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*Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2007; 33; 1603

DOI: 10.1177/0146167207307488

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# The Appeal of the Underdog

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*When people observe competitions, they are often drawn to figures that are seen as disadvantaged or unlikely to prevail. The present research tested the scope and limits of people's support for underdogs. The first two studies demonstrated, in the context of Olympic matches (Study 1) and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Study 2), that observers' support for a competitor increased when framing it as an underdog. The final two studies explored mechanisms underlying support for underdogs. Study 3 showed that participants attributed more effort to a team when they believed it to be an underdog, and perceptions of effort mediated liking. In Study 4, participants reading a hypothetical sporting event supported a team with a low probability of success and labeled it an underdog unless it had greater resources than an opponent, suggesting that low expectations by themselves do not engender support if positive outcomes are not seen as deserved.*

**Keywords:** *underdog; justice; social identity; competition; schadenfreude; inequality*

Imagine two rivals locked in an intense competition. As an unaffiliated observer, you will probably find yourself supporting one side or the other; it is in fact difficult to remain neutral when pulled into the drama of competition or conflict. Imagine further that one of the rivals is at a pronounced competitive disadvantage, perhaps because of past failure, some physical disparity, or a lack of experience. Some of the most enduring figures in history, literature, mythology, religion, cinema, and sports are those who have faced daunting odds, were given little hope, or were expected to fail. These figures have a great appeal, largely because of their status as underdogs. In this article, we explore how social perceptions of parties in competitive situations are influenced by their relative status or expectations for success.

We test whether, and under what conditions, underdogs are supported. We further consider why underdogs hold their appeal.

Underdogs can be defined as individuals or groups who are at a disadvantage and are expected to lose (American Heritage Dictionary, 2006). Given the presence of well-known underdog stories in literature, mythology, and sport, it might seem intuitively obvious that most people sympathize with and support such figures. But why should we be drawn to the Davids, Texans at the Alamo, Greeks at Thermopylae, or Rocky Balboas of the world? Although there is a good deal of research on group status and social perception, the specific psychology of underdogs has received scant attention. Despite ample anecdotal evidence of the appeal of underdog figures, it is by no means clear from a review of prominent social psychological theories that people should in fact be drawn to underdogs, and there may even be reasons to suspect people should favor top dogs. We begin by reviewing some of the relevant literature.

## *Social Identification, Success, and Esteem*

A core tenet of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) is that the accomplishments of the groups with which we identify are a crucial source of our self-esteem. Assuming this is true, groups with high status or prestige

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**Authors' Note:** David Richards is now at the University of Florida. The authors would like to thank Amy Firebaugh, Leah Granson, Kristi Hipp, Chris Jackson, Ashley Lynch, Max Nankin, Kristen Salomon, and Zulema Vega for their help with data collection. Correspondence should be addressed to Joseph Vandello, Department of Psychology, University of South Florida, PCD 4135, Tampa, FL 33620-7200; e-mail: vandello@mail.cas.usf.edu.

*PSPB*, Vol. 33 No. 12, December 2007 1603-1616  
DOI: 10.1177/0146167207307488

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should be especially attractive. Indeed, when positively valued groups succeed, nonparticipating observers tend to bask in their reflected glory (BIRG; Cialdini et al., 1976; End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, & Jacquemotte, 2002; Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986), and numerous studies have shown that members of disadvantaged or stigmatized groups sometimes demonstrate outgroup preference (Boldry & Kashy, 1999; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Reichl, 1997; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987, 1991). As Tajfel (1982, p. 12) notes, "There is a good deal of evidence that members of groups which have found themselves for centuries at the bottom of the social pyramid sometimes display the phenomenon of 'self-hate' or self-depreciation." Although low-status groups do not always show such self-depreciation (Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001; Crocker & Major, 1989), social identity theory offers no theoretical reason to suspect nonpartisans to choose to identify with disadvantaged groups.

People often choose to emphasize their associations with those who are successful (Campbell & Tesser, 1986). Conversely, there is a good deal of evidence that people distance themselves from people or groups that are viewed unfavorably (Schimmel, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, O'Mahen, & Arndt, 2000; Snyder et al., 1986). For instance, in experimental groups that receive failure feedback, group members are less likely to wear badges that symbolize group membership (Snyder et al., 1986). Even when people merely observe others, they may distance themselves from those perceived to have negative identities (Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, & Russell, 1994).

To the extent that underdogs share characteristics of low-status individuals or groups, the long history of research on social status may also be relevant. Within this tradition, individuals of higher status are seen as more influential, competent, and worthy than low-status individuals or groups (Ridgeway, 2003; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987; Sande, Ellard, & Ross, 1986; Sherif, White, & Harvey, 1955). Conversely, low-status individuals and groups are more likely to be targets of prejudice and negative stereotyping, and are more likely to be seen as unworthy and incompetent (Goffman, 1963; Ridgeway, 2001).

There would thus appear to be risks to esteem for aligning oneself with underdogs. Sports fans whose favorite teams suffer defeat, for instance, show temporary decreases in mood and testosterone and even lose faith in their own mental and social abilities (Bernhardt, Dabbs, Fielden, & Lutter, 1998; Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992).

Following the logic of these theories, we might suspect that people would not want to associate with underdogs and would be more likely to feel contempt than sympathy for them. Perhaps the salient historical, literary, or cinematic examples of championed underdogs are

exceptions to the rule, and it is their rarity that makes them enduring.

However, several important distinctions need to be drawn between the types of underdog situations we are interested in presently and the past research on group identification, status, and success. First, in the vast majority of these social identification studies, people have some preexisting affiliation with a group (e.g., one's college team, one's salient ingroup); in contrast, in many underdog situations, the person may choose to sympathize, identify, or affiliate (or not) with a disadvantaged team with which they had no prior affiliation. Second, in most of the literature on social identification and success (e.g., BIRGing), people are queried about their post hoc rationalizations regarding team success or failure. Choosing to identify or not identify with a team follows from that team's success or failure. In contrast, underdog scenarios are situations where, by definition, the outcome has yet to be decided. One can only be an underdog before a competition takes place. Afterward, one is simply a winner or loser.

### *Justice, Fairness, and Support for the Underdog*

In contrast to the research reviewed in the previous section, we believe there are good theoretical reasons to expect that people will in fact like and support underdogs under most circumstances. Although there may be additional motivations, we propose that concerns with justice and fairness drive support for the disadvantaged.

