The "Sudden Death" of Hockey in Hartford: Sports Fans and Franchise Relocation

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While researchers have examined the economic effects of sport franchise relocation on cities and municipalities, little research has explored the social psychological effects of relocation on the fans from the cities being abandoned. Through the use of "Virtual Participant Observation" and "Inter(net)viewing," this paper examines the meanings fans attach to franchise relocation decisions and how they make sense of and adjust to the impending loss of a civic institution such as a sport franchise. The paper also examines the root metaphors created and used by fans in the expression of their feelings, experiences, and interpretations of (a) the relocation decision, (b) the relationship of the owners and team, and (c) the relationship of the fans and team. These metaphors enable fans to make sense of a particularly disruptive situation (i.e., franchise relocation)—a decision which violates normative American cultural assumptions, core tenets, and values.

Quoique les chercheurs ont examiné les effets économiques de la relocalisation des franchises sportives sur les villes et municipalités, peu d’études ont exploré les effets sociopsychologiques de cette relocalisation sur les fans des villes abandonnées. À partir de l’«observation participante virtuelle» et de l’«inter(net)view», la présente étude examine les significations que les supporters donnent aux décisions de relocaliser une franchise sportive, le sens qu’ils et elles donnent à la perte d’une telle institution civile, et la façon dont ils et elles s’y ajustent. L’étude porte également sur les métaphores créées et utilisées par les fans dans l’expression de leurs sentiments, leurs expériences et leurs interprétations de (a) la relocalisation, (b) la relation entre les propriétaires et l’équipe, et (c) la relation entre les fans et l’équipe. Ces métaphores permettent aux supporters de donner un sens à la situation particulièrement perturbatrice qu’est la relocalisation d’une franchise sportive; une décision qui transgresse les suppositions, valeurs et principes normatifs culturels américains.

In March of 1997, the Hartford Whalers’ hockey club announced that it would no longer be affiliated with the City of Hartford upon completion of the 1996–1997 National Hockey League season. This announcement signaled the fourth such NHL team relocation in as many seasons (i.e., the Quebec Nordiques’ relocation to Colorado, the Winnipeg Jets’ relocation to Phoenix, and the Minnesota North Stars’ relocations to Dallas). What occurred in these NHL cities is endemic to the entire professional sports industry and threatens a number of small-market teams (e.g., Milwaukee Brewers, Pittsburgh Pirates, Edmonton Oilers).

Although researchers have examined the politics surrounding sport franchise relocation decisions (e.g., Silver, 1996) and the economic effects of relocation on cities and municipalities (e.g., Danielson, 1997; Euchner, 1993; Gorman & Calhoun, 1999), the social psychological effects of relocation have received little attention.

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1994; Staudohar & Mangan, 1991; Zimbalist, 1992), little research has explored the social psychological effects and consequences of relocation on the fans. How do sports fans interpret such decisions and subsequent actions? What are the meanings they attach to a franchise move? How do they make sense of and adjust to the loss of a civic institution?

Sport sociologists and communication researchers have identified a strong degree of affective attachment that exists between a sport fan and a particular team (e.g., Fiske, 1992; Gantz & Wenner, 1995; Grossberg, 1992; McPherson, 1975; Real & Mechikoff, 1992; Sloan, 1979; Smith, Patterson, Williams, & Hogg, 1981). Emotional attachment rooted in familiarity, continuity, and trust characterizes the relationship. The outcomes for fans of such affective relationships include a sense of empowerment, passion, and pleasure (see Grossberg, 1992), as well as the attainment of a degree of social prestige, enhanced self-esteem and other forms of “cultural capital” through fandom (see Fiske, 1992). Not only does the individual fan benefit from such a relationship, but so too apparently does the community in which the sport team is housed. Stevenson and Nixon (1972) identified several functions of sport teams for communities, among them increased social integration and commitment among fans to the existing social structure and norms of a community.

When the bond or affective attachment that develops over a number of years is torn asunder through franchise relocation, what are the social psychological consequences for the sport fans that remain in the wake of such decisions? How do they cope with the impending loss of an important civic institution to which they have grown attached? To date, there is very little research in the world of sport that explores such a sudden loss of attachment. Researchers of natural disasters, in which valued civic institutions likewise suddenly disappear, suggest that survivors experience a loss of identity and direction, a sense of apathy, and an overall feeling of a loss of community in the aftermath. (See Taylor, Zurcher, & Key, 1970; Erikson, 1976, 1979 for a discussion.) Do sport fans have the same experiences? How do they make sense of what some would claim are disastrous consequences for a municipality?

In her study of the process by which people attempt to create continuity after an unexpected disruption to life, cultural anthropologist Gay Becker (1997) contends people try to reestablish order from unexpected chaos in the “cultural life course” through the use of root or “organizing” metaphors. Individuals’ creation and use of these root metaphors provide insights to contemporary cultural assumptions and foundations of a society, as the society’s dominant cultural assumptions are embedded in these organizing metaphors. In one of her examples, Becker notes how the root metaphors of the life course as “journeys,” “wheels,” “bridges,” “staircases,” “dances,” and “spirals,” among others, reflect entirely different paradigmatic, cultural assumptions. Some of these metaphors lay bare the cultural assumption that the life course is orderly, predictable, knowable, linear, and continuous. Others reflect paradigmatic societal assumptions that the life course is chaotic, unpredictable, mysterious, insecure, and circular.

Through her study of disruption in people’s lives due to personal, physical bodily conditions (e.g., infertility, chronic illness, sudden illness, death), Becker (1997) claims to have uncovered “the well-springs of many core tenets of U.S. society” (p. 8). These include: rational determinism, competition, independence, self-reliance, continuity, personal indestructibility, personal responsibility,
coherence, order, control over the environment, productivity, progress, predictability, perseverance, hope, resolution, and normalcy.

