

# Interaction Ritual Theory and Sports Fans: Emotion, Symbols, and Solidarity

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The study of sport spectatorship has an increasing focus on the importance of fandom beyond fan violence. Fundamental to understanding fan behavior are the meaningful rituals and emotions experienced by fans. In this paper, I use the theoretical work of Randall Collins to examine the ritualistic outcomes of collective effervescence, emotional energy, and group symbols and solidarity among sport fans. I illustrate these concepts using case study data from participant observation of fans of a U.S. football team, the Pittsburgh Steelers, and content analysis of news articles. I extend Collins' interaction ritual (IR) theory by taking the group as the unit of analysis and analyzing group solidarity beyond situational interactions and typical sport settings, including the significant life events of weddings and funerals. While critiquing Collins' (2004) a priori portrayal of sports fans, the analysis advances IR theory, improving its utility for understanding sports fan behavior.

Les études sur l'auditoire sportif se penchent de plus en plus sur les phénomènes liés aux fans qui vont au-delà de la question de la violence chez les spectateurs. Fondamentales pour la compréhension du comportement des supporters sont les rituels significatifs et les émotions vécues par les fans. Dans cet article, j'utilise le travail théorique de Randall Collins pour examiner les aboutissants ritualisés de l'effervescence collective, l'énergie émotionnelle, ainsi que les symboles et la solidarité des amateurs sportifs. J'illustre ces concepts en utilisant les données des études de cas impliquant une observation participante des fans d'une équipe de football états-unienne (les Steelers de Pittsburgh) et une analyse du contenu des articles de presse. J'utilise la théorie du rituel interactif (RI) de Collins en prenant le groupe comme unité d'analyse et en analysant la solidarité du groupe au-delà des interactions situationnelles et des lieux sportifs typiques, en incluant des événements marquants de la vie comme les mariages et les funérailles. Tout en critiquant Collins (2004) et sa façon de voir les fans sportifs, les analyses font avancer la théorie du RI et améliorent son utilité pour la compréhension des comportements des fans sportifs.

While the role of fandom and fan behavior has long been a part of the sociological study of sport, sport scholarship has primarily focused on violence and hooliganism (Poulton, 2008; Young, 2002). Consequently, other dimensions of fandom have been relatively neglected (see Duke, 1991 for this critique). While

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this focus may stem from a concern for the antisocial aspects of fandom, a turn to such meaningful aspects of fandom as rituals and emotions is important for a more holistic view of this social phenomenon. One theory that focuses on ritual and emotion is Randall Collins' theory of "interaction ritual chains" (IR theory). Moving beyond a focus on fan violence and hooliganism, I extend and apply IR theory to illustrate the emotion-based ritual experiences of fans of a U.S. football team, the Pittsburgh Steelers. As a radical microsociological approach, IR theory provides a critical lens for understanding emotion and ritual behaviors of fans and the meaning that fandom provides.

After locating my work theoretically within the previous literature on sports fandom and emotion, I discuss how Collins' (2004) theory, through modification, can be applied to sports fan settings and situations. I then provide findings from my analysis of fans at Heinz Field (the Steelers home stadium) and in sports bars before tracing (via news articles) the use of fan rituals and symbols across several other locations and situations. Applying and extending IR theory to sports fans captures *how* sports fans, as an informal social group, develop and maintain meaning and solidarity across time and space.

## Sports Fans and Emotion

Our understanding of sports fandom has been advanced largely by psychological and quantitative work (Bizman & Yinon, 2002; Wann, 2006; Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann & Pierce, 2003). Sociological literature has focused primarily on the use of alcohol (End et al., 2009; Nelson & Wechsler, 2003), aggression and violence among fans, or hooliganism (Braun & Vliegthart, 2009; Dunning, Murphy, & Williams, 1986; Pilz, 1996; Russell, 2004; Ward, 2002). Beyond a focus on sports fans as deviant, scholars have looked increasingly at positive aspects of fandom (Hugenberg & Hugenberg 2008; Kraszewski, 2008; Wenner 1990). Some have explored the changing market relations between owners and fans as "customers" (King, 1997), fans as consumers of cultural commodities (Hughson & Free, 2006), and the role of the media in the production of meaning (Lee, 2005). Despite the fact that the sports fan experience clearly involves intense emotional experiences, the role of emotion or feelings of group solidarity for understanding fandom has received relatively little explicit attention.

Some scholars have recognized the meanings supplied by fan identity and emotion when they classify sports fandom as a secular form of religion (Birrell, 1981; Burstyn, 2005; Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Hunt, 2003). Unfortunately, these approaches have suffered from a dearth of evidence that is empirical, naturalistic, and contextualized in the meanings of particular sports fans. Dunning, Murphy, and Williams (1986) noted that fandom "has come to form one of the principal media of collective identification in modern society and one of the principal sources of meaning in life for many people" (p. 222). Attention to the meaning of fandom is, thus, vital to a complete understanding of sports fans and their behavior.

