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## **Learning the game: Football Fandom Culture and the Origins of Practice**

*Based on the partial results of a doctoral programme this article explores the significance of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice for explaining the experiential processes involved in becoming a football fan. Whilst recognizing value in the theoretical construct – habitus, in the sense that football cultures appear to be self-perpetuating (in part) based on histories of objective social conditions and accrued experiences; findings indicate that caution must be taken not to overemphasize the structuring power of habitus and the unopposed continuation of tradition at the expense of the reflexive nature and subtle transformation of fandom practice in late modern life.*

**Key Words:** *Bourdieu; football fandom; practice origins; culture; reflexivity*

Much of the recent research dedicated to football fandom culture operates at extreme ends of a theoretical dichotomy, situating fans as either products of social structures or as agents of post modernity (e.g. Boyle and Haynes 2000; Giulianotti 2002; King 1997; Nash 2000; Quick 2000). As a means of offering an alternative to this theoretical stalemate and moreover, to present a developed attempt to reconcile the theoretical elements of structure and agency as they apply to fandom, this paper considers the work of Pierre Bourdieu for exploring a pivotal and yet neglected avenue for football fandom research – the origins of practice.

Despite the crucial and inevitable process of fandom origins within the life cycle of sport fans there is currently a dearth of empirical scholarly activity relating to this subject (Crawford 2004, p230). When empirical data is considered, the orientation of many investigations tend to neglect crucial questions of fan origins in order to pursue

what scholars consider to be more exciting, topical and politically interesting issues (see for example Back, Crabbe and Solomos 2001 in relation to racism; Armstrong 1998 – hooliganism; Wann and Dolan 1994 - obsession; and King 1998 - new consumer fandom). More recently however, authors such as Crawford (2003) and Stone (2007) have made the following point. They suggest that any research that concentrates on exceptional forms of fandom does so at the expense of social inquiry into everyday life and furthermore they argue that this too must have implications for the current understanding of practice. On this point Harris (1998, p.4) elaborates:

Although we use the term with abandon, fans and their social and cultural environment ‘fandom’ are profoundly untheorized in the social sciences. We know virtually nothing about what produces fandom, what specific practices are associated with it and what role fans may play in social and cultural processes.

Congruent with this, Bourdieu maintains that everyday activity ought to be the main unit of analysis of any sociological investigation, although he insists that the historical and cultural conditions that make practice possible ought not to be disconnected from contemporary examination (Bourdieu 1977; 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Consequently, contingent histories of practice (how fandom begins), he would suggest, are vital to fully comprehend contemporary issues. Hence in what follows, this paper aims to explore the potential of the work of Bourdieu for understanding football fandom origins and this is achieved through an analysis of original data from a range of interviews with football fans. Before the data is presented, key components of the theory of practice are briefly outlined below.

### **Getting a Feel for the Game**

In *The Logic of Practice* Bourdieu (1990, p.66-67) uses the language of sport and games to make the following theoretical point. He argues that to ‘get a feel for the game’ one must know the game - and knowing the game inevitably entails the genesis, acquisition

and consumption of knowledge relating to various rules, genres, discourses and social norms that underpin any given practice. He writes:

In a game, the field (the pitch or board on which it is played, the rules, the outcomes at stake etc.) is clearly seen for what it is, an arbitrary social construct...By contrast, in the social fields, which are the products of a long, slow process of autonomization, and are therefore, so to speak, games 'in themselves' and not 'for themselves', one does not embark on a game by a conscious act, one is born into the game, with the game; and the relation of investment, *illusio*, investment is made more total and unconditional by the fact that it is unaware of what it is (Bourdieu 1990, p.67).