While certainly a notable contribution, Becker’s study raises questions that this study may be able to help answer. Are the metaphors created to give meaning to lives disrupted because of personal, physical bodily conditions similar to the metaphors created to give meaning to lives disrupted due to culturally-created, social institutions such as sport? If not, how do they differ? What unique insights to contemporary cultural assumptions and foundations of American society can the metaphors created to give meaning to lives disrupted by franchise relocation offer? These are the larger theoretical questions this paper will address. In addition, the study provides insights specifically into how sports fans experience the increasingly common disruption of threatened and actual franchise relocation and their attempts to make sense of these cultural disruptions.

Methodology

The plight of the Hartford Whalers hockey team offered an ideal case study for an examination of franchise relocation’s effects on sports fans. On March 26, 1997, with their 18th NHL season soon ending and negotiations with city and state officials at a standstill, Whalers owner Peter Karmanos made the announcement many fans had dreaded: The Whalers would not play in Hartford the following season, and in all likelihood, Hartford would never again host an NHL hockey team. Several weeks later, the location of the team’s new host city was announced: Charlotte, North Carolina. The team, named the Carolina Hurricane, would play in Greensboro, North Carolina until an appropriate venue was constructed in Charlotte.

Within days of the announcement of the move, representatives from the International Hockey League (IHL) and the American Hockey League (AHL) submitted proposals to the state and city to locate new minor league franchises in Hartford for the 1997–1998 season. After several weeks of discussions, the state announced that it would accept the AHL’s bid to host the New York Rangers’ minor league affiliate in Hartford. The new team was christened the Hartford Wolf Pack, and their season began in October 1997. Hartford was no longer a city with a major league, professional men’s sports team.

Fan reaction and interpretation of the events surrounding the relocation decision of the team dominated local media outlets for days afterward. In an effort to come to a greater understanding of the social meaning of the relocation decision, I documented fans’ reactions from three particular sources: (a) content analysis of local newspaper fan editorials/letters to the editor; (b) virtual participant observation on Internet sites devoted specifically to the Hartford Whalers (i.e., reading and saving fan postings unobtrusively); and (c) “inter(net)views” (i.e., interviews conducted over the Internet) with a sample of participants from the Internet fan discussion groups.

As this is a study of hockey fans’ definition of the situation (Thomas & Thomas, 1928) and social constructions of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), I sought those spectators who McPherson (1975) and Smith and colleagues (1981) classify as “deeply committed.” These are the types of fans who attend games frequently, regularly read accounts and profiles of the team in newspapers and magazines, watch their team on television, and discuss aspects of the team via talk radio or the Internet. The Internet was a particularly intriguing gathering place for
such people and a valuable source of information on this topic. Participant postings on sites tend to be unedited, and participants have the opportunity to think and reflect on their responses before sending them to be posted.

From March 1996 until May 1997, I engaged in "virtual participant observation" of Hartford Whaler fans who participate in discussions on the Internet. The sites included two of the most popular among Hartford Whaler fans at that time: The Whalers Fan Feedback (<http://www.access.digest.net>) and The Whalers Fan Forum (<http://www.chat.courant.com>), a discussion group run by the local newspaper The Hartford Courant.1

During that 14-month time period, approximately 112 different people posted messages. After sufficiently “participant observing” the site throughout that time period, I selected 44 participants whom I classified as "frequent" contributors (i.e., posted responses 20 or more times during that period) and solicited them individually to be interviewed. Twenty-five (25) of the 44 agreed, and I interviewed each via computer in August and September 1997—5 months after the announcement of the Whalers' relocation decision.2 I also collected over 300 newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor for the period March 1996 to September 1997 and analyzed them for fan reaction to the relocation.

Findings and Discussion

Hartford Whalers fans struggled to make sense of the impending disruption to their lives—a disruption that clearly conflicted with their assumptions about American society and cultural values. An examination of the two Internet discussion groups and letters to the editor and editorials in The Hartford Courant revealed that Whaler fans created and used different organizing metaphors in an effort to interpret and come to a greater understanding of the events surrounding the decision to relocate the franchise. Specifically, they were useful tools for fans in their attempt to attach meaning, interpret, and understand: (a) the loss of the franchise; (b) the relationship of sport team owners and their host cities; and (c) the relationship of sports teams and their fans.

The Loss of the Franchise

Organizing metaphors used in the discussion of the loss of the franchise itself included death and divorce. Fans' choice of these metaphors provides insight into their relationship to the team. For many, the team is much more than a group of well-compensated men hired to entertain people via their attempts to use pieces of wood to strike a rubber object into a net. Rather, they are viewed as a social institution—a bedrock of the community, for which their collective relocation is actually mourned and grieved over, much like human death and divorce.

Loss as Death. In the many postings that followed the announcement of the decision to relocate, no other metaphor was used as widely as that of death. As these representative postings indicate, this was more than a mere relocation of a sports team. It was a death for many devoted fans:

I will not continue to follow the team. I wish the players all the luck in the world, but the team I grew up with—the team I cherished—died yesterday. It was a slow, painful death, dragged out by Karmanos and the NHL, but perhaps I was gullible in believing they would never really leave.
It has been a terrible, long road. I’m sick as I think of the dark winters, the sympathy calls from friends from around the country tomorrow once the news hits.

Having this board (and the Hartford Courant Board which I was on more often) really helped during the ups and downs of the death and finally for the funeral. Sharing the pain with others who were going through the same thing really helped. I can’t thank all of you enough. The grieving period is not over, I’m not sure when it will be. I don’t know what my reaction will be the first time I walk into the Hartford Civic Center again.

Fans who embraced the death metaphor often refined it further. Some viewed what happened as a “natural death” or “death by natural causes” due to the fact that the Whalers were located in the small market of Hartford. As one fan explained, the death was only natural and “inevitable,” given the trajectory of professional sports:

Still, while unhappy about the Whalers departure, I appreciate that it has been inevitable for some time. Small markets cannot survive in light of escalating costs . . . limited revenue streams in smaller markets . . . [and] cutthroat attitudes among league “partners.”

