'It's Just Such a Class Thing': Rivalry and Class Distinction Between Female Fans of Men's Football and Rugby Union

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Abstract

This article draws on 85 interviews with female fans of men's football and rugby union to explore sporting preferences and social class in one locale in Britain. Although it has been widely contended that social class is no longer a major source of people's identity and people will usually deny class identities, these findings demonstrate that sport can operate as a unique space in which people openly discuss class distinctions. The findings examine the perceived class differences between football and rugby union fans and rivalry between respective groups of supporters. There is very little work on the cross sport perceptions of sports fans so this article makes an original contribution to sociological research.

Key Words

Football, Rugby Union, Social Class, Sports Fandom, Female Fans

Introduction

This paper focuses upon rivalry and class distinction between female fans of men's football and rugby union in one case study city in the United Kingdom (UK). Savage (2000: 40) notes it has been routinely contended that, 'Britain is not a deeply class conscious society' and Bottero (2004) proposes that most commentators would accept Savage's (2000) argument that class identification is of limited significance rather than a major source of people's

identity and group belonging in Britain today. The research findings in this paper make a contribution towards challenging claims that social class is no longer a major source of people's identity in the UK and that people will usually deny class identities.

It has been suggested that two distinct schools have developed in class analysis (see Bottero 2004). One identifies an increasingly precise and contained approach to defining the meaning of class (see, for example, Goldthorpe 1996; Marshall 1997) whilst the other 'culturalist class approach' calls for an expanded and transformed class theory (see, for example, Crompton 1998; Savage 2000). Savage et al. (2013) propose that over the past decade there has been a renewal of interest in social class inequality driven by evidence of rising social inequalities. However, a key issue for 'culturalist' class approaches 'is the embarrassing absence of clear-cut class identities, despite persisting inequality' (Bottero 2004: 987).

Bottero (2004) draws on examples of existing studies to argue that although British people recognise the continuing prominence of inequality and are willing to talk about class as a political issue they refuse to position themselves *'within'* classes and will often deny class identities (for example, Reay 1998; Savage et al. 2001; Skeggs 1997). Bottero (2004: 987) argues that many qualitative accounts have shown that 'people are reluctant to claim class identities, and adopt a 'defensive', 'hesitant', 'ambivalent' or 'ambiguous' attitude to class labels'. She draws on evidence from researchers to suggest that people will 'shrug off' class labels and locate themselves as 'ordinary' or 'middling'. For example, Savage (2000: 116) claims that when people speak in personal terms they 'want to belong to a group of ordinary, average types, differentiating from a group above them and below them' and Kelley and Evans (1995: 166) in a study of class identification found 'rich and poor, well-educated and poorly educated, high-stats and low status, all see themselves near the middle of the class

system, rarely at the top or bottom'. This leads Bottero (2004: 999) to suggest that: 'it is because personal life (friendship, marriage, the people who surround us) is hierarchically ordered that people tend to see themselves as 'ordinary', and thus downplay the significance of hierarchy in their lives'. Sayer (2002: 1.2; 1.4) has similarly found that class is an 'embarrassing topic' and so there is a reluctance to talk about class because this 'raises issues of the relative worth of individuals' and is associated with 'moral evaluation'.

In this paper I draw on 85 interviews with female fans of men's football and rugby union to examine female sports fans perceptions of the role of social class in sporting preferences. The UK city of Leicester was used as a case study site for the research. This research is sociologically important because these findings demonstrate that sport may operate as a space in which people openly discuss social class and thus challenge Bottero's (2004) claims that British people usually refuse to position themselves 'within' social classes and adopt an ambivalent attitude towards class labels. In my research differences in sporting preferences were directly linked to social class distinctions and female sports fans openly discussed class based differences through their rivalry with other sports fans. There is very little sociological work on the cross sport perceptions of supporters, or on the area of female sports fandom, so this paper offers a highly original contribution to sociological research.

The paper begins by providing some context for the research. I draw on the work of Bourdieu (1978, 2010) as a theoretical framework to examine the different sporting preferences of females, before providing an overview of the historical development of men's professional football and rugby union in the UK and existing research on female sports fans. My findings examine two main themes: perceived class differences between football and rugby union fans and rivalry between respective groups of supporters.

Bourdieu: Sporting Practices and Social Class

Bourdieu's paper on sport and social class (1978) was one of the first commentaries by a major social theorist to address sport as a serious sociological issue (Tomlinson 2004). Bourdieu views society as a site where people are in competition, individually and collectively, in a struggle for power, along with dignity, identity and recognition (Light and Kirk 2001: 83). Sport, just like any other practice, is said to be an object of struggles between the fractions of the dominant class as well as between the social classes (Bourdieu 1978). Bourdieu (1978: 820) suggests that it is possible to consider the whole range of sporting activities and entertainments offered to social agents as a '*supply* intended to meet a *social demand*'. One question he poses is especially pertinent for the focus of this paper:

> 'How is the demand for 'sports products' produced, how do people acquire the 'taste' for sport, and for one sport rather than another, whether as an activity or as a spectacle?...According to what principles do agents choose between the different sports activities or entertainments?' (Bourdieu 1978: 820).

For Bourdieu (1978: 833) the logic whereby agents incline towards particular sporting practices can only be understood if their dispositions towards sport: 'are reinserted into the unity of the system of dispositions, the habitus, which is the basis from which life-styles are generated'. Habitus can be defined as 'a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination*' (Bourdieu 2010: 555). The dispositions through which people perceive, judge and act are said to be unconscious schemata which are acquired through lasting exposure to certain social conditions and hence will be shared by people subjected to similar experiences (Wacquant 2007). Whilst an individual's life history means that each habitus is unique, people with similar life experiences tend to develop a similar habitus and their dispositions or schemes of perception will determine how they interpret social situations (Light and Kirk 2001: 83).

