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Journal of Issues in **Intercollegiate Athletics**

"But it's Joe Pa!" The Effects of Social Identification on Sport Fan Perceptions of the Penn State Case

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This study examined the attitudes of football fans towards the recent events at The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State). The child sexual abuse allegations at Penn State led to the firing of the long-time head football coach and resignation of the university president. Using a snowball sampling technique, participants completed an online questionnaire that assessed their identification with the Penn State football team and their attitudes towards Penn State, and the coach and president. The fans who were high-identified with the football team were expected to demonstrate more support for the actions of, and less perceived responsibility and blame for the coach and president than the low-identified fans. Furthermore, this greater support and decreased responsibility and blame was expected to be enhanced for the coach compared to the president because the coach was more directly linked to the football program. The results supported three of the four hypotheses and demonstrate how identification with a sports team influences perceptions about a scandal in intercollegiate athletics.

"They ask me what I'd like written about me when I'm gone. I hope they write I made Penn State a better place not just that I was a good football coach."

—quote from Joe Paterno by his statue, formerly outside of the football stadium.

Whatever feelings people may have had about college football, Penn State, and Coach Joe Paterno have been dramatically affected by the events that unfolded during the 2011 football season. Questions about responsibility, blame, the power of intercollegiate athletics on college campuses, and what to do now appeared in our everyday conversations. Posnanski (2012) states that our perception of college sports had shifted "...because he was Joe Paterno, the all-time winning coach, architect of The Grand Experiment, and he had been celebrated for almost half a century as a man of integrity" (p. 335). As people discussed the Penn State case, it seemed that their thoughts about the case might be influenced by their status as fans of Penn State football and, therefore, it became apparent that we needed to investigate how this membership in the Penn State fan culture might affect sport fans' perceptions of the case.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains that people have a need to be affiliated with other people as members of groups and the importance we place on these group memberships. SIT further proposes that these memberships give people a sense of identity and enhance their self-esteem. As such, people act in ways to maintain a positive self-image based on these group memberships. The sport fandom research expands upon this SIT knowledge by investigating the social identities of sport fans and the efforts they use to maintain a positive self-image in the face of wins and losses by a team (Cialdini et al., 1976; Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992). The studies by Cialdini, Hirt, and colleagues show how sport fans act to maintain and boost their self-esteem by decreasing the psychological distance to their team after a win, and increasing the psychological distance after a loss. This research shows that sport fans alter their interpretations of events to maintain a positive self-image.

The level of identification with a sports team also impacts fans' perceptions about their own behavior. Wann, Carlson, and Schrader (1999) asked participants what they would do to help their team win. Fans who were high-identified with the team reported greater hostile and instrumental aggression than low-identified fans. These results demonstrated that high-identified fans place a greater importance on their team winning as a means to maintain a positive self-image about themselves via their social identification with the team. The high-identified fans appear to be more inclined to act in accordance with what helps the team or other in-group members rather than what is the correct action to take. Importantly, this research by Wann and colleagues shows that the level of identification with a team might cloud a person's judgment when making rather basic moral decisions (e.g., breaking the leg of an opposing star player or coach, helping in an emergency).

This social identity as a sports fan leads fans to present themselves as fans of a specific team (Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). Additionally, Stott, Hutchison, and Drury (2001) demonstrate that being a fan of a certain team requires the adoption of certain behaviors that characterize the fans of that team. Therefore, it seems that fans have expectations for what it means to be a fan of a certain team and how s/he should behave. Combining this research on fan presentation (Wann et al., 2000) and behaviors (Stott et al.) with the self-esteem research (Cialdini et al., 1976; Hirt et al., 1992) further validates the opportunity for fans to adjust perceptions of an event to maintain positive feelings about their team and associated fandom. That is, sport fans can psychologically adjust their perceptions of an event to allow themselves to feel good about being psychologically connected via their fandom to the event, according to models of self-esteem maintenance (Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Tesser, 2000). Additionally, it seems likely that the fans will alter these perceptions for their own feelings as well as for any other people associated with the event. Those individuals more closely linked to the team can also be psychologically protected via these altered perceptions.

Recently, the Team Identification – Social Psychological Health Model (Wann, 2006) proposed that sport fans derive social and psychological health benefits from their fandom. The model posits that these health benefits are due to enduring (e.g., long-time friends with other fans) and temporary (e.g., becoming gameday friends with other fans) social connections. These connections allow the individual to more effectively cope with any threat to the self. The sport fans' social well-being is enhanced through their identity as a sport fan. Therefore, if the social well-being of sport fans is based upon this affiliation, then they want to be able to look favorably upon the team, players, coaches, institution, etc. as a means to maintain this well-being and their positive self-perceptions.

