Ta(l)king Sides: Ethical and Methodological Challenges in Comparative Fieldwork on Avid Football Rivalries

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Abstract

Previous research on football (soccer) fan cultures has documented the lived experiences of devoted football supporters. Few studies, however, have used participant observation and intensive interviewing to examine the deep-rooted inter-group oppositions that characterize avid football rivalries. Even fewer have done this involving both sides of a rivalry and in countries and cultures unknown or unfamiliar to the researcher. This article examines the process of doing qualitative research in such settings. Fieldwork experiences in Italy, Spain, England and the Netherlands are used to report and reflect on the ethical and methodological challenges associated with comparative research into inter-group conflicts in the football context. There are specific dilemmas that relate directly to the task of studying multiple sides of a football rivalry. Accusations of partiality and ethical criticisms of the researcher's betrayal of one side against the other are rife, particularly where intra-group cleavages and a strong distrust of the police exist.

Introduction

The issue of 'taking sides' is well established in qualitative research. Interested parties are often quick to make accusations of partiality, especially in research settings involving inter-group conflict.[1] They may claim that the researcher paints a one-sided picture that

does not give immediate attention to alternative perspectives or interpretations, seeing things from the perspective of only one party to the conflict. The question 'whose side are we on?'[2] takes on new meanings within the context of football (soccer) rivalries. Football is highly competitive, centred on the defeat of rivals and often accompanied by intense in-group bonds and correspondingly intense antagonisms towards out-groups. Rivalries between professional football teams have deep roots and are often based on broader social conflicts which have come to express themselves through the medium of sport. Such rivalries

> live off their own histories, full of memories of previous games, referees' errors, victories won by spectacular last-minute goals, and so on. They can live for many years even when the clubs in question are not in the same division and do not meet on the field of play.[3]

Researching inter-group conflicts in football up close and personal can be a daunting task. A major difficulty that the researcher encounters at every stage of the research process relates to the ethical criticism of his or her potential betrayal of one side against the other.[4] While a handful of studies have provided thick descriptions of football fandom or 'hooliganism', very few studies are undertaken comparing both sides of a football rivalry. Moreover, few scholars[5] have discussed in a sustained and reflexive manner the ethical and methodological dilemmas they faced during their fieldwork despite the fact that, in practice, fieldwork is 'a messy business'.[6]

In this article, our fieldwork experiences in Italy, Spain, England and the Netherlands are used to report and reflect on the ethical and methodological challenges of comparative research on inter-group conflicts in the football context. We analyze the process of gaining research access, maintaining field relations, leaving the field, and post-fieldwork implications. This analysis serves to increase the understanding of the challenges and complexities of comparative fieldwork on avid football rivalries and similar types of inter-group conflict, as well as to offer a glimpse into the lived experiences and meaning-giving processes that inform these rivalries. Unlike most football fan ethnographies, our research was mostly carried out in a foreign, international

environment where we, as researchers and in later stages also in the roles of participants or friends, were outsiders attempting to gather 'insider perspectives' on the subject. Our status as foreign researchers created several kinds of methodological and ethical complications as well as opportunities. This article illuminates and interrogates these and other aspects of cross-cultural qualitative research with football supporters.

This article also draws on and augments the wider debate among ethnographers on how ethical decision making during fieldwork is best achieved. On the one extreme, Eder and Corsaro make a strong case for the 'learning by doing' position.[7] For Eder and Corsaro, fieldwork is flexible and self-corrective; ethical decisions made on the basis of reflexive participant observation are necessarily more valid than decisions governed by pre-existing guidelines. They argue that it is often impossible for researchers to know at the outset of fieldwork how to present their research and themselves as researchers to those under study, and how to position themselves in the social scene in a way that best permits observation of the phenomenon of interest. On the other side of the debate, ethnographers such as Taylor and Vanderstaay maintain that the 'learning by doing' position is highly problematic because it undervalues the benefits of careful, reflexive consideration before entering the field.[8] Taylor has argued that 'it is important to go into fieldwork thinking about potential moral and ethical dilemmas before encountering them in the field.'[9] From this perspective, reflecting on the dilemmas encountered by previous ethnographers is of great significance to researchers, heightening their caution and awareness while helping them establish, as much as possible, ethical guidelines and parameters before entering the field.[10]

The approach taken in this article occupies a middle ground between these two positions. Our analysis shows that many issues are hard to predict and prepare for beforehand and that, as a consequence, fieldwork inevitably remains a trial-and-error process in which situational decisions based on improvisational skills and common sense are as essential as pre-existing methodological knowledge. Recording and analyzing initial methodological errors and misjudgments is one useful way that researchers gain information for revising their procedures to better fit the demands of a particular field situation.[11] However, in hindsight we also believe that careful, reflexive consideration before entering the field is enormously important to aid researchers' 'judgment in

context'. Researchers can learn from the methodological errors and misjudgments of those that went before them, and reviewing similar studies with an eye to the ethical dilemmas encountered by previous ethnographers is vital for helping researchers establish (or at least reflect on) ethical guidelines before they enter the field. With this article, we aim to aid researchers in thinking about and preparing for their fieldwork on football rivalries.

Background and context of the research

A substantive body of research on football fan cultures has been produced over the past two decades.[12] Most studies share the objective of making visible, describing and trying to come to an understanding of how football fans give meaning to and experience their social world and the events that occur in it. Their focus is on *emic* representations of football fan behaviour, that is, on uncovering insider perspectives held by those who have personal experience of a particular cultural and social setting. In contrast, *etic* refers to the idea of outsider perspective which is the viewpoint of a person who has not had a personal or lived experience of a particular culture/society.[13] With fanatic football supporters, these *etic* representations held by, for example, the media and the general public (e.g. regarding the meanings of fan violence) tend to be at odds with the *emic* perspectives held by fans themselves.

