Exploring Sense of Community in a Relocated Sport Fan Group

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Being a sport fan is an integral component of the social life of many individuals. Indeed, social motivations such as the desire for belonging, social support, community pride, and bonding are common motivations for being part of a fan group (Grove, Dorsch, & Hopkins, 2012; Trail & James, 2001). It is, therefore, not surprising that a sense of community often develops among sport fans. This community develops through social interaction as fans interact in attending sporting events, watching the events together on television, and interacting in online venues (Fairley & Tyler, 2012; Ferriter, 2009). Thus, it is worth exploring how sense of community develops among sport fans.

The feeling of a sense of community may be a valuable outcome of being part of a sport fan group. Broadly, sense of community, or psychological sense of community (SOC) may be defined “as a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 9). SOC develops through the interaction of four elements – membership, needs fulfillment, influence, and a shared emotional connection (McMillan, 2011; McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

SOC may be an important component of the fan experience as evidence suggests that possessing SOC is associated with a range of positive outcomes. For example, individuals who feel strong SOC are more likely to be engaged in healthy activities (Peterson & Reid, 2003), experience decreased feelings of alienation (Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994) decreased negative moods (Roussi, Rapti, & Kiosseoglou, 2006), increased self-confidence and emotional connections (Goodwin, et all, 2009), improved coping skills (Greenfield & Marks, 2010), and increased feelings of empowerment (Peterson & Reid, 2003). Communities who have members with strong feelings of SOC benefit from increased civic participation (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990), prosocial behavior, and volunteerism (Omoto & Snyder, 2009). Thus, the development of SOC within sport fans may be an important and beneficial outcome of their experiences.

Today, however, being a sport fan, interacting with other fans, and developing a sense of community within that context may be complicated by individuals’ relocating geographically. In fact, each year approximately 12% of households move, with approximately 18% of those households moving outside of their previous state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Relocating makes it more difficult to connect with one’s previously local team of fans and may create a sort of diaspora of fans. Further, relocation may create a number of adjustment issues for the individual including losses of community and social support (Hausman & Reed, 1991; Lawson & Angle, 1994; Martin, 1995; Rothberg, 1991). Although these social needs may be addressed as part of being a sport fan, the relocated individual is now physically removed from the primary fan base. Relocated individuals are thus faced with the challenge of developing a sense of community while being physically removed from the base of that community.

Despite being physically removed from the local fan base, individuals often find ways to connect to other fans of their “local” team. This diaspora of sport fans may connect with others in smaller groups of fans to watch televised games together and they also may interact in online venues (Fairley & Tyler, 2012; Ferriter, 2009). These connections raise interesting questions as to if and how a sense of community may develop among these fans and how that community is affected by being physically located outside of the area of the primary fan base. The purpose of this research, therefore, was to explore one such group of sports fans. In so doing, this paper addressed the research questions: (a) If a sense of community develops among a group of sports fans, how does it manifest itself?; (b) How is that community affected by residing outside of the geographic area of its mutual interest?; and (c) How does the community affect the group members’ relation to their current community or their previous community?
Method

Data were collected from a group of fans who currently reside in a medium size city in the Intermountain region of the United States, but are fans of the Washington Redskins, a professional football team based in Washington, DC. All but one of the group members were former residents of the Washington, D.C. area. The primary method of data collection was through in-depth semi-structured interviews with five research participants, combined with substantial participant observation of fan group meetings. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In addition, data were collected by reviewing the group Meet-Up website and the group standalone website. Each of these sites was used by the group to communicate with each other and to post about their experiences and feelings. These data did not constitute the core of the research, but served a complementary role to the data gleaned from in-depth interviewing. A textual analysis approach was also used to place relevant pieces of text in to existing coding schemes.

Results

Data were transcribed and analyzed, where qualitative themes were developed. Multiple levels of coding were used to help develop themes. These themes or codes were regularly compared throughout data analysis. Initial coding followed a theory-generated coding scheme. That is, codes were derived from the elements of the theory of sense of community.

Six themes emerged from the analysis. Four of the themes related directly to the elements of a sense of community proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986, 1996, 2011) and surfaced from the a priori theory based coding scheme. These themes are categorized as (a) It's all about the camaraderie (need fulfillment) (b) Flying the flag (membership) (c) Loyalty to our own (influence), and (d) Defining moments (shared emotional connection). A fifth theme related to leadership as predictor of sense of community materialized out of the in vivo open coding process. Finally, a sixth theme related to the exploratory questions connected to the unique experience of this particular fan group being located in a different city is explored.

Discussion

This paper makes several important contributions to the existing literature. First, the paper adds further confirmation that viewing sporting events may be as much about the social experience as it is about the actual game. This supports other studies that have noted the importance of the social element (Grove, Dorsch, & Hopkins, 2012; Trail & James, 2001). For participants in this fan group, it is clear that what started out as a way to watch the game quickly became more about the relationships and experiences that developed with other members of the group.

Additionally, the results of this study provide additional confirmation of McMillan and Chavis' (1986, 2011) theory of a sense of community by providing a detailed description of how the elements of the theory functioned in this particular setting. Specifically, for participants the development of a sense of community appeared to correlate with need fulfillment, membership, shared emotional connection, and influence. Further, the findings provide additional insight in to the theory by pointing out the important role of leadership and also by noting the apparent lack of importance of personal investment. While leadership has not been mentioned as part of the theory, previous literature has supported the idea that personal investment is an essential component of both membership and influence (Breunig, O'Connell, Todd, Anderson, & Young, 2010). These findings suggest that personal investment may be as much of an outcome as a predictor. Finally, the paper provides insight in to questions related to the attitudes of group members toward the current city as a result of their experience with the fan group.