Contemporary approaches to emotion (Elias, 1994/2000; Elias and Dunning, 1986; Kemper, 2006) often take a macro level approach that focuses on society's role in control and constraint. For example, Elias (1994/2000) developed his figurational, process approach to social analysis by looking at how the body and emotion are repressed through the civilizing process. Turning to sport, Elias and

Dunning (1986) highlighted the role of excitement drawn from leisure activities. This excitement stands in contrast to the “almost unshakeable habit of restraint” that pervades the majority of social existence (1986, p. 71). Sports, according to an Eliasian view, provides a means through which modern individuals satisfy their “need to experience the upsurge of strong emotions in public” and release built up tensions (1986, p. 168). Consistent with Freud’s (1961) conception of emotion, this approach suggests that tension and other negative emotions require opportunities for periodic, preferably benign, forms of release. This cathartic approach presumes emotion to be inherently volatile. Sports provide one means of catharsis. By contrast, interaction ritual (IR) theory provides an important lens on the meaning of fandom predicated on a positive, socially emergent view of emotion whereby fans’ experiences, along with their ties to solidarity and social cohesion, are taken seriously.

## Interaction Ritual Theory

Interaction Ritual (IR) theory conceptualizes emotion as a socially emergent (rather than socially constrained) positive energy. Grounded in Durkheim’s work (1912/1965), attention is given to the socially emergent, positive emotions found in fan experiences and thus, the application of IR theory provides an alternative to the scarcity/release approach of Elias and Dunning (1986). Furthermore, IR theory focuses on microinteractions as the foundation of society rather than historical processes. This microsociological approach contributes to an understanding of sports fans that is complementary to an emphasis on macrolevel, historical processes. The theory’s scope and synthesis of the micro and macro levels makes it applicable to many facets of social life (Erickson, 2007; Fine, 2005), including sports fandom.

Building on Durkheim (1912/1965) and Goffman (1967), Collins constructed a microsociology in which emotion forms the symbolically reproduced outcome of and catalyst for interactions among energized social actors. Collins (1975; 1981; 1990; 2004) examined the mechanisms of interaction underlying a broad range of social phenomena and argues, as did Durkheim, that values are “cognitions infused with emotion” (1990, p. 27) and emotions serve as the social mechanisms underlying societal cohesion. Cementing social relationships, emotion can bypass, fuel, and be influenced by cognition (Loseke, 2009); but it is *emotion* that pervades the most intimate and public of social settings, serving as both outcome and catalyst. Drawing on Goffman (1967), IR theory is used to analyze the interactions that make up everyday social encounters and the importance of such encounters for the existence of both society and self. Key elements of the theory are ritual ingredients, ritual outcomes, and collective effervescence.

Successful interaction rituals require certain “ingredients.” They may occur when there are: “two or more people are physically assembled in the same place; boundaries to outsiders; people [who] focus their attention upon a common object or activity; and they share a common mood or emotional experience” (Collins, 2004, p. 47–49). Focused attention and a shared common mood draw on Mead’s (1934) notion of taking the role of the other. Without the cognitive development necessary to approach an event or object from the perspectives of others, successful interaction rituals are infeasible. One difficulty with these two ingredients is the degree to which they are dependent upon interpretation. *How* focused attention is and *how* common a mood may be is dependent on the meanings attached to the

experience. The formality of an interactional situation affects the nature of the first two ingredients (physical copresence and boundary maintenance) but “formal” rituals are not necessary for the development of successful IR chains. Finally, the extent to which ingredients are present in any particular interaction varies across situations and thus becomes a key variable for empirical analysis.

Outcomes of a successful interaction ritual chain include: group solidarity—“a feeling of membership;” emotional energy—“a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action;” group symbols; and a sense of morality—“the sense of rightness in adhering to the group, respecting its symbols, and defending both against transgressors” (Collins, 2004, p. 49). Generation of emotion among group members determines the degree and longevity of a group’s solidarity and its ability to maintain coherence beyond specific situational events. Symbols are fundamental to this process as they arise from focusing attention on specific objects in “otherwise anonymous crowds,” and from “personal identities and narratives” (p. 87). The culmination of outcomes is *collective effervescence*—“a momentary state,” but one that has lasting impact when it is “embodied in sentiments of group solidarity, symbols or sacred objects, and individual emotional energy” (p. 36). The extent to which the above ingredients and outcomes sustain intersubjectivity across interactions (linked as chains) determines the degree of collective effervescence. Although examining these experiences on an interactional level cannot tell us precisely what people think and feel, using IR theory, one is able to infer emotions by observing the sustainment of emotional energy across interactions.