Others opted to view the relocation as euthanasia or “mercy killing.” The team and its fans had suffered long enough with its unhealthy prognosis. Some mentioned that they did not care to have the Whalers around for another year and prolong the inevitable. If the franchise was not going to remain, they argued to let Whalers’ owner Peter Karmanos leave the state a year early and collect the penalty fees. Nonetheless, this form of death was just as difficult on fans. As one poignantly noted:

It’s really over. I’m truly too numb to really say much. . . . Today was a toughie. The tears started as soon as I saw the Hartford skyline. They came again when my dad arrived and sat down next to me . . . the last time I cried in public was when I saw ET . . . I couldn’t clap at the end of the game, couldn’t cheer, I just stared through tears, knowing this was really the end of the one of the most beautiful memories of my life—Hartford Whaler games. We sat until the police asked us to leave. Leaving that seat in 105 was like leaving your dog behind to be put to sleep.

Finally, there were some who believed the loss of the Whalers was a “sudden death,” particularly tragic for the fans, as they had insufficient time to prepare for the loss. While many fans knew for nearly a year that the team was not thriving fiscally, the periodic upbeat reports from team owner Peter Karmanos and Governor John Rowland led some to believe the team’s economic condition was in remission, perhaps even improving, and that the team might actually pull through. The abrupt announcement (i.e., “sudden death”) changed that. As one fan explained:

I have the WHA All-Star game program from mid-January 1977, signed by all the players for my father as he lay dying at St. Francis, the victim of a sudden stroke which occurred following a “routine” operation. I have the strange memory of sitting in his season ticket seat in section 111 as the Whalers played the Fighting Saints on January 20, 1977; he slipped out of coma into death during the game. Today’s news brings me back to that day.
Many interpreted the relocation of the franchise not only as the death of their beloved hockey team, but perhaps of the city of Hartford itself:

It does still feel like a bad dream, huh? I can’t believe my eyes and ears. I’ll go into Hartford, maybe 3 times a year now. Gone is our $30 dinner in a Hartford restaurant. Gone is $6 for parking. Gone is $10 in concessions sales. Gone is the $90 in tickets. Hell, I’ll be rich now. *This is a stick day.* . . . *Hartford is dead.*

I wonder if anyone out there (besides WHALE fans) has really thought about what’s going to happen to Hartford & Connecticut’s future once the Whalers actually leave. Downtown will go to the dogs. People will lose jobs perhaps even moving out of state. More Hartford schools will lose accreditation. Nobody will visit Hartford anymore. . . . The hotels will close (maybe not all of them, but some). *Hartford will become a ghost town.*

Others, while clearly in the minority, were not as convinced that the city was “dead.” They sometimes invoked the memory of other cities that had lost professional franchises and still survived:

*Take heart everybody. The Whalers are going, but the ponds will still freeze next winter. And if an IHL team moves in, all the better for the pennant-waving kid (who can now attend more games). And, maybe Connecticut will take the arena money and put it into the school system. And, no, this does not mean the death of the city of Hartford. Any visitor to Quebec or Winnipeg will say that, although there is still a bitterness in the hockey fans, these cities are still great, great places.*

Nonetheless, many questioned their commitment to the Hartford area now that their team was “dead”:

*Now that our team is leaving, ask yourself, “Will you stay in CT?” I’m not. There is nothing in this state that another state doesn’t have. And now we don’t have hockey. I’m sick of taxes, crime, politicians and everything else. . . . I don’t know what’s gonna happen. It’s a very sad day. This probably is the worst day in the history of the state.*

I have little pride remaining in the state that I once loved so much. I used to joke with friends saying that I was branded at birth with the shape of CT, and I loved it. *CT offers me little to nothing now.* Many of my friends have moved out. The only remaining thing was the Whalers. Now they are gone too.

I don’t know what to say about our state. . . . I love it here . . . *it’s my home but, I don’t see much left for me.* I work at Aetna . . . and I’m tired of the insurance industry. . . . I want to get the hell out of here. My girlfriend and I were thinking maybe Georgia. . . . I don’t know.

As researchers have documented, death is never easy to accept for the relatives, friends, and other survivors of the deceased. Unlike people in many other cultures, Americans have the propensity to routinely deny death and its consequences. This denial often takes the form of avoidance of discussing death with
the dying, lying to the dying regarding their condition and impending fate, and encouraging the dying to fight death with all the strength and courage they can muster; to "not go gentle into that good night," as the poet Dylan Thomas once wrote. Once death finally occurs, Americans tend to remove all traces of it from their daily lives, generally frowning upon extended mourning and attempting instead to continue on with their lives as quickly as possible. (See Aries, 1974; Feifel, 1959; Sudnow, 1967 for discussions.)

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969, 1981, 1989) argued that most people go through five stages before finally accepting impending death. The first stage is denial, in which the dying (and those close to them) cannot believe they are really going to die; the second stage is anger, in which the dying acknowledge their impending death but view it as unjust; the third stage is bargaining, in which the dying try to avoid death by making a bargain with God or other powers that be; the fourth stage is depression, in which the dying are resigned to their impending fate but are extremely unhappy about it; and the fifth is acceptance, in which the dying come to terms with their death. When the death finally occurs, another series of emotions tend to emerge among the survivors, such as shock and refusal to acknowledge that death has occurred, protest, and despair or severe depression. Some may feel guilty for the way they treated the deceased. Others may feel abandoned once the loved one dies.

While certainly not claiming that each and every Whaler fan progresses through each stage, nor that each and every fan even experiences any or all stages, analysis of Internet discussions and newspaper editorials reveals that, collectively, fans experienced these same stages following the announcement of the Whalers’ fate. Like the loss of the Whalers to a death helped some to come to terms with the loss and grieve in the immediate aftermath of the announced relocation.

The Denial Stage. Many fans expressed shock and disbelief immediately following the news conference. Some questioned the veracity and accuracy of the statements posted on the Web; others simply refused to believe what they were hearing and reading. It simply could not be true:

It has been a very difficult day, to say the least. Part of me is in a state of denial, the rational part of me is in a day-long funk. I’m just numb.

I didn’t think this would happen. . . . I swear, I really didn’t. I still can’t believe it. . . . I think next year when the season starts, I’ll really feel it. My girlfriend called me up crying when she heard the news. . . . I couldn’t sleep, and consequently freaked out on a co-worker today because my nerves were shot.

What a dark day for Hartford, CT, me, and all my Whaler friends. I can’t believe it’s over. I’m ready to puke. . . . I’m completely numb. . . . my life has changed.