Accordingly then, Bourdieu explains that social life is made up of numerous fields that are relatively structured domains or spaces (i.e. they are socially instituted) and have a contingent history of development. Moreover, those fields he argues, tend to form distinct microcosms endowed with their own rules, regularities and forms of authority (Wacquant 2008). What is more, whilst fields do not offer a universal experience due to the presence of capital (i.e. resources that exist and are accrued by some to enhance position within a field), practice is often predictable. He explains how this is so with his most frequently used theoretical component – 'habitus':

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment...produce the *habitus*, systems of durable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as the principle of generation and structuration of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goal without presupposing the unconscious orientation towards ends and the express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being that, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor (Bourdieu 1977, p.72).

In this rather complex account Bourdieu explains how seemingly spontaneous individual actions actually meet wider societal expectations and thus, he makes clear that individual dispositions inevitably hold cultural characteristics (Wacquant 2008). In this sense habitus is used by Bourdieu to express the way in which individuals become themselves by developing attitudes and dispositions that are influenced by history, traditions and cultures operating within and between specific fields (Bourdieu 1990, p.54). Consequently, habitus directly influences practice and also determines an agent's

response to different situations. Furthermore, as Bourdieu uses this concept, habitus is not simply responsible for action but also for thought, understanding, motivation and perceptions as well (Schatzki 1997, p.287).

All of these factors, when combined are used to explain strategic actions that move beyond the determinisms of structure and the subjectivisms of agency (Robbins 2000, p.27). Bourdieu does not suggest that the action of the habitus is to determine fixed responses in practice but rather, it limits the options that individuals have by providing cultural norms and historical precedents which in turn determine strategies of action or practice (Crawshaw and Bunton 2009). So whilst holding strong structural properties, Bourdieu's theory of practice is useful to our understanding of football fandom origins and ensuing cultures given that it allows for an appreciation of individual wills without neglecting the conditions that shape wills in the first instance. In other words this perspective navigates the space between dominant theoretical paradigms and it is on this logic that I turn to explore the salience of Bourdieu for explaining the origins of football fandom practice.

## **Methods**

At this point it is worth restating that the analysis presented here is based on in-depth interviews carried out as part of a doctoral programme of work<sup>1</sup>. Whilst interviews covered a multitude of issues, and were for the most part unstructured, each began with an exploration of the genesis of football fandom under the assumption that this would offer a central reference point from which fandom practice has developed for each participant. This follows Weber (1968, p.18) who explains that 'any real empirical sociological investigation begins with the question: what motives determine and lead individual members...in this socialistic community to behave in such a way that the community came into being in the first place, and that it continues to exist'.

In the context of this paper then, I draw upon participant understandings of the origins of practice from the perspective of 56 football fans. When adopting this research strategy, it is important to note however, that vernacular used to describe life history and notions of collective memory can be exaggerated or understated by participants in order to emphasise a dominant memory (King 2001; Seaton 2006; Gibbons Dixon and Braye 2010). Consequently as Franzosi (1998) infers, whilst personal narratives do not necessarily offer universal truths, they remain valuable to academic research in the sense that they take account of emotion and the relationship between text, lived experience and social reality.

With this in mind, and in order to communicate the main findings of the work I highlight and interpret verbatim responses, giving a voice to those whose story I have set out to uncover. This approach to writing allows the culture of the field to reveal itself to the reader via the discourse that football fans have themselves constructed and which has constructed them (Blackshaw 2003). Accordingly, the data presented is representative of common themes and ideas that have emerged from the words of a sample of football fans. In line with Geertz (1973) those narratives selected here offer a thorough and accurate description of the range of opinions, experiences and reactions that were expressed by all subjects.

### **Recruitment Strategy**

A purposive sample of participants was selected for this study from a pool of football fans (situated in the North East of England) that responded to a media call for volunteers in 2008. On acknowledgement of interest (via email correspondence), volunteers were consequently selected as participants for subsequent interview according to the following criteria: (1) Given that scholars Malcolm, Jones and Waddington (2000) point