Our research can be situated within the growing literature on football fan ethnographies. The studies on which this article is based had a specific focus on *emic* representations of football fan rivalries. While our studies were conducted independently from one another and we did not know each other at the time of our researches, we departed from a similar personal and professional interest: to collect the richest possible data on those fan groups that are popularly labelled deviant and violent with the aim to produce a better understanding of their behaviour, identities and patterns of meaning-giving. We departed from the premise that although manifestations of fan rivalry at different football clubs may have much in common, inter-group oppositions are understood and experienced in different ways depending on the particular socio-cultural

traditions and habitus of clubs and their fan communities. Both authors selected a comparative design structured around avid fan rivalries.

The first research, conducted between 2002 and 2006 as part of a PhD dissertation, focused on six fan groups that have been implicated, to varying degrees, in long-standing symbolic conflicts with local rivals.[14] These groups followed FC Barcelona and Espanyol in Barcelona, Spain; Feyenoord and Sparta Rotterdam in Rotterdam, the Netherlands; and West Ham United and Fulham in London. The second study centred on the deep-rooted rivalry between ultras (organized fanatic supporter groups) of Bologna and neighbouring Cesena in Italy. This research, carried out in 2006 and 2007, formed the basis of a Master thesis.[15] A detailed description of *emic* conceptions and vernaculars of football fandom in the four countries, including terms such as 'ultras' and 'hooligans', is beyond the scope of this article. This description is provided in the abovementioned theses as well as in other publications.[16]

Both studies included multiple data sources: individual and group interviews, informal conversations, observation, documentary analysis (fanzines, written statements by fans), and analysis of related websites and online message boards. The data from each source were used to illuminate and interrogate the other. A central aspect of the fieldwork consisted of observations and conversations at football grounds and related spaces, particularly the intensive association during train, bus or car transport to and from away matches. Observation did not concentrate exclusively on fan behaviour but also on the interaction between supporters and law enforcers. At an early stage observations were mostly made from a distance from a strategic position (in a particular area of the ground, in the streets, in a bar) without the researchers actually positioning themselves among the fan groups under study. It was only after establishing rapport with group members that observations became more genuinely participant. Observations were not merely a means for collecting specific data, but equally for obtaining a feeling, albeit a rather restrained one, for what it is like to be in a particular social situation. On the basis of such experience the researcher is more able adequately to make sense of what fans have to say and the ways in which they describe their social worlds.[17]

We deliberately sought to avoid full participation in the sense of trying to learn and master the behaviour of the fans and to participate in it to the fullest possible extent,

including engaging in physical violence. We set out to observe illegal activities when they occurred but also to avoid committing such activities ourselves. We did cheer along with the group or assist group members in certain activities (e.g. the painting of banners or the production of fanzines) while trying to observe and understand what was going on around us. At some of the clubs under study this type of participation was enabled by the partial match between the fans' ideas and understandings and our own, as well as by the sometimes very personal relationships we established with individual fans, which resulted in the blurring of researcher and participant/friend roles (as discussed below).

We regularly socialized with informants outside of the football context, for example at their homes, in transport, at parties or in public places such as bars. These occasions offered the opportunity to have more private and personal discussions with individuals or small groups of fans, and to get to know fans' behaviour and interests outside of football. The majority of semi-structured interviews were conducted in these locales, potentially providing a 'back region' to fans' public performances in and around the football stadium.[18] The discussions and interviews created the opportunity to ask fans for explanations and for their views on certain events or developments, and also to address matters that the researcher could not observe directly, such as the historical development of inter-group rivalries. In this 'back region' we could expect more serious, thoughtful answers regarding relatively sensitive or contentious issues, such as the use of violence and experiences with police and the justice system.

The relative closeness to informants that was established in these types of situations enhanced our ability to grasp and contextualize fans' visions and ideas, which reduced the possibility of misunderstandings and inaccurate observation.[19] Moreover, this often produced a greater willingness on the part of informants to go out of their way to assist us in our studies, for example by urging other group members to participate in the research. In other cases, however, we failed to systematically observe fans' daily lives. This constituted a considerable limitation to our research, in part because it hindered our understanding of their behaviour and social identities at home, in the workplace and in other non-football contexts.[20] This limitation appears to have been caused in part by the fact that, unlike some scholars,[21] neither author had a significant pre-existing relationship with the fan groups under study. This, we hoped, would enable us to take advantage of

reflexive detachment, entering the research setting for a given period of time but ultimately withdrawing in order to analyze our data and write up the findings. Below we will first discuss the process of entrée.

Entering the field: gaining access and establishing rapport with football fans

Rather than assuming the position of an 'acceptable incompetent',[22] in the early stages of our fieldwork our primary concern was with appearing 'marginally competent' and being taken seriously. This concern was based on certain personal characteristics and interests we believed to have in common with our (predominantly male) informants. At an early stage, we had a vague sense of how our identities would impact our research and how selected personal competencies might make us appear more worthy of informants' time and attention.