Is this just a nightmare, or am I really awake right now? Someone please wake me up.

The Anger Stage. Profanity and outrage marked fans’ reactions in this stage. The expression of such sentiment in the written form included bold, capitalized letters and repeated exclamation points. In the aftermath of the announcement,
some fans went so far as to create a Web site with the sole intent of offering fans an outlet to "flame" Whalers owner Peter Karmanos. Representative statements from fans included:

WHERE THE FUCK ARE THEY GOING TO GO? SCREW YOU. .... MUST FEEL REAL NICE TO STAB FANS IN THE BACK. YOU ARE SCUM. .... YOU BUILD A LOSING FRANCHISE, HIRE A PIECE OF GARBAGE NEPOTISM COACH, ASSEMBLE A GROUP OF PATHETIC UNDERACHIEVERS, AND THIS IS HOW I GET SHAFTED? .... If you are ever near me, look out, I'll run you over boy.

I was just about to log off when the mail came in.... I'm not asleep yet and the nightmare has begun. PETE! WHAT IN GOD'S NAME DID WE DO TO DESERVE THIS?!?!. ... What telephone pole do you have up your derriere? I'll personally call SNET and have them remove it if necessary!

The Bargaining Stage. This stage was marked by the pleading of fans for "someone to do something" in an effort to change the news that had been delivered. Fans proposed a host of "rescue fantasies" and scenarios which, if followed, would ensure the viability of the team in Hartford—despite the fact that the final pronouncement had been made. They appealed to wealthy local businessmen and corporations and Native American tribes flush with gambling proceeds to "do something." They proposed social protests and the storming of the governor's office to display their concern in an effort to change the prognosis. They discussed letter writing and fax campaigns designed to inundate both the NHL commissioner's office and owner Peter Karmanos' office and show them that they must be mistaken in this decision. Some fans even offered to start a movement to get fans to buy the team themselves. Representative responses during this stage include the following:

[Karmanos] has another thing coming if they think they have heard the last from me! Maybe a miracle can still happen—maybe the Whalers will somehow still stay in Hartford (I know it is too wishful thinking)!

I think we should gather our thoughts and memories into a single, cohesive book and send copies to Gary Bettman and P.K. Maybe, if done with the heart we all have, they will realize that we have more dedication, class, and love for the game than they do. I can't believe how eloquently you all have put the emotions I am feeling. If it moves me, maybe it can move the stone-hearted individuals mentioned above.

Why don't we buy the team? If Karmanos is willing to sell at $100,000,000, that's only $7,000 from each of the 14,000. I don't know about anyone else, but I'd go deeper into debt to keep the Whale in Hartford. It's just a thought, just hanging by a thread of hope I guess.

The Depression Stage. In this stage, fans were rather doleful and morose. A pall of sadness hung over their responses as they came to the realization that their team was no longer to be housed in Hartford:

I have tickets to the last game. I know right now I'm gonna be sitting there when the final horn blows and I'm gonna be bawling. I'm crying as I type
this. WHY PK, WHY???. . . I’M in shock. . . I’M depressed. . . and I hate PK.

Unbelievably depressed. . . I thought this day would never come. There were always doubts in my mind but after hearing all the positive news about the arena in these past two weeks, these doubts were put to rest. A piece of me has just been lost as a result of the announcement. I don’t know what to say, I don’t think the shock has fully left me.

It’s 1:00 am. I’m sitting here with tears running down my face, as I read that the team I have followed, that the team I have sweated for, cried for, screamed for is leaving. . . nothing matters now. I came home to reports by a greedy owner, minor league state that tomorrow we will be blessed with a sorry end to this saga in Hartford history.

Some expressed this sadness and depression with the use of “emoticons”: symbols composed of a few text characters used to express emotional feeling in a posted Internet message. For example:

Well I wished it wouldn’t happen, I tried to get myself ready for an announcement, but it hasn’t helped. . . Channel 3 announced that the Whalers had rejected the state’s offer. I guess it’s off to Columbus. . . I am very sad, as most on this list. :( :( }3

The Acceptance Stage. For many, accepting the news and fate of the team took a bit of time, and the forms in which acceptance was expressed varied. Some simply made declarations that efforts to save the team had failed and that it was “over”:

After reading a lot of these posts this morning I’m finding a lot of people feeling the way I am. It really is over this time. . . . I think that we should let the name Hartford Whalers rest. I mean, isn’t this like a funeral? In March, we found out that they were on life support and no matter how hard we tried to revive them and bring them back to life (even for just one more year); they died.

Ok, they’re not staying. It’s over. Let’s go on with our lives and wait for an IHL team. There is nothing we can do to save them. . . . I know I will get a lot of hatred from this letter but let’s face the facts!

It’s 1:30 in the afternoon and I just finished watching the news conference with PK. Now it’s really official. . . THEY’RE GONE!!! I guess like the rest of you on this list I was holding on to the last hope that they would stay . . . but now after the past year’s agonizing, it’s finally over.

A few of the fans indicated acceptance by discussing details of the exit agreement between the Whalers’ owner and the state. They wanted to make sure the state received every penny from the owner upon departure. Similarly, others appeared to reach acceptance when debate raged over who was going to be able to keep valuable possessions and mementos of the “deceased” team—akin to probate court proceedings. Like any death, quibbles over belongings and prized possessions sometimes arise once the person dies or the relationship ends. Fans are very protective and territorial over sacred totems. For example, one fan cited an article
she came across in an Arizona newspaper referring to the Phoenix Coyotes’ "Whiteout Tradition." She pointed out that this was actually the tradition of fans in Winnipeg wearing white to playoff games and offered this reaction:

My personal reaction was first disgust ("it’s not the Coyotes’ tradition, it’s the Jets’ tradition!!") and then kinda acceptance . . . ("well, it keeps the tradition alive so we don’t lose sight of the team’s past"). . . . My question is: should the Whalers’ franchise keep Brass Bonanza [i.e., the Whalers’ team anthem] and play it in a new city? Is this a bad thing or a good thing, in people’s opinions? Is it sacrilege for a team that is not the Whalers to use Brass Bonanza? Or is it a way to keep the team’s past from fading from everyone else’s memory?