to the fact that season ticket holders are most frequently and disproportionately used within academic literature to represent all fans, I argue that there is a need for the inclusion of fandom narratives from a wider range of experiential profiles. (2) Selecting fans of multiple teams and at different levels within the English game was deemed an important strategy to ensure that the experiences of fans from top flight (e.g. successful teams) were not privileged over others. This has been a common characteristic within recent academic research where authors such as King (1998) and additionally, Sandvoss (2003) have studied fans of a handful of 'super clubs'<sup>2</sup> and consequently they have ignored the more common examples that I argue most typify everyday fandom. (3) On the recommendations of Jones (2008) I agree that it is important to be inclusive of female fans and also to take into account a range of age groups. (4) Finally, the inclusion of transcripts from an eclectic sample (as described above) was deemed valuable in order to ascertain the potential overarching usefulness of Bourdieu's theory of practice.

### **Participants**

56 football fans (32 male and 24 female [aged 18 -56]) were interviewed during the course of this investigation. Of those participants, 27 were current season ticket holders. The remaining 29 were not current holders of season tickets although they did watch or listen to live football multiple times per-week via the media. Therefore, for the purposes of transparency within the transcript extracts, they were identified as (1) Season Ticket Holders (STH); (2) Media Fans (MF) to reflect their primary mode of live football consumption at the time of the interview.

In terms of supported teams, 47 participants were fans of one of the following 2008 English Premier League Clubs: *Newcastle United; Middlesbrough; Sunderland; Liverpool and West Ham United*. It is worth pointing out that (with the exception of Liverpool) those clubs represented here were not noted as highly successful Premier

League Clubs (at the time of research). In fact, in the season 2008-09 (e.g. the same season as data collection), both *Newcastle United* and *Middlesbrough* were relegated from *The Premier League* into *The Championship*. Of the remaining participants, nine were supporters of one of the following teams: *Hartlepool United* and *Darlington*. Whilst ideally, the sample would have greater representation from fans of lower division teams, the majority of respondents were fans of the ‘big three’ North-East teams (*Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Sunderland* [n=45]). Key characteristics of this sample are shown below.

**[Insert table 1 here]**

### **Data analysis**

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews served as the raw data to be analyzed using a framework of thematic analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). Each transcript was read a number of times to gain a thorough understanding of the participant’s accounts. The transcripts were then re-read in full and emergent themes were recorded. A combined list of themes was then produced and new themes were tested against earlier transcripts in a cyclical fashion until saturation was reached. The aim of this analytical process was to produce what Geertz (1973) describes as ‘thick description’: that is a thorough and accurate account of the range of responses articulated by participants.

Those findings expressed in this paper relate directly to the theme ‘fandom genesis’, serving to expose the inner workings of those dominant modes of primary teaching (e.g. kin or peer groups) that are fundamental to the origins of practice specific knowledge. Moreover, whilst Bourdieu is used as a platform for discussions of fandom genesis; I also acknowledge that there are trends that exist outside of this framework. They too are explained in light of the effects of late modern life.



## **Football Fandom Habitus and the Role of Family / Kin groups**

You think you love some things, but no, it's your milieu, your origin, your formation that makes you appreciate them. (Hennion 2007, p.103)

The most commonly cited and forcefully argued reason provided by participants for the consumption of football fandom knowledge and therefore for the genesis of uni-directional passionate support for one particular team - was the influence of a family member, predominately, but not always 'Dad'. In agreement with Hennion (advocating the influence of field and habitus) participants such as Dave (below) draw attention to the possibility that one's fandom might be constructed by significant others and then unconsciously adopted as though it is an inherent component of ones being:

Dave:                    People often say, 'I was born black and white', but that's not strictly true is it? You learn it at home don't you? From your family. [**Newcastle United, aged 40 (STH)**]

As a direct influence on the future behaviour of children, family members were observed in this capacity to exert authority on others. That is to say, in the course of everyday interactions with significant others, the authoritative positioning of the parent can be used to heavily influence momentary and future actions of the child. Consequently the values, dispositions and practices of significant others can be subsumed or modelled - leading to the relative reproduction of previous generation habitus. This is a position that is partially adopted within Crawford's (2004, p.46) theoretical portrayal of the career of sports fans. Adapted from the work of Goffman (1968) and incorporating the literature on late modern community theory (see Maffosoli 1996; Bauman 1990) Crawford infers that despite the fluidity of career paths (symptomatic of the conditions of late modern life<sup>3</sup>); at the beginning fans are likely to learn and replicate 'the norms of a particular habitus'. The current sample offers

empirical support for this position and given the frequency of such citations, two varied but ultimately similar accounts are offered below:

