

# Chapter 10

## Social Identity Theory in Sports Fandom Research

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### ABSTRACT

*Sports fans are known to engage in BIRGing, or basking in reflected glory after their team wins, and CORFing, cutting off reflected failure following a team loss. These phenomena are related to social identity theory, which examines how group memberships shape a person's self-image. This chapter explores how media-attentive sports fans internalize victory and externalize defeat by charting the simultaneous developments in the 1970s of social identity theory, advanced by European social psychologists, and BIRGing and CORFing, which are rooted in a landmark study on college students wearing school-identifying apparel after the university football team won. The chapter also examines how social identity has served and can continue to be utilized as the theoretical backbone for research on mass-mediated sports fandom.*

### INTRODUCTION

Through a series of seminal articles in the 1970s, social psychologists developed a new research tradition based on social identity theory, “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69). European scholars such as Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner employed social identity theory to examine intergroup relations, group processes, and the social self (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). At the same time, a groundbreaking study for sports fandom research demonstrated that university students had a greater tendency to wear school-identifying apparel following a victory by the school football team, decreasing their distance from a successful group with which they were only trivially associated (Cialdini et al., 1976). This scholarship prompted work on the phenomena of BIRGing, or basking in reflected glory after a team victory, and CORFing, cutting off reflected failure following a loss (Snyder et al., 1986; Wann & Branscombe, 1990).

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Working in separate disciplines, scholars interested in social identity and BIRGing and CORFing started to explore similar questions about how group memberships shape a person's self-image. More than four decades later, sports researchers are beginning to utilize social identity more frequently in studies on how mass communication can heighten fans' identification with sports teams and athletes, answering calls for research on the interaction between sports media narratives and identity variables (Billings, 2011). This chapter aims to achieve two goals: (a) to chart the simultaneous developments of social identity theory and BIRGing and CORFing, including research influences and seminal studies, and (b) to explain how social identity has served and can continue to be utilized as the theoretical backbone for important scholarship on mass-mediated sports fandom.

## **ORIGINS AND INFLUENCES**

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory explains individuals' tendency "to identify with a specific group to satisfy their needs for positive self-esteem, belonging, control, and a holistic life" (Ye, Zhu, Deng, & Mu, 2019, p. 159). A main tenet of the theory holds that group identification helps individuals maintain a measure of certainty about themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a concept that has roots in European social psychology. After World War II, the United States financed the reconstruction of western Europe, including the restoration of an intellectual climate for social psychology research that was decimated by fascism and the Holocaust (Hogg & Abrams, 1999). Conscious of the hegemony of American ideas, European scholars sought a unique scientific perspective. Some researchers developed a new line of literature concentrating on how group memberships affect people's self-concepts. Festinger (1954) presented the theory of social comparison processes, which described the human desire to evaluate one's opinions and abilities against the opinions and abilities of similar others. He proffered an example of people who are learning to play chess and evaluate their performances against other beginners, not masters at the game. Nascent chess players identify with their ingroup.

In the late 1950s, Tajfel began developing a cognitive theory of stereotyping (Hogg & Abrams, 1999). He elaborated on the process of accentuation, in which similarities within and differences between social categories are both accentuated, and he pointed out that stereotypes are widely shared perceptions of social groups, calling for a broader examination of intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1957; Tajfel, 1959; Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963). The stereotype of a lively Italian, according to Tajfel (1959), meant that Italians were considered more lively than other ethnicities by outgroups. Tajfel and Wilkes (1963) determined that stereotyping involves "exaggerating *some* differences between groups classified in a certain way, and of minimizing the same differences within such groups" (emphasis in original, p. 113). Categorizing oneself into social groups was therefore seen as crucial to identity.

These group memberships begin in the earliest stages of life. Berger (1966) pointed out that people are first granted identity as a "good baby" or a "little gentleman" (p. 112), classifying them into a type of positive ingroup. From infancy on, humans learn whom they are through socialization that creates symmetry between objective and subjective reality as well as objective and subjective identity. According to Berger, "the individual *realizes* himself in society – that is, he recognizes his identity in socially defined terms and these definitions *become reality* as he lives in society" (emphasis in original, p. 108). At the same time, Sherif (1966) linked intergroup behavior to media, noting that technological advances

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