Competitive scenarios of inequality may arouse people's sense of fairness and justice, general principles people care about deeply (Lerner, 2003). A number of social preference models point to people's aversion to inequalities (e.g., Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Lowenstein, Thompson, & Bazerman, 1989; Messick, 1995). These models all suggest that people become less satisfied with outcomes as discrepancies between parties' outcomes increase. People's concerns with fair outcomes can even override self-interest such that people experience more utility with equality than advantageous inequality (Camerer, 2003; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986). Although most of this research has looked at fairness when one is directly involved in the outcomes, it is possible that general norms about fairness and equality are salient to people even when they do not have a direct stake in the outcomes of competitions.

In the context of direct competitions or conflicts between parties, inequalities in expectations may suggest some disadvantage that is perceived as "unfair" (at least under some conditions) and thus might activate justice concerns. Given that observers cannot directly alter outcomes, passively supporting the underdog may be one way to restore a sense of fairness. In addition, people may be motivated to view the performance of

underdogs in a positive light relative to their more advantaged rivals. Deservingness theory predicts that “positively valued outcomes that follow positively valued actions are generally perceived to be deserved” (Feather, 1999b, p. 3). If the desired outcome is to see an underdog prevail, we should be motivated to see underdogs’ actions positively—for example, attributing greater effort, tenacity, or “heart” to an entity perceived to be at a competitive disadvantage, a prediction we tested in Study 3. Attributions of greater effort may also serve as compensation for underdogs’ presumed deficit in ability relative to top dogs. Whereas ability is perceived to be less under one’s control, effort is perceived to be a controllable dimension (Weiner, 1985) and should thus be tied more strongly to deservingness of outcomes. People are often motivated to make favorable character judgments about disadvantaged groups (e.g., seeing poor people as more honest, moral, and likable than rich people) as a way of rectifying (or at least rationalizing) inequalities by suggesting that the world is a fair place where there is some balance in outcomes (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003). In the same vein, rooting for underdogs and viewing their performance in a positive light might create a psychological balance when one cannot directly control the outcomes.

Certainly, not all situations of competitive inequality should be seen as unfair. As Feather (1999a, 1999b) has noted in his theory of deservingness, judgments of fairness and deservingness are influenced heavily by whether people are seen as responsible for their outcomes. Following this logic, we reasoned that support for underdogs rests on the assumption that the underdog entity is at some competitive disadvantage. We predicted that when a perceived disadvantage is removed, support for those entities would disappear, even if expectations for success remain low. For example, if an entity has low expectations for success despite having tremendous resources, size, or ability, they should be less likely to be seen as an underdog and less likely to be supported. We explored this prediction in Study 4.

### *Empirical Evidence for Underdog Support*

Despite the ubiquity of competitions between individuals or groups with unequal status or ability, and despite the large literatures on social identification with groups and social comparisons between self and others, there has been almost no research examining social perceptions of underdogs. We could locate only two published studies that directly explored attitudes toward underdogs. In one relevant study preceding the 1980 U.S. presidential election, Ceci and Kain (1982) examined the effect of polling information on people’s voting preferences. When presenting participants with polling

data showing Jimmy Carter commanding a lead, participants tended to favor Ronald Reagan, but when participants were presented with polling data showing Reagan leading, they tended to favor Carter (but see Mehrabian, 1998, for evidence of an opposite “bandwagon” effect from political polling). In a study from the sports sociology literature, Frazier and Snyder (1991) asked participants to consider hypothetical sporting competitions in which one team was “highly favored.” In this scenario, 81% of respondents said that they preferred the presumed underdog to win. In a slightly different vein, Gibson, Sachau, Doll, and Shumate (2002) looked at people’s perceptions of the pressure felt by favorites or underdogs and found that favorites are believed to be under more pressure and are therefore more likely to choke.

Although not directly examining underdog support, research on attitudes toward high achievers (what Feather, 1991, has labeled *tall poppies*) is also relevant. For instance, high achievers often elicit envy and resentment from others, particularly when the achievement is seen as undeserved (Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Feather, Volkmer, & McKee, 1991), and people often experience pleasure in seeing the mighty fall (*schadenfreude*; Feather, 1994; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003; Smith et al., 1996).

Aside from the aforementioned research, very little is known about how people feel about competitive situations of disparity in general and underdogs specifically. Consequently, the goals of the present research were, first, to first establish whether and under what conditions people will support underdogs and, second, to explore possible motivations for underdog support.

### *Overview of the Studies*

We conducted four experiments intended to explore attitudes toward underdogs. In our first two studies, using different operational definitions of underdogs and across differing domains, we formally tested the hypothesis that support for an entity increases when it is perceived to be an underdog. In the final two studies we explored implications and limitations of this underdog effect. In Study 3, we tested whether people view an entity’s performance differently when it is perceived to be an underdog by having people watch a sporting event and manipulating which team was believed to be the underdog. Study 4 tested whether support for teams with low expectations erodes when those teams have ample resources, thus eliminating their assumed disadvantage. These last two studies were intended to shed light on possible motivations for underdog support.

**TABLE 1:** Degree of Support for Teams in Olympic Competitions, Study 1

	Mean Support (1–9 Scale)			Difference
	Sweden (469 Medals)	Belgium (140 Medals)	Slovenia (6 Medals)	
Sweden vs. Belgium	4.1 (1.7)	6.4 (1.7)	—	2.3
Belgium vs. Slovenia	—	4.5 (2.3)	6.8 (2.4)	2.3
Sweden vs. Slovenia	4.0 (1.9)	—	7.0 (1.8)	3.0

NOTE: Standard deviations are reported in parentheses.

## STUDY 1: OLYMPIC UNDERDOGS

Our first study tested the basic hypothesis that, given two entities with differing expectations for success, people will more often be drawn to the entity with lower expectations (i.e., the underdog). As this study took place in the month before the 2004 summer Olympics, we used the opportunity to examine people's support tendencies in this real-world sporting context. We presented participants with a short questionnaire in which we summarized the all-time medal totals of various countries (thus establishing their credentials as underdogs or dominant countries through past success or lack of success). We then asked them to consider an upcoming competition between various pairs and to rate how much they wanted each team to win.

### Method

**Participants.** Seventy-one University of South Florida students (56 women, 15 men) completed the questionnaire for psychology course credit.

