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# Kris Southby

## Supporting the Fans: Learning-disability, Football Fandom and Social Exclusion

In Britain, within the contemporary drive of using sport to tackle the isolation of socially excluded groups, association football (football) fandom has been implicated in many policy documents as a possible site for learning-disabled people to become more socially included. However, whilst there is some evidence of the benefits of playing football for learning-disabled people, there is little evidence to support these claims. Drawing on empirical data from learning-disabled people about their experiences of football fandom and from relevant authorities responsible for facilitating the fandom of learning-disabled people, this thesis provides a critical analysis of the opportunities to tackle social exclusion that football fandom provides learning-disabled people. This includes examining the experience of football fandom for the learning-disabled people involved, any opportunities for social inclusion football fandom provides, and the response of relevant football authorities to learning-disabled fans. The thesis concludes that whilst football fandom offers social benefits to learning-disabled people in terms of opportunities for social interaction, a sense of belonging and a shared social identity that go some way towards tackling their social exclusion, football fandom is unlikely to result in the 'social inclusion' characterised by Government.

# Supporting the Fans

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*Learning-disability, Football Fandom and Social  
Exclusion*

Kris Southby

PhD Thesis

School of Applied Social Science, Durham University

2012

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## **Statement of Copyright**

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# **Prologue: I like football, but I'm not a fan**

Me: "Hello. You alright?"

My Brother: "Yeah"

Me: "What you been up to this week? How was work?"

Brother: "Not much. Alright. I watched the football yesterday"

Me: "Oh yeah! What d'you watch?"

Brother: "On Match of the Day, and two matches on Sky"

Me: "Cool. I only saw a bit of Match of the Day. What d'you think?"

Living about 300 miles away from my family I telephone them once a week or so to catch up. I report to my parents about work, health, news, and generally what my life is like trying to be an adult. I then speak to my elder brother about the important stuff: girls and football<sup>1</sup>.

Both my brother and I really like football. However, our appreciations of the game are somewhat different. For me, whether it is playing, watching, reading or talking, football is excellent entertainment. I like observing the narrative of a season unfold and trying to understand the different characters involved. But I do not really care about particular results or outcomes.

Conversely, my brothers' interest is focused on one thing, his favourite team: Manchester United. Rather than being a casual observer like me, he does care about their results, performances, and players. He is also pleased to meet other people who like Manchester United and equally pleased to explain to those who do not why they should. Whilst we both like football (I would say I like it more, but he would probably disagree), only he is what you might call a fan<sup>2</sup>.

I find football fandom interesting, observing peoples' relationships to 'their' clubs. Why do so many people devote so much time and energy to only one team? Why do they care so much? What do they get out of it? From my experiences I would say that being a football fan allows people to practice almost every human emotion: fun, enjoyment, love, humour, anticipation, pain, suffering, anguish, regret, and many in between. It also enables people to interact with each other by giving

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<sup>1</sup> Although often referred to as soccer, the British idiom 'football' is used throughout this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> At a purely semantic level – the sociological debate will be introduced in later chapters – the term 'fan' is used throughout this thesis, unless otherwise stated, to avoid confusion with the connotations that the term 'supporter' might present in the learning-disability context.

both familiar and disparate individuals something to talk about. However, thinking back over my brother's experience of being a football fan raised some interesting questions: what if you are not able to take part in these interactions? Is the experience of being a football fan still the same? Do you still get the same benefits?

You see, my elder brother has Down's syndrome, a learning disability that means he is not always part of 'mainstream' society. Despite being a Manchester United fan for the best part of twenty years, he has never seen them play live. Instead he watches their matches at home on television. Whilst it is not uncommon for a Manchester United fan to have never been to Old Trafford – in fact it is a well versed football cliché – this story, which he was happy for me to share, is exemplary of the broader restricted leisure opportunities faced by learning-disabled people. But what are the football fan experiences of other learning-disabled people? Are other learning-disabled people restricted in their football fandom? What do they get out of being fans? Aside from my personal interest in this topic, understanding learning-disabled peoples' football fandom has broader policy implications; it will significantly contribute to the sport-to-tackle-social-issues rhetoric that has persisted for the past fifteen or so years.

# **Chapter 1- Introduction**

## **Defining learning disability**

There is considerable confusion around definitions and applications of the term 'learning disability'. Whilst more in depth definitions will be discussed in later chapters, it is necessary to establish the terminology to be used throughout this thesis. Devlieger (1999) suggests that changes in terminology reflect a different logic of the understanding of disability as a phenomenon. As such, stigmatising terms such as mental retardation, mental handicap, intellectual retardation, and intellectual handicap are avoided. Instead, following the example of Mencap - the prominent British learning disability charity and advocacy group - and the British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD), the term 'learning disability' will be used throughout this thesis to refer to people who "find it harder than others to learn, understand and communicate" (Mencap, 2011). 'Learning-disabled' is preferred to 'person with a learning disability' in recognition of the understanding of social, political, and physical barriers that disable people with intellectual impairments (Kelly, 2007). This does, however, contravene the vocabulary used by People First, the advocacy group *of* rather than *for* learning-disabled people, who speak of people having a 'learning difficulty'.

## **Framing the research in a policy context**

Until as recently as 1990, learning-disabled people have been seen in both policy and popular terms as oddities, out of place in mainstream society, demonstrated in, for example, national policies of sterilization and institutionalisation (Macintyre, 2008). However, since the 1970s, there has been a gradual shift in public attitudes associated with the move from exclusive reliance on individual, medical models of disability, to a more integrative agenda viewing disability as a failure by society to allow physically or intellectually impaired people to participate fully in social life. But while learning-disabled people are no longer as viewed as objects of fear, ridicule, or segregation, and despite a raft of integrative social policies with titles such as Valuing People (Department of Health (DH), 2001), learning-disabled people continue to face unseen barriers to participation, remaining largely invisible in mainstream communities (Macintyre, 2008).

Whilst the social integration of learning-disabled people has been a priority policy issue since the community care reforms of the early 1990s and the introduction of disability discrimination legislation in 1995, the election of the 'New Labour' government in 1997 initiated social policies to create holistic approaches to integration. Under the collective banner of 'social exclusion', in both theoretical and political discourses, the causes of learning-disabled people's social isolation was

attributed to individuals having a lack of social capital, and becoming disconnected from their communities (Baron, 2004). Tackling social exclusion was thus supposedly a simple matter of “creating routes back into society and giving people a chance to integrate” into their communities (SEU, 2001:9). As such, cultural activities, such as sport and creative art, that offered opportunities for “friendship, rivalry, challenge and enjoyment” (DCMS, 2000:2) became increasingly championed as a means of tackling social exclusion.

While sport was previously on the fringes of other more “resource rich and politically heavy” political departments (Houlihan & White, 2002:2), this new role at the heart of the social inclusion agenda marked a change in British sports policy away from ‘sport for sports sake’ towards using sport instrumentally to tackle social exclusion (Green, 2006; Seippel, 2006). Primarily based on the conclusions of Collins et al (1999), the newly formed Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) highlighted “the powerful input that sport can have on social exclusion factors [that] is increasingly recognised by all involved in regeneration and inclusion” (DCMS, 2001:8). Subsequent national sports strategies ‘A Sporting Future for All’ (DCMS, 2000) and ‘Game Plan’ (DCMS, 2002) made explicit in policy discourse the theorised link between sports participation, increased community involvement, and decreased social exclusion.

Not surprisingly, as the most popular sport in Britain, football has been at the forefront of the drive to use sport to tackle the social exclusion of learning disabled people. Football’s popularity, extending to spheres of life and communities hard to reach through traditional political means, suggests ‘the nation’s game’ may offer the most likely sporting platform to make a significant impact on social inclusion targets (Wagg, 2004). The national governing body for football, The Football Association (The FA), has attempted to exploit this position by putting professional football clubs in England under increasing pressure to “create opportunities at all levels for anyone with a disability to get involved in football- whether as a player, referee, administrator, coach or spectator” (The FA, 2010b). However, rigorous evaluation of all the claims of such football inclusion policies has yet to be carried out. There is no evidence of the social inclusion benefits of being a fan for learning-disabled people. Rather, the aforementioned policies appear to adopt a somewhat romanticised view of football fandom and its potential for social inclusion (Coalter, 2001; Tacon, 2007), suggesting learning disabled people might integrate into the existing community of established fans.

This research aims to explore the reported positive relationship between learning-disabled people, football fandom, and social inclusion by investigating learning-disabled peoples’ experiences of football fandom and their involvement in football fan communities. In doing so, it will address a



significant gap in the academic literature and provide more robust evidence of whether participation as football fans can contribute to addressing the social exclusion of learning disabled people.

## **Structure of the thesis**

Following this introduction, the thesis is divided into six further chapters. The next chapter, Chapter 2, provides a review of relevant academic and governmental literature regarding the social inclusion of learning-disabled people through football fandom. This includes a brief historical review of the social isolation of learning-disabled people. Learning-disabled peoples' experiences of 'social exclusion' and 'social inclusion' are introduced and discussed. The role of sport and football fandom in tackling the social exclusion of learning-disabled people is then critiqued. Finally, the three specific research questions that have guided this research are presented.

Chapter 3 is concerned with outlining the chosen methodological approach to answering these research questions. A key influence on the methodology has been the literature on inclusive research and a significant theme within this chapter is my struggle to position the research in relation to the Participatory and Emancipatory paradigms. Issues concerning the research design, negotiating access to the field, sampling, ethics, specific research instruments, and analysis are described and justified in relation to relevant literature and in contributing to the overall inclusive research approach.

Chapter 4 is the first substantive chapter of the thesis. The focus of this chapter is on analysing the experience of the learning-disabled participants as football fans. Discussion begins by highlighting the diverse football fandom engaged in by the participants. It then moves on to consider, specifically, the participants' experiences of attending live football matches and the opportunities for social inclusion this presents. Finally, it is argued that football stadia represent a form of semi-institutional social space which provides learning-disabled football fans with the opportunity to be part of a 'mainstream' social event without being exposed to the rigours of everyday life.

Chapter 5 then moves on to discuss the participants' football fandom outside of live matches. This includes a discussion of the varied opportunities for social interaction that football fandom stimulated for the participants in this research and what affect this had on their social exclusion. The persistent nature of the participants' football fandom in their everyday lives is analysed as a form of serious leisure, providing a source of valued social identity and a sense of belonging that might have otherwise been absent in their lives.

Chapter 6 centres on analysing the observed variation in football fandom and evaluating the responses of football clubs at meeting the diverse needs of their learning-disabled fans. Issues of choice, financial resources, social support and impairment are all considered and dismissed as the cause of the variation in the participants' football fandom. The Capability Framework (Sen, 2004) is preferred as the most effective tool for understanding the participants' differing engagement with their favoured clubs. What individual football clubs do to facilitate learning-disabled football fans is then analysed through the lens of the Capability Framework in relation to how they are able to enhance the capability sets of their learning-disabled fans, if at all. The effect this has on the likelihood that football fandom can play a role in tackling the social exclusion of the participants in this research is discussed.

Finally, chapter 7 provides a conclusion to the thesis. After summarising key points from previous chapters, three specific contributions to knowledge are outlined along with recommendations for policy and practise. These relate to enhancing the understanding of learning-disabled people as football fans, the ability of football fandom to help in tackling the social exclusion of learning-disabled people, and the role relevant authorities play in facilitating the football fandom of learning-disabled people. The limitations of the research are discussed hand-in-hand with the practical implications. Some ideas for future research are outlined.

# **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

## **Introduction**

In the introductory chapter the point was made that, despite the rhetoric of the football authorities, there is little evidence to support the claims of many football based inclusion policies. Until now, learning-disabled peoples' experiences of, and any social benefits gained from, football fandom have been unexplored. The aim of this chapter is to consider what might already be known regarding the potential of football fandom to help tackle the 'social exclusion' of learning-disabled people. This will be achieved by firstly providing an overview of learning-disabled peoples' historical social marginalisation and isolation in relation to the changing conceptualisation of 'learning-disability'. Such historical analysis will illuminate the underlying ideologies that serve to uphold the present day social isolation of leaning-disabled people. The review will then move on to look at contemporary understandings of the social isolation of learning-disabled people as a form of 'social exclusion'. This includes causes and solutions born out of this concept and how they relate to the experiences of learning-disabled people. The rise of sport and leisure activities as a political tool to tackle social exclusion is discussed. Finally, the body of knowledge relating to football fandom and the role this might play in the social inclusion agenda is considered. From this critique, specific gaps in the knowledge are indentified and used to inform precise research questions.

## **From bad to sick to out of place: Changing perceptions of learning disability**

The marginal position of learning-disabled people in British society is, as Hall (2010:1) suggests, "well documented". They are at significant risk of unemployment, insecure housing, physical and mental ill health, and less likely to engage in leisure activities, friendship networks, and intimate personal relationships (Miller & Gywnne, 1972; Foundation for People with Disabilities, 2001; Hall, 2005; Brindle, 2006). This is not a new phenomenon, however. Whether in spatially separated institutions or absent from wider social opportunities (Hall, 2010), learning-disabled people have been subject to chronic marginalisation (Hall, 2005; Harrison & Berry, 2006). The perceived inability to reason or exert agency represents everything the "'normal world' fears" (Parr & Butler, 1999:14) – "tragedy, loss, dark, the unknown" (Hunt, 1966:155) – marking learning-disabled people as the "ultimate other" (Parr & Butler, 1999:14).

This marginalisation has, however, not existed in one fixed state over time. Rather, the conceptualisations, justifications, and policy responses to this phenomenon have gradually evolved. One could argue that the numerous books, reports, and scholarly articles that have been produced to document both the historic and ongoing social isolation of learning-disabled people indicates that there is no ‘truth’ about learning disability outside of specific and historically contingent systems of knowledge (Yates *et al.*, 2008). Like stigma (Goffman, 1963), learning disabilities (as well as other disabilities) are always constructed as a deviation from some notion of normality and pre-defined social norms (Winance, 2007). As societal structures change over time so too do the discursively constituted subjects relating to concepts of ‘mental ability’ that emerge as particular types of problems at particular times. From an essential pathology to a form of social oppression, learning disability – and accompanying marginalisation – is “dialectically related to the ideology or group of ideologies that justify and perpetuate this situation” (Abberley, 1987:7). Following Finkelstein (1980), historical perceptions of learning-disability, and therefore of learning-disabled people, can perhaps best be understood by examining the development of British society through the pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial phases.

### ***Pre-industrial: too poor to care?***

Histories of disability often start their stories citing ancient Greek idealisation of body shape linked to the acceptance of infanticide of those born with visible impairments. Such historical accounts stress the continuity of negative attitudes towards those with impairments (Winzer, 1993). Rooted in religious ideas of ‘badness’, impairments were considered as judgments for social deviance (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). However, in feudal societies, although the high mortality rate among those born with impairments greatly reduced the need for community support, peasant households “could not afford to view any bodies as unproductive” (Gleeson, 1999:83). As such, those with impairments who survived their formative years were still expected to participate in economic life. As Gleeson (1997:194) suggests “whilst impairment was probably a prosaic feature of feudal England, disablement was not”. Goodey (2011:1) provides a particular history for learning disability, arguing that whilst we tend to “assume that ‘intellectual disability’ is a permanent historical fixture...the idea of an intelligence that defines membership of the human species is itself modern”.

### ***Industrial revolution: the rising demands of economic efficiency and medical authority.***

The social changes brought about by the industrial revolution resulted in learning-disability being conceptualised as a social problem (Barnes & Mercer, 2006). In the new market-orientated society, those unable to maintain the emerging norm of economic rationality were considered a burden. The

perceived degenerate behaviour of mentally (and physically) impaired people legitimised a range of institutional solutions, which proved both functional to the capitalist state in maintaining economic efficiency and provided reassurance that something was being done for these 'deserving poor' (Scull, 1984).

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, impairment and the supposed deviation away from 'normality' attracted growing scientific interest. 'Medicalisation' emerged as a key aspect in the social control of learning-disabled people, supplanting religious ideas of 'badness' with medical ideas of 'sickness' (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). This conceptualisation of disability, based on medical judgements of those with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments as "less-than-whole" (Dartington *et al.*, 1981) and so unable to fulfil normal social obligations, became known as the 'medical model'. Within this framework, disability became regarded as an individual pathology equated to individual functional limitations, with medical 'knowledge' determining responses and treatment (Barnes & Mercer, 2003).

The medical model resulted in the sterilisation and segregation of supposed "travesties of human form and spirit" (Burleigh, 1994:194) in segregated institutions/asylums (Philo, 1987; Radford & Tipper, 1988; Park & Radford, 1999). (The forced sterilisation of learning-disabled people was never legalised in the United Kingdom, although there is evidence to suggest it did still occur (Fennell, 1995)). The 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, for example, strongly influenced by eugenic thinking, set out a process of identifying, certifying, and detaining 'mental defectives' in specialised institutions or 'colonies'.

Considered 'protective care' for learning-disabled people, the asylum system provided physical and symbolic confirmation of the declining tolerance of "the awkward and unwanted, the useless and the particularly troublesome" (Scull, 1979:240). At the time the medical model attracted little, if any, criticism. Rather the hegemony of the 'institutional solution' confirmed the existence of a caring society that stopped learning-disabled people being a burden on the public (Barnes & Mercer, 2006).

Following the conclusion of World War II, disabled 'colonies' became hospitals under the control of the newly created National Health Service (NHS) where disabled people received 'treatment' (Barnes & Mercer, 2006). The NHS takeover reinforced the authority of institutional regimes with the status of medical professionals. The 1948 National Assistance Act transferred responsibility for residential accommodation from the NHS to local authorities. However, despite arguing for welfare systems to "ensure that all handicapped people...have the opportunity of sharing in and contributing to the life of the community..." (Department of Health, 1948:60), the act continued medical model ideology

and contributed very little to overturning the hegemony of residential 'care' (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). Medical authority was incorporated in the next legal definition of learning-disability, the 1959 Mental Health Act, with the categories of 'normal' and 'subnormal' enshrining learning-disabled people as patients. For learning-disabled people then, the pre and post war years looked very similar, only with the increasing authority of the medical and professional establishment (Race, 2007).

### ***Post-industrial society: the rise of normalisation...***

From the 1950s, despite optimism about the quality of life moving from "master and inmate" to "hotel manager and guest" (Townsend, 1962:36), segregated institutions attracted growing criticism from disabled people, academics, and politicians (Kugel & Wolfensberger, 1969; Morris, 1969; Miller & Gwynne, 1972; Barnes & Mercer, 2003). Along with a series of public scandals about mistreatment of residents, this provided sufficient pressure to improve the living conditions of learning-disabled people and for a general shift towards closing large, residential institutions and supporting individuals to live *in* the community (Crossman, 1977; Martin, 1985).

This alternative form of support for learning-disabled people was underpinned by an emerging 'normalisation' discourse (Emerson *et al.*, 1999). Originating in Scandinavia in the 1960s, rather than hiding learning-disabled people away, normalisation encouraged opportunities to participate in the "patterns of life and conditions of everyday living" (Nirje, 1980:33). Better Services for the Mentally Handicapped (Department of Health and Social Security, 1971) represented a significant acknowledgment of normalisation in government thinking through the relocation of half the hospital population to local authority 'community housing' and adult day centres (Baranjay, 1971). This transition to living in the community was supposedly accompanied by a reassertion of rehabilitation and caring goals by those working in the human care industry (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). However, despite the growth in the less formal, small scale housing units and support networks (Russell, 1998), these did not deliver the promised reworking of helper-helped relationships, maintaining the atmosphere of institutions (Barnes, 1990).

This 'equal but separate' approach, largely based on developing segregated services within mainstream locations, did little to address the marginalisation of learning-disabled people in the UK (Emerson *et al.*, 1999). Despite the emergence of a more detailed version of normalisation from North America in the early 1970s – Social Role Valorisation (SRV) – that emphasised the importance of opportunities for learning-disabled people to fulfil socially valued roles in order to challenge their perceived incompetence (Wolfensburger, 1980), living in the community continued to be an isolating experience (Oldman & Quilgars, 1999).

The modern legacy of normalisation/SRV is often thought of as maintaining the status quo about what constitutes culturally valued and appropriate services for learning-disabled people (Brown & Smith, 1992; Chappell, 1998; Stalker *et al.*, 1999; Culham & Nind, 2003). However, the failure of normalization/SRV to have any significant impact on the quality of life of most learning-disabled people resulted from the ideas being more influential in policy documents and government reports than in practice (Wolfensberger & Tullman, 1989; Race, 2007). Much bigger social forces – principally a free market economy that shifted from manufacturing to ‘informationalization’ – meant the “committed implementation [of normalisation/SRV] is like a dribble, and sometimes even that often turns into a frizzle” (Wolfensberger & Tullman, 1989:184; Sapey, 2000; Race, 2007). Used appropriately, however, normalisation/SRV is more nuanced than simply moulding individuals into socially accepted ‘normal’ roles (Race *et al.*, 2005), emphasising the social influences that act on the individual to limit ‘personal competencies’ and shape behaviour. As such, the failure of normalisation/SRV has been in trying to exist within the over-arching capitalist and medical model ideologies of post-industrial society, rather than trying to deconstruct them.

### ***...and the social model***

During the 1960s, many began to question the way disabled people were conceptualised in dominant discourses and to voice criticisms of the medical model (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). Taking their cue from political theorists of the day who argued that social and personal problems needed to be located within wider material and political contexts as public issues (Mills, 1963) disabled activists and disability advocates challenged the convention of the medical model, arguing that the “problem of disability lies not only in the impairment of function...but...in the area of our relationships with ‘normal’ people” (Hunt, 1966:146). What emerged from these criticisms was a contrast between the orthodox conceptualisation of disability through the medical model and a more structural understanding that highlighted how disabled people were subjected to wide ranging processes of discrimination and marginalisation (Bowe, 1978). Although originally focused on the experiences of physically disabled people, learning-disabled people have, to a limited extent, contributed their voice, arguing that “barriers make us disabled as well” (Docherty *et al.*, 2005:35).

First fully articulated by the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS, 1976), a clear distinction was drawn between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’. While UPIAS broadly accepted the medical definition of impairment as an individual attribute (i.e. missing a limb or having a defective organ), the meaning of ‘disability’ was turned on its head to become “the outcome of an oppressive relationship between people with...impairments and the rest of society” (Finkelstein, 1980:47). Reversing the chain of causality, disability was removed as an individual pathology and instead

placed “on top of our impairment by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (UPIAS, 1976:14).

This reformulation of disability prompted Oliver (1983:23) to coin the phrase ‘social model of disability’ to refer to the way “physical and social environments impose limitations upon certain groups or categories of people”. This is not to deny the significance of impairments in people’s lives – “the social model is not about showing that every dysfunction in our body can be compensated for by a gadget” (Vasey, 1992:44) – but rather shifts focus to the major architectural, attitudinal, educational, occupational, legal and personal barriers that are constructed on top of people’s impairments; barriers “which [society] had the knowledge and ability to alter” (Bowe, 1978; Topliss & Gould, 1981:142; Barnes & Mercer, 2003). According to social model theorists, the “personal tragedy theory [of disability]” (i.e. the medical model) emerged with the rise of industrial and post-industrial capitalism, serving to individualise the problem of deviating from the expected norm of a productive workforce, in order to leave broader social and economic structures untouched (Oliver, 1986:16; Abberley, 1987; Oliver, 1990; Gleeson, 1999).

Gradually this social analysis of disabled people’s marginalisation gained formal recognition in government discussion papers and debates among social welfare professionals (Beresford, 2004). The change is argued to have had both reformist and revolutionary aspects (Tregaskis, 2002), including an increase in the amount and variety of services, a move from health to local social services, a change in understanding about the rights and identity of learning-disabled people, a change to a mixed economy of services with a steady privatisation of former NHS and local authority provision, increasing professionalization of services and the growth of professional and technical knowledge/skill. Internationally the World Health Organisation (WHO) twice changed its schema on disability to include both medical and social models of disability, whilst domestically the need for legislation to address the oppression faced by disabled people is broadly acknowledged. Simplistically, this shift meant that rather than being seen as oddities, out of place in society, there was a desire to integrate learning-disabled people into communities (Buell & Minnes, 2006; Macintyre, 2008). However, there is a possible argument to suggest that learning-disabled people are placed outside the social model because their impairments are mental, not physical, and so ‘without reason’.

Following the 1979 national election victory of the Conservative Party, numerous government policies were introduced appearing to follow social model ideas. The 1989 government white paper ‘Caring for People’ and the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) both proclaimed the overall aim of ‘community care’ as “promoting choice and independence” emphasising the importance of “giving



people a greater individual say in how they live their lives” (Department of Health, 1989:4). Similarly, following the 1996 Community Care (Direct Payments) Act, selected groups of disabled service users were given greater choice in the services they received through receipt of direct payments from local authorities. Also, the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) made the removal of barriers for disabled people a legal responsibility, albeit in a limited way.

Although significant in terms of organisational change, these policies did little to alter service provision any more than the normalisation/SRV agenda. Long stay hospitals continued to close and learning-disabled people moved into four to six bed roomed ‘ordinary houses’, yet continued to be marginalised in society (Emerson *et al.*, 1999). Despite the social models supposed growing influence, changes in services for learning-disabled people were perhaps more the result of the Thatcher government’s ideological desire to reduce government spending; the closure of expensive long-stay hospitals, replaced with supported or independent living was thus an exercise in revitalising market forces towards market-driven citizenship (Hadley & Clough, 1996). As well as placing responsibilities on the family and other ‘informal carers’, this approach adversely affected learning-disabled people who were unable to exert their citizenship through the market place.

### ***The cultural model***

At this point it is perhaps worth mentioning the cultural or post-modern theory of disability, which focuses on the social experience of impairment (Barnes, 1996b), and has found something of a middle ground between previous paradigms. Rather than viewing impairment as a defining pathology (as in the medical model), the cultural model understands disability as a naturally occurring minority variation that should be neither more nor less valued (Welterlin & Larue, 2007). Similarly, whereas the social model suggests disability might be entirely eliminated given the right societal alterations, the cultural model posits that impairment has a very real influence on peoples’ lives, but they should not be stigmatised for any assistance received (Devlieger *et al.*, 2003; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006).

A significant difference between the cultural model and previous conceptualisations of disability is that disability – both physical and learning – is seen to be, much like an identity, constructed through the complex interactions of people, places, and activities in different contexts (or cultures). As learning-disabled people move between different settings, non-disabled peoples’ perceptions of learning-disabled people change. For example, visible impairments may trigger social responses while invisible impairments may not. Goffman (1986) refers to this as the distinction between a ‘discrediting’ and ‘discreditable’ stigma. As such, it is imperative to recognise that “the different major groupings of impairments, because of their functional and presentational impacts”, have

impacts at individual, social and structural levels (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002:12). To use Dudley-Marling's (2004:484) words: in "other cultural contexts, [learning impairments] do not carry the same significance".

This idea is at odds with contemporary British, highly individualised culture where we tend to think of individuals as having essential/true identities and interpret behaviour in terms of core personality traits (Dudley-Marling, 2004). However, because identities are intelligible only within a complex web of social relations, presenting human identities outside the contexts of social relations misinterprets life (Quantz & O'connor, 1988). That is to say, a person cannot assume an identity without a cultural setting for their action to take place and for their actions to be interpreted by others. As Dudley-Marling (2004:485) has argued:

"different tasks, different sets of cultural expectations, or the failure of these various factors involved in the performance of sanctions to come together in just the right way in the right place, and at the right time could easily transform a 'smart' person into someone who is not so smart after all" (Dudley-Marling, 2004:485).

Because "people can't be shy, be smart or have [a learning disability] on their own" (Dudley-Marling, 2004:485), conceptualising someone as 'learning-disabled' is always bound to specific cultural expectations within a given setting.

As yet, however, the cultural model has had minimal impact in UK social policy relating to learning-disabled people. Rather, both the medical and social approaches continue to dominate, informing a normalisation/SRV discourse as the key theoretical approach for learning-disabled people (Yates *et al.*, 2008).

## **Learning-disabled people in the discourse of social exclusion and inclusion**

Whilst the social integration of learning-disabled people has been a priority policy issue since the community care reforms of the early 1990s, it was not until the election of New Labour in 1997 that social policies took a more holistic approach to understanding this isolation under the umbrella term of 'social exclusion' (Byrne, 2005). Originating in France towards the end of the 1970s (Cousins, 1998), the first appearances of the term 'social exclusion' in Britain in the early 1980s owes much to Peter Townsend's (1979) book 'Poverty in the United Kingdom'. Townsend (1979:31) introduced the importance of "participation in activities" and being "excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs, and activities". This suggested social isolation was the result of various interconnected cultural, personal, and societal issues, not just about absolute poverty. Since then, social exclusion

has become ubiquitous throughout Government “not only in the process of policy development, but also at the sharp end of policy implementation” (Byrne, 2005:1).

