Does the Sport Fan Role Cause Conflict with Family? Exploring the Dynamics

Jason Simmons, University of Cincinnati
Meg G. Hancock, University of Louisville
Heidi Grappendorf, University of Cincinnati

Socio-cultural Saturday, June 4, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-321 3:10 PM (Forum West 3)

A recent post on a college sport team message board read:

“Well, the lamp broke as a result of smacking the 2 liter off a table right after [they] went up by 6…I spent the next few game minutes calming down my 8 year old son who got nervous by my outrage (he doesn’t like seeing me like that).”

Though an extreme example, posts such as this suggests sport fans may experience conflict as they try to balance the demands of their fan and family roles. The post speaks to behavior incompatibility between the two roles, but conflict may take other forms as well (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Conflicts over finite resources such as time, money, and energy may also exist. Further, strain or stress from the fan or family role has the potential to spill over to the other, negatively affecting performance. The current study explores the phenomenon of fan-family conflict in an effort to better understand the types of conflict sport fans experience and factors influencing perceptions of conflict.

Inter-role conflict has been linked to a number of detrimental outcomes including decreased role satisfaction, stress, and hindered role performance (Allen, Hurst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Bruening & Dixon, 2007). By recognizing the forms and causes of fan-family conflict, family members may be better prepared to communicate and compromise where the sport fan role is concerned. On the sport organization side of the equation, family is a strong reference group impacting the consumer decision-making process (Shank, 2015). Understanding obstacles to consumption and factors influencing the consumer experience is of great value to sport marketers.

Much of the scholarly work on inter-role conflict focuses on work-family conflict (i.e., Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Hargis, Kotbra, Zhdanova, & Baltes, 2011). While these roles figure predominantly in lives of many, they by no means comprise the only roles between which inter-role conflict may exist. Personal roles, such as those linked to friends, hobbies, community, or leisure, may also conflict with work and/or family, and carry unique characteristics that lends itself to a separate line of inter-role conflict inquiry (Wilson & Baumann, 2015).

The sport fan role is one such personal role where the potential for conflict may exist (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002). Indeed, Gantz, Wenner, Carrico, and Knorr (1995a; 1995b) and Smith, Patterson, Williams and Hogg (1981) found some evidence to suggest the sport fan role was a source of resentment and friction among other family members. More recently, Simmons and Greenwell (2013) reported significant differences in time-based and strain-based fan-family conflict between highly identified and lesser-identified sport fans. This latter study, however, utilized an adapted work-family conflict measure to assess perceptions of fan-family conflict. Wilson and Baumann (2015) argued this practice is a severe limitation of research attempting to assess inter-role conflict between personal life roles and family, most notably due to the fact that the fan role, for example, carries with it a greater degree of choice with respect to resource allocation, as well as less stringent consequences of non-compliance with role expectations compared to work.

As such, one might expect perceptions and antecedents of fan-family conflict to vary from work-family conflict. Simmons and Greenwell (2015) indicated individuals with increased family responsibilities (as a product of marriage and the presence of children in the home) experienced significantly less fan-family conflict than single parents or single non-parents. This finding is important because it stands in stark contrast to prior work-family conflict research investigating the impact of family structure (Boyar et al., 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2005; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Further, it highlights the need to examine the unique nature of fan-family conflict, and its antecedents separate from work-family conflict.
Data collection is currently in progress and will continue through November 2015. Semi-structured interviews are being conducted with sport fans, focusing on fan/family role obligations, and the different forms of fan-family conflict experienced. Participants were recruited via an initial 17-item survey measuring involvement with sport fan and family role, as well as resources allocated to sport fan role demands. The criteria for inclusion in the interview portion of the study were involvement scores exceeding 4.0 (on a 7-point Likert scale) for both the fan and family role. As noted by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), perceptions of conflict are likely to be most intense when they stem from two or more highly salient roles.

To date, 10 individuals have participated in semi-structured interviews. We anticipate conducting interviews until saturation is reached or up to 20 total participants. Preliminary analysis of data indicates time-based conflict is the most prominent form of conflict experienced by sport fans. Family structure appears to play a role in the intensity of perceived conflict, as does role prioritization and identification. Other forms of conflict also exist, but in many cases, are minimized due to the presence of familial support for the interviewee’s sport fan role.