

National Identity and Athletes' Success Pride Internationally- A Review

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Abstract: *Grounded in social-identity and self-categorization theories and drawing on data gathered in the US General Social Survey (N = 2528), this research examines how demographic and media use measures associate with national pride, as experienced through the success of US athletes competing internationally. Bivariate tests and analysis of covariance models indicated greater levels of national pride among black males, older respondents, those who classified themselves as republicans and those with lower levels of formal education. Exposure to newspapers and television did not prove statistically significant in multivariate analyses, although bivariate tests revealed that those exposed most frequently to television tended to agree in significantly higher numbers with the statement 'When my country does well in international sports, it makes me proud to be an American.' Review and some comparisons to domestic athletes' pride taking as well as limitations and recommendations for future research are offered.*

Keywords: national pride, identity, media, athletes, success

1. Introduction

Like many other countries, the Dutch government increased investments in elite sports in the last decennium, partly driven by the ambition to organize the Olympic Games in 2028 in the Netherlands. One of the most important legitimating for this ambition is that elite sports events and national achievements should foster national pride, social cohesion and international prestige. In the article by Agnes Elling, Ivo Van Hilvoorde, Remko Van Den Dool there were presented and discussed the results of a study on the relationship between Dutch international sport achievements and the development of national pride. The outcome is based on 27 longitudinal measurements among the adult Dutch population in the years 2008–2010 in which European and world Championships men's soccer and a summer and winter Olympic Games took place. The results support the common belief that international sporting success of Dutch athletes contributes to the testimony and expression of national pride and belonging. However, the extent to which national pride can be increased by national sporting success seems to be rather limited. The data show that national performances in international sport events may lead to small, short-term eruptions in feelings of national sporting pride and well-being, especially among athletes, men and non-immigrants. However, the results indicate that national pride is a rather stable characteristic of national identification that cannot easily be increased by improving national sporting success and winning more Olympic medals. Creating or awakening national pride through sporting success: A longitudinal study on macro effects in the Netherlands, Agnes Elling, Ivo Van Hilvoorde, Remko Van Den Dool. (International Review for the Sociology of sport, 2012).

As well as being a growing academic literature, SWB is now firmly on the public policy agenda. Likewise, the sports industry is viewed as being of growing economic significance, reflected in its promotion in public policy. This paper explores the impact of engagement with sports on individual subjective well-being (SWB) for a sample of 34

countries. Engagement with sports is defined to include formal and informal participation, as well as attendance at sports events. It is hypothesized that one dimension of SWB associated with sports by individuals in a country is the pride felt by them as a result of international sports success. To provide a robust account of the determinants of these dimensions of SWB a variety of estimators are employed that also account for any feedback between them. Account is also taken of different country level effects on the impacts. Controlling for standard covariates associated with SWB the results suggest that all forms of sports engagement enhance SWB. However, it is suggested that there is also an indirect impact of pride felt from international sporting success on SWB. Crucially, these effects are, in part, determined by formal participation in sport, or attendance at sport events but not informal participation. Further, there is some evidence that pride has a strong country-level dimension. A further interesting policy dilemma raised by the research is that passive engagement at sports is more likely to raise SWB. (Tim Pawlowski, Paul Downward and Simona Rasciute Sport Management Review 08/2013)

More specifically the following pattern of results can be established. For the socioeconomic covariates a quadratic effect of age is identified on happiness, as noted in the literature. A similar effect is identified for pride. In contrast, the results suggest that generally females are happier, yet males experience greater pride from international sporting success. This is perhaps not surprising since it is recognized that males participate more in sport, and make up more of its audience (Downward et al. 2009). As also indicated in the literature, greater household size and being a couple, rather than being widowed, divorced or separated contributes to happiness.

In contrast and perhaps not surprisingly given the comments just made, being single or separated is more likely to contribute to pride from international sporting success. Further, in general, work status other than being unemployed or ill and unable to work contributes to happiness as does education and income. The opposite is the case for pride

from international sporting success. This would seem to suggest that the pride from sporting success can help to offset economic and social disadvantage. As far as the key sporting covariates are concerned the main results are robust to specification and suggest that all forms of sporting engagement contribute to SWB, suggesting that this impact is greater the more frequent the sporting activity.

Social-identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) suggests that a human tendency to categorize with a need to maintain positive self-esteem leads individuals to perceive themselves as members of certain social groups. The model claims members of in-groups will stress their similarities relative to out-groups, belongingness helping to neutralize insecurity and bolster esteem. Thus, when a nation sends its best athletes to compete in the Olympics, the Tour de France or the World Cup, individuals within a given country will generally support those who represent the 'in-group' internationally. When an athlete or a team excels, the entire nation may share in the victory, with mass media engaging in nationalistic news coverage (Bairner, 2001; Butterworth, 2010; Hargreaves, 1992; Lee and Maguire, 2009; Tomlinson, 1996; Tomlinson and Whannel, 1986).

