mainly distributed during the collective bus trip to away games and in other sites of sociability such as the club headquarter often based in a bar. This methodology is akin to that already employed by Boen and collaborators (e.g., Boen, Vanbeselaere, Pandelaere, & Schutters, 2008).

**Measures**

**Team identification.** Identification with respondents’ rugby club was measured with the French version of the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS, Wann & Branscombe, 1993; see Bernache-Assollant, Bouchet, & Lacassagne, 2007 for the French validation). The SSIS is a well-known instrument which has demonstrated good reliability and validity in the French context on student samples (see e.g., Bernache-Assollant & Chantal, 2009). The SSIS comprises seven Likert-type scale items. All responses were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with lower scores indicating lower levels of identification and higher scores indicating higher identification. A principle components factor analysis on the seven items indicated a two factors solution with an eigenvalue of 3.03 and 1.11 accounted for 43.26% and 16.88% of total variance respectively. The fourth item from the team identification scale (‘during the season, how closely do you follow
name of the local rugby team via any of the following: in person or on television; on the radio, television news or a newspaper; or the Internet?) appeared to have high positive factor loading on the second factor (i.e., .68) and relatively low negative factor loading on the first factor (i.e., -.35). The sixth item ‘how much do you dislike name of the local rugby team’s greatest rivals?) appeared to have both moderately high positive factor loading on the second factor (i.e., .55) and on the first factor (i.e., .60). Consequently, we decided to exclude these items from the analysis. A principle component factor analysis on the five items indicated a one-factor solution with an eigenvalue of 2.68 accounted for 67.12% of the total variance (loadings ≥ .70). The five items of the team identification scale were averaged to produce a team identification measure (M = 6.06, SD = 1.07) (Cronbach’s α =.83).1

BIRGing. The BIRGing process was assessed through with three items in line with the three scale items of Trail, Fink and Anderson (2003): ‘I want to support the name of the local rugby team’, ‘I want to publicly show my attachment to the name of the local rugby team (through team-derived object such as clothing…)’, ‘I want to move away from the name of the local rugby team’ (reversed score). A principle component factor analysis on the three items indicated a one-factor solution with an eigenvalue of 1.76 accounted for 58.56% of the total variance (loadings ≥ .72). The three items of the BIRGing scale were averaged to produce a BIRGing measure (Cronbach’s α =.64). Fans were asked to indicate their level of agreement on 7-point Likert scale from 1 (disagree completely) to 7 (agree completely).

Prediction of future performance. A single-item measure was used in order to assess fans’ tendency to be optimistic about the future performances of the teams they supported (see Bernache-Assollant, Bouchet, & Lacassagne, 2007 for a similar measure). That item read: “what is the probability that the name of the local rugby team (i.e., either SF or ASM) win the French rugby championship this year?” Participants were asked to indicate the likelihood of such a favorable event using a 7-point Likert scale which ranged from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely).

Results

Preliminary analyses. Prior to conducting the main analyses, we verified if the fact of supporting a relatively high status team led fans to report significantly higher identification scores than fans who supported a middle status team. Indeed, past research suggests that identification scores tend to be stronger with high status groups such as winning teams (see e.g., Wann, Dolan, McGeorge, & Allison, 1994, study 3). Result of a one-way ANOVA revealed that SF fans were more highly identified to their team (M = 6.20, SD = .80) than ASM
fans ($M = 5.69, SD = 1.04$), $F(1, 92) = 7.33, p = .008, \eta^2_p = .08$. Accordingly, and even if both groups of fans could be considered as “die hard fans” [both team identification means were strongly and significantly above the mid-point of the scale (i.e., 4.00), $t(48) = 11.90, p < .0001$ and $t(45) = 7.86, p < .0001$ for SF fans and ASM fans respectively], we retained identification ratings as a covariate within the main analyses. Second, a one-way ANOVA was used to test for team identification differences between female and male fans. Results revealed that female fans tended to be more highly identified than male fans [$Ms = 6.39$ vs 5.85 for women and men, respectively; $F(1, 92) = 2.86, p = .094, \eta^2_p = .03$]. Consequently, and because past research suggests that gender constitutes a salient basis for categorization in the sport spectatorship context (see e.g., Bernache-Assollant, Laurin, Bouchet, Bodet, & Lacassagne, 2010), further analyses included gender as a grouping variable.

**Main analyses.** A two-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) across gender (female vs male) and supported teams (SF vs ASM) was conducted owing to the presumed relationships between the dependent variables (i.e., BIRGing and prediction of team future performances). Once controlling for the statistical influence of the covariate [i.e., fans’ identification scores, $F(3, 87) = 10.01, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .20$], the results indicated highly significant differences for supported teams, $F(3, 87) = 54.14, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .57$, using Wilks’s lambda criterion. However, no significant differences were found for either gender, $F(3, 87) = .22, p = .81, \eta^2_p = .00$, or the interaction ($F < 1$, ns).