Thus, the habitus reflects the different positions people have in society, such as whether people are brought up in a 'middle class' or 'working class' environment (Bourdieu 2000). Hence, if sporting activities and entertainment constitute a system of practices on offer to potential sports participants or consumers, such consumers will not make 'free and unconstrained choices' (Tomlinson 2004: 166) as these choices will be led by the system which is 'predisposed to express all the differences sociologically pertinent at that moment', such as class and sex differences: 'The agents only have to follow the leanings of their habitus…to find an activity which is entirely 'them'' (Bourdieu 2010: 220). It is the capacity to produce classifiable practices and to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (tastes) that define the habitus; and the represented social world or the space of lifestyles is then constituted (Bourdieu 2010: 166).

Bourdieu (1978: 834) argues that: 'an explanatory model capable of accounting for the distribution of sporting practices among the classes and class fractions must clearly take account of the positive or negative determining factors, the most important of which are *spare time* (a transformed form of economic capital), *economic capital* (more or less indispensable depending on the sport), and *cultural capital* (again, more or less necessary depending on the sport'. The system of dispositions or habitus that people acquire depends on the position(s) they occupy in society or their endowment in capital (Wacquant 2007) and whereas economic capital can be said to refer to wealth and money, cultural capital can be defined as the consumption of cultural goods and expression of taste (Tomlinson 2004). The position of an individual, group or institution will be determined by their volume and composition of capital as well as changes in these two properties over time as a result of their trajectory in social space (Bourdieu 2010). Wacquant (2007: 271) describes how it is the distribution of capital which defines the two oppositions that undergrid major lines of

cleavage and conflict in advanced society: the vertical division pits agents holding large volumes of either capital against those deprived of both, and the horizontal opposition arises among the dominant class between those with high levels of economic capital but few cultural assets, and those whose capital is mainly cultural. The hierarchy of lifestyles, for Bourdieu, is the 'misrecognized retranslation of the hierarchy of classes'.

Bourdieu's work provides a highly useful framework to examine sporting preferences and social class distinctions. Sport, as with other body directed practices, can be seen as class-based (Tomlinson 2004):

> 'To understand the class distribution of the various sports, one would have to take account of the representation which, in terms of their specific schemes of perception and appreciation, the different classes have of the costs (economic, cultural and 'physical') and benefits attached to the different sports…gains in distinction accruing from the effects on the body itself…or from the access to highly selective groups which some of these sports give (golf, polo etc.)' (Bourdieu 2010: 12).

Although Bourdieu's analysis here is referring to sports participation, his work can also be applied to examine class distribution in sports spectatorship. Here individuals will follow the 'leanings of their habitus' (Bourdieu 2010: 220) in their sporting preferences and different classes will have specific 'schemes of perception and appreciation' (Bourdieu 2010: 12) in relation to different sports. Thus, the probability of practicing – or indeed watching – different sports will depend upon economic and cultural capital, but also the aesthetic accomplishment which seems to be contained in each sport (Bourdieu 1978). The popular team sports and typically 'working class' individual sports are said to repel the dominant class, not just because of the social composition of their public which adds to their 'commonness' but also because of the values demanded such as violence and docility. Sports such as golf, tennis and riding, however, are said to contain the features that appeal to the dominant taste (Bourdieu 2010; 1978). But variations in cultural capital and economic capital

alone cannot explain how the most distinctive sports are distributed among the social classes and especially among the dominant class as there are: 'hidden entry requirements, such as family tradition and early training, and also the obligatory clothing, bearing and techniques of sociability which keep these sports closed to the working classes and to individuals rising from the 'lower-middle and even upper-middle classes' (Bourdieu 1978: 838).

Wilson (2002) draws on Bourdieu's (2010) concepts of cultural capital and economic capital in his research on sport consumption in America. His findings showed that among both sexes, those who are richest in cultural capital and economic capital are most likely be involved in sports generally, both as spectators and players. But those who were rich in cultural capital were 'less likely to be involved in 'prole' sport, and this implies that sports consumption is to a large degree motivated by preferences, tastes, skills and knowledge that vary by social class' (2002: 13). Thus, although most sports are consistent with the preferences of the upper classes, some sports are antithetical to upper class preferences and so are avoided by the upper classes. As a result of this upper class avoidance and perhaps because these sports better correspond to lower class tastes, 'prole' sports attract participants and spectators drawn from the 'working class'. Wilson (2002: 13) links these findings to the reproduction of social inequality. As sports tastes are not only linked to economic capital but also to class-based differences in cultural capital, this implies that, along with other class differences in taste, sports tastes will accommodate and reinforce the existing structure of social inequality. This supports Bourdieu's (1978: 828) claims that class differences in taste are a means of reproducing status-based social networks; the practice of certain sports owes part of its 'interest' to its distinguishing function and the 'gains in distinction' it brings.

Other studies lend weight to Wilson's (2002) research. In Australia, Ward (2009) found that sports such as cricket and tennis attract higher income and higher status crowds, whereas sports such as rugby league and motor sports have a more 'working class' or blue collar following. In Belgium, Scheerder et al's., (2005: 159) findings suggest that in previous decades club participation was largely the preserve of the upper classes, but as this became more egalitarian, the higher classes changed their organisational sport preferences to non-organised sport, thus providing the basis for 'class reproduction and differentiation – or a distinctive habitus'. I will now overview the recent major transformations of rugby union and football in England.