Consistent with social-identity theory, news organizations may become especially nationalistic, or overtly biased, when a country, through elite sports competition, comes under attack. As an example, Denham (2004) studied how US and international news organizations reported revelations in 2003 that famed Olympian Carl Lewis had failed a drug test prior to the 1988 US Olympic trials. While US news organizations largely ignored the story, international outlets offered intense criticism not only of Lewis, but of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC). Linking the news with the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, international observers charged that the United States had played by its own set of rules for too long, and that Lewis deserved to lose the medals he had won in 1988. Similarly, Denham and Duke (2010) studied US and international press coverage of cyclist Lance Armstrong and US media outlets, in general, did not criticize Armstrong to the extent that international news organizations did (Billings and Tambosi, 2004; Delgado, 2003; Denham and Desormeaux, 2008).

The current study shifts the conversation from *between* groups to *within* them. Drawing on US survey data, the study examines determinants of pride in the performance success of US athletes competing internationally, exploring the extent to which measures such as sex, race, age, education level and political leanings predict nationalistic sentiment. The study also examines the respective roles of newspaper and television exposure in the formation of attitudes, anticipating that media users will tend to express more nationalistic sentiment than those not exposed to mass media, given the aforementioned research on nationalistic news coverage.

That observation identifies the importance of studying the subordinate, or interpersonal, level of self-categorization, as it pertains to variation *within* an in-group, as opposed to variation *between* in-groups and out-groups. Writing about global sport, Maguire (1999) posited that individuals who live in complex nation-states may structure identities at the

local, regional, national and international levels, with individuals self-classifying based on factors such as status and prestige. When advantageous, individuals may stress their membership in a certain group, just as they may discount that membership in a different context.

For purposes of the current study, in-group variation might be understood along demographic lines. Because American males, for instance, have traditionally been more involved as both participants and sport spectators, they might express more nationalistic pride in the performances of US athletes than American females will. Televised sports, in particular, focus largely on male athletic competition, and Whannel (2002: 67) posited that 'For many men, sport provides a bounded universe, part real, part fantasy, in which fantasies of the perfection of performance can be realized.'

Regarding education level, those with higher levels of formal education might be comparably reluctant to agree with a categorical statement about pride in athletic performance success, perhaps being more willing to scrutinize the efforts of US athletes in relation to those from other nations. Additionally, those who indicate greater levels of political conservatism might be expected to score higher on measures that relate to patriotism. In the United States, those with conservative political beliefs often consider themselves republicans, while those with more liberal, or progressive, beliefs tend to identify with the democrats.

Older Americans might express greater levels of national pride in the performance success of US athletes, as much of their political socialization will have occurred during the Cold War, when athletic competition symbolized East/West political rivalries. Finally, the study anticipates that individuals who report higher levels of media exposure will tend to express more pride in the performance success of US athletes competing internationally. Seminal research conducted by sociologists Gans (1979) and Tuchman (1978) identified ethnocentric patterns in the construction and dissemination of news, and in the context of sport, media outlets in the United States seek to construct rivalries in order to develop compelling news narratives. Television, which packages sporting competitions for mass audiences adds to the drama through visual symbols (e.g., Olympic medal winners singing their respective national anthems or taking victory laps while waving a national flag).

2. Methods

2.1 Sample

This study drew on data gathered in the US General Social Survey (GSS), an ongoing research initiative administered by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. In the cumulative GSS data file (1972–2008), items measuring pride in the performance success of US athletes appeared twice, in the Olympic years 1996 and 2004. The 1996 data included 2904 total cases and the 2004 dataset included 2812. While all respondents were not asked about pride in athletic performance success, the number of 1996 respondents ($N = 1331$) combined with those from 2004 ($N =$

1197) resulted in a representative sample of 2528 individuals.

2.2 Dependent measure

In the current study, the following Likert measure served as a dependent variable: 'When my country does well in international sports, it makes me proud to be an American.' Response options included 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'undecided', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. This step allowed bivariate relationships to be tested with chi-square analysis. Figure 1 illustrates data dispersions for 1996 and 2004 – public opinion appeared consistent across the two periods, with approximately three in four respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Given its centrality as the dependent measure, the national pride variable served as a filter for all other variables.

2.3 Independent measures

2.3.1 Personal characteristics

This study included five demographic items, including sex, race, education level, age and political party identification. Age formed a continuous measure, beginning at 18 and concluding with 89 or older ($M = 44.96$, $SD = 16.48$). In addition to the male/female sex variable, race included three categories – white, black and other race – as coded by the GSS. Education level indicated the highest degree earned, including no high-school diploma, high-school diploma, degree from a junior college, undergraduate degree, or a graduate degree. Lastly, an item asked respondents to place their political affiliations on a continuum, including the following seven categories: 'Strong democrat', 'not very strong democrat', 'independent, close to democrat', 'independent', 'independent, close to republican', 'not very strong republican', and 'strong republican'. As indicated, individuals with conservative beliefs often identify themselves as republicans, while those with more liberal, or progressive, beliefs tend to align themselves with the democrats.