In his a priori application of IR theory to sports fans, Collins described sports fans as consisting of “a community that has no other coherence, and no other purpose, than the experience of the peaks of ritual emotion itself” (2004, p. 59). For Collins, fandom relied on “a volatile and episodic experience that comes out just at moments of high ritual intensity” (p. 83). He further argued that group symbols which develop as a result of collective effervescence among fans do not withstand the test of time because they are “situationally specific” (p. 83). Sports fans also lack, according to Collins, a sense of strong solidarity because of the universal availability of sports as a conversational resource—as the generic conversation starter “how about them Steelers?!” suggests (see p. 384). In sum, Collins argued that fans collectively have “no other purpose” outside of peak “ritual emotion;” their symbols are “situationally specific” and hence not capable of transcending situations; and the universal availability of sports for conversation implies weak solidarity. By dismissing sporting rituals as “contrived,” “artificial,” and “non-serious” (pp. 58–59), Collins missed an opportunity to further explore the IR processes underlying examples of sustained fandom. An empirical evaluation of the extent to which sports fans actually depend on repeated game attendance to charge and recharge emotional energy and a sense of solidarity is necessary. As I show below, *using Collins’ own theory* to make sense of sports fans’ behavior, the preliminary empirical evidence runs counter to his a priori claims.

## Methods

As Collins’ IR theory draws from Goffman, I have, similar to Goffman, opted to use qualitative methods to unearth everyday rituals, focusing on marginal cases that may be outside of the norm but nonetheless illuminate social theory (Goffman,

1961; 1967; see also Drew & Wooten, 1988). Following a Goffmanian approach and viewing Steelers fans as a distinctly bounded system (Stake, 1988), the current study generates a rich qualitative analysis of an exceptional fanbase. As sports fan behavior is both a “contemporary phenomenon” and situated in a “real-life context,” the methods used here follow Yin’s (2003, p. 1) explanatory case study approach where Steelers fans constitute a particular case of the more general phenomenon of “sports fandom” (also see Stake, 1994 on the importance of particularity). As Yin indicated, explanatory case studies are well-suited to illustrating and extending theoretical ideas. As IR theory focuses on how emotion and solidarity are maintained across settings and situations, its empirical application requires methods that are able to capture these processes. Through the triangulated use of formal observation and content analysis techniques (Stake, 1994), the current study is able to yield insights into the particular and, at times, peculiarly intense behavior of Steelers fans. Of course, as Stake (1988) noted, results emerging from this type of case study approach must be understood in the context of my analytical focus on IR theory and the times and spaces of observation.

The Steelers are an NFL (National Football League) team based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (United States), with a following of devoted fans. The season this study took place, ESPN, an American sports news network, ranked Steelers fans as number 1 in the NFL based on their loyalty, creativity, vocal support, travel to away games and the number of consecutive, sold-out games (Mosley, 2008). In describing the team and fans, an ESPN blogger states:

No team is as woven into the fabric of a city. The organization’s stability has a lot to do with it, as generations of Steelers fans relate to the tradition of ownership (Rooney’s), smashmouth football, quality head coaches (league-low three since 1969) and success (five Super Bowl titles)<sup>1</sup>. (Mosley, 2008).

This was not an easy ranking, with the Green Bay Packers of Wisconsin a very close second to Steelers fans. Hence, it is important to view fan devotion and the extent to which fans attach meaning and identity to fandom along a continuum rather than dichotomously between normal and abnormal (Gantz and Wenner, 1995). As a case study, the data gathered are not generalizable to all Steelers fans, but rather to “a previously developed theory [that] is used as a template with which to compare empirical results of the case study” (Yin, 2003, pp. 32–33). IR theory provides the template and Steelers fans, as the number 1 fan base of 2008, are an appropriate starting point to test Collins’ claims concerning sports fans. Because the data focus on Steelers fans exclusively, cross comparisons with other fans is beyond the scope of the analysis.

Pittsburgh Steelers fans may gather in a variety of public settings, but I limited formal observation and participation (Yin, 2003) to Heinz Field (the Steelers home stadium), parking lots adjacent to the stadium, and two sports bars in the city on two game days during the 2008–09 season (approximately 20 hours). Tailgating occurs before and occasionally after a game as fans congregate in the surrounding stadium parking lots to prepare food, eat, drink, converse, listen to music, sing, and play games. My informant, a long-time Steelers fan and Pittsburgh resident, introduced me to a group of 8–10 regular tailgaters and traveled with me to local bars as I observed fans watching televised games. During this time I tried to “observe the ordinary” (Stake, 1995, p. 44), taking notes using a note-taking application on

my cell phone which I transferred to my laptop for analysis. In line with IR theory, I analyzed the data by looking for ingredients, outcomes, and instances in which fan behaviors indicated identification with the team outside of peak emotional experiences.

Wanting to see how elements of successful rituals carried beyond typical fan settings, I also analyzed news articles. Collection and analysis of news articles was driven by my interest in exploring the extent to which team symbols, originating in IR chains, would travel beyond settings relevant to sport. I thematically selected and analyzed content, increasing conceptual understanding of fandom (Altheide, 1996). Through “progressive theoretical sampling,” I searched for articles “based on emerging understanding of the topic under investigation” (Altheide, 1996, p. 33). With data collection originally focused on sports fandom as a quasi-religion, the search focused on fans and their reliance on Steelers symbols, events, and meaning during major life events—examples of settings and situations traditionally framed in religious/existential terms. With funerals and weddings often framed in religious terms (using religious symbols and rituals) and occupying a conceptual space not typically associated with sports fandom, I began my search using these terms in an online search (google.com). After using the key words of “Steelers fans” and “funerals,” I preceded to search for articles using key words related to Steelers fans and weddings. Because the study took place during the team’s sixth Super Bowl win, many articles were from the years 2008–2009 and in the process of searching, I came across many other aspects of personal and city life that were influenced by fandom. Overall I sampled a total of 20 articles dealing with events such as weddings, funerals, and the influence of sports fandom on schools, the city of Pittsburgh, and small business planning. Rather than cover all of these, I use examples from the categories of funerals and weddings to illustrate and extend IR theory, focusing on the degree to which the influence of sports fandom extends beyond sport-related settings and events.