Gender, age, sexual orientation and, in some cases, ethnicity were meaningful elements in defining our initial research identities. These elements played a significant role in reducing our perceived 'Otherness' and in establishing cultural proximity. Being of similar age and appearance enhanced our 'cultural competence' to participate in the fan groups.[23] As young white heterosexual males our basic profile was generally broadly similar to that of our informants. Our gender and sexual orientation appear to have enhanced the development of rapport through male bonding in a masculine football culture that both of us, as football fans, were reasonably familiar with.[24]

Although we had guessed that these particular aspects of our identity might make the development of rapport easier, there were also elements of our identity that appeared to complicate access. The first author's research with neo-fascist fans in Spain serves as an example. In trying to suspend judgment and facilitate rapport, he chose to conceal his political views as well as his personal views on the use of violence. He suppressed differences of opinion he had with his informants, while highlighting similarities such as his strong interest in football. These efforts were intended to make the researcher more like the people he was interviewing.[25] This meant that he usually did not show disapproval when fans said or did something which offended his personal morality,

although with fans with whom he had developed a close relationship he could, if disagreeing, make statements implying his point of view or joke about events.[26]

Interestingly, in the latter types of situation 'emphatic disagreement' was sometimes an *engaging* experience that constituted closeness rather than distance.[27] For instance, the first author found that on occasions where he defended his own beliefs and feelings about football-related violence to participants rather than pretending to agree with them, he found that most group members remained comfortable with him while some initiated more elaborate conversations about the circumstances in which they considered violence legitimate or illegitimate. Most times, however, we felt that judgment had to be suspended in favour of acquiring information and being (and appearing) genuinely interested in what people had to say. Our goal as researchers was 'neither moral judgment nor immediate reform, but understanding' through listening well and respectfully.[28]

Initially, we accepted the role and engaged in the performance of a relatively naïve foreign young male with a strong interest in football fan culture. We both became known to fans as 'the Dutchman' and were often referred to as such. In order to appear at least marginally competent and in that manner facilitate access to the groups, in our preparations we strived to obtain knowledge of the local football context by reading football-related literature, fanzines, fan websites and so on. We also drew on our own experiences as football fans, using our personal interest in and knowledge of football to establish a connection with our informants, for example by discussing recent football results or transfers as a way to 'break the ice' in our early meetings with informants. This role enabled us to participate in fan activities and gave fans a forum in which to tell their stories. In other words, our (inevitably limited) 'subcultural capital'[29] made initial rapport easier in that it provided a forum for light-hearted discussions about the game and its fans, which enhanced our credibility as knowledgeable and serious researchers/fans. In other aspects of subcultural status – i.e. linguistic codes, group/team clothing, behaviour – we remained clearly identifiable as outsiders.

Sharing a social and cultural background can reduce the distance between both parties, and language is an important element.[30] Language fluency can give the researcher credibility, demonstrating a commitment of many years. While we were well versed in

the languages that were not our first languages, at least in some cases we tended to speak 'a simplified form of the native language with a pidginlike quality'.[31] In such cases the topic of conversation may have come across in a simplified and/or distorted fashion. In the beginning we struggled with the specific terminology and subcultural linguistic codes used by some fans, which created considerable stress and feelings of incompetence, reflecting what Wintrob called a 'dysadaptation syndrome'.[32] The second author, for example, initially found it difficult to make spontaneous remarks or catchy jokes in Italian which can play an important part in developing rapport with football fan groups. More generally, we experienced fear of imposing on people and of trying to maintain a completely different role than anyone else around us, particularly at the beginning of our fieldwork. Language barriers made this even more stressful.

Negotiating research bargains

Language issues negatively affected our cultural competence in some cases, but they also had an unanticipated advantage: they downplayed fans' suspicions that we were police informers. It corroborated our 'foreignness' as a Dutch researcher/student and portrayed us as being relatively unaware of and impartial to ongoing tensions between rival fans or between fans and the police. Our research potentially provided a forum for fans to tell their side of the story and to 'set the record straight'. Many fans appeared to feel that they had something to gain by telling us their stories. The fans were proud of their club and their own fan group. They often demonstrated a strong desire to communicate this pride to the outside world and our research created an opportunity to do so. For example, informants gave or sent us photographs, videos, songs and fanzines relating to their group in the hope that we would use them in our research.

For some fans our educational status as university graduates and our international interests appeared to augment their willingness to contribute to our research. Some informants were themselves university students or graduates in disciplines such as law, history, journalism and communication science. These individuals generally displayed an interest not only in our research but also in our personal lives and careers. One of the Spanish informants, a 24-year-old male law student, once remarked that he found it much

easier to talk to the researcher than to most ultras because of our shared educational backgrounds and 'more moderate political leanings', as opposed to the often extreme views held by many of his friends. He was also interested in the legal aspects of football fandom and hooliganism as part of his studies. In the second research one of the more respected ultras was a university graduate with considerable international experience. He understood the importance of the thesis to the researcher as well as the difficulties the researcher faced in conducting intensive international research, which appeared to increase the ultra's willingness to help.

These shared backgrounds also gave us the opportunity to offer fans limited support. The first author accepted requests from Dutch and Spanish fans to help them with papers they were writing on football hooliganism as part of their studies. The second author accepted fans' requests to do an interview about the Dutch policies on drugs and prostitution with one of the ultras on a local radio station. These fieldwork experiences were themselves valuable data since they contested the *etic* belief that radical fans are typically undereducated, lower-class people.

The implicit research bargain struck with informants appeared fair on paper, but the actual data collection often made it seem inequitable. Not only did we ask our informants about their private and public lives, but if successful, this research would also complete our PhD and Master's Degree respectively, and help us further our professional careers. All we seemed to be able to offer in return was a platform for fans to tell their stories or at times provide limited support such as with term papers or fanzines, buying drinks, and so forth. In fact, the research bargain did not always work, due in part to bad timing. At the early stages of the fieldwork the FC Barcelona and West Ham United fan groups experienced sensitive periods, namely disruptions and tensions related to recent incidents and arrests, ongoing police investigations and/or internal conflicts. While access to these fan communities was eventually gained, at both clubs several people remained unwilling to participate due to suspicions towards outsiders, despite the researcher's insistence that the identities and locations of individuals would be concealed in published results, data collected would be held in anonymized form, and all data would be kept securely confidential.