Lisa: ...through my dad. My dad's a big Darlington fan, just kind of got forced into being amongst the crowd, gathering the experience. It's a family tradition...I was born into it. **[Darlington, aged 20 (STH)]**

Luke: Part of it is hereditary. It's your place of birth you know. My granddad went. My granddad took my dad and things like that. So, it's passed down, but you're not forced to do it. You want to!**[Hartlepool, aged 21 (STH)]**

Whilst the role of tuition, or at least tutored exposure to the practice is evident within the responses cited above, what remains unclear is whether fandom is a voluntarily (e.g. chosen by a reflexive agent) or involuntarily (e.g. forced onto a passive subject) practice. Taking such accounts (above) at face value is not always desirable given the possibility that agents articulate stories with a tendency to dramatically portray the process of fan origins as a journey filled with energy and insight (Cavicchi 1998; Hills 2002). Moreover Blackshaw (2003) reminds the academic community to consider carefully the vernacular used by participants beyond surface level interpretation. For instance when Lisa refers to 'forced' fandom, she is in fact speaking in the context of a positive relationship with her father through football; something that the participant values and as such it ought not to be construed as force against ones will. In this instance, the adjective 'force' is used to dramatically portray the process of fandom origins (in light of Cavicchi 1998) and yet beyond surface level it implies a form of consented coercion, or the will to explore a practice that is important to significant others. Consequently there are more similarities than differences between Lisa and Luke (above). For instance, Luke maintains that football fandom was passed down through kin relationships but it was not forced. Social agents, he asserts, would choose to continue and develop themselves within the practice, irrespective of kin relationships:

Luke: How could it be forced? They might pass the baton on, but then you go in your own direction sort of thing...I'm certainly not a clone of my dad when it comes to football, though I am grateful for the introduction. [**Hartlepool, aged 21 (STH)**]

Given the appreciation granted by both participants towards the role that parents play within fandom initiation, it seems that the concepts of 'force' versus 'choice' are, in the end, irrelevant within the minds of our subjects. Academically speaking however this issue is particularly useful as a means of thinking beyond the subjectivist-objectivist split– in order to help reveal the intricacies of football fandom cultures.

### **Habitus: Conscious Coercion and Passive Acceptance**

Congruent with Bourdieu it is clear that participants draw heavily on pre-understanding experiences or one's inherited background to make sense of their current involvement within the practice. What is unclear however, is the extent to which those experiences are deliberately / intentionally influenced by significant others.

In order to address this issue I turn to the accounts of those participants in the current sample who now have children of their own and so were able to draw on their experience as parents within this process. For instance, parents often spoke with enthusiasm and ultimately with pride about the ways in which they consciously attempt to pass on knowledge, tradition and love for football in ways reminiscent of their own fandom experiences:

Tim: I got our Richard into it, 120 per-cent... Kitted him out in all the gear you know, made him feel part of it all. He was a mascot for Teesside Polly when he was six. He picked this up and became a Boro fan. Now he goes to away games, but he picked this up from his dad. [**Middlesbrough, aged 54 years (MF)**]

Likewise, participant Sarah<sup>4</sup> recalls the period when she introduced football spectatorship to her daughter. She reveals 'Before my daughter was born me and my husband went to every home and away match; so when she was old enough I took her to The Riverside<sup>5</sup>. Our passion rubbed off on Clair, we taught her the ropes and she's

as mad as me now'. Thus, Narratives like these illustrate the recursive nature of fandom genesis in process, leading to collective participation and the acquisition of a seemingly implicit sense of knowing how particular things are done. Indeed, when discussing the myths and realities of Millwall fandom, Robson (2000, p.169) uses this argument (derived from Bourdieu 1977) to explain that practical mastery becomes embedded in the very perceptions and dispositions of fans (via teachings) to such an extent that actions are simply known in practice as 'the way things are done'. Actions and thought processes become ritualistic and exist in individuals as an awareness of what is appropriate in any given context.