In the Whalers’ case, fans began to question who should retain the rights to valued songs, banners, logos, colors, and the nickname itself. Many viewed these items as "intellectual property," not of the team, but of the City of Hartford itself:

I got thinking about Brass Bonanza and I think that it along with the Whalers name and logo should become "Intellectual Property" of the City of Hartford. . . . I couldn’t bear to hear BB playing in some other arena in some other city. . . . It’s just wrong . . . :

If the team isn’t going to stay in Hartford, then at least the logo and the rights to the name of the team should. Kind of like the Browns name and logo staying in Cleveland after Modell moved the team to Baltimore. . . . There should be some shred of the Whale in the Hartford Civic Center.

Even though ‘we’ get to keep the name and logo, I don’t know if I can go cheer, “Let’s go Whalers”. It is sort of like the person who has their dead pet stuffed and keeps it around because they loved it so much. Sort of morbid in my mind.

Others indicated their acceptance of the death of the team by mulling over plans for the last game in the history of the franchise (i.e., designing special events for the "funeral" of the deceased):

Now that the end is approaching, what do you guys think of the idea of bringing candles to the last game on the 13th? It’s gonna be like a memorial service, anyway! We could decide on a time when to light them, maybe after the final horn goes off.

Look to Shakespeare and his wisdom for guidance as to what to do at the last game, now that this play is, mercifully, over. Take a cue from Hamlet’s last words: “The rest is silence.” Imagine, if you can, the Mall full, for one last time, of Whaler fans; fans who loved their team sitting politely through the last three periods of major league ice hockey (or major league anything else in all probability) in Hartford—IN SILENCE. Offer no applause, no cheering, no booing to players who have, collectively, failed. Offer no applause, no cheering, no booing to those who hijacked a franchise, and exacted a cruel charade upon their ultimate benefactors, the fans. Offer no tears—just silence. Until, that is, at the end, after the players have left the empty ice, and the play (a tragedy, of course) is finally over; the fans should remain and,
finally, rise as one and give themselves a farewell round of applause. ... The silence, followed by applause for fans, will be deafening, and will resonate not only in Hartford, but everywhere else, from Brooklyn to Baltimore to Quebec to Winnipeg to the next franchise-losing town, where they have been, or will be, had.

Some fans considered skipping the final game altogether so as not to contribute more money to owner Peter Karmanos. However, many more fans considered the final game to be an opportunity to pay their last respects to the deceased and were willing to put aside old wounds:

There’s talk of boycotting the last few games. I can’t see doing that—it may hurt now, but it’ll also be our last chances to say goodbye. It may spite Karmanos to stay away, but it will also spite every player and member of the Whalers organization for the past 22 years. And they’re the reason I go, not Peter Karmanos.

Still others displayed their acceptance of the death of the team in a much more controversial fashion: by discussing future fandom relationships with professional and (or) minor league “suitors”:

By the way . . . who are you gonna root for now??—I’m thinking the Islanders. . . . I definitely can’t root for an Adams division team or one of the original 6.

I always thought changing your favorite team was like changing your blood type. But these are desperate times. . . . I think for those of you casting about, the Devils are as good a choice as any and better than most. . . . Yeah, let’s go Devils.

While signaling acceptance of the death of the Whalers, the rapidity in which some fans replaced their beloved, recently departed team caused a great deal of acrimony among grieving survivors:

I keep seeing posts for people who are already deciding who they are going to choose to follow now that the Whalers are being taken from Hartford. Excuse me? Say what? Hey folks you don’t choose a team to follow like you do a #2 from Burger King with extra pickles. Following a team is being committed, informed and passionate about “YOUR TEAM!!” . . . Man, ya’ll make me want to puke. Where’s your loyalty? Would you leave a wounded loved one? . . . Geeez!!

Good riddance to ya! If you can’t wait to pay your respects to the team (i.e., the end of the season) then get off the Good Ship Bluetrail. . . . I think I speak for the rest of the fans on here, when I say “We’re hanging on until the moving trucks pull up to Trumbull Street!”

To those wondering about who to cheer for now, I don’t see how you can. . . . None of the other NHL teams could ever take the Whalers’ place.

Other fans indicated their acceptance of the death of the team through referrals to themselves as “hockey orphans”: 
I already had plans to move to Orlando in June. I was looking forward to coming home 2–3 times a year to see the Whale, especially in a new arena, and following them on DSS. I will now be a hockey orphan. ... I will not follow any joke of a team that Rowland tries to put in the Mall to replace them.

Fans who were having a difficult time accepting the death of the Whalers were encouraged to do so even by the local media. The editorial page of the May 9, 1997, Hartford Courant (Zakarian) newspaper read:

Enough whining on Whalers

The Hartford Whalers are gone, finished, extinct, departed, kaput. Goodbye, adieu, adiós, auf Wiedersehen, arrivederci, sayonora, and so long. As much as the fans hate to admit it, the Whalers now belong on memory lane. After the deals, pleas, cajoling, name-calling, blaming and tears, the time has come to face reality. To those who still fume and whine, we say enough. Time to move on. ... What’s left of the Whalers is $22.7 million and a cornucopia of memories—most of them good. Let’s treasure the memories without acrimony and bitterness. All good things come to an end, just as nightmares go away. But let’s determine to move on. There is more to Hartford and to Connecticut than the Whalers.

The last line of this editorial (“There is more to Hartford and to Connecticut than the Whalers”) suggested yet another indicator of fans’ acceptance of the newly departed: a focus on (a) other economic priorities and (b) other cultural opportunities available in Hartford in the Whalers’ absence. Some editorials stressed that now that the team had decided to leave, public officials could shift their attention to more “important” pressing needs, such as the crumbling Hartford public school system. Some fans, however, were upset by this progression:

[We fans] will soon encounter a cold, preachy and scolding message from the news media to move on put it away and focus our attention on more important priorities such as the deteriorating schools in Hartford. I’m starting to hear it already ... [the] moralizing on the need for real economic development, and not something like the Whalers which was, after all, just an indulgence—as much as gambling and casinos. I predict that there will soon be backlash on the part of the media, political spin artists ... and other pointy heads insisting that our priorities have been all wrong and that the city can and will flourish with investments in (name any of their politically correct fiscally responsible morally imperative pet projects here). But to all of you true fans who knew the richness of that experience, we know that we have lost something special, that it hurts and that it’s ok to feel bad for a while.