Both researchers witnessed collective illegal activities in their research. Research access to these activities differed from one group to another. In general, however, the more deviant and secretive the activities engaged in by individuals (e.g. collective violence, drug dealing, political extremism), the more likely they were to fear the consequences of research participation.[33] In such cases, the potential costs of participating in the research outweighed the potential benefits, as some people were afraid that the researcher was a police informer or that the research might disclose private knowledge that could eventually lead to prosecution if published or if subpoenaed by a court.[34] These fans seemed well aware that 'the cloak of anonymity for characters may not work with insiders'.[35]

These fears were voiced more frequently in the first research, probably because it was openly presented as 'for a book'. Armstrong and Giulianotti adopted this strategy in their fieldwork.[36] This research stance had a twofold effect. On the one hand, some fans were most certainly alarmed by the 'for a book' approach. This approach made it clear that the study would be a public document lodged in libraries and open to all, and readily available to police and media. Suspicions were also fuelled by the researcher's believed lack of productivity: the compilation of the book took nearly four years, which cast aspersions on the researcher's dedication or credentials.[37] On the other hand, this approach triggered the attention of fans who were determined to "set the record straight". Several Dutch hooligans were familiar with a previous book by the first author, which appeared to increase the researcher's credibility. In contrast, the second author never presented his research as being 'for a book' since he expected the ultras to know that it is highly unlikely that a person writes a book for his university graduation and that they would only feel misled by this stance.

The uses and limits of gatekeepers and cultural brokers

It is important to have individuals within the fan communities who can grant initial access and vouch for one's presence. Comparative research multiplies the problems relating to gaining access because access needs to be negotiated in different social settings. While a comparative approach may foster learning processes, gaining access to

fan groups is not a one-off occasion but a continuous negotiation process. Throughout the fieldwork researchers are continuously locked into a form of (re)negotiation with participants. We were aware that having someone who would vouch for us in the field could help build webs of relationships, providing both lateral and vertical connections to people.[38] As Giulianotti has noted, identifying and seeking out influential gatekeepers can circumvent much of the time-consuming and stress-inducing experiences of entrée.[39]

It is not, however, easy to figure out which individual can facilitate access to other informants. In our experience, there are two main ways in which this can be achieved. One way is to enter the field through a combination of 'descriptive' and 'focused' observation.[40] We started to frequent home and away matches and to chat with fans and with representatives of fan organizations with the aim of mapping the social networks in the fan community. Descriptive observation involved the observation of everything that happened before, during and after matches in and around the stadium. Focused observation involved attempts at systematization by focusing on the identities and locations of and possible hierarchies within fan formations. Initial contacts were the basis for further relationships with informants. Once introduced to some of the gatekeepers within fan formations we were able to gradually expand our networks through snowballing and to use the popularity and associations of a number of leading fans to snowball across the research groups. In both studies, snowballing was 'an effective method of helping the researcher to be known to others by the process of positive recommendation.'[41]

A second way is to tap into pre-existing social networks that cross the insider-outsider divide and provide researchers with varying degrees of assistance in gaining access. People in these networks may operate as 'cultural brokers' who serve as links between individuals or groups who are culturally different. The knowledge of these cultural brokers is valuable in helping the researcher learn how to understand behaviours, avoid social errors and sustain good relationships. They can also help to refer potential research participants. For the second author this started with an organization that is positioned between the ultras and Italian society and that possesses extensive social networks within the ultra subculture. An employee of this organization acted as a gatekeeper towards most ultra groups in the province. He was instrumental in setting up a

meeting with an influential ultra, who eventually invited the researcher to attend matches with him and his friends.

Not only fan associations or individual fans acted as cultural brokers or gatekeepers; in some cases, youth workers and club representatives fulfilled this role. When the first author complained to a Spanish club director that he experienced difficulty in gaining access to a small group of neo-fascist fans, the director immediately grabbed his mobile phone and called one of his contact persons in this group while murmuring that they owed him a favour (presumably concerning the free tickets group members received). This intervention resulted in a three-hour interview with five group members and served as a basis for further contacts. This was one of several occasions where luck was an important part of gaining access. Luck often involved unexpectedly meeting the right person, a person who helped open the doors we needed to go through.

Neither way of gaining and building on initial access is without problems. Finding people who are ready and willing to engage in the research typically involves great persistence. Researchers may be rejected many times, even when gatekeepers or cultural brokers vouch for them. While we quickly gained access at some sites, it took much longer to gain access to others. For example, the abovementioned organization's efforts to open the gate to the other group of ultras studied by the second author long remained fruitless, leaving the researcher increasingly frustrated. Their contact person had a demanding job and was often abroad, and for a long time he did not answer any e-mails or calls. A meeting with this person was eventually arranged months later. On this occasion, which served as an opportunity for both sides to test whether the other party could be trusted, the researcher was picked up by two ultras and shown around the city. The ultras consented to having the researcher attend and observe their activities at football matches and related spaces.

Trying different research sites requires flexibility. At first, we may be convinced that a particular site is the perfect place for the study we have designed, for example because of the avid rivalry between the two sets of fans. However, there is always the possibility that (gatekeepers to) one of the (sub-)groups does not want to cooperate for reasons discussed earlier. It may therefore be helpful to establish a backup plan from the very beginning: to sample or even tentatively approach other fan formations that are

involved in a social rivalry in the football context. Ethical and practical considerations need to be taken into account in determining whether this is an appropriate strategy, not least because of the time-consuming nature of such efforts. Also, the potential accusations of exploitation can be fierce in case the researcher decides to pull out after establishing initial rapport with gatekeepers, whose social status within the fan community may be damaged by early withdrawal. In these situations, the ethical criticism of the researcher's potential betrayal of one side against the other will be particularly pronounced.

The abovementioned strategies for gaining access are also problematic in the sense that they may create a situation in which the researcher is highly dependent on individual gatekeepers and cultural brokers. Both of us have experienced situations where gatekeepers or other key informants who vouched for our presence were not available, for instance due to a hefty banning order and/or prison sentence. Two Italian gatekeepers, for example, had a banning order for disorderly conduct during the latter stages of the fieldwork and had to report at the police station during each match.

