

Understanding the Intersection between Sport Fandom and Parenting: Family Rivalries and Reverse Socialization

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Much of the academic work with respect to how people become sport fans notes how common it is for parents- especially fathers- to socialize their young children to become fans of a specific sport in general and a specific team in particular (Kolbe & James, 2000; James, 2001; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010; Wann, 2006). However, social scientists have noted instances of reverse socialization, where children exert a socializing influence on adults such as their parents (Mead, 1970; Ritzer, Kammeyer, & Yetman, 1979). The parents of these children may be influenced by their offspring's sport participation to become more interested in sports themselves- either as a participant or as a fan (Dorsh, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Snyder & Purdy, 1982; Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). While evidence exists suggesting a socializing link between child sports participants and the influence they may have on their parents' sporting interests, a similar socializing link between child sports fans and the influence they may have on their parent's sports fandom- irrespective of any sport participation- remains an under-explored phenomenon. Mercado (2016) noted that in the United States, the third generation within the Hispanic subculture "most often introduces the first generation to sport in cases where there are low acculturation levels" (p. 271). Hyatt and colleagues noted that former hockey fans speculated that they might become fans again in the future, should their children or grandchildren become fans and they themselves wanted to share a common interest with them (Hyatt, 2007; Hyatt & Foster, 2015). In Gantz's 2012 study of teenagers watching sports with their parents, he found that teens are given an opportunity to discuss sport, show their expertise, and "reverse roles, and begin to mentor their parents" (p. 179). Both Hyatt and Foster (2015) as well as Gantz (2012) call for more research to understand the potential complexities of this process.

The purpose of this exploratory research is to come to a better understanding of the intersection between sport fandom and parenting. More specifically, how being a sports fan affects parent-child relationships and how parent-child relationships affect fandom. We assumed that understanding this phenomenon would involve coming to an understanding of a potentially complex and multi-faceted process that might span generations. Consequently, we embraced interpretive qualitative interviews as they are appropriate when the research question involves understanding processes shaped by the contexts of individual lived experiences (Neuman, 2006).

To take part in the study, participants had to meet two criteria: 1) They needed to be a parent of at least one child between the ages of 10 and 20; 2) They needed to consider themselves a fan of at least one team in the NHL, NBA, NFL, CFL, or MLB. Starting the spring of 2016, participants were recruited in two regions of Canada using bulletin board posters, electronic postings on social media, and word-of-mouth. As of October 2016, 19 parents (15 men and four women aged 32 to 55) were interviewed one-on-one and face-to-face either in-person or via an online video platform for between 20 and 55 minutes. The interviewers utilized a protocol containing 12 open-ended questions that addressed sports fandom and parenting with respect to their children and their own parents, thus providing an intergenerational perspective of this relationship.

Our preliminary findings resulted from a coding process based on Merriam (2001) and Rossman and Rallis (1998), where the researchers attempt to discover themes that recurred across many participants within the context of the research question. Coding began soon after the first few transcripts were completed, and continued as the remaining interviews were transcribed. As new themes were identified, previous transcripts were re-read and re-coded with the new themes in mind. This iterative process resulted in two themes with respect to the process of fan socialization.

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While much of the fan identification literature suggests that it is very common for parents and other family members to pass along their love of their favorite teams to the children (e.g., Kolbe & James, 2000; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996) we found evidence of the opposite in approximately half of the participants. Many told stories of family members cheering for different teams (often arch-rivals) to create a competitive rivalry. Participants noted how family members cheered for rivals, “to spite me,” or to “give my dad a little dig,” or to “give her a hard time.”

As for reverse socialization, we found evidence that the majority of parents were taking more interest in following certain sports or specific teams because their children had taken a strong interest in those same sports or teams, in an attempt to bond around a mutual interest. In some cases, the children started participating in sports the parents were relatively unfamiliar with (e.g., soccer, rock climbing, snowboarding, diving). As the child developed an interest in this “new” sport, the parent soon followed, resulting in the two of them watching elite athletes compete in these sports, which helped develop a spectating fandom in both generations. In other cases, parents who have favorite teams in the major professional North American leagues develop an “affinity” for or “secondary team” interest in a son or daughter’s favorite team in the same league. In these cases, they do not drop their primary and long-held team loyalty, but they cheer for their child’s team under certain circumstances (such as if the parent’s favorite team is not participating or has been knocked-out of the playoffs and their child’s team is still playing) even going so far as wearing the jersey of the child’s favorite team to show support. In a few cases, parents have even switched loyalties from one team to their child’s favorite team. As one mother (who was once a big Detroit Pistons fan) said, “if you ask me who my team is now, I’d probably say the Raptors or the Golden State Warriors because that’s who [my youngest daughter] follows.”

These findings will be of interest to sport consumer behavior researchers who have typically conceptualized team fan socialization in terms of parents or other family members teaching kids to love certain sports and/or teams (Kolbe & James, 2000; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010; Wann, 2006). It appears that in the 21st century, it is becoming relatively common for some children to not only reject familial influence in picking a favorite team, but also exert a socializing influence on the older generation as well, leading parents to (at least temporarily) put aside their unconditional loyalty to a sport and/or a team, and embrace following their child’s favorite sport and/or team in an attempt to spend quality bonding time with them.