PSY 252 Social Psychology Essay 2 Option 3: Ingroups and Outgroups in High School Athletics

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While I was in high school, I participated in both cross country running and track and field. These sports took place at different times during the year, cross country in the fall and track in the spring. Depending on the season I identified myself as belonging to one of those "ingroups," and along with that my "outgroup" would change. During cross country season, the outgroup was the football team, as those were the two most popular sports in fall. During track season, most cross country runners, including myself, identified as "long distance" runners (the "track"), while most of the football players would either do upper body strength events such as shot-put, or short distance sprints (the "field"). Although we all went to the same high school, associating yourself with different sports would determine how people thought of you. A cross country runner would be thought of as smart and a good student, while a football player would be labeled a "meathead."

During cross country season, most of us negatively stereotyped the football players so we could feel like our sport was superior. This is consistent with social identity theory, because we categorized into ingroup-outgroup, where the cross country team is the ingroup and the football team is the outgroup.. We would say things like "all football players complain so much about their workouts, but they could never do a cross country workout," or "all of the football players have a lower GPA than we do." These stereotypes definitely influenced how we interacted with the football players. It was very common for the varsity cross country guys to challenge the football players to a "practice switch," where the two people would practice with the other's team for a day. This was never actually done (due to coaches not allowing it), so the cross country team was able to keep their stereotypes intact. Most of the students were still very good friends, even though they were on different teams, and these stereotypes were very noticeable in the friendly teasing that occurred. After practice, the friends would challenge each other to do a part of the other friend's training, and see who would win. This usually included events such as 400 meter sprints, or pushups.

The football team had a similar negative stereotype of the cross country kids. They thought all of the cross country runners were slow sprinters, something that the football team excelled at. Also, they thought we were all very weak, and could never make it through an entire day of football practice. While the cross country team excelled in running and endurance, the football team had much more training in upper body strength. The stereotypes each group had of each other were greatly exaggerated though, as I'm sure a cross country runner could get through an entire football practice, and a football player could do an entire cross country run. We just stereotyped the other sport to make us feel superior.

The cross country team greatly benefited from having the football "outgroup." Social identity theory says that "us-them" distinctions can improve the group's collective self-esteem. For us, it boosted solidarity, increased our motivation to run, and when running on the track it increased our desire to perform well. Most of the runners on the cross country team had the same negative stereotypes of football players, and that helped to bring the group closer together. The stereotype that football players can't run long distances like we could also improved our motivation to do just that. While going on a long seven mile run, we would remind ourselves that we were doing something that the football players couldn't do, and even though we were very tired we knew we could possibly poke fun at the football players when we got back. A similar situation occurred on track workout days, where the cross country team would work on their shorter distance runs. The football team practiced in the middle of the track where the football field was, and we would do our track workout on the track itself. Having the football players in plain sight made their presence very salient to the group, and we wanted to make sure we did well so they couldn't make fun of us. Additionally, by performing very well on the track, we could show off in front of the football players. We could intimidate them with our short distance speed, which made us feel good because we were disproving their stereotype that cross country runners were slow sprinters.

One of the main conditions for reducing prejudice that was lacking between the cross country and football groups was the seeking of common goals. Most of the cross country races and football games would overlap, so we were always competing for attendance to the events. Our goal was to bring as much attention to our school as possible, and show how good the entire school was. Although this goal was shared with the football team, we also wanted to show that cross country was better than football, and attendance to the events played a huge role in determining what sport we thought was better. If the races and football games occurred at different times, the cross country team would've gone to support the football players, and I'm sure they would have done the same. This would've reduced our prejudice against them, because we would've been trying to achieve the same goal of making the school look good.

However, during the track and field season, having constant contact with the "field" team greatly reduced prejudice. This is consistent with the contact hypothesis, because the two parts of the team were around each other so often, prejudice was reduced. Unlike cross country and football, the entire track team practiced in the same area at the same time. This allowed the two previously separated groups (cross country and football, now "track" and "field" respectively) to get to know each other better. The ingroup-outgroup prejudice was reduced because both groups saw that the other group wasn't as different from them as they had previously thought.