Despite its central position, however, a clear conceptualisation of social exclusion, its causes, and possible solutions, is unclear. The “diverse ideologies and interests of a pluralist world” (Stewart, 2000:1) has led to intellectual conflicts about ways of conceptualising and analysing social organisations (Byrne, 2005). This has led to practical conflicts between social justice and order, and economic and political organisations about the nature of social exclusion.

### ***The advantage of ‘social exclusion’***

The re-diagnosis of learning-disabled people’s social isolation as ‘social exclusion’ was a significant moment as it placed them under the same conceptual heading as, for example, single parents and the homeless, as another social group seeking ‘inclusion’ (Cameron, 2006). For the first time, their experiences were to be understood as not only serious and unacceptable, but as the product of inherently dynamic social processes beyond their control (Byrne, 2005). Whilst debates to tackle learning-disabled peoples’ marginalisation had previously been framed around the singular issue of disability, the concept of social exclusion more effectively recognised the complex causality of their social isolation (Bates & Davis, 2004), adding “something different” (Lister, 2000:38) to political and academic debate.

The advantage of social exclusion is its reference to:

“the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political, or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society” (Walker, 1998:8).

Thus, conceptually at least, social exclusion signalled an improvement over its predecessors in that it defined disadvantage as an outcome of social processes, rather than a personal trait (Labonte, 2004; Byrne, 2005). However, because “the term itself and the process it describes are deeply contradictory and contestable” (Byrne, 2005:1), the wide ranging nature of social exclusion has allowed various ideological positions to “shelter under its wing” (Lund, 2002:8), confusing political debate and policy responses.

Levitas (1998) outlines the three main interpretations of social exclusion: the redistribution (RED) discourse, which describes the multidimensional nature of social exclusion as part of a wider pattern of inequality; the moral underclass (MUD) discourse, which focuses “on the [distinct] behaviour of the poor rather than the structure of the whole society” (Levitas, 1998:21); and the social integrationist (SID) discourse, which “narrows the definition of social exclusion/inclusion to

participation in paid work” (Levitas, 1998:28). In mainstream political debate, social exclusion generally assumes a dichotomous model of society made up of a compromised and satisfied ‘included’ majority and a dissatisfied, ‘excluded’ minority (Spandler, 2007). However, this ignores the “chosen exclusion” (Hutton, 1996:47) of those “who can detach themselves from mainstream institutions” (Barry, 2002:17) and the means by which they maintain their power and privilege, leaving little room to take account of the conflicts and inequalities of wider society which generate and sustain exclusion (Levitas, 2004). As such, the MUD and SID discourses have become dominant as the cause and solution to social exclusion.

The notion of social exclusion has gone from being a dynamic term focusing on the processes of marginalisation into an outcome, a “condition people are in” (Fairclough, 2000:45). This can be seen in an official definition, whereby social exclusion refers to:

“what happens when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime, and family breakdown” (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001:10).

Not describing the causal processes of “what happens” (SEU, 2001:10) to excluded individuals has left this definition “spectacularly vague” (Levitas, 2004:45). Whilst the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) established forty indicators to ‘measure’ and monitor exclusion (i.e. low income, labour market exclusion, behavioural risk factors), these ‘hard outcomes’ relate only to specified forms of inclusion, principally through paid employment and involvement in the labour market (Faiers, 2004; Rankin, 2005). ‘Soft outcomes’, such as participation in the “patterns, customs, and activities” of everyday life (Townsend, 1979:31), which accurately reflect peoples lived experiences, are merely viewed as distance travelled towards government defined outcomes, rather than ends in themselves (Secker *et al.*, 2005).

### ***The cause of social exclusion – a lack of social capital***

Whilst the official definition of social exclusion includes a list of factors (such as worklessness, poor health, poor housing, a lack of qualifications) associated with exclusion, these apparent correlations should not be confused with causes (Pierson, 2010). Rather, in both theoretical and political discourses the cause of social exclusion is attributed to individuals (or groups of individuals) having less than the necessary ‘social capital’ to allow them to participate in mainstream society (Baron (Mitchell & Harrison, 2001; Baron, 2004). These ideas are prominent in both the prevailing government MUD & SID discourses (highlighting the personal failure of individuals to acquire social capital) and in the alternative RED discourse (emphasising the intergenerational hoarding of social capital by the privileged rich and powerful). The popularity of this idea lies in the elasticity of

meaning and usage of the term 'social capital'. That is to say, beyond the general consensus that social capital represents the "ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (Portes, 1998:6; Adler & Kwon, 2002; Holt, 2008), there are significant differences in application between the main theories of social capital advocated by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1995).

Bourdieu (1986:249-250) views social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources" linked to a "durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships" (i.e. membership to a group). Hence, through social capital, actors can gain access to the resources within a given situation, explaining the presence of inequality and the preservation of power and privilege (Bourdieu, 1986; Butler & Robson, 2001). Similarly, Coleman (1988) views social capital as the property of individuals, focusing on its intrinsic role in the creation of opportunities. Although he does not mention Bourdieu, Coleman (1988) stresses the conscious action of individuals in the development and use of social capital through the acquisition of educational qualifications. Unlike Bourdieu (1986), however, Coleman (1988) does not see social capital as being the presence of one class, but a more ubiquitous resource related to community based processes surrounding "family relations and...community social organisations" (Coalter, 2007:541). Coleman's analysis is particularly useful for highlighting some of the mechanisms through which social capital is generated, particularly his discussion of 'closure' (Portes, 1998). Finally, the third theory of social capital, forwarded by Putnam (1995), places less emphasis than Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) on kinship relations, closure, instrumentalism, and more or less conscious choice. He views social capital as a neutral resource belonging to collectives. Rather than being the property of privileged individuals, Putnam (1995) suggests social capital is a public good serving to bind communities together through strong social networks, social norms, civic infrastructure, mutual trust and reciprocity among members of a community. Putnam (1995) distinguishes between two types of social capital. Bonding capital, which is based on strong social ties between similar people, provides a form of sociological superglue, allowing people to 'get by' in life and which works to maintain a strong group loyalty and reinforce specific identities. Putnam acknowledges that this can represent a 'dark side' of social capital, acting to impose conformity, downward levelling norms, and excluding outsiders. Conversely, bridging capital refers to weaker social ties between different types of people. It is less of a glue and more a sociological WD40 which helps people 'get ahead' by providing extra information.

Mainly due to an apparent set of correlations between communities high in measured social capital and a number of highly desirable policy goals (i.e. low crime, good health, high educational

attainment), Putnam's (1995) more civic version of social capital has been the most influential in the emergent discourse on social exclusion. Whilst there is a degree of circularity in social capital being defined in terms of a set of characteristics which are then taken as evidence that it exists, social capital is seen "simultaneously [as] a cause and effect. It leads to positive outcomes...and its existence is inferred from the same outcomes" (Portes, 1998:19). More significantly, however, Putnam's (1995) interpretation of social capital is most sympathetic to the prevailing MUD and SID discourses of social exclusion, ensuring political focus remains on increasing the social capital and social networks of excluded individuals by "creating routes back into society and giving people a chance to integrate" into their communities (SEU, 2001:9). Engaging people in activities likely to boost their social capital is thought of as the key mechanism for tackling their exclusion (Baron, 2004). However, this ignores the fact that – in an echo of Bourdieu (1986) – social capital is becoming increasingly class specific (Warde *et al.*, 2003).

Social capital and inclusion approaches advocate the expansion of learning-disabled peoples' social networks to increase social capital. This may be extremely beneficial, contributing to quality of life, providing opportunities for social and emotional development, companionship, intellectual growth, and social support (Duck, 2007; Solish *et al.*, 2010). However, whilst Devine & Parr (2008:392) suggest the formation of "social capital in relation to inclusion of individuals with disabilities has not been examined", most learning-disabled people are likely to experience great difficulty in creating and maintaining the social networks (i.e. friends and acquaintances) that act as the basis of reciprocal relationships (Newton & Horner, 1993; Mclean *et al.*, 1996; Robertson *et al.*, 2001a; Hall & Strickett, 2002; Solish *et al.*, 2003; Orsmond *et al.*, 2004).

Relationships that produce social capital require mutual investment, enjoyment of the social interaction, a sense of belonging to a group, and the opportunity to create relationships of equal status (Bourdieu, 1986; Hewitt, 1991). This involves individuals spending time together that is not always purposeful but is mutually rewarding (Duck, 2007). Humorous verbal interactions – gossiping, small talk, jokes – assists in developing such relationships (Duck, 2007). However, for learning-disabled people with little or no formal verbal communication skills, participating in social interactions that are reliant on words are problematic (Johnson *et al.*, 2012). Limited disposable income and agency, as well as missing out on certain 'rights of passage' (i.e. going to university, getting a job or moving house) where social capital is typically built and lost (Riddell *et al.*, 2001) often inadvertently affects the ability of learning-disabled people to invest in relationships (Zetlin & Murtaugh, 1988; Johnson *et al.*, 2012).

The perceived subordinate role of learning-disabled people in society may limit the “tendency of people to attach positive values to...[learning-disabled people] in their environment and to make contact with them” (Mckittrick, 1980:18). Johnson et al (2012:336) describe interactions between learning-disabled people and those with whom they have positive relations as “sharing the moment”, in which a diversity of pleasurable non-verbal interactions dominate. Whilst social capitalists advocate that everyone can feel at home in society, the reality for many learning-disabled people is that ‘bonding’ is limited to their learning-disabled peers within day centres and ‘bridging’ exists only between day centres. As such, social acceptance of learning-disabled people is the necessary ingredient to create a climate of inclusion that goes beyond simply physical accessibility (Schwartz, 1988).

The artificial creation of ‘inclusive environments’ where learning-disabled and non-learning-disabled people are brought together in the same space are advocated as a source of social capital (Bullock & Mahon, 1997; Devine & Parr, 2008:402). ‘Officials’ are required to assist in creating bonds between people through, for example, aiding communication and encouraging strong ties (Warde *et al.*, 2005; Mansell *et al.*, 2008). Such inclusive contexts can be useful for addressing stigmas and stereotypes (Greiner, 2006) and creating ‘bridging capital’ (Lin, 2001) to bring dissimilar people together where they otherwise would not. While Putnam (2000) derides such ‘mail order’ networks, belonging to an inclusive club or association may contribute to a sense of identity and provide material for conversations with others. However, whilst inclusive environments “may camouflage society’s typical response to individuals with disabilities” (Devine & Parr, 2008:402), they are only useful for creating ‘weak social ties’ between people (Bedini, 2002; Devine, 2004), not the ‘strong ties’ learning-disabled people need to tackle their exclusion (Glover & Hemingway, 2005). There is also a danger that this generation of social capital will become context specific (Glover & Hemingway, 2005). Furthermore, the artificial nature of inclusive environments may perpetuate the idea that disabled people are only allowed to participate because others “let them” (Devine & Parr, 2008:402).

### ***Tackling social exclusion by promoting social inclusion***

The ultimate task of social exclusion policy has thus become to somehow help, cajole, or coerce those who have become socially excluded into social networks where they can access the necessary social capital to become socially included. For learning-disabled people in England the solution to this problem was laid out in ‘Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the Twentieth Century’ (DH, 2001) and in its later incarnation ‘Valuing People Now: A New Three Year Strategy for People with Intellectual Disabilities, Making It Happen for Everyone’ (DH, 2009). These represented a

bold policy initiative to hopefully move learning-disabled people towards an apparently “ordinary life” (Burton & Kagan, 2006:304).

Recognising how previous public services had “failed to make consistent progress in overcoming the social exclusion of people with learning disabilities” (DH, 2001:19), Valuing People aimed to transform the way learning-disabled people were supported, enabling them “to lead full productive lives as valued members of their communities” (DH, 2001:22). However, amidst the flurry of interest around addressing social exclusion, little consideration was given to what the experience of social inclusion would be like for learning-disabled people. As Cameron (2005:194) suggests, there was “relative silence over the meaning of social *inclusion*”. Rather, similar to other aspects of New Labour dialogue, social inclusion was presented as self-evidently desirable and unquestionable (Spandler, 2007).

Like exclusion, the notion of social inclusion is very hard to define and has many possible meanings (Spandler, 2007). Theoretically, inclusion and exclusion have a relational character (Stewart, 2000), meaning they are often used as interchangeable, unproblematic opposites. However, since the abandonment of RED discourses of social transformation in favour of “limited arguments concerning the disadvantaged situation of particular social constitutions” (Stewart, 2000:57) towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the meaning and application of ‘social exclusion’ and ‘social inclusion’ has moved away from being “diametrically opposite poles in policy working” (Spandler, 2007:3). Whilst social exclusion can, theoretically at least, be conceptualised as a complex, multidimensional problem, social inclusion has quickly been narrowed by MUD and SID discourses to individuals engaging with “a set of normative practices” around consumption, lifestyle, and identity (Cameron, 2005:400; Secker *et al.*, 2005; Burton & Kagan, 2006). As Hall (2010:51) suggests:

“The discourse of social exclusion/inclusion, which has informed all current UK social policy, has shifted to place less emphasis on the multivariate processes that cause poverty and marginalisation, and to put greater emphasis on the individual and their social engagement and activity”.

The solution to problems of excluded groups has thus been to have targeted efforts at “remedial inclusion rather than more systematic reform of economic practices predicated on inequality” (Labonte, 2004:117; Spandler, 2007).

Whilst Valuing People (DH, 2001) and Valuing People Now (DH, 2009) are undeniably positive in their intentions, both policies perpetuate aspects of modern society likely to adversely affect learning-disabled people; individualism, active citizenship, globalisation, and privatisation (Cameron, 2005; Redley, 2008; Dowse, 2009). The loudest voices have come from those whose liberatory agenda for



personal choice and control chimes with a broader global discourse of individual responsibility (Boxall *et al.*, 2009). Although these policy documents rhetorically site the values of ‘community inclusiveness’, ‘full participation’, and ‘participatory citizenship’, underpinned by New Labour’s Third Way ideology – a “soft synthesis of market forces and a reliance on community” (Levitas, 2004:43) – promoting social inclusion has come to mean providing learning-disabled people with the opportunity for active, useful, and self-reliant participation in employment, the ‘community’, and independent living (Labonte, 2004; Hall, 2010). Reflecting John Rawls’ (1971) idea that an ‘inclusive’ society is one in which there is a fair and equal distribution of opportunities (Gray, 2000; Lister, 2000; Barnes & Mercer, 2006; Wilson, 2006), Valuing People (VP, 2001) and Valuing People Now (DH, 2009:11) seek to enable learning-disabled people to “lead their lives like any others with the same opportunities and responsibilities, and to be treated with the same dignity and respect”. The implication being that those who fail to grasp “the same opportunities as others” (Executive, 2000:IV) are largely to blame for their own exclusion (Christie & Mensah-Coker, 1999). However, this ignores the fact that many learning-disabled people are less likely to possess the social and cognitive skills required to meet “the needs of the market” (Quiggan, 2001; Labonte, 2004:119; Burton & Kagan, 2006). Such policies may look very different if they were based on, for example, Sen’s (2004) Capability Framework, in which case they would have to be considered not only the equality of opportunities, but people’s ability to seize opportunities.

Into debates about social justice and social wellbeing, Amartya Sen has introduced the notion of ‘capabilities’, or “the alternative combination of things a person is able to do or be” (Sen, 1993:30). The Capability Framework posits that each individual has a ‘capability set’ consisting of everything they are able to do or be – their “doings and beings” (Sen, 1993:31) – known as their ‘functionings’. Whether or not the functionings in one’s capability set can be achieved depends on the individual possessing the appropriate knowledge and skills – and for external factors to be such – to do so. That is to say one, one can, for example, only attend a live football match (the capability) if one knows when matches take place, has money for a ticket, and can travel to and access the stadium (functionings).

Being concerned with the ability to live well across all spheres of life, the Capability Framework avoids the pitfalls of other theories of social justice and inequality that are too concerned with material wealth or mental states (Clark, 2005). For example, the Capability Framework challenges the assertions of utilitarianism and other income based ideas that a person controls factors of production. Instead, assessing advantage/disadvantage in terms of one’s “ability to achieve various valuable functionings as part of living” (Sen, 1993:30). As Clark (2005:1340) suggests, the Capability

Framework accommodates both “material and mental aspects of development...which are not covered by opulence or utility inspired frameworks”. Rejecting the importance of goods or outcomes themselves, the Capability Framework provides a scaffold to analyse inequality as a result of personal, social, economic, and environmental barriers (Burchardt, 2004), with the ideal outcome being “basic capability equality” (Sen, 1980:218).

The Capability Framework is particularly useful for analysing the experience of both physically and learning-disabled people because of the similarities it shares with the social model of disability. Burchardt (2004) suggests that the two theories are complementary when it comes to conceptualising the disadvantages associated with disability as a result of social, economic, and environmental barriers to equality. She argues:

“The capabilities framework provides a more general theoretical framework in which to locate the social model of disability; the social model of disability provides a thorough-going application of the capabilities framework” (Burchardt, 2004:736).

This view is shared by Vorhaus (2013) who suggests that in revealing the “social, economic and political features of disabled people’s lives to which any theory of justice should be responsive” (Vorhaus, 2013:2), the Capability Framework amounts to a “substantial advance in thinking about an egalitarian assessment of disability” (Vorhaus, 2013:3).

Such a close relationship does, however, open the Capability Framework up to the same criticisms as those directed at the social model; principally the unrealistic conclusion that if one’s capability set were enhanced indefinitely one might eradicate learning disability. However, ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’ are best employed to assist in understanding the distinction between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’. This is because the availability of suitable resources will help determine whether impairment (restricted functioning) amounts to disability (restricted capability) (Terzi, 2010a). Sharma (2005:130) suggests that the “hallmark of the [Capability Framework] is its focus on the capabilities or real opportunities that people have in their lives”. Learning-disabled people are typically disadvantaged because their capabilities are stunted due to physical, mental or social limitations imposed by their impairments (Sharma, 2005). However, impaired functioning does not necessarily have to be the cause of limited capability – that depends on how the environment is designed to accommodate impairment (Terzi, 2010b). Burchardt (2004) also underlines the social causes, specifically discrimination, as a barrier to equality of capability for learning-disabled people:

“The conditions in which people live are critical in expanding or constraining their capabilities, and these conditions include social characteristics like discrimination as well as material circumstances” (Burchardt, 2004:744-745).

Within the Capabilities Framework, impairment is seen as “one characteristic among many which interacts with the physical environment” to produce a particular form of “capability-poverty” (Burchardt, 2004:746). Learning-disabled people are therefore understood to experience particular ‘conversion handicaps’ that go beyond purely financial considerations. Conversion handicap refers to the disadvantage that disabled people have in converting money into a good living.

However, there are at least two weaknesses to the Capability Framework as it is currently understood in relation to disability. Firstly, being concerned with opportunities or freedoms to choose between possible lifestyles (i.e. capabilities), the Capability Framework is not entirely suited to reflecting the significance of dependency (Vorhaus, 2013). Sen (1985:10) originally conceptualised ‘functionings’ as “what a person succeeds in doing with the commodities... at his or her disposal”. This terminology does not reflect the nature of “human states considered separately from their relationship to activity or choice” (Vorhaus, 2013:6). That is to say, many people with profound or complex impairments do not ‘act’ on resources but still derive benefit from them. For example, a severely disabled person might not feed themselves but still gains a nutritional benefit from food. Whilst Sen (1993:31) has more recently offered a broader interpretation of functionings to include “doings *and* being” (emphasis added), because we are all dependent on others at some point in our lives, it is still questionable how goods are utilised when unrelated to agency (Vorhaus, 2013).

The second potential criticism of the Capability Framework concerns the notion of certain functionings being “valuable” as part of living (Sen, 1993:30). Whilst the Capability Framework has a broad informational base, Sen does not provide a substantial list or taxonomy of ‘valuable functionings’ (Clark, 2005). This is a deliberate act on Sen’s part in order to render the Capability Framework as an “objective, normative account of human functioning” devoid of value judgements (Nussbaum, 1988:176). However, this open-endedness is also the Capability Framework’s “Achilles heel”, as it is not always clear how capabilities, functionings, and utility should be classified when there is considerable overlap (Qizilbash, 1998:54). From a practical standpoint, being able to effectively evaluate wellbeing and develop and guide policy thinking requires a more extensive list of ‘valuable functionings’. Identifying valuable functionings and capabilities through fieldwork – what Clark (2005) calls ‘empirical philosophy’ – should cast light on the constituent elements of well-being in specific settings and provide useful insights to develop and refine the Capability Framework (Clark, 2005).

Most inclusion policies currently fall prey to a certain ‘romanticism’ about the nature of disabilities (Abberley, 2002; Burton & Kagan, 2006; Shakespeare, 2006). For example, a key feature of Valuing People (2001) and Valuing People Now (2009) is person-centred planning (PCP), which aims to use

Individual Budgets to counter the standardised responses of service providers (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003). Despite questions being raised about the cost-effectiveness and the success of Individual Budgets (Glendinning *et al.*, 2008), and the effectiveness of giving people more choice/control over money (Abbott & Marriott, 2012), there is an unreserved commitment to Individual Budgets as the way forward for social care in England (Beresford, 2008).

Valuing People's (DH, 2001) key principles of rights, choice, independence and inclusion have been linked to the "utopian vision" of normalisation/SRV, which "sees people making choices about activities in pleasant neighbourhoods with plentiful community resources" (Burton & Kagan, 2006:305). However, the fundamental basis on which learning-disabled people are meant to be 'included' requires individuals to conform to mainstream notions of normality, through, for example, appearance, behaviour, and location (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1983; Hall, 2004); something that is challenging for most learning-disabled people, and impossible for many (Walmsley, 2001; Bates & Davis, 2004; Macintyre, 2008; Parr, 2008). As Barnes (1999:18) points out: expecting people with "'severe' or multiple and complex impairments to be as productive as non-disabled peers is one of the most oppressive aspects of modern society". The reality for many learning-disabled people is that 'normality' involves the risk of discrimination, abuse, intolerance, and more subtle forms of personal exclusion (Reid & Bray, 1998; Clement, 2006). This has led Bates & Davis (2004:198) to remark that "bringing people back home demands more than the relocating of their beds".

The inappropriateness of this inclusion criteria means that, despite an increased spatial presence (Bunning & Horton, 2007), learning-disabled people remain largely invisible in contemporary communities, 80-90% remain unemployed (Labour Force, 2007), and continually face experiential barriers to inclusion (Harrison & Berry, 2006; Macintyre, 2008). While some learning-disabled people have been 'successful' – secured employment, live independently, and engage with their local community – this has not necessarily alleviated their exclusion (Macintyre, 2008). While being in full employment, for example, is "spatial and economic inclusion...it also includes the 'normality' of discrimination, abuse, and social isolation" (Hall, 2004:303). The embedding of market principles in almost every aspect of life has meant that, for learning-disabled people whose cultural, social, and political status is often embedded with an assumption of cognitive incapacity, feelings of exclusion in mainstream locations are an ongoing occurrence (Dowse, 2009).

Despite living in the community, learning-disabled people remain likely to be absent from mainstream social networks (Pinfold, 2000) – particularly from intimate social and interpersonal relationships (O'brien, 2001; Bray & Gates, 2003; Emerson & Mcvilly, 2004; Hall, 2004) – restricted to smaller interpersonal networks with limited exposure to new people and places (Milner & Kelly,

2009). Schelly (2008), for example, notes how the participants in her ethnography are not integrated into the community just through being physically present. The 'community' tends to be experienced as fleeting and irregular visits to public amenities (i.e. shops), which leaves little time for others to see beyond impairment and to be assimilated with the social history of mainstream community settings (Milner & Kelly, 2009).

When opportunities arise to leave the daily routine, community participation often involves a migration away from known and validated places to spaces in which individuals have less cultural knowledge and expertise (Milner & Kelly, 2009). It is not surprising then that learning-disabled people can be unprepared for or daunted by entering such spaces (Milner & Kelly, 2009; Hall, 2004). A lack of self-confidence coupled with historical experiences of 'othering', where others do not value or expect a contribution to the well-being of the community, can often limit the experience of belonging within mainstream community (Milner & Kelly, 2009). Negative encounters – such as swearing, smoking, or threatening behaviour – results in learning-disabled people building up off-putting perceptions and an unwillingness to return to a particular social space, further entrenching their exclusion (Mathers, 2008).

Privileging location over other indicators of inclusion may represent a potentially oppressive denial of the reality of the lives of learning-disabled people (Milner & Kelly, 2009). Seeing community as experiential, however, and therefore augmenting utilitarian quantitative indicators of inclusion with qualitative understandings of relationships is perhaps a more useful way of understanding learning-disabled people's social exclusion/inclusion. Milner & Kelly (2009) suggest that when learning-disabled people spoke about where they experienced a sense of inclusion what mattered most was not where but how they participated. Positive inclusive experiences included self determination, establishment of positive social identities, reciprocal and valued contributions, the expectation of participation, and psychological safety. Being in a place shared with disabled peers, where bodily difference and support needs were unremarkable and anticipated added to people's sense of inclusion (Wilson, 2006; Milner & Kelly, 2009). Although the use of verbal humour is possibly not as prevalent in interactions between learning-disabled people as it is in their interactions with family/support workers, a characteristic of these relationships is "hanging out together" (Johnson *et al.*, 2012:338).

Instead of 'social inclusion', it is perhaps more appropriate to consider the notion of 'belonging' when considering "what people with intellectual disabilities want from their spaces of support and care and...how they can relate to and find a place within society" (Hall, 2010:52). 'Belonging' describes the feeling of being accepted or in identifying with others in a particular social group:

“The knowledge that he/she belongs to a certain social group with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership” (Tajfel, 1982:31).

The “need to belong” and to be “accepted by one’s fellow human beings” is one of the most pervasive and powerful emotions “outside those directly related to biological function” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995:96). ‘Belonging’ is the currency within social relationships with our fellow human beings, family, friends, community and society (Miller, 2006). Belonging is taken to have certain positive consequences concerning the establishment of shared identities and in the positive experiences derived from being so connected or identified (Miller, 2006).

There are numerous theories about the causes or necessary conditions for belonging to occur. Maslow’s (1968), for example, suggests belonging requires (1) the fulfilment of the desire to have frequent, pleasant or neutral interaction with others and (2) for the person to believe others have positive feeling about them and care about their welfare. Tonnie’s (1974) argues that four factors – acquaintanceship, sympathy, confidence and dependence – distinguish the majority of society from those we feel a sense of belonging towards. Tajfel’s (1981; 1982) Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests individuals achieve a sense of belonging after experiencing group categorization, group identification, group comparison, and group distinctiveness. The body as a tool for self presentation, and the way individuals are perceived by others, is therefore of crucial importance to becoming accepted and belonging.

Historically, belonging is not something many learning-disabled people have historically been able to experience in mainstream society. The historical-cultural starting point for learning-disabled people is that they are considered “in varying degrees ‘other’...beyond the bounds of normal society according to some narrower definition of normality” (Sibley, 1995:61). Such ‘otherness’ has been expressed in the discrimination and physical segregation of learning-disabled people into, for example, long-stay hospitals and day centres, demarcating the boundaries of society “beyond which lie those who do not belong” (Sibley, 1995:4). Where learning-disabled people have been unable to seek out the dominant routes through which a sense of ‘we’ can be negotiated, such as employment and independent living, and denied opportunities to compare themselves favourably to other groups, a large number have responded by seeking out alternative spaces in which to experience ‘belonging’ (Hall, 2010; Hall & Wilton, 2011).

Hall (2010:56) tentatively points to the examples of the ‘Lung Ha’ theatre company and the ‘Garvald’ gardening project as spaces in which the learning-disabled participants attained the “feeling and status of belonging”. This resonates with Parr’s (2008) analysis of arts and gardening

projects as places in which people with mental ill-health – another socially excluded and stigmatised group – are able to experience friendship and communal support. In both examples, participants found acceptance within learning disability or mental ill-health exclusive spaces, separated from ‘mainstream’ society. This is seen as crucial to the groups’ success at creating a supportive, safe and non-judgemental environment (Hall, 2010). While ‘Valuing People’ and ‘Valuing People Now’ deride such practises as isolating, exclusionary, and denying citizenship access to learning-disabled people (Burton & Kagan, 2006; Milner & Kelly, 2009), the value of such places is their ability to satisfy a need for being within a mainstream location, but also with some separateness, privacy, and exclusivity (Parr, 2000; Hall, 2004; 2005). Parr (2000) classifies such spaces as ‘semi-institutional’ because they lie in-between the segregated locations of the asylum and the ‘integrated’ sites of the community. This is not ‘social inclusion’ to fulfil the standard criteria, but rather “inclusion within particular spaces and groupings, where [learning-disabled people are] valued and celebrated” (Hall, 2010:55).