**Procedure.** Participants were given a one-page questionnaire that first asked them if they planned on watching any of the upcoming 2004 Olympics on a 1 (*definitely not*) to 9 (*definitely*) scale. In general, participants expressed some interest in watching the Olympics ( $M$  response = 6.75). Next, they were presented with a list of five countries followed by each country's all-time medal totals at the Olympics: Sweden (469), Bulgaria (195), Belgium (140), Mexico (40), Slovenia (6). Thus, a country's underdog status was operationalized as past Olympic medal success (being a reasonable predictor of future success). Participants were asked to imagine two of the countries engaged in an upcoming swimming contest. One group was asked to imagine the top-ranked team (Sweden) playing the middle-ranked team (Belgium), a second group was asked to imagine the middle-ranked team (Belgium) playing the bottom-ranked team (Slovenia), and a third group was asked to imagine the top-ranked team (Sweden) playing the bottom-ranked team (Slovenia). All participants were asked how much

they would like to see each country win the competition on a 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*a great deal*) scale.

### Results and Discussion

We predicted that, regardless of the specific countries asked about, people would be more pleased if the underdog won (i.e., the team with fewer past Olympic medals). As Table 1 shows, our hypothesis was supported. In each of the three pairings, people were significantly more favorable to the underdog winning than the top dog. A 2 (underdog vs. top dog)  $\times$  3 (country pair) repeated measures ANOVA revealed a main effect,  $F(1, 68) = 37.17$ ,  $p < .001$ , for supporting the underdog over the top dog. Stated differently, 75% of participants across conditions were more supportive of the team with fewer medals.

Though we intentionally chose countries with which we expected students to be largely neutral and unfamiliar, it is plausible that support for the underdog was due to some preexisting attraction to the countries considered in this sample. Note, however, that when Belgium was an underdog (compared to Sweden), people favored it,  $t(24) = 3.94$ ,  $p < .01$ , but when Belgium was seen as the top dog (compared to Slovenia), people favored Slovenia,  $t(20) = 2.51$ ,  $p < .05$ . To further rule out this alternative explanation, we had a separate sample of 20 undergraduate volunteers rate each of the countries in terms of liking and familiarity on 7-point scales. Liking ratings were fairly strongly correlated with familiarity ( $r$ s = .45 to .65). In general, participants reported being only modestly familiar, or even unfamiliar, with these countries (familiarity ratings for Sweden, Belgium, and Slovenia were 4.35, 3.95, and 2.25, respectively), suggesting no strong prior feelings. Regarding liking, Sweden and Belgium were rated equally likable (5.10 and 5.20, respectively) and both were rated significantly more likeable than Slovenia (4.10,  $p$ s < .01). Therefore, the countries portrayed as underdogs were not, in fact, liked more than their rivals when removed from the context of competition; if anything, they were liked less.

We also wondered whether there would be a greater tendency to root for the underdog relative to the top



dog as the disparity between the two teams grew larger (i.e., when Sweden played Slovenia). Though the difference between the large-disparity competition was slightly greater (3.0) than for the small-disparity competition (2.3), this difference was not significantly larger than the other two conditions,  $F(1, 69) = .61, p = .44$ .

Finally, we examined whether there were any sex differences in the tendency to support the underdogs. There was no significant effect,  $t(69) = 1.30, p = .19$ , though caution is warranted because of imbalanced samples. In fact, across all four studies reported in this article, there were no sex differences on the main dependent variables (all  $ps > .19$ ).

Overall, the results of Study 1 provide support for the basic idea that people tend to support underdogs in competitive situations. Interestingly, the same team can go from a supported team as an underdog to a nonsupported team as a top dog. In our next study, we attempted to replicate and extend this underdog effect by looking outside of the sports context and by using a different operationalization of underdog status.

## STUDY 2: ATTITUDES ABOUT THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

The international political arena provides another context in which disparities in power or resources, and differing expectations for success, can shape public opinion about various groups. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians is one salient example. If people are drawn to sympathize with figures seen as underdogs, attitudes about the parties in this conflict might be strategically shaped by emphasizing the underdog status of one group over the other. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides an interesting test of this hypothesis because either side could conceivably be seen as an underdog. On one hand, Israelis are surrounded by Arab countries who are generally hostile to their presence, and anti-Jewish sentiment runs high in the region. On the other hand, after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Palestinians lost their homes and were relegated to live largely under Israeli occupation, where the standard of living is much lower than among Israelis generally.

In this study, we examined whether support for Israelis and Palestinians could be shaped by manipulating who was perceived to be the underdog. Here we operationalized underdog status by subtly reinforcing physical size disparities through maps that shifted the perspective to make salient Israel as large, surrounding the smaller occupied Palestinian territories, or conversely, by making Israel appear small by showing it surrounded by the Arab countries of the greater Middle

East. We predicted that this shift in visual perspective would create perceptions of underdog status, which would in turn predict support for the underdog side.

### Method

**Participants.** Sixty University of South Florida undergraduates (47 women, 13 men) completed the survey in groups of up to 4 in exchange for course credit.

