Sports & Social Identity Theory

Why do people cheer for their sports teams? The answer is not as simple as you would think. Psychologists have found that following a team is psychologically healthy for people. This developed from research carried out by Henri Tajfel, who studied how people relate to certain groups and form identities. Tajfel developed the social identity theory, which suggests that people form part of their own identity by associating themselves with part of larger groups. This could be a nation, an ethnicity, and even a sports team.

Tajfel’s studies suggest that the associations that people make are not just random. They identify with larger groups in a way that maximizes their own positive identity, which helps to build self-esteem and confidence. For example, if someone identifies with a local team, they are not only happier when the team wins but they also feel better about themselves as part of the group. This boost in self-confidence is surprising since the person who just identifies as a fan of a certain sports team has little to do with its success or the outcome of a game. This phenomenon is called “basking in reflected glory” by social psychologists. It also explains why people feel better about themselves because they share a hometown with a famous person or when their child performs well on a test. It seems people are quick to share the positive feeling that comes with success even when they have nothing to do with it.

When it comes to failure, however, social psychologists have discovered that people are quick to distance themselves from it. To preserve their own self-esteem, people who identify with larger groups that fail will employ a number of different strategies called CORF (“Cutting Off of Reflected Failure). They will usually try to blame external factors on the failure of the group. For example, they may blame a referee for making unfair calls against their team. They may also change the language they use in order to distance themselves from the team. When their team wins, for example, they tend to say, “We won” but when their team loses, fans will usually say, “They lost.” They may also resort to criticizing not only the other team but also wider aspects of the other group. A fan whose team loses at the Olympics to another country may therefore point to political or social problems happening in the other country.
1. According to the article, who discovered that supporting a team is healthy for the human mind?
   a) physicists
   b) pessimists
   c) psychologists
   d) physiotherapists

2. The phrase “carried out” in paragraph 1 is closest in meaning to:
   a) brought
   b) performed
   c) ignored
   d) remained

3. According to the article, what is social identity theory?
   a) A theory suggesting that rivalry amongst nations is psychologically unhealthy for people
   b) A theory suggesting that people should not support sports teams because it is dangerous
   c) A theory suggesting people shape part of their own identity by affiliating with a larger group
   d) A theory suggesting people shape part of their own identity by distancing themselves from a group

4. The word “boost” in paragraph 2 is closest in meaning to:
   a) decline
   b) praise
   c) break
   d) increase

5. The word “it” in paragraph 2 refers to:
   a) the success
   b) the failure
   c) a good test result
   d) the positive feeling

6. What can be implied from the “basking in reflected glory” phenomenon?
   a) people are more likely to enjoy their own local team’s success
   b) people are more likely to enjoy other team’s successes
   c) people will do well on a test if their own local team is successful
   d) people are more likely to support a team from another area

7. According to the article, which of the following is an example of CORF?
   a) blaming themselves for the failure of the group
   b) starting to support a new team after each failure
   c) blaming something else for the failure of the group
   d) supporting multiple teams in order to not experience failure

8. According to the article, why would some fans say “They lost” when their team loses?
   a) because they often don’t understand the rules
   b) because they enjoy criticizing other groups
   c) because it is a strategy to preserve self-esteem
   d) because they don’t understand how to speak English

9. The word “unfair” in paragraph 3 could be replaced with:
   a) biased
   b) based
   c) decent
   d) partial

10. Paragraph 3 is about:
    a) how people turn against their team when it fails
    b) how people distance themselves from group failures
    c) how people distance themselves from group successes
    d) how people blame themselves for the failure of the group

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