Gatekeepers and cultural brokers will usually wish to safeguard what they perceive as their legitimate interests. They may attempt to exercise some degree of surveillance and control, either by blocking off certain lines of inquiry, or by shepherding the researcher in one direction or another.[42] Our research highlights two main types of influence. The first way in which gatekeepers and cultural brokers can exert influence is through their direct or indirect association with certain (sub-)groups rather than others. Some fan communities feature profound inter-group and intra-group conflicts and schisms. It is crucial to develop an awareness of these schisms not only because they are themselves important data, but also because they are likely to affect the researcher's relationship with research participants. Association with one faction or group 'may not only preclude access to other groups or divisions within the setting, but may even get one labelled as an adversary'.[43] Like Magazine, we found that it was difficult to split our loyalties without potentially alienating both sides.[44] When conflicts arose in the group or between factions, merely the fact of who we were standing close to created an appearance of partisanship and limited who would or would not take us into their full confidence.

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The conflict within Spanish fan communities illustrates this point. During an away match a group of fans attacked supporters of the same club with whom the researcher was standing. In this situation the researcher was considered 'one of them' rather than a neutral observer, and was on the receiving end of the fans' aggressive conduct. On another occasion, a close informant warned the researcher that a small group of fans was planning to break into his apartment to steal his research data which were stored on a laptop and audio tapes. The informant advised the researcher to end his fieldwork as soon as possible, advice he took to heart out of fear for his personal safety and the well-being of his informants. This decision was based entirely on 'judgment in context'; no pre-existing account of fieldwork with football fans had alerted the researcher to this possibility, and he had therefore not been able to establish some kind of guideline before entering the field as to under which circumstances the fieldwork should be abandoned.

Decisions of this kind clearly fall within the responsibility researchers have for the safety and well-being of research participants, but in the field the potential consequences of one's actions are often difficult to foresee, especially if one's initial awareness of inter-group and intra-group schisms is limited. The first author once made a costly error by inadvertently alluding to the identity of Alberto, one of the research participants. The following day Alberto was visited and intimidated by other fans (who followed the same club) while at work. After this incident he severed all ties with the researcher, but not before giving him one last valuable piece of advice: 'You have to operate like a medical doctor. You have to practice what you preach and offer people complete anonymity. Insiders can easily find out who is who. It's just too dangerous.' Some of Alberto's friends also came to consider research participation as a safety risk and became more distant and suspicious after this event. Alberto's remark echoes Punch's observation that 'the cloak of anonymity ... may not work with insiders'.[45] The first author learned this through trial and error; meanwhile, he seriously compromised Alberto's safety and well-being and undermined the trust he had established with this group of football fans. After this incident he experienced a persistent sense of guilt and unease over the 'betrayal' of his informant. This situation could potentially have been

prevented had the researcher been aware of this danger before entering the field, allowing him to reflect on an appropriate strategy to handle the matter should it occur.

The second form of research influence exerted by gatekeepers and cultural brokers is the control they seek to exert over data collection and publication of research results. Gatekeepers will usually have practical interests in seeing themselves and their friends represented in a favourable light. This form of influence may present itself in several forms, for example through attempts to prevent the researchers from observing or writing about certain profitable criminal activities such as drug dealing or extortion. More commonly, 'individuals may seek to present an idealized form of collective self, utilizing the researcher as an intermediary for wider, public communication'.[46] Consider the following typical claim by Gavin, a self-confessed football 'hooligan' in his late forties:

> The other groups, I never rated none of them. … As a group I never respected them. … I thought they was, like I said … the sort that would jump on a bloke and his boy, or two blokes on their own or a bloke and his girlfriend. That type. Just perpetual criminals. But so lacking in guidance that they were always going to be second best. We used to fight groups that were seven or eight times our number and still win.

This comment can be read as an attempt by participants to make sure that the researcher understands the situation 'correctly' in terms of who dominates a particular football rivalry and who is the 'hardest' and the most masculine. Very often, the aim is to counteract what is assumed others have been saying, or what are presumed to be the researcher's interpretations of what has been observed.[47] While constituting important data regarding local meaning-systems and truth claims, this tendency underlines the familiar danger of uncritically accepting informants' self-portraits and claims.[48] This tendency has also been observed in relation to football hooligan memoirs which tend to be characterized by exaggerated and one-sided tales of bravado.[49]

Maintaining field relations and developing trust

Research access and rapport are subject to ongoing negotiation. These negotiations themselves are data. They tell us, for example, about how a fan group relates to its external environment.[50] Trust is integral to developing rapport. Being around the fans on a regular basis helped us build trust. Physically being there and demonstrating genuine concern about informants and their interests contributed to us increasingly being seen as a trustworthy person. Showing up regularly was probably the most mundane commitment act that helped foster rapport, effectively showing our willingness to spend time and share space with the fans. It also normalized our presence in the field.

Other commitment acts were less mundane and more ethically ambivalent. Building trust with informants often meant overlooking certain situations and behaviours or, in contrast, giving in to social pressures in order to be considered trustworthy. Such situations called for flexibility and judgement in context about the 'right thing' to do. They underline the unavoidable presence of barriers between the researcher and the researched, even when a relatively high level of reciprocal trust has been established.[51] A commitment act that raised relatively few ethical concerns was related to the compulsions and sanctions associated with actively supporting the clubs we were studying. In the beginning the second author tried to take a relatively neutral stance and not to participate overly in the singing and cheering inside the stadium. On one occasion he was confronted by a fan who was unknown to him and a quick conversation followed:

> 'Why aren't you singing and cheering? You are not a *poltrona* [a "lazy" person who sits in the most expensive part of the stadium], are you?'
> 'I'm Dutch and I don't understand all the songs yet.'
> 'Well, you're not too stupid to clap your hands and dance are you?'