The Historical Development of Football and Rugby Union in England

It is important to map historically and culturally the very different trajectories of the development of men's football and rugby union in England, as their different roots and sporting cultures are likely to play a key role in the cross sport perceptions of female football and rugby union fans. Indeed, as Hill (1996: 5-6) posits, 'sporting preferences in Britain since the second half of the nineteenth century have been very clear signifiers of class position'. In football it is something of a truism that the sport in England is traditionally regarded as a 'working class' man's sport. Holt (1992: 297) describes how throughout much of its history the sport has functioned to provide an escape from drudgery for 'working class' men whose lives centred on 'the works, the pub, and the match'. English rugby union in contrast is largely a 'middle class' and 'upper class' game (Collins 2009: 98). Football reluctantly accepted professionalism in 1885, thus opening up the sport to working men who could not afford to play for their club without reimbursement for lost working hours. But the bolstering of amateurism was the RFU's reaction to what was perceived to be an increasing threat to its authority from northern 'working class' players and spectators (Collins 2009).

Both football and rugby union in England have recently undergone major transformations which arguably may have opened up these sports more to players and spectators drawn from *across* the social classes. In football, following the Hillsborough Stadium disaster of 1989, the resulting 1990 Taylor Report recommended that all major clubs in England convert their stadia to all-seater status by the 1994-5 season (Taylor 1990), which was later restricted to the top two divisions of the sport. The formation of the Premier League in 1992 and the income resulting from the selling of TV rights to the satellite BSkyB channel saw an influx of new money into the game, with ticket prices for spectators increasing rapidly. The England national team reaching the semi-finals at the 1990 World Cup in Italy also contributed to more domestic 'middle class' interest in the sport in England (Giulianotti 1999). Data shows that there has been a 1,000 per cent increase in ticket admission prices since the Taylor Report and this increase in pricing can be seen in how Liverpool Football Club's cheapest ticket has increased from £4 to £46 (Wilson 2014). Such rising ticket prices have meant that major grounds in England are perhaps 'increasingly unlikely to host their old working class audience for top games' (Giulianotti 1999: 78).

Rugby union, too, underwent seismic change in this period when the sport eventually professionalised in 1995. Media coverage of rugby union increased dramatically as matches were increasingly screened on satellite television, and the European Heineken Cup was introduced for elite clubs. Televised coverage of the men's England national team winning the rugby union World Cup in 2003 (and reaching the final again in 2007) is perhaps also likely to have aroused more *national* interest from a broader spectrum of social classes. As has been the case in football (though not quite to the same extent) live attendances grew as the sport became more 'fashionable' (Collins 2009).

However, these recent transformations in football and rugby union do not appear to have led to major changes in the traditional class make up of these sports. Fan surveys have demonstrated that rugby union fans generally have higher incomes and come from a narrower class range than do football fans in England (Williams 2003a). Collins (2009) describes how rugby union still clings to its 'middle class' and 'upper class' heritage, and this is supported by statistics which show that 58 percent of supporters at Premiership rugby matches in 2010 came from the top AB socio-economic groups, so rugby union's fan base does not appear to be widening much beyond the professional classes (Kitson 2011). In Leicester, the case study site for this research, local fan surveys show that the football club still draws on a large 'working class' and 'lower middle class' constituency, whereas the rugby union club has a rather more affluent, professional base to its active fan support (Williams 2003b; 2004a).

Research on Sports Fans

The major changes in professional football and rugby union in Britain, combined with wider changes which have contributed to equalizing power relations between the sexes (Liston 2006: 371) are likely to have played a key role in opening up these sports to some female fans. Female fans are now estimated to make up around 19 percent of the football Premier League crowd and 18 percent of all rugby union Premiership fans (Kitson 2011; European Professional Football Leagues 2013). However, academic research to date has primarily focused upon male sports fans and female fans have been largely marginalised by this male-centric approach to the study of sports fandom (Pope 2013). In football, research has largely focused upon 'exceptional' forms of fandom (Dixon 2013: 335) such as hooliganism and/or issues of fan rivalry (see, for example, Armstrong 1998; Dunning et al. 1990; Stott and Pearson 2007).

However, there are signs that this is beginning to change with some important recent research studies emerging which have focused upon female fans. Recent research has examined female fans of men's football in countries such as Denmark (Pfister et al. 2013), Italy (Cere 2012), the United Kingdom (Jones 2008), Israel (Ben-Porat 2009) and Spain (Llopis-Goig 2007). Toffoletti and Mewett's (2012) edited collection also offers a number of interesting contributions, including research on female fans of men's rugby union in New Zealand (Obel 2012) and Australian rules football (Toffoletti and Mewett 2012). However, these existing studies are centred upon female fans of one sport and thus lack the comparative focus I advocate in this paper. There is very little sociological work on the cross sport perceptions of male or female fans – of the sports under study here or of fans of other sports.

Methodology

Case Study City and Sports Clubs

The most recent census data in 2011 showed Leicester's overall population to be 329,839, making Leicester the largest city in the East Midlands. 64.6% of all people aged 16 to 74 were economically active (compared to the England and Wales average of 69.7%) and the figure for unemployment was 6.2%, slightly above the national average of 4.4%. The city's historical association with the manufacturing industries (Beazley 2006) has continued into the 21st century; manufacturing is the second largest source of employment in the city, behind the wholesale and retail trade. Leicester is also an ethnically diverse city; 45.1% of the population described themselves as White British compared with 80.5% in England and Wales (see Official Labour Market Statistics, Census 2014). The majority of respondents in this research lived within the city of Leicester or the county of Leicestershire.

