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SPORT FAN SOCIA LISATION

Becoming loyal to a team

Jeffrey D. James

Introduction

If you think about the hours and hours of sports programming available on television, over the radio and via the internet, it is easy to conclude that people enjoy sports. If you review the reports of sales of sporting goods in just the United States alone, it is easy to conclude that people enjoy participating in sports. Taken together, the interest in following sports passively, as spectators, and the interest in participating in sports, provide anecdotal evidence that sport is prominent in our society and something we value. The prominence of sport is further illustrated through the various metaphors people use when speaking. For example, in a business setting it would not be unusual to hear someone say, ‘Give me a ballpark figure’, or, ‘The ball is in our court’, or, ‘Be careful not to jump the gun’. We like to watch sports, we like to play sports and we like to talk about sports. Sports are important to us, but why is this so?

The role or place of sport in society is not the focus of this work. That content is best left for another treatise. What will be focused on with this work is the idea that the importance of, or the value placed on, sport is a part of our society. As such, we communicate the importance from one generation to the next and include sport in some way, shape or form in our everyday lives. The focus of this work is socialisation and the importance of this concept for the advancement and study of sport management. More specifically, the focus is on our interest in following sports teams and the strong psychological connection so many form with sports teams. These are the folks we refer to as allegiant or loyal team fans. It seems evident that people who wear team apparel, that schedule their activities so nothing interferes with their attending or watching ‘the game’, who talk about their favourite team, who go so far as to define themselves as part of a team and proclaim, ‘I bleed scarlet and grey’ (or add your favourite team’s colours), have developed a very strong psychological connection to a sports team (Funk and James, 2001, 2006).

It is important to recognise that a person does not just ‘wake up’ one day and realise she or he is a loyal team fan. Start at the beginning, your very beginning – birth. When you were born, you had no knowledge about, understanding of, or interest in any particular sport or a sports team. You learned, through various influencing agents, about sports, teams and athletes, and developed (or not) an interest in sports. We go through a process to reach the point at which we like sports and want to follow sports teams.
The notion of process, of being socialised into sport, was illustrated for me earlier in my career. While working as a marketing director for a minor league baseball team, I watched a couple bring their three-day-old – yes, three-day-old – daughter to her first baseball game. They were so excited to begin teaching her about baseball and their favourite team. The young couple helped me understand that there is a process by which people form connections with a sports team. The preceding is one episode that influenced my desire to study socialisation as a process by which people may become loyal team fans (James, 2001).

Overview
As a starting point, some background pertaining to socialisation in general should be considered. Socialisation is a process through which people learn the attitudes, values and actions appropriate for individuals that are members of a particular society (Kenyon and McPherson, 1973). Another way to think about socialisation is that it is the means by which we learn behaviours, or roles, that are essential for participation in society (Hughes and Kroehler, 2012). In essence, socialisation is the process through which we learn what it means to be part of society and how to live and act within a given society. Socialisation is about more than sport, but socialisation is a critical process through which we as members of society learn, not just about sport and about watching and/or participating in sporting activities, but why we come to value sport and to value the roles associated with sport.

What is meant by the idea of, ‘roles associated with sport?’ Kenyon and McPherson (1973) refer to primary and secondary sport roles. A primary role includes being an athlete or playing a sport. Secondary roles include watching sporting events as a spectator, reading about sports and/or listening to sports. Such behaviours are associated with the role of sport consumer. Being a coach, referee, sporting goods retailer or a sports promoter are examples of other secondary roles, what Kenyon and McPherson refer to as producer roles. One way to think about the various sport roles, whether primary or secondary, is that our interest in sport can manifest in numerous ways. Critical questions remain to be addressed, however, including ‘how does the process of socialisation occur?’ ‘When does socialisation occur?’ ‘How has the concept of socialisation been studied within sport management?’ In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss (a) the process of socialisation in general and the theories of socialisation as background for better understanding (b) sport and socialisation and (c) previous work that has been done on sport and socialisation, which leads to (d) my specific study of becoming a loyal team fan. The final section includes suggestions and ideas for future work with the topic.

Process

Socialisation in general
To better understand socialisation in general it is important to address two elements: theories of socialisation and agents of socialisation. The theories are important for understanding the process of socialisation. The latter include understanding what socialising agents are and how various agents facilitate the socialisation process. Both elements are important for understanding how socialisation occurs.
Theories of socialisation

Three theories commonly associated with socialisation are social learning theory (Bandura, 1971), cognitive development theory (Piaget, 1970) and symbolic interactionism (Hughes and Kroehler, 2012). With social learning theory there is an emphasis on conditioning and observational learning as mechanisms through which various attitudes, values and roles develop. Those emphasising cognitive development theory purport that socialisation proceeds differently based on the stage or phase of development. Symbolic interactionists focus on symbolic (subjective) meanings imposed on objects, behaviours and events; from this view attitudes, values and roles are socially constructed.