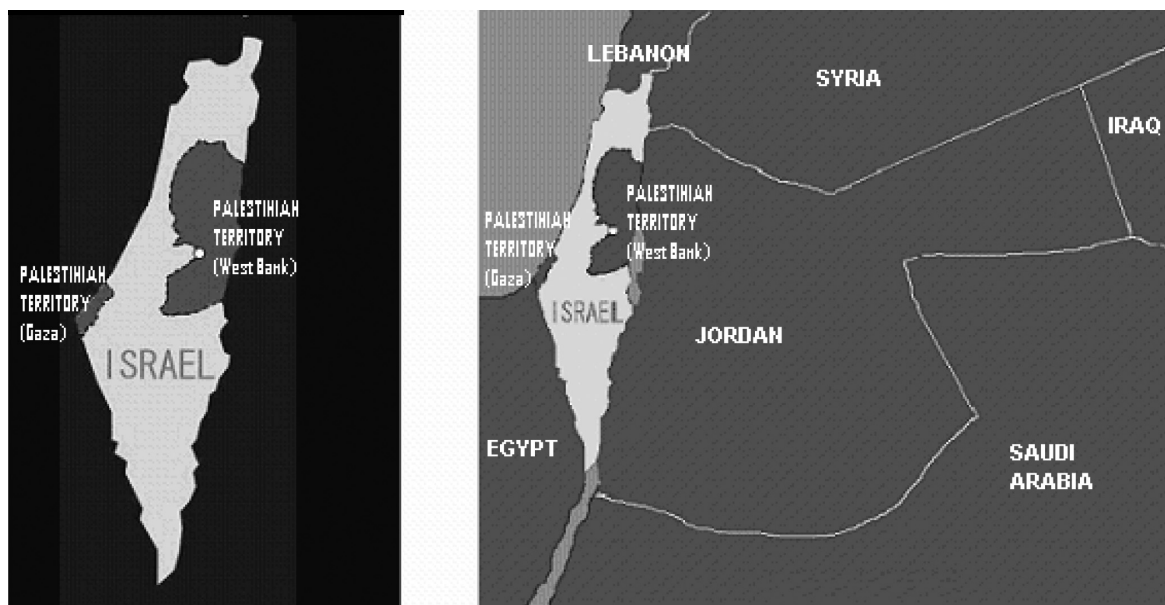
**Procedure.** Participants read a brief (one-page) essay outlining the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the perspectives of both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Accompanying the essay was a map of the region “for reference” (see Figure 1 for maps). Half the participants viewed a map of Israel (in light color) and the Palestinian territories (in dark color) alone (Israel-focused map). On this map, Israel took up the large majority of the visual space. The other half of the participants received the same map pulled back in perspective to now show Israel (in light color) much smaller in the visual space, surrounded by the countries of the greater Middle East (in dark color; region-focused map). Participants were asked to study the map carefully because they would later be asked to redraw it from memory. This instruction was meant to increase the salience of the picture. We predicted that when viewing Israel as large (Israel-focused map), participants would perceive the Palestinians as underdogs; consequently, they would show more sympathy for and support to the Palestinians compared with the Israelis. In contrast, those viewing Israel as small (region-focused map) would perceive the Israelis as underdogs; consequently, they would show more support for and sympathy to them.

After reading the essay, participants were asked to give their opinions about the conflict, including how familiar they were with the conflict, which side they supported most, how much sympathy they felt for each side, and which side they perceived to be the underdog. Next, participants drew the map from memory in a box on a separate page. Finally, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire.

### Results and Discussion

In general, participants reported being “not very” to “somewhat” familiar with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before reading the essay ( $M$  familiarity = 2.60, on a 5-point scale). The two experimental groups did not differ in their familiarity,  $t(58) = 1.24, p > .20$ .

Participants were asked which side they considered the underdog in the conflict. When Israel was portrayed as large on the map, 70% saw the Palestinians as the underdog. In contrast, when Israel was portrayed as small on the map, 62.1% saw Israel as the underdog,  $\chi^2(1, N = 59) = 6.11, p < .02$ .

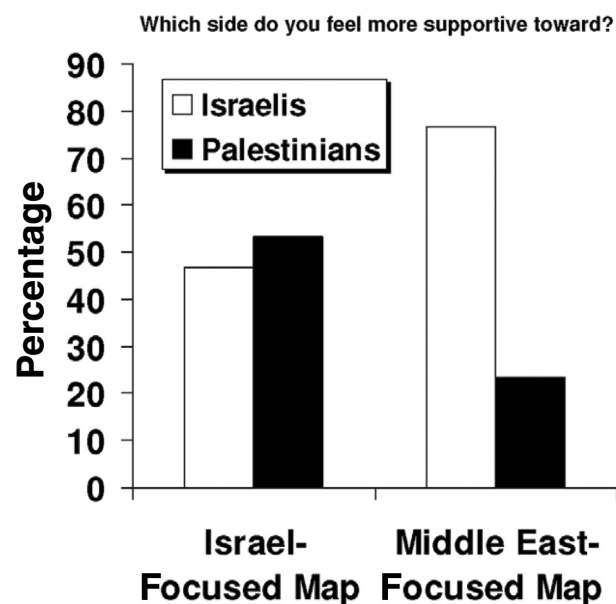


**Figure 1** Israel-focused and Middle East-focused maps used in Study 2.

Participants were also asked toward which group they felt more supportive. When Israel was portrayed as large on the map, 53.3% were more supportive toward the Palestinians. In contrast, when Israel was portrayed as small on the map, 76.7% were more supportive toward Israel,  $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 5.71, p < .02$ ; see Figure 2).

Participants were asked to rate how much sympathy they felt toward each side in the conflict on a 1 (*none*) to 5 (*a lot*) scale. When Israel was portrayed as large on the map, participants expressed slightly more sympathy toward the Palestinians (3.77 vs. 3.73), but when Israel was portrayed as small on the map, participants expressed more sympathy toward the Israelis (4.00 vs. 3.30). This interaction was significant,  $F(1, 58) = 4.54, p < .04$ .

As a follow-up, we also collected baseline data on an additional sample of 30 participants who went through the same procedure without seeing any map accompanying the text. The support and sympathies of this group fell in between the other two conditions. That is, 56.7% of this group saw the Israelis as the underdog and 56.7% supported the Israelis over the Palestinians. This lack of a strong consensus suggests (along with the somewhat low levels of familiarity) that opinions were malleable, an interpretation borne out by the experimental manipulation. Interestingly, when comparing the sympathy ratings of the baseline control with the two map conditions, the data suggest that the map



**Figure 2** Support for Israelis or Palestinians as a function of relative visual salience of each on a map, Study 2.

manipulation increased support for the perceived underdog rather than decreased support for the perceived advantaged group. That is, in the baseline condition, sympathy for the Palestinians was rated 3.30,

identical to when Israel was portrayed as small. When the Palestinian territories were portrayed as small, support for Palestinians increased to 3.77. Sympathy for Israelis was rated 3.53 in the baseline condition, compared to 3.73 when the Palestinian territories were portrayed as small and 4.00 when Israel was portrayed as small. In short, portraying a group as small increased sympathy, but portraying the group as large did not decrease sympathy.

In summary, as in Study 1, participants were more favorable to an entity they considered to be an underdog. Despite reading the same essay, when an accompanying map highlighted Israel as small, people showed greater support for Israel; when the accompanying map highlighted the Palestinian territories as small, people shifted their support to the Palestinians. Whether an underdog is defined as having a past history of little success (Study 1) or as relatively small in stature (Study 2), support increases when an entity is portrayed as disadvantaged relative to its counterpart.

