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National identity, social institutions and political values. The case of FC Barcelona and Catalonia from an intergenerational comparison

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Using the case of FC Barcelona and Catalonia, this paper examines the relationship between national identity, social institutions and political values. Through different methods of qualitative research, we present an intergenerational comparison between age cohorts to capture continuities and discontinuities in the discursive linkage between FC Barcelona and national feelings of belonging. As the context has changed, the identity construction process should have changed in conjunction with it. The results point to how the old cohort tended to use Barça, as an escape valve, intertwined with Catalan nationalism and political freedom. In contrast, the young ones reproduce the old discourse leaving aside those political values formerly attached to the idea of Barça.

Introduction

On 24th of July 1925, under Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship, FC Barcelona\textsuperscript{1} organized a match against fellow Catalan football club, C.E. Jupiter – as an homage to Orfeó Català.\textsuperscript{2} The Spanish authorities initially banned the game, intent on prohibiting expressions of Catalan nationalism. In response to this decision, a large crowd of nationalists gathered in Les Corts to protest against the ruling. However, owing to the strong reaction, the authorities backed down and the game went ahead. When the spectators had taken their seats and just before kick-off, the music band from the British Royal Marine, which was anchored in Barcelona, performed the Spanish and British national anthems. Spectators jeered while the ‘Marcha Real’ was being played and applauded during ‘God Save the King’. Furious at the incident, the state ordered the closing of Les Corts for six months and the FC Barcelona president was forced to resign. Yet, beyond the immediate aftermath the events of that day would have more far-reaching consequences. For one, the pro-Catalan protests by the fans and the government punishment can be seen as a further strengthening of the link between FC Barcelona and Catalan nationalism. Barcelona was no longer just a football club, but as supporters today still chant, Barcelona had become more than a club.

Although the political meaning of the institution began around its foundation, the impact of specific events of Spain’s history may have affected the perceptions attached to the Fútbol Club Barcelona by its supporters. Group identities are a negotiated practice and what fans feel when they see the flag, hear the anthem, go to

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the stadium and perform the traditional rituals, may have changed owing to changes in Spanish society, including the democratic transition. It has previously been argued that Barça has played a specific role in the construction and cohesiveness of a cultural force in Catalan society. Yet we argue that deeper analysis is required regarding how perceptions of the club differ within the group, in particular how differences occur between generational groups. Therefore, this work asks the question of how the perceptions of Fútbol Club Barcelona as a vehicle for Catalan nationalism have been constructed among Barcelona supporters of different generations. We analyse whether a given context of socialization has consequences in the performances of one’s identity. We do this through an intergenerational comparison of perceptions of FC Barcelona among its supporters.

The following section offers a literature review and the theoretical framework. It first provides the general basis of social identity theory and how the context of socialization affects the construction and performance of one’s identity and values. Following that, the paper addresses the literature on football and identity with particular focus on FC Barcelona. The third section lays out the research design and methodology. The main findings and results are illustrated in the fourth section. The final section presents the conclusions and provides directions for further research.

Theoretical framework

Identity: A culturally transmitted meaning

Culture is usually understood as ‘an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life’. In this sense, culture marks how people behave now and how they are likely to act in the future. Central to this definition is the idea of a shared understanding among those who have a common identity. Performance in rituals or the use of symbolic markers is essential in underpinning the symbolic meaning of these identities. They are part of the process of anchoring the abstract and changeable concept of identity. The effectiveness of the marker depends on the symbolic significance attached to it by group members. Barth argued that ‘often such features such as dress, language, house form, or general style of life’, are ‘overt signals or signs’ of the group identity and uniqueness. These symbols are given meaning through discourse. The Catalan flag is simply a coloured material of yellow and red until it is given meaning through the nationalist rhetoric which links this flag to perceptions and interpretations of historical events.

Social identities, then, emerge as a collective practice. Identity surfaces when communities begin to do things together; indeed identity facilitates the coordination of these activities which constitute a community. Collective identities are produced and reproduced through interactions that construct common realities attached to communal membership. In this sense, the jointness of the interactional task such as performing in periodic collective rituals like going once a week to a football stadium constitutes a fundamental basis for the emergence of a collective identity and its persistence over time. Understanding identity as performance allows us to see that culture and identity are not static realities but they flow and change over time. Meanings are transmitted from generation to generation, which makes intergenerational comparisons a crucial part of the study of culture and identity as
their evolution and adaptation to the social and political environment are likely to be crucial for their survival.

