

The appeal of the underdog

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In a series of studies, researchers Joseph A. Vandello, Nadav P. Goldschmied, and David A. R. Richards (of the University of South Florida) tested the scope of people's support for those who are expected to lose, seeking to understand why people are drawn to the Rocky Balboas and the Davids (versus Goliaths) of the world.

Using both sports and political examples, the researchers asked study participants to react to various scenarios presenting different competitors with an advantage or disadvantage.

For instance, in one study using the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, the participants were given the same essay about the history of the area, but with different maps to reference – one showing Palestine as smaller than Israel (and thus, the underdog) and the other showing Israel as smaller. No matter what scenario the participants were presented with, they consistently favored the underdog to win.

Why do people support underdogs and find them so appealing? The researchers propose that those who are viewed as disadvantaged arouse people's sense of fairness and justice – important principles to most people. The researchers also found that people tend to believe that underdogs put forth more effort than top-dogs, but that favorable evaluation disappeared when the underdog status no longer applies, such as when people are expected to lose but have a lot of available resources.

Source: SAGE Publications

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