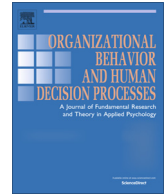




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp)

## Motivating underdogs and favorites

Robert B. Lount Jr.<sup>a,\*</sup>, Nathan C. Pettit<sup>b</sup>, Sarah P. Doyle<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Management and Human Resources, Fisher College of Business, The Ohio State University, Fisher Hall, 2100 Neil Ave., Columbus, OH 43210, United States<sup>b</sup> Department of Management and Organizations, Stern School of Business, New York University, 44 West 4th St., New York, NY 10012, United States<sup>c</sup> Department of Management and Organizations, Eller College of Management, University of Arizona, 1130 E. Helen St., Tucson, AZ 85721, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 16 October 2015

Revised 5 June 2017

Accepted 20 June 2017

## Keywords:

Underdogs

Favorites

Intergroup competition

Motivation

Regulatory fit

## ABSTRACT

A core question for managers and leaders is how to motivate individuals in intergroup competitions. We examine how an individual's effort is affected by whether one's group is considered the *underdog* or the *favorite* and the content of the motivational appeal they receive. Specifically, we first propose and test whether underdogs and favorites enter intergroup competitions with different motivational orientations (Study 1). We then demonstrate that motivational appeals that match these orientations lead to greater effort than appeals which do not (Studies 2–4), with goal commitment mediating this effect (Study 5). Finally, we present a meta-analytic integration of the findings, along with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications for individual effort in intergroup competitions.

© 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Within the context of impending competitions, leaders often try to 'rally the troops' and motivate members to help their group succeed. Whether it takes the form of a coach giving an impassioned locker room speech before a game, a campaign manager asking for support to help a candidate in an election, or a CEO urging employees to give extra effort to combat fierce market competition, attempts to increase members' effort to help their group, organization, political party, etc. succeed are a natural feature of competitive contexts.

When groups face off in direct competition, there are often expectations about who will win and who will lose. These expectations can be based on a variety of factors, including formal rankings based on experts' judgment (e.g., NCAA basketball playoff brackets), who is predicted to win based on popular opinion (e.g., polling data in elections), prior outcomes (e.g., who won last time), or simply obvious differences in ability or resources. The terms *underdog* and *favorite* have been used in a number of social science disciplines to describe such instances of clear competitive expectations. Common among them is a general definition of underdogs as those who are expected to lose, whereas favorites are expected to win (Kim et al., 2008; Paul & Weinbach, 2005; Simon, 1954).

Given that intergroup competitions often involve clear performance expectations—and thus an underdog and favorite—could leaders use the expectations that are embedded in these terms to elicit behaviors to help their groups succeed? That is, might certain motivational appeals be more effective in pushing people to work hard depending on whether their group is considered the underdog or the favorite? In this research we propose that members of underdog and favorite groups experience different motivational orientations, and argue that the efficacy of leaders' motivational appeals will depend on whether such messages are congruent with their group's standing (i.e., whether their group is the underdog or favorite).

We test this general prediction across multiple studies which examine (1) the motivational orientations of underdogs and favorites and (2) how appeals can be tailored to match these orientations and thus better elicit effortful behaviors which can help their group succeed. Doing so provides several important theoretical and applied contributions. Theoretically, this research offers initial insights into the psychology of being an underdog versus favorite and contributes to research on the situational factors that can affect individual effort in competitive intergroup contexts. From an applied perspective, we offer a clear and potent takeaway for leaders and supervisors who manage groups considered to be underdogs or favorites—specifically, a simple shift in the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [lount.1@osu.edu](mailto:lount.1@osu.edu) (R.B. Lount Jr.), [npettit@stern.nyu.edu](mailto:npettit@stern.nyu.edu) (N.C. Pettit), [spdoyle@email.arizona.edu](mailto:spdoyle@email.arizona.edu) (S.P. Doyle).

motivational appeal one presents to a group prior to competition can affect individuals' effort.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Individual effort in intergroup competition

It is well established that people want their group to compare favorably relative to others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As such, settings that promote performance comparisons between groups are argued to create 'social competition' (Turner, 1975), where people place increased value on helping their group perform well (Ellemers, de Gilder, & Haslam, 2004). One of the core tenets of the collective effort model (Karau & Williams, 2001) is that the more value people attach to their group performing well, the harder they will work. Therefore, performance comparisons between groups increase effortful behaviors aimed at helping the group perform well (e.g., Bornstein & Erev, 1997; James & Greenberg, 1989; Lount & Phillips, 2007; Ouwerkerk, de Gilder, & de Vries, 2000; Worchel, Rothgerber, Day, Hart, & Butemeyer, 1998), with this motivation being further enhanced when the comparison is part of an explicit competition (Erev, Bornstein, & Galili, 1993; Kistruck, Lount, Smith, Bergman, & Moss, 2016; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004; Wittchen, van Dick, & Hertel, 2011).