Furthermore, follow-up univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were performed separately for each dependent measure. As expected and consistent with hypotheses 1 and 2, regardless of gender, ASM fans were significantly less likely to display the BIRGing strategy ($M = 5.84, SD = 1.28$) and were also significantly less optimistic about their local team future performances ($M = 1.72, SD = 1.33$) than SF fans ($M = 6.60, SD = .77$ & $M = 5.52, SD = .98$, respectively), [$F$s (1, 90) = 6.82, $p = .011, \eta^2_p = .07$ & 109.54, $p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .72$ respectively]. Finally, and in line with hypotheses 3 and 4, Pearson correlations showed that amount of identification with the ASM team was significantly related to the use of BIRGing, $r(45) = .56, p < .01$ and to favorable predictions of future performances, $r(45) = .33, p = .028$, respectively.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the present research report was to provide exploratory data pertaining to the existence of the COFFing process in the realm of sport fandom. Although important reviews in the field (Bryant & Cummins, 2010; Dietz-Ulher & Lanter, 2008; Wann, 2006) have recurrently proposed that the
COFFing process could take place amongst a sport fan population, it seems that no investigation has empirically explored this issue in this specific context. In fact, our findings coming from a real setting (i.e., French elite rugby) suggest that fans supporting middle status teams react differently to their team victories than fans supporting high status teams. More specifically, we first found that, compared to fans of high status team, fans of middle status team were less likely to BIRG and were less optimistic about their local team future performances when controlling for team identification level. Secondly, with respect to the role of team identification in the COFFing process for fans of middle status team, a positive correlation was found between team identification, BIRGing and prediction of future performances.

We feel that the present study contributes to the current sport fandom literature in at least two important ways. First, with regard to theoretical considerations, not only do these findings represent, to the best of our knowledge, the first demonstration of the existence of the COFFing process in the sport fandom context, but also, our results help delineate underlying psychological mechanisms which may yield such process. Indeed, in line with a SIA framework (Haslam, 2004), the present results suggest that fans of middle status team, in comparison to fans of high status team, avoid association (i.e., BIRGing) with a potential loser to protect their future social identity from probable damage (i.e., they expect their team to perform badly in the future), even though that team is currently experiencing success. Moreover, the results disclosed with the sample of middle status fans reveal that it is the least identified fans who engage in these kinds of unfair behaviors. Contrary to relatively low-identified fans, for very highly-identified fans, the fanship identity is a strong component of their identity. As a consequence, because the team can even become an extension of themselves, they stick with it and therefore display a group loyalty. Second, from a practical point of view, sport marketing researchers demonstrated that team supportive behavior such as BIRGing stress a variety of consumption choice from the purchase of clothing dedicated to the team to financial support (Dalakas, Madrigal, & Anderson, 2004). As a consequence, employing marketing campaigns (e.g., TV spots, club museum with trophies) to accentuate the positive image of the team in terms of sporting performances represent managerial triggers for developing BIRGing behaviors. Alternatively, and because the status of a team doesn’t automatically rely on its performances on the ground (Wann, 2006), managers of teams historically unsuccessful could benefit from developing others aspects of the team identity such as the value-morality (e.g., being a good loser, respecting the rules) or the distinctiveness (e.g., stressing the aesthetic part of the play) of the players to encourage team supportive behaviors.
While the current findings are encouraging, the present investigation suffers from a number of limitations which need to be addressed. First, within the framework of the present study, we are aware that our analyses focus on two fairly small and specific samples of fans. Accordingly, future replications research should strive to employ larger samples of fans recruited from different sport disciplines, competitive levels, and age groups in order to extend the validity of the present findings. The second shortcoming deals with the measurement issue. That is, even if previous studies have successfully used self-report measures to access identity management strategies, more in-depth investigations may be needed. In other words, it is essential that future research should directly observe fans supporting middle and high status teams in order to see if the psychological mechanisms which appeared in this research are reflected in actual behaviors, in context (e.g., singing the club anthem, travel to away games, wearing team-licensed products). Finally, it should be noted that the mean score of BIRGing for fans of middle status team was significantly above the mid-point of the scale [(i.e., 4.00), \( t(44) = 7.60, p < .001 \)]. Consequently, fans of the middle status team, in comparison to fans of the high status team, refrained from BIRGing after team success but didn’t totally decline the opportunity to bask in the glow of victory of their team. We feel that this result could be explained at least partly by the fact that we selected in this research a middle status team (i.e., ASM) which was not truly a “losing team” (i.e., a low status team). As a consequence, and to better test the self protective nature of the COFFing process than in the present study, future studies should use a team which is unambiguously ranked as at the bottom of the championship.

Endnotes

1 Interestingly, previous research using non students samples in a North-American US Football context (Madrigal & Chen, 2008), in a French ice-hockey context (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2009) and in an Australian soccer (Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009) has showed that these two items does not systematically perform like the others SSIS items. Therefore, it is apparent that the manner in which rugby fans relate to their professional team has differences when compared with previous studies

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the French Federation of Rugby (FFR). We are grateful to the presidents of the fan clubs for their help in collecting data and fans who volunteered their participation to the current study.
References


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