Using articles from news outlets, scholars cannot ignore the intentions of the media to entice readers and cater to a specific geographical region of subscribers. Nearly all of the news articles cited are taken from news outlets that are local to Pittsburgh. As documents, they demonstrate the peculiarities of particular fans while also offering a glimpse into the culture of Steelers fans—“the process and array of objects, symbols, and meanings that make up social reality shared by members” (Altheide 1996, p. 2). Embodied in the “cultural texts” of published news (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004, p. 304), these articles illustrate how fan behavior may involve more sustained use of symbols and meanings.

## **Interaction Ritual Chains Among Steelers Fans**

### **Attending a Game**

The four ingredients of a successful interaction ritual chain (Collins, 2004) were readily apparent among fans observed at Heinz Field during a home game. Fans physically congregated in the stadium with a clear boundary to outsiders—those who were unable to or uninterested in procuring a ticket for the game. The attention of fans was clearly directed at the action on the field, by means of both stadium layout and the display of numerous television screens throughout the stadium and

concession area that played live footage of the game. The sharing of an emotional experience and common mood was best demonstrated by my observance of collective gestures and verbal responses of the crowd as dictated by the events on the field. More specifically, this involved the expression, verbally and through gestures, of positive emotions (e.g., fervent clapping, smiling, cheering, high-fives, and waving the Terrible Towel—a small black and gold towel with the team’s name and logo) during plays in which the Steelers did well and the converse (e.g., booing, taunting, admonishments to improve, shrugs, and looking away from the field) when they performed poorly.

Many fans engaged in active participation — sharing smiles, hand-slaps, and hugs, even between strangers. From my field notes, a specific example demonstrated a fan’s level of emotional energy (i.e., his level of personal excitement, confidence, and initiative):

Late in the final quarter of the game the Steelers made a spectacular play, which resulted in much cheering, screaming, clapping, and waving. A man with a stern face in front of me, probably in his late twenties to early thirties, began to remove layers of clothing. Finally, he pulled his final shirt up over his head and stood cheering and screaming without a shirt in temperatures around 15 degrees Fahrenheit. After a second stellar play on behalf of the Steelers, the man beside him also took off his many layers of coats and shirts and the two clutched hands and screamed in earnest.

As Collins noted, the level of individual emotional energy demonstrated in active participation has an effect on the solidarity of a group: “[C]ollective solidarity and identity is stronger to just the extent that the crowd goes beyond being passive observers to actively taking part” (2004, p. 82). When these two men also turned to face my informant, to them a stranger who was also gesturing and yelling, and gestured for a high-five, this further suggested that fans will seek out “bodily contact with each other” as an outcome of the emotional energy and group solidarity felt during moments of heightened and active spectatorship. Observing the solidarity exhibited in this behavior may also increase feelings of solidarity (Collins, 2004). Beyond the specific dynamics of the game, feelings of group solidarity were palpable in the corridors and stairwells of the stadium as fans exchanged smiles, cheers, and collective chants. Gestures and verbal responses following the game’s conclusion (a Steelers victory) were not as organized as they were during the game, but these rituals reverberated among fans as they made their way to cars and homes.

The behaviors described are not unique to Steelers fans, as anyone who has attended a game or watched a game on television can attest. But the observations made during attendance confirmed the presence of collective effervescence and emotional energy among fans at the stadium. As the central location of the game, the stadium environment was permeated with intense emotions. Going beyond the stadium, I also observed interaction rituals while tailgating before a game and in local sports bars.

## **Tailgating and Sports Bars**

IR ingredients (Collins, 2004) were more informal and varied while tailgating and watching the game in sports bars than those observed at the stadium. While tailgat-

ing and sports bars have notable differences, in tracing the presence and absence of IR ingredients, I combine the two. Though informal, group symbols and rituals remained prolific among tailgaters and fans watching the game in bars. Although tailgaters did not exhibit the levels of intensity observed at the stadium (few collectively orchestrated rituals such as chanting, clapping, yelling, or towel-waving), fans in this setting showed levels of solidarity, muted emotional energy, and expressions of moral disdain for fair-weather fans and any denigration of group symbols. Symbols were pervasive. Fans wore Steelers clothing, painted faces, decorated vehicles with decals, and drank from cans nestled in Steelers beer cozies. It is difficult to overstate the ubiquity of such symbols within every setting I observed.