It is not within the scope of this work to review the three theories. Instead, I emphasise how social learning theory and cognitive development theory served as the guiding framework for the study of socialisation in sport contexts. I incorporated tenets of social learning theory in my work because it seemed obvious from a review of previous research on socialisation in general, and sport socialisation specifically, that elements of learning and modelling would be important to understanding becoming a loyal team fan. I focused on cognitive development theory as a result of ‘dissecting’ loyalty. With even a brief review of previous research pertaining to loyalty (c.f., Day, 1969; Jacoby, 1971), you would recognise the multi-dimensional nature of loyalty, notably the attitudinal and behavioural dimensions. Thinking about what is involved in forming attitudes, and attitudes influencing behaviour, I recognised that cognitive development would play a role in becoming a loyal team fan. With a reasonable understanding of socialisation, including the theoretical tenets that would frame my work, the next step was to consider the role of various agents in the socialisation process.

Socialising agents

The individuals, groups and institutions that are part of, and which create, the social context in which we learn attitudes, values and roles, are socialising agents. Socialising agents help us learn what the values and norms are in a particular society, and the roles or positions within the social structure, including being a fan of a sports team. The socialising agents commonly identified include family, peers, school (education) and media. To better understand the impact of socialising agents, think about your favourite sports team. How did that team become important to you? Did your father or other family members teach you about the team? Do you have the same favourite team as your father or other family member? Think about the sports you like to participate in – how did you learn about a particular sport? Did a sibling or peer play that sport? Did you learn about a sport in school? Our engagement with family, friends and the media contributes to what we think and believe and how we behave.

One other point to consider regarding socialising agents, and the process of socialisation overall, is that agents influence us throughout our life, which, said another way, simply means that socialisation occurs throughout one’s life. We learn about the attitudes, values, norms and roles of our society, literally, from the day we are born through to the day we die. Much of our socialisation regarding core beliefs, norms and values occurs early in life. That does not preclude, however, learning about new roles (e.g., progressing from being an elementary school student, to a middle school student, to a high school student, to a college student), accepting new norms (e.g., communicating in shorthand via texting) and changing one’s attitude towards a subject (e.g., rules governing the administration of college athletics began in part to address the idea that students competing as athletes should not be paid; today advocates are lobbying to pay students involved in college athletics). Socialisation is applied to many topics, including sport. So, what about sport and socialisation?
Sport and socialisation

For anyone involved in the study of sport and socialisation, there is an understanding that the elements are generally considered from one of two perspectives: socialisation through sport and socialisation into sport. The former involves the use of sport as a tool or platform through which a person learns values and norms that are important within one’s society. For example, values associated with sport include learning the importance of teamwork, learning to deal with defeat, learning discipline, the value of hard work, just to name a few. Socialisation into sport encompasses the study of how individuals come to value sport, better understanding the place and importance of sport in one’s society. The latter topic is our primary focus: better understanding of how people come to value sport in general and sports teams more specifically.

What do we mean when we write about or say that ‘sport is important to someone?’ Think about the following example. I know a man for whom baseball is really important: seriously, really, really important. During one of the seasons I worked as a marketing director for an AA baseball team, this man, who was a season ticket holder and had been since the team first began playing, had a son who scheduled a summer wedding. The wedding date was set before the baseball schedule was released. Upon learning the team’s schedule, there was recognition that there was a conflict; the wedding was scheduled the same evening as a home baseball game. The father gave the couple three choices: (a) change the time of the wedding; (b) change the date of the wedding; or (c) have the wedding without him. Being at the baseball game was important to that man. When we say that a sport or team is important to someone, what we generally mean is that the sport or team is something that a person thinks about, spends time participating in or following, something a person talks about and invests his or her resources in (e.g., spending money to buy team merchandise or game tickets).

As noted earlier in the chapter, it is important to recognise that a person does not just ‘wake up’ one day and realise she or he is a loyal team fan. I believed (and still do) there is a process by which people become loyal team fans. We are influenced, throughout our life, through a process of socialisation. By the way, the wedding date and time were changed. So, how is socialisation involved in people thinking of sport and sports teams as an important element in their life? What have we learned about socialisation into sport?

