



## Where the action is: Towards a discursive psychology of “authentic” identity in soccer fandom



Paul K. Miller <sup>a, \*</sup>, Adam Benkwitz <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Medical and Sport Sciences, University of Cumbria, UK

<sup>b</sup> School of Human Sciences, Newman University, UK

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 3 June 2015

Received in revised form

29 October 2015

Accepted 6 November 2015

Available online 12 November 2015

#### Keywords:

Discursive psychology

Fandom

Language

Soccer

Social identity

### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Fandom underpins a wide range of foundational sporting activities. The corpus of psychological research on the topic remains, however, largely concerned with (a) producing of formal taxonomies of fans, and (b) making the analytic distinction between authentic “fans” and mere “spectators.” This work is premised on the classical – but problematic – social-cognitive assumption that identity itself both precedes and (largely) determines the manner in which it is communicated. As such, the core objective of this paper is to take provisional empirical steps towards a formal psychology of “authentic” sporting fandom that does not replicate this troublesome assumption.

**Design:** A Discursive Psychological framework is used to explore how self identified soccer fans make “robust” cases for the authenticity of their own fan-identities.

**Method:** N = 26 unstructured interviews are analysed to highlight the constructive and attributional techniques drawn upon by speakers when making cases, and the culturally-available knowledges and contextual reasoning procedures that these make apparent.

**Results:** Three models for legitimating fan-identity are described: (a) longitudinal endurance, (b) logical choice-making and (c) emotional imperative. It is noted how key issues that inform social-cognitive analysis are actually assembled as members’ concerns in the service of persuasively accounting for particular claims *in situ*, and that this can facilitate a stronger understanding of the interrelation between sporting culture and social identity itself.

**Conclusions:** Until a stronger description of public procedures for self-identification is advanced, analytic abstractions made for the sake of “clarity” can guarantee no relevance to the social psychological lives of everyday fans themselves.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Across the extant psychological corpus of literature on sporting fandom, there remains a broad reliance on classically social-cognitive explanatory mechanisms for supporter loyalties and behaviours. Such concerns as emotional catharsis, excitement-seeking, image-maintenance and the core social-cognitive theme of “connectedness” are often viewed as determining attractors for individuals in their support of a particular team (Jacobson, 2003; Melnick & Wann, 2011; Porat, 2010; Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000; Wann, Weaver, Belva, Ladd, & Armstrong, 2015). Within most of this literature, there is a common (and often troublesome) precursory move to primordially define what a “fan” actually is, as

opposed to, for example, a “spectator” (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001).

In this paper, conversely, a formal analysis is advanced of the manner in which self-declared soccer fans organize accounts of their *own* fandom. Drawing chiefly on pertinent work in discursive psychology (henceforth DP – Locke, 2004; McGannon & Mauws, 2000; Miller, 2012) and allied studies in the field of conversation analysis (henceforth CA – Faulkner & Finlay, 2002; Groom, Cushion, & Nelson, 2012), opening sequences from unstructured interviews with supporters of a range of different soccer clubs are explored in order to take some precursory steps towards elucidating the range of systematic public procedures through which fans construct and manage their identities *as* real fans.

To the practising sport psychologist, it may not be instantly apparent why a phenomenon such as “fandom” is directly relevant to traditionally core matters of participation and performance, even

\* Corresponding author. DMSS, University of Cumbria, Bowerham Road, Lancaster, LA1 3JD, UK.

E-mail address: [paul.miller@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:paul.miller@cumbria.ac.uk) (P.K. Miller).

less so the ostensibly mundane, everyday business of “talking about it.” There are, however, three key issues to consider here. Firstly, strong identification with a sport, team or athlete is acknowledged in many studies to be a key progenitor of enthusiasm for the sport on the wider scale and, thus, the springboard for prospective and/or sustained engagement, especially during childhood (Lau, Fox, & Cheung, 2006; Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014). Few athletes of any order, and even fewer elite athletes, will not have had their primordial experience with their core sport of choice as a “fan.” Moreover, “love” of a sport *in general* is often cited as a central motivational factor for individuals to pursue (and sustain) involvement in sport at higher levels, especially in difficult circumstances such as recuperation from severe injury (Inigo, Podlog, & Hall, 2015; Podlog, Hannon, Banham, & Wadey, 2015). Thus, sport fandom underpins both the engagement and (re)invigoration of many sporting participants. Moreover, it is also highly-invested fans – especially those of the most commercialized mass sports, such as soccer – who ultimately fund a great deal of amateur and elite activity, through regular event attendance, the purchase of merchandise, the act of paying for TV subscriptions or simply being a viable target for advertisers (Quinn, 2009).

Secondly, understanding how individuals express their own fandom in conversation is not “simply” a matter of language. Rather, and as discussed in depth below, the manner in which individuals communicate any details about themselves can highlight a range of contextual, social and cultural constraints upon the normative order of self-expression (Potter, 2010) and, thereby, upon social identity itself (McGannon & Smith, 2015). At the most basic level, it can demonstrate what they might assume it is “okay” to be in interpersonal domains, and to whom, and what they reason needs to be downplayed or justified.

