Baseball Fan Loyalty and the Pillars of Existence

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INTRODUCTION
The origins of existentialism are as nebulous as the theory itself, which, unlike most theories of personality, is not a uniform philosophy of human behavior (Rychlak, 1981). Perhaps fittingly, some of the forefathers of this movement have themselves resisted being labeled existentialists. Indeed, the movement in general arose as a reaction to other schools of psychology that fell “into the common error of distorting human beings in the very effort of trying to help them (May & Yalom, 1989, p.363).” Difficulties notwithstanding, I will attempt to give a brief illustration of the history of existentialism, as well as a basic outline of its application to personality theory. This outline will serve as a conceptual framework whereby elements of baseball fan participation can be examined in light of their relevance to existential psychological theory.

EXISTENTIALISM: A BRIEF HISTORY
Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher (1813-1855) is often credited as the father of existentialism (Rychlak, 1981). Kierkegaard is most well known for his criticism of the highly intellectualized rationalist philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). Kierkegaard reacted against Hegel’s philosophy, positing that the human condition could not reasonably studied without examining the spontaneous, emotional, and unpredictable elements of life. Some time after the initial contributions of Kierkegaard, a new wave of theorists, most of whom worked closely with Husserl, continued to advance existential ideas. Although they did not agree on some important points, each of these theorists focused on concepts such as being, ontology, and existence that have come to define what can be loosely referred to as the existential movement (Rychlak, 1981). During the 1940’s and 1950’s, a number of psychologists and psychiatrists in Europe, began to adopt some of the ideas of the aforementioned thinkers and attempted to apply them to their studies of human behavior. These individuals believed that the prevailing psychological ideas of the day, such as Freudian drive theory and Jungian archetypes were overly simplistic and reductionistic, and tended to overlook important aspects of the person of the client in their attempts to explain them. It was the desire of these mental health professionals to “not fall into the common error of distorting human beings in the very effort of trying to help them (May & Yalom, 1989, p. 363).” The writings and theorizing of modern-day existential psychologists such as May, Yalom, and Frankl, continues the focus on broad themes such as death, anxiety, and meaning, while attempting to recognize and respect the uniqueness and unpredictability of each client.

EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY – A BRIEF OVERVIEW
As previously mentioned, existential theory resists “pigeonholing” clients, and is fundamentally opposed to some reductionistic and
mechanistic elements of psychological practice as currently constituted (e.g. – treatment manuals). Thus, it stands to reason that existential theory is difficult to standardize and does not rely on formulaic conceptions of human behavior. Although existential psychology rests on common theoretical underpinnings rather than a specific set of techniques, Irvin Yalom attempts to describe some universal elements of this theory in his seminal work Existential Psychotherapy (1981). This work is the closest approximation of a uniform description of an approach that resists uniformity at its core. As this book has attempted to standardize this sometimes ethereal worldview, I will use the basic structure, as presented by Yalom, as a framework from which to make comparisons to baseball fan participation. To summarize the basic framework of existential personality theory as proposed by Yalom (1981), the conflict between an individual and the “givens” of existence accounts in large part for their adjustment and satisfaction with life. Yalom describes four “givens” or “ultimate concerns” that each of us most confront and come to terms with; death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness. It is through confrontation with and resolution of these conflicts that an individual begins to live a meaningful existence. In the following sections, I will give a brief description of each of these four existential pillars, and use this frame of reference to draw conclusions about the existential significance of baseball fan participation and team loyalty.

DEATH

Death is perhaps the most obvious and most important of the four existential givens. Like all living beings, humans are subject to death, despite our wish to live and persist in our own being. However, unlike other living things, we have an awareness of the brevity and fragility of our lives, a concept which can either lead us to live more fulfilled lives, or to cope maladaptively with the inevitability of our own demise. Our simultaneous wish to live and knowledge that we will someday die, has serious negative implications if handled incorrectly. Existential theorists believe that we erect defenses against death awareness, and that some of these defenses are denial-based, pathological and may have consequences on character development (May & Yalom, 1989). Optimally, an individual will confront the imminence of their own death, and use this as a “boundary experience” that will promote a life more passionately and fully lived. As Yalom points out in The Gift of Therapy (2002), “though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us (p. 126).”