In many ways the East Midlands city of Leicester was an ideal location to examine the cross sport perceptions of supporters as Leicester is one of the few cities in Britain in which a strong public support and interest in men's professional football (Leicester City) is relatively balanced, locally, by public interest in men's professional rugby union (Leicester Tigers). Leicester City's King Power Stadium currently has a slightly higher capacity (32,500) than the Leicester Tigers stadium Welford Road (24,000) although both clubs attract similar attendance figures for home matches. The club's stadia are located within half a mile of each other near the city centre, so there is no division between supporters based on geographical differences in the stadium locations. Leicester City was competing in the Championship (the second division of English football) when the research was undertaken. Leicester Tigers is one of the most successful rugby union clubs in Europe and has regularly won the national club Premiership, thus posing a legitimate challenge to the football club in its local dominance.

The Research

The findings presented in this paper draw on 85 semi-structured interviews with female football and rugby union fans that were undertaken in 2007 and 2008 (Pope 2010). I had access to existing sampling frames of local sports fans in the form of postal questionnaire surveys that had been conducted a few years before commencing my research (Williams 2003b; 2004a) and the sampling frame used to select the sample was the original survey replies from these surveys. The survey responses were separated into three broad age groups to include women's responses from different generations, and systematic sampling techniques were used to select potential respondents using the age delineations from the surveys. The final football fan sample consisted of 10 'younger group' fans aged 20-27, 25 'middle group' fans aged 28-59 and 16 'older group' fans aged over 60 (n=51). The final

rugby fan sample was made up of 12 'younger group' fans aged 19-35, 10 'middle group' fans aged 36-55 and 12 'older group' fans aged over 56 (n=34). Ethnic minority fans are not typically well represented in sports crowds in Britain (Williams 2004b) and as a result nearly all respondents were White. Many respondents were season ticket holders who attended all home matches, or club members who attended the majority of home matches, but the sample also included some occasional attendees. Interviews mainly took place in the homes or workplaces of respondents and averaged around two hours in length, with a small number lasting closer to four hours. Demographic data was collected from respondents at the end of interviews, including some basic social class information which identified the occupation of female fans' and that of their parents. Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity – football fans are represented by the letter 'F' and rugby union fans 'R', followed by the case number assigned to each respondent.

Analysis of Data

I found 'grounded theory' a highly useful tool for purposes of data collection and analysis and so there was an emphasis upon Glaser and Strauss's (2008: 1, 5) 'discovery of theory from data' throughout the research. An interview schedule was designed which covered eight different themes and one of these sections focused upon cross sport perceptions of supporters. Interviews were fully transcribed and the data was coded drawing on Glaser and Strauss's (2008: 102) 'constant comparative method'. Data collection and analysis continued until reaching a point of 'theoretical saturation' whereby the categories were well developed and further data gathering was adding little or nothing new to the conceptualization (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The research largely produced 'substantive theory' but I also draw upon other sources where appropriate, including the work of Bourdieu (1978, 2010), thus incorporating 'formal theory' into the analysis. I will now turn to my findings.

Findings

i) Perceived Class Differences Between Football and Rugby Union Fans

Although there has been a relatively large body of research exploring club rivalries and especially hooliganism in English football, there is very little sociological work on fan perceptions of other sports and their fan cultures. These data offer an insight into the cross sport perceptions of female football and rugby union fans, which show the complex intersection between space, gender and social class in this unusual social and cultural landscape.

Of the 85 female fans in my sample only three confessed to actively supporting *both* football and rugby union. Even here, these fans had a clear preference for *one* sport. There seemed to be a general assumption that different *kinds* of people watched football and rugby union. Typical comments included: 'It's a different people that go to the rugby than they do to the football' (F3) or 'I think there's rugger fans and there's football fans; and I don't think many go to both' (F38). Bottero (2004: 998) suggests that people will usually refuse to position themselves 'within' classes. She draws on existing research (for example, Savage 2000) to suggest that people will usually 'shrug off' class labels and instead locate themselves as 'middling'. But rather than adopting a 'defensive' or 'ambivalent' attitude to class labels (Bottero 2004: 987) female sports fans generally spoke openly about how the differences in sporting preferences were the result of class distinctions:

> It's just such a class thing…Cos I'm working class, that's why I go to the football. Posh people go to the rugby…I think in this village there's an "in crowd" that goes fox hunting and played rugby *(posh voice)* And then there's, like, the other people that work in petrol stations and things… Now I look back on it I can see there is this kind of rugby and class divide. *(F4, age 26, season ticket holder, PhD student, Dad=mechanic, Mum=works in garage)*

Subtle class differences were apparent in Leicester football and rugby union fans adherence to, and articulation of, urban or non-urban affiliations respectively. Although the stadia of Leicester City and Leicester Tigers are within close proximity, fan surveys have indicated that there are geographical divisions in the residences of football and rugby union fans. Whereas recruitment of support for the football club is still strongly city based, the Leicester Tigers draws its fans much more strongly from the more exclusive residential areas of the city and from villages in the county of Leicestershire to the south of the city centre (Williams 2003a, 2004a). These spatial distinctions between supporters were observed by some respondents. For example, R11 stated: 'My image is that a lot of rugby fans don't actually live in Leicester, it's much more of a county thing…Whereas I always imagine the people living in the city are a lot more football'. F13 similarly suggested that there were geographical and class differences between respective groups of supporters based on her observations of Leicester Tigers fans travelling *into* the city for match days:

> It's a different class of fan; you tend to associate rugby with slightly more middle class […]. You get fans at the Tigers that are sort of you know, drive up in their Range Rovers, with their green wellies and more sort of like country set. Whereas football fans are more the…inner city sort of more working class type. *(F13, age 37, season ticket holder, immigration officer, Dad = in the army, Mum = nurse)*