However, not all intergroup settings are created equal, and thus their impact on group members' effort can be affected by relational features between competing groups (e.g., Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010; Kistruck et al., 2016; Pettit & Lount, 2010). For instance, the nature of competition can be affected by prior history with the out-group. Kilduff et al. (2010) analysis of NCAA basketball teams showed that teams put forth more effortful-behaviors when competing against a rival in comparison to non-rival opponent. Further, Pettit and Lount (2010) found that students' effort when representing their school in an inter-university competition was affected by differences in the relative prestige between universities.

Consistent with the growing recognition that relational differences between groups can affect a person's cognition and behavior, we consider how the standing of one's group in terms of explicit performance expectations—i.e., underdog versus favorite—may differentially affect group members' concerns about the impending competition. Specifically, we develop theory on the underlying psychology of underdogs and favorites and use this to build predictions for how and why the efficacy of motivational appeals depends on whether the content of the appeal matches the underlying concerns of underdogs and favorites.

### 1.2. Underdog and favorite groups

For how common the terms underdog and favorite are to the vocabulary of intergroup competition, little is known about how these explicit expectations influence effortful behaviors by members of these competing groups. This is likely due, in part, to the fact that researchers have typically examined third parties' expectations of, and responses to, underdogs and favorites (Gibson, Sachau, Doll, & Shumate, 2002; Paharia, Keinan, Avery, & Schor, 2011; Simon, 1954), rather than considering the experience of underdogs and favorites themselves. For example, people are more likely to root for and support underdogs than favorites (Kim et al., 2008), perhaps out of a desire to see them win. Yet, at the same time, analyses of gambling behavior in sports shows a bias in favor of 'over betting' on the favorite (Paul & Weinbach, 2005), perhaps because people feel it is safe to assume the favorite will not 'let them down.'

Although not directly focused on underdogs and favorites, some work has examined how providing relative performance feedback—which could inform performance expectations—can shape group members' reactions to an upcoming comparison. Namely, learning that one's group performed better or worse as compared to another group can alter group member's physiological (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005) and attitudinal reactions going into another performance comparison (Ouwerkerk & Ellemers, 2002). Implicit in the above is that group members' awareness of expectations surrounding an impending performance comparison can affect how they approach this intergroup setting.

### 1.3. The psychology of underdogs and favorites

Although it has become a taken-for-granted assumption that people have a strong desire to come out on top in competitive contexts, individuals can still approach such settings with different orientations, motivations, and goals (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005; Ten Velden, Beersma, & De Dreu, 2009). We contend that favorites and underdogs approach intergroup competitions with different motivational orientations which begin with the differing expectations that are held for each. Indeed, the labels underdog and favorite are laden with the very expectations they describe (i.e., to lose and to win respectively) and it is well established that people are sensitive to, and often internalize, the expectations that others hold for them (Oz & Eden, 1994; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

By definition, favorites are expected to win (Gibson et al., 2002). As such, favorites have little to gain by winning but much to lose if they are outperformed by the underdog. Said another way, favorites may feel that losing in a situation where a win is expected will cast their group in an especially negative light, whereas winning will offer only minimal benefits because it matches existing expectations. The psychological experience of being a favorite should therefore be characterized less by potential advancement—indeed, how much can be gained when winning is expected?—and far more by concerns about what might happen if they fail to meet the standard that is expected of them. That is, for favorites the goal of winning is seen as a minimum standard that must be met, and as such, winning becomes an obligation or duty that favorites *ought* to fulfill in order to secure their standing (Higgins, 1998). When winning is viewed in these terms, people translate the goal of winning (a positive outcome) into a focus on not losing (elimination of a negative outcome) (e.g., Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008).

In contrast, underdogs are, by definition, expected to lose (Kim et al., 2008; Nurmohamed, 2014). As such, underdogs have little to lose but much to gain if they perform better than the favorite. Said another way, underdogs may feel that winning in a situation where a loss is expected will cast their group in an especially positive light, whereas losing will come with few costs because it matches existing expectations. The psychological experience of being an underdog should therefore be characterized less by pressure to meet expectations—indeed, what is there to lose when losing is already expected?—and far more by potential gains and the advancement opportunities that are possible if they win. That is, for underdogs, the goal of winning is seen as a maximum standard that one hopes to achieve, and as such, winning becomes an aspiration or an *ideal* for underdogs to advance their standing (Higgins, 1987). When winning is viewed in these terms, people should be primarily concerned with obtaining a desired positive outcome.

As stated above, while the goal or standard that competitors have is typically to win, self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) suggests that competitors could see this same objective as either a duty/obligation (i.e., an *ought*) or as a hope/aspiration (i.e., an *ideal*). We contend that the expectations associated with being a favorite or underdog leads members of these groups to experience

<sup>1</sup> For convenience and readability, and following prior work (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1970), we use the term 'group(s)' and 'intergroup' to encompass a number of social categories, including groups, organizations, or larger collectives (e.g., political parties). Thus, when we refer to intergroup competitions these could be between groups, organizations, etc. When we use the term 'effort' in intergroup competitions we refer to and measure individual-level effort on behalf of one's group.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5035317>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5035317>

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