Previous research

Scholars have studied the topic of socialisation into sport for several decades. Kenyon and McPherson (1973), and McPherson (1976) provide information about the impact that various socializing agents had on individuals becoming sport participants. For example, Kenyon and McPherson learned that during elementary school years individuals were encouraged to participate in sports primarily by family members. For those participating as college athletes, peer reinforcement was found to be very important (Kenyon and McPherson, 1973). These studies deal with people participating in sports. McPherson also studied sport consumers – those who watch sports – and found that, among high school students, peers had a strong impact on whether males followed sports teams, while parents were more influential for female high school students.

The study of sport socialisation from the 1970s through the 1980s was conducted primarily with college students and adults. Information was based on the memories and recollections of participants in the respective studies. While other research was conducted regarding socialisation and other contexts (e.g., leisure socialisation, Hoff and Ellis, 1992; consumer socialisation, Bahn, 1986) there was essentially no other substantive work² on sport socialisation until the late 1990s, going into the new millennium.
The late 1990s provided a unique opportunity to study loyal team fans. The owner of the then Cleveland Browns decided to relocate the franchise to Baltimore, Maryland. There was a void in Cleveland: no professional football team. But there were still Browns fans. I met Dr Richard Kolbe at a consumer psychology conference and we discussed my work on becoming a loyal team fan. As a Cleveland Browns fan, he lamented the team’s move to Baltimore and wondered what would happen with the Browns fans.

When an announcement was made by the National Football League that there would be another Cleveland Browns football team, we recognised the opportunity to study those who were Browns fans, how they became Browns fans and whether they would be loyal fans of the ‘new’ team. Rick and I (Kolbe and James, 2000) conducted a study of Browns fans in an effort to better understand the factors influencing people to become fans of professional sports teams. We sought to provide answers to two questions: which people and things most strongly influence an individual’s decision to become a team fan; and in what age period does an individual typically become a team fan? Similar to previous research (e.g., McPherson, 1976), adults were surveyed and asked to think back on people, events or other agents that influenced their becoming a team fan. Participants were also asked to report at what age they thought they became a ‘true’ team fan.

We found that among individuals reporting that they became a team fan early in life, prior to the teenage years, fathers had the most influence (Kolbe and James, 2000). Those who reported becoming a team fan during their adult years noted that players and coaches for the particular team were important influences. One challenge with the earlier research, continuing with the Kolbe and James work, is the reliance on recall from adults. While there is certainly merit to the information individuals may provide, there is also a question as to the impact of various socialising agents that may not be remembered after five, ten or more years. Recognising the limitations with previous research is part of what drove me to want to better understand the process of becoming a team fan from a different approach. I realised that if our knowledge was to advance, we had to try to learn about becoming a team fan during the process, not just after the fact. To develop theory about becoming a loyal team fan would require a different approach. To address the concerns I had with previous work, and to explore the early development of team loyalty, I sought to examine when children may first begin to demonstrate team loyalty and what socialising agents influenced the initial development of team loyalty (James, 2001).

Through my research, I was trying to better understand the impact of socialising agents on the initial development of team loyalty. Additionally, I was trying to ascertain when a child would be capable of demonstrating team loyalty based on stage of cognitive development. Think back to the earlier information provided about theories of socialisation. Through my early work I incorporated both social learning theory and cognitive development theory in a study of sport socialisation. As I have already noted, being loyal to a specific sports team does not occur on a whim. Loyalty results when one has a strong psychological connection to an object, a sports team, that is persistent and resistant to change; ‘becoming loyal to a team requires a minimum level of thought and reasoning, a minimum level of cognitive development’ (James, 2001, p. 236).

The ideas I sought to test regarding cognitive development came together in large part from my thinking about the multi-dimensional nature of loyalty. I agree with the premise that loyalty is multi-dimensional (Jacoby, 1971) and, further, that in order for someone to have a strong attitude towards a sports team, there would have to be a minimum level of cognitive development. I really centred on cognitive development because I was trying to address some of the limitations with earlier research. I believed that working with individuals as they
are learning about sports teams, I could better understand the process of becoming a loyal

team fan.

Instead of relying on recall information from adults about their childhood, I interviewed
children ages five to six and eight to nine to learn whether they had a favourite sports team
and, if so, whether various socialising agents influenced a child’s preference for a particular team.
With respect to loyalty, I assessed whether children demonstrated psychological commitment
(based on cognitive complexity, resistance to change and volition, elements that require having
reached a particular level of cognitive development) and behavioural consistency. I talked with
the children about their interest in a variety of topics, including playing sports and following
sports teams. The interviews included questions about various socialising agents (e.g., parents,
siblings, friends) to determine whether children were aware of the preferences of others and to
gauge the way(s) in which various agents may have influenced a particular child’s socialisation
into sport, to following a specific team.