Unlike the largely city based sample of football fans, a small number of rugby fans asserted that their own 'local' attachment to the club was rooted much more in the shires – to the *county* of Leicestershire, where they lived – rather than to the city where the Tigers played. In such accounts – which had obvious social class, as well as spatial and possibly gender implications too – connections usually drawn between spectator sport, community identities and urban space came to the fore. As R15 put it: 'I love Leicestershire…I hate Leicester city centre, but I love Leicestershire'. R18 expressed similar views and demonstrated specific spatial and place associations with the county and the rugby union club:

I don't feel as though I've got an allegiance to Leicester, the city. I don't equate the city itself with Leicester Tigers so much; Leicester Tigers for me is Leicester*shire* Tigers…Not the city…I live in Leicestershire and Leicester Tigers play for…they're not just playing for the city, they're playing for Leicestershire…Like the cricket, it's *county* cricket, it's not the city cricket, and I think that in a similar way to the rugby it's more county wide than the city. *(R18, age 47, season ticket holder, scenes of crime officer, Dad=engineer, Mum=head teacher)*

Some female fans from across the three generations suggested that class differences between football and rugby union fans were manifested in the different histories of the two sports and these differences were typically linked to the varying types of school in Leicester and Leicestershire that usually sanctioned play for one of these two sports for *males*. A number of the middle and older group respondents (24/63) suggested that people schooled in 'middle class' institutions watched rugby union and those from the 'working class' equivalents were football fans. Even a number of the younger female fans suggested that most private and selective grammar schools historically (and possibly today) place greater emphasis for 'middle class' boys on rugby union and people from this sort of class and educational background were therefore more likely to follow rugby union rather than football. Recent press coverage surrounding goal keeper Fraser Forster's selection for the England national football team centred upon Forster's private education at Newcastle's Royal Grammar School and his father's occupation as a judge, thus emphasising how unusual it is for football players to be from this kind of educational and class background (Edwards 2013).

A small number of respondents did however suggest that these sporting class barriers have now been eroded. This was usually attributed to recent changes – especially in rugby union – which have made this sport 'more accessible to the ordinary people' (F49). A small number of mainly younger group female rugby union fans challenged the idea that class and school background largely determined which sport an individual followed. Professionalism in rugby

union and the advent of BSkyB televised sport was also argued to have made the sport 'more accessible' to people from 'working class' backgrounds (R15) as it was suggested that the increased televised coverage allowed the sport to 'open up to a much more wider audience' (R3). R5 posited that Leicester Tigers have recently undertaken more outreach work by organising coaching sessions in state primary schools and this, combined with the England national team winning the World Cup in 2003, was argued to have led to more young males playing the sport. In football, some respondents suggested that as the sport was now 'big business' (F37) its appeal had been extended to the moneyed 'middle classes', suggesting that the traditional class distinctions between the two sports have now blurred.

However, despite the recent transformations of football and rugby union which have arguably opened up these sports to a broader spectrum of social classes, social class was widely perceived to play a central role in determining local sporting allegiances. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (61/85) explicitly linked sporting preferences to social class differences based on schooling and/or acquired wealth. Some respondents drew class distinctions based on levels of 'economic capital' (Bourdieu 2010); it was described how rugby fans were simply more 'middle' or 'upper' class – more 'wealthy', 'moneyed', 'better off', 'well to do' or a 'higher' or 'better' class, possibly travelling into matches from the county, and football fans were more 'working class' or 'less wealthy' and could be assumed to be more city based. This challenges Bottero's (2004) claims that people will usually deny class identities and adopt an 'ambivalent' or 'defensive' attitude towards class labels as sporting preferences were clearly linked to social class differences. In the sports context, social class did not appear to be an 'embarrassing topic' (Sayer 2002, 1.2), with many rugby union fans keen to self-identify as 'middle class' and stating in a matter-of-fact way how

rugby union remains: 'very much still a White middle class sport…the people who are interested in rugby are a very small socio-economic group of the city or county' (R29).

These accounts thus illustrate how and why rugby union is still perceived to be holding on to much of its traditional class heritage in Leicester (Collins 2009). A number of football and rugby union respondents from across the generations suggested that sporting preferences continued to be linked to educational background. Whereas there was a sense that 'everyone' (R22) or 'anyone' (F3) can play football, rugby union was restricted to private schools and therefore remained the preserve of the 'upper' or 'middle' classes (R22). Bourdieu (1978: 838) has argued that in order to understand how the most distinctive sports are distributed amongst fractions of the dominant class 'hidden entry requirements' such as family tradition and early training need to be considered which can keep these sports closed to the 'working class' and 'lower middle class'. Family tradition was certainly an important entry requirement for sports fandom, with socialisation and the influence of the family (especially the male parent) argued to play a crucial role in sporting preferences for just under one third (23/85) of all respondents.

In rugby union it is perhaps access to a private school education (with fees usually paid for through the family) that is a crucial 'hidden entry requirement'. Without access to this sort of educational background and adult supervision it is difficult for children to gain the necessary early training to be able to learn the highly complex laws and/or practices of playing the sport. Football, by contrast, can be played and organised in virtually any urban space and unsupervised:

> I still think that it's always the more educated people that like rugby…because it's more the public school end where they do a lot of rugby…Your players are coming

from potentially a more well to do background, whereas any kid that shows any talent with a football can potentially become anything, because it's there and it's available and it's free…I think that means that people who are from very poor backgrounds have better access to football….. Whereas rugby, it's not so easy to just play it…so it ends up being something that is more focused on school rugby. *(R3, age 26, season ticket holder, charity worker, Dad=vicar, Mum=housewife)*

This division between the 'proper' (R3) rugby playing private schools, or 'good schools' (F46) and the football playing state schools or the 'ordinary' schools (F40, R17) which the 'normal' children attend (R17, F48) had a more general relevance for some. Rugby fans were more 'businessy people' (F3), and some football respondents suggested that rugby fans viewed themselves as socially and intellectually superior. F11, for example said: 'People seem to think they're a better person for going to the rugby…Whereas you're viewed as a…a bit of a 'derrrr' for going to the football…Rugby people do see themselves as better citizens'. F44, who previously worked in nursing, described how the senior staff at her workplace followed rugby union, and were keen to demonstrate that their sporting preferences and 'taste' (Bourdieu 2010: 170) was linked to their class distinction and superiority: 'They used to make out it was their private school background' and thus rugby union fans, 'think they're different'.

