

Football and Family: The Influence of Family on Team Support Among Dundee United Fans

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Dundee United F.C. and Dundee F.C. were founded only 16 years apart, their grounds are merely 200 yards from one another (the closest two football grounds in Britain) and despite the fact that they are not currently both enjoying league success (Dundee United F.C. finished in the top six of the SPL whereas Dundee F.C are set for relegation) both teams have had their glory days.¹ What then would make someone in Dundee support one team rather than the other? Setting out to investigate this through observation at games and particularly through several informal interviews with Dundee United supporters I suspected I might find some collective underlying cause: class differences, religious differences, geographical differences within the city. I did not. Much the same as Gary Armstrong in his exploration of the relationship between Sheffield Wednesday and Sheffield United I found that 'there is no correlation here between football support and religious or political identity' (Armstrong 1998:12). Despite the fact that when Dundee United was first founded it was called Dundee Hibernian and fans for the most part attached themselves to the Catholic undertones of the team, since they changed their name in 1923 supporters told me that religious difference between the two Dundonian teams has almost entirely evaporated and that it does not have a deciding influence on support. As Armstrong found 'divisions in football loyalty do not have their origins in correlates of class, race or geography' when it comes to these two teams (Ibid).

What I did in fact discover is that it is family and family ties that had the greatest influence on which team was supported among the fans that I spoke to and observed. I found that 'family ties mainly determined an individual's subsequent allegiance' more heavily than any other factor (Ibid). Narratives of familial influence and bonding over team support dominated the conversations I had, with supporters displaying a great deal of pride in this aspect of their involvement with the club. Through observation and interview it became clear that two of the most important elements in the lives of these Dundee United supporters, the majority of which interviewed were men in their forties or fifties, were their

¹ All facts about Dundee United F.C. and Dundee F.C. here are taken from the official Dundee United website: <http://www.dundeeunitedfc.co.uk/index.asp?pg=238>

families and the football club. These two core elements of their lives appeared to be interwoven and inseparable, with the family home often providing a space in which support of the club could be encouraged and practised and Tannadice football ground serving as a space where family values could be explored and asserted and familial ties reinforced (particularly the father-son relationship). Particular emphasis fell on two areas: firstly that of intergenerational support being a source of pride interlinking the history of the club with the history of their family and secondly that of the experience of the first game ever attended, usually with the family, and the impression this made on the supporter. Contrary to my expectations and in response to my field notes this, then, is where the gaze of this ethnographic project must fall: on the influence of family in the continued club support of Dundee United fans. Before immediately recounting the experiences of supporters as regards their interwoven memories of their family and football club it is important to situate this encounter within work previously undertaken in the discipline on the subject of football and supporters. 'Fanatics!'. 'Football Hooligans'. 'Football, Violence and Social Identity' - it would appear the anthropological study of British football is dominated by accounts of hooliganism, violence and disorder.² Giulianotti and Armstrong (1997:2) argue that after early studies of Manchester fans by Gluckman the analysis of football by social theorists in Britain lagged significantly behind those in America and Europe. Indeed, they suggest that this delay in the arrival of proper sociological and anthropological studies of football in Britain can be attributed to 'an overriding concern with controlling and criminalizing spectators' and that this sector of sociological research surrounding football flowered because of research funded by bodies interested in 'policy-orientated' studies, providing a better understanding of supporters in order to control them (Ibid).

The absence of an anthropology of football until recent times and the prevalence of research which leans towards a study of simply the more radical or violent aspects of the social behaviour displayed by supporters has meant that 'until recently, anthropology had failed to address adequately the game of football... or consider its supporters' (Ibid: 1). Until very recently the trend has been to divide football supporters into 'types' and 'sub-types' such as 'lower middle class' or 'psychopathic' in the case of hooliganism (Ibid: 2). However, I

² Referring to an edited volume from A. Brown, Gary Armstrong's book on hooliganism and an edited volume by R. Giulianotti, N. Bonney and M. Hepworth respectively.

feel that such generalised grouping of people is not beneficial to more specific analysis of the experiences of supporters and I agree that 'the major methodological oversight is, therefore, ethnographic detail, or a willingness to pay due attention to the voice of the participants' (Ibid). As a result this ethnography shall be predominantly informant led, with their narratives taking precedence.