I learned that children in both age groups were aware that family members or friends did
have a favourite sports team. Children on average reported knowing their father’s favourite

team more so than other family members or friends. While not all children indicated they had
a favourite sports team, among those that did have a favourite team, the influence of a father
was most prominent. As part of the research, I attempted to sort out the manner in which
fathers influenced or socialised their children. Fathers were found to influence the children by
talking about a favourite team, watching the team on television and taking children to a game.
While the results in and of themselves were not particularly surprising, the research provided
the most direct evidence of socialisation in action in the sense that children were able to
provide information about the formation of their preferences and team loyalty during the period
in life that they were being influenced as opposed to recall studies. This type of work provides
a snapshot of what particular socialising agents had an impact on development of loyalty to a
particular sports team, and also the manner in which a particular agent (e.g., a father) influenced
a child.

In terms of theory development, a key outcome from my preliminary work was proposing
a theory about the initial development of team loyalty. Based on cognitive development theory
and social learning theory, I proposed that the development of team loyalty occurs through a
five-stage process: (a) introduction to sports and teams, (b) preference formation, (c) preference
strengthening, (d) emerging commitment and (e) identification with a team (James, 1997). Within
the theory I advanced ideas about the impact of various socialising agents and the impact of
stage of cognitive development. In the initial research I learned about the importance of ‘person
factors’ in sport socialisation: specifically, the influence of family members on the initial
development of team loyalty. From the work by Kolbe and James (2000), I was also aware of
the role of non-persons (e.g., team history, community connection). In a later project (James,
Walker and Kumina, 2009) I sought to learn more about the non-person factors.

Extensions and applications

In the 2009 project, and consistent with earlier studies, I surveyed adult sport consumers about
factors influential to the development and continuation of their sport fandom. An additional
element in the work was grouping respondents based on the degree to which they had
internalised the team as part of their identity. Consistent with previous research, I assessed the
importance of persons, specifically family members, coaches and players. In a different vein,
I also assessed the importance of non-person factors, such as a team’s history, style of play and
connection with the community, as socialising agents. A third element in this work included
assessment of factors that were believed to influence one’s continued connection with the sports team, i.e., the ongoing socialisation process.

The results were consistent with previous work; the person reported to have the most impact on someone becoming a fan of a particular team was a father. The agent next identified, at a much lower percentage, was a friend. The finding reinforced what had been consistently reported in research dealing with sport socialisation; that family members are a primary influence early in an individual’s life. The inclusion of non-person factors in the 2009 project is an example of advancing the study of sport socialisation. This facet illustrated for us that socialising agents, particularly in a sports context, may come in a variety of forms. I learned that the tradition of a team had an important influence on people thinking of the team as their favourite. The team as a representation of a particular city (‘my hometown team’) was also influential. Findings such as these help us understand on some level why people come to value sports and a particular sports team. The notions of tradition and a hometown team both provide a source of collective identity, a sense of belonging, which is a fundamental need that may be satisfied through a psychological connection with a sports team. Heere and James (2007), among others, write about the proposition that sports teams may be representative of other group identities such as one’s hometown, and provide a mechanism for satisfying a need for belonging. This latter point illustrates how my earlier ideas provided a foundation from which others developed new ideas pertaining to the connections people have with sports teams.

There is continued interest in the topic of sport socialisation. One recent project was a study of the topic across national boundaries; Parry, Jones and Wann (2014) compared the influence of socialising agents in samples from the United Kingdom, Greece, Australia, Norway and the United States. They collected information from a sample in the United Kingdom and compared the results with previous research from other countries. Parry et al. (2014) specifically examined the extent to which parents, friends/peers, school and community contributed to a person’s socialisation into the sport fan role. Consistent with previous research efforts, they asked people to rate how much influence the respective agents had on their decision to be a sport fan. The participants were also asked to complete an open-ended response item noting the most influential person or entity in their choice to be a sport fan.

The findings were consistent with previous research; in all countries, fathers were reported to have the most influence on someone becoming a sport fan, with friends cited second in terms of frequency (though at a much lower level). A notable difference was that friends were noted as more influential in Greece, Australia and Norway than family. At a minimum, such findings should lead us to question what other differences there may be in sport socialisation in different nations, or perhaps what differences there may be across cultures.