These findings lend weight to Light and Kirk's (2001) research that playing and watching rugby union can bring 'gains in distinction' for private schools – and those who attend such schools. Just under half (20/51) of the football fans suggested that football as a sport was easier to comprehend and/or they were not interested in rugby union because they did not understand the sport, perhaps highlighting the privileged class habitus that is necessary to gain access to knowledge of rugby union. F19 suggested that those who attended private school would have gained an understanding of the laws of rugby union and so would be able to 'relate to it'. But without a family tradition and/or an educational background which

emphasised rugby union this sport seemed out of reach for many football fans. In Leicester, recruitment of support for the football club still has a large 'working class' and 'lower middle class' constituency, whereas the rugby union club has a more affluent and professional base to its fan support (Williams 2003b; 2004a). This was supported by my own samples in which rugby union fans were generally more likely to fit typical 'middle class' identifiers than football fans. Thus, whilst there were some exceptions, broadly speaking, rugby union tended to be followed by those women with higher levels of Bourdieu's (2010) 'economic' and 'cultural capital' and seemed to symbolise something more upmarket and aspirational. Football on the other hand was regarded as Wilson's (2002) 'prole sport' and continued to be associated with the 'working class' or 'lower middle class'. These cultural distinctions are likely to contribute to the sense of rivalry between supporters which I will now turn to.

ii) Rivalry Between Local Football and Rugby Union Fans

Many of the football respondents felt that they were 'under scrutiny' from middle class rugby fans. They claimed they were variously labelled by rugby fans as: 'thugs', 'riff-raff', 'hooligans' and 'oddities'. By the same token, rugby fans typically regarded themselves (it was said) as both a superior type of fandom and people. This sort of oppositional class conflict, played out by women in the cultural arena of sport, provoked a barely hidden antipathy articulated in class terms, especially among football fans:

> I think they consider themselves to be a higher class of fan, don't they? They consider that it's a gentleman's game, don't they? So I think that rugby fans would see themselves as a slightly higher level of fan than a football fan…I think that they do really think that they are a different kind of fan; a gentlemanly fan I think. *(F32, Age 50, season ticket holder, trade union official, Dad=in the building trade, mum=caretaker)*

Skeggs (1997) in her earlier study of White working class women argues that it is an 'imaginary' 'middle class' that 'working class' women aspire to. The middle classes were

often a source of ridicule and contempt, behaving in ways they did not want to be associated with, such as talking too much, and ordering things in a 'hoity toity' manner, so 'working class' women did not want to take on the whole package of middle class dispositions. In a similar vein, female football respondents described rugby fans using terms such as 'civilized', 'reserved', 'refined', and who were 'well behaved' at matches. Rugby union fans also described themselves using such terms. But many football fans did not want to take on these traits and critiqued the 'calm' (F8) and withdrawn behaviour typically exhibited at rugby matches: 'Boring people go to rugby and the people with lots of energy go to football' (F33). F28 suggested that in earlier years Leicester City did not provide Leicester Tigers results at home matches and this was attributed to class hierarchies:

> Anybody who was a bit of a snob would look down on Leicester City say, on working class going down to Leicester City. Well sometimes people in the working class can have the same type of attitude of people higher up…So it's a bit of inverted snobbery to think Tigers *puff*. **(F28, age 50, season ticket holder, book keeper, Dad=sales and marketing executive, Mum=housewife)**

The ritual demeaning of rugby union crowds might be construed as a sign of class envy or a sort of symbolic class revenge in which football fans quite mercilessly mocked the 'egg chuckers' or 'egg chasers' of rugby union and their dress styles, clipped language and modes of support. Many football respondents often impersonated Leicester Tigers fans during interviews by attempting to mimic what they perceived as the well-spoken 'upper' class accents or those who speak with 'plums in their mouth' (F24). F31, referred to the Leicester Tigers crowd as the 'suede coat brigade, sheep skinned coats' and F43 observed:

> They're a different sort of people who go the rugby to the football. I mean when I first went with my husband, I said "Ohhh, snobby lot. Pipes and cigars". You know what I mean? *And how they spoke!* **(F43, Age 69, season ticket holder, retired-worked as school meals cook, Dad=clark, Mum=school meals cook)**

These sorts of social class signifiers, in turn, somehow sealed off rugby union supporters – at least in the eyes of their football critics – from even the possibility of claiming 'authentic' sporting knowledge or of deep emotional or cultural attachments to their sport or club. For F13, rugby fans 'go to the match because you want to go and watch a game, rather than going because, sort of, it's in your blood, like football':

> I always remember there was this one woman, who [said] "Oh yes, I'm certainly looking forward, it should be a good game shouldn't it?" *(said in posh voice).* "Oh so and so, which one's Dusty Hare?" *(laughs).* And I'm thinking oh my goodness. You're trying to sound *so* knowledgeable. *(F31, age 50, occasional attendee, teacher, Dad=warehouse manager, Mum=worked in hosiery)*