Many learning-disabled people are, however, acutely aware that public spaces are the ‘correct’ location for community participation and that involvement with other learning-disabled people implies a less valued form of community connection (Milner & Kelly, 2009). As such, “to identify and promote routes to inclusion for people and groups who sense that they do not belong within certain social spaces is hugely problematic” for social policy makers (Hall, 2010:53). Another potential issue is that whilst these semi-institutional spaces – the environment and arts projects – provide a therapeutic benefit and generate feelings of in-group belonging, they are seemingly in tension with wider social expectations to be socially active and useful (Parr, 2008). The potential to ‘belong’ to wider society would therefore appear to be much more limited. Hall (2010:54) suggests that through the production of socially valued art and theatrical ‘work’ the theatre is seen as an “acceptable route to becoming a ‘pretty’ active citizen”. Participation either diverts attention away from the discrimination and abjection often experienced by learning-disabled people in mainstream spaces, through high production values which ensure the participants are seen as actors first, and/or broadens out the concept of social inclusion away from just paid employment, independent living, and community participation. However, compared to theatre, it remains to be seen whether other activities less “valued...by the dominant middle classes” contain the same potential for belonging (Hall, 2010:45).

## **Leisure and sport to tackling social exclusion**

Over the past fifteen years the activities that people do in their leisure time, such as sport, have become a supposedly powerful medium for achieving social inclusion, cultural diversity and social cohesion targets (Woodward, 2007; Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009). Following the publication of

Bringing Britain Together (Seu, 1998), the Social Exclusion Units' Policy Action Team 10 (PAT 10), underpinned by the research of Collins et al (1999), concluded that sport (and the arts) could contribute to "neighbourhood renewal by improving communities 'performance' on four key indicators- health, crime, employment and education" (DCMS, Sport, 1999:22). Assuming that sport and other cultural activities "appeal directly to individuals' interests and they relate to community identity and encourage collective effort" (Pat10, 1999:8) the discourse that such leisure pursuits can "make a real difference to health, crime, employment, and education in deprived areas" (Pat10, 1999:5) has developed.

Published in 2000 'A Sporting Future for All' stressed the instrumental dimensions of sport, aiming to "ensure that every member of society is offered opportunities and encouragement to play, lead, and manage sport" (DCMS, 2000:7). Following in 2002, 'Game Plan: A Strategy for Delivering Government's Sport and Physical Activity Objectives' (DCMS, 2002) focused on the potential of sport to improve health, help community cohesion, combat social exclusion, aid substantial physical and economic development, and promote lifelong learning. This document moved sports policy away from sport-for-sport-sake and towards the use of sporting activity, and it's supposed intrinsic good values, as a tool to solve societal problems. Whilst an ideology of welfarism has always been evident in some form within the rhetoric of Sport for All, Action Sport, and selected local sports schemes (Bairner, 2001), the New Labour government moved it into the foreground of policy debate, making explicit the theorised link between sport, social capital, and social exclusion. Similar statements have since flowed from politicians, government departments (Cabinet Office, 2000; SEU, 2000), the sports councils (Sportscotland, 1999; Sport England, 2000) and other agencies (The FA, 2001a). Likewise, sport has been embraced internationally as a panacea for social issues. The opening statements of the Dutch sports policy 'Time for Sport: Moving, Participating, and Achieving' (Dutch Ministry of Health, 2005), for example, states:

"The cabinet supports sport primarily because it promotes social values. Because of its social function, sport is a highly desirable and effective way of achieving key government objectives".

The general argument put forward in these policies is that participation in sport and cultural activities creates social connections between people that, in turn, build trust within a community, thereby helping to establish the foundation for an active and engaged citizenry likely to serve broader community interests (Perks, 2007; Waring & Mason, 2010).

This emergent view of such leisure activities stems from the social capitalist ideas of Robert Putnam and his book 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital' (1995), which influenced the belief



that sport fosters a value exchange between social groups (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). Putnam (1995) lamented the decline in community engagement and in cooperative sporting activities in the United States since the Second World War. He suggested that as people bowled alone, for example, the face-to-face interactions necessary for building communities dissolved and stocks of social capital have evaporated. Putnam's (2000) concept of 'social capital' has become the cornerstone of policies on sport and social issues (Blackshaw & Long, 2005; Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009), and the man himself has become the "patron saint" of those who want to use sport to "rebuild the post modern world's dwindling supplies of social capital" (Dyreson, 2001:20).

Whilst these supposed social values of sport continue to be affirmed in government dialogue and policies, research is rather undecided about the social benefits of sport and cultural participation (Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009; Coalter, 2007). There remains a need for an objective consideration of the empirical basis of such claims (Bailey, 2005). But because many practitioners regard the monitoring of performance unnecessary this has been difficult to implement (Coalter, 2001). Initial research suggests that in terms of Putnam's (1995) wider civic effects, sports participation has limited impact (Coalter, 2007; Perks, 2007).

Stebbins' (1997; 1999) distinction between 'casual' and 'serious' leisure suggests that the social benefits of sport are dependent on the level of individual involvement. On the one hand, engaging in casual leisure activities may be problematic for achieving social goals because it typically involves consumptive and non-productive activities, including 'hanging around', drinking and smoking. Conversely, engaging in serious leisure is seen as productive in enabling individuals to develop a sense of career and personal relationships with others in their chosen activities. Jones (2000) identifies football fandom as a case of serious leisure based on the six characteristics described by Stebbins (1999): perseverance throughout the activity, development of a long-term career, investment of significant personal effort, achievement of 'self-benefits', existence of a unique ethos within the activity and participants' strong identification with their leisure activity. In this sense, leisure time is not free time, but a specific form of informal labour. It is the paramount setting for developing the prized people skills for the labour market and social networks (Rojek, 2010). As such, when sports policies speak of involvement in sport, it is perhaps serious leisure as "a vehicle for the cultural and moral reaffirmation of communities as places in which the individual reorganises relations of belonging" (Rojek, 2000:18) that they are referencing.

While stressing the advantages of becoming involved in sport, Game Plan (DCMS, 2002) has failed to recognise the dysfunctional social energies which sports participation also produces: misogynist, racist, anti-social posturing (Dyreson, 2001); violence and hostility to outsiders (Tonts, 2005); social

division (Smith & Ingham, 2003) and inequalities (Dyreson, 2001; Perks, 2007). Pollit (1996) attacks the very core of this social capital-through-sport theory by remembering the bowling leagues, which Putnam (1995) so idealised and desired to restore, as male tribal rituals.

Although such policy ideas help us depart from the singular conceptualisation of “social inclusion through employment approach” (Williams & Windebank, 2000:16), the one-sided picture painted by proponents of the social value of sport fails to recognise that one can make lasting enemies as well as lasting friends (Collins & Buller, 2003; Wagg, 2004; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Elling & Knoppers, 2005). Rather than viewing the connections formed through sports participation as “a tiny investment in social capital” (Putnam, 2000:93), there is a need to explore the “various social mechanisms within various types of sports clubs which might give rise to various aspects of social capital” (Coalter, 2007:551).

### ***Leisure and sport to tackle the exclusion of learning-disabled people***

The evidence for the potential of sport and cultural activities to address social exclusion is particularly underwhelming with regard to the experiences of learning-disabled people. Whilst many sport policies advocate the personal benefits to be gained from increased participation, and that increased leisure participation can be an effective marker on the course to achieving social inclusion (Duvdevany & Arar, 2004; Grandisson *et al.*, 2012), there is little substantiated evidence of the sense of inclusion sport can provide (Colley & Hodgkinson, 2001; Tacon, 2007).

Although popularly perceived as free time, leisure choices are often widely constrained and socially patterned for learning-disabled people. Contrary to popular belief – essentially because domestic and personal tasks take longer to complete – learning-disabled people typically have less leisure time than their non-disabled compatriots. As such, there exists a tendency to engage in more passive and solitary activities not requiring social interaction (i.e. watching television) (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005), and fewer casual social activities (Orsmond *et al.*, 2004). When learning-disabled people do take part in leisure activity it is typically with immediate/extended family (Modell *et al.*, 1997; Buttimer & Tierney, 2005). Social support is an important aspect of leisure activity for learning-disabled people (Frey *et al.*, 2005), with family, carers, and other learning-disabled peers the three groups most likely to provide support (Robertson *et al.*, 2001b). However, a dependence on this support means learning-disabled peoples’ leisure participation is often dictated by others (Messent *et al.*, 1999; Heller *et al.*, 2002).

The aim of disability sport and leisure policy is to enable learning-disabled people to engage in more leisure activities by opening up access through, for example, the Disability Discrimination Act (1995).

Within recent sport policy, however, there appears to be little reference to empirical research on reasons for barriers to participation for learning-disabled people (Allender *et al.*, 2006). The simplistic 'open access' approach overlooks the vitally important distinction between necessary conditions (for participation) and sufficient conditions (under which the outcomes are achieved) (Bailey, 2005). Comparatively, whilst extra provisions are provided for learning-disabled people to attend work, the same provision is not made for leisure time (Barnes & Mercer, 2003).

Rather than assuming that if provided with facilities individuals will choose to participate, successfully raising participation has generally required engaging excluded groups in intensive, targeted outreach work (Coalter, 2007). As Waring & Mason (2010:527) suggest:

"It is necessary to seek to ensure that increased opportunities to participate offered to previously excluded groups are also occupied by strategies which seek to address multi-faceted barriers to participation".

This point was recognised in the original PAT 10 (1999:5) report, which suggested arts and sports bodies that receive public funding should "work actively to engage those who have been excluded in the past". "Arts and sports bodies should acknowledge that social inclusion is part of their business" (Pat10, 1999:5). However, because people with severe impairments require more financial, structural, and cultural investment, compared to other excluded groups, they are less likely to be the recipients of sustained inclusion efforts (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). Whilst the contemporary trend for commodification of sport and leisure time (Martin & Mason, 1998; Kirk, 2002) means learning-disabled people could buy access, they are one of the groups most likely to be hit hardest by the costs of participating (Collins, 2004). Unless more attention is paid to the multifaceted barriers affecting participation, it is no surprise that the effectiveness of current individual approaches to promote the greater leisure activity among learning-disabled people remains limited (Allender *et al.*, 2006).

Bedini (2002) and Jones (2003/2004) suggest that barriers to inclusion for learning-disabled people mostly lie in the social/psychological aspects, rather any barriers in the built environment. A lack of general understanding about impairments has led to impairment becoming the dominant social identity of disabled individuals (Hogan, 1999). Although absolute and complete exclusion of specific groups from sports participation is now illegal, implicit and explicit stereotypical images, and material and cultural social inequalities continue to exist (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). Schelly (2008:723) clearly identifies some of the apprehensions of entering into a mainstream leisure activity for learning-disabled people.

“Some nights at the pub I feel guilty for allowing him to be exposed to a crowd of sometimes intolerant drunkards. In these cases SW seems awkward, out of place, and anything but integrated. Other nights I am able to socialise with my friends and allow SW to walk around the bar independently. These nights he fits in with the crowd so effectively that strangers are surprised to learn of his disability”.

Valuing People (DH, 2001) and Valuing People Now (DH, 2009) have thus sought to encourage inclusive leisure settings where individuals with/without disabilities can engage in leisure behaviour together and enjoy the positive physical, cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes of recreational participation (Schleien *et al.*, 1994). Results suggest that whilst individuals with disabilities “must prove they have desirable resources to gain access to the existing social structure” (Devine & Parr, 2008:395), community based leisure experiences yield opportunities for disabled people to successfully cope with social stigma and engage in positive interactions with non-disabled people (Tripp *et al.*, 1995; Wilhite *et al.*, 1999). However, this appears to only be the case within structured, reciprocal environments where rights are respected. Informal and physically competitive environments produce more negative/paternalistic feelings (Devine & Wilhite, 1999). Whitehouse & Chamberlain (2001) suggest that in order for learning-disabled people to create friendships the physical opportunity to meet people in a supportive environment is much more important than the severity of impairment and how socially skilled one might be. These studies indicate that for disabled people positive outcomes are associated with inclusive leisure where: a) individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to exercise choice and autonomy; b) active participation and empowerment is fostered, and; c) personal goals can be attained.

Hall (2010) highlights the example of an inclusive art project in generating a possible ‘bonding’ form of social capital between learning impaired and non-learning impaired participants. For the learning-disabled people taking part, these activities engendered a sense of inclusion within the cultural network of the theatre group and an opportunity to be seen first and foremost as an actor. Such inclusive leisure settings are spaces within which people can attain a feeling of belonging, without being exposed to the rigours associated with ‘normal’ social inclusionary positions (Hall, 2004). However, whilst participants in such activities have irregular opportunities for inclusion in wider cultural spaces (i.e. when visiting other theatre groups), such inclusion is often limited to those specific contexts (Parr, 2008). Hall (2010:56) argues that only through learning-disabled people continuously taking part in “active processes of insidership and proximity...that the deeply-set structures of society might be gradually dismantled”. As such, although the development of inclusion to wider society is more limited, the exclusion of learning-disabled people can be contested and redrawn through the activities of such community leisure projects (Hall, 2010).

## **The role of football fandom in tackling exclusion for learning-disabled people**

As one of the most popular sports in Britain, football has been at the forefront of the drive to use sport to tackle the social exclusion of learning-disabled people. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a discourse emerged promoting diversity, inclusion and cohesion through football (Elling & Claringbould, 2005), with professional football clubs in Britain under increasing pressure to “create opportunities at all levels for anyone with a disability to get involved in football- whether as a player, referee, administrator, coach or spectator” (The FA, 2010b). The reason for this prominence lay in the supposedly specific features, histories and genealogies of football clubs within highly visible spaces with the potential for political transformation (Woodward, 2007). However, despite football’s popularity extending to communities less accessible through traditional political means (Wagg, 2004), there is little evidence to substantiate the claims of football based inclusion policies (Tacon, 2007). More specifically, whilst some health and social benefits have been established for (non-learning-disabled people) playing football (Collins & Buller, 2003), there is no evidence concerning the social inclusion benefits of fandom for learning-disabled people.

Within individual football clubs, the deliverance of inclusion-through-football policies is typically the responsibility of Football in the Community (FITC) departments (Wagg, 2004). However, although the language of diversity and inclusion is increasingly voluble within these strategies, as the “mechanisms of diversity have become routine” these departments have come to focus mainly on race and ethnic diversity issues (Joppke, 2004; Woodward, 2007:278). As a result, other social projects are often only rudimentary.

A singular focus on removing physical barriers in order for football clubs to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Equality Act (2010) has resulted in the wider social barriers and implicit discrimination faced by learning-disabled people going unchecked by football clubs (Allender *et al.*, 2006). The National Association of Disabled Supporters (NADS) – now called A Level Playing Field – and the learning-disability charity Mencap have produced ‘A Level Playing Field’ (Mencap & Nads, 2008), outlining how sports venues might be made more accessible to learning-disabled people. However, this is only an advisory document and not enforced by The Football Association. Considering that private sports organisations (such as football clubs) are often disinterested in actively contributing to broader social inclusion goals (Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009), it is questionable how many professional football clubs have adopted the recommendations of ‘A Level Playing Field’. This raises questions about what opportunities are available for learning-disabled people as football fans.

The assumption within, for example, the 'Disability Football Strategy: 2004-2006' (The FA, 2004) and 'Football for All' (The FA, 2006) is that becoming football fans will enable learning-disabled people to integrate into the existing community of established fans and expand their social networks and social capital. However, this inappropriately assumes that football fans are a homogenous group, overlooking the various behaviours, attitudes, and sub-cultures that exist in contemporary football fandom. These policies also neglect the logistical and inter-personal difficulties experienced by many learning-disabled people entering mainstream leisure settings (Solish *et al.*, 2003).

### ***Are football fans a homogenous group?***

A simplistic definition of a fan, as "a regular supporter of a professional sports team", has been derived from the word 'fanatic', meaning "a person filled with excessive and mistaken enthusiasm" in a subject (Brown, 1993:914). However, football fans are not a homogenous group. This definition, therefore, has limited application as it is too rigid and lacks suitable depth.

Fandom has provided the sociology of sport with a major topic for empirical research, with numerous articles and books devoted to the different fan cultures of British football (Taylor, 1971a; 1971b; Dunning *et al.*, 1988; 1991; Giulianotti, 1991; Finn, 1994; Giulianotti *et al.*, 1994; Giulianotti & Williams, 1994; Giulianotti, 1995a; Taylor, 1995; Dunning *et al.*, 2002; Giulianotti, 2002; King, 2002; Crabbe & Brown, 2004; Giulianotti, 2005; Weed, 2006; 2007). This has included: subcultures of violence, hooliganism, systems of social control, cultural politics, resistance and popular empowerment, demographic composition and the construction of taste communities, forms of gender, national identity, and media representation. This field of study has, however, been criticised for being overly concerned with 'exceptional fans' – specifically football hooligans – ignoring "the actual patterns of sociability" amongst other fans (Giulianotti, 2005:289; Sandvoss, 2005; Horne, 2006; Schimmel *et al.*, 2007) and overlooking "those who do not regularly attend 'live' sport" (Crawford, 2004:105). To date no research has concerned itself with the experiences of learning-disabled football fans.

None the less, an aspect of football fandom consistent in the literature is its role as a source of personal and social identity – as a highly vibrant area for developing the desired image one wishes to portray in a given situation (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006). Wann *et al* (2003:407) discuss the identification people feel towards sports teams, particularly toward football clubs, as "a strong sense of psychological connection to a team...a central component of their self-identity". As well as being an important source of self-identity football clubs have been regarded as sites "for the expression of common identity for much of the games history" (Brown *et al.*, 2008:303). Football clubs embody

collective symbols of identification for a large number of people and express processes of connectivity associated with community (Brown *et al.*, 2008; Mellor, 2008).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the development of professional clubs from labour unions, workhouses and factories, football fandom provided an opportunity for working class males to demonstrate local solidarity and express and re-affirm masculine social identities that had been undermined by the civilising process after the industrial revolution (Stone, 2007). Developing at a time of rapid urbanization, football clubs provided sites where local people could 'know themselves', learn (male) social norms (Holt, 1989), as well as enhancing "the cultural bonding and integration of disparate individuals within modern society" (Giulianotti, 1999:14). This led to the entrenchment of functionalist ideas about the relationship between football clubs and their 'community' of fans drawn from the immediate geographical area (Brown *et al.*, 2008). The suggestion within contemporary football inclusion strategies that fandom will offer learning-disabled people opportunities to integrate into a pre-existing social networks fits very closely with this traditional conceptualisation of football fans as a single, homogenous group drawn from the immediate vicinity, making weekly pilgrimages to football stadia in order to enact their 'authentic', passionate, and audible displays of allegiance.

In recent years, however, there has been a significant and well documented re-alignment of football's social configurations (Crabbe, 2008), which has seen the previously white, working-class, male bedrock of football fandom become marginalised by a more diverse, middle-class, family orientated body (Armstrong & Young, 1999; Martin, 2007). This has been achieved through processes of gentrification, feminisation and commodification, the sterilisation of the atmosphere at English football stadia (Armstrong, 1998), a pacification of supporters (Joern, 2009), and a general rejection of the notion of 'the peoples' game' in favour of embracing liberal economies and maximising profits. Extraordinary financial investment since the 1980s, for example, has resulted in a "cultural revolution within football" (Giulianotti, 2002; Williams, 2006:98), as football clubs adopt new corporate images as leisure companies, not just sports teams (Giulianotti, 2005). Subsequently, the relationship between fans and clubs has changed from an emotional and cultural link to an economic one, making fans behave more like consumers (Giulianotti, 2005; Oppenhuizen & Van Zooman, 2006).

Compared to "traditional fans" who held an identity of "club member" rooted in the unbreakable reciprocal relationship between fan and club (Cricher, 1979b:170), newly emerged 'consumers' use clubs relatively more instrumentally to bestow the greatest personal benefit. Alt's (1983:100) analysis of North American sports similarly suggests that commodification (in this case, the rise of

televised sport) has “dissolved” local team identification, such that North American sports viewers “shop around the franchise marketplace for that team which embodies the necessary winning traits”. The old rituals that served to bind sports fans to their club and community have been replaced by the mass consumption of televised, market driven sport. However, many longstanding fans, critical of modern football’s modernisation and commodification, reject their redefinition by marketing people as consumers (Giulianotti, 2007). For those fans, such a utilitarian definition misapprehends fundamentally their football identities as both the ‘heart’ and ‘opposition’ of the club they follow (Crabbe & Brown, 2004).

Whilst much of the literature laments these recent changes to fan culture, these developments have been positive for those people previously excluded from football fandom. Although ‘traditional’ fans have become less common in stadia because of rising costs (Crabbe & Brown, 2004), contemporary football culture has become increasingly characterised by equality (Williams, 2006). Compared to the almost exclusively working class, white, male fan cultures that existed prior to the 1990s, football fandom in a hypercommodified age is open to all races, sexes, disabilities, sexual orientations, and ages – as long as they can pay. Penny & Redhead (2009), for example, have shown how, despite protest from more traditional fans about the lack of atmosphere in the City of Manchester Stadium, ‘other’ Manchester City fans have championed the new safe, enjoyable and accessible facility. Wheelchair users, for example, have been integrated as part of the crowd rather than separated from the atmosphere as is normally the case in football stadia.

Although there have undoubtedly been changes to the consumption of football, there are also many continuities from previous generations (Nash, 2000; Crabbe & Brown, 2004; Stone, 2007). As Robson (2000:X) suggests, football fandom remains:

“The practical medium par excellence of the continuing expression and celebration of the core practises and concerns of embodied masculinity in a specifically working class variant.”

Despite being sold as a commodity, football fandom is different from purchasing other pre-packaged commodities (i.e. going to the cinema) in that its meaningfulness still depends on the active participation of consumers whose presence helps to create the commodity as the contest unfolds. And so, whilst Crawford (2004:4) suggests “being a fan is primarily a consumer act and, hence, fans can be seen first and foremost, as consumers”, for many football fandom remains a “collective enterprise” that offers a “complex communal identity...to thousands of young men [and women]” which defines ‘us’ against ‘them’ whose defeat is priority, and is displayed through collective expression of social and cultural identity (Armstrong & Young, 1999:175-176).



Giulianotti (2002) provides perhaps the most complete theorisation of contemporary British football fandom. Whilst numerous other authors have put a great deal of time and effort into researching, describing and analysing football fans in Britain, they have typically focused on individual enclaves of fans – either ‘traditional’ fans and their responses to a changing football landscape (e.g. Fawbert, 2004; Oppenheim & Van Zooman, 2006; Stone, 2007; Weed, 2007; Blackshaw, 2008; Brown, 2008; Weed, 2008; Fawbert, 2011a) or newly emerging groups of fans (e.g. Ben-Porat, 2009; Fawbert, 2011b). Conversely, Giulianotti (2002) provides a theoretical framework for understanding, more generally, the motivations and behaviours of football fans.

Based on peoples’ identity as football fans and their relationships to specific clubs, Giulianotti (2002) proposes four archetypal categories into which contemporary fans may be classified : *Supporters*, *Followers*, *Fans*, and *Flaneurs*. These categories are underpinned by two basic binary oppositions – the ‘hot’-‘cool’ and ‘traditional’-‘consumer’ – which come together to produce a taxonomy of four quadrants (see figure 1). The ‘traditional’-‘consumer’ horizontal axis, based on the work of Taylor (1971b; 1971a) and Critcher (1979a), reflects the basis of an individual’s investment in their chosen club. ‘Traditional’ fans have a longer, more local and popular cultural identification with football clubs, whereas ‘consumers’ have a more market centred relationship to the club reflected in the “centrality of consuming club products” (Giulianotti, 2002:31). The ‘hot’-‘cool’ vertical axis measures how central a football club is to an individual’s sense of self. ‘Hot’ forms of fandom emphasize intense kinds of identification and solidarity, whereas ‘cool’ forms denote a more aloof and transient relationship to a particular club.

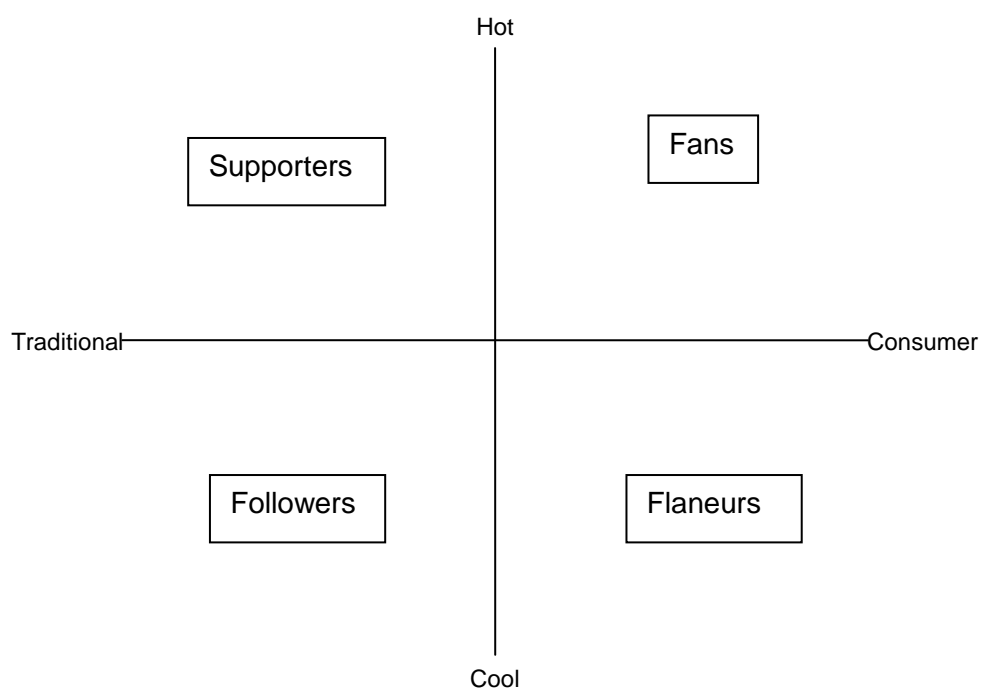


Figure 1 Giulianotti's (2002) *Supporter, Followers, Fan & Flaneurs Taxonomy*

The taxonomy applies principally to “professional football clubs...whose corporate structures are owned or controlled on market principals” (Giulianotti, 2002:26). Indeed, Giulianotti’s (2002) analysis is explicitly designed to develop the sociological and normative arguments of football fandom in relation to the increasing (hyper)commodification and globalisation of football clubs. However, whilst Giulianotti draws particular attention to the likes of Manchester United, Real Madrid, and Juventus – football clubs that possess “transnational characteristics in consumer profile” (Giulianotti, 2002:30) and who provide fans with “an increasingly welcome shop window in which to gaze” as a result of increasing media exposure (Giulianotti, 2002:40) – I would suggest the *Supporters, Fan’s, Followers, & Flaneurs* taxonomy may also be applied to the fans of less (hyper)commodified clubs. This is because the two axis upon which the taxonomy is built are valid descriptors of all football fans: all football fans can be seen to have varying traditional/consumer relationships with specific clubs as well as different hot/cool personal and social identities as football fans. The distinction between the fans of (hyper)commodified and non-(hyper)commodified fans instead lies in the distribution of individuals across the taxonomy, not in the behaviour of individuals within each category. That is to say, *Supporters* of a less (hyper)commodified club and, for example, Manchester United will share the same “long-term personal and emotional investment in the club” (Giulianotti, 2002:33). But because Manchester United offer more opportunities for interaction through “the cool media of television and the internet” (Giulianotti, 2002:38) a greater number, or a greater percentage, of their fan base will be made up of ‘cooler’, ‘consumer’ fans.

There are comparisons to be drawn between football fans and fans of other popular cultural forms, including music and movie fandom and the creative arts (Rowe, 1995; Sandvoss, 2003; Crawford, 2004). For example, in the same way that football creates an ethic of unification between fans based around their shared interest (Giulianotti, 2005), a shared taste in music can create interpersonal bonds between people (Boer *et al.*, 2011). However, while the fandom generated by football and the arts is somewhat comparable, there are also important analytical distinctions to be drawn between these cultural forms (Schimmel *et al.*, 2007). Gantz (2006:20), for example, conducted a direct comparison between sports and pop culture fans, concluding that sports fans are “strikingly different from all other types of fans in their pre-viewing and post-viewing behaviours” and that self identified sports fans are more purposive and content orientated in their viewing. Jones & Lawrence (2000) suggest that although football fans have a lower personal identification, they are likely to have a much higher social identification with other fans than do attendees of a Star Trek convention. Sport, in general, and football, in particular, can be seen to foster a distinct form of fandom due to its distinct cultural history emerging from industrial communities (Schimmel, 2001), the reproduction of hegemonic forms of masculinity (Sabo & Panepinto, 1990), the centrality of

competition and uncertain outcome, the importance of 'live' or in-person consumption (Hughson & Free, 2006), the particular role of sport in globalisation (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006), and because, to many people, sport seems real in comparison to other entertainment (Schimmel *et al.*, 2007).

