

Downs as well as the ups of a football club's fortunes build fans' loyalty

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Why do football fans feel so passionate about their team even if it is languishing at the bottom of the league and why is such loyalty so deeply entrenched? New research by the University of Oxford could provide the answer.

Anthropologists have discovered that intense experiences of crucial wins and losses shared with fellow fans bind them more tightly to one another and their club. Painful losses or big wins can be so intensely felt that they are perceived as 'self-shaping' experiences, meaning they become embedded in the psyche of a football fan so that their own personal identity fuses with that of their club. Over time, such shared experiences are likely to further increase their loyalty to their team, says the paper, published in the scientific journal, *PLOS ONE*.

The research suggests that really negative experiences, such as humiliating relegations, are just as important as shared feelings of euphoria for producing this self-shaping mechanism. Around 150 supporters who followed a range of different performing teams from across the UK's football leagues were involved in the online survey. Participants rated their feelings towards their football team and how strongly they identified with it. To measure fusion with club, respondents were invited to endorse the following statements on a 7-point scale: 'I am one with my club', 'I have a deep emotional bond with my club'; 'I'd do more for my club than any other fan would', and 'My club makes me strong'.

Lead author Martha Newson, from the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology at the University of Oxford, said: 'Leicester City Football Club is a good example of where you might find deeply loyal fans. Together the fans have been on a journey where for many years the team didn't get the results, then the club's fortunes soared, culminating in them celebrating the Premiership title last season. Our research suggests it is the intensity of emotion that counts, so their history of shared painful losses is as important as the joy of winning the league in creating "self-shaping" experiences. These experiences lead fans to fuse their own identity with that of their club and fellow supporters.'

Previously published work by Oxford University shows that identity fusion also occurs between fighters in military units and victims of shared [traumatic events](#) such as the Boston Marathon bombings in April 2013. In the latter, the important part of the process leading to fusion was whether an individual reflected on the shared experience afterwards. This latest research paper comments that whatever mechanism leads to identity fusion, it produces an extraordinary mentality where members feel a unique responsibility to defend their psychological kin at any cost.

Co-author Professor Harvey Whitehouse, Director of the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology at the University of Oxford, said: 'We find that deeply unpleasant, painful shared memories can strengthen ties rather than breaking them. This has relevance for policymakers, for example, fighters in Syria experiencing the horrors of a bombing campaign may be bound together by these traumatic events. A similar mechanism might be responsible for creating ties between gang members who have shared violent experiences. We hope further research can shed light on how self-shaping mechanisms can be harnessed to produce more positive outcomes. The reverse might also be possible – that is it may be possible to "de-fuse" individuals whose love of the group leads acts of terrorism or possibly, in the case of a few

[football fans](#), fighting on the terraces.'

More information: Martha Newson et al. Explaining Lifelong Loyalty: The Role of Identity Fusion and Self-Shaping Group Events, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0160427](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0160427)

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