In the case of tailgating, weather served as a meaningful boundary and, among hardcore fans, a means to retain and reinforce a sense of moral superiority. For example, parking lots and sidewalks were much more crowded when the temperature was in the mid to high 50's than it was on colder days (i.e., low 20's Fahrenheit). As I recorded in my field notes on a relatively warm day:

The warmer temperatures seemed to draw more fans (including more children) and also added a more festive mood to the gathering. The number of fans in the parking lots seemed to have doubled in comparison with the last [colder] trip. There were also games, much like carnival games, in which contestants attempted to maneuver through an inflated mini-football field without falling over or throw a football accurately into a target.

This finding may be particularly unique to fans in colder climates, where colder temperatures must be endured. Weather is not likely to be a constructed barrier for fans in warmer climates such as Texas or Florida.

One reason IR rituals (Collins, 2004) were less intense in these nonstadium settings is the absence of strict barriers to attendance. Attending a sports bar requires little more than an ID to verify one's age. While local bars placed considerable emphasis on local sports teams, demonstrated by the set up and décor of the establishments, there was a greater degree of variation in intensity of fan behavior in bars as compared with the stadium. Games were shown on all televisions—placed so that nearly every seat in the establishment had a view—and bars were decorated in jerseys, Terrible Towels, and black and gold streamers. Exclusive emphasis on the game and the raucous behavior of fans may have deterred some patrons who were not Steelers fans, but the pervasiveness of decorations and televisions suggests this was of little concern to bar management.

Fans in sports bars were physically assembled and focused on the game for the most part, but as my field notes suggest, fans remained seated except during exceptional events, clapped sporadically, and carried on side conversations throughout the game:

Chatter continued throughout the first quarter, with sporadic bursts of cheers, clapping, smiles, Terrible Towel waving, and high fives after notable plays—when their opponent performed poorly, and when the Steelers gained a first down, interception, or touchdown.

The gestures and verbal responses of fans at the bars appeared less emphatic and synchronized in comparison with those at the stadium. Fans watching the game



at bars remained seated for most of game and took a more passive and less enthusiastic role in observing the game through the medium of television. Tailgaters, because they were not focused on a common activity, rarely displayed collectively orchestrated behavior. Rarely did gathered fans collectively wave Terrible Towels or synchronize chanting of a single phrase (i.e., “Here We Go Steelers, Here We Go!”). There was, however, a muted collective mood of excitement and anticipation that pervaded tailgating and the sports bar pointing to long-term emotional moods that make up these weekly, seasonal rituals. The importance of these long-term emotions is not ignored by Collins: “We must also be able to talk about the long-term emotional tones, even the ones that are so calm and smooth as not to be noticed. In theoretical terms, it is the long lasting ones [...] which are of greatest importance” (1990, p. 31). Unfortunately, Collins did not apply this same logic to the case of sports fans, though the evidence here suggests that fans experience successful interaction rituals outside of peak experiences in the stadium setting.

In tailgating and sports bar settings, settings beyond moments of high intensity ritual (Collins, 2004), fans held a coherent identity, even if they were primarily anonymous to one another. As my informant demonstrated, some fans go tailgating without the means or intention of attending the game—without the promise of a peak emotional experience in the stadium. This suggests that fans congregate for the purpose of drawing on the collective effervescence and emotional energy embodied in the symbols alone, detached from the experience of peak “ritual emotion” (Collins, 2004) and tied instead to the more muted ritual emotions found while tailgating and at sports bars.

The observations made while tailgating and in sports bars could apply to other fan bases in other cities, but without systematic observation of other fans, it is difficult to gauge the representativeness of these findings. Regardless, my data illustrate the maintenance of IR chains outside of the stadium and among fans who are not experiencing peak ritual emotions. Despite being more muted and uncoordinated, rituals among these fans did exist and collective effervescence and emotional energy were drawn from the symbols and interactions available. Contrasting tailgating and sports bars with the stadium illustrates how IR chains successfully exist beyond the peak emotion generated in the stadium.

## **Morality among Steelers Fans**

As suggested above, the development of feelings of morality that lead individuals to defend the group and its sacred symbols against outsiders is a culminating feature of a successful interaction ritual (Collins, 2004). Through conversations with tailgaters, I was able to detect a degree of moral hierarchy among fans. Fans who did not arrive for tailgating early in the day and during cold weather were disparaged as “fair-weather” fans. This term, though, went beyond the weather and included several other attributes: attending games and favoring the Steelers only when the team is doing well; failure to attend during cold or unpleasant weather, and knowing little about the playoffs. Using these three modes of evaluation (team performance, weather, and knowledge of the team/game), fans use the term “fair-weather fan” to convey a moral hierarchy that idealizes a devoted, “hardcore” fan as one who is knowledgeable about the game itself, the nuances of playoffs and

rankings and remains loyal to the team through seasons of poor performance and inclement weather.