The Penn State Case

The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) was recently embroiled in a scandal alleging child sexual abuse by former football coach Jerry Sandusky. He was charged with sexually abusing 10 children over a 15-year period, with some of these incidents alleging to have happened on Penn State's campus. In June 2012, Sandusky was convicted on 45 counts of abusing 10 boys and then sentenced to a minimum of 30 years in prison in October 2012 (Johnson, 2012). The criticism over how Penn State handled the sexual abuse allegations led to the firing of head football coach Joe Paterno, the resignation of university president Graham Spanier, as well as the early retirement of vice president Gary Schultz and a leave of absence for athletic director Tim Curley.

Hypotheses

Previous research shows that identification with a sports team influences the attitudes of sports fans (Cialdini et al., 1976; Hirt et al., 1992; Wann et al., 1999) as they seek to maintain a positive self-image. Therefore, it seems plausible that identification with the Penn State football team would impact the attitudes of sport fans about the Penn State case. The main hypothesis is that fans who are highly identified with the Penn State football team are expected to report the following compared to fans lowly identified with the Penn State football team:

1. less support for the firing of Coach Paterno and the resignation of President Spanier
2. more support for both Coach Paterno and President Spanier keeping their jobs
3. less responsibility and blame for Coach Paterno and President Spanier for what happened at Penn State
4. more support for both Coach Paterno and President Spanier acting correctly during the scandal

Furthermore and since Coach Paterno is a representative of the Penn State football team, enhanced perceptions of support, responsibility, and blame are expected from the high-identified fans compared to the low-identified fans for Coach Paterno, while no identification differences are expected for President Spanier.

Method

Participants

Two hundred people (89 male, 105 female, 6 unreported; 82% Caucasian) volunteered for the study. The participants ranged from 18 to 78 years of age ($M = 29.86$, $SD = 13.56$). Participants were contacted via email to request their help with the online study. Participants self-selected into the study and did not receive any compensation for completing the materials.

Materials

The questionnaire materials included the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), statements about the Penn State case, and demographic information (i.e., age, gender, race). The SSIS is a seven-item scale measuring a person's level of social identification as a fan of a sports team. The SSIS uses an 8-point Likert-scale and was altered to specify identification with Penn State's football team (e.g., How important to you is it that PENN STATE'S FOOTBALL TEAM wins? 1 = Not Important, 8 = Very Important). The items on the SSIS were found to be reliable (Cronbach's alpha = .959) for the current study.

Participants responded to 20 statements about the Penn State case using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). The Penn State statements assessed participants' attitudes towards coach Joe Paterno, president Graham Spanier, Penn State University, and Penn State football. Specifically, participants reported their agreement/disagreement to the following statements for both Coach Paterno and President Spanier: Penn State was correct in firing him, he should have kept his job, he did everything legally correct during the scandal, he did everything morally correct during the scandal, he should have done more, he is responsible for what happened at Penn State, he should be blamed for what happened at Penn State, and his reputation has been permanently damaged by this scandal. Participants also reported their agreement/disagreement to the statement that Joe Paterno should have been able to coach through the end of the 2011 season. Additionally, participants reported their agreement/disagreement with the following statements: the reputation of Penn State has been permanently damaged by this scandal, Penn State football will be less successful without Joe Paterno as head coach, and Penn State football just as successful without Joe Paterno as head coach. Finally, participants provided an estimate of financial liability should Penn State be found guilty in a civil case.

All materials were setup for online data collection via InstantSurvey. The study materials were available online from November 11, 2011 (two days after the firing of Coach Paterno) to December 9, 2011.

Procedure

The researcher used a snowball sampling technique, starting with family and friends, to request participants for the study. This technique was used to rapidly collect information via online participation while the case was still being discussed amongst college sport fans. The family and friends received an email with a link to study and were requested to complete the materials, if they were interested in participating. Additionally, the family and friends were asked to forward the study information to other friends and family members who might also be interesting in participating in the study.

Upon receiving the e-mail from the researcher, participants clicked a link to provide informed consent and reported basic demographic information. The participants then completed the SSIS and responded to the statements about Penn State. Upon completing all study materials, the participants were thanked for their participation and provided the researcher's contact information to ask questions about the study.