**Identity and cultural change and the concept of generation**

Karl Mannheim’s essay, entitled ‘The Problem of Generations’, is the starting point for studies into generational differences. In it he argues that people who are born in similar years share ‘a common location in the historical dimension of the social process’. Consequently, they experience the same cultural and social changes, which help to contribute to the formation of a generational consciousness resulting in certain attitudes and behaviours associated with social identities. Generation situates agents within a social structure, in much the same way as class or gender are understood to do so. In fact, it can be argued that generations are a more robust structure as while one can change their class group and even their gender, the ability to exit their generation is much more difficult.

This paper is concerned in particular with the concept of social generations. Following the work of Antikainen et al., we define a social generation as, ‘a group of people born during the same time period and who are united by similar life experiences and a temporarily coherent cultural background. People belonging to the same generation have the same location in the historical dimension of the social process’. As such, we draw a distinction between a social generation and the biological generation which refers to the parent–child generational gap.

Knowing that generations overlap, how do we determine which social events define a generation? Addressing this question, Mannheim argues that most important are the experiences in the formative years of adolescence which shapes the world view of the agent. Later events and changes are understood through the prism of this earlier set of experiences. This does not mean that individuals lack agency to change their mindset. Deciding what constitutes a generation is more an art than a science and inevitably depends on each country. Within each country, there are often seismic historical changes which permit us to define a generation more clearly.

This is not to say that generational groups are homogenous bodies. In fact Mannheim and subsequent work allows for intra-generational and intergenerational attitudinal differences. As Mannheim states, ‘within any generation there can exist a number of differentiated, antagonistic generation-units’. These ‘generational units’ are groups of people who experience the same societal changes but react to them in different ways. This more nuanced analysis of generations implores that any study must not make sweeping statements about homogeneous generational groups but must take into account and control intra-generational units.

Mannheim’s theory provides us with conceptual framework to inquire how the meaning of identities can change across generations. Through highlighting the importance of external social pressures on shaping individuals’ perceptions of their surroundings his theory encourages social scientists to explore how inter-generational perceptions differ.

**Identity and sport**

Sporting institutions like football clubs are a critical site in which to explore the complex relationships between nationalist identities and social institutions. Football is the world’s most popular sport, both in numbers of spectators and their social
composition. In addition, the very structure of football seems to make it a fertile ground for the construction and maintenance of social identities as they act as ‘imagined communities’. Many studies have likened football fans to Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’. Imagined communities are groups of people who may never individually meet but self-identify with each other. For example, a game of football consists of two groups of people engaged in a symbolic fight for collective space in a football pitch. Within the wider discourses of these communities, material objects such as goalposts, stadia, football t-shirts turn into a special type of object. Stadia become ‘home’ and ‘away’ grounds and a coloured t-shirt takes on the team colours and crowds of people become ‘fans’.

Football clubs around the world have come to take on meanings and express socially relevant distinctions. Many teams serve as ‘anchors of meaning via their role as vehicles which individuals and groups can strengthen their attachment and identification with a particular community’. Examples include Glasgow Celtic in Scotland, Belfast Celtic in Northern Ireland, which represents an Irish identity; or Athletic Bilbao in the Basque Country which is intertwined with Basque national identity. Perhaps the most internationally famous example is that of FC Barcelona which has historically been perceived as symbolizing the sub-state national Catalan identity in Spain.

Barcelona, often known by their nickname Barça, feature heavily in the literature on sport, football and social identity. Although founded in 1899 by Swiss immigrants, the club quickly became associated with Catalan identity. This was exacerbated by overt attempts of successive club presidents to do so. However, it was the tumultuous period of the Spanish Civil War that had the strongest effect on the association. In particular, the murder of club president Josep Sunyol at the hands of Franco’s forces would have a continuing impact. In the years that followed, FC Barcelona suffered at the hands of the dictatorship as their great rivals, Real Madrid FC, were highly favoured by the Franco-led government. This led to unprecedented success for the Madrid team while Barcelona struggled to compete on an uneven playing field. Moreover, the wider repression of the period affected the club which did most to represent the capital of Catalonia. While the dictatorship tried to homogenize Spanish culture under Castilian culture, Barça took on strengthened meaning as a Catalan symbol.