### STUDY 3: ATTRIBUTIONS FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF UNDERDOGS AND TOP DOGS

Having demonstrated the appeal of underdogs, in our next studies we attempted to shed light on underlying motivations for underdog support. In Study 3, we explored how underdog status changes the way performance is viewed. Participants watched a clip of a basketball game, and they later made attributions about the performance of each team. We predicted that underdogs would be seen as having less ability than favored competitors, but as a compensatory belief, people would attribute greater effort to underdogs' performance. This type of attributional pattern would be consistent with research from system justification theory that demonstrates people are motivated to see positive attributes in entities with some disadvantaged status, thus maintaining or restoring a sense of justice about the disparity (e.g., "poor but honest"; Kay & Jost, 2003; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Jost & Kay, 2005). Anecdotally, commentators often note the qualities of character, spirit, courage, or "heart" that underdogs seem to exhibit, seemingly to compensate for the presumed lesser ability. As a recent example, after the largely unknown U.S. college men's basketball program from George Mason University defeated the heavily favored Connecticut team to reach the coveted Final Four in 2006, *Sports Illustrated* observed that, "they lacked in size, athleticism and history relative to their opponent, but the 11th-seeded Patriots made up for it with tenacity" (Associated Press, 2006).

Several researchers have looked at the antecedents and implications of effort and ability attributions in past work (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Yee & Eccles, 1988). Dweck and colleagues (Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998), for instance, have shown that people's implicit theories about effort and ability can motivate goals and behaviors. For example, praising students for intelligence (ability) can undermine performance compared to praise for effort (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Similarly, Weiner and Kukla (1970) found that students described as low in ability but high in effort received especially high praise. In contrast to work where participants were provided attributions for the performance of targets, we asked participants to estimate effort and ability while watching the performance of a presumed underdog or favorite.

If people do indeed attribute greater effort to underdogs than to top dogs, a related question concerns the mediational role that effort might play in connection with status and support. We predicted that attributions of effort would mediate the relationship between group status and degree of support. That is, perhaps underdogs are supported at least in part because they are seen as exerting more effort. It has been established that people give more positive evaluations to people when their performance is attributed to effort rather than ability. Wann et al. (2002), for instance, found that participants tended to like athletes whose performance they deemed largely to be the result of hard work as opposed to natural talent. Therefore, attributions of effort might explain the relationship between low status and liking.

#### Method

*Participants.* Fifty-seven undergraduates (39 women, 18 men) participated in the study in exchange for course credit.

*Procedure.* Participants entered the lab alone or in pairs. The experimenter began by explaining that the study would involve watching a video clip of a basketball match and then making some judgments. Participants then read a short vignette describing a long, fierce, and lopsided rivalry between two European pro basketball teams: Maccabi Tel Aviv and CSKA Moscow (the underdog designation was counterbalanced such that half the participants thought Tel Aviv was the underdog and half thought Moscow was the underdog). The two teams were described as competing in an important championship game. Participants read that Tel Aviv (or Moscow) had won all 15 of their previous playoff matches and that oddsmakers gave them a 90% chance of victory in this championship. After reading the vignette, participants were asked to report which team they considered the underdog; 93% agreed that



the team that had lost all the previous matches was the underdog. Immediately following this, participants were brought to individual rooms to watch a 15-min video clip of the supposed game between the two teams that was taken from an actual televised game. Throughout the clip, the score remained close, and it was not known who eventually won the game from the segment shown. We chose the Moscow versus Tel Aviv match because it was assumed that most participants would be unfamiliar with the teams (and indeed, post-experiment debriefings confirmed this expectation).

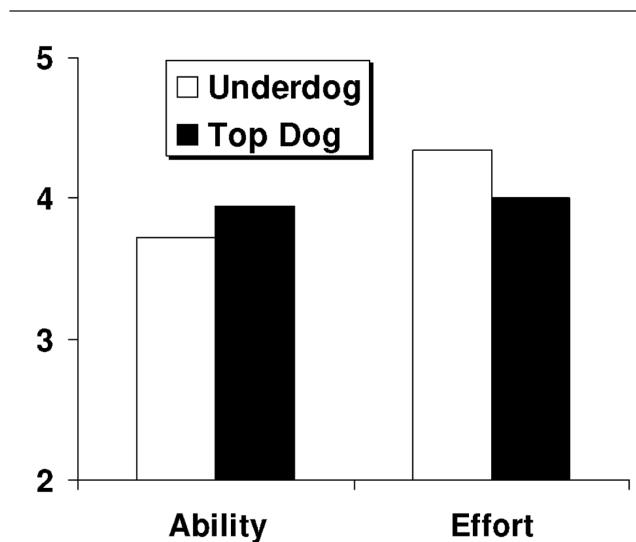
At the conclusion of the clip, participants were asked to make attributions about the performance of each team. Specifically, three questions asked about the ability of the teams: How much natural ability did this team have? How much intelligence did this team show? How talented were they? In addition, four questions asked about the effort put forth by the teams: How much hustle did this team show? How much effort did this team put forth? How much heart did this team show? How much did they want to win? All questions were answered on 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) Likert scales.

Finally, participants were asked how much they would like each team to win the game on a 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) scale.

## Results

**Liking to win.** Consistent with the previous studies, teams portrayed as underdogs were supported significantly more ( $M = 7.09$ ) than top dogs ( $M = 3.91$ ),  $F(1, 54) = 47.14$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, participants supported the Israeli team ( $M = 6.27$ ) more than the Russian team ( $M = 4.73$ ), regardless of status,  $F(1, 54) = 11.00$ ,  $p < .01$ . The Country  $\times$  Status interaction was also significant, such that the underdog Israeli team was favored over the Russian team to a greater degree than the underdog Russian team was favored over the Israeli team,  $F(1, 54) = 11.00$ ,  $p < .01$ .

**Attributions for performance.** Responses to the questions about natural ability, intelligence, and talent were combined into an aggregate ability dimension ( $\alpha = .76$ ), and responses to the questions about hustle, effort, heart, and wanting to win were combined into an aggregate effort dimension ( $\alpha = .86$ ). As predicted, simple effects tests showed that top dogs ( $M = 3.95$  on a 5-point scale) were perceived to possess significantly more ability than underdogs ( $M = 3.72$ ),  $F(1, 55) = 7.34$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, underdogs were perceived to exert significantly more effort ( $M = 4.34$ ) than top dogs ( $M = 4.00$ ),  $F(1, 55) = 8.22$ ,  $p < .01$ . The Attribution (effort vs. ability)  $\times$  Team (underdog vs. top dog) interaction was significant,  $F(1, 55) = 33.62$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3** Attributions for the performance of supposed underdogs and top dogs, Study 3.

