
Routledge Handbook of Sport Fans and Fandom

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Using Sport Fandom to Fulfill Personal and Societal Needs

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There are few pastimes that rival the popularity of sport fandom. Indeed, one simply has to consider the pervasiveness of this activity to understand its seemingly universal appeal (Wann & James, 2019). For example, sport is prominently featured in various forms of mass media, including radio broadcasts, television programming, and Internet sites. Additionally, sport and the fans who follow it are often the focus of movies and songs. And certainly, the multitude of fans attending sporting events suggests that this activity is a driving force in the lives of many people. Researchers (e.g., Thomas et al., 2017) have noted that participation in an athletic event can help individuals meet important needs. Furthermore, given that humans have been interested in observing sporting spectacles for thousands of years (Guttman, 1986), and followers of sport can be found in almost all cultures (Serazio, 2019), it stands to reason that sport fandom can also play an important role in fulfilling both individual and societal needs. Indeed, a key question within the psychological and sociological study of sport fandom has been how, and to what extent, involvement in the pastime provides personal and societal benefits. In this chapter, we will examine this question by reviewing multiple streams of research and theory to uncover several individual and societal needs that can – at least partially – be met via sport fandom.

However, before proceeding to a discussion of the specific individual and societal needs impacted by sport fandom, it warrants mention that the current examination is not meant to be an exhaustive list of needs to be met via sport fandom. Rather, the goal of the current chapter is to give the reader a general impression of how fandom matters both to the individual fans and the societies in which they live. There are likely other needs that can be partially fulfilled via this pastime in addition to those targeted in the current chapter.

Individual Needs Met Through Sport Fandom

In this section, we will examine four important individual needs that can be at least partially met through sport fandom. First, we will target the need to belong, that is, the desire to establish and maintain memberships in valued social groups. Next, the discussion will center on the need for distinctiveness, which concerns our desire to feel unique and special. The third personal need we

will inspect is our need for uncertainty reduction, that is, the desire to decrease the randomness of life events. And finally, we will review how sport fandom can partially satisfy our search for meaning in life.

Sport Fandom and the Need to Belong

One of the most powerful influences on human affect, behavior, and cognition is our innate desire to “form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Often referred to as the need to belong, this drive is reflected in our yearning to socialize and spend meaningful time with others. Given that sport is a social activity and the vast majority of fans consume sport as part of a group (Schurr, Wittig, Ruble, & Ellen, 1988; Wann, Friedman, McHale, & Jaffe, 2003), it seems plausible that individuals could partially fulfill their desire to affiliate through sport fandom (Serazio, 2019). Consistent with this logic, researchers have indeed found that individuals use sport fandom to establish and maintain connections with others and, thus, assist in their quest to satisfy their need to belong (Kim & James, 2019; Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2017; Lock & Funk, 2016; Theodorakis, Wann, Nassis, & Luellen, 2012; Wann, Waddill, Brasher, & Ladd, 2015; Wann, Waddill, Polk, & Weaver, 2011).

There appear to be two primary methods through which sport fandom can assist in our need to belong: sport fandom itself and team identification. First, simply being a sport fan (that is, someone with an interest in following a particular aspect of sport – see Hackfort, Schinke, & Strauss, 2019; Wann & James, 2019) could lead to connections by finding like-minded individuals. People are aware that sport fandom is a pervasive activity and that most people are in fact sport fans. Thus, individuals who are interested in increasing their social connections may realize that they can accomplish this goal by becoming or maintaining their involvement in sport as a fan. Second, individuals can increase their social networks by developing a fandom for a specific team. By becoming psychologically connected to a team (commonly referred to as team identification – see Hackfort et al., 2019; Wann & James, 2019), individuals can gain a sense of belonging with other supporters of that team. For example, individuals who live in Boston can become interested in the Red Sox and, as a consequence, add many people to their social network through their membership in “Red Sox Nation.” One might want to argue that, because the majority of these associations would be superficial, they would be of limited value. However, research suggests that connections and interactions with others do not have to be intimate to be beneficial (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014a, 2014b). Thus, even casual acquaintances made via one’s general sport fandom or identification with a specific team are valuable and can aid in meeting our need to belong.