Although the conversation in itself did not seem threatening, in this case the fan's body language indicated that there was no room for discussion: the researcher either had to participate, leave the stadium or punishment would follow. The researcher opted to actively cheer for the team from that moment onwards.

How to deal with alcohol or drug consumption was a more contentious issue. Alcohol consumption is a central element of the cultural repertoires of the fan formations under study. Their masculine norms stress the ability to 'hold one's ale' as a mark of 'being a man'. During nights out beer usually flowed and we felt that not joining in (to at least some extent) could frustrate our attempts to get close to fans on such occasions. We normally tried to drink slowly or drink only a few beers but at times had to stop memorizing conversations after 'a few too many' drinks. In such instances we would temporarily call off our data collection in favour of socializing with fans informally.

On occasions where hard drugs such as cocaine were consumed fans sometimes tried to persuade us to take these drugs. We always declined the offer politely yet insistently or attempted to 'laugh it off' as a way of setting the boundaries between ourselves and research participants. Although this may have affected our perceived 'manliness' among group members, we agree with William Foote Whyte that one does not have to engage in all relevant behaviours in order to be accepted by the people studied.[52] The second author never used any drugs during his research. He nevertheless noticed that drugs helped him gain respect from the ultras. They were particularly interested in Dutch drug policies and enjoyed his stories about drug use amongst Dutch youth. In this regard the ultras appeared to consider him 'a man with experience'. The first author had less moral reservations concerning cannabis, but being aware of its illegal status in Spain and England as well as its temporal impact on his observational skills, he considered taking cannabis safe and morally justified only during private functions, notably at fans' homes. As a general rule, both of us were reluctant to consume cannabis or large quantities of alcohol as we sought to keep a 'clear head'.

As mentioned earlier, we set out to observe illegal activities when they occurred but to avoid committing offences ourselves. There were a number of occasions, however, where we, mainly for pragmatic reasons, committed relatively minor offences that could have resulted in a hefty fine and banning order. Both authors once bought a ticket on the black market because the match they wanted to attend was sold out. More regularly, we bought or received tickets from informants allowing us to watch the match from the section of the stadium where the fan groups under study were situated. We did so despite knowing that some of these tickets were probably acquired by illegal means. On two

occasions the second author deliberately and successfully attempted to enter the stadium's end (the *curva*) with a ticket for a different section, which is a punishable offence.

During the research we observed fighting, vandalism, missile throwing, banning order breaches, drug use and dealing, ticket scams and the smuggling of fireworks. These observations raised ethical, legal and methodological issues related in part to the comparative nature of our research. Whenever outbreaks of violence were likely to occur, participants seemed to be aware that we would not offer any material or symbolic support for their actions. An unspoken mutual understanding was reached that we would not get involved in fighting. For instance, the second author was once positioned at the other side of a gate that the ultras aggressively attempted to force open to attack rival supporters. The ultras knew that from his side, the researcher could have opened the gate very easily; nevertheless, they did not even ask him to do so. On the other hand, there were situations in which rival fan groups attempted to pressure us into becoming a go-between for the rival groups in organizing fights. For example, an Italian informant once remarked that he hoped the other group would confront them before the next game between the two clubs, expecting the researcher to pass on this message to his rivals (which he did not).

More commonly, informants used us as sources of information to find out more about the intentions and the activities of other fan formations under study. While in practical terms this facilitated a research bargain, it also posed ethical dilemmas. In most cases the approach was relatively unproblematic because informants did not personally know the other (mostly foreign) fans and because the information was rather general in content (relating to historical developments, past incidents, dress styles, fanzines). But in the case of specific information about their local rivals which could jeopardize our relationship with, or the safety and well-being of informants, this research bargain was unacceptable. On a couple of occasions informants urged the first author to tell them which pubs their rivals frequented or where they lived. Usually younger fans who demanded such information, while older, more experienced fans did not really seem to care. Some older rival supporters know each other reasonably well and may meet outside of the football context without such meetings automatically resulting in physical confrontation. Peter, a Dutch supporter in his late thirties noted: 'When I run into them at

a match I defend the honour of my club and they defend theirs. But during the week it's a different story. I actually get along quite well with some of them.' Particularly in intra-city rivalries there is, at the everyday level, a stronger contextualization of time and space in distinguishing the legitimate and illegitimate pursuit of violent fan rivalries.[53] In the majority of spaces oppositions between fans tend to be functionally suppressed, and intra-city rivalries are often regarded as sanctioned only within match-day contexts.[54]

Another ethical dilemma involved our contacts with police. As part of our research, we also observed police behaviour at football matches and conducted interviews with police officers. The strong dislike and distrust of the police on the part of many fans was a difficult point here. From the outset, we had been quite open and honest about our intentions to also gather police perspectives on the inter-group conflicts. We repeatedly reassured fans that no information about them would be given to the police and that their confidentiality would be guaranteed at all times. Likewise no information about police strategies would be passed on to the fans.

Our decision to also speak with police nevertheless had a negative impact on our relationships with some fans, especially those who had negative experiences with police and the criminal justice system. The first author's relationship with English football fan John serves as an example. John, who has a criminal record, was very helpful during the first three months of the fieldwork. His attitude changed when he observed the researcher chat to a police officer before a match, after which he became far more aloof. Although he continued to provide the researcher with relevant information, he no longer introduced him to new people. The first author's relationship with some other individuals developed along similar lines. On one occasion the accusation that the researcher "collaborated" with police led to great hostility, leading one Spanish fan to sever all ties even though the researcher had informed him about his intentions from the beginning. In other cases we continuously needed to prove that we were trustworthy and did not collaborate with police in any way.

