England (dis)United in Rio 2014?

On June 12th the Football World Cup kicks off in Brazil. The event is expected to be watched by upwards of 700 million people and to generate revenue of approximately £6.5 billion for Brazil. The World Cup is a global event like no other. It engages and brings individuals together on a national and global scale. For psychologists the World Cup provides a window to many psychological phenomena – not least the ability of players from rival clubs to come together for a brief period and unite towards a common goal – success in a global tournament. At first glance this would seem a non-issue. For the players it seems it is much harder. Even Gary Neville, who won 85 caps for England and is now part of the coaching team said: “I regard myself as patriotic but, truth be told, playing for England was a bonus. Winning for my club was always the most important thing, and given a straight choice of a European Cup with United or a European Championship with England, it’s United every time.” Social identity theory explains why within the unique context of a Football World Cup bringing players together is a challenge, but a challenge that can be overcome.

The nine club identities that make up England’s 23-man World Cup squad are not simply forgotten or ‘sleeping’ when the players come together at a national level because the footballers have strong ties to their clubs through being part of them day in, day out. From a social identity perspective (see Haslam, 2004) these club identities define individuals, and players seem to have a stronger identification with their clubs than England, favouring club honours to national success. This is in contrast to most other sports where the international stage is the pinnacle both financially and in terms of ability. Further, these club identities may not simply reflect different teams, but also contrary values associated with players’ affiliations to their clubs. The cognitions and behaviours expected as an England Football team member may diverge from those the squad are accustomed to at their clubs. Thus, England need to develop a sense of commonality, which is more than simply playing under the umbrella of the “England team”. Taking time to create a team identity is time well spent; identities promote commitment (Haslam et al., 2006), collective efficacy (Fransen et al., in press), and have been posited to facilitate a high performing environment (Slater et al., 2013).

So, how can we create a national team identity? The context in part directs which identities individuals ascribe to. As suggested by Slater et al. (2013), the England management can mould an environment conducive to facilitating a strong team identity. The key is to highlight and emphasise, as the England football team, the commonalities “*we*” share that make “*us*” unique from other teams. This is obviously important to England manager Roy Hodgson who expects his players to show their pride in representing England by passionately singing the national anthem. Indeed, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposed individuals positively distinguish their group from others. But, do the England players know what it is about being English that makes “*us*” unique and distinct? Is it for example to live and breathe lion-hearted patriotic spirit, or is it “to be winners”. Only once we know what this team represents can we come together to be a unified team.

Interestingly, fans have little trouble uniting behind the team and club rivalries are (mostly) forgotten as this summer we can expect the streets and cars of England to fly the St George cross and England replica football shirts (even at £90 a time) to proliferate. The fans will share the emotional responses of their team and vicariously enjoy the highs and lows of the tournament (Jones et al., 2012). Indeed, the World Cup is more than just a game, while it remains to be seen if England (dis)unite in Rio this summer.

References

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