NOTE: The y-axis represents performance on the 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) Likert scale.

**Mediation.** To test that perceptions of effort or ability mediate the relationship between manipulated status (i.e., underdog vs. top dog) and liking, we conducted mediation analyses following the steps recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). We performed two mediation analyses, first using effort as the mediator and second using ability.

We first demonstrated that status (coded as *underdogs* = 1, *top dogs* = 2) predicted both perceived effort ( $\beta = -.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and liking to win ( $\beta = -.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When liking was regressed simultaneously on status and effort, the effect of status decreased slightly ( $\beta = -.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the effect of perceived effort on liking remained significant ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A Sobel (1982) test confirmed that the path from status to liking was reduced when perceived effort was included in the model ( $Z = -2.61$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that perceived effort is a partial, but significant, mediator of status.

We performed the same regression procedure using ability as the mediator. When both status and ability were entered into Step 3 of the regression model, underdog status continued to predict liking ( $\beta = -.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but perceptions of ability did not ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .10$ ). A Sobel (1982) test showed that the path from status to liking was not reduced significantly when we included perceptions of ability in the model ( $Z = 1.24$ , *ns*).

## Discussion

Despite watching the same video clip, participants had very different impressions about the performance of each team depending on whether they believed a team

to be an underdog or a favorite. As previous studies have shown, people watching or listening to the same event unfold can see very different things depending on their motivations and perspectives (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Stone, Perry, & Darley, 1997).

This study suggests that a motivated perception occurs such that people believe underdogs' performance reflects great effort, which tends to be associated with favorable evaluations (Farwell & Weiner, 1996; Wann et al., 2002). A mediation analysis supported the interpretation that underdogs are seen as exerting more effort than advantaged entities, and this perception of effort leads to greater liking. This begins to give us a clue as to a mechanism underlying underdog support. When we learn of a group's disadvantage, we may view its performance in such a way as to compensate for the disadvantage—that is, attributing greater effort on its part, which reinforces our liking for it.

The results of Study 3 are consistent with a fairness-based account of underdog support given that perceived greater effort on the part of underdogs may suggest factors within their control (as opposed to ability, which is less controllable), which may in turn suggest they deserve to have success. Indeed, several researchers have noted the connection between deservingness and moral evaluations of outcomes (e.g., Farwell & Weiner, 1996; Feather, 1994; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Weiner & Kukla, 1970).

#### STUDY 4: LIMITS TO THE UNDERDOG EFFECT

Study 3 suggests, albeit indirectly, that people care about the "fairness" of unequal competitive situations. When faced with unequal competitions, seeing the performance of the underdog in the best possible light restores a sense of fairness.

In our next study, we further explored motivations behind underdog support by testing the limits of this support. As we noted at the beginning of this article, underdogs can be defined as having low expectations for success, or they can be defined as being at some disadvantage. We believe this distinction, though subtle, is critical. We believe underdogs are supported because they are seen as disadvantaged, not simply because they have low expectations for success. Disadvantage arouses a sense of injustice in most people that they wish to see rectified. But what would happen if an entity with low expectations was no longer seen as disadvantaged? Would it still arouse sympathy? Would it even be seen as an underdog?

In our next study, we attempted to test whether the perception of disadvantage would moderate support for underdogs. We suggest that being seen as an underdog is driven as much (or more) by considerations of relative resources as much as by expectations. David's heroism

lies with the fact that he was outmatched by his much larger and more heavily armored rival Goliath, the Texans at the Alamo were outnumbered and outarmed, and baseball's Boston Red Sox were (until their 2004 World Series victory) considered perennial underdogs to the New York Yankees in part because of their lack of success but also in part because they could not match the Yankee's richer team payroll.

If these assertions are true, people should be less likely to see a team with relatively ample resources as an underdog even if they did have low expectations for success compared to a team with few resources. And if the team is not seen as an underdog, support for that team should vanish. To test this, we manipulated both the expectations for success and relative resources of two teams. We predicted that both low expectations and low resources would contribute to the labeling of a team as an underdog (and thus supporting that team). However, when a team with low expectations also had high resources, support for the team would erode, as would the belief that the team was an underdog. Stated differently, relative resources should moderate the effect of expectations on liking.

#### Method

**Participants.** One hundred and twenty-eight University of South Florida students (101 women, 17 men, 10 unidentified) completed a questionnaire in introductory psychology classes in return for extra course credit.

**Procedure.** Participants completed a two-page questionnaire. The first page presented participants with a brief sports scenario in which they were asked to imagine two teams playing an important match. Each team's expectations and resources were manipulated such that there were four versions of the scenario. In the first version (*expectations only*), Team A was described as having a 70% chance of victory versus 30% for Team B; in the second version (*resources only*), Team A was described as having a payroll of \$100 million versus \$35 million for Team B; in the third version (*expectations and resources congruent*), Team A was described as having both a 70% chance of victory and a \$100 million payroll versus a 30% chance of victory and a \$35 million payroll for Team B; and in the fourth version (*expectations and resources incongruent*), Team A had the greater chance of victory (70%) but a lower payroll (\$35 million) compared to Team B (30% chance, \$100 million payroll). Thus, the design was a 2 (team)  $\times$  4 (scenario) design, with team being a within-subjects factor and scenario being a between-subjects factor.

Participants were asked how much they would like each team to win the game on a 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*

*much*) scale. They were also asked which team, if any, they considered the underdog.

For exploratory purposes, we also administered an individual difference measure, the 15-item Social Dominance Orientation Scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), which measures one's tendency to endorse inequality among social groups versus the belief that all groups should be equal. We included this measure to see if support for underdogs would reflect people's larger worldviews about inequality. We tested whether those who were higher in social dominance orientation would be less favorable toward underdogs.