The thread through the literature is that, in the context of repression by a centrist state, being a Barcelona football fan assumed importance beyond the sporting arena. The slogan that characterized the period was més que un club. As, for many Barcelona FC fans, the football was a proxy through which they could exhibit their suppressed national identities. This was summed up by the words of Carles Rexach, former FC Barcelona player and coach, suggesting that the role of the club during the dictatorship:

Franco tried to obliterate all regional rivalries in Spain, except in soccer. He promoted soccer as a healthy way for the regions to work out their tensions. But with Barça, the dictator miscalculated. As the Catalans had no political parties, no regional government, and no right to use their own language, they threw their cultural pride into Barça. At a Barça match, people could shout in Catalan and sing traditional songs when they could do it nowhere else.

Instead of looking at the perceptions of FC Barcelona as an aggregate group of fans, this study seeks to compare different generational perceptions. In Spain, there is
little doubt that a crucial point in the history that divides the society between those born before and after of that period is the transition to democracy that took place between 1975–1978 after 40 years of Franco’s dictatorship. As such, a Catalan whose formative years took place after the civil war and during the dictatorship should exhibit different attitudes and perceptions of the Catalan identity than one who was born more recently and whose formative process occurred in the very recent democratic period. The older generation experienced repression of the language, culture and democratic parties in Catalonia. On the other hand, the younger generation have been able to vote for pro-Catalan independence parties, speak the language and pursue the culture. Today Catalans are free to speak their language, sing their songs and wave their flags throughout Catalonia and not simply within the confines of FC Barcelona football stadium. Therefore, it is reasonable to suspect, in line with Mannheim’s theory, the meaning and perception attributed to the role of social institutions like FC Barcelona as Catalan symbols differ between the two generations. The older generation ought to attach greater significance to the association with Catalanity.

This is not to say that today FC Barcelona is not seen as a Catalan institution. The official website claims that ‘FC Barcelona is ‘more than a club’ in Catalonia because it is the sports club that most represents the country and is also one of its greatest ambassadors’. Moreover, fans can be seen to carry Catalan symbols such as flags. However, we propose that the intensity of meaning described by Rexach is not the same because of the new channels which have opened to Catalans to express national identity. Access to these other channels which would more realistically produce a Catalan state during the formative years of fans will have had an effect. This paper argues that the perceptions of FC Barcelona as a symbol of nationalism will be influenced by different periods of socialization experienced by different generations of fans.

**Data and methodology**

The paper combines two techniques of qualitative research: participant observation and 10 in-depth interviews. Participant observation was conducted from November 2011 until June 2012 on 17 occasions. The in-depth interviews were carried out between January 2012 and March 2012.

When using participation observation, we wanted to view the supporters’ behaviour before, during and after the games; in a variety of locations around the stadium and in the city and bars. For this reason, we varied the ways in which we conducted the observation. In total, we carried out our observations at 17 matches, which included matches of the three main competitions in which FC Barcelona was involved (UEFA Champions League, La Liga and Copa del Rey) and the derby game against Real Madrid. Pre-match, we varied between following groups of supporters in the city centre, moving from bar to bar and catching the metro to the stadium. We also spent time around the stadium observing the interactions and behaviour of the fans. Our focus was on pro-Catalan supporters, and looking for ‘markers’ of this. Markers included Catalan being spoken and the carrying of symbols such as a Catalan scarf. Inside the stadium, the focus of our research was on the link between the football club and the expression of Catalan nationalism. For this, we observed the behaviour of the fans in the songs they were singing, the flags they wore and the banners they waved.
We approached our interviewees through referrals by key individuals in Penyes barcelonistes (fan clubs). The selection of the interviewees was done carefully to control for several potential confounders. All respondents were Barça members, had medium values in the left–right scale of political orientation (ranged between 4 and 6 in a scale between 1 and 10), were born and lived in Catalonia, and, above all, described their subjective national identity as more Catalan than Spanish or only Catalan. By interviewing only those who regarded themselves as Catalan, we aimed to control for potential differences in the perception of FC Barcelona as a vehicle for Catalan nationalism being as a result of differences in national identity sentiments.