In addition to this, Crawford (2003, p.226) reports comparable findings with regard to the acquisition of knowledge and the adaptations that must be made (if particular practices are to thrive) as fans reach differing stages of career. He suggests that time and space can alter type and intensity of fandom in the same way that careers change and develop over a life course. Specifically speaking - through parental influence it is possible to visualize a change in role as one evolves, or perhaps more accurately, develops along a career path of football fandom: from the inducted to the inductor; apprentice to mentor; or student to teacher. However, whilst most parents (e.g. like those above) were consciously aware of their role within the process, others were more resistive to this notion:

Dougie: I wouldn't say that it was forced on them. No. I mean, I tell them that I love Sunderland and if they have a similar passion I will be happy to take them... I've enthused them but I've never bought them any Sunderland stuff to begin with. I think a nephew of mine bought a Sunderland shirt for my son when he was a baby, so it was other people rather than me instilling this. Then my daughter felt left out so we had to go and buy her one. And since then they have wanted to update to the next one. So it wasn't me initially, but I'm happy to keep that rolling over. **[Sunderland, aged 37 (STH)]**

Notwithstanding this, it is worth pointing out certain parallels between Dougie's self evaluation of his parental influence and recollections of what childhood fandom was

like for him. For instance Dougie recalls the time spent with his father as ‘an exciting learning curve’ but insists that fandom was not forced:

Dougie: I don’t think he tried to instil Sunderland on me... But he always used to take me if I wanted to go, and when I played he always used to drive us backward and forwards, so without forcing the issue he kept my passion burning.

The parity between accounts of childhood and parental roles lends support to the idea that the unconscious acquisition of child fandom can be later, ‘consciously’ or ‘semi consciously’ passed on to the future generation in an active and reciprocal manner. On this basis it seems reasonable to suggest that as football has taken root within society it has become an important aspect of family or kin tradition which continues to thrive in this sense. Yet, it must be noted that despite an abundance of supporting evidence, late modern society offers no guarantees that coercion will gain the desired effect or that tradition will roll over in such a predictable manner.

### **Beyond Habitus: Evidence of Reflexivity**

*KD: Is your son a football fan?*

Dave: No, no! I can’t stand it (laughing). I’ve tried, I’ve tried! Maybe it’s for the best after all the torture it’s brought me over the years. No. He’s got other interests. He goes paintballing, does things like climbing, outdoors adventure stuff, but he couldn’t care less about Newcastle. **[Newcastle, aged 40 (STH)]**

Andy: Our Matty shows no interest really, he’s into other things you know. He’s massively into art and stuff. That’s what he wants to do. I don’t know where he gets it from. It’s certainly not me or his mother. **[Newcastle, aged 50 (MF)]**

In this section I argue that previous references made to the power of objective structures (although conspicuous within the data) ought not to be overemphasized. Yet again, those accounts provided (above) illustrate a less defined structure of acceptable leisure pursuits within kin groups, where next generation children can display a reflexivity which subsequently defies tradition. This however, is a situation that cannot be explained by adhering strictly to Bourdieu’s theory of practice.

Whilst Bourdieu attempts to abridge the hiatus between objectivism and subjectivism, his conceptualization of agency is not without critics. Often accused of reflecting excessively deterministic tendencies (Halle 1993; Widick 2003); agency, according to Bourdieu is seen to operate within broader systems of constraint of which the individual is routinely unaware. Consequently it is bounded, compromised and accentuated by habitus (Adams 2006), and as Jenkins (1992: 77) contends, it 'hardly makes for reflexive agency in any meaningful sense of the word'. Moreover, this would suggest that reflexivity is as much the habitual outcome of field requirements as any other disposition, and yet, given that participants demonstrate an ability to break free from the habitual requirements of the field, it would seem that one's capacity for reflexivity can extend beyond the Bourdieuan position in certain instances.