Other fans were dismayed by both the rather quick acceptance and a smattering of letters to the editor and editorials suggesting that the arts could “replace” the newly deceased Whalers:

The spate of warped points of view expressed in today’s Commentary section was nauseating. Basically, if your kids are despondent over the Whalers leaving, then give them a lesson in social responsibility and meaningful civic
pride by taking them on a cultural tour of the city and focusing on the neighborhoods. The message here is that sports are indulgent, mourning the loss of a beloved team is self-pitying and of course we should all be liberal-minded connoisseurs of the arts, not sports.

I love the arts as much as anyone. . . . I must say however that the spate of editorials that was run in yesterday's commentary section under the heading "After the Whale . . . Sun!" was inappropriate. . . . Collectively, the opinions were an example of slapping someone when they're down, and that someone who has made incalculable contributions to the community. . . . I felt so angered. I also know that it is pathetic to think that kids will be as turned on to wind sculpture, boutiques, food festivals and belles lettres as they are to a magnificent Sean Burke save.

Clearly, the fans' likening the loss of the Whalers to death shed light on some of the larger, underlying cultural assumptions and core tenets in American society. Embedded in these responses surrounding the metaphor of death are evidence of such cultural assumptions and tenets as: reverence, respect, precedence, commitment, loyalty, propriety, ingenuity, hope, dedication, passion, activism, reciprocity, and retribution.

Fans, however, did not solely rely on the death metaphor to define the situation and make sense of their predicament. They utilized a host of other metaphors as well, such as divorce.

**Loss as Divorce.** Another prevalent metaphor for franchise relocation was divorce. For example, one fan declared plaintively on the Internet:

> *I feel as though I have just gotten divorced, and the soul mate I once knew has been banished from my life forever. Have you ever been divorced, Mr. Bettman? I hope so. I hope you have felt my pain, tasted my tears, felt the cold slap of a former lover's hand as they walked out of your life, forever. That is the way I feel. Abandoned.*

Another added:

> *This is what it must feel like to get divorced. I feel as though tomorrow morning, I must wake up and face the day as a hockey fan without a team. I want to smack Peter Karmanos in the face, and tell him that his money-grabbing ways have ruined a lifelong relationship, one that I cherished.*

Some Hartford hockey fans expressed pity for the North Carolina hockey fans. The Hartford fans likened the Carolina fans to an unsuspecting man who is about to get involved with Hartford's "ex-spouse" and does not know what he is getting into:

Did Pete [Karmanos] actually commit bigamy or is he merely engaged to Raleigh before the divorce with Hartford has been finalized by the Connecticut Development Authority tribunal? Looks like the wedding date is set for 1998-99 in Greensboro at the latest, unless he can get the CDA's blessing and move the nuptials ahead to this fall. Otherwise he will be forced to play at the Hartford Civic Center this fall, to coexist with the spouse he so loathes, and go through the motions of a season devoid of commitment or good will. In the end, he might have to ask himself whether he might prefer to settle
with this troublesome former spouse, and dole out the ransom money to the
tune of 40 million, necessary to sever all ties with her and consummate his
new union this fall.

Taking the metaphor even further, some fans in North Carolina appeared to actu-
ally ask for Hartford fans’ blessing to embrace their newly-betrothed franchise. As
one North Carolina fan posted:

I live in Raleigh, NC and the Whalers are moving here. I am very excited yet
there is also a feeling in the back of my mind that says this is not quite right.
I am now on the other end of receiving someone else’s team. . . . I am not
quite sure why I wrote this but I think it is almost like closure. . . . I can only
end this by saying I will support your team until/if/when they move.

Clearly, fans used divorce as another metaphor to help them make sense of
their plight during this time. Researchers on divorce note that the partner who did
not expect the divorce often experiences the event similar to a death—in this case,
the death of a formerly close relationship. And like death, the partner not wanting
the divorce experiences many of the same feelings outlined previously by Kübler-
Ross. (See Cherlin, 1992; Gallagher, 1996 for further discussion.)

In their attempt to attach meaning to and interpret the loss of the team, Whalers
supporters’ use of these two metaphors (i.e., death and divorce) provides great
insight into contemporary sports fandom. Both of these metaphors suggest a high
degree of emotional attachment to and personal investment in the team. Not one
fan observed or interviewed associated losing the team to losing a material object,
such as one’s car keys or purse. Rather, this was an intensely personal loss, with
the relocation of the team to North Carolina having profound social psychological
and emotional consequences for many of the fans.

Although these were some of the organizing metaphors used to make sense
of the loss of the franchise, fans were no less reliant on these literary mechanisms
in their structuring and interpretation of the relationship of sports team owners and
their host cities.

The Relationship of Sports Team Owners and Host Cities

Metaphors were also used by fans to describe the relationship of host cities
and contemporary sports team owners, in general, and Whalers’ owner Peter
Karmanos, specifically. They included:

Owner as Prostitute/Whore

Some saw professional sport owners as prostitutes, willing to sell their teams
to any city as long as the price was right:

Karmanos has shown us his true colors. He is a short-sighted little puke,
looking for quick (EASY) money, and he will take advantage of any cities,
or any fan he can, as long as he can make a buck.

This metaphor is used increasingly not only by fans but by many sport journalists
and writers who comment on developments in franchise mobility (e.g., Lupica,
1996).
Owner as Thief. Another metaphor used was that of thief. Some fans believed that the team was stolen from Connecticut by former Governor Lowell Weicker and owner Peter Karmanos. Weicker had helped Karmanos purchase the team from a local ownership group and, subsequently, was appointed a seat on the board of directors of Karmanos' computer software company, CompuWare. With the team out of local control, "theft" was more likely:

This may sound hateful, but I hope that wherever Karmanos brings the team that they fail. Miserably. I'd like for him to see what a mistake it was to steal the Whalers from Hartford.