### Results

*Liking to win.* Table 2 presents the mean ratings of desire for each team to win the game across the four conditions. In the condition pitting a low-expectations team against a high-expectations team, the low-expectations team was rated marginally higher ( $M = 6.69$ ) than the high-expectations team ( $M = 5.50$ ),  $t(31) = 1.85$ ,  $p < .08$ , replicating the basic underdog effect. Stated differently, 66% of participants favored the low-expectations team. In the condition listing only the teams' relative payrolls, the low-resources team was rated significantly higher ( $M = 6.88$ ) than the high-resources team ( $M = 4.69$ ),  $t(31) = 4.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ; that is, 69% of participants in this condition favored the low-resources team. In the third condition, expectations for victory were paired with resources such that the team with the lower expectation also had a smaller payroll. In this condition the low-expectations/low-resources team was rated significantly higher ( $M = 7.03$ ) than the high-expectations/high-resources team ( $M = 4.77$ ),  $t(30) = 3.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ; that is, 68% of participants favored the low-expectations/low-resources team. Most interesting was the condition in which resources did not match expectations for victory. When pairing a high-resources/low-expectations team ( $M = 4.33$ ) against a low-resources/high-expectations team ( $M = 5.97$ ), people rated the a low-resources/high-expectations team significantly higher,  $t(32) = 2.62$ ,  $p < .05$ ; that is, 67% of respondents favored the a low-resources/high-expectations team, reversing the common finding that teams with lower expectations for success are supported more.

*Who is the underdog?* We also asked participants which team they considered the underdog. It is not surprising that when two teams with differing expectations for success were paired (with no mention of resources), almost everyone (97%) thought the low-expectations team was the underdog. Similarly, in the resources-only condition, almost everyone (89%) thought the team with the smaller payroll was the underdog. When the team with low expectations also had the smaller payroll, this

**TABLE 2:** Desire for Each Team to Win the Game as a Function of Expectations for Success and Resources, Study 4

	Degree of Liking to Win (1–9 Scale)	
	Team A	Team B
Team A: 70% chance of victory, Team B: 30% chance of victory	5.50 (2.13)	6.69 (1.99)
Team A: high payroll, Team B: low payroll	4.69 (1.79)	6.88 (1.56)
Team A: 70% chance of victory + high payroll, Team B: 30% chance of victory + low payroll	4.77 (1.96)	7.03 (1.85)
Team A: 70% chance of victory + low payroll, Team B: 30% chance of victory + high payroll	5.97 (1.86)	4.33 (2.10)

team was also overwhelmingly chosen as the underdog (97%). However, when the team with low expectations but a larger payroll competed against a team with high expectations but a low payroll, participants were roughly evenly split on who should be considered the underdog. In contrast to the first three conditions, only 55% of participants rated the team with low expectations as the underdog,  $\chi^2(1, N = 116) = 25.34$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Social dominance orientation.* To explore whether individuals high on social dominance orientation would be less likely to favor underdogs, we first looked at the three versions where there was a clear underdog. Across the three versions, there was a nonsignificant trend such that higher social dominance orientation scores correlated with lower support for the underdog relative to the top dog,  $r(95) = -.17$ ,  $p = .10$ . Similarly, in the condition in which low resources were matched with high expectations, those high in social dominance orientation were slightly, but not significantly, less likely to support a low-resources/high-expectations team than a high-resources/low-expectations team,  $r(33) = -.14$ . Despite these nonsignificant correlations, we note that social dominance scores were low overall ( $M = 2.87$  on 7-point scale). In fact, 88% of the sample fell below the neutral point on the scale, and this range restriction likely limited the size of the correlations.

### Discussion

These results suggest that people do not support underdogs simply because of their lower expectations

for success but rather because of the perception of some disadvantage. In general, people wanted teams to win more when the teams had lower expectations for winning or had relatively small resources (or both). However, when a team had low expectations but high resources, they lost the participants' support. In fact, in this situation, there was no consensus about whether these teams were even considered underdogs, as only slightly more than half of participants labeled them as underdogs despite their low expectations for success. In short, although low chance of success may be necessary to be considered an underdog, if an entity has a great deal of resources, they may nonetheless lose underdog status and support.

We suggest this desire to see disadvantaged entities succeed is based on people's strong motivation to see just outcomes. In most cases of competition, a rough equality of success is considered fair, and underdogs deserve support unless an entity with low expectations has all the resources necessary to succeed. When those with low expectations have ample resources, it is much less clear where the injustice lies, or if an injustice even exists. In fact, sympathies seemed to be driven more by resource disparity than expectations.

These results parallel recent work on status legitimacy, which suggests that group members accept their low status to the extent that it is seen as legitimate (Bettencourt et al., 2001; Ellemers, Wilke, & Van Knippenberg, 1993). Like that work, we found that people were motivated to support an underdog unless the inequality was perceived as legitimate (i.e., a low-expectations group squandered its resources, in which case it deserved to lose).

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Past research on affiliation with groups has focused on groups with which people have some established connection (e.g., social ingroups). In this research tradition, there is a great deal of evidence that people are motivated to identify with successful groups and to dissociate themselves from unfavorable, unsuccessful, or stigmatized groups (Cialdini et al., 1976; Snyder et al., 1986). In contrast, the present studies addressed the question of how people would respond to groups with which they had no previous affiliation. Unlike with groups in which people are previously affiliated, in these studies people consistently chose to support underdogs, those individuals or groups at a competitive disadvantage. We demonstrated support for underdogs in both sports and international politics, using different operationalizations for underdogs. Of the various ways we defined underdogs (history of past failures, low

probabilities for future success, smaller size, fewer resources), the common denominator is that the entity is seen as disadvantaged in some way. The results of Study 4 in particular speak to the issue of what defines an underdog in the first place. Low expectations are necessary, but as Study 4 demonstrates, not everyone with low expectations is seen as an underdog. When an individual or group with low expectations has ample resources, people may perceive their position as fair and just. In short, an underdog is a figure who not only is not expected to succeed but whose disadvantage is not seen as deserved.

### *Motivations Underlying Underdog Support*

Perhaps it is not surprising that people prefer underdogs, given the numerous heroic or sympathetic portrayals of underdogs in fiction and nonfiction. What is less intuitively obvious is why people should root for underdogs, given social psychological theorizing on the link between social identification and self-esteem. We suggested one plausible theoretical perspective for understanding support for underdogs rooted in principles of justice, fairness, and deservingness.

Although the present studies provided evidence that concerns with justice and fairness play a role in underdog support, other motivations are worth considering. An alternative, or additional, motivation for supporting underdogs might derive less from abstract moral concerns about fairness and more from self-interested, rational calculations of one's own emotions. Because underdog success is by definition unexpected, this may increase the excitement of rooting for an underdog. Put simply, people may root for underdogs for the simple reason that unexpected victories are more emotionally satisfying than expected victories; conversely, expected losses are not as hard to take as unexpected losses.