Our interviewees were divided into two separate groups: young and old. The dividing line was the transition from dictatorship to democracy. On the one hand, we grouped those who had their adolescence and therefore their most intense period of socialization during the dictatorship and on the other hand those whose adolescence was during the democratic period. This left us with a group of five respondents who were born before 1950. The youngest was 29 and the eldest 41 by Franco’s death. The second group of five respondents were born after 1982 (the year of the first socialist government of the democracy that eventually consolidated the democratic transition); the eldest was born in 1986 and the youngest in 1991, so all five were born in a time when the democracy and a system of political liberties had already been consolidated.

In all cases, the interviews took place in an environment chosen by the interviewee; mostly their own home or the bar they frequently go to and they were given anonymity. The questions were the same for all the interviewees so as to make their responses comparable across the two groups in a systematic way. The language was chosen by the respondent as well. Although the 10 interviews started in Catalan, some changed from Catalan to Castilian and back to Catalan in an unprompted way throughout the interview.

Results
One of the key findings to emerge from the results was the different form of socialization for Barça fans. The majority of the interviewees described the immediate family as the main channel of socialization, although this mechanism has a stronger presence among our younger interviewees. The next most common factor was the role of friends, highlighting the association of the identity with leisure time. Some of the older interviewees stated that the neighbourhood in which they grew up was a dominant influence on their becoming a FC Barcelona fan. It is perhaps interesting to see that, in addition to this, the neighbours are not mentioned together with any other group; in contrast to family and friends which are usually mentioned together.

Besides social pressure, we also found that there are other causal factors in becoming a Barça fan, including political expression against the dictatorship. Unique to the elder cohort, we hear respondents argue that Barça was a vehicle to express alternative views to the dictatorship of General Franco which had blocked other channels of political expression. ‘In an authoritarian regime, from government to home, to be a Barça fan was the only available means to, politely, dispute father’s authority’ (D., 78).

Members from both age cohorts positioned Barça as an arena in which they could express their Catalan identity. The elder interviewees claim that they became
Barça fans due to the fact that the club represents a feeling of Catalanity. In reply to the question of why he became a Barça fan, one interviewee states: ‘Because it is a Catalan club and it is the most important one’ (E., 77). He continues, ‘Barça is the feeling of Catalan people. Not all of us, but a lot’ (E., 77). On a similar note R., (76) reveals the club was: ‘… the only way to express that I felt Catalan’, and (D., 78) claims that, ‘The hopes of Barça fans converted progressively into a patriotic hope’. Evidence of viewing Barça as a vehicle for expressing a Catalan identity was not restricted to the elder cohort and could be seen among the younger group too. Discussing the meaning of the club, I. (21) remarks, ‘Barça is bigger than Barcelona. […] It has an attribution of catalanity that other clubs don’t’ and M. (26) says, ‘I would admit that an identification between Barça and Catalonia exists because that’s something … like this’.

Despite the different contexts of socialization of our interviewed age cohorts, Barça is perceived as representing Catalan identity by both. One explanation could be that these results were collected during the recent increase of support for pro-Catalan and pro-independentist movements in Catalonia. Soon after the collection of the data, evidence can be found in the way the supporters who attended the stadium expressed their national feeling during the game against Real Madrid on 7 October 2012 by shouting ‘independència’ and displaying a big Catalan pro-independentist flag. From then on, nationalist sentiments inside the stadium have been on the rise, just as clashes between the central Spanish government and the regional Catalan government have become more intense. For example, Barça fans have begun to repeatedly shout ‘independència’ every match at 17 min and 14 s, in reference to the defeat in 1714 of the Catalan troops fighting during the War of the Spanish Succession.

When examining other meanings of Barça, a further two differences between cohorts emerge. The elder cohort says that FCB is a channel to politically express themselves against the dictatorship. In that direction, it is interesting to see how in our interviews the young cohort is aware of this specific meaning for the older cohort. The young interviewees link expressions against the dictatorship with the sentence ‘més que un club’ indicating that for them it is a latent value in FCB. For this reason, we can infer from our results that while the young cohort collectivizes Barça’s values, the old cohort individualizes them.