The Whalers are a way of life for me and all of you, and we are having it taken away from us by a greedy owner just like Cleveland had their life sucked out of them with the Browns situation. I feel for the businesses in the area as well as all the children that depend on the charities that the Whalers supported and each and every fan that has put up their money to support this team. What else is there to say except that this is the 3rd saddest day of my life only ranking behind my mother dying back in February and my father passing away 8 yrs. ago.

That the relocation of a franchise is similar to a theft presupposes that a team is "owned" by a community—and not an individual. In team sports at the professional level, very few teams have even a modicum of community ownership (two notable exceptions being the Green Bay Packers and the Boston Celtics). Hence, while the metaphor is used, it does not represent their relationship to "their" team—at least in the eyes of the law. It does, however, expose yet another widely-held core tenet of American society: social responsibility.

Owner as Duplicitous Friend. Some felt betrayed and "cheated on," for they had been faithful to the Whalers and their owner by increasing season ticket sales, as requested, and attending games at 93% of Hartford Civic Center arena capacity. To some fans, Peter Karmanos was a deceitful friend who had violated a trust and essentially "cuckolded" them and the city of Hartford:

The news hit a lot of people hard, but perhaps none harder than Hartford's mayor, (Mike Peters) who owns Whalers season tickets. Peters was kept at arm's length throughout the talks. Like many people, he learned about the Whalers' departure in Wednesday's newspaper. (Later, Karmanos called the mayor to talk civilly about the matter). "It's like your best friend steals your girlfriend," Peters said afterwards, "and then he wants to have a beer with you." (Swift & Keating, 1997)

Owner as Rapist/Murderer. A couple of fans went so far as to liken owners to rapists and murderers, in which they violently force their will upon powerless municipalities and their leaders:

Well fuck Karmanos, fuck Rowland. ... I feel that we've been RAPED!!!

I'm just as disappointed as the next guy. ... I plan to catch one more game. Hopefully the one against Montreal. Look for me, I will be wearing the full body size condom with a sign saying "I got screwed by Karmanos." ... We brought the fan base up just like he wanted, and now we have been stabbed in the back.
All of these metaphors created by fans suggest that they perceived the owner’s relationship with the city of Hartford as fleeting, insincere, deceptive, violent—in a word, deviant. The relationship did not conform to wider, societally-valued core tenets and cultural assumptions of honesty, sincerity, trust, devotion, commitment, cooperation, respect, and even love. Whaler fans assumed that Peter Karmanos attached the same meanings and interpretations to the team that they did. When the fans discovered that he did not, they experienced a violation of their socially constructed expectations. The result? Fans’ perceived injustice of the whole franchise relocation decision. The decision was not fair for it was rooted in a relationship between owner and host city that did not resemble the fans’ expected relationship—a relationship modeled much more like that between sports teams and their fans, as will be discussed next. In essence, a moral and psychological contract was broken resulting in perceived injustice among fans (see Mitrano, 1997; Rousseau, 1995).

**The Relationship of Sports Teams and Their Fans**

*Sports Teams as Family.* Overwhelmingly, what made the relocation decision painful for many was that they viewed the team as family. And in most families, the core tenets of loyalty, trust, commitment, and love still exist:

The team that was there for us (okay, so mostly off the ice!) is just about dead. A "member of the family" is dying. I will forever remember how I got the news (my husband left me a voice mail message.) I will remember those that I called to confirm the news... It took me approximately 8 hours for the tears to come. But believe me, many, many more will be shed in the days, weeks, years to come. I will always feel this loss.

I still am trying to deal with it. It is like losing a family member to me.

*Sports Teams as Friend.* Others viewed the team as a liked and respected long-time friend with whom they grew up and came of age:

I know how all of you feel and I deeply share your sense of loss and grief. I think last night I figured it out when a friend asked me why I cared anymore about the Whalers when I don’t even live in CT anymore. It hit me that the Whalers were never just a hockey team to me but rather more like a dear friend that I shared bad and good times with. And no matter how bad things may have been and no matter how much other people criticized them and Hartford, they were mine. They were my friend and were as much a part of my childhood and adulthood as any other dear friend or family member. And so were all of you. When we all were in that beautiful arena, we all were a family and all shared the same purpose.

*Sports Teams as Heirloom.* Many Whalers fans defined their relationship with the team as a prized possession or special heirloom which, due to the relocation decision, was now lost and unable to be bequeathed as a legacy to their children and their children’s children:

I always dreamed of seeing my little son or daughter in that Whaler bib, or dressed in the cute little hockey outfit. I always dreamed of bringing my child to their first game, and that look of awe as they entered this cavernous
arena, the smells of the game for the first time, the sight of all those screaming people, answering all their inquisitive questions, just like my dad had done. . . . Sure, I’ll bring my child to another sporting event, in another city. . . . but they’ll never be able to root for the team that I rooted for when I was their age. That is sad.

I’ve been in tears for most of the day. . . . I once had dreams of moving back to CT and becoming a season ticketholder. I too had hoped to one day take my own kids to see the Whalers and to dress them up in cute little J3 jerseys. Now those dreams are never going to become reality.

When my 2 1/2 year old daughter came home from daycare, I realized that I will never be able to take her to a Whalers game—to share the same joy, heartache and emotions I have had for the last 18 years. I was sad for her.

My only regret is that I won’t be able to take my son to a Whaler game. He is only 18 months old. He was born on opening night in 1995. The Whalers shut out the Rangers that night, I watched the game from the hospital.

These two metaphors, team as friend and team as heirloom, reveal yet another core tenet or cultural assumption of American society: continuity, whether in our relationships or our social institutions. Clearly, the relationship of sports teams and fans is intensely personal and expressive—much more so than the fans’ perceived relationship that exists between owners and host cities. Owners generally forge an instrumental tie to their team and the community in which it is supported. They tend to conceptualize their relationship to a sports team as an economic relationship or financial investment (i.e., the Weberian concept of instrumental rationality). When the team no longer serves the rational end of increased profit, it is time to relocate. The contradiction between the sensibilities of owners and fans often results in perceived injustices.