Perhaps then, as Sweetman (2003, p.535-6) suggests, there is a case for a potential hybridization between Bourdieu's habitus and other accounts of reflexivity. To be specific, Sweetman acknowledges that Bourdieu's non-reflexive habitus depends on relatively stable social conditions or a more simple, organized form of modernity that he suggests, no longer exists in this manner. Furthermore, whilst he and others (Adkins 2002; Craib 1992) are opposed to the idea that agents act through individual will alone, they insist that changes to the late modern environment have summoned conditions via which the 'reflexive habitus' has become increasingly common in the sense that uncertainty and change are paradoxically becoming a familiar occurrence in most fields - with agents possessing a greater tolerance of and taste for diversity.

This position is in keeping with evidence from the current sample. For instance it is apparent that, at any stage of life social actors can become football fans or alternatively opt out of the practice altogether (e.g. as shown within the examples above). In other words, they are reflexive thinkers and during the course of daily lives

they are presented with various options to reproduce social action, or else change behaviour. And whilst they are indeed influenced by the consumption of core knowledge gathered through ones childhood habitus, they are also capable of consuming new knowledge of distant or estranged practices via interaction with others. Several subjects were demonstrative of this point:

Carol                    My ex hubby was a big football fan so it was always on in the house. I used to hate the game but learned to love it. Once I knew the rules, appreciated the skills and tactics and experienced the atmosphere I was hooked. **[Hartlepool, aged 43 (STH)]**

Removed from the influence that significant others have on one's consumption experiences (see above), participant Wanda (below) also provides details of a life estranged from football until one chance meeting with a friend at college. She explains how her mother had never encouraged involvement in football (believing that it was a game for hooligans) but in 2005 an external opportunity to attend a football match presented its self:

Wanda:                    In 2005 I had just gone to college and made new friends when one girl that I was in the same class with won a competition for a free box at Darlington for ten people and she invited me to go. I didn't really know what to expect, but that was it. I haven't looked back since'. **[Darlington, aged 21 (STH)]**

Those examples presented here demonstrate the role that new interactions can play in order to change life direction and consequently provide opportunities for agents to engage with distant or estranged consumer practices (adding to those habitual forms of learning previously documented). As my participants demonstrate, agents are constrained to an extent but are not imprisoned by pre-understandings / habitus.

Other examples of fandom genesis were equally non conventional. That is to say, narratives displayed openness to influential modes of established and emergent technology, which for some, have unlocked the door to football fandom. For instance, when asked 'how did fandom begin for you'? Participant Richie<sup>6</sup> answered: 'Ian Rush'<sup>7</sup>.

I used to worship him when I was little, so I used to support the team he played for type of thing... Watched him on TV banging in the goals and followed him from there’.

Beyond the allures of television; computer gaming was also shown to have influenced the onset of fandom for the following participant:

Ian: My story’s a bit strange. I got into football in my late teens and I had never played football; was never on the school team or anything like that. My support began when I was introduced to Champ Manager<sup>8</sup> on the PC. I got to know all the current players, there values (economic value), how good they were and all that stuff... It fast tracked my subject knowledge if you like (laughing). We used to bring our teams into college and discuss our careers and that. It was totally addictive, and of course crossed over into reality, and that’s what we did. That’s when I started following football more generally. **[Darlington, aged 26 (MF)]**