In his analysis of the sacred, Durkheim (1912/1972) noted that, “by definition, sacred beings are separate beings. Their principal characteristic is that there is a break in continuity between them and profane beings” (pp. 232–233). Echoing Durkheim (1912/1965, pp. 237–238), Collins (2004) highlighted the distinction between the sacred and mundane: “respect for sacred objects, and for the group sentiments behind them, is a higher value than the merely mundane, individual consideration of ‘useful or injurious effects’” (p. 40). The establishment of morality is conveyed in the separation of the sacred from the profane. In the case of Steelers fans, this is demonstrated in the treatment of two group symbols: the Terrible Towel and beloved quarterback Ben Roethlisberger. Fans do not *use* the towel for any utilitarian purpose; rather it is a prop to be waved during games and may be displayed as a decorative item on walls in homes, offices, and public places. Opponents have been known to step on a Terrible Towel, or use it as an ordinary towel (i.e., for cleaning/drying) in an effort to gloat or taunt players and fans (see “Steelers Fans Fuming,” 2008). Ben Roethlisberger, the starting quarterback for the 2008–09 season, was also an important symbol for the team<sup>2</sup>. A conversation at a concession stand between my informant and another fan confirmed Roethlisberger’s status as a sacred object:

My informant, after watching Ben Roethlisberger throw the ball away (into the crowd, rather than to a player), shouted an obscenity and expressed frustration at the quarterback’s poor play. A middle-aged man in front of us turned around and asked him if he realized how hard it was to throw a football in freezing weather and under those circumstances.

From this observation, the older man defends Roethlisberger as a sacred object to a fellow fan that he believes is behaving irreverently. In objecting to the criticism, the man calls my informant’s knowledge of the game (throwing the ball in the freezing weather) into question, suggesting that my informant is not a hardcore fan.

In sum, symbols of group membership (Collins, 2004)—including the team logo and colors, Terrible Towels, Steelers-themed coats, sweaters, hats, gloves, scarves, bags, tablecloths, lawn chairs, car decals, inflated figurines, and painted faces—pervaded all three observed settings. The degree of “emotional energy” (Collins, 2004) observed to be experienced by individuals was related to the mutual focus of the group. The muted emotional energy observed and experienced while tailgating could be seen as the result of fans drawing upon the shared energy stored in group symbols, as well as the rituals of wearing and displaying their favored merchandise. As Collins (2004) would suggest, missing from this fan setting was a single set of events or activities that served as the focus of everyone’s attention—something that *is* provided when attending a game. The greater the collective focus of attention the more emotional energy exhibited by fans. The fact that outcomes were more intense and apparent in the stadium setting, where the key ingredient of a barrier to outsiders was most strictly enforced, affirms the theoretical importance of this ingredient. The attributes that distinguish devoted fans are not limited to game time and space but, as shown below, extend to major life events beyond sport.

## Group Solidarity among Steelers Fans

As illustrated in observations of fans, collective effervescence (Collins, 2004) is embodied in group symbols (e.g., the Terrible Towel) and influences a group's demonstration of coordinated ritual behavior—a key indicator of group solidarity. However, a group's level of solidarity may also be determined by analyzing the extent to which its symbols retain potency beyond the peak moments of ritualistic intensity (Collins, 2004). Claiming that sports rituals lack the ability to maintain a sense of solidarity once the game concludes, Collins (2004) views fans' interaction ritual chain as ephemeral—one that may be reinforced week to week during the season but should quickly disappear after its conclusion. Thus, the degree to which symbols *are* able to transcend immediate situations and serve as sources of collective effervescence in other settings represents the level of solidarity a group maintains. For fans, high solidarity would be exhibited in their ability to draw collective effervescence (for groups) and/or emotional energy (for individuals) from team symbols in settings beyond the stadium and, importantly, in settings and situations beyond those associated with sport. To assess this expectation, I turn to news articles of fans, analyzing their content for examples of collective effervescence and emotional energy maintained beyond the stadium and sports.

Solidarity goes beyond the experience of the game itself and invades elements and events of everyday life—even those events that are usually framed with religious meaning. Funerals and weddings—major life events that use transcendent themes—have been organized and celebrated with the explicit use of Steelers themes (“Black & Gold,” 2009; Dvorchak, 2006; Dyer, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Lavis, 2007; “N.H. Woman,” 2007; Sostek & Marsula, 2008). I argue that Steelers symbols, like the Terrible Towel and the team colors, are incorporated into these events because of the collective meaning and effervescence that they retain long after moments of emotional intensity and beyond game-specific situations.

Four of the news articles cited above were published in the off-season, suggesting that the decision to use Steelers themes in a wedding or funeral was not influenced by moments of extreme “high ritual intensity” (Collins, 2004) gained by attending a game or the success of the team during the season (see Dyer, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Lavis, 2007; Sostek & Marsula, 2008). Also implicated is the number of chosen symbols that originated in fan interactions—which suggests that other competing themes, such as religious ones, were not chosen. As the news articles show, fandom blends with family, religion, education, and work in ways that are often difficult to trace and measure. To the extent that fandom transcends these types of social boundaries, Collins (2004) portrait of sports IR chains as somehow more artificial or nonserious than IR chains in other social contexts is questionable.