### ***The creation of football identities***

Those engaged in socio-political control believe that football should be an occasion for mutual enjoyment and appreciation between rival fans. However, the game and its metaphoric language is all about social differentiation, defeating the enemy and reaffirming one's own cultural identity (Armstrong & Young, 1999). The social processes involved require fans to be antagonistic, offensive, and abusive to all the opposition (Armstrong & Young, 1999). To paraphrase Wilde (2004:173): "the expression of particular solidarities normally takes place in opposition to other groups".

While the popularity of physical fights between fans has gradually died out, rituals of swearing and bellowing aggressive abuse, which denies humanity to the opposition, has been sustained (Finn, 1994; Armstrong & Young, 1999). Indeed, there is a significant correlation between team identification and tendencies to display both hostile and instrumental verbal aggression (Wann, Carlson *et al.*, 1999; Wann, Peterson *et al.*, 1999; Wann *et al.*, 2003). For highly identified persons, such acts reinforce the centrality of the team to their identity (Wann *et al.*, 2003). Consequently, the teams performances take on added meaning, and they express a high level of negative affect after watching their team perform poorly (Wann *et al.*, 1994). Even for people who might not otherwise engage in such behaviour in public spaces, the football environment gives people the possibility of abandoning their inhibitions and at least temporarily freeing themselves from self-imposed restraint (Bairner, 2001).

This appears to raise problems for inclusion-through-football policies that demand the celebration of difference (between clubs) on the one hand and anti-discrimination practises on the other (Woodward, 2007). Disturbed by practises of chanting and singing, politicians and football authorities have aimed at 'civilising' this ritual warfare (Armstrong & Young, 1999). However, Armstrong & Young (1999) argue that regardless of the venom and the violence inherent in the chants the whole performance is socially contrived and always specifically contextual. For example, while content analyses of the common practise of football chants has tended to suggest they are vehicles for expressing nationalism, regionalism, and socio-political antagonism, for the vast majority of fans such chants mean nothing other than to dramatise and exaggerate their social identity (Armstrong & Young, 1999).

Whilst the spectacle of a match day and the actuality of football teams' performances play an important role in creating and maintaining fan identity, belonging and interpersonal relationships, the role of the body and bodily displays are also significant. Based on Butler's (1990) notion that identity is not something we 'are' but something we 'do' – as opposed to Goffman's (1959) concept of 'true self' – Stone (2007) suggests football fan identities are inscribed on the body by a combination of various discourses and performances. The body enables people to experience desirable moments of "physical proximity to particular people, places or events" (Urry, 2002:258). Similarly, Robson (2000) discusses football fan identities through individuals' use of the body, which, embedded in ritualised movements and behaviour, is understood within English football culture. Clothing and other paraphernalia, including colours and scarves, help fans both create and affirm their self identity (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011). These items are connected to four major functions – identification, socialisation, expression and sacralisation – which enable fans to recognise, identify and relate to one another (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011).

Once an individual acquires an important social identity, that identity is demonstrated to others through self-presentational behaviour (Green & Jones, 2005). Vermeulen & Verweel (2009) argue that an identity constructed through sport is not simply the kind of commodity that can be 'handed over' to other domains of life. However, the ubiquity of football in any number of mediated and commodified forms offers fans almost unlimited levels of engagement and opportunities for bodily displays (Stone, 2007). Indeed, once a certain level of commitment is reached, rather than being based around "a discrete or isolated socio-cultural 'event'", the identity of a football fan becomes an "extension of the everyday" and the club a consistent part of themselves (Robson, 2000:9). Fans become schooled to know how and when to exhibit certain symbols, to act and to react to specific signals, and to play to different audiences (Stone, 2007). The symbolic meanings placed on these objects and behaviours is then developed and transmitted between fans through interactions. Football fan identities are thus *performed* so as to be appropriate for a particular context before being altered in accordance with known expectations of how to behave in another (Stone, 2007).

Certain forms of informal status is afforded to football fans seen to be displaying the most desirable and respected symbols. Drawing on Thornton's (1995) idea of sub-cultural capital, football fans seek to enhance their personal identity and social status with other fans through their knowledge, credibility, and identification within the subculture (Giulianotti, 2002; Weed, 2006; 2007). Such performances can be through consumer behaviour (i.e. buying official club kit and attending matches), although both Giulianotti (2002) and Weed (2006, 2007) emphasise the longevity and

power of more traditional 'hot' displays (including, length of support, committed attendance to home and away games, and getting club tattoos).

Although these practises can generate 'thick trust' between participants – a possible reason why football fandom is thought of as a site for tackling social exclusion – they are often related to homo-social bonding and exclusionary social mechanisms (Arai & Pedlar, 2003). For example, Millward (2009) suggests that fans not seen to be fully participating are disparaged as 'miserable bastards' and interrogated about their reasons for attending in the first place. For many fans, match days and away trips are an occasion to have a 'party' (King, 2000; 2003; Millward, 2006; 2009), which inevitably means getting drunk together. Within this environment, whilst fans appear very friendly, freely engaging with each other and those outside their group, the drunken party gradually descends into something more exclusionary (Millward, 2009). "Discriminatory overtones [become] normalised" (Millward, 2009:390) and predominantly male fan groups begin to act more 'laddish', resembling the masculine behaviour that King (2002; 2003) and Sugden (2002) refer to when discussing English fans.

### ***Football identity and modern communities***

The notion of 'community' has become a buzz word between scholars, politicians, and policy makers. Whilst the strategic and political use of football clubs as agencies in the delivery of social policy has created new relationships between football clubs and 'communities' (Brown et al, 2008), the tendency of politicians and football clubs is to draw on geographical proximity as the 'purest' form of community. However, while it is the physical locality around the ground that typically becomes the target of social inclusion and diversity policies, this is no longer representative of football fan 'communities' in post-modern, consumer driven society (Bradbury, 2001; Woodward, 2007). As such, there is a need to rescue the term from discourses which only serve to "perpetuate the myth of community" (Delanty, 2001; 2003).

Contemporary society can be seen to have stepped from certainty to uncertainty, conformity to self expression, from unmoving, assuredly solid referents to a series of ever shifting, consciously acknowledged, liquid moments (Bauman, 2000). In this liquid-modern society, enveloped in a sense of *unsicherheit* (feelings of relentless change, risk, uncertainty), the loss of social anchors that previously made identity seem natural has led individuals to search within speedy and transitory social relations for a 'we' through which a sense of self can be negotiated (Stone, 2007). In a society that is increasingly complex and fragmented, being a football fan may "not only anchor individual identity, but it might also provide a forum for the collective identity with particular and periodic opportunities to reaffirm this sense of connectivity in a stadium" (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011:288).

As such, the concept of community in liquid modernity is as a gloss for deep mutuality and long standing reciprocal relationships; as “a nourishing antidote to what has become an unquestionably individualised life” (Blackshaw, 2008:334). People invest in networks rather than geographical ‘communities’, hooking up with like-minded people to form Neo-Tribes or ‘emotional communities’, characterised by “fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal” (Maffesoli, 1996:76). Ultimately, they have no foundation or moral purpose beyond the relations of sociability and performance of identity that constitute them. While proximity and place still have a role to play, these are as much ‘imagined’ conditions of community as they are actual (Delanty, 2003).

As a product of the ‘solid’ Victorian sports project football has only latterly, if spectacularly, embraced the social changes referred to above and adapted to the individualized consumerist terrain of contemporary social formations (Crabbe, 2008). Within the uncertain patterns of everyday life, the ubiquitous nature of football appears to offer the illusion of persistence by connecting fans within and across spatial boundaries to one another, to the products, images and discursive renderings of football culture and to collective meanings of embodied experiences across space and time (Delaney, 2001; Stone, 2007). Individuals increasingly draw on sport both for identity construction and for social performance, with fan culture ‘neo-tribes’ offering individual a sense of belonging that replaces traditional sources of community identity (Crawford, 2004). Football fans are thus at least partially ‘safe’ from the volatile world of unstable identities (Ben- Porat, 2010).

Across Europe, Latin America, and Africa, football provides perhaps the strongest form of cultural life through which recreational sociability has been practised – particularly amongst males – since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Giulianotti, 2002). Football is a subject matter for strangers to ‘break the ice’ and to engage in pleasurable conversation during social events. Using Simmel’s (1949:255) idea of ‘sociability’ as the “play form of association” derived from personal impulses and interests that push individuals into common association with others, Giulianotti (2005) provides an illustration of how interactions created through football fandom – described as ‘crack’ or ‘banter’ – can create a sense of social collectivism. Although Simmel’s (1949) sociable interaction is often easiest among those with a shared background, the ethic of fan unification ensures that informal differences do not produce distinctive dynamics of social differentiation or exclusion as one would find in other recreational settings (Giulianotti, 2005).

The ‘imagined communities’ of football fans do not have any spatial significance (Nash, 2000). Rather, membership is subject to shared meanings, symbolization, and local knowledge; “whether or not its structural boundaries remain intact, the realities of community lies in its members” (Blackshaw, 2008:328). As Blackshaw (2008:335) suggests, football fans are not a ‘community’ but

the spectacle of a community: a “collective body...constituted for individuals”. The post-modern football ‘tribe’ can thus congregate in non-territorial spaces, such as the internet, as readily as in football stadium concourses and stands.

A significant part of football fan identities and communality is the role of emotions. Sport and sports fandom in general has long been held as arena for emotional experiences and the consumption of communal identification (Whannel, 1993; Oakley, 2007). Klugman (2008), for example, describes the love Australian Rules Football fans feel for clubs that facilitates a particular form of identification where fans experience the clubs trials, tribulations and triumphs. Football itself can be seen as a contrived ‘theatre of emotion’ where individuals can both express and share an emotional experience (Armstrong & Hognestad, 2003). Football fandom provides a platform for the expression of emotion that many people – especially young men – are reluctant to demonstrate elsewhere (Armstrong & Young, 1999). By allowing people to engage in collective emotional displays football fandom instigates the creation of symbols and the embodiment of shared meaning that defines community and ultimately acts to reinforce feelings of belonging (Ismer, 2011).

Salmela (2012:44) characterises football fandom as a moderately shared emotion, citing the example of “the joy of random fans over a goal scored by their favourite team”. Salmela’s (2012:43) describes football fans displaying emotions based on their “commitment to a [club] that is shared by other individuals who have similarly committed themselves”. However, the accumulated literature on football fans indicates that individual fans can just as easily display weakly or strongly shared emotion. Giulianotti (2002:33, emphasis added), for example, has described how ‘supporters’ have a “long-term personal and *emotional* investment in the club”. Through their various synchronised bodily displays, including choreographed chanting and symbolised dress, these football fans can be seen to display the emotional contagion, facial mimicry and behavioural entrainment which Samela (2012) suggests produces a strong affective experience.

Football fans are seen to perform all aspects of community and communality for the time they are together as one, but do not necessarily limit themselves to reciprocal relationships as a result (Brown, 2008; Crabbe, 2008). Rather than solid thick ties, football provides a momentary stopping place, where fans identify with one another through their attire and demeanour as a performative community. The spectacle of football fandom is somewhere where people can unite before going back to their individual lives at the end of the game (Brown et al, 2008). Nowhere is this temporal togetherness more pronounced than at international football tournaments where gathered fans seek out, perform and celebrate their sense of community (Crabbe, 2008). Those at the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany, for example, were “not a community in the orthodox sociological meaning”,

but rather “mobile and flexible groupings- sometimes enduring, often easily dissoluble- formed with an intensive effective bonding” (Crabbe, 2008:436). The match itself provides a physical manifestation of an ongoing process on identity formation (Robson, 2000).

Contemporary football fandom does, of course, contain some pre-modern social bonds based around the ‘thick’ associations of family and friends (Brown et al, 2008). Also, a certain level of commitment allows the symbolic aspects to be internalized so that, for some fans, the club becomes a consistent part of themselves (Robson, 2000). However, the majority of football communities arise more out of the continuous interactions of people at matches and their joint appeal to ‘tradition’ rather than any prior social facts (King, 2000). For example, football stadiums are

“Historical social spaces where people’s implicit understanding of these particular geographical areas could lead to a deep identity formation and the development of a sense of place within the stadium itself” (Penny & Redhead, 2009:757).

Football fandom, both as an expression of collective allegiance and as a symbolic representation of individuality, forms part of the expression of a ‘liquid’ self as its presence emerges in some situations and diminishes at other times (Stone, 2007).

## Research Questions

This review has so far shown that, despite a lack of robust evidence, various government and sport specific policies and discourses continue to promote a positive relationship between learning-disability, football fandom, and a reduction in social exclusion/promoting social inclusion. The aim of this research is to consider what, if any, social benefits learning-disabled people can gain from football fandom and what affect this has on social exclusion. Whilst the preceding review of literature offers some indication of the potential social inclusion benefits of football fandom for learning-disabled people, it also reveals gaps in knowledge and understanding that give rise to the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of learning-disabled people as football fans?

Considerable effort has been expended by researchers examining the phenomenon of football fandom. However, up until now, none has gone into trying to understanding the football fandom of learning-disabled people. If we are to know what social inclusion benefits football fandom presents learning-disabled people, having some idea about their experiences is the first necessary step.

On the one hand, although much of the violence and hooliganism has been exorcised, football fandom remains characterised by the confrontational mentality of rival groups (Joern, 2009). The



perceived aggression of other fans may be interpreted as perpetuating the discrimination, abuse, and intolerance learning-disabled people often experience in other areas of life (Clement, 2006), discouraging learning-disabled fans from, for example, attending live matches. The informal nature of football crowds, which in other areas of leisure typically produces more negative/paternalistic feelings towards learning-disabled people (Devine & Wilhite, 1999), raises concerns about involving learning-disabled people, for example, with a “crowd of sometimes intolerant drunkards” (Schelly, 2008, p723). Conversely, learning-disabled fans’ experiences may be entirely positive, integrating “with the crowd so effectively that strangers are surprised to learn of [their] disability” (Schelly, 2008:723).

Of course, learning-disabled people are a diverse group and it is vitally important to consider how individual differences and needs play out in relation to experiences of football fandom. Conspicuous by its absence thus far is discussion of how the compound effect of membership of other excluded social groups, such as being female or from an ethnic or sexual minority, might affect learning-disabled peoples’ experiences within the majority white, heterosexual, male world of football fandom. Giulianotti’s (2002) taxonomy of football fans may provide a useful theoretical framework for understanding learning-disabled peoples’ experiences of football fandom. Classifying learning-disabled fans as either *Supporters*, *Followers*, *Fans*, or *Flaneurs* should help illuminate individuals’ access to the highly vibrant area for developing and negotiating popular social identities (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006).

2. How do these experiences contribute to social inclusion, specifically in terms of increasing social capital, social networks, and community membership?

The suggestion in many policy documents is that, through football fandom, learning-disabled people might become more socially included through integrating into the social network of the established fan ‘community’. However, football crowds are no longer represented as single, coherent communities, and so learning-disabled fans are unlikely to face a united body with the power to deny or grant them access to stores of social capital. Although ‘traditional’ fans still exist in the minority (Giulianotti, 2002), more pertinent questions concern the involvement of learning-disabled fans in contemporary, heterogeneous football crowds and in making use of the ‘modern’ spaces (Bauman, 2000) in which fandom exists, such as the internet.

Considering the football fandom of learning-disabled people as a form of serious or casual leisure (Stebbins, 1992a; 1999; 2000) may help conceptualise any available social benefits. The consistent nature of football fandom may offer learning-disabled people regular access to ‘mainstream’ social

spaces (i.e. the stadium). Whilst the contextual nature of 'cloakroom' or 'emotional' football fan communities may be of limited use to learning-disabled people in need of more permanent social connections in everyday life (Milner & Kelly, 2009), as serious leisure, the benefits of football fandom for learning-disabled people may be in the distinct social identity and strong sense of belonging created between fans.

### 3. What, if anything, is being done to facilitate learning-disabled football fandom?

Whilst the Football Association stresses the importance of allowing learning-disabled people the opportunity to be football fans, it is unclear what these opportunities should be. Viewing learning-disabled fans as just another form of customer, individual clubs may seek minimum compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and Equality Act (2010), by removing physical barriers to spatial inclusion. This approach, however, misunderstands many learning-disabled people's previous experiences of mainstream leisure settings, potentially hindering the social inclusion benefits of football fandom. Alternatively – but probably less likely because of the additional investment needed – individual football clubs may be reflexive about previous failings and deliver an intensive effort to address the varied and multifaceted inclusion barriers faced by learning-disabled people (Coalter, 2007; Milner & Kelly, 2009).

Using Sen's (1987) Capability Framework – as opposed to other theories of social inequality, such as utilitarianism, Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971), or theories based on wealth – will assist in understanding the complex and multifaceted barriers faced by learning-disabled football fans. The Capability Framework focuses on peoples' 'capabilities' – their "opportunities to achieve particular states of being or to undertake particular activities" (Burchardt, 2004:734). Whether or not opportunities and activities can be achieved is contingent on the individual possessing the appropriate knowledge/skills and for external factors to be amicable. The Capability Framework will aid in effectively examining the 'valuable functionings' of being a football fan for learning disabled people and critiquing the appropriateness of football clubs' response to learning-disabled fans. This will be achieved by providing a scaffold to analyse the participants' football fandom as a result of personal, social, economic, and environmental barriers (Burchardt, 2004). This will also aid in providing recommendations for future practice.

## Summary

This chapter has provided a critique of the literature regarding the potential social inclusion benefits of football fandom for learning-disabled people. It began by outlining the changing historical conceptions of learning-disability, including the rise of medical and social models of disability. It

moved on to discuss the place of learning-disabled people within the contemporary discourses of social exclusion and inclusion. The role of sport and leisure to help tackle the social exclusion of learning-disabled people was then critiqued, along with how football fandom might affect social exclusion/inclusion. Finally, three research questions were formulated reflecting the observed gaps in the literature.

The next chapter of this thesis will explain the research methodology employed to address these research questions.

# Chapter 3 – Methodology

## Introduction

In order to facilitate effective communication and constructive criticism (Bryman, 2008), the aim of this chapter is to establish the system of explicit rules and procedures that governed the research and against which claims for knowledge can be evaluated (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). The story begins at quite a personal level, establishing some of the implicit biases I brought to the role of researcher. Discussion then moves onto the important ethical and political decision to position the research as closely as possible within the ‘inclusive’ paradigm. The overall research design is presented and evaluated in terms of its effectiveness in addressing the research questions. This includes a justification of the chosen qualitative approach. Details of negotiating access, sampling, and recruitment are outlined. The specific research instruments used to collect data, including semi-structured interviews, participant observations, photo-elicitation, and document analysis, are scrutinized. Finally, the process of analysing data, as a balance of inductive and deductive thinking, is described. Because of the prominence in this topic, rather than having a specific section, concerns about research ethics are interwoven throughout the chapter.

To realistically set forth a framework for replication and deconstruction, however, it is not enough to simply make explicit, public, and accessible the “rules of the game” that guided the research (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996:13). In order to assist in “interpret[ing] the researcher’s data and understanding of them, and to consider possible alternatives” there is a need to clarify decisions made along the way (Elliott *et al.*, 1999:221). In other words, how I got from research proposal to thesis. In my research proposal I wrote very prescriptively of the empirical work to be conducted in order to effectively answer the identified research questions. My intention was to:

“Follow a mixed-methods approach, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to gain information from the broader ‘community’ of football supporters and from supporters with learning difficulties respectively”.

Being able to “triangulat[e] between data across methods and respondents” would then “build up a more accurate picture of the experiences of people with learning difficulties in football supporter communities”. The research I eventually conducted deviated from this plan considerably. Written reflexively (with the benefit of hindsight), this chapter highlights the evolutionary nature of the methodology as the topic and research aims came into sharper focus. The first person ‘I’ is frequently used throughout to help enhance *your* (the reader) understanding of *my* (the

author/researcher) developing knowledge, understandings, interests and assumptions throughout the research process.

## **Myself as researcher**

The positivist school of thought suggests that researchers must distance themselves from the external reality they are studying. Research must be carried out in a way that is value free – that is objective – in order to paint a *true* picture of the social world (Bryman, 2008). Knowledge development in public policy places a great deal of emphasis on such ‘scientific’ research – particularly meta-analyses and randomised control trials – that supposedly embody neutrality, objectivity and distance (Beresford, 2006). To introduce any previous personal assumptions about an object of enquiry is to introduce bias, and taint the results (Davis *et al.*, 2000). However, because “the separation of scientific and personal biography is in fact never possible” (Seale, 1999:25) it was very difficult for me to distance myself from this research.

As alluded to in the introduction, my elder brother is learning-disabled. This has meant I have held close relationships with learning-disabled people – him and his peers – all my life. Living in this social world meant I embarked on the research full of a priori knowledge about learning-disabled football fans. Rather than denying this partisan position (Mercer, 2002), I have embraced it in the interpretivist and constructivist traditions. Whilst it may cast me “too close to the problem” in the eyes of the research establishment (Beresford, 2006:165), I consider my historical/emotional involvement with the subject matter to be beneficial to the research. Specifically, being less inclined towards maintaining the traditional subordinate and ‘helpless’ role of learning-disabled people (Macintyre, 2008), I was perhaps (whether consciously or subconsciously) more likely to respect their contributions and opinions as valued equals.

Throughout the research process though I “attempted to minimise or control effects [of my personal experiences] or at least understand them” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998:9). This has been achieved through providing relevant information about myself, as the researcher, which may have influenced the research process (Swain *et al.*, 1998; Kelly, 2007). It is important to state clearly that going into the research I felt that football fandom would prove to be a location for learning-disabled people to have many positive experiences. The popular appeal of football, I felt, was something that unites people from all social groups. Whether learning-disabled people would be able to establish long-term social networks through fandom, I was unsure about. Being aware of this position, I have made every effort to report findings that both support and confound this perspective in an unbiased analysis (Seale, 1999; Silverman, 2000). In writing this thesis I have attempted to reflect on where it

has confirmed or challenged what I thought I knew. In this way I hope to have “expose[d] underlying methodological and analytical decisions made throughout the research process” without claiming “complete neutrality” (Kelly, 2007:23).

## **Researching with learning-disabled people**

The essentially political act of research is able to empower but also exploit those who participate (Silverman, 2000). Learning-disabled people – especially those with greater degrees of impairment and decreased autonomy – are one of the groups at greatest risk of participation leading to further disempowerment and social oppression (Booth & Booth, 1994a; Swain *et al.*, 1998). Whether it be, for example, a lack of consultation or informed consent, learning-disabled people “are in greater danger of being victims of the good intentions of others” (Mittler, 1991:22).

As is expected in social research, I adhered to the code of ethics designed to limit the possibility of harm to participants and myself (Bryman, 2008) as set out by the School of Applied Social Sciences (SASS), Durham University. The SASS Research Ethics and Risk Assessment Form was completed alongside the Durham University Field Work Risk-Assessment, in which I demonstrated an awareness of the potential risks of this research to myself and participants and the steps I would take to minimise these risks. Completing this process formally established the rights of the participants by outlining how I would ensure, for example, confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, secure data storage and informed consent.

However, in and of itself, this procedure did not guarantee ‘ethical’ research. Despite providing a sound basis for understanding and addressing generic ethical questions, the research process is inherently fraught with ethical issues that cannot be predicted at the outset (Swain *et al.*, 1998). Gaining ethical approval in this way was thus the necessary bureaucratic obligation towards conducting fieldwork. This involved producing information sheets – in both standard prose and an ‘easy-read’ format – explaining the purpose of the research and participants’ role in the process (see Appendix 1) and a consent form for participants to sign (see Appendix 2).

However, rather than seeing my responsibilities fulfilled within this a priori approach (Homan, 1992), the notion of ethical research was something constructed and confronted during the research process through interaction (Swain *et al.*, 1998). Although the inherently hierarchical nature of research relationships may have affected this (Swain *et al.*, 1998), because of my previous experiences with learning-disabled people I endeavoured – perhaps more implicitly than explicitly – to treat all participants with equal respect, rights and responsibilities (Booth & Booth, 1994b). Being

'ethical' therefore, resulted from the way participants were treated and involved throughout the whole research process.

### ***Inclusion, participation or emancipation?***

Historically, underpinned by the medical model, the role of learning-disabled people in research has been as objects of scientific enquiry or voyeuristic interest (Stalker, 1998). Perceived mental deficiencies led to the exploitation of many as non-consenting victims of quantitative measurements and human experimentation (Cleaver *et al.*, 2010). However, gradually, and especially within the last thirty years, reflecting the changing status of learning-disability in society more generally, the role of learning-disabled people in research has evolved from non-consenting victim to consenting participant. In social research in particular, researchers have come to recognise learning-disabled people as valuable informants with a right to express valid opinions about their own lives (Booth & Booth, 1994a; Goodley, 1996). Normalisation and 'ordinary life' principles were influential in this change by insisting learning-disabled people should have a voice in events affecting their lives and in supplying the opportunity to speak out (Blow, 2008). More recently, informed by the social model, the role of learning-disabled people in research has expanded further with many researchers and self-advocates challenging their status as subjects or informants only (Walmsley, 2001).

The term 'inclusive research' has thus been coined to describe the new discourse of research participation and inclusion in which learning-disabled people are involved as more than just subjects; as equal partners, experts, or researchers (Williams, 1999b; Atkinson *et al.*, 2000; Walmsley, 2001). While many early examples of this inclusive research, such as that by Rodgers (1999) and Kellett & Nind (2001), were inspired by the desire to redress previous wrongs, with a number of major funding bodies insistent on the active participation of service-users, inclusive research with learning-disabled people is becoming increasingly common (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). I first became aware of this approach four years ago while completing my Masters dissertation. Reading Barnes & Mercer's (1997) book 'Doing Disability Research', I was pleased to learn of a research paradigm that mirrored my own ideas about the role of learning-disabled people in research. It is in this inclusive tradition that I endeavoured to complete this work. Not doing so – and prioritising distance and separation from the subject – would have raised major ethical, and perhaps epistemological, concerns for the learning-disabled people involved (Beresford, 2006).

Inclusive research can, however, be further divided into two methodological paradigms: Participatory and Emancipatory research. The terms are often mistakenly used interchangeably (Stalker, 1998). In both forms of inclusive research the classic researcher-researched relationship is subverted, blurring the boundaries between the roles of 'researcher' and those of 'participants' who

are not by training or expertise researchers in the formal sense (Charnley & Hwang, 2010). However, the two paradigms represent significantly different approaches to the conduct of research.

Participatory research entails a commitment to non-disabled people working alongside or in partnership with learning-disabled people as allies. Participatory research involves the non-learning-disabled researcher(s) encouraging or facilitating the active involvement of learning-disabled people in one or more parts of the research process. Sample (1996), Booth & Booth (2003), and Burke et al (2003), for example, all describe involving learning-disabled people in group decision making processes about the research to develop participation. Through a collaborative process – at least more so than would be found in non-inclusive research – formally trained researchers aim to use the first-hand knowledge and experiences of learning-disabled people to generate more valid and richer data. The ‘participant’ is thus utilised, for example, in both producing and collecting data.

Emancipatory research, on the other hand, emerging from the disabled people’s movement and the social model of disability, advocates a radical transformation of the traditional research relationship (Atkinson *et al.*, 2000; Williams, 2002; Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). Summed up in the slogan ‘nothing about us, without us’ (People First, 1993), in the Emancipatory paradigm disabled people direct – not just participate in – research as part of a wider process of “changing society to enhance full participation and citizenship” (French & Swain, 1997:28; Beresford & Boxall, 2012). Whilst this does not necessarily mean disabled people carrying out all aspects of the research (Beresford, 2006), they should be in control, using the research as a tool to explicitly challenge the prescribed agendas of governments and professionals (Abberley, 1987; Barnes & Mercer, 1997; Oliver, 1997).

Emancipatory research is “committed to conveying (oppressed) people’s accounts and offering their interpretations” (Beresford, 2006:167). This is to be achieved through accepting learning-disabled people as ‘knowers’ and rejecting the ‘expertise’ of trained researchers who must put “their knowledge and skill at the disposal of disabled people” (Barnes, 1996a:122; Gradwell, 1999).

While some researchers have gone to extraordinary lengths to implement a fully Emancipatory methodology with learning-disabled people – Williams (1999b), for example, describes her work with a Bristol self-advocacy group working on its own agenda, undertaking interviews, and sharing in the generation of theory – this approach has largely been a medium for physically disabled people to “produc[e] ourselves collectively as a coherent, strong and articulate political movement” (Oliver, 1995b:188). Emancipatory research can be perhaps be seen to not recognise the reality of impairment for some learning-disabled people (Shakespeare, 1994; Hughes, 1999), ignoring what skills and knowledge they have or do not have at their disposal (Kiernan, 1999; Chappell, 2000; Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). Ward & Trigler (2001:58), as well as others (Atkinson *et al.*, 2000;



Mccarthy & Millard, 2003; Lennox *et al.*, 2005), suggest that inappropriately expecting learning-disabled people to, for example, propose research topics or draw out implications from an array of information has created practical “methodological problems” and “compromised results”. Walmsley (2001) has even suggested that the dogma of the Emancipatory paradigm has acted as a straight jacket hindering less radical Participatory research, making otherwise well meaning researchers fear that they are inappropriately ‘speaking for’ learning-disabled people without their consent.