Those experiences cited above are illustrative of an additional but no less important set of interactions and consumption experiences which have the potential to initiate fandom. Through the use of media, such as television (e.g. a resource which infiltrates any number of practices), or computer gaming (e.g. a late modern development of similar stature) it seems that para-social experiences can inspire social agents to alter behaviour. In the first instance, televised portrayals of celebrity athletes such as ex-Liverpool Football Club player ‘Ian Rush’, have stimulated Richie (born to a working class family of Newcastle United fans) to become a lifelong supporter of Liverpool football club. Furthermore, this respondent was not alone in his behaviour. Football players - Bobby Moore, Alan Shearer, Paul Gascoigne and Bernie Slave were all noted to have had a similar effect on some of the respondents. And whilst some might argue that this is a form of celebrity fandom and not football fandom per-se; it is important to note that, similar to the findings of Sutton, McDonald, Milne and Cimperman (1997) all respondents were loyal and committed to the team that the celebrity athlete represented at the time of their initiation into the practice. Thus, they remained a fan of the club, in spite of the celebrity athlete, club success, or the absence of it:

*KD: Would you say then, that you were attracted to key individuals?*



Stuart: Yes and no, because I stuck with West Ham since then. I mean, the Hammers have had a lot of disappointment so if I was interested in the stars I would support Man U or Chelsea or something. I would say that most fans are not glory fans, but glory fans are just more visible because they follow high profile teams. **[West Ham, aged 45 (MF)]**

Stuart makes a point that academic research has tended to miss. Scholars seem to be in a hurry to explain how social life is rapidly changing rather than giving space to those stable features that remain, and to an extent, maintain practice. For instance, the race to explain change within the practice of football fandom has encouraged researchers to overlook fans (like this one) that emphasize the need to support a team irrespective of its fortunes (Giulianotti 2005). So whilst the genesis of fandom (e.g. in the case of Stuart and Richie) would not be described by scholars like Giulianotti (2002) as traditional; it clearly retains those associated components of duty to support, albeit for a team that for all intents and purposes ought to exist outside of ones habitus.

Similarly, with reference to participant Ian's (above) experiences with computer gaming, it is clear that over the course of the last 30 years, gaming has become a predominant feature of late modern consumption which is now located and incorporated into patterns of everyday living (Crawford 2004). Furthermore whilst Crawford and Gosling (2005) have been able to demonstrate a level of crossover between sporting and digital gaming interests and practices (in line with Bourdieu's habitus), the digital game 'Championship Manager' (CM) had an additional use for participant Ian. As Thornton (1995) illustrates, the media can be used in an informative capacity and likewise computer gaming was used by this participant to rapidly gain the knowledge needed in order to initiate and maintain an interest in live football per-se. Similar to Jenkins (2002) who indicates that gamers actively discuss the games that they play in social settings; Ian too draws on his experiences with CM to construct stories and narratives away from the games themselves, a finding that resonates directly with Crawford's (2006) investigation into the cult of CM. He states:

CM and other forms of media provide information and knowledge on sport that individuals can draw on in their interactions and social performances surrounding sport (p.509).

Hence, given that CM deals with semi-factual knowledge regarding the practice of football fandom, it became an intense, enjoyable and invaluable way for our subject to learn about the practice as an adult without prior experience in the traditional sense.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this discussion has been to explore the salience of the work of Bourdieu for theorizing the genesis and continued practice of football fandom. In contrast to conceptualizations that position fans as either products of macro level structures, or as agents of post modernity, Bourdieu offers a theory of practice which navigates between dominant ideas of structure and agency. However, whilst Bourdieu advances the research field towards a reconciliation of those dominant paradigms in relation to football fandom, the characteristics of late modern life, spoken through the words of my participants, serve to question the overriding usefulness of this theoretical position.

Based on the results of this investigation, I find great utility in the concept of habitus given that fandom origins were predominately described by participants as slow processes of autonomization involving the consumption of knowledge, discourse and social norms that were transferred in an active and reciprocal way by significant others (i.e. kin or peer groups) that occupy a specific field. Thus following Bourdieu, it seems that for the most part, football fandom cultures were self perpetuating in the sense that practice was stimulated by self propagating histories based on objective social conditions and accrued personal experience. Take for instance Luke's assertion that 'football is hereditary', Dave's declaration that 'you learn it at home', and Tim's discussion of kin group coercion. Within such instances the power of self propagation is revealed and yet whilst this was also true of others, it is important to stress that the

hereditary experience was not a necessary and sufficient condition required in order to consume football as a fan. Significantly, this is where participant responses began to depart in principle from Bourdieuan dominance.