### Funerals

Steelers solidarity is illustrated in the story of a woman who, at the final request of her late husband, brought his ashes to a Steelers game at Heinz Field (“N.H. Woman,” 2007). Her husband never attended a game in his lifetime and was, therefore, unable to experience peak moments of interaction rituals, but he had been a devoted fan even from his home in New England. His sons dressed in Steelers jerseys for his funeral and his body was covered with a Steelers blanket.

Fandom for her husband was by necessity of geography and economic means mediated through televised games and team symbols. Despite this mediation and contrary to what Collins (2004) argued, the man's identity as a fan constituted a significant source of meaning. Effectively drawing on the emotional energy embodied in Steelers symbols and the collective effervescence possible while watching Steelers games in local sports bars or in homes with other fans, his sense of solidarity with the team and fan base was high despite the fact that he had never attended a single Steelers game in person—an experience that Collins suggests is vital.

A second example of fans incorporating Steelers symbols into end-of-life rituals is the untimely death of Pittsburgh mayor Bob O'Connor. Journalists note that the mayor's son

will help escort his father's casket during the heavy-hearted procession from Mass to gravesite. Then, prior to the 8:30 p.m. kickoff at Heinz Field, he will lead the official twirling of Terrible Towels, just as his father led the Steelers faithful in the incredible playoff run of last season. (Dvorchak, 2006)

A friend of the mayor and devoted Steelers fan described the mayor and other fans as “all part of the Steeler *family* [...] a lot of our regulars work for the city and county and will be honor guards at the funeral, so we'll handle the occasion like a death in the *family*” (italics added, Dvorchak 2006). The notion of “family” used in conjunction with the fan group suggests levels of high solidarity and a blending of roles (both fan and kin).

This example shows not only the incorporation of Steelers symbols and rituals into the grieving of a lost loved one and political figure, but word choice communicates the significance of the Steelers community and their high level of group solidarity. Describing recent obstacles to tailgating in their customary space, a fan reports that her

group has been moved several times during stadium and related construction, but they hope to occupy the same spot as last year. “They keep throwing obstacles our way. We'll find a way,” she said. Which is the way the *Steeler Nation*, the *One Nation*, approaches life's challenges and season openers. (italics added, Dvorchak, 2006)

The mayor's son leads the “official twirling of the Terrible Towels” and an interviewed friend describes Steelers fans as a “family” and “one nation,” collectively engaging in family and nation activities such as dealing with grief and facing obstacles together. By comparing fans to family or a nation, the interviewee implies moral sentiments of devotion and loyalty to the group. Members rely on group symbols and rituals to grieve, comfort, honor, and persevere.

## Weddings

Weddings are also major life events in which fans may draw on the collective effervescence and emotional energy embodied in symbols and rituals. News articles described Steelers-themed weddings that incorporated the team's colors and the group ritual of twirling Terrible Towels (“Black and Gold,” 2009), a Steelers fight song (Lavis, 2007), and couples competing for an ESPN-sponsored Steelers-themed

wedding (Johnson, 2006). One Pittsburgh couple had their wedding ceremony at a church, but held the reception at Heinz Field (McMarlin, n.d.). Reasons included:

. . .besides being home to the couple's favorite football team - were the lounge's size and view, the opportunity to have wedding photos taken on the playing surface and a tour of the Steelers' locker room for the bridal party. Tina also wanted favors that people could keep and use, and Terrible Towels monogrammed with the couple's names and wedding date certainly fit the bill (McMarlin, n.d.).

When she used monogrammed Terrible Towels as gifts for guests, the bride relied on a symbol of group membership that she likely believed would resonate with her friends and family and would also be useful to them (for later ritual use). As Collins (2004, p. 97) noted, understanding symbols and their use requires going beyond the conscious to the "unconscious component" of social behavior. While the bride may not consciously infuse her blissful day with "borrowed" collective effervescence and emotional energy, this seems a likely results. Tina's use of Terrible Towels and the placement of the reception at Heinz Field was certainly creative, but it was also instrumental. Perhaps without realizing it, Tina relied on the positive and intense emotions associated with these symbols to transfer the meaning and emotion associated with fandom to their special day. In this regard, Tina and her groom used these symbols as a form of currency—using the emotions of fandom embedded in the symbols to bolster the intensity and elation of their wedding. In other words, the feelings of elation and excitement that wedding attendees will undoubtedly experience could be partially tied to the evocative Steelers symbols used rather than solely to the love shared between bride and groom.

Tina and her groom's decision to use these symbols in celebration of their wedding—a situation rarely associated with sports fandom—supports the notion that Steelers fans have a high level of group solidarity, as emotional energy is drawn from these symbols in settings and situations far removed from their origin.

## Discussion and Conclusion

My analysis demonstrates how IR theory (Collins, 2004) can be used to understand Steelers fan behavior and emotion in three distinct fan settings. Variations in ritual outcomes across settings are related to differences in ingredients, specifically "barriers to outsiders" and mutually-focused attention (Collins, 2004). Examples of fans tailgating and in sports bars revealed levels of group solidarity and emotional energy that were less intense than those attending the game in the stadium. The use of membership symbols was pervasive, though the intensity—synchronized, collective, and emphatic—of these symbols during rituals was greatest among fans within the stadium. Observed symbols included the combination of the team's colors of black and gold and the team's logo imprinted on all manner of apparel and merchandise.