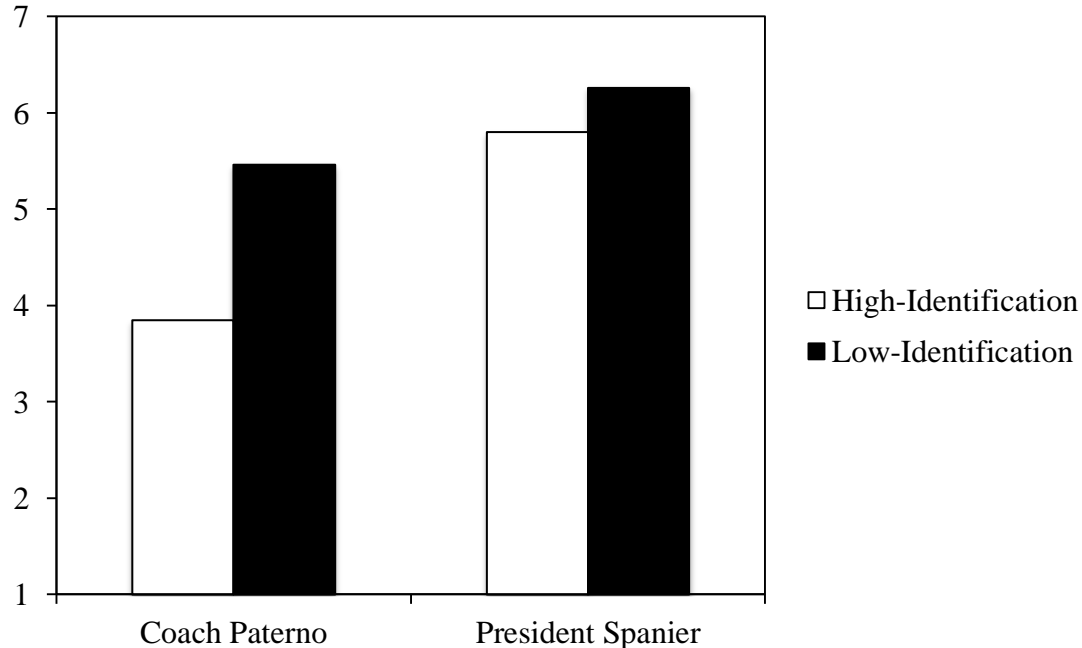
Results

A median-split was applied to the SSIS scores to create high- and low-identified groups. The high-group ($M = 32.45$, $SD = 10.76$) was more identified with the Penn State football team than the low-group ($M = 9.46$, $SD = 2.52$), $t(176) = -19.628$, $p < .001$. Confirming that two differently identified groups existed allowed the researcher to use these groups in the subsequent analyses.

To analyze the effects of identification and target (i.e., Coach Paterno or President Spanier) on the attitudes of sport fans, multiple 2 (Identification: Low, High) x 2 (Target: Paterno, Spanier) repeated-measures ANOVAs were performed. A Bonferroni correction was applied to these ANOVAs to offer a more conservative analysis and set the threshold for statistical significance at $p < .006$.

For support of firing the individual, significant main effects were found for Identification ($F(1,158) = 20.495$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .115$) and Target ($F(1,158) = 54.267$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .256$). These effects were both qualified by an Identification x Target interaction, $F(1,158) = 12.237$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .072$. Supporting Hypothesis 1, the high- and low-identified fans did not differ in their opinions about President Spanier being fired, $p = .089$, but the high-identified fans were less supportive of Coach Paterno being fired than the low-identified fans, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mean approval ratings for the firing of Paterno and Spanier based on level of identification with the football team.