To be specific participants did not always respond in a predictable manner to the influence of significant others. As well as 'opting out' of fandom practice (as participants David and Andy explain), agents from non traditional football backgrounds were also shown to have 'opted in' by embracing football culture through vast and various influences that extend beyond ones structural background or habitus. Take for instance the potential influence of one's spouse (see Carol), or the influence of a new acquaintance to change a previously impartial and disinterested agent into a partisan football fan (see Wanda). Likewise new media technologies were also shown to initiate or awaken the desire for football fandom to an audience beyond traditional communities of taste (see Ian).

On such evidence then, I join other scholars that criticise the deterministic tendencies of Bourdieu (despite an attempt to abridge the hiatus between structure and agency) with particular reference to his portrayal of reflexivity within practice. After all in Bourdieu's theoretical approach the reflexive process is itself a product of habitus like any other disposition. This conflicts with interviewee accounts where participants were shown to have made clear breaks with tradition, and so whilst Bourdieu strikes a balance between dominant paradigms, I argue that the strong structural leanings of habitus create a theoretically untenable situation for agents in the late modern period. Whilst he is correct to illustrate the relevance and presence of continuity, structure and routine (a position that postmodern scholars tend to overlook) he fails to acknowledge the extent to which reflexivity can contribute to subtle change over time.

In sum, this paper has offered a much needed exploration into the origins of football fandom practice, an area that is both largely under researched and under theorized. Throughout I have shown how participants present different experiences of football fandom genesis and on this basis, I have argued that lifestyles are in one sense habitual given that they often lead from objective structures; and yet when confronted with new knowledge or when agents come into contact with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds; they have the capacity to reflect on and change behaviour. In other words, whilst agents are without doubt influenced by habitus, they are not imprisoned by it. The strict swaddling bands of civilized society, it seems, are less intensely followed by contemporary agents that value reflexivity and a capacity to move with fluidity within and between practice in late modern life.

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup>See unpublished thesis: Dixon, K. 'A sociological investigation into football fandom as consumption in the age of liquid modernity', Staffordshire University, UK.

<sup>2</sup> See King (1997) 'The lads: Masculinity and the new consumption of football'; Sandvoss (2003) 'A game of two halves'. King's field work was carried out with Manchester United fans, many of whom were contributors to the Manchester United fanzine 'red issue' making them an interesting and yet specialized sample. Furthermore whilst Sandvoss purports to have shed light on the everyday consumption of fandom, he does so, not only with reference to fans of successful clubs in their domestic leagues (Chelsea, Bayer Leverkusen and DC United) but he also assumes homogeneity between fan cultures across geographical space and nationalities.

<sup>3</sup> For discussions of postmodern community and football fandom see Crabbe (2008) 'Postmodern community and future directions'; Brown (2008) 'Our club our rules: Fan communities at FC United of Manchester'; Blackshaw (2008) 'Contemporary community theory and football'; Brown, Crabbe and Mellor (2008) 'Introduction: football and community – practical and theoretical considerations.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah: [Middlesbrough, aged 42 (MF)]

<sup>5</sup> 'The Riverside' is the stadium home of Middlesbrough FC. It was opened in 1995 to replace the previous stadium 'Ayresome Park'.

<sup>6</sup> Richie: [Liverpool, aged 32 (MF)]

<sup>7</sup> Ian Rush was a football player for Liverpool FC and also a Welsh international throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

<sup>8</sup> The term 'Champ Manager', used here by this participant refers to computer games in the popular 'Championship Manager' series of association football simulation games. The game was originally written by Paul and Oliver Collyer (co-founders of Sports Interactive) in September 1992 and released onto the Amiga and Atari ST computer. It was released for the PC soon after.

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