# Sociology and Baseball Games

CC 2012 Dan Ryan

First off, I want to tell you that I’m not interested in talking about the “cultural” aspects of baseball as “America’s Pastime” or anything like that. Nor am I interested in the ways that baseball is a metaphor for either the cold war or the development of American individualism. I leave those flights of intellectual fancy for my friends and colleagues. I have tickets for a different destination.

In particular, I’m interested in taking a sort of scavenger hunt approach to see how many sociological concepts one can observe “in the wild” during a visit to a ball game at the ball park. I encourage you to join me. Put on your sociological glasses and see what you can see. Remember that our goal is to see the taken for granted. This is, after all, just a baseball game and we are not trying to make it into anything else. But if we become sociologically naïve we may be able to see the social, those features of life that lie between the idiosyncratic or personal and the universal or natural.

Baseball is a game that is played on a relatively small field – 400 feet square or so – but a baseball stadium is big. It dominates the urban landscape in which it sits. The first thing I always notice on the way to a ballgame is the sense of approaching a monument of sorts. It’s a bit like coming upon the pyramids or the wizard’s palace at the end of the yellow brick road in Oz or Ayer’s Rock or Devil’s Tower in the film “Close Encounters.” The very stature of the building tells you that you are going to something special. Something is going to happen here. This is not just a destination. It is a structure that is specifically built for a crowd phenomenon.

Standing outside the stadium, you can watch the crowds stream toward the gates. The masses stream across the BART bridge wearing their T-shirts, jackets, caps, uniform shirts, etc. People of every description are bedecked in team colors and other paraphernalia. To those of us not so inclined comes the thought – my, they are shameless. And indeed they are. Like a Jewish man in a yarmulke or a Catholic wearing a cross, these folks are simply doing what members of their tribe do. In fact, it reminds me a lot of what Durkheim wrote about the clan and its totems in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.* Each clan has a totem – the turtle or the snake or the oak tree – and this animal or plant stands for the group. Representations of the totem are fashioned out of feathers, stones, twigs, etc. and are brought out on special occasions when the clan gathers together. So too we can imagine each of these fans getting out their As stuff as they get ready to come to the game.

Note too how it is a completely reasonable question to ask “who is your team?” It can be who is your team in today’s game but also more generally – everyone “has” a team. Much of the “fun” of baseball is “having a team.” When fans my age who realize that they are both transplants talk about baseball they are quite likely to ask “who is/was your team when you were back east?” and it will turn out to have been Boston or Philadelphia or the Yankees or the Mets if we are from the mid-Atlantic or New England states.

Recall that Durkheim eventually shows that what the clan is worshipping when it worships the turtle is in fact itself. Society, that is to say, is god and vice versa. One might argue, similarly, that at the baseball park the object of worship is not “the As” or “the Braves” or “the Blue Jay” but the clan, the team and its fans that the team symbol stands for. As Durkheim points out, connection with totemic thing itself is somewhat arbitrary and symbolic. Except when activists point it out, the Brave which stands for the Atlanta team is not thought of it as a native American.

One might think, in this connection, about the difference between a team name and, say, a band name.

The taken for granted and the strange.

The ball park may offer numerous opportunities to capture samples of the marked and the unmarked. Recall that this is NOT deviant and normal. Rather, the marked is the accented member of a pair of concepts, the one that can’t stand for the generic category. If there were women playing professional baseball, for example, we might expect to hear about “players” and “female players.” You don’t need to modify “player” with “male” because it is understood to mean that if something else is not specified. If we say “baseball fan” do we need to tell you the gender? A female fan.

In “Social Gates of Consciousness” Zerubavel described the social bases of attention. We notice and ignore partly as social beings. A person who “understands” baseball, for example, will know which of the things that happen on the field “count” as baseball, which ones “count” in terms of scorekeeping, and which ones are just routine or antics. One set of these can be seen on the scoreboard where runs, hits and errors are displayed, though only the runs determine who wins or loses the game. With each pitch the collective consciousness switches to high gear ready to focus in on what matters – the ball heading in to the plate, the batter swinging, the umpire making a call or the ball heading out onto the field. All the other motions of the other players are ignored – in fact, you might try a game with yourself – try to watch what another player does as a “play” unfolds. You might be surprised where some players end up. This is, in fact, part of what knowing how to play means (for example, there are particular “rules” about who backs up whom on certain plays. The pitcher may run over behind the first baseman on a ball hit into left field

Social Memories. Recall that this phrase refers to the fact that what we remember and what we forget is socially mediated. – stats, for example. Or all during the game they will flash previous records and such on the score board.

##### Social Meanings

##### Social Optics – social construction of perception.

##### Social division of the world

##### Standard Time.

The game is divided into innings not quarters or periods. How long it takes to get three outs is irrelevant. And then there is a seventh inning stretch.

Compare innings to conversational turn taking? Or ritualized battle? We take turns being offense and defense.

