My Significant Other Puts Their Team before Me: Spouse/Partner Perceptions of Fan-Family Conflict

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Gantz (2012) defines sports fans as “individuals who are consciously and willingly vested in following sports. They watch, read, write, and talk sports because they care, because a player, team, league, or sport matter to them” (p. 3). It is not an overly complex definition; however, embedded within are the finite resources (i.e., time, financial, energy) sport fans devote to their fan role as they consume. Because sports “matter to them,” fans may become preoccupied with sport, allowing that preoccupation to spill over and affect other roles, such as family (Simmons, Grappendorf, & Hancock, 2016). Recent work in the area of fan-family conflict has sought to better understand the competing priorities sport fans face when attempting to balance the demands of their sport fan and family roles (Simmons & Greenwell, 2014). A form of inter-role conflict, fan-family conflict may manifest itself in four ways: time-based, strain-based, behavior-based, or economic-based (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Simmons & Greenwell, 2014).

To date, fan-family conflict studies have primarily considered the perspective of the sport fan. Do perceptions of the four fan-family conflict typologies listed above vary based on one’s identification with their team (Simmons & Greenwell, 2014) or family structure (Simmons et al., 2016)? What factors contribute to perceptions of fan-family conflict (Simmons et al., 2016)? What consequences, in both fan and family roles, result from inter-role conflict (Grappendorf, Simmons & Hancock, 2017)? How do gender roles shape perceptions of fan-family conflict (Hancock, Grappendorf, & Simmons, 2017)? While these studies offer insight into sport fan experiences of time-based, strain-based, behavior-based, and economic-based fan-family conflict, their experiences do not exist in a vacuum. Results strongly suggest the effects of fan-family conflict extend to family members as well, who at times, are left to carry the burden of their partner’s sport fandom.

For example, sport fans interviewed in the Simmons et al. (2016) study discussed off-loading childcare duties to spouses and partners during games. Other interviewees suggested a negative mood and personality carried over for several days following games, affecting familial relationships. The presence of fan role support from other family members appears to lessen perceptions of conflict; however, this support extends to providing time, free of home responsibilities to watch/follow sport or scheduling family leisure time around, or to include, sport fan-related activities (Simmons et al., 2016). Outside of the sport fan context, leisure-family conflict has been linked to diminished family functioning among runners (Fick, Goff, & Oppliger, 1996) and lower marital satisfaction scores among gamers and their spouses (Ahlstrom, Lundberg, Zabriskie, Eggett, & Lindsay, 2012).

Only a handful of prior studies have looked at family members of sport fans, specifically spouses/partners, to understand their perspectives of fan-family dynamics. Gantz, Wenner, Carrico, and Knorr (1995a; 1995b), conducted a series of studies assessing the impact of televised sport viewership within relationships. While the majority of those surveyed indicated televised sport played a small, positive role in their relationship, nearly 12% of the overall sample, and 21.9% of females surveyed, felt resentment towards their spouses for watching sports. Further, relationship satisfaction scores were significantly lower in relationships where resentment over televised sport consumption was present (Gantz et al., 1995a).

Partners of sports fans also recognize the effect of team wins and losses on their relationships. End, Worthman, Foster, and Vandemark (2012) reported that when a significant other’s team loses, negative affect and irritability are significantly higher than when their partner’s team wins. There is also a significantly higher fear of being yelled at following a loss than a win. These findings, coupled with those reported by Gantz et al. (1995a; 1995b) clearly indicate the resources devoted to one’s fan role, as well as moods/attitudes that spillover from the fan role into one’s
relationship, can be a source of conflict where significant others are concerned.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the established fan-family conflict typologies (i.e., time-based, strain-based, behavior-based, and economic-based) from the perspective of spouses/partners of highly identified sport fans. This study will also seek to understand how spouses/partners negotiate the competing demands of their significant other’s fan and family roles.

Data collection is scheduled to begin in early spring of 2018 and will include spouses/partners of participants from a prior study of fan-family conflict with highly identified sport fans (Simmons et al., 2016). An email will be sent to respondents from the earlier study asking them to forward a short screening questionnaire to their significant other inquiring about: a) the presence of fan-family conflict emanating from their spouse/partner’s fan role, b) their own fan role identification, and c) their family role involvement. Those significant others indicating an interest in participating in the interview portion of this study will then be contacted, and a phone interview scheduled.

The use of qualitative research and semi-structured interviews will allow the researchers to explore the potential antecedents and factors about a phenomenon where little has been known and they can be explored (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Perceptions regarding fan/family role obligations, the different forms of fan-family conflict experienced, and how conflict is navigated will be examined using a protocol adapted from prior inter-role conflict studies (Dixon & Bruening, 2005; Simmons et al., 2016). Interviews will be conducted until saturation is reached. Reaching saturation will ensure that adequate and quality data are collected to support the study. The researchers will deductively analyze and code the data, utilizing the fan-family typologies as the guideline. Coding and themes will be discussed to ensure validity at each cycle of coding.

Results from this study should have several implications, both theoretical and practical. From a theoretical perspective, this study represents the first exploration into fan-family conflict as perceived by family members other than the sport fan him/herself. Understanding how spouses/partners perceive different forms of fan-family conflict, as well as the factors contributing to conflict, will provide a more holistic view of this phenomenon of interest. Practically speaking, family is an important reference group in consumer decision-making. This extends to sport spectator consumption. It is our hope that this study yields insight into the challenges and obstacles family members face as a result of their spouse/partner’s fan role participation, and how such challenges affect reference group attitudes and behaviors towards other family members’ participation in the sport fan role.