Moving on, we have found that Barça has come to represent a specific set of sporting values among its fans. Our younger cohort gave these values greater importance than the elder one. When the elder interviewees did mention sporting values, the ones identified differed from those given importance by the younger group. The former underlines values such as solidarity while the latter focus more in the quality of the football practised by FCB. For instance, R. (76) believes that what makes Barça different is ‘… its values. Barça is a good example for schools for our children, in the way we do business, etc. This is ‘the Pep way’ (Pep refers to Josep Guardiola). However, it was not Pep who invented it, but the institution which has created the Guardioles: Barça’. And this is different to, for example, M. (24) who says that: ‘They are a really good football team which shows that people from here can play football as good as people from Brazil or Argentina’.

Beyond the findings of socialization, the meaning of the club to the individual and the values attributed to ‘més que un club’, the stadium emerged as a key tenet of the Barça identity. While both position it as a site in which to express Catalan identity, the meaning was not the same between the two groups. The elder group
reference the importance of the Camp Nou during the time of Franco as a place to challenge the repressive language policy, which prohibited the use of the Catalan language. M. (66) states: ‘It was a place where you could shout Visca Catalunya and nothing happened. It was the place where one could show his catalanitiy’. In contrast, the younger group, who mention the stadium more often, refer to its importance nowadays, for example: ‘In Camp Nou you can’t see a single Spanish flag, while in other stadiums you do’ (M., 26).

One of our most interesting findings was the different meaning attached to the club anthem. For the young cohort, it seems to not have any strong relevance and some of the young interviewees didn’t even know the words. On the other hand for the older age group, it is more relevant. The anthem generates strong emotions and they attribute strong importance to the lyrics, as can be seen when an interviewee argues: ‘Barça’s anthem is like Els Segadors (the Catalan anthem), they are both equally important to me’ (E., 77). It is particularly interesting to see how the elder group refers to the lyrics and in particular to the parts referring to the cohesiveness of the Barça identity. ‘The anthem expresses many things of Catalan people: that we come from the north, that we come from the south, that we are more than a club. It is a very well crafted anthem, very emotional’ (D., 78) ‘tant se val d’on venim si del sud o del nord (singing)’ (M., 66).

A further important factor uncovered during the analysis was the perception of FCB as a global brand. While the elder cohort still doesn’t perceive Barça as global brand, the younger age group does. In particular, they have a more global image of Barça, which they claim helps with increasing club income and is linked by some respondents to the internationalization of the Catalan situation. Relevant examples include: ‘When people think about Catalonia, the first thing they know is Barça’ (A., 25). ‘Since many people wants to watch a live game, Barça earns more money because it can raise the ticket price’ (I., 21).

This idea of a more global perception of Barça could perhaps be linked to the rivals of FCB. Without prompting by the interviewer, the younger cohort answer that some European clubs are Barça rivals and, in one case, even venture to talk about a potential derby ‘If the current history continues like this, Barça-Chelsea could probably become a match with a strong rivalry, even a derby’ (M., 26). As for the older cohort, they mention other European clubs without the same emphasis, and merely as something sportive. ‘Rivalry is only applicable in the Catalonia - Spain conflict, with the others rivalry is very healthy. [...] In Europe there are no problems with referees and the best team wins’ (R., 76).

When discussing rivals in the national league, both Real Madrid and RCD Español are mentioned as the main ones, especially the former. The older interviewees link this rivalry with Real Madrid to a feeling of political intention. They claim that FCB acts as a counterweight to the power of Real Madrid as shown through the actions referees and the links to and favours received from the state. In one of the interviewee’s words:

The first goal that they achieved was to steal the famous Alfredo Di Stefano when Barça had him legally acquired, but due to a dictatorial system in the government in which ‘el Caudillo’, with the acquiescence of general Moscardó achieved the transfer for Madrid through threats. [...] Then, general Moscardó, a crook in sport matters, made Di Stefano refuse to play for Barça. (D., 78)
However, interidentity conflict remains a constant theme in our results between both cohorts. Indeed, Barça-Madrid is seen by many as a battle between Catalonia and Spain by all of them. ‘The rival from the outside is always Real Madrid’ (M., 26) ‘Due to the political connotations, the rival is Madrid’ (R., 76) ‘Catalonia wants to become independent, but Madrid doesn’t want it. Therefore, there is conflict’ (E., 77). ‘There are people who in addition to the sport reasons also sees Catalonia-Spain rivalry’ (M., 24). Interestingly, the younger group give prominence to the conflict being an intercity competition rather than a national conflict of Catalonia vs Spain (Olympic Games, economic competition, international image, tourism and so on). Meanwhile, the elder group emphasizes the national conflict dimension.