An additional ethical dilemma involved our decision not to inform police about pre-arranged confrontations between rival fans. The first author experienced several situations where fans talked about planning confrontations with opposing fans. One night he received a call from a close informant, who told him that a fight had been orchestrated

with rival fans. He joined the group of around 30 young males on a two-hour train journey to the city where the away match would be played. Shortly after arriving the group was confronted by their rivals outside a pub and a fight ensued. The police did not arrive until after the fans had dispersed and no arrests were made. In these types of situation, we always upheld the confidentiality of informants and their activities, even when early intervention could have prevented outbreaks of football-related violence. While at times fuelling ethical hangovers and police accusations of partisanship, we felt that this was the only way in which a believable research role and rapport with informants could be maintained. We did, however, report these events in our published results.

Front doors and emergency exits: extrication and post-fieldwork implications

The process of leaving the field was difficult to manage and an ordeal that aroused mixed feelings. The decision to exit was the result of the confluence of three sets of factors: theoretical/methodological, structural/institutional and relational/emotional.[55] Theoretical or methodological reasons for leaving the field related to our conviction that enough data had been collected to sufficiently answer pre-existing and emergent research questions and to render an accurate description of fans' local meaning-systems and lived experiences. Structural/institutional factors included the drying up of research funds, pressure from supervisors and sponsors, and (partly self-imposed) deadlines in relation to the completion of our PhD and Master's Degree, respectively.

Extrication was also affected by relational and emotional factors. We had spent a prolonged period of time in foreign countries away from friends and family, and were experiencing considerable strain from spending several days and nights per week and large parts of the weekend as a fieldworker. While we gradually developed heightened confidence in the field, the dysadaptation syndrome, ethical hangovers (e.g. feelings of guilt) and initial information overload were starting to take their toll. Once we had made the decision to bring the fieldwork to a close, we felt better.[56] We realized that after we left, we would probably want to return because of the rewarding relationships we had cultivated with the people and places we studied. But at that time we simply wanted to go

home. As described earlier, the first author also experienced situations where extrication was largely a consequence of fans' decision to sever ties with the researcher. These events created circumstances that made collecting data much more inconvenient, forcing the researcher to leave through the emergency exit rather than through the front door.

Leaving proved to be an emotionally demanding experience. We kept open the option of returning to the site at a later date, and did in fact return to the sites, but we were also aware that leaving the field often breaks the dynamic of trust and communication that being in the field can create.[57] Our decision as to how to manage the personal relationships formed with the fans largely depended upon how we saw the people and the nature of the relationships developed with them.[58] In the field we were adamant that we would not, for the most part, choose our informants on the same basis as one chooses friends. In the post-fieldwork period, however, we tended to disengage more rapidly and more easily with informants with whom there was less of a personal connection, whereas we proactively sought to keep in contact with those informants with whom a close personal relationship had been established. Some of them remain valued friends or acquaintances.

Once extrication had been negotiated, we were still confronted with a set of questions concerning our indebtedness and moral obligations to our informants.[59] The post-fieldwork period raised critical issues considering the social, political and ethical implications of the research. Given the sensitivities of the football rivalries, we were worried that we would be criticized for taking sides, betraying informants or writing unflattering or inaccurate portraits of them. We had key informants review our reports, which led to important factual corrections as well as valuable discussions concerning our interpretation of particular events and behaviours.

Interactions with informants generally remained meaningful and pleasurable during the post-fieldwork phase. However, this period had unexpected and highly unpleasant consequences for the first author. The release of his PhD dissertation, which was simultaneously published as a book, coincided with incidents of football-related violence that received widespread media coverage in the Netherlands. Two of these incidents were allegedly provoked by members of the Dutch fan groups he studied. Suddenly the book was quoted at will in media outlets which, in author's view, put

forward a highly simplistic, one-sided and unfair representation of the research. Research participants appeared to be either amused by or indifferent towards the media coverage. 'We have seen worse', one of them remarked. Others actually bought copies of the book. However, the researcher was left frustrated and emotionally damaged by what he considered the unjust representation of what was the fruit of more than four years of hard labour.

Emotional stress was further aggravated by insistent requests from senior police officers to assist them in the identification of alleged offenders and 'ringleaders'. On one occasion the first author was summoned to divulge information that he withheld from the book (i.e., the real names of participants). He dismissed these calls by pointing to the confidentiality assurances given during the research, which in turn led to considerable dissatisfaction among police. Ironically, a foreign police unit now uses the book as part of its training course for football intelligence officers.

Conclusion

Accusations of partiality are inevitable in the type of fieldwork discussed in this article. Drury and Stott have argued that bias, in the form of taking sides, is actually necessary in research settings involving inter-group conflict.[60] Partisan participant observation, they note, will give the researcher credibility with research participants, enabling enhanced access and cooperation. Further, taking sides need not mean bias in analysis and reporting. This argument raises important questions. In the case of partisan fieldwork, are the researcher's observations of inter-group conflict (and his/her analysis and reporting thereof) likely to reflect the perspective of the in-group (the group under study) rather than those of the out-group (rival formations)? Does being accepted into one group block or limit research access to other groups?

For William Foote Whyte, the latter will depend upon the depth of cleavages within or between the groups.[61] It can be argued that in inter-group conflicts that are deeply rooted and openly expressed through symbolic and/or physical violence, close association with one group will most likely limit or block access to opposing groups and may also jeopardize the safety and well-being of the researcher and research participants.

This article shows that in the football context this is not necessarily the case. However, even when access to opposing formations is gained and reciprocal trust is established with members of each group, there will be persistent ethical and practical dilemmas that relate directly to the task of studying multiple sides of an avid football rivalry. These dilemmas are encountered at every stage of the research process.