2.3.2 Media exposure

In the current study, two variables measured the extent to which respondents were exposed to newspapers and television, respectively. The GSS asked respondents to indicate whether they read the newspaper 'every day', 'a few times a week', 'once a week', 'less than once a week', or 'never'. Television exposure formed a continuous measure, asking respondents to indicate the number of hours per day they watched TV, beginning at zero and ending with 24.

2.4 Analytic strategy

2.4.1 Bivariate analyses

After examining initial frequencies for all variables, the present study explored relationships between nominal and ordinal explanatory measures and the four-level ordered dependent measure through cross-tabulation and chi-square analysis, reporting coefficients of correlation for significant bivariate tests. For cross-tabulations that contained nominal explanatory measures, the study reports the value of Cramer's V. Cross-tabulations containing two ordered variables used Kendall's tau as a measure of association, in

addition to chi-square analysis. All bivariate tests contained original frequencies.

2.4.2 Multivariate analyses

In addition to bivariate tests, the study also used analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) procedures to investigate statistical relationships. ANCOVA procedures test the effects of both categorical factors and continuous-level covariates on one continuous-level – in this case, quasi-interval – response variable.² To keep modeling procedures systematic, an initial ANCOVA procedure included two categorical factors, year and sex, and one continuous covariate, age. Measures were then added incrementally, with ascending models displayed in table form. In addition to examining the entire dataset with ANCOVA procedures, the study also examined male and female data subsets independently, based on sex differences identified in the initial ANCOVA models. Full factorial models were examined prior to those indicating main effects, and equality of variance assumptions were tested and met in every case except one.

3. Results

3.1 Bivariate Analyses

The two nominal explanatory measures, sex and race, did not show statistical significance in chi-square tests. While a higher percentage of male respondents agreed with the statement regarding pride in athletic performance success, the relationship did not exceed chance ($\chi^2 = 5.624$; d.f. = 3; $n = 2528$; $p = ns$). Similarly, while black respondents agreed in higher numbers than did white respondents and members of other races, the cross-tabulation did not show significance ($\chi^2 = 6.233$; d.f. = 6; $n = 2,528$; $p = ns$).

Moving to education, the cross-tabulation of education level by pride in sporting success proved statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 34.461$; d.f. = 12; $n = 2527$; $p < .01$), yielding a Kendall's tau value of .088 ($p < .001$). While 44 percent of those who had not obtained a high-school diploma strongly agreed with the statement about sporting success, 29.4 percent of undergraduate degree holders and 29.7 percent of those with graduate degrees offered the same response. When the dataset was split by sex, 47.6 percent of male respondents without a high-school diploma strongly agreed, compared to 30.3 percent of those with an undergraduate degree and 27.5 percent of those who had completed graduate school ($\chi^2 = 34.245$; d.f. = 12; $n = 1114$; $p < .001$). The Kendall's tau value for males, at .111, showed significance at $p < .001$. For female respondents, patterns were less pronounced and not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 15.476$; d.f. = 12; $n = 1413$; $p = ns$).

The overall cross-tabulation of political party affiliation by pride in sporting success showed significance ($\chi^2 = 76.352$; d.f. = 18; $n = 2490$; $p < .001$) and yielded a Kendall's tau value of $-.042$ ($p < .001$). Here, 45.3 percent of those who identified themselves as strong republicans strongly agreed with the sporting success dependent measure, compared to 36.4 percent of strong democrats and 31.1 percent of independents. These differences proved significant among males ($\chi^2 = 35.707$; d.f. = 18; $n = 1101$; $p < .01$) and females ($\chi^2 = 55.613$; d.f. = 18; $n = 1389$; $p < .001$), although

Kendall's tau showed significance only among female respondents (Kendall's tau = $-.051$; $n = 1,389$; $p < .05$). Thus, while education level appeared significant among males, political affiliation appeared more important, statistically, among females.

Finally, regarding demographic measures, a significant inverse correlation appeared between age and the four-level dependent measure (Kendall's tau = $-.088$; $n = 2523$; $p < .01$), indicating that older respondents expressed greater pride in the athletic performance success of US athletes. This pattern held for both males (Kendall's tau = $-.069$; $n = 1113$; $p < .01$) and females (Kendall's tau = $-.100$; $n = 1410$; $p < .01$).