Finally, we found that the intra-city R.C.D Espanyol and FC Barcelona rivalry is more important within the older cohort. Furthermore, the older cohort attributes a dual dimension to this rivalry: left-right and Catalan Catalonia-Spanish Catalonia. ‘They (R.C.D Espanyol) are not catalanists, they are the right’ (E., 77) ‘Espanyol was Franco’s favourite club, it was the club of the wealthy people’ (M., 76). On the other hand, the younger cohort merely sees the national conflict in this rivalry. Although in one case, the city rivalry was mentioned: ‘because one represents the Spanish Catalonia and the other the Catalan Catalonia’ (I., 21). ‘Within the city, now, none, but within the metropolitan area, Espanyol’ (M., 26). This last quotation is in reference to a controversy that existed between the managers of both clubs after RCD Espanyol inaugurated their stadium. This comment shows a certain degree of hostility, although sometimes closer to mockery than hatred, towards RCD Espanyol.

Regarding the behaviour of the fans inside and around the stadium, we could find no distinguishable difference between matches from the different competitions. At the matches against Spanish clubs, we saw the same frequency of visible markers of Catalonia as we did against European clubs. The markers usually are Catalan scarves, flags and colours. The variety here was noticeable between our age cohorts, with the younger age cohort wearing the scarves and colours with a much greater frequency than the old age cohort.

As most of the flags were carried by supporters in the section in which fans were most vociferous, we would argue that they were mostly being carried by younger fans. Indeed the elder cohort said that when it comes to the games, they watch them quietly rather than singing. Something interesting regarding flags is that, inside Camp Nou, a majority of them were blue ‘Estelades’ instead of ‘Senyeres’ (‘Estelada’ is the flag used by the secessionist movements in Catalonia, while ‘Senyera’ is the official flag from Catalonia). This suggests that those carrying the flags lean more towards secessionist sentiments; however, it would require further study to establish a firm link.

A second finding to emerge from the participant observation relates to the significance of ‘més que un club’. To many Catalans, including those with whom we interviewed, the phrase defines FCB, as a symbol of Catalonia and indeed Catalan nationalism. From our observations, it struck us that the phrase had now also taken on a new connotation as a crude marketing ploy. It appeared as though Barça were using the phrase as a way to increase their marketing appeal around the world by claiming that it was different. The words ‘més que un club’ were not only plastered all over the stadium and its surroundings but also over much merchandise aimed at tourists. In terms of the intergenerational comparison, it could be argued that those from the younger age cohort are more susceptible to this type of influence. Having
presented the results, we now move on to the conclusions section where we will cross our theoretical framework with the data gathered from our qualitative methods.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the central importance of political context during early identity socialization to meanings attached to symbolic markers of social identity. Moreover, it underscores the way in which identities are a negotiated process among a wider group of members and as such are fluid and can change. The case study of FCB was chosen owing to the recent social and political history of Catalonia and its interaction with the process of political change in Spain.

The study has taken a cultural approach to social identities as a starting point. In this, we stress the importance of intergenerational comparisons to capture the crucial points in the transmission of patterns of meaning that would eventually lead in the evolution and adaptation of identities to the social and political environment. In our case study, those who experienced their socialization under an era of democracy and political freedom are expected to attach a different meaning to the social institutions than those who went through the same process under a repressive regime.

To explore this hypothesis, two cohorts of people were chosen for comparison: those who had their early socialization process under Franco’s regime and those who had it under the democratic context. The empirical analysis conducted combined in-depth interviews and participant observation. Both methods provided us with some interesting findings with theoretical implications for the understanding of how the imperfect or selective intergenerational transmission of patterns of meanings are able to explain change in perceptions of social institutions, in this case, sporting clubs.