For Bourdieu (2010: 166, 170) the capacity to produce classifiable practices and to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (tastes) define the habitus. 'Taste' transforms objectively classified practices into classifying practices or a symbolic expression of class position and the 'aesthetic sense exhibited by different groups, and the lifestyles associated with them define themselves in opposition to one another: *taste is first and foremost the distaste of others*' (Wacquant 2007: 271). Football and rugby union fans certainly seemed to define their sporting practices or lifestyles in opposition to one another. Some rugby union fans claimed football fans constitute the 'rougher crowd' and described football fans as 'thuggish' or 'thug-looking', 'violent', 'aggressive' and those who take part in hooliganism. There was a tendency to generalize yobbishness to *all* football fans and gentlemanly behaviour to all rugby equivalents. R9 for example says: 'I just don't like football fans, I think they're evil', and R20 confessed: 'You sort of come across football fans; I've no desire to mix with that really'.

Rugby union's 'middle class' heritage and historical association with amateurism and football's 'working class' history and connections with hooliganism, has no doubt

contributed to the widely held view held amongst rugby fans that football harbours violent

followers, generating friction and general hostility between supporters. But it could also be

suggested that 'taste' in rugby union is used to signify distinction and the lifestyles of rugby

union fans were perceived as more 'distinguished' than those of 'vulgar' football fans

(Bourdieu 2010: 168). The sense that there was a hierarchy for rugby union fans who 'don't

want to mix with the riff-raff' (F2), helped to generate a general division between 'them and

us' (F35):

> I think the football is a bit more of a working class game than the rugby. The rugby
> [fans] tend to look down their nose at football supporters…If we've got a game on the
> same day, they'll walk past you with their nose in the air if you've got a football shirt
> on…I think they see football fans as hooligans…There's quite a lot of animosity in
> Leicester between football and rugby, I think there's just accepted hatred…It's just
> accepted that they're the rugby and we're the football and there's no room to mingle.
> ***(F14, Age 37, season ticket holder, tenancy support worker, Dad=electrician,
> Mum=packer).***

The class distinctions between supporters also prompted different responses in terms of what

constitutes acceptable forms of fandom. These findings show that such struggles for

legitimacy, i.e. which sports are appropriate, who should play these sports and how they

should be played (Donnelly and Harvey 2007) can be extended to spectatorship and how

sports should be watched. Football fans argued that their highly expressive and passionate

styles of support, and their intense rivalries with opposition fans (including in a small number

of cases violence against other fans) was actually superior to the 'reined-in' repressed forms

of fandom typically exhibited by stiff-lipped rugby fans. 28 out of 51 female football fans

described how they enjoyed the segregated home and away fans. With no away fans there is

no distinctive football 'atmosphere' (Giulianotti 1999: 69). This fan intensity also highlighted

the importance attached to the match; for F10, 'It does make the matches a lot more exciting,

and there's a lot more riding on it'. Many football fans described the behaviour of rugby

union fans as 'bizarre' or 'too regimented and strict' and thus the rugby approach to fandom was 'boring' and not the best way of showing committed support for your team.

But for many rugby union fans, fan segregation in football and the general match day atmosphere was criticised with just over half (18/34) using negative terms such as 'unsafe', 'threatening' and 'intimidating' to describe the environment at football. Rugby union's residual amateur ethos and 'upper' and 'middle' class heritage (Collins 2009) in contrast to football's early professionalism and historically 'working class' background could help to explain the different perspectives around how sports should be played and watched. Light and Kirk (2001) found that rugby union players were expected to be ruthlessly competitive but even in defeat should shake hands with opponents and mix socially. For Bourdieu (1978: 823-824) this is a marker of the dominant social classes and such a show of detachment confirms that despite the 'will to win' it is important not to get so carried away as to forget 'it is a game'. This is in opposition to the 'plebeian pursuit of victory at all costs'. Thus, for football supporters creating an intimidating atmosphere for the opposing team was 'part of the game' (F35). However, for rugby union fans attaching too much importance to sport was argued to be a negative aspect of football fandom. It was suggested that football and its fans could learn much from rugby union, especially around 'fair play' and 'sportsmanship'. As R7 stated: 'It's just a game, you know? Football fans seem to think its life and death. At the end of the day it's something you do on a Saturday afternoon'.

Lamont (2002: 98) draws on the concept of 'symbolic boundaries' to examine the criteria that people use to define and discriminate between 'worthy' and 'less worthy' people. Lamont (2002) suggests that there are three types of symbolic boundaries: 'moral boundaries', which are drawn on the basis of moral character and are centred around qualities such as honesty

and consideration for others; 'socioeconomic boundaries', which are centred on judgements formed on the basis of wealth and power, and 'cultural boundaries', which are drawn on the basis of education, intelligence, tastes and command of high culture. Helsey (2010: 325) considers the extent to which the identities of the 'new squirearchy' in the English countryside are performed and marked through 'boundary-marking activities' such as 'the hunt' and 'the shoot'. Such research is useful to consider how lay discourses of class from football and rugby union fans similarly work to construct and perform class based identities. Football has traditionally been regarded as a working class sport whereas rugby union has typically been regarded as a middle class sport. Many rugby union fans felt that their association to the club was to the *shires* or the county rather than the city and rugby union could even be considered one of the 'middle class marker posts' in a similar way to hunting and shooting (see Helsey 2010). Both sets of fans used Lamont's (2002) 'symbolic boundaries' to discriminate between each other as revealed in the class based rivalry between supporters.

