Does Fandom Have a Dark Side? Exploring the Development of Collectively Narcissistic Sport Fandom

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Highly identified fans have long been shown to display more behavioral consistency than those low or moderate on team identification. This is perhaps best illustrated by their greater propensity to attend games, watch on television, and purchase merchandise (Wann et al., 2001). As such, a growing body of research has been dedicated to the examination of how team identification develops (e.g., Kolbe & James, 2000; Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012). While this work has served to elucidate the age at which children are capable of forming a psychological commitment to a team (James, 2001), instrumental socializing agents in the development of fandom (Kolbe & James, 2000), and behavioral manifestations of developing team identification (Lock et al., 2012), the work has generally defaulted to the notion that identification develops in a positive and healthy manner. However, as evidenced by the dysfunctional fan behavior discussed by Wakefield and Wann (2006)—behavior we argue is rooted in a construct called collective narcissism—it is clear that positive and healthy attachment is not always a given. Collective narcissism is an exaggerated and insecure collective self-esteem that produces an inflated and grandiose image of an ingroup (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Collective narcissists believe others simply do not understand the greatness of their ingroup and thus are extremely vulnerable to criticism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Identification of this kind is marked by an unwillingness to forget past slights, both real and merely perceived, as well as aggressive responses to such perceived attacks. Anecdotally, sports fans have long displayed the delusional perspective and hypersensitivity to criticism characteristic of collective narcissism. While scholars have been quick to address the factors influencing the development of positive team attachments in recent years, the factors underlying the development of collective narcissism remain a mystery. As such, the purpose of this study is to explore how collective narcissism develops. We do so by drawing on theory and literature related to the development of team identification, organization narcissism, and the development of a narcissistic personality at the individual level. Using these theories to inform our work, we conduct semi-structured interviews with both collectively narcissistic and mere highly identified fans as a means of comparing and contrasting the roots of these distinct forms of attachment.

Theoretical Framework

Early work on the development of team identification recognized environmental causes, such as socializing agents (e.g., fathers and coaches), that are instrumental in the initial formation of sport fandom (James, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000). Kolbe and James (2001) suggested this typically occurs between the ages of six and 15, with fathers and coaches the most influential agents in the development of fandom. In addition, organizational characteristics, team success, and player attributes (e.g., attractiveness and similarity) have been identified as team-related causes of team identification (Lock et al., 2012; Wann, 2006). While these environmental factors may indeed foster movement along a psychological commitment continuum, much of the initial attraction to a sport team may be rooted in psychological factors (Park, Mahony, & Kim, 2011; Wann, 2006). Park et al. (2011) conceptualized the notion of curiosity as an initial attraction mechanism for sport. Team identification has also been shown to stem from the psychological need for belonging and affiliation.

In discussing the motivational roots of team identification, Wann (2006) stated that fans are sometimes motivated to view their ingroup as distinct from outgroups and that in some cases this desire can even supersed the desire for a positive group image. Collective narcissism is a term used to describe an “individual’s emotional investment in an unrealistic belief in the exaggerated greatness of an in-group” (Golec de Zavala, 2011, p. 310). In other words, collective narcissists possess a highly persistent belief that their ingroup is special and thus deserves preferential treatment. Cichocka et al. (2015) explained that collective narcissism is likely to foster heightened degrees of collective paranoia, a feeling Kramer and colleagues (e.g., Kramer, 1998; Kramer & Jost, 2003; Kramer & Messick,
1998) argued is associated with the categorization of oneself as a member of a distinct social group that is constantly scrutinized (Cichocka et al., 2015). Therefore, it is plausible that collective narcissism may be particularly likely to develop in fans that identify with the team for the desire to be part of a distinct group.

According to Heere and James (2007), fans often consider themselves to be organizational members of the sport team(s) they support. This is potentially significant for the development of collective narcissism given that organizations can adopt collectively narcissistic identities that yield unethical behavior (Duchon & Drake, 2009). Like individuals, organizations, too, have a need for self-esteem and this can lead to the institutionalization of an extreme narcissistic identity (Brown, 1997; Duchon & Drake, 2009). Enron has been used as a classic example of such a phenomenon in scholarly work. While often rooted in the higher levels of an organization’s hierarchy, such a narcissistic identity can be passed down to organizational members at all levels through an organization’s culture (Duchon & Drake, 2009; Schein, 1992).

Therefore, a fan’s collective narcissism could perhaps develop via a trickle-down effect stemming from the team itself.

Lastly, Golec de Zavala et al. (2009) explained that individual narcissism and collective narcissism are distinct but related variables. That is, one may be narcissistic at the individual but not collective level or vice versa; however, in some cases, an individual may simply have a narcissistic personality by nature, which extends to their identification with ingroups. Therefore, collective narcissism could develop in this way as well.

Proposed Methodology and Expected Contribution
To explore the development of collective narcissism, semi-structured interviews are being conducted with both collectively narcissistic and non-narcissistic but highly identified fans. To understand the differences between the development of collective narcissism and positive team identification, results will be compared and contrasted between groups. Our participants are individuals initially recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to take part in a separate but related study containing Kwon et al.’s (2005) attachment to team scale as well as Golec de Zavala et al.’s (2009) collective narcissism scale, both of which have been deemed valid and reliable. The survey also contained a spot for participants to provide an email address at which they could be contacted to take part in a follow-up interview. Those scoring above the midpoint on collective narcissism have been contacted to participate in the interviews for the collective narcissist group, while those scoring above the midpoint on team identification but below the midpoint on collective narcissism have been contacted to participate in the interviews for the non-narcissist group. Those at the extremes have been contacted first in each case and all individuals will be responding to the same questions. Interviews are ongoing, but we intend to interview at least 15 individuals for each group. Through this research, we aim to extend the literature on collective narcissism—both in general and as it relates to sport fandom—by illuminating the roots of collective narcissism and how identification of this nature may form and develop. In addition, we seek to extend the literature on the development of team identification by uncovering factors that could influence individuals to identify in a much different manner.