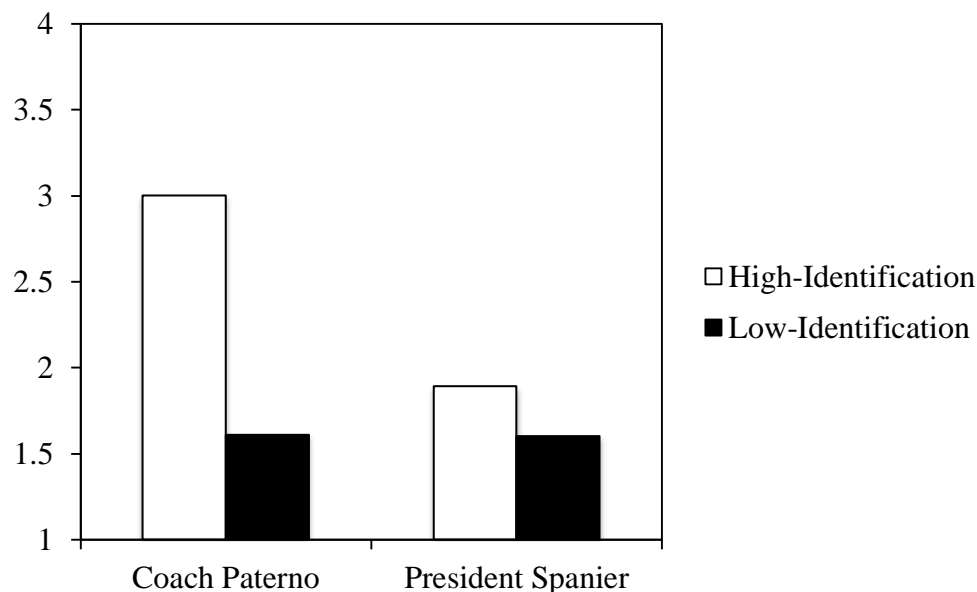
The results also supported Hypothesis 2 about the individual keeping his job. The effects of Identification ($F(1,159) = 17.545$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .099$) and Target ($F(1,159) = 48.061$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .232$) were independently significant. More importantly, a significant Identification x Target interaction was found, $F(1,159) = 10.887$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .064$. Once again, there were no

differences in support for President Spanier keeping his job between the high- ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.63$) and low-identified fans ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.23$), $p = .078$, but the high-identified fans ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 2.28$) were more supportive of Coach Paterno keeping his job than the low-identified fans ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.87$), $p < .001$.

Hypothesis 3 about responsibility and blame failed was partially supported as the effect of Target on perceived responsibility was significant, $F(1,154) = 125.062$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .448$. Participants placed more responsibility for the events at Penn State on President Spanier ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.91$) than Coach Paterno ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.51$). The effect of Identification was also significant, $F(1,154) = 7.905$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .049$. The high-identified fans ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.32$) perceived less responsibility across both President Spanier and Coach Paterno than the low-identified fans ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.54$). Similar results were found for perceived blame. Participants placed more blame for the events at Penn State on President Spanier ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.85$) than Coach Paterno ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.56$), $F(1,157) = 98.333$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .385$. Additionally, the high-identified fans ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.14$) perceived less blame for the events across both President Spanier and Coach Paterno than the low-identified fans ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.55$), $F(1,157) = 16.803$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .097$. However, the Identification x Target interactions on perceived responsibility ($F(1,154) = 0.840$, $p = .361$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$) and perceived blame ($F(1,157) = 0.713$, $p = .400$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$) were non-significant.