Jim: Do I remember my first match? Aye. Everyone has a wee story about their first match.³

The first phenomena central to the narratives of Dundee United supporters as regards the interwoven nature of their family and their club support is that of the 'wee story'. This is essentially a story supporters tell about the first game they went to, which often emphasises how young they were and their family's involvement. These stories often deal with times in the lives of the supporters that they cannot possibly remember, due to their very young age, or at least times they cannot remember in detail. The details of these stories, then, have been constructed and embellished by their family members and other supporters to provide a nostalgic recollection of their first match which is not necessarily accurate so much as it is emotive. These stories are told and retold by supporters, their family and friends in a way which demonstrates pride in their support of their team and asserts a sense of belonging and authenticity. Many of these 'wee stories' show the influence of family and the recalled memories detail experiences which mix the supporter's history of club support with what they remember about past experiences with their families. Take what Jim went on to tell me for example:

Jim: One day we were walking up the North side of Tannadice Street and passed Tannadice Park. 'What's that?' I asked, pointing to the ground. 'That's the wee team', my brother replied. I can't remember anything about the game we saw that day but I still remember my seemingly naive question to my big brother, and his reply, like it was yesterday. A seed must have been sown because the following Saturday I asked my Dad to take me (being just about old enough now) to Tannadice to see this 'wee team'. It was their second year in the first division and that game saw them beat Stirling Albion 2-0. There was something about it. I

³ All names have been made anonymous and all quotes copied from my field notebook.

was hooked. My next memory was being in David Low's on the Monday lunchtime from school buying a black and white scarf and tammy. The following week I had enough (2s 6d) to buy a rattle which I've still got. I wish I'd kept the scarf and tammy - my Mum sewed the players' names into the bars of the scarf.

The 'wee story' Jim has about the first game he attended highlights the importance of family to team support with the mention of first his big brother, then his father and finally his mother. Jim's whole family have played a role in his support of the club and just as his time in Tannadice allowed him to spend time bonding with his father and brother, his time in the family home reinforced his bond with the club, with his mother sewing the names of the players into his scarf. The story emphasises his youth when he says 'being just about old enough now' and this is also an important part of most 'wee stories'. For example another supporter Michael told me:

'I was first taken up to Tannadice at 18 months in a shawl when my dad couldna get a babysitter'.

Emphasising the young age at which the 'wee story' occurred is a source of pride because it shows that support in the club was a part of the life of a fan from their childhood and that this makes them a more authentic supporter with a closer bond to the club. It also shows that one's family was involved in club support as attending games since a young age requires family members either to have taken you or to have given you permission, and having a family who have encouraged you to become a supporter from a young age is something many fans take pride in. Jim's 'wee story' also demonstrates the typically pieced together, fragmentary nature of these narratives when he points out that he cannot really remember anything about the game that he and his brother were going to see but he can remember vividly his first impression of Tannadice.

These stories could be likened to Connerton's theory of collective memories. Connerton theorised that 'collective memory is defined as recollections of a shared past which are passed on through on-going processes of commemoration' (Eyerman 2004: 161). It is clear from what supporters told me about these 'wee stories' that they fit this

description in many ways. These narratives are recollections of a past event – their first game – which are shared by a fan, their family and other supporters and are commemorated through the on-going process of telling the ‘wee story’, whether this is a man telling his son or other supporters recalling these first games together. It establishes ‘a common heritage, with a shared past as a central component’ – that ‘shared past’ being formative experiences of Tannadice and their first games (Eyerman 2004: 161). These stories work as ‘an historical vehicle of embodied cultural representation’ in that they project values and ideals associated with the club through differing generations of the family and throughout the group of other fans they socialise with (Robson 2000: 3). However, despite the fact that Connerton’s theory regarding collective memory is a useful lens through which to examine these ‘wee stories’ it is important to remember that each of the informants is an individual and that although Dundee United fans might count themselves a one large collective, there are of course ‘different social segments, each with a different past’ who ‘will have different memories attached to the different mental landmarks characteristic of the group in question’ (Connerton 1989: 37). This leads me to believe that the ‘wee stories’ should be categorised in the space where ‘lived experience and collective memory interpenetrate each other through autobiography’ rather than as entities which could be strictly defined as collective memories (Crane 1997: 1377).

The second element of the narratives Dundee United supporters relate about their family’s involvement with the club are stories which relate the inter-generational history of club support throughout the family line.

Patrick: Oh, aye, I was there at the beginning. I used to go to all the games with my dad when I was a wee boy. He supported Dundee United when we were in the B league and the Dees were one of the best sides in Scotland.

To explain the intergenerational support of their family for the club, fans often employ the idea expressed by Patrick of being there ‘in the beginning’. This idea of being there ‘in the beginning’ is one which the ‘wee stories’ aim to highlight by showing that supporters were there, attending games, at the beginning of their lives but is also a concept that is embellished through tales of the support of previous family members. Showing that older

generations have supported the club for decades shows that they were there 'in the beginning' as they have always been behind Dundee United and have passed this quality down in the family. Fans are proud of what can be referred to as a lineage of support, relating their club support pedigree to me with a tone of satisfaction.

Robert: Like quite a lot of United supporters, my father was a United supporter. My grandfather was a United supporter (born 1905 he was a Dundee Hibs supporter to begin with before they were renamed to Dundee United).