Sport Fandom and the Need for Distinctiveness

As predicted by Brewer’s (1991) Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, individuals strive for two sometimes opposing social goals: inclusion and differentiation. That is, although people want to feel a sense of belonging with others, they also have a desire to feel unique and different. By selectively choosing to follow non-mainstream sports and teams (or by supporting distant teams), individuals can use sport fandom to help fulfill their need for distinction (Andrijew & Hyatt, 2009; Asada & Ko, in press; Dimmock & Gucciardi, 2008; Goldman, Chadwick, Funk, & Wocke, 2016). For example, an individual living in New York City could use sport fandom to aid in his or her need for distinctiveness by actively supporting the Boston Red Sox or by becoming interested in less popular sports such as curling or cricket.

In a series of studies, DeRossett and Wann (2018) empirically documented the relationships among sport fandom, the need to belong, and the need for distinctiveness. The goal of this work

was to determine if levels of belongingness and distinctiveness would be related to choices of favorite teams and sports. The authors hypothesized that people with higher levels of the need to belong would be more likely to follow mainstream sports and teams, while those with higher levels of the need for distinctiveness would be partial to those that are more unique. Interestingly, in their first study, neither pattern of effects was found. That is, they failed to find a relationship between levels of need to belong and uniqueness and levels of identification with a mainstream and less-mainstream sport team. Similarly, a second study found no relationship between belonging and uniqueness and having a mainstream (e.g., football) or non-mainstream sport (e.g., archery) as a favorite. The authors reasoned that, given that there are many factors that drive one's initial interest in sports and teams (Funk & James, 2001; Wann & James, 2019; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996), the impact of need for distinctiveness and belonging may be most apparent at the initial stages of one's connection with sports and teams.

Thus, in a third study, participants read a scenario detailing two fictional Australian cricket teams. The descriptions were generally identical (e.g., both teams were said to be equally successful), but one team was described as having a large following (i.e., the mainstream team), while the other was described as being less popular. Participants were asked to choose which team they would most likely support, should they move to Australia. An examination of levels of need for belongingness and need for distinctiveness confirmed expectations. Specifically, those who believed they would follow the more unique team had higher levels of need for distinctiveness than those selecting the more popular team. Furthermore, participants higher in the need for belongingness reported a greater expectation of supporting the mainstream team. As a real-life example, consider NBA fans who move to Los Angeles and have a choice of supporting the Lakers and their large following, or the more niche team, the Clippers. Given the results described above, one could expect those with higher need for belonging to choose the Lakers, while those with higher need for distinction would prefer to support the Clippers.

Sport Fandom and Uncertainty Reduction

A third individual need that can be at least partially fulfilled through sport fandom concerns our desire to reduce uncertainty. Subjective Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1993) argues that people strive to reduce uncertainty because decreased randomness (e.g., increased structure) results in better predictability and understanding of acceptable forms of behavior. Given that one common method of gaining certainty is via shared group memberships (Grieve & Hogg, 1999), it stands to reason that individuals may use their associations with fans of specific sports and teams to reduce uncertainty (Asada & Ko, in press). Such was the pattern of effects predicted by Dimmock and Grove (2006). These authors asked adolescents to complete a measure assessing the desire for certainty, and then used these scores to place the participants into groups of individuals low, moderate, and high in the need for structure. Subjects also completed a measure assessing their affective/cognitive identification with their favorite team. Consistent with expectations, the researchers found that the highest levels of identification were reported by those in the high need for structure group, while the lowest identification scores were found among those with a low need for structure.

Hofstede (2001, 2011) identified a number of dimensions on which cultures differ, including the extent to which a culture is individualistic or collectivistic (i.e., the extent to which members of a society are integrated into group) and the culture's degree of power distance, that is, whether or not individuals believe and accept that power is unequally distributed in their culture. Another critical dimension, and one related to our discussion here, is termed uncertainty avoidance. According to Hofstede, this dimension involves "society's tolerance for ambiguity" and involves

the extent to which "a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations" (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004, p. 62). Some cultures, labeled uncertainty-avoiding cultures, tend to have high number of laws and societal norms to assist in reducing uncertainty. Other cultures are more accepting of uncertainty; these societies tend to have fewer rules and regulations. Given that individuals can potentially use their involvement in sport fandom to reduce uncertainty (Dimmock & Grove, 2006), it would be interesting to examine whether those living in uncertainty-avoiding cultures are particularly likely to utilize sport fandom for this purpose. Future researchers, perhaps those with an interest in sport fandom from a sociological perspective, may be able to test this possibility by examining the correlation between the degree to which members of societies are uncomfortable with uncertainty and the levels of fandom (or at least the importance of fandom) within those societies.