Regarding mass media, for reasons indicated earlier, bivariate tests included data from 1996 only. First, a cross-tabulation of newspaper exposure by pride in athletic performance success did not show significance ($\chi^2 = 15.894$; d.f. = 12; $n = 906$; $p = ns$). Notably, those not exposed to newspaper content and those exposed everyday agreed in higher numbers with the statement about athletic success than did those who indicated more sporadic exposure. While similar patterns held for male and female respondents when the dataset was split by sex, neither males ($\chi^2 = 19.335$; d.f. = 12; $n = 390$; $p = ns$) nor females ($\chi^2 = 17.946$; d.f. = 12; $n = 516$; $p = ns$) differed significantly. Concerning television, a cross-tabulation of television exposure and athletic performance success contained a series of zero-count cells, and thus chi-square statistics were not interpreted. Nevertheless, the table revealed a clear pattern of exposure to television and pride in athletic performance success, with those who viewed more television expressing greater levels of pride (Kendall's tau = $-.147$; $n = 902$; $p < .01$). These patterns held for males (Kendall's tau = $-.158$; $n = 389$; $p < .01$) and females (Kendall's tau = $-.142$; $n = 513$; $p < .01$). Overall, then, bivariate analyses indicated that older respondents, those with lower levels of formal education, those who identified with the more conservative republican political party, and those who watched more television tended to express greater levels of pride in the performance success of US athletes competing internationally.

3.2 Multivariate analyses

There are six ANCOVA models, the first of which tested the effects of survey-year, sex and age on the dependent measure addressing national pride. As the model indicates, while no differences were observed across 1996 and 2004, males experienced significantly higher levels of national pride through the sporting accomplishments of American athletes, as did older respondents more generally. Because the Likert item incorporated as the dependent measure began with 'strongly agree' and 'agree', which were scored '1' and '2', respectively, negative parameter estimates for males and older respondents appear in the table (e.g. the older the respondent, the lower the attitudinal score).

The second model included race in addition to year, sex and age. As indicated, black respondents appeared to experience greater levels of national pride through the performance success of American athletes, with gender and age remaining significant as well. In the third model, political affiliation

served as a second covariate, and it revealed greater levels of national pride among those who identified themselves as republicans along the seven-point continuum. Race and age remained significant, with sex moving to $p < .06$.

Model 4 included education level in addition to the explanatory measures from the first three models. As indicated, level of education showed significance as a predictor, with college and graduate education associating with (relatively) lower levels of national pride in athletic performance success. Sex, race, age and political leanings remained significant as well. The final two ANCOVA models which included newspaper and television exposure, respectively, did not show significance, although the inclusion of television resulted in a loss of statistical difference across the two sexes and among black respondents.

4. Conclusion

In demonstrating how self-categorization applies to identity dynamics in the context of sport, one might consider how the quantitative results in the current study differ from intuitive, or casual, assumptions in identity politics. In the United States, for instance, President Barack Obama, an African American democrat, captured 95 percent of the black vote in the 2008 Presidential Election. In fact, black voters have consistently supported democrats since 1932 (Caraley, 2009), considering the democrats more progressive on both social and economic issues. Yet, in the present study, black males, in particular, expressed attitudes similar to those expressed by the most conservative GSS respondents – those who considered themselves strong republicans. One proceeding from intuition alone might have expected white males – not black males – to express higher levels of national pride; however, if one considers a fundamental premise of the self-categorization model – that individuals accentuate intragroup memberships when doing so enhances status or prestige – then the statistical findings appear plausible, if not probable. African American athletes have long excelled internationally, and while admiration of athletic accomplishment is by no means limited to one race, African Americans might experience a heightened sense of national pride in an athletic context. More specifically, African American males might experience a heightened sense of pride in the accomplishments of black male athletes.

Overall, female respondents expressed less agreement with the statement about pride in athletic performance success, conceivably because, in the aggregate, females do not follow sports as closely nor become as personally involved in athletics and sport spectatorship as males do. As statistical analyses revealed, female respondents did not differ attitudinally across race, and while education level proved highly significant as a covariate in analyses involving male respondents, political affiliation, as measured along a seven-point continuum, appeared more significant as a covariate among females. Regarding mass media, although limited, the bivariate findings concerning television exposure and pride in athletic performance success moved in the direction anticipated; that is, those who watched more television expressed greater levels of pride. Television broadcasts of events such as the Olympics, the World Cup and the Tour de

France tend to heroify American athletes, as do the many advertisements that accompany the broadcasts. In contrast to television, newspaper exposure showed a bimodal distribution, with those exposed everyday and those who never read the newspaper expressing more nationalistic attitudes. Respondents in the two categories may have expressed the same sentiment for qualitatively different reasons, with newspaper readers exposed to more nationalistic and ethnocentric press coverage and those not exposed to the newspaper drawing on personal dispositions.

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