**Future directions**

So, where do we go from here? Is sport socialisation an area that merits continued attention by sport management scholars? Since it is not likely that the importance of sport and sports teams will diminish in the near future, it is important to continue our study of how people become interested in sports and teams, how loyalty forms and the impact of loyalty over time. Another issue to consider is the notion of degradation. On one hand, loyalties formed early in life are believed to persist. On the other hand, who has not noticed a change in their interest in sports and teams? Perhaps it is not one’s loyalty that changes, just one’s behaviours in relation to a sports team. Is there a lifecycle to team loyalty? If so, what might that entail?

Sport socialisation is a topic that merits our attention. To really understand what socialisation agents influence people and how, longitudinal research is needed. Efforts are needed to talk
with and observe individuals as they are being influenced, similar to my early work. When constraints prohibit such labour and time-intensive work, we can focus on more in-depth research with existing team fans. We must talk to people, listen to people telling their stories, share their memories as fans and think about their current situations and what influences them to continue as loyal team fans. Sports and sports teams are important to people; they will continue to be important to people. We would be remiss if we did not continue to advance our understanding of why we are enamored with sports and teams, and the processes by and through which we continue to pass along our interest to future generations. If you are not sure what to do next, think about two questions: Who is your favourite team? Why do you have a favourite team? Let the answers guide you into the research.

Notes

1 This chapter is a reflection on James (2001) and the work related to it.
2 Space constraints prevent an exhaustive review of all sport socialisation research. Particular works were selected in order to address specific points for discussion.
3 The James, Walker and Kuminka (2009) article was a report on research I conducted in 2002, but did not write up for publication until 2008–09, with the help of two (now former) doctoral students.

References

Sport fan socialisation

Applying sport fan socialisation theory

Haylee Uecker Mercado

The central mission of scholars is to conduct research that contributes knowledge to a scientific discipline, on the one hand, and to apply that knowledge to the practice of management as a profession, on the other (Simon, 1967). To do this well, we need to design our research so that it provides an intimate understanding of the practical problems facing the profession. Equally important, we need to appreciate and strengthen our skills in developing good theory so that research conducted about these problems will advance the knowledge that is relevant to both the discipline and the profession.

About a decade ago, I began to explore the relationships between culture and socialisation into sport. The impetus for this research came from several sources. First, as I began my pursuit of doctoral programmes in sport management, I encountered Dr Jeffrey James and his work on team loyalty and socialisation into sport. I was subsequently accepted into the programme with Dr James as my advisor. One of the first doctoral seminars I took was a sport marketing seminar that exposed me to various theories and provided me with ways in which theories were developed, in particular sport socialisation. A second reason for connecting to this theory was through a Hispanic marketing course that opened my eyes to an emerging, yet highly misunderstood, segment of the population. Finally, I was immersed into this segment through personal and professional relationships that allowed me to see the value of this line of research. I realised that there was a need to design research so that it would provide a deeper understanding of the practical problems facing the sport industry. Equally important, there was a need to appreciate and strengthen our skills in developing good theory so that research conducted about cultural problems would advance the knowledge that was relevant to both the discipline and the profession.

Application

The goal of my research agenda is to investigate the primary sport socialisation agents for multiple generations of individual Hispanic subcultures (i.e., Cuban, Puerto Rican, etc.). More specifically, the theory was used to provide insight into similarities and differences in sport socialisation among multiple generations within particular Hispanic subcultures. I used the socialisation theory as I began to look at how sport socialisation was impacted by culture, level of acculturation and generation. This line of research has served me well in varying aspects of research, teaching and practice. I have used culture as a basis for marketing, managerial and event management lectures and have been asked to speak to several professional organisations on the impact of culture on their employees and stakeholders based on their socialisation into and through sport on varying generational and acculturation levels. For example, I found that reverse socialisation occurs in this segment where the third generation most often introduces the first generation to sport in cases where there are low acculturation levels (Mercado, 2008).

While sport socialisation research has made strides recently, it remains an area of study that is under-developed. The current literature does not fully address the creation of a sport spectator or the values that are transferred through sport participation. Further, I am not aware of any qualitative studies that ascertain whether the current sport socialisation agents being studied are
exhaustive. These might include the influence of media, video games and the internet. Additionally, there has been little effort to look at the sport socialisation process from a generational or subcultural perspective, as my research initially explored.

Note

1 Haylee Uecker Mercado is an Assistant Professor at the University of South Carolina.

References