Quite early in the research I knew it would not follow the Emancipatory tradition. The reason for this was that I – as opposed to learning-disabled people – proposed the research topic and controlled the process throughout. Hunt (1981) has fiercely criticised social research that does not set out to explicitly empower disabled participants. Referring to the work of Miller & Gwynne (1972), in which he was a participant, Hunt (1981:39) suggests:

“Long before publication of their research findings in ‘A Life Apart’, it was clear that we, the residents, had been conned. It was clear to us that Miller & Gwynne were definitely not on our side. They were not really on the side of the staff either. And they were not even much use to the management and administrators. They were in fact basically on their own side, that is the side of the ‘detached’, ‘balanced’, ‘unbiased’ social scientists, concerned above all with presenting themselves to the powers-that-be as indispensable in training ‘practitioners’ to manage the problem of disabled people in institutions”.

This critique has acted as a strong reminder of the need to be thoughtful about my own role in this research study. Whilst I was in charge of the research process, I have not claimed to be a completely “‘detached’, ‘balanced’, ‘unbiased’ social scientist”: I was not purely working on my “own side” (Hunt, 1981:39). In this way – working explicitly from the position of the cultural model of disability – I have worked to show that many of the barriers experienced by learning-disabled people are not solely caused by their own impairments (Beresford & Boxall, 2012). Although I am – or hope to be – a significant beneficiary of the research (i.e. being awarded my PhD), learning-disabled football fans and those learning-disabled people who took part can also be seen to benefit from the results and process of the research respectively (Charnley & Hwang, 2010).

Unlike many other examples of inclusive research, both in the Emancipatory and Participatory traditions, I have not attempted to play-down my own involvement as the trained researcher. In a range of research studies involving disabled participants, March *et al* (1997) called themselves ‘co-researchers’; Rolph (2000) described the learning-disabled people she worked with as ‘life historians’; Williams (1999b) described herself a ‘supporter’ in relation to the ‘real researchers’; Atkinson *et al* (2000) refer to themselves as ‘helpers’ and the participants as ‘disabled women’; Knox, Mok, and Parmenter (2000) categorised learning-disabled people as ‘experts’ whilst they described themselves as ‘enquirers’; and finally, Van (1999) portrayed everyone involved as

'cooperative researchers'. Although arguments are not always explicit, this ascription of roles constitutes a form of Social Role Valorisation (Wolfensburger & Tullman, 1982) to enhance the image of those learning-disabled people involved in research. Walmsley (2004:66) argues that such semantic changes can simply serve to camouflage any power imbalances between those involved in social research behind "a rhetoric of participation". Conversely, being explicit about who did what, and what did not work, enables others to learn from experience, rather than make the same mistakes (Walmsley, 2004). Atkinson, for example, originally did not mention her contribution to creating Mabel Cooper's life story (Cooper, 1997), but was compelled to retell her involvement later (Atkinson & Cooper, 2000).

In completing this research I attempted to avoid this "new obsession with process", where 'including' learning-disabled people in the research process is often attempted for its own good (Braye, 2000:9). An overemphasis on emancipation and getting the process 'right' would have led to mistakes in locating methods to address the research questions and threatening "the very real need for significant content and outcomes" (Walmsley, 2004:56). This research might be described as participatory but only in the sense that my agenda was followed "with participants being engaged as fully as possible in the research process" (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004:214). However, I fulfilled the 'traditional' researcher role and participation was "nominally consultative rather than collaborative" (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004:214). Although this might have left learning-disabled participants' vulnerable to having their interests misrepresented (Walmsley & Downer, 1997), throughout the research I have attempted to adhere to the three core beliefs of inclusive research: that (i) the conventional research relationship of researcher as 'expert' and informant as 'object of investigation' is inequitable; (ii) that people have the right to be consulted/involved in research relating to their own lives; and (iii) that the quality of research improves when people are involved in research concerning their own lives (Stalker, 1998). In practise this has meant giving learning-disabled participants the respect they deserve (in line with their non-disabled peers) to express their own narratives. This was particularly prominent during the interpretation and exploration of participants' narratives where their voices have been filtered and given meaning in my – the researcher's – terms (Swain *et al.*, 1998). Importantly, whenever there appeared to be a conflict of interests between myself and the participants (such as, in organising meetings), those of the participants always came first.

Writing this thesis I refer to myself as 'researcher', while the learning-disabled people involved are afforded the same status as those non-learning-disabled people who took part as 'participants'. It is

important to clarify these roles, without which the inclusive research agenda risks being trapped in a cycle of sentimental biography or individual anecdotes (Ward & Trigler, 2001).

## The research design

When writing my original research proposal, and for a large proportion of my first year of study, the research was planned to follow a deductive path. I assumed that within, for example, Football for All (The FA, 2010b) and Football for Disabled People (The FA, 2001b) there would be sufficient specific information about the instrumental use of football fandom to tackle the social exclusion of learning-disabled people to form a reasonable hypothesis. In this sense, the research was originally intended to be a policy evaluation of the effectiveness of tackling learning-disabled people's social exclusion through football fandom. In a short essay summarising the work I had completed at the end of my first PhD year, I wrote that achieving this goal would involve:

*“Drawing on three principal sets of empirical data – from supporters with learning difficulties, from the broader, non-learning-disabled ‘community’ of football supporters, and from club officials responsible for facilitating the inclusion of learning-disabled people – [using] a mixed methods approach enabling the triangulation of data across sources, building a more accurate picture of the experience of learning-disabled people as football supporters.”*

However, during an end of year review meeting it was pointed out that this approach may be ineffectual at achieving the aims of the research. Upon further consideration, I realised this to be true for two reasons. Firstly, there were (and still are) no documents or policies specifying how learning-disabled people might become socially included through football fandom. No documents meant no evaluation. Rather – as established in the previous chapter – there exists an unsubstantiated idea about the benefits of the ‘football environment’. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, I realised that my understanding of the topic was, at best, incomplete or perhaps even misguided. Like the football authorities, I had been conceptualising football fans of one club or another in the traditional ideal as solid ‘communities’. Believing they were an important part of the social inclusion process, I advocated surveying this group's (un)willingness to accept learning-disabled people as members of their social network. Upon realising there is no single ‘community’ of established fans with the ability to grant or deny access, this line of enquiry became redundant. (In future, it might be interesting to investigate learning-disabled people's involvement in specific subcultures of football fandom, such as football hooligans). As such, a more inductive approach was eventually employed.

Two forms of data were deemed necessary to achieve the aim of this research to explore the supposed positive relationship between learning-disabled people, football fandom, and social

inclusion. These were information from learning-disabled people themselves about their experiences of football fandom (research questions 1 and 2), and information from relevant organisations – principally professional football clubs – about the inclusion of learning-disabled people as fans (research question 3). This second source of data was deemed to be relevant considering the continuing rhetoric of football clubs having to “create opportunities at all levels for anyone with a disability to get involved in football...[as a] spectator” (The FA, 2010b). This strategy could still be seen as partially deductive. It was, after all, informed by the literature describing learning-disabled people’s access to leisure, of mainstream football fandom, and by the idea that football fandom might help tackle the social exclusion of learning-disabled people. However, because there was no literature directly relating to the topic, and because the guidance as to the social inclusion benefits of football fandom for learning-disabled people was non-existent in policy discourse, my approach to data collection was mostly inductive. Concerned with understanding learning-disabled peoples’ subjective experiences of football fandom, but also trying to locate these within broader discourses of social inclusion/exclusion, this research follows the interpretivist ideas first suggested by Weber (1947). It “attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its cause and effect” (Weber, 1947:88).

### ***Qualitative methodology – understanding the subjective experience***

Much has been written about the merits and pitfalls of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. To generalise, qualitative approaches can be seen to be concerned with understanding people’s subjective realities constructed through interactions, whereas quantitative approaches attempt to describe the ‘true’ reality using, predominantly, statistics and observation (Bryman, 2008). Achieving the stated aim of this research, and answering the specified research questions – which mostly concerned the subjective experience of football fandom for learning-disabled people – could only be achieved in the qualitative tradition. Trying to employ the alternative quantitative methodology would have involved me imposing my own perceptions of a reality that I – nor anyone else, according to the academic literature – knew little about.

I have been working from the hermeneutic-phenomenology tradition (Bryman, 2008), seeking to explore both how learning-disabled people experience football fandom and how football clubs facilitate learning-disabled fans. This approach ties in very closely with Weber’s (1947) concept of *Verstehen* – seeing things from the point of view of the person whose behaviour you are trying to explain. Such an ontological position, however, raises pertinent questions about whether I, as a non-learning-disabled person, am able to comprehend the lived reality of someone who is learning-disabled. To put it another way, can a non-learning-disabled researcher ever understand the

“common-sense constructs” that an individual with a learning-disability might use to interpret the “reality of their everyday lives” (Schultz, 1962:59).

Historically, the dominant medical view of impairment as individual pathology resulted in the supremacy of positivist and objectivist research to identify the ‘truth’ about disability (Danieli & Woodhams, 2005). More recently, however, reflecting changing conceptualisations of impairment generally, the position of the non-disabled ‘expert’ who is able to negotiate such a realist ontology has been rejected. Although some disability advocates have suggested Emancipatory approaches as the only way of understanding the experiences of physically and learning-disabled people (Oliver, 1992), research carried out by disabled people cannot be seen to be more legitimate than research carried out by non-disabled researchers (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Danieli & Woodhams, 2005). As such, throughout this research I employed a constructivist perspective, with social phenomena and their meanings viewed as being continually accomplished by the social actors involved. In an attempt to not produce dogmatic interpretations, I have “refocused epistemological attention onto impairment” and not just accepted a priori a social model of disability (Goodley, 2001:208). That is to say, rather than understanding learning-disability simply as the product of social barriers, I have been sensitive to the effects of peoples’ impairments on their experience of football fandom. Doing so has helped to reveal the individual ‘reality’ of the phenomenon in question.

Whilst a qualitative approach was the most appropriate choice given the subject matter, there have been some concerns in the methodological literature that “the basic tenets of qualitative research do not hold up well in the study of people with learning difficulties” (Booth & Booth, 1996:23). Initially I did not consider this to be a major barrier, but as the planning for data collection progressed it emerged as an issue in need of clarification. Good qualitative research generally comes when a researcher is able to build a rapport with participants, be unobtrusive yet probing, and listen more than speaking (Arksey, 2004). It is not difficult to see why one might question whether such characteristics can be achieved with learning-disabled research participants who may have limited communication skills. However, I have always felt that this concern is directed at the potential inappropriate use of certain (qualitative) research instruments rather than of qualitative methodologies in general. As Aldridge (2007:3) argues:

“From a methodological perspective, and in social research more generally, there is a very real danger that people with learning disabilities will be excluded from conventional studies if the methods used are not adaptable and if researchers themselves do not understand the mechanisms and approaches by which respondents with learning disabilities can be effectively included”.

The advantage of the chosen qualitative methodology was its flexibility in not binding me to a particular research instrument (Kelly, 2007). I was not interested in conforming to the recognised principals of 'scientific' research, attempting to use consistent methods across diverse groups, as this would have ultimately been unsuccessful (Aldridge, 2007). Like Davis *et al* (2000) who switch between observations and interviews, specific research instruments were chosen and adapted on an almost case-by-case understanding of individual participants' abilities and needs. Furthermore, the interactive nature of such a qualitative approach, which enabled participants to have influence over the direction of the research process (Kelly, 2007), reinforced my inclusive outlook.

In some respects, such methodological flexibility emphasised the precariousness of qualitative research (Bryman, 2008). However, I felt that having to scrutinise the preconceived 'rules' of social research was a good thing, and something other researchers – whether in the field of learning-disability or not – should consider. Doing so enabled learning-disabled people to be involved as participants where they otherwise might not have fit the expected model of a respondent in qualitative research (Aldridge, 2007).

## **Entering the field**

The statistical random or representative sampling procedures favoured by quantitative researchers are often seen to be the most accountable guidelines for selecting evidence in the social sciences. Conversely, qualitative research, in general, is often open to criticism for a lack of transparency regarding the way participants or subjects of enquiry are chosen to take part in research (Bryman, 2008). However, statistical random sampling does not fit all populations or situations and qualitative researchers are often forced to collect data from whatever sources are available to them.

For this research, working with an essentially unknown population (e.g. learning-disabled football fans), it was not possible to rely on systems of probability or random sampling designed to ensure the generalisability of results across a whole population. Instead, it was necessary to establish a "systematic selection to some alternative rationale" (Bauer & Aarts, 2000:20). Being concerned with fostering a rich understanding of learning-disabled peoples' experiences of football fandom and the effect this has on their social exclusion, purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct relevance to the research question. Gaskell (2000) even prefers the term 'selecting' to avoid the quantitative connotations of 'sampling', although I did not think this semantic change was necessary. Whilst such seemingly unsystematic sampling challenges the perceived principle of public accountability in research, the chosen purposive approach to "establish a good correspondence between research questions and sampling" (Bryman, 2008:458) was the only appropriate method.

Bauer & Aarts (2000) refer to this as the corpus-theoretical paradox: social scientists set out to study the varieties of social life, but as these varieties are yet unknown researchers simply cannot sample according to a representative rationale. That is to say, before entering the field, because no previous research as to the football fandom of learning-disabled people existed to serve as a guide, I had no descriptive or substantive information about learning-disabled football fans.

Achieving the aims of this research required purposive sampling at two levels: at an organisation level to select appropriate football clubs and at an individually level to recruit relevant football fans and professionals in the football environment responsible for facilitating learning-disabled fandom. From personal experience I knew professional football clubs often organised football teams and training sessions for learning-disabled people and that those teams would be a fruitful environment for identifying individual fans. As such, in order to minimise the difficulty of negotiating access to a myriad of separate professional sports organisation (i.e. football clubs) (Coalter, 2001) and learning-disability organisations (Lesseliers *et al.*, 2009), it was necessary to first sample and gain access to individual football clubs. Individual employees could then be purposively sampled along with learning-disabled fans from their learning-disability representative football teams. Patterson & Pegg (2009) outline a similar scenario in which they utilised a number of community-based agencies to provide access to suitable participants for their research looking at learning-disabled people engaging in serious leisure. Entering the field this way also mirrored Stalkers (1998) description of sampling learning-disabled research participants by having to gain top-down permission from (i) senior managers and committees, (ii) practitioners in the field, and (iii) learning-disabled people themselves.

Sampling football clubs first before identifying individual learning-disabled fans from within the organisational did, however, limit the representativeness of the sample. It meant the sample of fans was reduced from 'learning-disabled football fans' in generally to 'learning-disabled football fans *that also play football for their team*'. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6, the learning-disabled people purposively sampled to take part in this research held particular relationships to their clubs based around, both, their fandom and their participation as players. Although this approach excluded learning-disabled people who are fans but who do not play for their favoured clubs, potentially reducing the generalisability of my conclusions, this approach was a necessary practical decision. As Bauer & Aarts (2000) suggest, most qualitative research is limited by the effort required to manage and run large amounts of time consuming data collection.

I began in early 2010 by sending letters to all ninety two football clubs playing in the top four divisions of the professional football league structure in England, explaining my research and inviting

them to take part. Knowing that a probability sample would not be possible, my intention was to start broadly, allow individual clubs to volunteer, and follow up on those that wanted to take part. A month later I had received three email replies; two rejections and a request for more information. Even considering the difficulties associated with accessing research sites generally (Bryman, 2008), this seemed an especially poor response rate. In retrospect, not knowing the names of recipients – letters were addressed generically to, for example, the ‘Social Inclusion Officer’ or the ‘Disability Officer’ – meant most were probably never read, if they made it to the relevant person at all. Also, in my naivety as a first time researcher I did not follow up this initial correspondence to check on the status of my request.

The one positive response received was from a Disability Development Officer working for the local County Football Association – a regional branch of the national Football Association. After meeting to discuss the aims, data collection, and intended outcomes of the research, he introduced me to the Community Foundation Manager of Rovers (anonymised). Rovers played their football in the fourth tier of professional football in England – NPower League 2 – and had a thriving learning-disability team consisting of around forty players. Following our initial introduction, I arranged further access to Rovers with the Community Foundation Manager and, reflecting Stalker (1998), with his support I was able to approach specific professionals within the club to organise data collection.

By mid-2010, Rovers remained the only club to be sampled. After consulting my supervisors about the poor response rate, a more proactive sampling approach was adopted to overcome football clubs’ apparent indifference to the research. However, upon realising that I would actually have to *do* the research, the purposive sampling of professional football clubs became significantly based on convenience. I started telephoning directly the most local professional clubs to me and requesting their involvement. Although I was rebuffed by some, within a couple of days I had met up with the Community Foundation Managers of two further clubs – United (anonymised) and Athletic (anonymised) – and confirmed their involvement. United was part of the second tier of English professional football – NPower Championship – whilst Athletic played their football in the third tier – NPower League 1.

Although such convenience sampling may appear arbitrary to those expecting a more representative or repeatable approach, the process resulted in “a balanced sample of organisations” in relation to the study’s aims, in which “issues and processes could be compared but in which heterogeneity was also significant” (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007:60). The close geographic proximity of United, Rovers, and Athletic to one another ensured the clubs and fans shared similar historical backgrounds.



Additionally, playing across all three divisions of the NPower Football League – Championship (United), League 1 (Athletic) and League 2 (Rovers) – ensured the sample contained an appropriate “combination of heterogeneity and homogeneity” (Bryman, 2008:375). This heterogeneity did not, unfortunately, extend to a football club in the ‘Premier League’. Including a club from the Premier League may have opened up the research to the possible effects of hyper-commodification on the experience of football fandom for learning-disabled people. Nonetheless, within the confines of qualitative social research in general (Bryman, 2008), and the specific restrictions of working with sports clubs (Coalter, 2001) and learning-disability organisations (Lesseliers *et al.*, 2009), the final sample provided sufficient opportunities to access a range of individuals and “many different perspectives” (Bryman, 2008:414) relevant to understanding what, if any, affect football fandom has on the social exclusion of learning-disabled people.

### ***Involving ‘officials’***

After successfully sampling football clubs at an organisational level, it was necessary to purposively sample individuals within each setting with direct reference to football fandom for learning-disabled people. This involved sampling learning-disabled fans themselves and people within each football club responsible for facilitating the inclusion of learning-disabled fans. In my initial misunderstanding of the topic I thought there would be one employee at each club with responsibility for the social inclusion of learning-disabled people through fandom. However, it quickly became clear that at Rovers, United and Athletic no such person existed. The implications of this are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. As such, in order to ‘map the field’ (Bryman, 2008) around the inclusion of learning-disabled football fans, using the clubs’ websites as a guide, I set about sampling club employees – here termed ‘officials’ – with any apparent experience or involvement in their club’s position regarding learning-disabled people, football fandom, and/or social inclusion.

The officials included: the Community Foundation Manager and the Stadium Operations Manager at Rovers; the Community Foundation Manager, the Disability Officer and the Club Liaison for Disabled Supporters at United; and the Social Inclusion Officer, the Corporate Responsibility Officer, and the Head of the Disabled Supporters Club at Athletic. Whilst I tried to remain consistent, because of different internal staff structures and the unavailability of certain individuals it was not possible to speak to the equivalent officials across all three clubs. This is a common disadvantage of convenience sampling and, at worst, can potentially lead to insufficient homogeneity between sites for conclusions to be drawn (Bryman, 2008). However, despite involving different officials at each club, the emerging data from Rovers, United, and Athletic was of a shared conceptualisation of learning-disabled fans. With the same picture of the clubs’ responses to learning-disabled fans

across all three sites, I was confident that the implemented purposive sampling approach was sufficient for generalisations to be drawn. After being invited to attend a Football League Trust regional conference in March 2011 I was also able to interview the General Manager of the Football League Trust. This opportunity revealed the Football League's macro level interest in the social inclusion of learning-disabled football fans and complemented data collected from Rovers, United and Athletic.

Collecting data from club officials was, for the most part, a simple matter of arranging times and places to meet for face-to-face interview. Each official was given an information sheet describing the research (see Appendix 3) and asked to sign a consent form indicating that they understood their role in the research process, that their contribution would be anonymous and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. Where I was unable to interview officials in person, telephone-interviews or email exchanges were substituted. Although this somewhat reduced opportunities for follow up questions and to probe respondents further, these alternative approaches were acceptable substitutes (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

To supplement this interview data copies of official documents, strategies and charters from the individual clubs and from the Football League concerning learning-disability, social inclusion, and/or fandom were collected. These were assembled from Rovers', United's and Athletics' websites as well as directly from officials. It was not possible to collect the same documents from each club. However, again, the picture they presented was of the club's homogenous understanding and response to learning-disabled fans, allowing conclusions to be drawn across and between all three sites.

### ***Involving learning-disabled fans***

Compared to accessing club officials, involving the learning-disabled fans of Rovers, United and Athletic was less straightforward. The squad lists for Rovers', United's and Athletic's learning-disability teams were utilised as my sampling frame. However, sampling was complicated by having to establish a clear operationalisation of 'learning-disabled football fan' and recruiting individual fans involved having to satisfy more steps in the "hierarchy of consent" (Lennox *et al.*, 2005:297). Both aspects arguably placed further limitations on the generalisability of the research findings.

I am not the first to struggle establishing a usable definition of what qualified someone as being 'learning-disabled' in research. Proposing an operationalisation of learning-disability that is "complete, global, and stable over time" has puzzled social scientists for decades (Gronvik, 2009:1). Whilst the various models of learning-disability have been discussed in the previous chapter, these –

particularly the social model – are theoretical artefacts rather than tools for empirical research (Shakespeare, 2005). The problem with learning-disability as a concept is that it can be defined in several ways, often with contradictory meanings (Gronvik, 2009). While it is seldom discussed in empirical studies, Gronvik (2009) highlights three different practical definitions of learning-disability commonly used in research. The ‘functional limitations approach’, which has been used extensively by learning-disability researchers, stems from a medical understanding and characterizes ‘disability’ in terms of changes in body structure. Patterson & Pegg (2009:393), for example, classify participants in their research as “in the mild and moderate range of intellectual disability” based on their measured IQ. The ‘legal/administrative’ definition supposes that if a person, for example, receives a certain benefit intended for disabled people then that person can be considered ‘disabled’. Research based on this kind of definition tends to refer to ‘disabled people’ in general, ignoring the differences between individuals (e.g. their different impairments). Finally, the ‘subjective definition’ considers whether a person conceives themselves to be learning-disabled.

Considering how each particular definition of learning-disability is likely to lead to different research results (Gronvik, 2009), I chose to employ a combination of the legal/administrative and subjective definitions. A ‘learning-disabled person’ was considered to be anyone who attended the training sessions for either of United’s, Athletic’s or Rovers’ learning-disability teams, which were provided especially for learning-disabled people and were voluntary to attend. This approach moved attention away from individual impairments and towards the commonalities between individuals, which ultimately enable links to be made between “the experience of others and other groupings” (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004:212). Whilst learning-disabled people are not a homogenous group, after a shared history of care, exclusion, and discrimination, commonalities between individuals can be theorised (Hartsock, 1996; Wendell, 1996; Lesseliers *et al.*, 2009). Just as Lesseleirs *et al.* (2009) suggested that people living in shared supported housing may be regarded as more or less belonging to the same group, in this research all learning-disabled people attending the football training sessions can be seen as part of a shared institutional group.

The representativeness of this definition of ‘learning-disabled’, however, was limited. My chosen operationalisation practically excluded those people with profound or complex learning-impairments unable to take part in the football training sessions. This was partly a conscious choice as I did not have the necessary research and communication experience and skills to gain valid data from such individuals. Nonetheless, I would suggest my chosen operationalisation was sufficient to obtain results generally applicable to learning-disabled people without profound or complex impairments (Lesseleirs *et al.*, 2009).

As well as operationalising learning-disability, it was also necessary to define what it meant to be a 'football fan'. As we saw in the literature review in the previous chapter, football fans can be defined in many different ways and have numerous different characteristics; some which are indicative of particular fan groups and other which are more generic. Originally I intended to use individuals possessing a season ticket to their favoured club as a proxy for learning-disabled fans having a prolonged exposure to the theorised established 'community' of fans. However, when it became apparent that this 'community' was non-existent – at least in its traditional, location based form – defining 'fans' in such narrow terms was unnecessarily restrictive to the representativeness of the sample and generalisability of the findings. Similarly, restricting the operationalisation to, for example, individuals who had been to a given number of live matches or who had been fans for a certain number of seasons would have ignored the experience of more casual or newer fans. As such, the operationalisation of 'fan' instead came to mean anyone who identified *themselves* as a fan of Rovers, United or Athletic. Despite being vague, such an operationalisation better reflects the varied, self-defined nature of contemporary football fandom (Giulianotti, 2002), allowing me to "maximise the opportunity to understand the different positions taken by members of the [football fan] social milieu" (Gaskell, 2000:41).

After operationalising what it meant to be a learning-disabled football fan – someone who attend the training sessions for either Rovers', United's or Athletic's learning-disability teams and who identified themselves as a fan – recruiting people to take part was the next challenge. There is little consistent information about the best way of engaging learning-disabled people in research (Evenhuis *et al.*, 2004; Lennox *et al.*, 2005). On the one hand, Cleaver, Ouellette-Kuntz & Sakar (2010), for example, suggest approaching learning-disabled people directly as the most effective recruitment strategy. Conversely, Hatton *et al* (1999) and Lai *et al* (2006) advise going through service providers. As well as the practicalities of being able to speak to people, this area is also clouded by ethical considerations around informed consent and the potential for exploitation.

At the first football training sessions I attended I attempted a conference approach to recruitment, as outlined by Burke, McMillan and Cummins (2003). Addressing the whole group together I introduced myself, explained what I was there for and asked for volunteers. No one stepped forward. As the weeks went by, however, and the more Rovers, United and Athletic training sessions I attended, the players gradually became more interested in interacting with me. To ensure everyone in the football teams had equal chance to participate in the research I made a conscious effort to not let "conceptions of interviewee competence...unwittingly encourage some representations of experience and silence others" (Järvinen, 2000:371). That is to say, to ensure a

sufficiently heterogeneous sample of learning-disabled people, and therefore a more representative picture of football fandom for learning-disabled people, I did not just focus on participants who were 'easier' to talk to.

To further the recruitment of learning-disabled participants I also drew upon the expertise of the football coaches at training sessions who were able to nominate and encourage players to talk to me (Lennox *et al.*, 2005). Although agreement from professionals did not equal consent from participants, it was clear that the coaches had some knowledge about which players would be agreeable to taking part (Stalker, 1998). The use of such 'insiders' can, however, potentially harm the representativeness of a sample. They have the power to block access to certain participants by 'gate-keeping' (Lee, 1993). Specifically, there was a danger that staff would recommend or reject individuals based on their perceived ability to communicate and understand (Brown *et al.*, 1996). But once we had become allies and they understood I was seeking to involve a range of learning-disabled fans, the presence and constructive support of football coaches was crucial (Concannon, 2005; Lennox *et al.*, 2005).

One of the difficulties of qualitative researchers is that it is hard to know what size a sample should be. As a rule of thumb, the broader the scope of the study – and the more comparisons to be made between cases – the larger the sample needs to be (Bryman, 2008). Warren (2002), for example, has suggested that for a qualitative study to be published the minimum number of respondents needs to be twenty and thirty. The variation between different fields of study and the constraints of particular research settings and data collection methods means, however, that there are numerous exceptions to 'Warren's' rule. Following the examples of Hall (2004), Patterson & Pegg (2009) and Mathers (2008), who had between ten and twenty one learning-disabled participants in their studies of learning-disabled people's experiences of leisure and mainstream spaces, I intended to recruit fifteen learning-disabled fans (five at each club). Ultimately only thirteen learning-disabled fans volunteered to take part. Nonetheless, because the sample was relatively homogenous, this reduced number still provided enough data to reach theoretical saturation. Although having a larger sample, providing more data, would of been an "attractive nuisance" (Bauer & Aarts, 2000:34), it would not have made the findings any more representative or generalisable. Had not enough data been collected from Rovers, United, and Athletic, I would have sought to access another football club and sampled their learning-disability team.

### ***The fans***

The thirteen learning-disabled football fans involved in this research were each given a pseudonym. They were Gavin, Mark, Gary, Hannah, Paul, Joe, Sam, Alex, Sanjay, Tom, Steven, Daniel, and David.

A short biography is provided below to provide some contextual information about each participant. Where the participants' fan experiences are particularly entwined with one another', such as Gary and Hannah or Sam and Alex, there biographies are presented together.