Robert's statement repeats the trope of being 'there in the beginning' when he says 'to begin with'. It is also clear that Robert knows a lot about his family history and their involvement with the club: he knows exact dates for instance. This accuracy shows a high level of pride in his family as he feels that the longevity of their support for Dundee United highlights qualities of loyalty and authenticity. Being a supporter is seen as being a family tradition and to carry this on is seen as very important to fans, who take a lot of enjoyment in explaining their family tree and its correlation to certain points in the club's history.

Rory: My reason for being a Dundee United supporter is genetic from my father's side of the family. Granddad, my dad and my uncle were all big United fans. Myself and my brother along with our bairns are cut from the same cloth. My granddad was a supporter from at least the 1920s and my dad and uncle grew up supporting United in the 1940s.

Rory's statement highlights the fact that the support of previous generations is key to the family's identity and that this is something he and his brother have passed on to their children: the support of later generations is as key as that of the older members of the family. The word 'genetic' shows that he feels that support for Dundee United is as vital and as reliably reproduced in successive generations as a biological trait. It is not only the length of time a family has supported Dundee United that is emphasised in these narratives but also the hard times that they have seen the club through that is of great importance to supporters, who often boasted to me about previous generations of their family sticking with Dundee United even when they were not the better team in the city. It appeared that 'any change of allegiance, once given, is out of the question' since this is a sign of disloyalty

and supporters were very quick to show that previous generations of their families were dedicated enough to stick by Dundee United even when Dundee F.C. were the better club in the area (Armstrong 1998: 12). A particular source of pride, as is apparent from the interviews, is if a previous family member deliberately chose to support Dundee United at their creation, despite the fact that Dundee F.C. already existed and were successful.

However, there are issues with my encounters which must be addressed. The first of these is my role as anthropologist. As Armstrong (1998: 13) points out 'the pervading male attitude has been that women know nothing about football and should keep quiet'. One of my first informants drew my attention to the issue of my gender when he told me that, 'This is like confessing to my Missus. She's also called Heather, y'ken'. Despite laughing this off the comment made me acutely aware of the effect my gender might have on the information I was hoping to collect. My fear became that as a young woman the people I was looking to as informants may not be comfortable explaining their experiences to me, particularly as the events I wanted them to describe were seemingly all-male affairs which cemented kinship bonds between themselves and their male relatives. However, the more I spoke to them the more I noticed the very open, essentially didactic nature of their body language and tone of voice, their emphasis on words or ideas they felt I may not understand, their often emphatic, explanatory gestures and the way they held steady eye-contact with me, making sure I am keeping up with their story. I soon realised that because of my age and gender, rather than disregarding me, most of the people I interviewed were in fact taking more care to explain elements of their experiences to me. In a way then, my gender and age were quite helpful in getting informants to explain their experiences to me.

The second issue that must be addressed is that there are exceptions to the picture I have been portraying of the Dundee United fans I interviewed, and these must not be excluded or overlooked. Despite the fact that generalisation is convenient and as a result unbroken patterns of similar social narratives might be what would be easiest to process, the people I spoke to are all individuals and those who do not entirely fit within my stated analysis of Dundee United fans are interesting and must be acknowledged.

Colin: Having a mind of my own saved me. My family, including my grandfather, two older brothers and uncle all supported Dundee. So my favouritism for Dundee United was untypically against my family's leanings. I went my own way.

Ben: My old man went to all the clubbies in Lochee including the Dee Club and a few of my mates were Dees but although they were more successful than United they were never on my radar. I thank my parents for allowing me to pick my team and not having forced it on me.

In these cases, family was not the main determinant of club support but interestingly both men do talk about how it was an expectation for them not to have followed their families' choice of club. When Colin acknowledges that his case is 'untypical' and Tom says that he thanks his parents for not forcing him it is clear that they are aware that most men follow their family's 'leanings'. Clearly both men are proud of having made their own decision about which of the two Dundee clubs to support but they are also both aware that it is not the case for the majority of fans.

Overall, it is clear, then, that family is one of the most important deciding factors in influencing team support in the case of Dundee United fans. Despite the fact that I expected to find that it was a geographical, religious or class separation that determined fan support it became quickly apparent though informal interviews with fans that family history expressed through memories of the first game attended and recounting their families' long involvement with Dundee United was an undeniably large factor. Through the concepts of the 'wee story' and the idea of being there 'in the beginning' Dundee United fans provided me with a collection of narratives that showed pride in the interlinking pasts of their families' and the history of the club which convinced me that it was family preference that determined team support. The 'wee stories' brought families and other supporters together and functioned as a sort of collective memory, despite the fact that, of course, each informant is an individual. The intergenerational support shown through the concept of being there 'in the beginning' demonstrated pride in both the team and the family and asserted the fan's place as a loyal and authentic supporter.

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