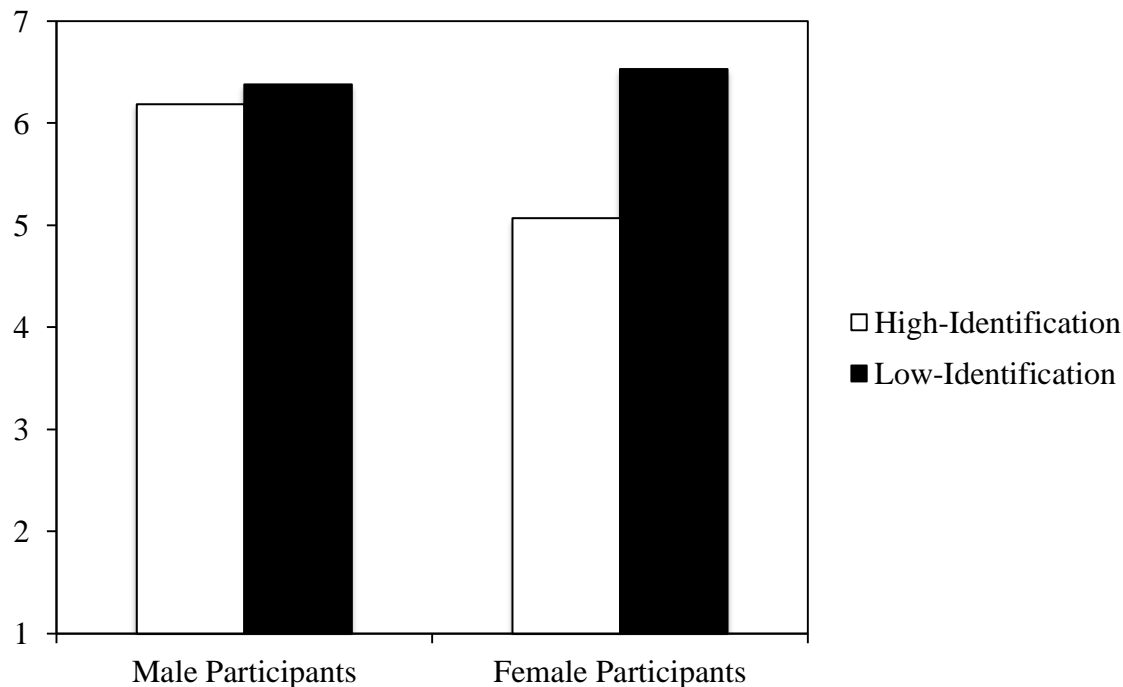
The results provided evidence in support of Hypothesis 4 about acting correctly. For the perception about acting legally correct, main effects for both Identification ($F(1,158) = 17.527$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .100$) and Target ($F(1,158) = 129.811$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .451$) were found. Importantly, these effects were qualified by a significant Identification x Target interaction, $F(1,158) = 14.923$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .086$. The high-identified ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.76$) and low-identified fans ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.67$) perceived no differences in President Spanier acting legally correct, $p = .357$, but the high-identified fans ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.93$) viewed Coach Paterno as acting more legally correct than the low-identified fans ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 2.17$), $p < .001$. For the perception about acting morally correct, main effects for both Identification ($F(1,157) = 22.544$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$) and Target ($F(1,157) = 14.249$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .083$) were found. Importantly, these effects were qualified by a significant Identification x Target interaction, $F(1,157) = 12.942$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .076$. As shown in Figure 2, the high-identified and low-identified fans perceived no differences in President Spanier acting legally correct, $p = .142$, but the high-identified fans viewed Coach Paterno as acting more legally correct than the low-identified fans, $p < .001$. Additionally, an Identification x Target interaction was found on thinking he should have done more, $F(1,158) = 8.264$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .050$. The low-identified fans ($M = 6.45$, $SD = 1.07$) perceived that Coach Paterno should have done more than the high-identified fans ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.74$), $p < .001$, while no differences were found between the low- ($M = 6.28$, $SD = 1.32$) and high-identified ($M = 6.11$, $SD = 1.52$) fans for President Spanier, $p = .357$.

Figure 2: Mean ratings for acting morally correct during the events as a function of identification level and target.



Two significant interactions involving Gender and Identification were also found for thinking that the individuals should have done more ($F(1,158) = 11.321, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .067$) and acting legally correct ($F(1,158) = 12.215, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .072$). The high and low-identified male participants did not differ in their opinions towards Coach Paterno and President Spanier doing more, $p = .591$, but the low-identified female participants believed Coach Paterno and President Spanier should have done more than the high-identified female participants, $p < .001$ (see Figure 3). A similar pattern was found for perceptions about acting legally correct. The high- ($M = 3.78, SD = 1.40$) and low-identified male participants ($M = 3.63, SD = 1.59$) were not different in their perceptions about acting legally correct, $p = .628$, but the high-identified female participants ($M = 4.03, SD = 1.46$) believed the individuals acted more legally correct than the low-identified female participants ($M = 2.30, SD = 1.22$), $p < .001$.

Figure 3: Mean ratings for the belief that Paterno and Spanier should have done more during the events based on level of identification with the football team and participant gender.



Discussion

The results provide strong evidence that identification with a sports team influenced sport fans' perceptions of the Penn State case. Three of the four hypotheses (1, 2, and 4) were fully supported as the high-identified participants indicated less support for the firing, more support for keeping the job, and more support for acting legally and morally correctly for Coach Paterno than for President Spanier compared to the low-identified participants. Participants might be engaging in psychological processes as a means to maintain their positive feelings about being fans of the team (Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Tesser, 2000). In the face of the scandal, the high-identified fans sought out a means to protect the person closest to the football program (i.e., Coach Paterno) and their affiliated social identity by providing more support and believing he acted more morally and legally correctly during the scandal than a person not directly tied to the football program (i.e., President Spanier) than the low-identified fans. Interestingly, the participants placed more blame and responsibility on President Spanier than on Coach Paterno, and this finding partially supported Hypothesis 3. While it is reasonable that the hierarchy of status, power, and responsibility should place the president of a university above a football coach and, thus, place more blame and responsibility on him, one has to wonder why the high-identified fans perceived less blame and responsibility for both Coach Paterno and President Spanier than the low-identified fans. The combination of these findings provides further evidence of sport fans engaging in psychological approaches to still feel good about their team and the coach (results from Hypotheses 1, 2, and 4), as well as the university (results from Hypothesis 3).