**Gavin** is eighteen and lives at home with his mother. He started being a fan of Athletic when he was a young child, influenced by his father, and has followed them ever since. He used to go to matches with his father, but since he passed away two years ago Gavin has continued attending by himself. He has held a season ticket since the beginning of the 2009/2010 football season. Although he sees his friends inside the Athletic's stadium, Gavin still follows the same match-day routine he did with his father; he gets the bus down to the stadium a couple of hours before kick-off, talks to the "badge lady" (Gavin, i1) whilst waiting for the stadium to open. Inside the stadium he normally gets a single pint of beer from his regular drinks kiosk. If he is feeling lucky he puts a bet on, then talks to his steward friend before going to his seat just before kick-off. After matches Gavin always goes to the same kebab shop before catching the bus home from his usual "Athletic bus stop" (Gavin, i1).

**Mark** is nineteen and, like Gavin, lives at home with his mother and supports Athletic. However, he has only done so since starting to play for their learning-disability team a few years ago. Previously, he and his father were both fans of Athletic's cross town rivals, although he never really felt "part of it" (Mark, i1). When his father moved out Mark decided to support Athletic. Starting off attending the odd game when he could afford it, he gradually wanted to attend more regularly and in the middle of the 2010/2011 season received a season ticket as a Christmas present. Although he sometimes goes to matches with his friend David, or other "personal mates" (Mark, i2), he normally goes by himself, getting the bus and a tram to the stadium.

**Gary** who is thirty and **Hannah** who is twenty five are both lifelong United fans. They both live at home with their respective parents. Despite being very close friends, they do not attend home matches together. Gary has a season ticket in the "old man stand" (Gary, i2) sat with friends from around where he lives, while Hannah has a season ticket in the disabled enclosure. With her ticket Hannah gets a free 'carer ticket' so she attends matches with her mother, father, or sister; whoever wants to go with her that day. Their routines for going to matches are somewhat different. Gary lives close to United's stadium so usually walks, picking up his match-day companions along the way. Conversely, Sarah normally drives to matches and parks in the stadium car park. If there is a parent to accompany them, Gary and Sarah do regularly travel together to United's away matches on the club's official coaches.

Also supporting United is **Paul**. Paul is twenty four and lives at home with his mum and dad – his elder brother and sister have moved out. Although his parents are not that interested in football, Paul has supported United since his granddad took him when he was about six years old. He has only had a season ticket for the past couple of years however. Getting dropped off halfway by his mother, on match days Paul walks to United’s stadium with his uncle and cousin, whom he sits a row in front of. After matches he gets picked up by his mother and often taken to his grandmother’s house.

**Joe** is twenty five and has been a fan of Rovers since he received some complimentary match tickets at school about fifteen years ago. Since then, in the words of his mother, “he got totally obsessed with it” (Joe, i1). Joe and his father have had season tickets for roughly the last eight years. They always go together, along with his father’s friend. If his father is away working or on holiday Joe is accompanied by a family friend. Joe and his father have their own match-day routine in which they drive down to the stadium a couple of hours before the match starts in order to get a parking space. They then get some lunch – usually a sandwich – always from the same cafe and sit in their car listening to the radio until a few minutes before kickoff. After the match they drop Joe’s father’s friend off at his house before going home themselves. Joe has been to a couple of away games with his father, but only to other local clubs and not frequently.

**Sam** and **Alex** are also fans of Rovers. Although they live in separate supported housing (in the same village), Sam who is thirty three and Alex who is thirty eight have had season tickets to sit next to each other at Rovers for the past fifteen seasons. They go to matches with Sam’s father, who also first encouraged them both to become fans of Rovers and who organises their season tickets. On match days Alex walks (accompanied by a personal assistant) to Sam’s house where they are both picked up by Sam’s father. They all travel the thirty or so minute car journey from the village in which they live to Rovers’ stadium with Sam’s father’s friend. Occasionally their friend Steven, whom they both play on the Rovers learning-disability team with and who lives with Sam, also comes to matches. Neither Sam nor Gavin has ever been to an away match.

**Sanjay** is thirty six and has been a fan of Rovers for about two years because he is from the area. He would like a season ticket but, both, is unable to afford one and would have no one to accompany him to games. He has been to a couple of live games when a friend is able to get him a ticket and take him to the match or when he has been given a free ticket by the learning-disability team. Generally, instead of attending live matches he listens to the commentary on the radio and watches the highlights on television.

**Tom** is eighteen and became a fan of Rovers after he started playing for the learning-disability team about a year ago. The only matches he has been to are as part of the learning-disability team when they have been given tickets to attend a match by Rovers, something that happens a couple of times a season. Whilst Tom thought the price of tickets prevented him from attending, another barrier was his parents not having the time to take him to matches because of work commitments.

Like Tom, **Daniel**, who is nineteen, has only been to Rovers' games with the learning-disability football team. However, unlike Tom, Daniel has been a fan of Rovers since he was about ten years old because all his family support them. The reasons Daniel does not attend many games is because of the cost and not having anyone to accompany him. Although he said it is not as good as being in the stadium, Daniel has to make do with watching match highlights on the television.

**Steven**, who is forty one, is the final Rovers supporter involved in this research. He lives in the same supported house as Sam, but does not have his own season ticket because of the cost. He usually just watches the match highlights on television. However, when either Sam or Alex are unable to attend matches, Steven usually takes their place. He is also a fan of another club – where he is originally from and whom his father used to support – so does not always want to attend Rovers games.

Finally, **David** is eighteen and has been a fan of Athletic for a couple of years. He was never really interested in playing or being a fan until he was introduced to the Athletic learning-disability team by his brother's friend. He has supported them ever since. He is close friends with Mark, with whom he often goes to Athletic games with when he has the money for a ticket. When he is unable to go he is not that bothered and just finds something else to do.

To provide further contextual information, Table 1 contains some basic descriptive statistics about the sample of learning-disabled fans in this research. Table 1 illustrates that the ages of the sample range from eighteen to forty one, with a mean age of twenty seven. Arguably this precludes drawing any conclusions from the sample about the experiences of older learning-disabled fans that may, for example, have different support needs associated with old age. The minimum age for participation was purposefully set as eighteen so that it is the experience of adults that is captured and to avoid any additional ethical issues related to involving children in social research (Bryman, 2008).

There is only one female participant and one participant who are not white-British, which limits the ability of the sample to represent the experiences of females and ethnic minorities respectively.

None the less, Hannah and Sanjay's respective experiences of being in a gender and ethnic minority at football are useful for considering how other factors in the formation of social identity interact



with learning-disability during football. However, because Sanjay does not have a season ticket, it is not possible to say how being from an ethnic minority background affects the fan experience in the stadium during live matches.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Club</b>	<b>Length of fandom</b>	<b>Season ticket</b>	<b>Regularly attends away matches</b>
<b>Tom</b>	18	Male	White - British	Rovers	1	No	No
<b>Steven</b>	41	Male	White - British	Rovers	2-3	No	No
<b>Sanjay</b>	36	Male	Pakistani-Muslim	Rovers	2	No	No
<b>Sam</b>	33	Male	White - British	Rovers	Over 15	Yes	No
<b>Joe</b>	25	Male	White - British	Rovers	15	Yes	No
<b>Alex</b>	38	Male	White - British	Rovers	Over 15	Yes	No
<b>Daniel</b>	19	Male	White - British	Rovers	9	No	No
<b>Gary</b>	30	Male	White - British	United	Over 15	Yes	Yes
<b>Hannah</b>	25	Female	White - British	United	Over 15	Yes	Yes
<b>Paul</b>	24	Male	White - British	United	18	Yes	No
<b>Gavin</b>	18	Male	White - British	Athletic	10-15	Yes	No
<b>Mark</b>	19	Male	White - British	Athletic	3	Yes	No
<b>David</b>	18	Male	White - British	Athletic	2	No	No

**Table 1 Descriptive Statistics about Sample**

An obvious distinction can be seen between the eight participants who have been fans of their chosen clubs for a significant proportion of their lives (i.e. Sam, Joe, Alex, Daniel, Gary, Paul, Hannah and Gavin) and the five who have only become fans in the past couple of years (i.e. Tom, Steven,

Sanjay, Mark, David). To some extent this division is a result of the sampling frame. Participants who have been fans for a long time where all fans before they joined their learning-disability teams, whereas those participants who have been fans for only a couple of years became fans after – or perhaps because – they joined their learning-disability teams.

Eight of the participants – 61% – have season tickets to attend all of Rovers', United's or Athletic's home matches. It would, however, be inappropriate to generalise this to all learning-disabled football fans. The high proportion of the participants with season tickets is most probably a reflection of the voluntary nature of my sampling approach. That is to say, those with season tickets are more motivated to volunteer to talk to me because they feel they have more to say. Finally, only two out of thirteen of the sample regularly attended their clubs' away fixtures. This, I think, is a reflection of not only Hannah and Gary's desire to attend away matches, but also of the support they receive to allow them to do so. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

### ***Informed consent***

The issue of informed consent – the “unquestionable right to make a voluntary decision of whether or not to participate” (Swain et al., 1998:28) – was a prominent issue, not just while recruiting learning-disabled participants but throughout the research process. Informed consent is arguably the safeguard which protects the rights of the participant and fulfils the responsibility of the researcher (Fryer, 1995). Ensuring informed consent from club officials was a simple matter of providing an information sheet explaining the purpose and aim of the research, what they were being expected to do, and what would happen to their anonymised data (Bryman, 2008). Club officials then clearly gave their informed consent by signing a consent form (see Appendix 4). A stipulation that all three clubs provided to their participation was that they would be anonymous. Working with learning-disabled people presented challenges in this respect, however (Swain *et al.*, 1998; Walmsley, 2004).

The decision to participate in research should be informed by an understanding of what the research entails. It was difficult to ensure the learning-disabled participants knew what they were signing up for; more than just participating in a series of interviews, for example, they were being invited to open up their everyday lives to outside scrutiny (Booth & Booth, 1994b). Parents or carers were not invited to give proxy consent as this would have contradicted the inclusive ethos of the research and disempowered the participants. (Of course, in reality, all the parents or guardians in their roles as gatekeepers were required to give some form of consent by, for example, helping to arrange meetings).

I explained to the participants that I was from a University doing some research about football fans. Rather than using the technical language I framed the research as: 'I'm trying to find out what are the good and bad things about being a fan of Rovers, United or Athletic and is it a good place to meet people and make friends?'. I also produced two information sheets to give to the learning-disabled people who expressed interest in what I was doing at football training sessions. One used standard prose and the other simplified language and pictures to explain the research process (Sanderson, 1998; Rubin *et al.*, 2001) (see Appendix 1). Although these good practices were drawn on, I am sceptical whether this technique actually made the information any more accessible, especially for those participants with little or no literacy skills (Ledger & Shufflebotham, 2003). As such, like Williams (1999b), who spent time 'hanging around' her research site so the participants could become comfortable with her, in order to ensure that participants understood what they were being invited to participate in I used the time at training sessions to let participants get to know me. Through interaction we created a shared understanding of 'research'. For example, Sanjay initially thought I was a local newspaper journalist – he had previous experience talking to journalists about being a fan of Rovers. Eventually he understood that I was from a university doing something different called 'research', although it still involved him talking about being a fan of Rovers.

Regardless of whether the learning-disabled participants initially understood what they were consenting to or not, the idea that informed consent only occurred once at the beginning of the research process is simplistic (Swain *et al.*, 1998). Gaining consent was a continuous process achieved through our ongoing interactions (Walmsley, 1993; Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). Whilst some of the participants may still not have fully understood the 'research' process, importantly they were all happy to speak to me about their experience of football fandom and for me to write about it (Baxter, 2005). I explained that in the final thesis each participant would be anonymised and that they could withdraw at any time if they no longer wanted to be involved.

### ***The research relationship***

When entering the research field I was aware that the challenge was to create a research process that facilitated the expression of experience and concerns deemed 'private' without intruding into peoples' lives, whilst also preventing myself becoming so immersed in 'the cause' that I would lose sight of the academic goals (Booth & Booth, 1996; Stalker, 1998; Swain *et al.*, 1998). Before any data collection began, I spent four or five weeks attending the weekly training sessions for the learning-disability teams of Rovers, Athletic and United. This enabled relationships between myself, as the researcher, and participants to gradually develop (Stalker, 1998).

Starting off just watching from the sidelines and occasionally speaking to people when they approached, as the weeks passed and people became more comfortable with my presence I gradually became more involved in the sessions and with the learning-disabled people in attendance. Whilst the nature and extent of this varied between settings, engaging in this shared activity facilitated communication between me and the participants (Booth *et al.*, 1990). Although such behaviour can result in a blurring of the research relationship boundaries (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003) and open up the process to infinite exploitation (Brandon *et al.*, 1995), sensitively building rapport in this way created opportunities to openly discuss personal experiences and feelings (Morris, 1998; 2003). After this time we had established enough of a relationship to move beyond the 'official story' that participants might tell the casual inquirer (Lesseliers *et al.*, 2009).

Establishing trust and rapport between researcher and participants is vital for making participants feel safe and secure (Baxter, 2005). Achieving this with learning-disabled participants demanded a level of intimacy beyond the usual interviewer-participant relationship. During training sessions we were able to talk, interact, and slowly build relationships conducive to conducting qualitative research (Munford *et al.*, 2008). I always endeavoured to be truthful about the purpose of my involvement in their lives (i.e. "I'm doing some research about people like you who are football fans"). The moral status model of trust (Booth & Booth, 1994b) was used where I, through my actions, tried to validate my identity as a researcher whilst showing the participants that they had value in their own right. This was achieved by emphasising to potential participants that they could make a valuable contribution to the research and that I was really interested in their experiences.

Building up research relationships in this manner, however, raised the danger of intruding uninvited into people's lives. For example, whilst I knew that I was attempting to collect data, what the participants would get in return was unclear (Stalker, 1998). Swain *et al.* (1998:35) summarise the dangers of in-depth qualitative research with learning-disabled people, suggesting it is "not inherently abusive...but [is] inherently potentially abusive". It was important to try and distance myself from other 'professionals', with whom participants may have had negative or disempowering experiences (Munford *et al.*, 2008). Whilst I felt comfortable interacting with the players at each training session, I made a conscious effort to make them feel at ease with me. This was achieved through what Booth & Booth (1994b) refer to as setting aside the values and standards of middle class society. This does not concern social class issues *per se*, but rather refers to researchers not trying to maintain power imbalances through, for example, formal dress or expecting participants to adhere to traditionally 'polite' modes of communication. Entering the field I wore athletic apparel or casual clothing similar to those participating in the training sessions. Whilst my southern accent was

noticeably different from most the participants – ‘posh’ in the words of one person – I spoke in a friendly and casual manner.

During the research process concerns about intrusiveness gave way to worries about setting up expectations of continuing friendship (Booth & Booth, 1994b; Gilbert, 2004). Most participants were willing to set their own conditions for engagement with me (Walmsley, 1995). That is to say, they wanted to keep the relationship quite ‘professional’, only interacting at pre-arranged meetings. My actions to establish working relationships may have been interpreted at a more personal level by Gavin, Mark, and Joe who added me as a ‘friend’ on the social-networking site Facebook. When research relationships assume greater significance in the lives of participants (Stalker, 1998) authors in the Emancipatory tradition, such as Ramcharan & Grant (1994) and Mitchell (1996), suggest becoming an advocate and transferring ownership of the research to participants. The alternative approach is to act like a guest in people’s lives – you are passing in and out of their life in an instant (Atkinson, 1988). In this way researchers can established sufficient rapport with those involved in their research without becoming too involved in the ‘action’ dimension of the work and neglecting the ‘academic’ aspect (Bowes, 1996). After discussing these incidences with my supervisors, I began trying to reemphasise my role in the participants’ lives as, rather confusingly, between friend and professional. However, I concluded it was impossible and unnecessary to deny the relationships built up between us. They had shared their personal experiences with me and I had spoken to them honestly about myself. Nonetheless, despite being ‘friends’ on the social networking site, I only ever communicated with one of the participants – Joe – a couple of times since my field work officially ended a year ago. He messaged me to ask how I was and tell me how the Rovers’ learning-disability team had performed at a recent tournament. I messaged back to say I was fine and congratulations.

Once the data collection had finished, rather than pulling out of the field abruptly, I continued attending the training sessions for several weeks, gradually reducing the duration and frequency of my visits (Stalker, 1998). This time was used to tie up any loose ends with the data collection, clarifying specific pieces of information from or about the participants, and explain to participants the research was coming to an end.

## **Research instruments**

While there is a growing literature about the values and principles underpinning inclusive approaches (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003), less has been said about practical issues encountered in empirical studies (Booth, 1996; Stalker, 1998; Walmsley, 2004). The generally accepted discourse is that working to collect data from/with learning-disabled people can present significant challenges

(Grant, 1997; Rooney, 2002; Concannon, 2005). Arguably, the most difficult obstacle to overcome is in communicating with people who might have few or no verbal communication skills (Cogher, 2005; Concannon, 2005; Blow, 2008). Of course, there is wide variation in the communication skills of learning-disabled people, but restricted language skills and a lack of self-confidence can combine to produce an apparent unresponsiveness. Also, because many learning-disabled people are used to other people controlling their lives, there is often a tendency to acquiesce or to choose the last option in a sequence (Stalker, 1998; Rogers, 1999).

In planning and implementing data collection the onus was therefore on me to be flexible, patient, imaginative, and reflexive. To account for any possible communication diversity – including those who do not use conventional methods of communication (Kelly & Monteith, 2003; Morris, 2003) – it was essential to employ research instruments and develop “techniques and technologies to help people express their needs and views” (Grant, 1997:129). This required the adoption of different data collection instruments to suit the range of individuals involved and for those instruments to be tailored for specific individuals (Gilbert, 2004).

Data collection was arranged with each participant on terms which left the initiative with them. This made it easier for them to refuse, minimising the risk of compliance (Stalker, 1998; Cleaver *et al.*, 2010). I first spoke to participants at training sessions about what data collection I would like to do with them. This was followed up over the telephone usually a couple of days later. Where possible I let the participants control where and when the data collection took place. For some, this was not a problem, but for others – after discussing the idea of a meeting – it was necessary to speak to an advocate (usually a parent) to arrange details.

## ***Interviewing***

The semi-structured interview was used as the primary research instrument, both with the learning-disabled participants and with club officials. In assuming that the social world is actively contested by people in their everyday lives, qualitative interviews provided the basic data for the development of an understanding of the relation between social actors and their situation (Gaskell, 2000). The interviews facilitated a “fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts” (Gaskell, 2000:39). That is to say, through these interviews I was able to gain an insight into the experience of football fandom for learning-disabled people. By ‘listening beyond’ the words of any one participant I was able to pick up the echoes of other participants’ experiences (Bertaux-Wiame, 1981). The common elements in the participants’ interviews revealed how their football fandom has been shaped not only by their learning disabilities but by wider, external factors linked to the networks of social relations to which

they belong (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame, 1981). Understanding the participants' experiences of football fandom in this way was the entry point for me to introduce interpretive frameworks to understand their accounts in more conceptual or abstract terms, often in relation to other observations.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format. An interview schedule (see Appendix 5) guided our conversations, but also allowed space for unforeseen topics to emerge and data collection to be constructed between myself and interviewees (Swain *et al.*, 1998; Bryman, 2008). The main topics covered in the interviews related directly to my research questions. These were broken down into subtopics I felt needed to be covered in order to gain the best understanding of the relationship between learning-disability, football fandom, and social inclusion. An interview schedule was also adhered to during interviews with club officials (see Appendix 6). This included how each club defined 'learning disability', their policy towards learning-disabled fans (i.e. ticket policy), and what strategies they had in place to tackle the social exclusion of learning-disabled people through football.

In order to achieve a deep understanding of each participant's experiences of football fandom, I intended to conduct at least three interviews with each of the learning-disabled participants. The first round of interviews focussed on how the participants became a fan of Rovers, United or Athletic, how long they had been a fan, what they do as a fan (i.e. going to matches or not), and what being a fan means in their everyday lives. Deliberately keeping conversation quite general was an effective tactic to gradually introduce participants to the interview format. The second round of interviews explored their experiences of match days in more detail. For those who regularly attended live matches this was an opportunity to describe their experiences in their teams' stadium, including how they got there, their routine of the day, the experience of being in the stadium and of their fellow fans, and how attending live matches made them feel. For the participants who did not regularly attend live matches, the second interview focussed on: firstly, their experiences of consuming football through different mediums and; secondly, their experiences of when they have been to live matches. Finally, the third round of interviews was intended to focus on how being a football fan created opportunities for the participants to meet people and make friends and how being a football fan affected their everyday lives. This included what, if anything, the participants did to show other people they were fans of Rovers, United, or Athletic and what reaction this generated. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews there was significant crossover of topics between different rounds of interviewing. This served to clarify and reinforce my interpretation of the participant's experiences. I tried to keep the interviews within close time intervals so that the

content and dynamics of previous visits could be easily recalled (Beresford, 1997; Morris, 1998). Although this was not always possible, with several weeks often passing between meetings, I continued to attend football training sessions to maintain some continuity.

With David it was only possible to conduct two interviews as he decided he did not want to be interviewed a third time. Conversely, with some of the participants it was possible to conduct a fourth (Alex and Paul) or fifth (Gary) interview in order to discuss or clarify certain aspects in more detail. These additional interviews were more ad hoc than those previous. Gary's fifth interview was only very short as I ran into him where I had arranged a separate interview and asked if we could have a quick chat about something he had mentioned previously, which he was only too happy to do. Similarly, I was only able to interview Alex a fourth time because I was making the long journey to speak to Sam and Steven, who live close to Alex, so I decided to take the opportunity to visit Alex again (with his prior approval).

The qualitative interview has often been considered an inappropriate instrument when researching with learning-disabled people traditionally thought of as lacking the necessary verbal skills. Lesseliers *et al* (2009) suggest that where people's voices are not 'narratively complete' they can often become excluded from participation. This was not my practice, however. Whilst the majority of the participants were all sufficiently articulate and able to tell their own stories (Bryman, 2008), where participants inclined to give one-word or short answers I endeavoured to ensure a lack of verbal skills would not prevent them from revealing their experiences. Successfully eliciting information about their football fandom simply required me – as interviewer – to work harder during the interview. More finely tuned listening skills and patience were necessary tools for understanding what participants said and responding appropriately, particularly for participants with more limited communication skills. A photo-elicitation exercise (as discussed below) was also undertaken to help stimulate conversation. Whilst a lack of words is often taken to mean a lack of comprehension, the flexibility of the semi-structured approach ensured I could avoid the common mistake of talking down to learning-disabled participants (Lesseliers *et al.*, 2009).

I varied the open-endedness of questions depending on each participant's ability to comprehend and discuss the topic, which was only revealed through repeated contact and interaction at training sessions (Tremblay, 1957; Booth & Booth, 1994b; Stalker, 1998). For the more articulate, interviews were conducted as informal, open-ended conversations taken at the pace of the participant. On several occasions, however, I was slightly concerned about the open-endedness of questions in relation to the well being of some of the participants (Fox, 1976; Swain *et al.*, 1998). This was particularly the case when they spoke about feeling lonely or, for example, when Gavin spoke about



his deceased father. I was not expecting these issues to arise and so had not undertaken the necessary training to effectively deal with them. In these instances I could do nothing more than offer a friendly and understanding voice. Such open-endedness, however, was not always appropriate. Whilst I always left space for participants to talk, for those with limited verbal communication skills it was necessary to employ more closed or simple yes-no questions (Booth & Booth, 1996).

Within both open and closed structures, the issue of response bias and suggestibility was a continuous concern (Kelly, 2007). Like Finch (1984:80) I often emerged from interviews with the feeling that “many interviewees need to know how to protect themselves from people like me”. That is to say, there were many opportunities where I could have encouraged the participants –with very little effort – to give just the answer I was looking for. I worked to overcome this by ensuring questions related directly to participants’ lived experiences (Mcauley, 1996). So, for example, asking ‘what’s it like when *you* go to watch Rovers with *your* dad?’ rather than just ‘what’s it like at Rovers’ matches?’. It was also important to give positive and negative answers equal attention, and avoid leading questions. I found it useful to recap what had just been discussed to confirm my interpretation. Although this may have invited further acquiescence, it was reassuring that all participants were willing to correct me. Although it differed depending on whom I was interviewing, my general approach was to accept, rather than challenge, participants’ narratives, knowing that I could ask the same question in different ways to gauge the consistency of responses. Over the course of the interviews I progressively focused my questions to establish a consistent answer and to clarify any previous answers (Rodgers, 1999). Whilst I and the participants appeared prepared to repeatedly visit topics until there was nothing else to learn, interviews ended when it seemed they might start to resemble interrogations.

All interviews were organised to make the participant feel comfortable, safe, and able to give the best answers (Cleaver *et al.*, 2010). As much as possible I tried to empower the participants to decide where, when and how interviews took place. Table 2 details some logistical details about the interviews. Tom, Sanjay, Daniel, Gary, Hannah, Mark, and David were able to independently arrange interviews with me. The degree of independent decision making for each of these participants, however, was somewhat different. I was able to arrange times and dates to visit David and Mark independently over the telephone. Conversely, for Tom, Sanjay, and Daniel, after they had decided they wanted to talk to me at football sessions (where I was going to be each week), arranging interviews was simply a matter of them deciding whether they wanted to talk to me on a given week or whether they would prefer to wait until next week. While this was somewhat unpredictable for

me, it allowed Tom, Sanjay and Daniel a great deal of flexibility. Similarly, with Gary and Hannah, they both decided they wanted to be interviewed at a weekly social club (run by their football coach) at a local leisure centre. To arrange these interviews I spoke to them both at football training sessions about whether they were free that week. To arrange interviews with Steven, Sam, Joe, Alex, Paul, and Gavin I first asked them – usually over the telephone – if they had a preferred location, time and place. With their permission I then confirmed the details with a parent/support worker (Kelly, 2007).

Steven, Sam, Joe, Alex, Paul, Gavin, Mark and David all preferred to be interviewed in their homes, whereas Tom, Sanjay and Daniel preferred to be interviewed at their football training sessions and Gary and Hannah chose to speak to me at a local leisure centre. I had considered thirty minutes a sensible time for each interview (Cleaver *et al.*, 2010). However, interviews conducted at Rovers' training sessions often only lasted for between ten and twenty minutes as the participants were keen to get back to playing. This is in contrast to interviews conducted in people's homes which lasted up to one hour. In these instances it seemed counterproductive to cut the flowing dialogue.

On several occasions, interviews were conducted jointly with more than one participant. This was useful as those involved were able to mutually prompt each other into areas that otherwise might have been overlooked (Booth & Booth, 1994b). During all of the first interviews a parent/support worker remained close by. The skills and expertise of support workers and/or family members are often used in social research to help 'interpret' the contributions of learning-disabled people (Stalker, 1998; Cogher, 2005; Blow, 2008). However, I tried to avoid this because of the significant adverse effect on data collection and results (Llewellyn, 2009). In the few instances where supporters were directly involved, their effect on the interview process was clear. For example, in the first interview, Joe's father dominated large chunks of the conversation, going off on tangents about his own experiences. Also, Tom's mother decided to sit in on our final interview and his engagement and responses noticeably tailed off towards the "more acceptable official shape" (Antaki *et al.*, 2002:1) his mother expected. Whilst I always allowed participants to choose who was present during interviews, in these instances I feel I should have presented this choice in a more convincing way, stressing to supporters the importance of giving participants the opportunity to express themselves, and reassuring them that findings would be treated in confidence and that participants' identities would not be revealed. However, I had to achieve a fine balance between avoiding 'contamination' of participants' views as a result of supporters' presence and not risking the loss of interviews by challenging the existing power relations between participants and their carers.

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Number of interviews</b>	<b>Arranged by</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Single/joint</b>	<b>Average Duration (Mins.)</b>
<b>Tom</b>	3	Participant	Football training	1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> joint with Daniel. 3 <sup>rd</sup> Single	13
<b>Steven</b>	3	Participant & supporter	Participant's home	Joint with Sam	55
<b>Sanjay</b>	3	Participant	Football training	Single	16
<b>Sam</b>	3	Participant & Supporter	Participant's home	Joint with Steven	55
<b>Joe</b>	3	Participant & Supporter	1 & 2 at Participant's home. 3 at football training.	Single	35
<b>Alex</b>	4	Participant & Supporter	1, 2 & 4 at Participant's home. 3 at football training.	Single	25
<b>Daniel</b>	3	Participant	Football training	1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> joint with Tom. 3 <sup>rd</sup> Single	16
<b>Gary</b>	5	Participant	Local leisure centre	1-4 joint with Hannah. 5 <sup>th</sup> Single	29
<b>Hannah</b>	4	Participant	Local leisure centre	Joint with Gary	35
<b>Paul</b>	4	Participant & supporter	Participant's home	Single	19
<b>Gavin</b>	3	Participant & supporter	Participant's home	Single	30
<b>Mark</b>	3	Participant	Participant's home	Single	32
<b>David</b>	2	Participant	Participant's home	Single	29

Table 2 Logistical information about interviews

With the participants' permission I recorded each interview with a Dictaphone. I explained that I would later listen to, and write about, what they said. Kelly (2007) has suggests that the use of such recording devices can inhibit people speaking their minds, but I found this not to be the case. All of the participants were happy to be recorded and it did not seem to affect their responses. As part of making the participants feel comfortable during interviews, I never emphasised the fact that participants were being recorded by, for example, asking for quiet or them to speak up. Whilst it may have empowered the participants', I did not go as far as letting them control turning the recorder on or off. In the future, such a gesture might go a long way to giving participants increased control during the research process.