Sport Fandom and Meaning in Life

A final personal need that may be partially met via sport fandom is the search for meaning in life (Frankl, 1963; Lambert et al., 2013; Seligman, 2011). Meaning has been defined as "the sense of purpose individuals derive from feeling a part of something larger than their self" (Doyle, Filo, Lock, Funk, & McDonald, 2016, p. 4). Meaning in life is a critical psychological variable as it correlates positively with both mental and physical health (Czekierda, Banik, Park, & Luszczynska, 2017; Heintzelman & King, 2014).

When asked to indicate factors that provide meaning in life, two commonly mentioned sources are social connections (e.g., friends and family) and leisure pursuits such as hobbies and pastimes (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Where Americans find meaning in life, 2018). Given that sport fandom is a highly social leisure pursuit, it stands to reason that fandom could be a factor in promoting beliefs that one's life has meaning and purpose. Furthermore, because sport fandom can add structure and reduce uncertainty in people's lives (see above), and research indicates that life structure and routines predict meaning in life (Heintzelman & King, 2019), sport fandom may be a particularly useful avenue for promoting feelings that one's life has purpose. Consistent with this logic, writers have argued that sport fandom can assist in an individual's search for meaning (e.g., Keaton & Gearhart, 2014; Mandelbaum, 2004; Serazio, 2019) and research has substantiated this claim. For example, Doyle and his colleagues (2016) conducted a qualitative study investigating the extent to which fans believed that following teams assisted in maintaining and enhancing their psychological well-being. One frequently mentioned positive outcome was meaning in life. Experiences such as meeting with players, visiting the team's stadium/arena, and special events were described by fans as ways in which "supporting the team helped them feel like something larger than themselves" (Doyle et al., p. 8).

In another empirical investigation of sport fandom and purpose in life, Wann and Fast (2020) asked individuals to indicate the extent to which they believed that following sport as a fan provided meaning in their lives. The results revealed several interesting findings. First, it was apparent that many individuals believe that sport fandom provides them with a sense of purpose and meaning. However, some individuals were more likely than others to report such a belief. Specifically, perceptions of sport fandom facilitating life meaning were positively correlated with both general sport fandom and levels of identification with one's favorite team. Thus, as one might expect, fandom as a route to meaning in life is more available to those who actually engage in the activity.

A final study worthy of mention was conducted by Wann, Hackathorn, and Sherman (2017). These authors examined the interrelationships among sport fandom, team identification, sense of belonging, and meaning in life. Wann and his associates framed their project within the tenets

of the Team Identification – Social Psychological Health Model (Wann, 2006). This perspective argues that, similar to identification in other organizational settings (Steffens, Haslam, Schuh, Jetten, & van Dick, 2017), sport team identification (and perhaps sport fandom – see Wann & James, 2019) leads to improved well-being. Wann et al. (2017) found that belonging mediated the relationship between fandom (both general sport fandom and team identification) and meaning in life. Thus, their data suggest that as one's fandom increases, so too does their sense of belonging. Then, in turn, these increased feelings of belonging result in greater perceptions that life has meaning.

Societal Needs Met Through Sport Fandom

Turning our attention to society at large, research and theory suggests that, similar to individual needs, sport fandom has the capacity to aid in the satisfaction of several societal needs. The Structural-Functionalist Perspective argues that for a societal institution to exist, it must contribute to the maintenance (i.e., survival) of a society. There are several imperatives that societies must address to remain viable (Aberle, Cohen, Davis, Levy, & Sutton, 1950; Parsons, 1951; Stevenson, 1974) and research suggests that sport fandom assists in meeting several of these necessities (Delaney, 2015; Lewis, 2007; Shin, 2007). In the paragraphs that follow, we will examine the impact of sport fandom on four societal needs, that is, methods through which fandom assists in meeting societal imperatives (there are other imperatives impacted by fandom – see Wann & James, 2019 and Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001, for reviews). First, we will discuss how sport fandom gives members of societies an appropriate avenue for affective expression. Next, we will examine the argument that sport fandom aids in enhancing communication among various members of societies. Third, we focus on the manner in which sport fandom aids in the socialization process. And finally, we will discuss the variety of ways that sport fandom can facilitate integration among society's members.