Previous research demonstrates that sport fans gain a sense of social psychological health via this affiliation with the team (Wann, 2006) and that people act in ways to validate themselves and their self-worth in contexts in which they are invested (Crocker & Park, 2004). Crocker and Park discussed how people react to threats in their invested domains in relation to the anxiety they might feel and their perceptions of belongingness. Thus, people will act in ways, with regards to their threatened social identity, to reduce anxiety and address their feelings of belongingness via psychological processes. Houck (2012) alluded to this idea of wanting to believe Coach Paterno and to protect him. The responses from the high-identified fans do just this as they acted in ways to protect the target to whom they were more psychologically connected (i.e., Coach Paterno), which allows them to maintain good feelings about the target as well as their affiliation with the larger group (i.e., Penn State University or its football team). The recent release of the "Paterno Report" (Sollers et al., 2013) by the Paterno family shows a remarkable approach to re-address the scandal but, more importantly and germane to this research, a direct method to reduce anxiety caused by this social identity and connection. Sollers and colleagues argue that a rush to judgment led to the firing of Coach Paterno based on glaring errors and unsubstantiated evidence. While the truth may never be known about what Coach Paterno knew and when, the effort by family members (and Penn State football fans) to preserve their memories about Coach Paterno – what he accomplished and represented – is understood even more thoroughly from this psychological perspective.

An additional method of explanation for these differences between the high- and low-identified fans can be found in the shifting standards model (Biernat, 2003; Biernat, Manis, & Nelson, 1991). The shifting standards model proposes that we perceive people differently based on group membership and the standard used for comparison. In reference to the Penn State case, the high-identified fans would view Coach Paterno as an ingroup member and President Spanier as an outgroup members. Therefore, the different group memberships would allow fans to alter the standards for judging the appropriateness of the Coach's or President's actions. As such, the perceptions of acting both morally and legally correctly might be influenced by sport fan status as well as by the simple position of the target (i.e., president or coach). The findings demonstrate that only the high-identified fans perceived the coach as more morally and legally correctly during the case than the president, which shows that fans are using different standards for assessing appropriate actions as a function of their social identification as a sport fan. The argument that the target's position is the reason for the change in perceptions would only be true if all fans, regardless of identification level, reported these same moral and legal perceptions and the data show this was not true.

Two unexpected findings with regards to participant gender were also found. The low-identified female participants felt that Coach Paterno and President Spanier should have done more and acted less legally correctly compared to the high-identified female participants, while no differences were found between the high- and low-identified male participants. An examination of the group means shows that the low-identified female participants were the outlier of the four groups, and that the low-identified male participants were similar in perceptions to the high-identified male and female participants. Therefore, it seems that the low-identified female participants were simply not as invested in Penn State football and provided a rather unique perspective on the case compared to the other groups.

The results from this investigation validate the concern that sport fans' identification with a sport team impacted their perceptions about a scandal. Furthermore, these results show that high-identified fans might be using psychological processes to maintain self-esteem due to this

group membership and to reduce anxiety when their group is threatened. These results may be viewed a bit cautiously as the participants in this study were a convenience and snowball sample contacted by the researcher. It is possible that other sport fans, including those outside of the state of Pennsylvania, might have different views of these events. However and based on these findings, it seems reasonable to speculate that additional sport fans without an allegiance to Penn State football and Coach Paterno (i.e., those not in Pennsylvania) might have more severe perceptions about the scandal compared to those who participated in the study.

As the only data, to the knowledge of this author, that has examined sport fan perceptions of the Penn State case, this study provides valuable insight into the psychological mechanisms that may impact sport fans as they continue to think about, discuss, and understand the scandal at Penn State. How might their social identification as a fan of Penn State football affect their assessment of the sanctions handed down by the NCAA? How might their social identification influence their feelings about the balance of academics and athletics on our college campuses? Research in-progress is attempting to answer these questions and provide further evidence of how social identification with a sports team impacts our judgments.

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