“She Enjoys Going to the Games if She Doesn't Have to Watch the Kids”: Gender Differences in Experiences of Fan-Family Conflict

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Fan-family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict wherein the demands of sport fan and family role are in conflict with one another (Simmons & Greenwell, 2014). Sport fan and family role demands often overlap, which can lead to conflict between partners and spouses as they navigate their sport fan and family roles. Limited research has been done to examine the effect of the sport fan role on one’s family life (Gantz, Wenner, Carrico, & Knorr, 1995a; 1995b; Simmons & Greenwell, 2014; Simmons, Greenwell, & Aicher, in press; Simmons, Hancock, & Grappendorf, 2016; Smith, Patterson, Williams & Hogg, 1981). Further, although studies have addressed gendered role expectations within the inter-role conflict framework, both in work-family (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Martinengo, Jacob, & Hill, 2010; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010) and leisure-family contexts (Jackson, 1988; Hambrick, Simmons, & Mahoney, 2013; Shaw, 1994; Simmons, Mahoney, & Hambrick, 2016) few have examined gender role expectations at the intersection of the sport fan and family roles (Simmons, Hancock, et al., 2016). Social role theory proposes gender differences in behavior derive from the differential prescribed social roles of men and women. In other words, expectations exist regarding the roles men and women fill in society and that there are qualities and behavioral tendencies demonstrated by each gender (i.e., descriptive roles), in addition to expectations regarding the roles men and women should occupy (i.e., prescriptive roles) (Wood & Eagly, 2012). Specific to sport and leisure, gender role expectations often dictate that women are expected to assume the majority of household responsibilities, which restricts and inhibits women’s leisure participation to a greater extent than men (Gillespie et al., 2002; Simmons, Mahoney, et al., 2016; Such, 2006; Thompson, 1999) and allow men more free time for their leisure activities (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Nomaguchi & Bianchi, 2004). Further, Hambrick et al. (2013) and Simmons, Mahoney, et al. (2016) found in their study of Ironman participants that females spoke of obstacles such as time commitments, financial commitments, and gender stereotypes; all three of which in some way made reference to needing to put family demands ahead of personal interests. Additionally female fans noted the “pressures of adhering to stereotypical societal expectations (p. 186) with respect to the woman’s role in the home (Hambrick et al., 2013). Men however, acknowledged obstacles of time and financial commitments, but viewed these more as role expectations of participating in an Ironman, as opposed to potential barriers to participation. Further, the logistical support men received relieved them of responsibilities of childcare and other home responsibilities, thus enabling Ironman participation (Simmons, Mahoney, et al., 2016). Whereas women were consistently concerned about Ironman interfering with family role demands, such pressures did not exist for men in the study.

As sport fandom may be considered a serious leisure activity, (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002) and knowing the demands of the sport fan and family roles often, it is important to examine the gender dynamics between these two roles to better understand how perceptions of fan-family conflict may differ between men and women. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to further explore the manner in which men and women navigate gender role expectations in the context of being a sport fan.

Perceptions of inter-role conflict are most intense when role demands emanate from two or more highly salient roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Frone & Rice, 1987; Simmons & Greenwell, 2014). Thus, a 17-item questionnaire designed to assess both sport fan and family role involvement (Goff et al., 1997; Hambrick et al., 2013) was utilized to recruit study participants. The criteria for inclusion in the study were involvement scores exceeding 4.0 (on a 7-point Likert scale) for both the fan and family role. The cut-off was utilized to ensure interviews were conducted with those most likely to experience conflict. Further, the screening survey allowed participants to provide an email address for follow up interviews. Phone interviews were arranged and completed with 21 participants (11 men, 10
Two researchers conducted each interview, with both taking notes and sharing questioning responsibilities. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were analyzed using a two-cycle independent coding procedure (Saldana, 2013). Data were coded through a process in which concepts and categories were formed to serve as basic units of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial coding was performed in the second cycle to identify how gender in the family context might impact the sport fan experience (Strauss & Corbin). The content of the responses were analyzed for themes and then coded into category headings (Babbie, 1995; Patton, 1987). Following each coding cycle, the researchers convened to debrief on the data analysis, compare codes or themes, clarify findings and meanings of coded data and debrief (Patton, 2002).

Results of the study suggested that men had more leisure time to participate in their sport fan role and that traditional gender role expectations were present amongst participants. The expectations of the traditional gender roles appeared to help participants in the study balance their fan and family roles. Particularly, male sports fans seemed to benefit the most as they felt less conflict in a relationship where traditional gender roles were present and were allowed to participate in their fan role. On the contrary, female fans appeared to experience greater conflict due to the presence of traditional gender roles as they were the ones left to do household chores and take care of the kids. Implications and future research will also be discussed.