Thirdly, and as a corollary of the above, to understand how fandom is expressed by individuals *in situ* can help us analyse the broader culture(s) of sport as they manifest in particular circumstances, and their impact upon those individuals' sense of self and agency. In this respect, “fandom” might be seen as nothing short of a foundational concern at all levels of the sporting experience, and its expression instrumental to an understanding of the cultures and contexts therein. As McGannon and Smith (2015) note, DP is a highly apposite method for addressing concerns relating to identity and culture in sport, and there is indeed a growing body of contemporary psychological literature emerging in this domain (Cosh, Crabb, Kettler, LeCouteur, & Tully, 2015; Locke, 2008; McGannon & Schinke, 2013; McGannon, Gonsalves, Schinke, & Busanich, 2015). As such, and given the above, this paper aims to take some provisional, empirical steps towards a wider analysis of the interpersonal and cultural dimensions of the fandom phenomenon.

## 1. Sport, identity and fandom: key literature

In the most commonly-cited psychological studies on the issue, there has been a pervasive concern with making the distinction between “serious” sports fans and more casual observers, what Wann et al. (2001) classify as sport *fans* and sport *spectators* respectively. A key differentiating point between the two ends of the assumed continuum here is taken to be that true fans are “authentically” interested in, and follow, a particular sport, athlete or team. Spectators, on the other hand, might well watch an event in person, or through various media outlets (television, radio etc.), without having a specific “interest” in it (Wann, 1995). Jones (1997), in a comparable vein, argues that spectators will watch a sporting event and then “forget about it,” whereas fans will exhibit greater intensity and actively invest parts of their everyday lives in the team/athlete. Although these two terms are often used

interchangeably in sport literature, Wann et al. (2001) caution against this.<sup>1</sup> They cite the example of a particular sports fan who might rarely (if ever) actually watch a sporting event at the venue, while a spectator may be given a free ticket and attend, but this attendance would be for purposes other than watching the match itself; in order to spend time with friends, for instance.

Within such studies, there has been a similarly sustained emphasis upon the difference between “lowly” and “highly” identified fans, couched as “team identification” (Real & Mechikoff, 1992; Wann et al., 2000, 2015). Team identification is, at its core, the extent that a fan feels emotionally “connected” to a team (Melnick & Wann, 2011; Wilson, Grieve, Ostrowski, Mienaltowski, & Cyr, 2013), with the active following of that team deemed a central component in the identity of the highly identified fans (Wann et al., 2013). Such research is itself grounded in the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (henceforth SSIS – Wann & Branscombe, 1993), developed to measure team identification by providing an inventory of seven core Likert-scale indicators, with responses ranging from 1 to 8, where higher scores indicate correspondingly higher levels of identification. These items address a range of emotional and practical investments that might be made by an individual, and the extent to which they believe that their role as a follower of a team is a core element of their social identity. Although designed to be adapted to particular incidences, core questions target such matters as: “How important to you is it that [this team] wins?” and “How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of [this team]?”

Although such scaling procedures, also typified by (among others) the Team Identification Scale (Theodorakis, Wann, & Weaver, 2012), may seem to imply a relatively static “level” of fandom in individuals, there is acknowledgement that an individual's level of team identification can fluctuate, largely depending on the (perceived) success-level of their team. Fans can bask in the reflective glory (BIRGing) of sporting success by highlighting and publicizing their team identification, or they can cut off the reflective failures of a losing team (CORFing) by distancing themselves from that team (Spinda, 2011). BIRGing is generally regarded an enhancement tactic, while CORFing is an image-protection tactic (Ware & Kowalski, 2012).

In a more multi-dimensional attempt at characterizing fandom, Ben Porat (2010) argues that a fan's identity is composed of three clear “domains of experience.” The first, the *emotional-affective experience*, addresses the quest for excitement, catharsis, and so forth. The second, the *cognitive experience*, treats the gains and losses of being a fan as costs and benefits, like their own/their club's relationship to significant others. The third, the *symbolic experience*, meanwhile, pertains to the symbolic-cultural context of supporting a club, and assists the fan in answering the question “Who am I?” Examples given in this domain include Celtic FC embodying Catholicism in Scotland, and FC Barcelona representing Catalanism in Spain.

In sum, while fluctuation in variables such as the level of identification (Wann et al., 2013) and the level of involvement or participation (Pope, 2013) is acknowledged, a soccer fan's identity as a fan is ultimately taken to be a bounded and permanent phenomenon within this corpus of research. Indeed, as Ben Porat (2010) explicitly claims, a “true” fan supports their team from the cradle to the grave.

<sup>1</sup> This criticism of the interchangeable use of the terms fans and spectators is, perhaps, undermined by the title of the book in which it appears: *Sport Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators*, which alludes to fans and spectators in exactly those synonymous terms.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/894244>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/894244>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)