The idea that people calculate their expected emotional reactions to future outcomes is supported by work on emotions and decision making, such as decision affect theory (Mellers & McGraw, 2001; Mellers, Schwartz, Ho, & Ritov, 1997) that argues that decisions are guided by the emotions people anticipate experiencing for expected and unexpected outcomes. Rooting for underdogs might be a good emotional investment because there is little to lose. The present studies were not designed to properly test this explanation, but recent evidence suggests that an affect management explanation is probably true under at least some underdog situations. Shepperd and McNulty (2002), for example, found that bad outcomes feel worse when unexpected than when expected, but good outcomes feel better when unexpected than when expected.

Still, several pieces of evidence from the present studies suggest that concerns with fairness play a role in



underdog support above and beyond self-interested emotional considerations. Study 2 showed that a political group was supported more when it was perceived to be disadvantaged by its relative size (Palestinians in Israel or Israelis in the Middle East). Given the ambiguity about any ultimate outcome in this political conflict (i.e., no clear winner or loser), it is unlikely that people's support was driven solely by their predicted emotional reaction to a victory or loss.

Study 3 showed that people are motivated to attribute favorable qualities such as effort or tenacity to underdogs as a way to compensate for their disadvantage in ability. Attributing favorable qualities to underdogs may help restore a sense of psychological justice (Kay & Jost, 2003; Kay et al., 2005). Attributions to effort may also drive support to some extent, as our mediation analysis showed (see also Wann et al., 2002; Weiner & Kukla, 1970).

In Study 4, people overwhelmingly supported a team with fewer resources, even in the condition where nothing was known about expectations, again suggesting underdog support may be driven more by perceptions of undeserved disadvantage than by a mere self-focused calculation of the emotional payoff for supporting a team with low expectations. This seems especially apparent given that when a team with low expectations had greater resources than an opponent, it was no longer supported, and only about half of participants saw it as an underdog.

In short, we suggest that the types of underdog scenarios faced by participants in the present experiments make justice concerns salient. A world where outcomes are distributed unequally may strike most as unjust (see Lerner & Miller, 1978) unless this inequality is seen as deserved. Unaffiliated observers have little direct power to influence performance and thus to help restore fair or just outcomes. However, even if we cannot directly control outcomes, we can have some degree of secondary control by actively supporting those at a disadvantage.

### *Underdog Support or Schadenfreude?*

Despite consistent evidence for the underdog effect in these studies, an issue remains: Rather than being strongly supportive of underdogs, might people instead root against dominant entities (this would be consistent with the sentiment, "my favorite team is whoever is playing the Yankees")? If this is the case, the finding that people prefer underdogs is really the default option given that underdogs happen to be (by definition) the opponents of dominant entities. This is also a justice-based explanation, but here the affective reaction is driven by the person or group on top, not on the bottom. As recent research on *schadenfreude* has demonstrated

(Brigham et al., 1997; Feather, 1994; Leach et al., 2003; Smith et al., 1996), under at least some circumstances, people do in fact take pleasure in seeing high achievers fail. Feather and Sherman (2002) have distinguished between envy and resentment, and they argued that *schadenfreude* is more closely related to the latter. In their formulation, deservingness played a big role in whether people would take pleasure in another's misfortune, again consistent with our belief that emotional reactions to disparities may be largely the result of wishing to correct perceived injustices.

In Study 2 we did find some evidence that framing Israel or the Palestinian territories as an underdog (through a visual perspective manipulation) led to great support relative to a control, but framing either as the dominant group did not lessen support, suggesting underdog sympathy was a stronger motivation than *schadenfreude*. The present studies were not designed to sort out definitively whether preferences for underdogs derive mainly from attraction to the disadvantaged or resentment toward the advantaged. We suspect both processes may operate, depending on the salient features of the situation. For example, when one competitor clearly has many more resources than is normal (e.g., a huge corporate chain store), this might focus our attention on the top dog and lead to resentment and *schadenfreude*; on the other hand, when one competitor is clearly lacking in physical or material resources (e.g., an unusually slight athlete or a politician with limited funds), our attention may be drawn to the underdog, in which case we might truly root for their success. These are speculations that await further testing.

### *Implications and Future Directions*

The present studies suggest that situations of competitive inequality make concerns with fairness and justice salient. However, the evidence for the arousal of these emotions was indirect. To further hone in on these motivations, future research should include direct process measures of perceived fairness, deservedness, justice, and responsibility to examine more specifically the motivational and emotional mediators of support for underdogs.

Although most of the participants across these studies supported underdogs, there was individual variation, and future research might further explore individual differences that might plausibly account for these differing tendencies, such as egalitarianism, liberal political orientation, just world beliefs, or belief in the Protestant work ethic. Although our one attempt to measure individual differences in the belief that all groups should be equal (social dominance orientation; Pratto et al., 1994) did not correlate strongly with support for underdogs,

it is worth noting that our participant population was generally low in social dominance orientation, supporting our belief that people are generally motivated to believe that groups should be equal.

Addressing the limitations of underdog appeal will also help us understand the nature of emotional support for social competitors. The present research suggests that relative resources are an important factor to consider. Another potentially important factor is the size of the disparity between competitors. On one hand we might suspect that as a disparity grows between two competitors, our sense of injustice would also grow, leading us to pull for an underdog even more. On the other hand, when a disparity becomes so large that defeat is all but assured for an underdog, one may conclude that the emotional investment is not worth the effort. It is not uncommon for fans to refuse to watch or attend games if they think their team has little chance of winning (Wann, Roberts, & Tindall, 1999).

Understanding third-party judgments of social competition or conflict has important implications for understanding intergroup relations and the shaping of public opinion about conflict in general. For example, in the area of international relations, emotional alliances with underdogs may help explain why the United States will have a difficult time garnering support in the court of world opinion during times of conflict, regardless of its policies, by virtue of its being the lone superpower. Similarly, people's reactions to the Arab-Israeli conflict are probably heavily influenced by their perception of which side is the underdog, as we showed in Study 2. In fact, savvy political leaders may attempt to increase support for their cause by framing their side as a disadvantaged underdog.

The present studies are an initial step in attempting to understand underdog support, but the implications for understanding people's reactions to parties in conflict or competition are broad. We hope future research will shed light on why people support underdogs, why others do not, and when disadvantaged groups lose support.

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Received July 31, 2006

Revision accepted May 12, 2007