Parents or peers: which is it? Sport socialisation and team identification in Australia: A rejoinder to Melnick and Wann

Ramón Spaaij

La Trobe University, Australia, and University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Alastair Anderson

La Trobe University, Australia

There exists a rich sociohistorical scholarship on sport in Australian society, and particularly on the sociogenesis, development and differential popularity of sports such as Australian Rules football, cricket and soccer. However, the processes through which young Australians are socialised into sport and become fans of a particular sport team remain a relatively unexamined phenomenon. In their article on sport fandom in Australia, Merrill Melnick and Daniel Wann (2011) make a significant contribution to knowledge about sport socialisation and the team identification of Australian fans. Using a convenience sample of 163, Melnick and Wann surveyed students from a Melbourne-based university. The questionnaire used comprised 25 items which included two reliable and valid uni-dimensional instruments, the Sport Fandom Questionnaire and the Sport Spectator Identification Scale. Melnick and Wann reported that for the respondents friends (peers) were most influential in their becoming a sport fan, followed in order by parents, school and 'community'. Their findings further evidence the role that peers play in the sport socialisation and team identification of young people. However the respondents overwhelmingly identified males, and particularly fathers, as the most influential person responsible for their decision to become a sport fan. In general, 'family members had the greatest impact as sport fandom socialization agents. They accounted for 65 percent of the responses' (Melnick and Wann, 2011: 7).

We argue that in the study by Melnick and Wann there is a disconnect between the forced choice responses given by respondents in terms of rating the importance of socialisation agents, and those agents that were freely nominated by them as the most influential person in their decision to become a sport fan. This disconnect affects the potency of their article. It has ramifications for the weighting given by Melnick and Wann to influencers in respect of socialisation into sport. Respondents did as a whole rate friends not parents as greater influencers in their sport socialisation. However, a reading of the text suggests that the difference was not statistically significant across all of the respondents. Without having the data the effect size for this difference – significant or otherwise – cannot be calculated. Melnick and Wann did report statistically significant differences in terms of influencers according to the sex of the respondents. Specifically they reported that in comparison to females, males rated friends and community more highly. We calculated Cohen's d (the standardised difference between two means) and r (the effect size correlation) as measures of the effect size for the significant differences according to sex. For friends Cohen's $d = 0.32$ and $r = 0.16$. For community Cohen's $d = 0.31$ and $r = 0.15$. Cohen (1988) suggested that effect sizes be classified as medium if $d = 0.50$ and $r = 0.30$. As may be seen the effect sizes for the relevant differences in the means do not reach that threshold. Thus, although significant differences were observed they are not compelling in terms of making attributions about the influence of friends and community according to the sex of the respondents. In summary, we believe that the analysis of the forced choice data is not compelling.

The most compelling finding in Melnick and Wann's article is that under a free choice scenario respondents recollected that fathers were the most influential socialisation agents in respect of their decision to become a sport fan. Whilst mothers were also nominated by the female respondents as influential it is fathers who stand out as the single most influential agents for both males and females. Thus the essence of the findings reported in the article is the evidence of the powerful role of fathers in the sport socialisation of their children.

Melnick and Wann do explicitly discuss and reflect on the limitations of their findings. Two limitations are of particular import here. First, Melnick and Wann argue that while the data are an accurate reflection of sport fandom within a 20-29 age cohort, these findings cannot be generalised to other age groups, and they suggest that more research be conducted using older age groups. Second, they note that the methodology used 'left little room for the discovery of new or unanticipated responses', and urge future researchers to

consider a more qualitative approach which provide greater possibilities for discovering the meanings individuals associate with becoming a sport fan (Melnick and Wann, 2011: 12). These limitations are important because they suggest a major hiatus in their approach: the absence of a clear understanding of the process dynamics of sport socialisation and team identification, and of the social mechanisms that affect or drive this process at different points of the life cycle. A focus on process as opposed to retrospective snapshots based on questionnaires would enable a better understanding of how and why people come to identify with a particular sport or team. We will illustrate this point below.

Melnick and Wann's study focuses on university students and recommends that more research be conducted with older age groups. However, Spaaij and Anderson (2010) reported results of a study into the socialisation into sport early in life through the direct influence of significant others. They found that this initial exposure to sport and sport teams often plays an important role in the subsequent development and maintenance of an individual's sport team identification. The aim of that study was to examine the embryonic development of an identification with sport and sport teams among children, with particular reference to the nature and extent of influence exerted by socialisation agents. To explore this process and its consequences for children's subsequent sport socialisation, a qualitative study was conducted which consisted of five focus groups with children aged 5-13 and five corresponding focus groups with their parents. In total 37 children (25 males and 12 females) and 32 parents (19 males and 13 females) participated. All research participants were fans of a Melbourne-based Australian Rules football club. Focus groups were used because the dynamics of a focus group can produce data that would not arise from a survey or interview in which particular questions have been scripted by a researcher, therefore leaving ample room for the discovery of new or unanticipated responses and (collectively constructed) meanings.