Results suggest that the Catalanity of Barça is a constant among all the interviewees. Barça emerges from their interviews as a symbol of and a vehicle through which fans can express a Catalan identity and Catalan pride. For a number of interviewees the former is seen as a synonym of the latter. Interestingly, these results were expressed by both groups. In opposition to our initial thoughts, it seems that the context of democratic freedoms experienced by the younger group during their period of socialization has not altered the perception of Barça as representative of Catalanity.

That is not to say that expressions of Catalanity in the context of Barça fans have remained constant across generations. Changes can be seen within the stadium, the Camp Nou. As the political context changed in Spain, so did the symbolic markers of identity expressed in Camp Nou. While during the dictatorship many ‘Senyeres’ were found, nowadays flags and nationalistic markers symbolise both Catalanism and its linkage to the secessionist movement. It seems that those who feel most Catalan still find Camp Nou as the place to display their nationalistic symbols. Today, those who feel more Catalan seem not to have the need to show their identity in the stadium with ‘Senyeres’ as the Barça’s markers of identity are sufficient to show their Catalanity.

The nationalist discourse embedded in Barça’s identity has been reproduced over time. Old interviewees merged football and politics so as to have a channel to release their nationalistic energies. Franco’s machinery of repression seems to have tacitly agreed upon using football as a tool to release the nationalistic tensions in exchange for political deactivation outside the stadiums. That explains why in the
interviews, particularly among the older cohort, Camp Nou is regarded as such an important symbol of Catalanism and freedom. It suggests that football, and Barça in particular, had a key political function within Franco’s regime.

One explanation for the continued symbolic importance of Barça as a Catalan institution is the reproduction of social meaning from parents to children. The democratization of Spain and the recovery of political freedom meant that the new generations were no longer socialized as linking Barça to values of democracy and political freedom. Instead, they have been socialized in terms of it as a symbol of Catalan identity. Barça is no longer a symbol channelling anti-repression and freedom for the young interviewees. For them, the club today is a symbol of Catalan identity, despite being aware of what the FCB used to mean for their elders. The idea, that Barça as an anti-repression tool, was no longer necessary to be transmitted. However, its political relevance as a Catalan symbol has persisted through generations to the young interviewees — though, as in the Chinese whispers game, the current narrative differs from the old discourse.

The process through which such a symbiotic process between Catalan and Barça identity is developed differs among generations. For our older cohort, three concepts work together, almost as synonyms, in their construction of symbolic meaning: Barça, Catalanism and political freedom. Chronologically, this discourse has been held, either in the public or in the hidden transcript — using Scott’s nomenclature — and transmitted from generation to generation. Thus today’s grandchildren still speak of the importance of Barça in the construction of the Catalan identity and see the football club as instrumental in national identity.

Nevertheless, the reproduction of the old narrative about the nationalistic fight has not been thoroughly mimetic. Through the narratives of the elder cohort, Barça emerges as representative of both Catalan nationalism and the desire for political freedom. On the other hand, the young cohort does not mention a link between national identity and liberty, and Barça emerges as symbolic of only national identity. This intergenerational difference reflects a shift in the meaning of Barça for the Catalan nationalists and how the symbolic linkage has been reproduced from generation to generation. This small-N qualitative analysis does not aim to reach a definitive conclusion on the topic but, instead, to shed some light on promising lines of research, contribute to the generation of new hypotheses and provide new evidence on the generational transmission of national identities. Even though the results provided here are only partially generalizable to similar populations of that of our sample, they entail a substantial contribution to the field by redeeming highly valuable features in the understanding of the construction of the meaning of Barça and Catalanism over time.

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Notes

1. Throughout the paper we use the terms FC Barcelona, Barça and FCB interchangeably to refer to Fútbol Club Barcelona.
2. *Orfeó Català* is a symphonic choir that since its foundation in 1891 emerged as one of the greatest symbols of Catalan culture and it is known for its links to Catalan nationalistic orientation. See Millet i Loras, Lluís. ‘El Llegat Històric De l’Orfeó Català (1891–1936)’, 139–53.


15. Burns, Ibid.


19. Part of the Barça’s anthem that says ‘nevermind where we come from, if the south or the north’.


References


