

Exploring Empathy in Fan Responses to Athlete Behavior

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Aim

Sport can deliver extraordinary experiences, emotionally engaging consumers to athletes and their teams through identification and group behaviors. This psychological connection that fans have to sport objects is highlighted by an alignment of values (Hyatt & Foster, 2015), however if a ‘disparity’ were to occur between those values, such as through athlete misbehavior, a cognitive and emotional conflict could arise that threatens fan identity. Fans may seek to justify or set aside this disconnect through moral disengagement strategies, evoking a sense of forgiving (Lee, Kwak & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016), however the increased scrutiny of athletes and their consequences makes this increasingly difficult for fans. In this research, we posit empathy as another means by which fans may respond to incidents that conflict with their values and potentially threaten their identification with a sport object. Using a qualitative approach of online fan posts and in-depth interviews we examine how fan empathy manifests as a response to off-field athlete transgressions, acts as a mechanism for maintaining identification and the implications for sport managers that result.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Recognition and management of highly identified fans is critical to sport managers given the direct financial impact they can have on an organization and its stakeholders (Foster & Hyatt, 2007). An understanding of empathy as it exists in fans can potentially add an important characteristic to managing identification, reducing the potential for disengagement when fans may feel tired or tested by mounting athlete indiscretions and the inevitable scrutiny they invoke (Fink, Parker, Brett & Higgins 2009).

Empathy is an essential part of human interaction and is of increasing interest to social researchers because of its “power to predict and explain important social behaviour” (Argo, Zhu & Dahl, 2008, p.615). There is a general agreement on three components of empathy as a multidimensional psychological construct. First, empathy is an affective response to another and can include emotional concern. Second, it involves a cognitive aspect where one adopts or shares the perspective of another, referred to as perspective taking. Finally, it includes a mechanism that allows one to differentiate between self and other.

Research Design and Data Analysis

We explored the views of highly-identified fans through a series of depth interviews after first undertaking a qualitative content analysis of online discussion posts to illuminate fan viewpoints. This preliminary stage explored 32 transgressive incidents from athletes, producing 9868 associated fan posts. from 11 different forums, comprising a mix of specialist sport and news outlets. Many comments revealed both an emotional and cognitive response to an incident that reflected a type of empathy for the athlete. We decided to explore this empathetic response more deeply through interviews. The initial data and analysis of online forums provided structure and informed the interview guide.

Ultimately 15 in-depth interviews were conducted (7 male). Informants’ age range was 28 to 50 and they were interviewed individually and face-to-face by a single researcher, who screened to ensure high levels of fan identification across a variety of sports. Interview data

(approximately 110,000 words) was initially open-coded by two researchers that concentrated on identifying broad expressions of emotion and was followed by another axial coding pass that sought to put some context to this source, disaggregating the data and seeking appropriate linkages and relationships to the broad themes extracted. During both stages the researchers convened to cross-check the coding process and to discuss any discrepancies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results and Discussion

Our data provides evidence of fans using their knowledge and experience to adopt the perspective of the athlete in terms of their emotional concern and in making sense of a transgression and, in doing so, this can result in an empathetic response to the athlete or team's circumstances. We establish fan empathy as both an emotional and cognitive response to an event that may impact fan identity and define it as the capacity of a sports fan to experience and understand an athlete's affective or psychological state in a personalized way that can also enable them to maintain their identification with the sport object. Further, we relate five processes by which fans make sense of athlete misbehavior and subsequently engage their tendencies for fan empathy. These are moral testing, weighing the evidence, reserving judgement, managing expectations, and determining a locus of control.

Conclusion and Implications

The research supports the concept of fan empathy as a unique psychological and experiential phenomenon in the sport context. It contributes to the literature by identifying and defining the concept of fan empathy, including its cognitive and affective aspects, and by demonstrating processes that can lead to an empathetic response. Our research also provides an expanded understanding for sport managers of how sport fandom is experienced and how empathy might be used to maintain identification.

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