Immediately after the interviews, when I got back to the car I made rough notes about key discussion points and other observations in a research diary. These notes have been particularly helpful to prompt the process of methodological reflexivity. For example, they enabled me to remember the success of particular interview techniques and the negative effects of, for example, Joe's father and Tom's mother during interviews. I transcribed each recording as soon as possible after the interview with the context still fresh in the memory (Kelly, 2007; Bryman, 2008).

### ***Photo-elicitation***

One of my main tools for facilitating communication with the learning-disabled participants – particularly those who were less articulate – was a photo-elicitation exercise, a technique that is gaining popularity in research with learning-disabled people (Booth & Booth, 2003; Aldridge, 2007; Charnley & Hwang, 2010). Following Booth & Booth (2003:434) the design was to give each participant a disposable camera with the instructions to take pictures of what is “important to you” about being a football fan. Unlike Booth & Booth (2003) however, I was not interested in the photographs themselves as ‘visual truths’, but rather the added meaning that the participants could offer about the images (Aldridge, 2007). Such an approach has been shown to be effective when researching with learning-disabled people (Mathers, 2005; Charnley & Hwang, 2010), aiding the participation of those who lack verbal fluency. It is argued that putting a camera in people's hands can empower participants in ways that bury issues of acquiescence and compliance associated with other data collection techniques (Sigelman *et al.*, 1980). The aim is to facilitate choice and active participation in the research process (Booth & Booth, 2003; Mathers, 2005:5). Photo-elicitation exists within the participatory paradigm of social research. However, because I struggled with the tension between taking a truly participatory approach and apprehension about the degree of participation throughout the process, my experience of this technique was somewhat mixed.

At the beginning of data collection I decided that photo-elicitation would be most effective employed by participants who regularly attended live football matches as – I thought – they would have the most opportunities to take pictures. In retrospect, this decision disempowered those who did not attend live matches regularly. After agreeing to take part, a disposable camera was given to season ticket holders Sam, Joe, Alex, Gary, Hannah, Gavin, and Mark. (The cameras were not all given out at the same time, but over a period of weeks when participants wanted them). Because I anticipated the images conveying “their place in, and experience of, the [football fan] world” (Booth & Booth, 2003:432), after showing the participants briefly how to use the camera, I tried to give only minimal guidance about what to take pictures of. In an attempt to empower the participants further, I avoided consultation about this exercise with parents or supporters with whom they attended matches. The intention was that I would then collect the cameras whenever participants decided they were finished, have the pictures developed, and talk about the photographs with participants in a subsequent interview.

This process did not work as I had planned. Whilst Paul used all his exposures at a United match and even took his film to be developed, I considered the other participants to have been less productive. Gavin and Mark, despite claiming to have used all their exposures, both lost their cameras, while Sam and Alex did not take any photographs. Joe, Gary and Hannah only took a handful of photographs each, whereas I was expecting them to have used most, if not all, of their films. However, in retrospect it is inappropriate of me to label this contribution ‘not successful’. Gary, Hannah and Joe may have simply decided they had taken enough pictures.

There are some practical issues that have been observed about photo-elicitation methods with learning-disabled participants. Charnley & Hwang (2010) suggest that inexperience can lead many learning-disabled people to feel anxious about making a mistake. Likewise, Aldridge (2007) argues that the number of exposures in cameras can be too many. I feel the biggest flaw was my own lack of experience in using this technique and using participatory methods that are characterised by uncertainty for the researcher who has to relinquish control of the process. This was manifest in my failure to appropriately establish the right balance between minimal interference and sufficient support. Simply instructing the participants when giving them the camera and speaking to them once again – either over the phone or at training sessions – about their progress was not sufficient. Whilst Paul successfully completed the task, I learned later this was only with the help and encouragement of his mother who overheard us talking about it.

Reflecting on these difficulties (and under the misguided notion that Gary, Hannah and Joe had been ‘unsuccessful’), I approached the same participants to do the exercise again with a new disposable

camera. Joe, Gary, Hannah, Gavin and Mark all declined. They said they had enjoyed the process the first time round, but did not want to do it again. Sam and Alex did want to try again. This time I informed Sam's dad – with whom they both attended Rovers' matches – about the cameras and what I had asked Sam and Alex to do. With his assistance they were both able to use all their exposures over the next few matches they attended. While the involvement of a supporter to assist participants to take photographs in this way may infringe on the ability of some learning-disabled people to independently decide what is "important to you" (Booth & Booth, 2003:434), it made the difference between them producing photographs or not – a necessary step to engaging them as "active contributors" (Mathers, 2005:5).

This has been an important lesson for me, principally because where photographic images were used in interviews they were very effective in eliciting additional information and deeper understanding. For Gary, Hannah and Joe who were verbally articulate, using the small collection of pictures they had each taken and "sharing the story [of] the pictures" (Booth & Booth, 2003:432) stimulated them to divulge more details about their experiences as fans. Similarly, for Sam, Alex and Paul who were less verbally articulate, describing what they could see in front of them and choosing their favourite photographs helped provide a catalyst for conversation (Aldridge, 2007). For Sam in particular, referring to his own photographs was an extremely potent tool bridging the communicative barriers between interviewer and interviewee (Radley & Taylor, 2003). The images helped "arouse curiosity" and move towards understanding the ways in which the participants' social worlds are shaped and controlled (Radley & Taylor, 2003:79; Charnley & Hwang, 2010).

### ***Participant observation***

To supplement and enhance the interview data, several participant observation exercises were carried out across the 2010/2011 football season. In the literature review, live football matches were identified as the manifestation and culmination of football fan identities (Robson, 2000). Attending live matches also appeared to me to be a site where football fans came together as a community – in one shape or another. As such, in order to properly understand the social inclusion potential of football fandom for learning-disabled people, it was necessary to fully explore the participants' experiences of this space. This involved accompanying participants to a live football match so that I could try to understand how they went about expressing their fandom. A criticism of this method could be the privilege it confers on regularly attending live matches over other modes of football fandom. However, I feel the significance of football stadia as a site where football fans congregate as 'imagined communities' or neo-tribes (Blackshaw, 2008) justified the decision to focus on this context.

My first participant observation opportunity occurred by chance, almost immediately after I had entered the field. Having only attended Rovers' training session a couple of times, the head coach invited me to attend Rovers' first home game of the 2010/2011 season with the whole learning-disability team where they were to parade a trophy on the pitch at half time. Although I had been invited by the head coach of the learning-disability team as opposed to any of the learning-disabled participants in the research, attending this match enabled me to see how the members of Rovers' learning-disability team – including Sanjay, Tom, Steven, Sam, Joe, Alex, and Daniel – experienced attending a live football match together, as team-mates and friends.

I attended a further six live football matches: one each with Sam, Joe, Alex, Paul, Gavin, and Mark. The details of these observations can be seen in Table 3. Like the interviews, participant observations were organised by consulting with each participant a number of times at different football training sessions about if I could attend a match with them. Where necessary (i.e. with Sam, Alex, Joe, Paul, and Gavin), the specific details were then arranged with parents/supporters. I wanted to carry out participant observations with all the participants who regularly attended live matches. However, neither Hannah nor Gary wanted to do this. They did not give a specific reason for this decision other than they preferred to just participate in interviews. Although I reminded them that I would be able to conduct participant observation with them at any time if they so wished, they persisted in declining, which was perfectly acceptable.

The extent or limit to my observations was negotiated with individual participants. I explained to Joe, Sam, Alex, Paul, Gavin and Mark that I wanted to see what a normal match-day was like for them. Joe, Paul, Gavin and Mark invited me to meet them at their houses to observe their preparations for live matches and to travel with them to and from the stadium. Sam's Father suggested it would be easier to meet Sam and Alex at Rovers' stadium. The participant observations did allow me to "gain a foothold in [the]social reality" of each participant's football fandom (Bryman, 2008:465). Much like Stalker's (1998) idea of a 'guided tour', accompanying participants allowed me to gain firsthand knowledge of how they experienced football fandom. Information gained in these observations were used both in their own right and to stimulate conversations in later interviews.

Accompanying participants on match days was particularly useful in enabling me to experience some of the taken for granted or implicit features of football fandom that I had not previously considered or that could not be fully understood through interviews alone. An example of this was how the participants interacted with those around them whilst inside football stadia. In the interviews my impression was of jovial back-and-forth exchanges between the participants and those who sat in the surrounding seats. However, attending the matches I could see that communication was often

much more subtle and understated. Another example was the language and swearing that Gavin and Mark used when inside Athletic's stadium, which they had initially said in interviews they did not enjoy or engage with.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Attended with (myself, participant and...)</b>	<b>Location of meet</b>	<b>Time met (pm)</b>	<b>Time left (pm)</b>	<b>Activities (before/after match)</b>
<b>Joe</b>	Joe's Father, Joe's Father's friend	Joe's house	1.30	6.00	Listen to pre-match radio for an hour in the car
<b>Sam</b>	Alex, Sam's Father, and Sam's Father's Friend Graham	Rovers' stadium	2.40	5.30	Looked around the club shop. Escorted them back to their car
<b>Alex</b>	Sam, Sam's Father, and Sam's Father's friend Graham	Rovers' stadium	2.40	5.30	Looked around the club shop. Escorted them back to their car
<b>Paul</b>	Paul's Uncle and Cousin	Paul's house	2.10	5.30	Met Paul's uncle and cousin to walk to the stadium before the match
<b>Gavin</b>	N/A	Gavin's house	12.00	6.45	Talked to the 'badge lady' before the match. Waited an hour outside the stadium for it open. Bought a pint of beer inside the stadium. Got a kebab on the way home.
<b>Mark</b>	N/A	Mark's house	12.45	7.00	Travelled on the bus and tram to the stadium. Got a burger on the way home.

**Table 3** Logistical information about participant observations

Despite the benefits of this method in helping me develop a more complete picture of the fandom of the research participants, I had to continually question what kind of observer effect I may have had (Bryman, 2008). For example, while I observed Paul's limited interaction with his cousin and uncle with whom he normally attends United matches, how much of this was because I had disturbed the naturalness of the setting by being there 'with him'? Like Giulianotti (1995b), I was open in my role as participant-as-observer. Each time I attended a football match I tried to partake in each participant's normal pattern of travelling, eating and drinking, laughing and joking, and discussing the team. I was spending the afternoon doing something I enjoyed – watching football – so I naturally became quite involved. However, when participants were, for example, engaged in interactions with other people I made a conscious effort not to disturb this 'natural behaviour' by being too involved. When it came to actively supporting each team, I adopted a more passive role.



Whilst I was happy, for example, to stand up and clap when Rovers, United or Athletic scored a goal, I did not engage in any chanting, singing, or shouting. Taking this metaphorical step back into a purely observer role may have contributed to my observer effect, marking me out as different and disturbing the 'natural environment' (Silverman, 2000). However, not doing so would have been dishonest to both myself and the participants.

After I left the company of the participants I recorded my observations in my research diary. Again, I only made notes once I had left each participant in order to avoid drawing more attention to myself as a researcher and to maintain some of the naturalness of the settings.

### ***Club documents and policies***

My final source of data consisted of various official documents and policies produced by Rovers, United, Athletic, The Football Association, The Football League, and The Football League Trust. These documents concerned learning-disabled people, social inclusion/exclusion and football fandom. Whilst I had access to key officials within Rovers, United and Athletic, I only had access to documents that were already in the public domain. These included:

- *Athletic's Customer Charter Season 2010/2011* (Athletic, 2010).
- *Club Charter – United* (United, 2010).
- *Rovers' Policy for Disabled Supporters* (Rovers, 2010).
- *Rovers' Fan Charter* (Rovers, 2010)
- *Guide to Facilities for Disabled Fans at Football League Grounds – Championship* (Football League, 2010).
- *Guide to Facilities for Disabled Fans at Football League Grounds – League 1* (Football League, 2010).
- *Guide to Facilities for Disabled Fans at Football League Grounds – League 2* (Football League, 2010).
- *Disability Football Strategy 2010-2012* (The FA, 2010).
- The Football Association, The Football League and The Football League Trust websites.

These documents, policies and key websites provided information with regard to what, if anything, was being done to facilitate the inclusion of learning-disabled people as football fans. However, I was always cautious to view these publications as a distinct 'reality' in their own right and not necessarily as 'transparent representations' of Rovers', United's and Athletic's actions towards learning-disabled fans (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). As Atkinson & Coffey (2004:58) suggest:

“We cannot...learn through written records alone how an organisation actually operates day by day. Equally, we cannot treat records – however 'official' – as firm evidence of what they report”.

As such, the accumulated documentary evidence served to compliment the testimonies of key officials. The relative dearth of data available was indicative of absence of consideration given specifically to learning-disabled fans.

## **Analysis**

In contrast to the analysis of quantitative data there are few well-established and widely accepted rules for the analysis of qualitative data (Bryman, 2008). There is a range of literature documenting the underlying assumptions and procedures associated with different varieties of qualitative data analysis. Many of these are associated with specific approaches to data analysis, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, discourse analysis and narrative analysis. However, when reporting qualitative data analysis, particularly in journal articles where space for methodological reflection is reduced, a considerable number of authors describe a strategy without any specific label given to their analytical approach. Patterson & Pegg (2009:394), for example, simply state how “an inductive approach was considered the most appropriate means”. Although they describe the particular steps involved – “looking for patterns, checking emergent themes, interrelating themes, interpreting the meaning of themes and providing quotes from the original data that support the themes (Patterson & Pegg, 2009:394) – their process can be seen as more 'generic' and not within one specific tradition (Silverman, 2000).

In this research, the accumulated data has been analysed through a 'generic inductive approach' (Silverman, 2000; Thomas, 2003). This approach to data analysis shares some traits with grounded theory, so much so that the findings may have been indistinguishable had analysis been carried out in a grounded theory fashion (Thomas, 2003). This included the concurrent collection and analysis of data, coding the data at three levels, the enhancement of theoretical sensitivity and the constant comparison of data and emerging interpretations to 'ground' the findings in the data. However, I was not bound by the “systematic set of procedures” set forth by Strauss & Corbin (1990:24). In

particular, existing literature was not integrated “at [a] time when the inductive process [was] largely finished” (Connell & Lowe, 1997:167).

The advantage of this ‘generic’ approach was in allowing findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in the raw data without any constraints imposed by structured methodologies. In particular, the chosen generic inductive approach worked to establish clear links between the research objectives and the findings, whilst ensuring these links were transparent and defensible. Theoretically, qualitative data analysis is split into two schools based around the role of theory in analysis (Bryman, 2008). Deductive analysis is a ‘top-down’ approach beginning with a theory and hypotheses to be tested through the accumulation of data. Conversely, inductive analysis is more of a ‘bottom-up’ approach based on specific observations leading to general theorising. Whilst this analysis ostensibly followed an inductive path, in reality it involved a balance of inductive *and* deductive reasoning (Silverman, 2000).

Although the emphasis was on allowing dominant themes to emerge from the data, this was “guided by specific objects” (Thomas, 2003:2). ‘Specific objects’ included the research objectives (deductive) as well as multiple readings and interpretations of the raw data (inductive). Both the research objectives and the raw data were given meaning based on my interpretation, which was informed by previous research and theory about learning-disabled people, football fans and social inclusion/exclusion, my professional and personal experience in the field, and my knowledge of the people and/or situations under study. That is to say, I was not seeking to test a hypothesis in the typical deductive sense about, for example, the distribution of learning-disabled football fans across Giulianotti’s (2002) taxonomy of fans or the importance of ‘capabilities’ for learning-disabled people wanting to attend live football matches. However, this *a priori* knowledge of past research was still influential – via the research objectives and my interpretation of data – throughout the analysis process.

## ***Coding***

The analysis of interview data, field notes, and official documents began as an iterative/recursive process, involving data collection and analysis proceeding in tandem and referring back to one another. Following each interview and participant observation I recorded what I understood to be the key points of discussion and/or observations in my research diary, reflecting also on how they related to the broader research questions and, to some extent, key theoretical ideas in the literature. For example, after my second interview with Gavin I wrote in my research diary:

“Gavin goes down to the stadium at 12 (quite early?) and meets his ‘season ticket friends’. He knows the programme sellers/badge sellers and talks to them – they are a source of interaction, expanding his network, but probably not social capital”.

This interview with Gavin, and a similar incident during my first interview with Mark, led me to first start thinking about the benefits of football fandom for the learning-disabled participants not as a route to ‘socially inclusion’ but in terms of individuals being able to feel a part of something as a valued participant. This eventually led to the introduction of the notion of ‘belonging’ as a significant theoretical construct around the social benefits of football fandom for learning-disabled people. I was then able to explore these emerging themes further in subsequent interviews and observations.

The more formal process of data analysis, however, began following the end of data collection. After ‘cleaning’ the text for formatting, punctuation, grammatical and spelling errors, I commenced reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, field notes, and official club documents. It was necessary to embark on breaking down this raw data into its “component parts” through a process of coding (Bryman, 2008:592). Coding involves looking for patterns, checking emergent themes, interpreting the meaning of themes and providing quotes from the original data that support the themes (Creswell, 2008). Codes are linked together in various relationships – such as networks, hierarchies, or casual sequences – to develop a model or framework that captures key themes and processes. Henderson (1991) refers to this as the discovery and interpretation stage, as it allows researchers to seek out possible new classifications, develop concepts and search for patterns. Strauss & Corbin (1990) suggest that there are three levels of coding – open, axial, and selective – and, although I was not following their grounded theory, these are the steps I followed; exploring the data from the most descriptive level to the most interpretive. The codes became “the organizing tools which allow[ed] [me] to sort out the heap of bits to relevant characteristics” (Dey, 1993:40).

Using Nvivo, I began open coding by examining the data in a very detailed and methodical manner, highlighting words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs that appeared to contain some inherent meaning. I created a label for a new category into which the segment was assigned. Whilst I endeavoured to limit the introduction of any preconceived ideas, this first stage of coding was not a purely inductive process (Silverman, 2000). Not only was I, perhaps unconsciously, guided by my own assumptions and experiences, but pieces of text were only considered valuable if they were at least loosely relevant to: (i) the experience of football fandom for learning-disabled people; (ii) the experience of football fandom contributing to social inclusion, specifically in terms of increasing social capital, social networks and community membership, or; (iii) work being done to facilitate learning-disabled football fandom (i.e. the research questions). The codes created at this stage

ranged from, for example, 'activities in post-season' through 'radio' to 'clubs responsibilities'. A full list can be seen in appendix 7. Despite initially being quite concerned about the sheer number of codes being generated, it was reassuring to discover it is not uncommon to assign new codes almost "line by line" (Beart *et al.*, 2004:93).

After breaking down, examining, comparing, contextualising and categorising the data in this open format, the next stage was to start making links and grouping concepts back together through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Silverman, 2000; Bryman, 2008). Axial coding was significant for not only creating links between codes, but also for starting to introducing a broader theoretical framework to emerging themes (Charmaz, 2006). Guided by the research questions, the first stage of axial coding was to classify all the open codes into two categories based on whether they concerned the participants' experience of fandom or the clubs' response to learning-disabled fans. I was then able to make further substantive and conceptual links between open codes within these broad categories. For example, following open coding there were several separate codes relating to the role of television, radio, the internet, and newspapers/magazines in the participants' football fandom. These were subsequently merged into two codes concerning the use of media to either follow ones team or interact with other fans. These decisions were based on "which...codes made the most analytical sense to categorise [the] data incisively and completely" (Charmaz, 2006:57-58). Throughout this analysis phase, however, a process of circular reduction was used to constantly return to the raw data and open codes to ensure accuracy (Neuman, 2003). This ensured the emerging themes provided a deeper insight into the potential social inclusion benefits of football fandom for learning-disabled people.

The axial coding process merged into the final 'selective' coding phase. Axial codes were continually combined and related to one another into a hierarchical structure until the "core category[ies]", or central issues, around which all other codes were related and integrated, had emerged (Neuman, 2003; Bryman, 2008:60). Strauss & Corbin (1998:10) refer to such codes as the "building blocks of theory". Whilst I was not employing a rigid grounded theory approach, selective codes were still considered 'building blocks'. But rather than leading to emerging theory per se, selective codes were chosen that "capture[d] the key aspects of the themes in the raw data and which [were] assessed to be the most important themes *given the research objectives*" (Thomas, 2003:5, emphasis added). The model in Appendix 8 shows the completed coding tree, demonstrating the hierarchical relationship between codes.

Prior to coding the raw data I presumed any analysis would result in three 'selective' codes, with one unique to each research question. However, by the final stage of coding it was more conceptually

complete to have only two highest-order categories. The selective code 'How are LEARNING-DISABLED PEOPLE included as supporters' included codes relating to how the football fandom of learning-disabled people is facilitated, and so directly addressed the third research question. Conversely, through the process of linking relevant codes together it became apparent that learning-disabled people's experiences of football fandom (a core theme of research question one) and any social inclusion benefits to be gained through football fandom for learning disabled people (a core theme of research question two) were deeply intertwined and conceptually linked. The second selective code, addressing both research questions simultaneously, was thus defined as 'LEARNING-DISABLED PEOPLE's experience of support – do they feel included'. This selective code is then sub-categorised into exploring the participants' experiences of football fandom 'at matches' and 'away from matches'. In this way I have attempted to address issues concerning learning-disabled people's experiences of football fandom (research question one) and any possible social inclusion opportunities this presents (research question two) simultaneously.

Following (and to some extent during) this predominantly inductive process to code and reorganise the raw data into a hierarchical structure it was necessary to introduce some additional theoretical concepts. As suggested above, my analysis of the raw data was guided by the "specific objects" of existing literature about learning-disabled people, football fans and social inclusion/exclusion; my professional and personal experience in the field; and my knowledge of the people and/or situations under study (Silverman, 2000; Thomas, 2003:2). For example, the code 'in-group/out-group' is informed by, and named after, an aspect of Stebbins (1999) work on serious leisure. Although I had not set out to look for examples of in-group/out-group distinctions, it was patently apparent some of the participants thought about fans of their club and rival clubs in this way.

It was not until coding was completed, however, that the key theoretical ideas, which would help conceptualise the potential social inclusion benefits of football fandom for learning-disabled people, were realised and introduced. Firstly, the Capability Approach, initially described by Sen (1980; 1987; 1993; 2004), is employed to analyse how the football fandom of learning-disabled people is facilitated. The Capability Approach appears to provide the necessary tools for understanding the participants' opportunities to engage in football fandom in light of their 'capabilities' and for evaluating the football clubs' role in enhancing or not enhancing these opportunities. Secondly, Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy of football fans was similarly introduced to the inductively devised codes as it appeared congruent with the participants varied fan behaviours and identities. Finally, the coding process and eventual coding tree indicated that participants experienced, and gained some benefit, from both attending live matches and football fandom in their everyday lives. As such,

it was necessary to employ a theoretical construct which accounted for how participants felt in each setting rather than being based on their actual behaviours and interactions. The concept of 'belonging' – underpinned by notions of personal and collective identity, emotions and the body – was thusly introduced as a key theoretical idea. Whilst other ideas and concepts from the pre-existing literature, such as serious leisure (Stebbins, 1999), social capital (Putnam, 1995) and semi-institutional spaces (Philo *et al.*, 2005; Parr, 2008) are also re-introduced in the forthcoming substantive chapters, the Capability Approach (Sen, 1980; 1987; 1993; 2004), *Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs* (Giulianotti, 2002), and 'belonging' (Hall, 2010) form the main theoretical framework for this research.

## ***Write up***

The results of the data analysis are presented and discussed across the subsequent three chapters. The next chapter, Chapter 4, focuses on the varied football fandom of participants and the experience and social benefits of attending live matches. Chapter 5 focuses particular attention on the participants' football fandom in their everyday lives, away from live matches. Chapters 4 and 5 stem from the same selective code (i.e. 'LEARNING-DISABLED PEOPLE's experience of support – do they feel included') and so harmonize in presenting a complete picture of the participants' experiences of football fandom and any social benefits gained. Chapter 6, based on the remaining selective code (i.e. 'How are LEARNING-DISABLED PEOPLE included as supporters') shifts focus towards the role of football clubs in the participants football fandom.

One of the advantages of the chosen generic inductive analysis was that, like grounded theory, it offered a way for the subjective experiences of participants to be explored and for these to be retained in the write-up (Beart *et al.*, 2004). Direct quotations have been taken from the original data and used to support conceptual themes (Creswell, 2008). Where quotations have been taken from interview scripts, these are referenced with the participants' name, an 'i' (indicating 'interview'), and a number indicating from which of the interviews with that participant the quote is taken. 'Grounding findings', for want of a better phrase, in the accounts of those involved has helped preserve the voices of the learning-disabled participants.

The vulnerability of the participants and the historical marginalisation learning-disabled people served as a constant reminder to make clear in the final thesis whose voice was speaking and not misrepresenting the participants' narratives (Booth, 1996). When re-reading the interview scripts, it was sometimes difficult to discern the meaning of some of the participants' answers or phrases out of context. Where this occurred, or where participants gave limited responses, their answers to a number of questions have been 'run together' and presented as one piece of text in a reconstructed

story (Stalker, 1998). While Booth & Booth (1996) felt it appropriate to insert words that seemed to reflect the meaning of their learning-disabled participants' speech, I do not feel I had the right to put words into the participants' mouths. However, where some participants spoke in strong regional dialects, it has been necessary to 'translate' certain phrases into a grammatically correct version.

The findings of this research have not been subjected to any external validation exercises or techniques to test their trustworthiness. Such exercises include: the independent replication of research, triangulation within a project, and feedback from participants in the research and/or users of the findings. Doing so may have helped to confirm the accuracy and validity of the final conclusions. Advocates of more Emancipatory styles of research argue that respondent validation is also necessary to enable participants have a say in the final outcomes (Oliver, 1992; 1997). For example, I might have reviewed with each participant my interpretation of their experiences of football fandom, giving them opportunity to feedback any thoughts or feelings. None the less, the findings of this research do compare favourably with those of previous research, including, for example, the varied nature of contemporary football fandom (Giulianotti, 2002; 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2006; Giulianotti, 2007; Crabbe, 2008) and the benefits of different leisure activities and spaces for learning-disabled people (Hall, 2010). Additionally, because of the inclusive manner in which the research has been conducted, this thesis offers some "explanatory power... to explain what might happen" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:267) with regard to learning-disability, football fandom, and social inclusion/exclusion.

## Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to explain how this research has been carried out. As well as explaining the explicit rules and procedures that governed data collection, analysis and ethics, I have tried to make clear some of the thought processes that got me from research proposal to thesis. Through my reflections I hope to have conveyed some of the difficulties I encountered, but also the enjoyment I had along the way.

My personal background, heavily involved with learning-disabled people, has been a guiding influence throughout the research and an inclusive ethos has hopefully permeated through the methodology. As I proposed and controlled the research I maintained my status as 'researcher', but with "participants engaged as fully as possible" (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004:214). This approach carried an obligation to go beyond the traditional ethical standard. More than simply satisfying the conditions for ethical approval for this study, I have endeavoured to establish an equitable research-participant relationship between myself and the learning-disabled participants. However, what I



think is clear in this chapter is the tension between my desire to conduct the research in the inclusive tradition and my inexperience as a researcher leading to me not wanting to relinquish control.

Following a personal realisation about the lack of knowledge and legislation around learning-disabled fandom, the research design has evolved from a deductive policy evaluation to an inductive exploration of the theorised positive relationship between learning disability, football fandom, and social inclusion. This required data to be collected from learning-disabled football fans and those involved in facilitating their inclusion at football clubs in the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition. Collecting qualitative data from both sources enabled a deeper understanding of the social benefits that learning-disabled people might attain through football fandom. It also allowed for the necessary degree of flexibility in selecting and tailoring research instruments to suit participants.

Issues of sampling, recruitment, and negotiating access have also been covered, describing how the research was based at three professional football clubs – Rovers, Athletic and United – where access to different ‘officials’ was negotiated. In this chapter I have attempted to convey some of the difficulties I had with this process. If I were conducting the research again I would be more proactive in approaching football clubs and identifying key individuals directly rather than relying on post or email.

At each club, the representative learning-disability teams were used as ad hoc sampling frames from which to recruit learning-disabled football fans. Reflecting the inclusive ethos of the project, throughout the process of gaining access, recruiting and sampling I endeavoured not to disempower those who volunteered to participate. I tried to ensure participants had as much power over their involvement as possible, but any choices they had were constrained within my overall control of the research. For logistical reasons, the support of various ‘gatekeepers’ was also often necessary.