It might be suggested that much of this has concerned class rather than gender distinctions. Some studies have claimed that 'working class' self-identity in Britain is highly gendered, for example, Bottero (2005: 113) posits that the importance of manual work in working class men's lives has helped to shape their masculinities as well as the identity of the working class and Surridge (2007) found that men were nearly three times more likely than women to say they 'feel' 'working class'. However, these findings challenge assumptions that women are less likely to feel a strong sense of 'working class' identity as class affiliations are shown to play a prominent role in women's identities – certainly in the cultural arena of sport.

Phillips (1998) notes that it is increasingly recognised that class should be seen as being in part constituted through gender relations. Gender, along with race, ethnicity and sexuality are important constituents of social recognition, self-identity and cultural differentiation. However, studies have shown that *female* sports fans will often downplay their gender identities in order to reinforce their fan identities as sports fandom is defined in 'male terms' (Jones 2008: 520). In the UK the recent transformations that have occurred in football post-1989 which have led to more middle class interest in the sport have coincided with rising numbers of female fans at matches, meaning that females have been directly associated with the alleged recent gentrification of the football crowd. This association of female fans with the increasing movement of middle class fans into the sport has prompted some resistance from male working class fans, with female fans typically perceived as 'inauthentic' in their support (Pope 2012). Thus, female football fans may emphasise their 'working class' credentials in performing class based identities in the belief that this ensures 'gains in distinction' (Bourdieu 2010: 12) or authenticity and credibility as a supporter.

Gender was also invoked in the way that female rugby fans discussed the masculine culture of the sport. Whereas rugby was perceived as a 'manly' sport played by 'real men', football was more aligned to Connell's (1995) 'subordinated masculinity' – football players were described by some rugby union fans as 'weak', 'poncey posers' or 'poofters' that drew obviously homophobic connotations. Consequently, football *fans* lacked both manly discipline and civic honour: 'You get the impression that football people are a lot more rowdy and beer swilling people that would get drunk and fall over and get very vocal about their team whereas rugby fans are a lot more subdued' (R11). In contrast, male rugby supporters played a more chauvinistic and protective role in being 'respectful of the women' and generally behaving in a 'gentlemanly' manner (R22). As R33 explained, unlike in

football: 'There's more a code with rugby…I think the males are always aware of the females and you don't get the bad language and stuff at the rugby'. This could be considered an example of Lamont's (2002) 'moral boundaries' whereby male rugby union fans were perceived to demonstrate qualities such as consideration for others in performing class based identities and thus were defined as 'worthy' as opposed to 'less worthy' male football fans.

Conclusion

There is very little existing research on the cross sport perceptions of sports fans or on the topic of female sports fandom so this paper makes an original contribution to sociological research. Despite the transformations that have occurred in football and rugby union in the UK in recent years which might be expected to have produced something of a convergence of appeal across the social classes, the findings showed that social class played a prominent role in shaping sporting preferences in Leicester, the case study site for the research, and thus rugby union and football remained strongly segmented in terms of their class appeal.

Lamont (2002: 98) suggests that 'symbolic boundaries' are used to discriminate between 'worthy' and 'less worthy' people. Football has traditionally been defined as a 'working class' sport and rugby union a 'middle class' and 'upper class' sport. It could be suggested fans use 'symbolic boundaries' to discriminate between 'worthy' people (or fans of the same sport) and 'less worthy' people (or fans of the other sport), thus generating a sense of 'them and us' (F35). Unlike football, being a fan of rugby union might be considered one of the 'middle class marker posts' or one of the 'boundary-marking activities' performed by the middle classes (see Helsey 2010: 325). Respondents discussed how rugby union was associated with the 'middle' or 'upper' classes and thus tended to be linked to those with higher levels of Bourdieu's (2010) 'economic' and 'cultural' capital. Football on the other

hand was associated with those from the 'working class' and thus could be considered a 'prole' sport (Wilson 2002). Geographical differences were also observed by some respondents with fans of rugby union associated with the county or Leicester*shire* and football fans typically associated with the city, and these spatial distinctions also served to reinforce these class differences. The historical class based differences between the two sports along with lay discourses of class worked to construct and perform class based identities for respondents. For example, there was a strong sense of rivalry between the two sets of supporters, with rugby union fans labelling football fans as 'thuggish' or 'violent' and football fans critiquing the supposed social superiority of rugby fans and their 'middle class' styles of dress and highly restrained modes of support.

Bottero (2004: 999) has argued that 'class' and 'class conflict' is less significant as a feature of personal identity today and suggests that most commentators would accept Savage's (2000) suggestion that social class is no longer a major source of people's identity and group belonging. These findings are therefore sociologically important as they directly challenge such claims. Bottero (2004: 987) draws on evidence from varies researchers to suggest that British people will refuse to position themselves 'within' social classes and will 'shrug off' class labels. Here it is claimed that people will be reluctant to claim class identities and will adopt a 'defensive' or 'ambiguous' attitude towards class labels. However, my findings showed that in the cultural arena of sport, social class was an important source of people's identity. Respondents openly attributed their own (and others) sporting preferences to class based distinctions and the rivalry that emerged between the two sets of supporters could also be attributed to social class differences. Thus, perhaps sports fandom represents a unique space whereby it is somehow acceptable to discuss class identities and where people feel

comfortable in labelling others on the basis of their perceived social class in a way that would not be appropriate in other areas of their lives.

Clearly there is a need for further research to explore this largely neglected area. It is important to acknowledge that the findings presented in this paper are based on one case study city and thus cannot be generalised to other regions. However, future research could examine cross sport perceptions of supporters in other UK cities and worldwide to see how these findings compare to other case study regions. It is hoped that this exploratory study will pave the way for more comparative research of this kind.

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