##### Stratification

Inside the stadium, seating is, in a sense, by class. The relative numbers of the various kinds of seats form a pyramid of sorts. And there are the skyboxes. Would these correspond to Fussel’s “rich out of sight”? Note how some of the classes are adjacent though one is “better” (closer to the field) than the other. In other cases, though, there is a big gap (as between the lower and upper deck).

##### Social Types

Types of fans:

the kid-like adult

the excited child

the good sport spouse

the quirky loner fan

the serious fan

the buddies

the visa commercial guy (a day at the ball park with your kid – priceless)

Can we categorize obnoxious and nice fans? In terms of excess and deficits?

How about types of fools among the fans?

Types of players

Identity and seriousness. How much one knows. Sitting next to an expert.

Types of fans. Season ticket holders (this is more a status than a type).

##### The Self

Players as personal and anonymous. They play a

##### Home and Work : Working at Play

Keep an eye out for how families “use” baseball games. Fathers teach sons or daughters how to keep score.

##### Facework

Maintaining face. Pitcher gets behind in count. Catcher comes out to talk. Or pitching coach. But if manager comes out and asks for the ball, it means we’re going to get a relief pitcher.

##### Teamwork.

Pitcher and catcher. Catcher signals for the kind of pitch he expects. Pitcher can “shake him off” but in the end they agree. Sometimes the pitcher throws a wild pitch. Sometimes the batter hits the ball. Sometimes he hits a homerun. All the pitcher and catcher can do is stand there and watch it go out of the park.

Is there teamwork among the fans? Who would be the audience?

##### Communication out of character.

What about when you see, say, a professor at the ballpark acting like a fan. Or do you look at the “serious” fans with all their tribal paraphernalia and get embarrassed for them? Recall the kinds of COOC.

Consider too the need to “join in” which can be hard for someone who is feeling non-spontaneous or self conscious. My first experience at a hockey game.

Look at fathers and mothers being fathers and mothers while also being fellow fans.

##### Territoriality

Rich array of spatiality going on here. Front stage and backstage behavior. Locker room as backstage. Male area. Argument in 70s and 80s about letting women reporters in. Special treat when broadcasts of locker room celebration are permitted. Suiting up. Who gets to suit up.

Dugouts?

Corridors behind the stands – the commercial bowels of the ball park.

Bathrooms.

Cars and parking lots.

On deck circles. Bull pen. Coaching boxes.

People sitting in close proximity. Section identity (especially when they give away a pizza to the whole row or section).

##### Deviance, Boundaries, the Sacred and the Profane

Foul balls. Chance to touch the sacred? How about autographs in the same sense. Also, the field as sacred. Very carefully manicured. Only players allowed on it.

National anthem. Even if you think it’s hokey you can feel the surge of ritual solidarity that accompanies it. Note how tacky it feels when they play a recording.

##### Strategic Interaction

Strategy. Norms. Prisoner’s dilemma. Consider the kinds of pitch to throw and to expect depending on how many outs, how many on base, etc.

Gender relations. Are fans men or women? What do you make of the serious women fans?

Signals between coaches and base runners and batters and between catchers and pitchers.

Rituals of how the ball is tossed around after a put out – second 🡪 first 🡪 third 🡪 short 🡪 pitcher.

##### Social Control

Fair ball/foul ball as deviance and boundaries. Strict rules and umpires to decide what’s in or out when it’s close.

Umpires as social control agents.

Ejection as ostracism as the “worst” form of social control. Being thrown out of the game.

Roster as organizational structure.

##### Rationalization – Role of Numbers

Stats as identity. He’s a .333 hitter, .359 against left handers.

Everyone has a seat. Compare Simmel in “How is Society Possible?” (the last a priori – social world as structure of positions).

Rationalization and double entry bookkeeping (Weber). Watch how “real” fans keep score. Their records record every pitch. Each position is given a number (bureaucracy). Each position has a function. Players fill position. We ask “who is in right field” not “where is Fernandez playing?”

##### Mental weighing

Which things count how much in coming up with folks identities? Pretty rational here – they keep stats on just about anything. Any examples of how temporal location, markedness, and context contribute to whether certain acts become heavily weighted in terms of people’s identies?

##### Social comparison.

Look for examples of standardization, ranking, \_\_\_\_\_, and handicapping.

### Extras

Blind trust among people sitting in same row. Pass along money and food. It’s just expected that you would do this and no one ever asks any questions. Social control of informal groups. Casual mutual monitoring. Community of the moment. Consider where folks do and don’t talk. What kind of conversations are overheard?

Socialization and rites of passage – bringing kid to first game or family going to first game as a family.

What to make of the folks who are there on a date? Is one trying to show the other that s/he can go with the hobbies and pastimes of the other?

Hotdog as ritual food.

Notification norms. Pitchers generally announced a few days in advance but starting lineup often only released at game time.

The economy is present in microcosm. Cotton candy sales persons are the retailers and they make their way back to the wholesale area and then bring the goods right to the seat of the consumer.

Cheering. Audience pressure. Need to join in. Team work. Need to make it look like it’s easy. Team needs to work together. Waves.

Consider how promotions are used – get everyone hopping.