The use of group symbols and rituals in settings that lacked heightened ritual emotion (Collins, 2004), that is, while tailgating and watching games in sports bars, suggests that Steelers fans as a group share a level of group solidarity that extends beyond the stadium experience. Devoted fans may even be drawn to these

settings having never attended a game or experienced the peak emotional rituals that attending a game affords. Symbols and rituals associated with fandom also go beyond the stadium experience, as fans draw emotional energy from these symbols while cooking, eating, drinking, and conversing in more emotionally muted settings.

Steelers symbols and rituals also transcend situations typically associated with the team and even sports generally. Coping with the loss of a loved one during a funeral or the celebration of one's wedding are major life events not often associated with sport activities or identities. In the case of fans who draw emotional energy from Steelers symbols and rituals during major life events, the meaning derived is both collective and personal. As Collins noted:

These are the events that we remember, that give meaning to our personal biographies [...] Where these moments have a high degree of focused awareness and a peak of shared emotion, these personal experiences, too, can be crystallized in personal symbols, and kept alive in symbolic replays for greater or lesser expanses of one's life. (2004, p. 43)

The level of personal and collective meaning implied here suggests that these objects and behaviors are able to transcend the situations in which they originate. To be effective in unrelated situations, symbols must represent a level of group solidarity that is cohesive and well understood by other group members (Collins, 2004). With collective effervescence and emotional energy embodied in group symbols, a group's level of solidarity is no longer solely dependent on specific, sports-related moments of high intensity ritual.

Tracing the use of these symbols across settings and situations, this study suggests ways of measuring group solidarity and the maintenance of collective effervescence across interactions. This technique, while consistent with the assumptions underlying IR theory (Collins, 2004), could be refined and systematized in ways that make it applicable to other substantive areas and groups. Phenomena may be studied from the perspectives of the individuals as well as the group using methods of participant observation among group members and then tracing the nature and extent of symbolic movement: the movement of symbols beyond their situation of origin. Outside the current study, the private behaviors and emotions enacted and experienced by fans as rituals and symbols might be transmitted into the home through mediated forms of fandom. Home life may be where most of the meaning-making process of fandom takes place, combining muted emotional energy derived from symbols with familial traditions and collective memories. This may also be a primary space for the socialization of future fans, as parents pass on rituals and symbols to children. More research on this aspect of fandom, as well as the use of groups as a unit of analysis in the application of IR theory is necessary.

While the above analysis is limited to data collected on Steelers fans, there are many reasons to believe that fans of other teams and of other sports enact ritual chains in similar ways, drawing on emotionally-imbued symbols and using these symbols outside the stadium and sport context. Steelers fans have a unique history, geographical location, and tie to their city. While this justified my focus, the theoretical findings may be applicable to other sports fans. Future research on other football fans and fans of other sports is needed to compare across fan bases and the extension of IR theory presented here provides insight into how to conduct such research. Furthermore, future research should also give greater attention to

the many “spaces” of fandom, noting when (before, during, or after a game) and where (stadium parking lots, local sports bars, distant sports bars, homes) interaction rituals of varying intensity take place.

My application demonstrates that Collins’ (2004) IR theory can be used to study sports fans. Using *his own theory*, the above analysis reveals Collins’ a priori statements on sports fans as overly simplistic. His portrait of fans as having “no other purpose” outside of peak “ritual emotion,” symbols incapable of transcending immediate situations, and weak solidarity contradicts findings from the case study (2004, p. 59). My data, nevertheless, show that fans congregate and draw emotional energy from symbols and rituals outside of the peak emotional experience of a game and in situations that are not specific to football or sports. My findings, while contradicting Collins’ portrait of fans as having low levels of group solidarity, illustrate the situational and individually-specific nature of IR theory. Collins’ definition of fan behavior and emotion located solely within the stadium setting—where peak ritual emotion occurs—and not in the context of tailgating, sports bars, or living rooms, is too narrow. In events conveyed through news articles, symbols and rituals transcend typical fan situations suggesting that by limiting attention to individuals and situations, Collins failed to adequately account for the degree of group solidarity provided by membership in this type of informal group.

When one takes the group as the unit of analysis, a richer and more holistic portrait of fan membership emerges. Without an accurate portrayal of group identity, understanding the selection of fan group membership when choosing among competing options remains limited. Individuals attempt to maximize levels of emotional energy by opting for particular interactions that have a distinct history and context of group solidarity. Only by capturing the nuanced and emotion-based processes underlying the experience of group solidarity and identity can sociologists of sport fully understand the draw of fandom to individuals who may never even attend a game. Furthermore, attention to the group helps explain the interaction choices individuals make daily and, by implication, the utility of IR theory for understanding the underlying processes of complex social phenomena.

## Notes

1. This became a league record of six Super Bowl titles the season the study was conducted.
2. It should be noted that data collection took place before the rape allegations made against Ben Roethlisberger. It is possible that his role as a symbol and as a sacred object was affected by these events.

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