Some fans, however, appear to be starting to adopt more of what has traditionally been an owner’s conceptualization of a sports franchise. For example, a few of the Whaler fans viewed the fan-team relationship in economic terms. As fans, they invested time, money, and emotions into an endeavor that did not yield great returns (e.g., championships) and which eventually went “bankrupt”:

I can’t explain the way I feel, as I’m sure is the way we all are right now. I feel like I’ve wasted my time following the Whalers since I was eight, or like my Whaler web page was a waste of time.

The part that hurts the most is that we apparently never did have a chance. Karmanos and his freaking “moving target negotiation tactics” never had any intentions of staying in Hartford. And to think that I and several friends in the Booster Club absolutely busted our butt for this team.

**Conclusion and Some Final Comments**

In this paper, I have attempted to illustrate how fans work with metaphor as they grapple with disruption in their habituated lives as sports fans. As Becker (1997, p. 60) notes, metaphors frame and structure meaning. They provide a means of expressing feelings and emotions and enable people to structure, frame, and
(when necessary) reframe disruptive events in their lives, whether it be chronic illness (in Becker’s study) or franchise relocation decisions. Using metaphor allows fans to situate their predicament in a larger framework, replete with scripted, “appropriate” ways in which to act and react accordingly. For example, fans collectively experience the same stages of grieving and loss associated with human death and divorce. Hence, they are able to utilize the “scripts,” “frameworks,” and even the “rules” for feelings that have been constructed previously and identified by such sociologists as Erving Goffman (1963, 1974) and Arlie Hochschild (1983).

In addition, the use of metaphor exposes cultural assumptions and core tenets. In this study, Whalers fans’ use of metaphor for the relocation decision, the relationship of the owners and team, and the relationship of the fans and team sheds light on additional larger American cultural assumptions and core tenets or values. They included: reverence, respect, precedence, commitment, loyalty, propriety, ingenuity, hope, dedication, passion, activism, reciprocity, retribution, social responsibility, honesty, sincerity, trust, devotion, and cooperation.

Finally, while the use of metaphor exposes historically-embedded tenets and values, sports fans are beginning to create new metaphors that better represent their emerging feelings and experiences and help them make sense of disruptive situations that violate normative cultural assumptions. As Becker (1997) notes:

Personal disruption prompts an effort to make sense of experience and transform it through metaphor. Metaphors are used not only to integrate knowledge but also to create new understandings of the phenomena people experience, . . . Metaphors not only serve as tools for working with experience and simplifying the process of creating meaning, but also suggest new meanings.” (p. 198)

With the increasingly frequent disorder and disruption in sports fans’ lives (e.g., players’ strikes, owners’ lockouts, player contract holdouts, free agency, franchise relocation, stadium demolition and construction, the ever-increasing changes in team logos, colors, designs, nicknames), we see evidence that new metaphors are being used to highlight alternative discourses on what is normal in the sports fan’s world. For example, fans’ and sportswriters’ references to sports teams as “family” are declining. Rather, the players are now “prostitutes,” and the owners are now “pimps,” willing to pack up the team and take advantage of more lucrative offers elsewhere. Use of such metaphors to frame the current situation restores order for the fans. Now that the teams are no longer “family” but “prostitutes,” their behavior “makes sense” to the fans; it is “normal” for prostitutes to frequent the highest bidder for their services. Framing teams, players, and owners this way through metaphor allows fans to create and attach meaning to these disruptive actions. The creation and use of new metaphors also suggests a shift in core tenets and cultural assumptions—in this example, a shift from the tenets of loyalty and stability to infidelity and celerity.

Clearly, further study in this area is necessary. For example, researchers need to examine the meanings that owners themselves attach to sport teams and the municipalities in which they are located. While there are anecdotal accounts, much more systematic research must be undertaken to come to a greater understanding of how owners conceptualize teams, fans, and cities. Researchers also must come to a greater understanding of the processes by which sports fans create these
emotional attachments to teams. How do teams come to be perceived by fans as “owned” by the fans? Sport researchers must also examine structural barriers to fan ownership of sports teams. Why are there not more communities that own the sports teams for which they root? Why are there not more moral contracts established among owners? These are the questions that remain to be addressed in a much more systematic fashion than has been previously.

As some fan groups (e.g., the International Association of Sports Fans, F.A.N.S.) have suggested, perhaps it is time for fans and local governments around the nation to take a cue from many of our country’s senior citizens. Increasingly, the elderly across America are becoming less terrified of death than they are at the prospect of being kept alive at any cost. Many seniors now have legally-based pacts to forgo “heroic measures” to resuscitate them when they are near death. The State of Connecticut did just that with the Hartford Whalers. Pulled the plug. Stopped the CPR. Ceased prolonged mouth-to-mouth. The state just let them go peacefully “into that good (North Carolina) night.” Given the metaphors used by fans to describe their relationship to the team, the governor’s decision to not “resuscitate” the team via meeting the financial demands of the owner was, and continues to be, a rather controversial one. Until fans and owners attach the same meanings to sports teams, franchise relocation decisions will continue to be like a rose: propitious for some; thorny for many others.

References


Notes

'The Whalers Fan Feedback site no longer posted submissions after May 27, 1997, while The Whalers Fan Forum shut its site down temporarily for a number of weeks following the March 26, 1997, announcement of the departure due to numerous obscenity-laced postings. The actual message to users read: “Due to the inappropriate nature of many messages in the past several hours, The Courant is suspending the Whalers Fan Forum until further notice. For those of you have used it faithfully and properly over the past 6 months, we’re sorry. It was a great vehicle to exchange news and opinions.”
In the course of conducting the interviews, I did not request that the interviewees provide information regarding their age, race, class, or gender. As I was interested in “deeply committed” fans’ reactions; the demographic background of such fans was of less interest to me for this particular paper. Nonetheless, one could surmise that the fans on these particular Internet sites had to come from class backgrounds that would afford them access to a computer and the Internet on a relatively frequent basis. Hence, there is the possibility of a degree of selection bias among my interviewees.

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