

Observing Football Supporters: An Investigation into the Relationship between Collective and Personal Identity

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Abstract

A participant observation was conducted at four Premier League football matches and data was collected concerning the participants estimated age as well as their gender, styles of dress, location in stadium, small group composition and details of their interactions both individually and collectively. These details included reactions to other crowd members, verbal and non-verbal communications, normative and anti-social behaviour before and after the game and reactions to the stages of play. Data was coded initially and patterns highlighted from which interpretations were made using hermeneutical analysis informed by Psychological theories about group behaviour and identity with relation to crowds in particular. It was found that there was strong evidence supporting social identity theory, in particular the self-categorisation aspect, and role conflict theory in the behaviours of participants suggesting that their individual identities were transformed into a collective identity by virtue of their involvement in a crowd environment.

Introduction

As well as personal idiosyncratic factors that shape and guide an individual's behaviour it is well established that broader social interactions and situations influence how someone may behave (Hogg & Vaughan, 1995.) A widely accepted label used to summarise an individual's unique personal proclivities and orientation is "identity" which is a consistent mental model of self (Leary & Tangney, 2003.) Although consistent, this sense of identity is not fixed and the uncertainty-identity theory states that people are motivated to reduce feelings of uncertainty when reflecting on "self" so membership of a group, with its combined and shared outlook, can help provide this (Hogg, 2007.) One theory commonly used to explain this is Social Identity Theory (Billig, Bundy, Flament & Tajfel, 1971) which claims that the individual need for consistency in identity maintenance coupled with the human need for social interaction and acceptance results in an individual identifying with a group that adopts shared attitudes i.e. offers similarity in a role defined by its difference to other groups. In order to identify which groups an individual may consider themselves similar to, a process of self-categorisation is used in which someone may identify features of their individual personal identity in the characteristics of a group and consider themselves either part of that group automatically or aspire to belong to it. This aspirational longing is linked to the idea of self-enhancement by boosting self-concept and shows that identity is not fixed but can be context dependent (Hogg & Terry, 2000.) The context which determines which particular identity is salient to an individual at any given time has been argued to depend on how accessible the categorisation is and how well the particular categorization fits the social context at the time (Lea, Spears & Watt, 2007.) Therefore, individuals formed into groups focus on their similarities (the in-group) as defined by the perceived differences of other groups (outgroups) in order to maintain or protect the integrity of their own group(Hogg & Vaughan, 1995.) This can lead to different groups being seen as a threat, especially when limited resources are at stake and groups are in competition for them. This can bind groups closer together by causing them to discriminate and be prejudiced against perceived rivals, an idea known as Realistic Conflict Theory (Jackson, 1993.) The threat does not have

to be a threat to life or limb in order for this phenomenon to take effect as shown by experiments on minimal group paradigm conflicts in which strong prejudices and fierce ties are formed over seemingly trivial disputes (Tajfel, 1970.) A frequently studied example of social grouping is the phenomenon of crowd behaviour. The collective behaviour of large crowds has been linked to social identity theory by the argument that individuals that comprise a crowd often assume a collective identity outlined by shared behaviour and attitudes, especially in a uniform and anti-social way (Berk, 1974.) It has been argued that crowds produce behaviour that is primitive and instinctive, primarily through a process of deindividuation as the size of the crowd strengthens the sense of collective identity at the expense of personal identity largely due to individuals feeling relatively anonymous while they are part of it (Perry, 1998.) Consequently a crowd may exhibit emergent norms which may be contrary to socially accepted norms (Aguirre, Virgo and Wenger, 1998.) One familiar example of this may be the collective behaviour of crowds at a football match who are commonly assumed to show anti-social norms, primitive tribal behaviour and instinctive emotion (Horak, Malcolm and Warrington, 1998.) Therefore, in observing the behaviour of football spectators at a major game, the research question being investigated in this report is whether the theories concerning social identity in a group context outlined above will be in evidence.

Method

A participant observation was conducted across four Premier League games at Wigan Athletic's DW Stadium. Spectators were observed and coded into the following categories: Age, gender, group composition (alone, pairs, groups of friends, families) and location in stadium (proximity to opposition fans, proximity to pitch and location in regards to other spectators) and behavioural characteristics were noted that defined similarities or differences to other groups present, in particular displays of verbal and non-verbal communication towards players and other fans as well as ritualistic behaviour such as chanting and use of team colours. A mobile phone was used to record data at the events so data collection was surreptitious and expanded upon shortly afterwards. From this data a hermeneutic analysis was conducted both during and after the event as the observations were applied to psychological theory regarding crowd behaviour and social identity.

Results/Discussion

The face fits the mask

There appeared to be an overwhelming gender bias in the data with the vast majority of the spectators being male but there was a very broad spectrum of ages. I did not observe one female attending on her own or even with other female friends, all females there appeared to be with a boyfriend or her family. This suggests immediately that crowds at this event were grouped overall according to one very prominent shared set of beliefs and cultural outlook □ this was an ostensibly masculine occasion due to its competitive nature and tribal composition (Dionisio, Leal & Moutinho, 2008.) Women appeared to accept a certain role in this scenario as an accompanying partner or as a mother, not as an active participant. As this does not reflect wider social trends, it could be argued that that the masculine identity threaded throughout the crowd at this event is one that those in attendance valued. This was further exemplified by the social interactions observed before, during and after the event that may be seen as a prototype of □being male□ that include copious alcohol consumption, boisterous pseudo-aggressive shouts and gestures towards other groups of males and friends and even the □protector□ of their partner as those attending with females appeared to ensure they were