The relationship between death anxiety and baseball fan participation may not be readily apparent, however, a closer look at the literature shows some interesting correlations. Ernest Becker, noted cultural anthropologist, posits a number of ways in which we attempt to deal with the anxiety of our own death in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, The Denial of Death (1987). First, Becker contends that we attempt to live on in symbolic ways through our collective allegiance to a group that shares a common goal. Historically, examples of such groups have been countries, political groups, and religious groups that share a common history, worldview, and represent themselves in recognizable symbolic ways. However, it is not difficult to see how this same idea pertains to a baseball team. Consider for instance, the “Red Sox Nation”;
these fans share a common history (of losing, for many years), common goals (beating the Yankees), and common symbols (red and blue colors, “B” cap, etc...) whereby they can identify themselves as members of this cohesive unit. As individuals ally themselves with the “Red Sox Nation”, they transcend the smallness and fragility of humanity in a symbolic way, thereby becoming “larger than life.” Allegiance to a given team also allows an individual to pin their own mortality to the perceived immortality of that organization. The team has existed before, which gives the individual a sense of tradition, and the team will likely exist after he or she is gone, which gives that individual a sense of belonging to something permanent and transcendent.

Becker also asserts (1987) that aligning our lives with something heroic is another way in which we seek to thwart our nagging death anxiety. By feeling a part of something that seems to transcend the bounds of human possibility, we delude ourselves into thinking that we can become something greater than a mere mortal. Certainly, baseball is full of “heroism” of sorts, and daily highlight shows emphasize dramatic feats of athletic accomplishment; eye-popping defensive plays, and towering home runs. By focusing on, and feeling part of, the accomplishments of the athletically gifted and the powerful, we assuage our fears about our puniness and finitude. In this same vein, even the meanest of professional baseball players is extremely athletically gifted when compared to the average baseball fan. Further, most players are between the age of 20 and 40, with few playing after their late 30’s. Associating with these individuals as a fan, may allow someone to ignore obvious indications of his or her own aging (e.g. – thinning hair, wrinkles, etc…) by identifying with an image of a far more powerful, vibrant human being. Thus, by following and idolizing the young, healthy, and athletically gifted, we are able to turn our eyes away from other indications of our own mortality.

Finally, Becker (1987) postulates that one final way that we seek to overcome our natural fears of death is to conquer or defeat someone else. Becker asserts that as we come to dominate someone who is symbolically different than us, we manifest, if only briefly, our own superiority and invulnerability. In so doing, we are able to set aside our anxiety and fears about our temporality and physical imperfections. The parallels to baseball here are obvious, if “our” team is able to defeat the opposing team, for a moment “we” are victorious and superior. This may, in part, explain the proliferation of Yankees fans as compared to fans of other teams. After all, if our goal is to lose consciousness of our own vulnerability by pairing ourselves with a powerful organization, it stands to reason that many would choose a team with deep pockets and a bulging trophy case.

**ISOLATION**

Existential isolation, as conceptualized by Yalom is fundamentally different than “isolation” as it is used in the vernacular. Existential isolation refers to the fundamental, unbridgeable gulf that exists between human beings. Simply put, the living and dying that each of us do, must be done most fundamentally alone (Yalom, 1981). Certainly, we can have close interpersonal relationships and valuable affiliations with clubs and other larger organizations that contribute to our happiness and
personal growth. But no matter how much we are loved, or how close we are to a significant other, at some point they cannot do our living for us. May and Yalom explain the application of this concept in their article, “Existential Psychotherapy,” “If one acknowledges one’s isolated situation in existence and confronts it with resoluteness, one will be able to turn lovingly toward others. If, on the other hand, one is overcome with dread in the face of isolation, one will not be able to turn toward others, but instead will use others as a shield against isolation (p.379).”