In several respects the research results resonate with those of Melnick and Wann, particularly in terms of the prominent role of fathers and other males as primary sport socialisation agents. Parent-child interactions were found to play a major role in children's embryonic identification with a sport team, and for boys and girls alike this identification is most strongly influenced by parental and near family influences, especially fathers and to a lesser extent uncles, brothers, mothers and grandfathers. The participants in the focus groups viewed their parents and other near family as being far more influential in their becoming a sport fan than friends, and in this regard Spaaij and Anderson's (2010) results differ from those of Melnick and Wann. However, similarly to Melnick and Wann Spaaij and Anderson

(2010) reported differences according to sex which point to a socialisation of boys into sport which is different in character to that of girls. Typically boys watch and play Australian Rules football and cricket with their dad. In contrast, girls tend to be socialised into an appreciation of Australian Rules football, however they typically play netball, hockey or soccer, which are viewed as more 'appropriate' sports for girls (Spaaij and Anderson, 2010). In these sports mothers are more predominant as influencers.

With regard to the process dynamics of sport socialisation and team identification, Spaaij and Anderson (2010) sought to uncover the underlying social mechanisms which drive parents' role as a primary socialisation agent. In other words, it is important to examine not only the extent to which parents, peers or other socialisation agents contribute to people's socialisation into the sport fan role, but also how and why this occurs, as well as the longevity of such influence. It was found that parents and other near family often have a vested interest in managing the development of sporting tastes in their children such that they conform to their own world view. Following the 'right team' is integral to the sense of self which many parents seek to develop in their children, and is influenced not only by gender but also by other sociological categories such as class, ethnicity and geographical location.

Compliant behaviour is elicited by parents through compulsions and sanctions. When children are compliant parents will provide love, affection and rewards. When they are not, love and affection may be withdrawn and sanctions may also be applied as a means of correcting what parents regard as errant behaviour. For the children in the focus groups, the main motivations for complying with parental expectations were approval from parents and avoidance of sanctions. Thus, it may be said that the connection of children to a sport team is effected in large part by the parental capacity to use conditional regard as a means of eliciting and maintaining required behaviours such as support for a designated sport team. Parents use conditional regard in the hope that as children grow they will internalise a connection to the team chosen for them. This internalised loyalty will act to promote allegiance to that team. Put differently, parents ultimately seek to achieve in their children an autonomous sense of loyalty instead of one which is directed or controlled, rooted in a firm sense of shared social identity.

Connections to a sport team which rely on that parental capacity are of course fragile. The development of a child into a more autonomous being entails challenges to parental directives and less concern about sanctions. As children move through childhood their increased cognitive ability and a developing sense of self equips them to make their own,

increasingly subtle discriminations and evaluations, which shape their attitudes and affect their behaviours. Gradually other socialisation agents become more prominent, including (but not limited to) peers, sport marketing and famous players. Thus, children gradually become part of a much wider social network, and friends often come to have a greater influence on a child's sporting interests (James, 2001). That the forced choice responses of the Australian university students surveyed by Melnick and Wann ranked friends highest (slightly ahead of parents) as the main influence on their socialisation into the sport fan role is consistent with this view.

This raises the important question whether the sense of shared social identity instilled through parental conditional regard is likely to be durable. Although the data presented Melnick and Wann are at best inconclusive on this issue, the results reported by Spaaij and Anderson (2010) provide further insight into the longevity of team identification that is instilled at an early age. In several cases where fathers or other near family had instilled a sense of team loyalty in their children from an early age, this strongly informed the child's subsequent sense of self as a supporter of a particular Australian Rules football team. Importantly, however, where a child's identification with a team has progressed into strong, relatively autonomous allegiance, the child is likely to also use conditional regard vis-à-vis other family members and peers. Thus children and young people may seek to compel others to conform and also meter out sanctions in the case of non-compliance. This illustrates the point that sport socialisation is an interactive process: young people are active agents in the process and may attempt to socialise others (i.e. family and peers) as well. It may also (partially) explain why the forced choice responses of the university students surveyed by Melnick and Wann (with a mean age of 21.33) ranked peers as the main influence on their sport socialisation.

Comparing Melnick and Wann's findings to the research of Spaaij and Anderson (2010) makes visible, *inter alia*, the differential influences of various socialising agents at different points of the life cycle, and thus portrays the process of sport socialisation and team identification as being age-specific. While Melnick and Wann's analysis advances our understanding of the extent and nature of sport fandom among Australian (or, more accurately, Melburnian) university students, it gives insufficient attention to the process dynamics and social mechanisms involved in sport socialisation and team identification. Here we have briefly drawn on our own work to demonstrate how more qualitative research methods can shine new light on these issues. We are aware, however, that significant gaps

remain in social science understandings of the sport socialisation and team identification process. Researchers interested in the sport socialisation process would do well to develop longitudinal mixed-methods studies in order to generate a more sophisticated and empirically grounded understanding of the evolving patterns of social influence as they affect the sport socialisation and team identification of individuals at different points in time, as well as of the degree to which and ways in which such influence is internalised to produce durable or more fluid fan-related behaviours and identities.

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