kept close to themselves and steered away from large groups of noisy males. As identity is marked by similarities defined by the differences amongst outgroups (Krueger & Robbins, 2005.) it could be argued that attendance alone at such an event is frequently seen as a statement of one's own patriarchal masculinity in contrast to those who have no desire to attend such events (King, 1997.) Another grouped identity amongst the spectators, this time defined by economic differences, could be seen by the physical segregation in the stadium according to the price paid for tickets. Those in the far more expensive hospitality suites were dressed differently (shirt and tie) than those in the seats situated just in front of the suites in which men dressed much more casually. There was no access between the two sets of seats but those in the cheaper sections would frequently turn and shout comments to friends situated above, usually in a jocular manner concerning their dress and behaviour as those in the suites were much more subdued and far less vociferous than those below. It was obvious that many friends were divided between the two sections and that many were colleagues from work which suggests not a huge economic difference between the supporters but an aspirational one. Those in the suites appeared to value the prestige and status their more expensive vantage point gave them and they behaved differently during the game than those below in order to facilitate their "belonging" to the category they had chosen for themselves. The fact that this particular social identity was context driven was shown by one particular supporter who managed to find a way into the cheaper seats to be with his friends that had been goading him throughout the first half. He proceeded to remove his tie when amongst them and join in with the aggressive chanting, shouting etc. almost immediately as though by removing his tie he was physically switching identities. By absorbing himself into a much larger group it could also be argued that he became more anonymous and therefore deindividuated which made him less conscious of how he would normally be expected to behave (Neal, 1993.) Both of these examples highlight and support the theory of identity as context dependent, with the masculine tribal and aggressive/primitive identity of the crowd being the overwhelming salient one.

The Enemy Within

At all the matches I attended, the demographics and attitudes of the crowd as a whole were roughly very similar. This was shown by the fact both prior and after the match, "rival" groups of supporters would congregate in the pubs beforehand and discuss the upcoming match with genial banter and mutual respect. This was markedly and significantly different once supporters were inside the stadium. Defined by their use of team colours to identify allegiance and a very definite segregation (home and away supporters are located in totally separate stands at this stadium) a very clear identity emerged between "them" and "us"

during the match. Supporters who had been socialising and even bonding with shared interests and attitudes before the game were now depersonalised groups of enemies engaged in ritualistic prejudiced chanting (maligning the opponents town or appearance or anything they could think of) and gesturing at each other in a discriminatory, primitive, tribal fashion. This is an example of Realistic Conflict Theory and is redolent of the minimal group paradigm experiments by Tajfel (1970.) The identification with their team as representatives of their geographical location was intense and the teams began to represent weapons with which both groups of supporters could symbolically injure their rivals as shown by the immense frustrated aggression exhibited by supporters when things were not going their teams way on the pitch. The points (goals) for which the teams competed were the limited resource and the supporters identified with their teams in this symbolic competition for status. Consequently the mediator (referee) was the subject of much abuse throughout depending on whether or not

he was seen to be for or against one particular team. This shows the relevance of the Intergroup Anxiety Theory in that supporters sensing their team, which they strongly identified with in this mock battle, were at risk subsequently putting themselves as individuals and as a group at some kind of symbolic risk (Stephan, 1985.) This led to behaviour which outside of the stadium would have been seen as anti-social and deviant such as screaming hostile abuse and making obscene gestures towards others but as this happened in a uniform way here it was an emerging norm and accepted by everyone present although kept in check by mediators like police and stewards to ensure that the broader social concerns were not contravened and hostilities did not escalate to a point where any real harm could be done. Both sets of supporters are complicit in this as they accept that without such mediation this event could not take place within society and they consciously recognise that no real risk is present.

Conclusion

It could be argued that sport is itself a conceptual metaphor with the struggles and competitive nature of life being the target domain and the game being the source domain (Lakoff, George and Johnson, 1980.) This could be expanded to include those who follow a sports team with a vested self-interest as witnessed in this observation. They appeared to identify very strongly with the competition and struggles on the pitch to such a degree that their sense of identity as an individual and a group were intricately bound up with the game. This echoes many of the psychological theories outlined in the introduction, namely social identity theory (the shared beliefs and attitudes of the crowd); self-categorisation theory (the alternate identities adopted depending on the situation); realistic conflict theory (the points battled for in the game were a limited resource which symbolically represented a battle for status amongst the arbitrarily divided supporters □ reminiscent of minimal group paradigm) and intergroup emotion theory (identifying a perceived threat to an individual's group as a threat to the individual themselves). There are many more theories that could be discussed (optimal and positive distinctiveness, primary socialisation, relative deprivation etc.) and a lot of additional behaviours that could be applied to them in future studies that allowed for longer reports, giving a more detailed and rounded consideration of the few issues raised here.

Reflection

I found that in conducting an observation in this way, it was necessary to go through certain stages to obtain satisfactory results. I initially planned to attend just one match and collect data but I found that as I was writing the data down I began to theorise immediately based on what I had read in the Social Psychology textbook. Therefore, I felt it was best to attend another game but this time actually looking for evidence to support the theories I already had in mind. This method does not seem very objective as after just one game I already had preconditioned ideas and theories that I was looking for rather than simply observing but I don't think that necessarily makes the observations any less valid, especially if subsequent and alternate research confirms similar findings. Personal bias is inevitable though and I think that selective attention is probably unavoidable especially once primed by theoretical research that □ feels □ accurate. Another factor is that of stereotyping and I think my assessment of football as a largely masculine environment might be a result of my own experiences in the past as I am a football supporter familiar with attending games with other groups of males or my girlfriend and I may have seen what I expected to see when I was there, especially as I know for a fact that many women attend football games with female friends but I just may not have noticed them due to my own personal bias.