This realization, much like the other givens, is both empowering and frightening. On one hand, being fundamentally our own entity means that we are in charge of our destiny in important ways. Conversely, fundamental isolation means that the rocky road of life must be faced alone at some level, when we may most long for another to relieve us of our cross. People sometimes react to the reality of existential isolation by attempting to avoid it. Most commonly this is seen in cases of pathological neediness, a history of enmeshed relationships, and sexual acting out. Sadly, these attempts at fusing with others do not relieve these individuals of their loneliness, as they fail to address the fundamental reality of our separateness.

Much as some individuals seek to overcome their loneliness by becoming one with another person, a fan may seek to fight feelings of isolation by becoming intensely loyal to a preferred team. Indeed, membership has its privileges, as a simple profession of allegiance gives the individual access to a large body of like-minded individuals, a team full of talented athletes, and most importantly, a context in which he or she undeniably belongs. Notice the word choice of a devout fan who has recently watched his or her favorite team win an important game. Typically the chant is, “We won! We won!” The person has so identified him or herself with the team, that they actually give themselves some credit in the victory. This perceived unity with the team may be an attempt at overcoming what the client may be sensing at a deep level; that they are truly alone.

This is certainly not to suggest that all fan behavior is an effort to overcome existential isolation; only that fan loyalty is an effective way to join a large, pre-existing group of individuals that is symbolically and teleologically unified. If done from a place of strength and self-awareness, the rewards can be immense. If done as a clingy reaction to fear of isolation, the results will likely be unsatisfactory. As mentioned earlier, the “I” of the fan may quickly fade into the “We” of the team, an occurrence that may have actual socialization benefits but may also serve as a sort of “faux intimacy.” The relative “healthiness” or “unhealthiness” of this behavior is dependent on the fan’s level of involvement and how it affects their interactions with the important elements of their existence.

FREEDOM

Freedom, in the existential sense, is different than the freedom we typically speak of. Typically, we do not think of freedom as a source of anxiety. In America, freedom is spoken of in reverent terms and is largely seen as what undergirds the greatness of our country. However, freedom in the existential sense, refers to the “groundlessness” of our
existence, and our attendant responsibility to create a meaningful worldview. As May and Yalom state (1989), “Freedom refers to the fact that the human being is responsible for and the author of his or her own world, own life design, own choices and actions (p.377).” Simply put, life does not come with an instruction manual, which then makes it our responsibility to mold and shape our lives in meaningful ways. The anxiety that comes with the realization of this freedom, can either embolden us to move forward, proactively shaping a world in which to operate, or can be debilitating in that we realize that, in a real sense, the weight of the world is upon us. As Soren Kierkegaard famously said, “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.”

As a reaction to the groundlessness of existence, people often cling to form and structure, commonly in the form of religious and political ideologies or organizational structures. Much like a church, a political party, or a life-philosophy; loyalty to an athletic organization gives an individual a stable point to which they can anchor their existence. Like all organizations, fans of a baseball team have a culture, social norms, and a history. This structure can offer a framework from which to move about, and can assuage some of the terror of being solely responsible for one’s own life construction. To some, the comparison of team loyalty to political or religious loyalty may seem silly. However, one need look no further than the soccer riots of South America and Europe to understand that dedication to a team can be a visceral experience. Wrapped up in support of a team are often deeper-seated issues such as love of country or place and long held family traditions. This attachment to “groundedness” is a natural reaction to the amorphousness of existence, and when done in moderation can be adaptive and health promoting. However, excessively dogmatic commitment to a philosophy or organization can lead an individual to shirk the responsibility of forming a worldview from which to operate. Pathological overcommitment to an idea can also lead an individual to devalue other ways of operating, which can even lead to hostility (e.g. – soccer riots, religious wars) in the worse case scenario.