Sport Fandom and Affective Expression

From a societal perspective, the powerful and frequent emotions felt by sport fans would be considered a critically beneficial aspect of the pastime. That is, one of the more important imperatives is that societies provide members with safe and accepted opportunities for emotional expression (Wann et al., 2001). Sport fandom frequently offers such an opportunity (Bain-Selbo, 2012; Cottingham, 2012). This includes positive emotions such as enjoyment, pride, and happiness (Jang, Ko, Wann, & Kim, 2017; Koenigstorfer, Groeppel-Klein, & Schmitt, 2010; Tobar, 2006) and negative reactions such as shame, anger, and disappointment (Jones, Coffee, Sheffield, Yanguéz, & Barker, 2012; Partridge, Wann, & Elison, 2010; Rainey, Larsen, & Yost, 2009). Given that Wann and James (2019) highlight research examining over two dozen different fan affective reactions, it seems sport fandom allows for the acceptable and appropriate expression of all facets and forms of the human emotional experience.

Sport Fandom and Enhanced Communication

A second societal imperative that is partially met by sport fandom involves communication among society's members. To function successfully, societies must provide occasions for communication and, preferably, offer individuals different topics of conversation (Aberle et al., 1950). Sport appears to have the ability to assist in each of these endeavors. First, it is clear that sport is a topic of conversation for many individuals. For sport fans, discussions about their favorite teams,

sports, and players are commonplace. The saturation of sport coverage on television, radio, and the Internet provides additional topics for conversation and fuels the discussion (in fact, a large portion of sport programming is now based on conversations and debates among members of the sport media – see Serazio, 2019).

However, sport fandom does not simply provide society's members with a topic of conversation. Rather, it also informs on how people are to converse and what they actually say (Serazio, 2019). That is, a second method through which fandom assists in the communication imperative is by providing words and phrases that have moved beyond the realm of sport and are now part of everyday language. Referred to as "Sportugese" by Tannenbaum and Noah (1959), there are literally hundreds of words and phrases that originated in sport, but are now accepted and understood outside the realm of athletic competition (Palmatier & Ray, 1989). Phrases such as "hit it out of the park" and "scored a touchdown" not only describe successful outcomes in baseball and football, but are now also used to describe non-sport endeavors in which one has succeeded.

Sport Fandom and the Socialization Process

Yet another societal imperative aided through sport fandom involves the socialization process. A number of authors have written about the process through which individuals are socialized into sport fandom (e.g., Funk & James, 2001; McPherson, 1976), discussing how family members, peers, and other socialization agents encourage one to become a sport fan, and teach the accepted norms, behaviors, and values in this pastime (Thompson & Forsyth, 2012; Wann et al., 2001; Yoh, Pai, & Pedersen, 2009). However, in addition to being socialized *into* sport fandom, members of a society can be socialized *through* sport fandom (Delaney, 2015; Edwards, 1973; Lewis, 2007; Serazio, 2019). That is, sport fandom has the ability to teach individuals about society at large, and provide strategies for successful living. Consistent with this thinking, research has found that sport fandom can influence the values and attitudes of sport fans (both positively and negatively – see Brown, Basil, & Bocarea, 2003; Wann & James, 2019).