One major difficulty involves the ethical criticism of the researcher's betrayal of one side against the other.[62] As we have shown, cleavages and schisms exist not only between fan groups associated with rival clubs but at times also within single fan formations that may initially appear rather unified. When intra-group or inter-group conflicts arise, physical or social proximity to one faction rather than another can easily create an appearance of partisanship and limit who will or will not take the researcher into their full confidence. Accusations of partiality were also associated with our attempts to simultaneously gather police perspectives on inter-group conflict. In some cases this undermined our presence in the field as fans were afraid that we were police informers or that the research might disclose private knowledge that could eventually lead to prosecution. At the same time, it increased the emotional stress associated with conducting field research with both sides of a social rivalry.

Ethical dilemmas emanate not only from 'being there' but also from 'being here'.[63] During the post-fieldwork period we were confronted with questions and issues concerning our indebtedness and moral obligations to our informants, friends and acquaintances in the field. We had anticipated that the main questions would be how to assure the confidentiality of participants, and to what extent our analyses offered an alternative to the *etic* discourse on football supporters. In reality, the question of who is rendered vulnerable, responsible or exposed by these analyses was at least equally prominent. As it turned out, in a context of inter-group conflict dominated by *etic* representations and conflicting audiences, it was often us who were left feeling vulnerable, responsible and exposed.

Notes

[1] Drury and Stott, 'Bias as a Research Strategy in Participant Observation'.

[2] Becker, 'Whose Side are we on?'

[3] Walton, 'Football and Identities', 22.

[4] Giulianotti, 'Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism', 6.

[5] Exceptions are: Armstrong, 'Like that Desmond Morris?'; Giulianotti, 'Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism'.

[6] Pearson, 'Talking a Good Fight', vii.

[7] Eder and Corsaro, 'Ethnographic Studies of Children and Youth'.

[8] Taylor, 'Observing Abuse'; VanderStaay, 'One Hundred Dollars and a Dead Man'.

[9] Taylor, 'Observing Abuse', 300.

[10] VanderStaay, 'One Hundred Dollars and a Dead Man', 404.

[11] Eder and Corsaro, 'Ethnographic Studies of Children and Youth'.

[12] E.g. Segurola, *Fútbol y Pasiones Políticas*; Hughson, 'The Boys are Back in Town'; Armstrong and Giulianotti, *Fear and Loathing in World Football*; Dunning et al., *Fighting Fans*; Alabarces, *Hinchadas*.

[13] Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*.

[14] Spaaij, *Understanding Football Hooliganism*.

[15] Geilenkirchen, *Understanding Football Rivalry*.

[16] E.g. Spaaij and Viñas, 'Passion, Politics and Violence'; Roversi and Balestri, 'Italian Ultras Today'.

[17] Marsh et al., *The Rules of Disorder*, 119.

[18] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 112.

[19] Drury and Stott, 'Bias as a Research Strategy in Participant Observation'.

[20] Magazine, *Golden and Blue Like My Heart*, 40.

[21] Armstrong, 'Like that Desmond Morris?'; Giulianotti, 'Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism'.

[22] Lofland et al., *Analyzing Social Settings*, 69.

[23] Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

[24] The implications of this familiarity cannot be discussed in detail in this paper. One implication is that it inadvertently served to reduce the separation between the researcher and the fans by the 'collusions of masculinity'. See Woodward, 'Hanging Out and Hanging About'. This and other implications are addressed at length in the important contribution by Free and Hughson, 'Settling Accounts with Hooligans'.

[25] Feldman et al., *Gaining Access*, 41-2.

[26] Armstrong, 'Like that Desmond Morris?', 19.

[27] Gordon, 'Getting Close by Staying Distant'.

[28] Lofland et al., *Analyzing Social Settings*, 52.

[29] Thornton, *Club Cultures*.

[30] Madriz, 'Using Focus Groups with Lower Socioeconomic Status Latina Women'.

[31] Werner and Schoepfle, *Systematic Fieldwork*, 257.

[32] Wintrob, 'An Inward Focus'.

[33] Punch, *The Politics and Ethics of Fieldwork*, 46.

[34] Lee and Renzetti, 'The Problems of Researching Sensitive Topics', 10.

[35] Punch, *The Politics and Ethics of Fieldwork*, 46.

[36] Armstrong, *Football Hooligans*; Giulianotti, 'Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism'.

[37] Giulianotti, 'Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism', 7.

[38] Feldman et al., *Gaining Access*, 54-5.

[39] Giulianotti, 'Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism'.

[40] Werner and Schoepfle, *Systematic Fieldwork*.

[41] Eide and Allen, 'Recruiting Transcultural Qualitative Research Participants', 50.

[42] Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*, 51.

[43] Lofland et al., *Analyzing Social Settings*, 25.

[44] Magazine, *Golden and Blue Like My Heart*.

[45] Punch, *The Politics and Ethics of Fieldwork*, 46.

[46] Giulianotti, 'Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism', 10.

[47] Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*, 99.

[48] Wacquant, 'Scrutinizing the Street, 1478.

[49] Redhead, 'Hit and Tell'.

[50] Pearson, 'Talking a Good Fight', xii.

[51] Bennett, 'Researching Youth Culture and Popular Music', 463.

[52] Whyte, *Street Corner Society*, 316.

[53] Giulianotti and Armstrong, 'Avenues of Contestation', 229.

[54] Spaaij, 'Men Like Us, Boys Like Them', 384.

[55] Snow, 'The Disengagement Process'.

[56] Powdermaker, *Stranger and Friend*, 120.

[57] Feldman et al., *Gaining Access*, 49.

[58] Taylor, 'Leaving the Field'.

[59] Snow, 'The Disengagement Process', 114.

[60] Drury and Stott, 'Bias as a Research Strategy in Participant Observation'.

[61] Whyte, *Learning from the Field*, 70.

[62] Giulianotti, 'Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism', 6.

[63] Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 130.

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