Part and parcel of our personal freedom is the responsibility that comes with it to create a personality. Far different from more biologically deterministic models of personality, existentialism proposes that each of us is “contextually agentic”, meaning that we can create a personality within the parameters of certain contextual variables (e.g. – genetic endowments, culture). While this possibility heartening, it can also be daunting, as we realize that we cannot wholly hide behind faulty genes or bad parenting as excuses for why we behave in certain ways. Again, given the difficulty of this task, humanity has often taken symbolic shortcuts en route to personality construction. For instance, owning a Rolls Royce makes symbolic statements about who we are that largely circumvent the arduous process of “from scratch” personality construction. If I own a Rolls Royce, others may assume that I am intelligent, wealthy, or industrious. Of course, they may also assume that I am pompous and frivolous, but the point remains; we associate ourselves with symbols and organizations that serve as heuristic shortcuts for making judgments about our personalities and those of others we come
in contact with. In baseball, as in luxury car ownership, the team we support says things about the person we are and wish to be.

Bearing this in mind, as I adopt an affinity for a given team and begin to take their symbols upon myself, I send myself, and others meaningful clues about my personality. Consider for instance, a fan of the St. Louis Cardinals. As a fan, they may frequently wear the symbols of their chosen team (e.g. – red hat with StL logo), thereby associating myself with a history, a place, and an attitude that I can adopt en route to personality construction. For instance, the Cardinals are the second most decorated team in World Series history, and are often commended for having a knowledgeable but amiable fan base. As a fan, one can personally and symbolically invest themself in these meanings and apply them to their own life. Much as a devotee of a religion, they can be comforted in their adoption of the attitudes and positive stereotypes of a given organization. The groundlessness of existence is effectively swallowed up in their commitment to the meaningful scaffold provided by my team allegiance.

MEANINGLESSNESS

As Yalom states in his treatise on existential therapy (1981), we are meaning seeking creatures born into a meaningless world. Each of us needs a raison d’etre but life is largely formless and allows us to create (or not create) a personal meaning that will guide our own earthly travails. Perhaps no other existential psychotherapist has spoken as poetically and as powerfully about the power of meaning as Viktor Frankl. Relating his experiences in the concentration camps of World War II, Frankl speaks to the power of the human spirit when motivated by an overarching purpose in life (2000). Rather than giving in to the absurd tragedy of his experience, Frankl maintained personal meanings such as his love of God, and his desire to teach future generations that saw him through the terrors of Auschwitz. Commonly repeating Nietzsche’s words (as quoted in Frankl, 2000), “He that has a ‘why’ to live can bear with almost any ‘how’”, Frankl became the living embodiment of the power of aligning oneself with something grander than oneself.

Fan dedication to a given team, may imbue individuals with a sense of meaning and a sense of being part of something grand. In an age where commitment to “traditional” organizations is thought to be on the decline, team loyalty may be the current secular analogue of membership to a church or civic organization. Further, fans can often feel needed by the team, as a sort of “tenth man.” Half-jokingly, fans may say that their team lost because, “I must not have been yelling loud enough” or because they missed an important game on television. While these fans likely understand the limits of their own involvement at a rational level, their wish to be needed and valued by the team may be very real and powerful. This, paired with the meaning derived from being part of a larger whole, may be powerful forces in the fan’s life. In an existence where meaning may be hard to find, the love of a baseball team may represent a sort of prepackaged end to strive toward. In closing, consider the Major League Baseball slogan of a few years past, “Major League Baseball, I Live For This!”, in reality, some of us just may.
CONCLUSION

Existential psychology, as delineated by Yalom (1981) is the intellectual offspring of existentialism, a philosophy that shares some broad common concerns if no formally accepted structure. Existential psychological theory states that much of human behavior can be described and evaluated in terms of four “givens” of existence: death, isolation, meaninglessness, and freedom. Often applied to examine maladaptive behaviors in clients, these four pillars may be of use in examining something as seemingly quotidian as baseball fan team loyalties. In reality, baseball fan allegiance to a team may have great existential significance, providing a means of ignoring death anxiety and adopting preconstructed personal meaning, among other things. This phenomenon may be a secular analogue to other, more commonly considered ways of approaching the pillars of existence, such as religious participation.

REFERENCES