Research on socialization into sport fandom has frequently found cultural differences in the relative impact of various socialization agents (Wann & James, 2019). This seems reasonable given that cultures highlight and emphasize different aspects of the sporting experience and, as a result, different aspects of cultures should play a greater or lesser role in sport fan socialization. For example, consider work by Melnick and Wann (2004) on the impact of different agents on the socialization of Norwegian sport fans. In many cultures, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, one's community is ranked very low in its influence on the sport fan socialization process (Parry, Jones, & Wann, 2014; Wann et al., 2001). However, Norwegian participants ranked their community as having the largest influence on their development as sport fans. Melnick and Wann noted that, because Norway operates via a club youth sports model (i.e., the top youth players play for club teams) rather than a varsity youth sports model (in which the top players play for school teams), it made sense for the community (and the sport clubs in them) to have such a large impact on sport fan socialization. Relating this work back to how members of society are socialized by sport fandom, it seems likely that fandom affects culture at the same time as culture affects fandom. That is to say, if socialization into fandom differs by culture, then it seems likely that there will also be cultural differences in socialization via fandom. Researchers may want to investigate this to determine if such differences do exist, and if so, how cultures are the same or dissimilar in this process.

Sport Fandom and Integration

A final societal imperative impacted by sport fandom concerns integration. Most societies are comprised of people from multiple ethnic, racial, religious, and political backgrounds. Additionally, societies contain people from rural and urban backgrounds, individuals with wide differences in educational experiences, and people from diverse socioeconomic groups. Given this, a key imperative for societies is to find and develop methods to integrate these vastly different persons, that is, provide opportunities and experiences that have the capacity to bring these otherwise different people together. Sport fandom is one such opportunity, and a powerful one at that, as involvement in this pastime can foster integration at multiple levels (Groeneman, 2017; Kim & Walker, 2012; Markovits & Albertson, 2012; Serazio, 2019). First, sport fandom can increase integration at the interpersonal level. As noted above, sport fandom is a highly social activity that has the ability to increase feelings of belonging and connections with others (Koenig-Lewis, Asaad, & Palmer, 2017; Theodorakis et al., 2012; Wann, Waddill, et al., 2015). Even brief encounters with fellow sport fans and supporters of favorite teams can allow for critical interpersonal interactions that will often facilitate integration (Melnick, 1993). These interpersonal encounters and increased integration can have important benefits. For instance, sport fans report high levels of trust in people (Wann & Polk, 2007) and fandom can be positively associated with increased helping of others (particularly others fans, see Levine, Prossner, Evans, & Reicher, 2005; Platow et al., 1999).

However, integration via sport fandom is not limited to the interpersonal level. Rather, it also facilitates connections among larger groups of people. For example, integration at the community and metropolitan (i.e., city) levels are also nurtured via sport fandom (Oja, Wear, & Clopton, 2018; Wilkerson & Dodder, 1987). As a clear example of such integration, consider that the official celebration of the 2016 Chicago Cubs (long-awaited) World Series Championship was attended by approximately 5 million people, ranking it as one of the largest human gatherings on record (Flosi, 2016). Similarly, sport fandom can promote integration at the state level. For example, the University of Nebraska football team is a cultural phenomenon that has a statewide following, promoting interactions from people all across the region (Aden, 2008). At the national level, sport has the ability to integrate an entire country (Hoye & Nicholson, 2008), such as when the 1980 United States men's ice hockey team captivated the country with the "Miracle on Ice" Olympic gold medal. And finally, sport may have the ability to aid in integration at the international level through events such as the Olympics and the World Cup soccer championships (Allison & Monnington, 2002; Serazio, 2019).

Conclusion

A key question for sport scholars has been if and how involvement in sport as a fan can provide personal and societal benefits. As discussed above, research and theory reveal that sport fandom does indeed have the ability to help individuals meet several basic personal and societal needs. In this way, sport fandom seems to reflect the Gestalt psychology adage that "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts" (Galotti, 2018). That is, the value of sport fandom, for both people and societies, is far greater than what it appears to be on the surface. As the preceding pages highlight, these benefits are numerous and far reaching. However, in truth sport scholars have only recently begun to examine and unpack the benefits of fandom and, as a result, there is still much to learn. For example, because the vast majority of published work on sport fandom has targeted English speaking countries (Wann & James, 2019), more research from a cross-cultural

perspective is needed. Additionally, investigators need to continue to expand their methodologies and incorporate mixed method and longitudinal designs into their work. By using a wider variety of research tools to examine the potential benefits of fandom, researchers can advance our understanding of the value and importance of sport fandom in the lives of individual fans and the societies in which they live.

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Sport Fandom for Personal and Societal Needs

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Sport Fandom for Personal and Societal Needs

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