My primary method of data collection was the qualitative interview, conducted face-to-face with all learning-disabled participants and either face-to-face, by telephone, or email correspondence with football club ‘officials’. In an attempt to stimulate greater conversation between myself and the learning-disabled participants, a photo-elicitation exercise was also carried out. An example of my control over the research process, the activity was only offered to participants who regularly attended live matches. Participants who volunteered to take part were given a disposable camera and asked to take pictures of things important to them about being a fan. I would suggest that this activity produced mixed results. The biggest problem was that in my efforts to avoid interference, I failed to achieve sufficient support for the participants. The limited numbers of photographs

produced, however, were very effective conversational prompts in interviews. Also with those who regularly attended football matches, and who were happy from me to accompany them, a participant observation exercise was undertaken. Similar to Stalker's (1998) 'guided tour', this exercise allowed me to gain firsthand knowledge of how those learning-disabled fans experience football fandom. Any publicly accessible documents and publications produced by Rovers, United, The Football Association and The Football League regarding learning-disabled football fans were also collected and reviewed.

Finally I have explained how all the accumulated data has been analysed through a balance of induction and deduction. Using Nvivo, and informed by the researcher questions, the raw data from interview transcripts, policy documents, and field notes was coded. Open codes were merged and combined them into a hierarchical structure, on to which a theoretical framework has been added. This tree structure now forms the basis for the remaining chapters of this thesis, in which the findings are present and discussed.

# **Chapter 4 – Part of the crowd: Learning disabled people’s experiences of fandom and the social inclusion implications of attending live football matches**

## **Introduction**

The preceding chapters of this thesis have focused on providing a background to the research study, including a review of relevant literature and an outline of the chosen methodology. The next three chapters, starting here, discuss the key themes that have emerged from the empirical data in relation to wider theoretical ideas in the existing literature. This chapter focuses on the learning-disabled participants’ experiences of football fandom and opportunities for social inclusion available at live matches. Chapter 5 then moves on to consider any opportunities for social inclusion that occur through football fandom in the participant’s everyday lives. Chapter 6 explores the role of relevant organisations (i.e. football clubs, The FA and The Football League) in facilitating the inclusion of learning-disabled fans. The final chapter, Chapter 7, will draw together the significant points of discussion to address the research questions and fill in gaps in the wider knowledge concerning learning-disability, football fandom, and social inclusion/exclusion.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the participants’ experiences of being football fans, specifically attending live games, and any opportunities for social inclusion this presents. This is achieved by first considering the experience of football fandom for learning-disabled people in relation to the broader football fan literature. The purpose is to compare the experiences of the learning-disabled people in this study with those presented in the current literature on football fans in order to ascertain to what extent conclusions about mainstream football fandom can be applied to fans with learning disabilities. This section draws heavily on the work of Richard Giulianotti (2002), using his taxonomy to conceptualise the varied fandom of the participants. The chapter will then move on to explore in more detail the experiences of learning-disabled football fans attending live football matches. Opportunities for social interaction that occur while attending live football matches for learning-disabled people, and any resultant increase in social capital or social networks, are considered. Finally, the football stadium as a semi-institutional space is discussed.

## Football fandom for learning-disabled people

Over the past twenty five years or so football fan culture and the way people consume football has supposedly transformed from being the sole preserve of 'traditional' fans making weekly pilgrimages to stadia to enact their 'authentic' support (Williams, 1999a:35; Fawbert, 2011a). Fawbert (2011a) suggests the catalyst for change was the Hillsborough Stadium disaster in Sheffield on the 15<sup>th</sup> April 1989, when ninety-six Liverpool Football Club fans were crushed to death while watching their team play Nottingham Forest Football Club. The eventual switch to all-seated stadia – as opposed to standing terraced 'ends' – after Lord Justice Taylor's investigation in the safety of football grounds in England attracted increasing numbers of *nouveau* fans at the expense of traditional working-class ones. This, and a growing number of corporate seats taken up by people who "generally like...expense accounts, but not football" (Wells, 2006:95), resulted in a pacification of fans (Joern, 2009) and a sterilisation of the atmosphere at English football (Armstrong, 1998). The establishment of the Premier League in 1992 from the rest of the Football League, funded by monies from the BSkyB satellite television company, supposedly caused further gentrification, feminisation and commodification of football fans (Brown, 2008).

Whilst much of the sociology of sport literature laments the disruption caused to traditional fans (Giulianotti, 2002; Crabbe & Brown, 2004; Williams, 2006:98), this "cultural revolution within football" has benefited those people previously excluded from football fandom. This has included women, young people, members of ethnic minorities, and disabled people (Penny and Redhead, 2009). Penny & Redhead (2009), for example, have shown how despite protest from some fans about the lack of atmosphere in the new City of Manchester Stadium, 'other' Manchester City fans have championed the new facility. Whilst football stadia have historically been rather inhospitable places for older people, children, and disabled spectators in particular, the City of Manchester Stadium has won numerous awards showing how through good design the resulting environment can be safe, convenient and enjoyable to use by all people, regardless of age, gender, or disability (Penny & Redhead, 2009).

The experiences of the learning-disabled fans involved in this research is a novel example of the equality and diversity increasingly pervading contemporary football fandom (Williams, 2006). It can also be seen to reinforce the declining hegemony of working class, white, male fan cultures (Ben-Porat, 2000; Crabbe & Brown, 2004). I would not like to suggest whether the aforementioned processes of gentrification, feminisation, or commodification of football fandom have had a direct affect or been directly experienced by any of the participants of this research. Sam and Joe, for example, have both supported Rovers since the mid 1990's, but we did not discuss any changes to

their fandom in this time. (An interesting future research topic might be to explore the learning-disabled fan experience in the pre-commodified era and the changes that have since occurred). However, regardless of how we arrived at this position, by the 2011/2012 football season, the learning-disabled fans involved in this research participated in most, if not all, aspects of football fandom.

### ***The varied football fandom of learning-disabled people***

Just as non-learning-disabled, or 'mainstream', fans are no longer characterised as a homogenous group, the evidence collected here suggests the same is true of learning-disabled football fans. The stories told by participants demonstrate a wide variation of football fandom in terms of duration, intensity, and participation. Using Giulianotti's (2002:31) taxonomy of football fans provides a visual illustration of the "changes and cultural differences experienced by [individual learning-disabled fans] in their relationships with identified clubs".

Giulianotti (2002) proposes four archetypal categories of football fans – *Supporters*, *Followers*, *Fans*, and *Flaneurs* – underpinned by two basic binary oppositions: 'hot'-'cool' and 'traditional'-'consumer'. The 'traditional'-'consumer' horizontal axis, reflects the basis of an individual's investment in their chosen club. 'Traditional' fans have a longer, more local and popular cultural identification with football clubs, whereas 'consumers' have a more market centred relationship to the club reflected in the "centrality of consuming club products" (Giulianotti, 2002:31). The 'hot'-'cool' vertical axis measures how central a football club is to an individual's sense of self. 'Hot' forms of fandom emphasize intense kinds of identification and solidarity, whereas 'cool' forms denote a more aloof and transient relationship to a particular club.

Figure 2 illustrates where each of the sample of learning-disabled fans fits onto Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy based on my interpretation of their fandom. This analysis takes into account, for example, the number of live matches – both home and away – participants attend, duration of fandom, amount (in both economic terms and number of items) and motivation for purchasing club merchandise, and level of identification with chosen team. The participants' position within the taxonomy is more than anything, however, a reflection of my subjective understanding after spending time with each participant, interviewing them, and in some cases attending live football matches together as a participant observer.

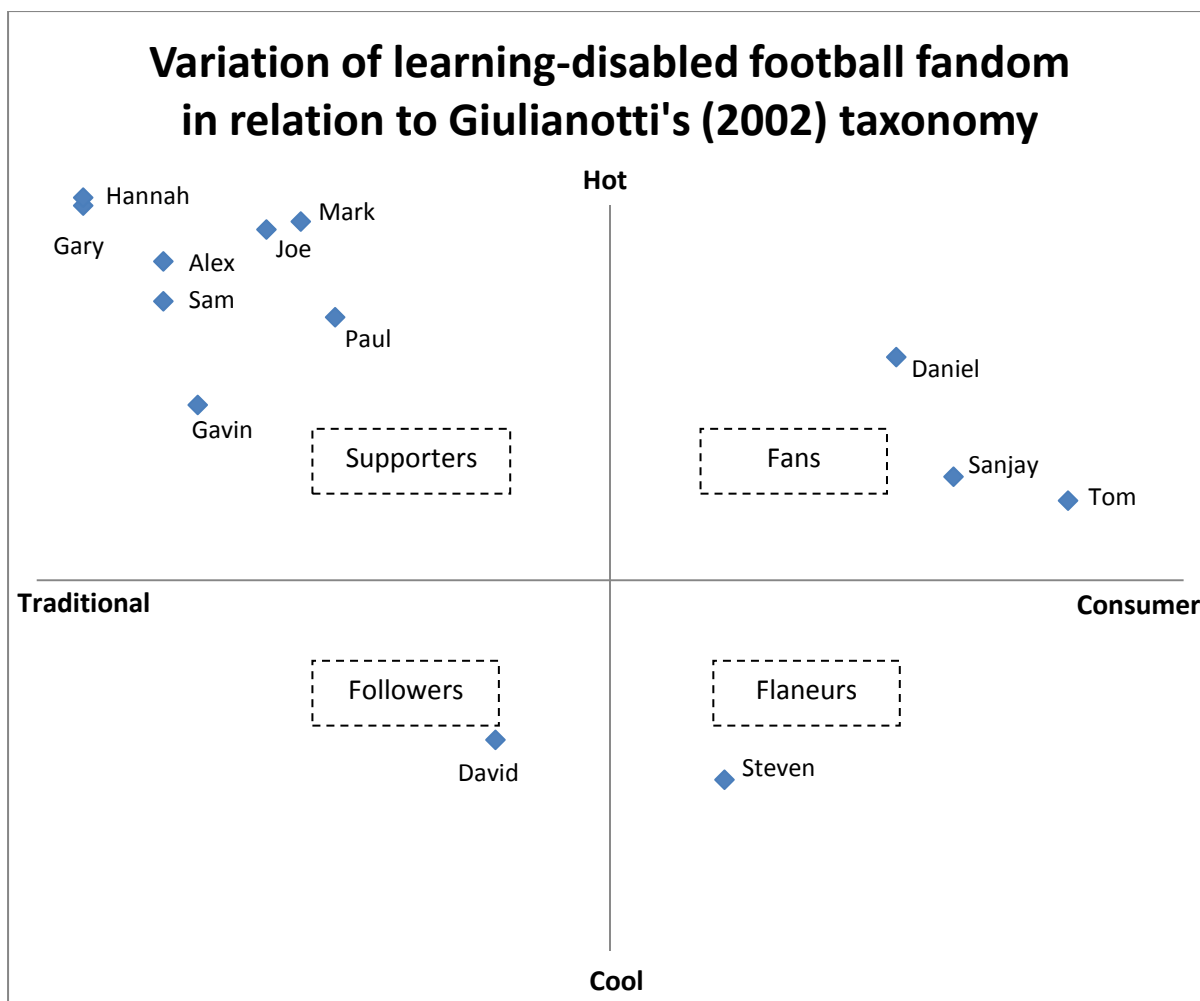


Figure 2: Variation in participant's football fandom in relation to Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy.

Whilst there is not an even distribution, the diagram demonstrates how, just like non-learning-disabled football fans, learning-disabled people are able to operate as either *Supporters*, *Followers*, *Fans*, or *Flaneurs*. In the methodology chapter I referred briefly to the sampling bias of asking learning-disabled fans to volunteer to participate in the research. The suggestion was that only those more passionate about their clubs – who really wanted to talk to me about them – would volunteer. This can perhaps be seen in the high concentration of the sample within the *Supporter* category. None the less, this should not detract from the key point made by this diagram: the football fandom of learning-disabled people is heterogeneous.

Although there is some variation in 'hot'-'cool' identification, eleven out of the thirteen participants in this research can be seen to exhibit 'hot' forms of identification with their chosen clubs. This means that, to a lesser or greater extent, these people experience "intense kinds of identification and solidarity with the club" (Giulianotti, 2002:31). Only Steven and David displayed a mostly 'cool' relationship with Rovers and Athletic respectively. During interviews, Gary, Hannah, Mark, Gavin, Joe

and Sanjay all referred to the collective relationship they had with their clubs, using phrases such as “how did we do?” (Hannah, i2) and “we did well” (Paul, i1). Gary (i1) even suggested that being a fan of United is so important to him that “it’s like [my] religion”. Being “proud” (Hannah, i1) to be a fan of Rovers, United, or Athletic because they are “[my] own local team” (Joe, i2) or because “that’s where I’m from” (Alex, i2) was a common occurrence. For these highly identified participants, to use Giulianotti’s (2002:33) words, their chosen club has become an “emblem of its surrounding community”. This feeling is then embodied through various “supporter rituals” (Giulianotti, 2002:33), such as regularly attending live matches.

As well as their identification with their own club, a source of some variation along the ‘hot’/‘cool’ axis was the participants’ relationships to other clubs. Those higher up the axes tended to be concerned with only one club – Rovers, United or Athletic. In my interpretation, expressing an interest in or professing to be a fan of other clubs drew individuals down towards ‘cool’ identification. Sanjay (i2), for example, said he “support[ed] Rovers first, then Manchester United”. Gavin is an interesting case in this regard. Despite being strongly identified with Athletic, he was also a fan of Chelsea Football Club because “it’s got Frank Lampard (his favourite player) in it” (Gavin, i1). However, I did not feel that Gavin was so determined to keep “abreast of developments among clubs and football people in which he...has a favourable interest” (Giulianotti, 2002:34) that he should be considered a *Follower*. Steven appeared to have the ‘coolest’ identification to his team, Rovers. This was in fact because Rovers was his second team:

Me: You support who?

Steven: Burnley.

Me: Burnley, OK. Why do you support Burnley?

Steven: Cos...me dad support Burnley for his life.

Me: So your dad supported Burnley all his life and you support them too as well?

Steven: Yeah

Me: And do you support Rovers too?

Steven: Little bit.

Along the ‘traditional’/‘consumer’ horizontal axis greater variation between participants was evident. The number of live matches participants attended was a key factor in their placement along this continuum. For example, Sanjay, Tom, and Daniel attended the least number of live matches and so were considered to be the most ‘consumer’ in their fandom. They instead had to rely on the ‘cool’ mediums of television, radio, and the internet. Conversely, Hannah and Gary, who occupied

the most 'traditional' positions, held season tickets to attend all of United's home games as well as travelling to many away games throughout the football season.

The length of time the participants in this research had been fans of their chosen club also varied considerably from the 'traditional' "all [my] life" (Alex, i1) to shorter, more 'consumer' time periods. Giulianotti (2002:33) implies that length of time is one of the most important factors in classifying ones fandom, suggesting "the classic supporter has a long-term personal and emotional investment in the club" which "may be supplemented (but never supplanted) by a market-centered investment". It is for this reason that, for example, Sam and Alex are considered to be more 'traditional' fans than Mark. Although Mark attends more away matches, he has only been a fan of Athletic for a few seasons, whereas Sam and Alex have been consistently attending Rovers' live matches for over fifteen years. It is for the same reason that Daniel, who has been a fan of Rovers since he was a young boy, is considered to be more 'traditional' than both Sanjay and Tom, who have only started being fans of Rovers in the past couple of seasons.

It is possible to see something of a correlation between the length of the participants' fandom for their chosen club and their initial motivations for becoming fans. That is to say, Sam, Gavin, Gary, Paul, and Daniel, who had all been fans of one club for prolonged periods in their lives – "all [my] life" (Alex, i1) or "about since six I think" (Sam, i1) – were all influenced to become fans by a parent or grandparent during adolescence or childhood. (Alex was influenced to become a Rovers fan by Sam's father when he was young). Comparatively, Sanjay, Tom, Steven, and David were only introduced to their clubs relatively recently through playing football in learning-disability teams. As with the other characteristics of figure 1 that have been described however, this is not a causal relationship. Participants' motivation for becoming fans was not necessarily associated with shortened or prolonged fandom. Similarly, being a fan over a long period of time did not necessarily result in 'hotter' identification with a club. What will become clear as the discussion unfolds in the forthcoming chapters is that the participants' positions within Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy are a reflection of their personal relationships to their clubs and of their subjective experiences as fans.

### ***Learning-disabled people as 'traditional' fans***

Amongst the variety of fandom displayed by the participants in this study, much of the behaviour of these learning-disabled fans echoed that of the "traditional" (Williams, 1999a:35) idealised in many quarters of the football fan literature. For example, as well as regular match attendance, many of the learning-disabled fans involved were acutely aware of the binary distinction between the supposedly 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' fan (Robson, 2000). Particular those positioned at the 'hot' and 'traditional' ends of Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy – the *Supporters* – differentiated themselves



as “proper supporter[s]” (Mark, i1) away from other “glory hunters” (Hannah, i1). Discussing the fluctuating attendances for United’s home matches Gary (i1) suggests:

“When it’s only a small club like...they’ll only be something like 8,000, but when Sheffield United and Leeds, you think it’s like the whole of United’s come ‘cos there’s 20-odd-thousand. You’re right, glory hunters! It’s the same with cup ties. ‘Oh it’s West Ham this week. Oh I’ll go down”.

Mark also discussed the same phenomenon of people only attending certain Athletic matches. He classified these people as not being “real supporters” (Mark, i2):

“If people only go to the big games I don’t think they’re real supporters either, ‘cos only going to the big games, only for the entertainment value they’re gonna be big games kind of thing. But, like, I go to games even if...all odds will be against Athletic, no matter what. If I can get to it, I will go” (Mark, i2).

A less common example of ‘traditional’ fan behaviour was participants frequenting public houses, the place where “the male holy trinity of alcohol, football, and male bonding come together” (Weed, 2007:400). Gary often talks to his friends at his local “[working man’s] club” about United’s performances. Although it is not as regular an occurrence, Gavin (i2) has been to a “local Athletic pub for Athletic fans” with his cousins. Also, Joe and his father visited a public house when they went to an away match. However, other than these three examples, none of the other participants spoke of public houses as a site for displaying or enhancing their football fandom. Certainly none of the learning-disabled fans involved had ever engaged in the ‘traditional’ fan routine of rendezvousing with other like minded individuals in public houses before and after attending live football matches (Weed, 2007). Hannah (i1) did not understand how anyone could watch a football match when “caylied” (drunk).

Learning-disabled fans, almost by definition, can never become part of the “traditional” fan culture idealised by many (Williams, 1999:35). Even where they are able to display most, if not all, of the expected behaviours for group membership, their presence contradicts the homogenously working-class, white, male sub-culture that ‘traditional’ fandom symbolises. However, this does not mean that the fandom of learning-disabled people should automatically be viewed as less passionate or in any way ‘inauthentic’. As wider structural, organisational, and commercial changes have affected football fan subcultures, evidence suggests that the learning-disabled fans involved in this research have been able to access – to varying degrees – the ‘invented traditions’ which maintain the collective identities of certain types of football fans (King, 2002). In this sense, by highlighting the continuities that exist within football fandom (Crabbe & Brown, 2004; Crabbe, 2008) it is perhaps more appropriate to describe an evolving ‘traditional’ type of fandom that learning-disabled fans can now access.

## ***Varied football fandom and social inclusion***

With regard to possibly enabling learning-disabled people to become more socially included, the observed variation in fandom is significant. It suggests the learning-disabled participants have been able to exercise a choice – a key goal of Valuing People (DH, 2001) and Valuing People Now (DH, 2009) – about how they engaged with football fandom. An example of this can be seen in Mark's decision to become a fan of Athletic after his father left home. He says:

“My dad, sort of, encouraged me to support [Athletic's rivals]. But...umm...I think that...what I like most about supporting Athletic is that it's probably...the club...probably the first club I feel like I've properly supported. Cos when I went to them on my own I didn't just go there cos I was encouraged and go to 'em for any certain reason. I just go there cos I liked 'em” (Mark, i1).

In this respect, Mark's decision to support one team over another was an empowering act that allowed him to, in his words, “being my own person” (Mark, i3). Similarly, Daniel has decided to persist with being a fan of Rovers despite being pressured to change. He said:

“People come up to me and they say ‘you should wear Man United and stuff’ and I say ‘Well, I don't really wanna wear that sort of stuff. I'm interested in what I feel and what I feel to wear. I want to wear it and no-one can change that’” (Daniel, i2).

It could be argued that the decision of the other learning-disabled fans to, for example, attend live matches or consume certain club products empowers them by giving them back control over their leisure time. However, it would be inappropriate to view football fandom completely in this way as part of some “utopian vision” where all of the participants have been able to make “choices about activities in pleasant neighbourhoods with plentiful resources” (Burton & Kagan, 2006:305).

Just as learning-disabled people's opportunities to engage in leisure activities in general are widely constrained and socially patterned (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005), the reality for all the participants was that their fandom was in some way constrained. Fandom was constrained by the financial barriers affecting many football fans (Giulianotti, 2002), but also by their impairments. The most prominent example of this was the affect individuals' impairments had on their ability to attend live football matches. Although this issue will be discussed in more detail in the Chapter 6, it is worth describing briefly here how the participants' attendance of live football matches was affected by their impairments. Doing so will provide a backdrop to the rest of this chapter.

Just as Frey et al (2005) suggest social support is an influential factor for learning-disabled people engaging in leisure activities, this was clearly the case with regard to attending live football matches. For example, Sam, Alex, Joe, Hannah, Paul, David, Tom, Daniel, and Steven only ever saw their favoured club play live when accompanied by someone else. Unsurprisingly, the support to attend

live matches mostly comes from parents or other members of participants' extended families (Modell *et al.*, 1997; Buttimer & Tierney, 2005). David also received assistance attending matches from his friend Mark (Robertson *et al.*, 2001a). Additional support to attend live games for the fans of Rovers and Athletic also came when their learning-disability representative teams arranged for all the players to attend a live match a couple of times during each season. In these instances all the players attend the match together supervised by their football coaches.

When these support networks were not in place or were unavailable for whatever reason, the effect on the participants' ability to express their fandom in their preferred manner (i.e. attending live matches) was clearly evident. Sanjay, for example, made it very clear that he would love to be able to attend more of Rovers' live games, but cannot because there is no one to accompany him. A result of many of the participants' dependence on the social support meant that their ability to express their fandom and attend live matches was often dictated by others, a not uncommon feature of many learning-disabled peoples' leisure activities (Messent *et al.*, 1999; Heller *et al.*, 2002).

Not all the participants in this research were affected in the same way. For those with less severe impairments, such as Gary, Mark, and Gavin, they were evidently able to exercise more choice about their fandom by attending matches independently. For example, although each of these individuals had their own established match-day routines, they were not fixed in these patterns and so had control over how they spent their leisure time that day. This included deciding whether or not to stop for something to eat on the way to the football stadium as Gavin and Gary often did, or whether to go to a friend's house after a match like Mark. However, even for these people, their impairments eventually created barriers to their fandom. The most obvious example is attending – or not attending – away matches, where both Gavin and Gary relied on some family support.

## **The live football match – the heart of the fan experience**

The rise of televised football via satellite and cable television since the early 1990's has seen a growth in alternatives to attending live football matches in person (Weed, 2007; 2008). Despite these changes, however, there is still much continuity from previous generations of football fans with attending live football matches and watching one's team in person continuing to be the preferred medium of consuming football (Nash, 2000; Crabbe & Brown, 2004; Stone, 2007). Weed (2008) suggests that much of the pleasure of being a football fan comes from 'being there' and experiencing the immediate pleasure and excitement of witnessing the live event. This was evidently

the case for the learning-disabled fans in this research for whom attending live matches was the most important and best part of being a fan.

Being present in the stadium to watch Rovers, United, or Athletic play live was overwhelmingly associated with positive emotions (Ismer, 2011); feeling “excited” (Gavin, i2) and “really happy” (Daniel, i2), even if “it’s against a really rubbish team!” (Mark, i2). Indeed, during participant observation data collection when I attended football matches with the participants, I found it to be an extremely enjoyable way to spend a Saturday afternoon; for someone like myself who appreciates football, there is something indescribable – a visceral experience – about being in the stadium amongst like-minded people. Even for those participants who did not have season tickets, attending live football matches was a “happy” (Sanjay, i2) experience. David (i1) explains about the few matches he has been to:

“It feels...it feels quite exciting to be honest. I mean, seeing all the team training and that it puts a smile on my face and...uhh...I just like watching ‘em and stuff like that”.

Compared to the alternative supporting options – either watching on television or listening on the radio – attending live matches is significantly more enjoyable. As Daniel (i3), for example, suggests about the limited number of live matches he has attended:

“I get more, like, excited when I go watch Rovers now then...I didn’t before. Cos when I used to watch them on tele it’s not the same. You don’t hear all the noise on tele then you do at Rovers ground”.

Similarly, Sanjay (i1) highlighted the preference of attending live matches over following Rovers through alternative means:

Sanjay: Uhh...sometimes I listen to matches on the radio, sometimes I go to matches, sometimes I go on the matches, yeah.

Me: Which is your favourite?

Sanjay: Going to matches...uhh...going to matches and that...sit down and when they score just stand up and go (clap) and do that if they score. And if they win I be happy.

Whilst many so called ‘traditional’ fans have relocated entirely from increasingly sanitised football stadia to the ‘new terraces’ found in public houses (Williams, 2006), “going to watch live football [at the stadium]” (Joe, i1) was arguably the core element of football fandom for the participants in this research.

The excitement of watching Rovers, United or Athletic compete live in their stadia was associated with the physical proximity the participants were able to achieve between themselves, the match and other fans. In relation to the appeal of live events, Boden & Molotch (1994) describe the need to

be in the company of others and to feel a physical proximity to the place or event being visited. This is reinforced by Urry (2002:258) who also discusses the significance and desirability of experiencing “intermittent moments of physical proximity to particular peoples, places, or events”. This resonates with how football stadia are often conceptualised in the sociology of sport literature:

“Historical social spaces where people’s implicit understanding of these particular geographical areas could lead to a deep identity formation and the development of a sense of place within the stadium itself” (Penny & Redhead, 2009:757).

Whilst the “sense of authenticity” between fan and the stadium space is supposedly threatened through the development of “sanitised, safe, concrete but ‘placeless’ stadium” (Bale, 2003:73), this does not appear to be true for the participants in this research. The learning-disabled fans involved continued to emphasise the importance of their club’s home stadium and the personal significance of being in that space. Enjoying being in Rovers’ “big stadium” was acknowledged by both Alex (i2) and Sanjay. Joe thought there was something exceptional about the space that made it different from all other football stadia. Containing the “memorials there and things like that” made it a “special ground” (Joe, i1).

Compared to other mainstream locations, in which many learning-disabled people have historically found it difficult to feel comfortable (Hall, 2004; 2010), attending live football matches can be seen to have some personal benefit. Within the football stadia of Rovers, United, and Athletic, the learning-disabled fans of each club were able to experience an “authentic sense of place”, a feeling of “being inside and belonging to your place both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to know this without reflecting on it” (Relph, 1976:65) .

Watching matches live and being physically present in the stadium was also enjoyable for many of the participants as it enabled them the opportunity to be in physical proximity to other fans of Rovers, United, or Athletic. The following passage from an interview with Sanjay (i2) illustrates the pleasure of being in the proximity of other fans whilst watching live matches:

“Happy. Yeah, looking out there, fresh air. Loads of people there, yeah. Sit on chair, front or back seat...Happy to go out to [the stadium]...Alright. Yeah, alright. Happy. Yeah, I feel happy inside, yeah” .

The presence of others in the stadium allowed the experience of watching Rovers, United, or Athletic to be shared, whether consciously or unconsciously. Joe (i1) suggested that when he was in Rovers’ stadium watching them play live it felt like all the fans were “all sat together”. Rather than just being about watching the match – which could be streamed live over the internet – being in the stadium enabled Joe to share the experience with other people “in the same stand” (Joe, i1).

However, whilst being in the presence of other fans of Rovers, United, or Athletic was universally enjoyable for all the participants, this was not the case when the proximity became too close. Sam (i1) described feeling “bunched in” when, for example, lots of Rovers fans simultaneously used the stadium stairwells and walkways before and after games. This made him feel “upset” (Sam, i1). Similarly, Hannah was concerned about her lack of mobility within the large crowds at United’s stadium. Conversely, Gavin and Joe, for example, enjoyed the close proximity of all the fans as it made them feel “more together” (Gavin, i1). It would be fair to suggest that, in general, the degree to which participants did not enjoy the close proximity of fans in the various football grounds correlated with them having more significant impairments. This provides clear evidence to support the view that learning-disabled and physically disabled people have benefited from the switch from standing terraces in football stadia to the allocation of individual seats (Penny & Redhead, 2009).

### ***The stadium atmosphere – becoming part of the carnival***

It has become widely accepted that while attendance at sporting events is sold as a commodity, the meaningfulness of such contests depends on the active participation of consumers whose presence creates the commodity (Armstrong & Young, 1999; Hughson & Free, 2006). Attending a football match, for example, is different from purchasing any other pre-packaged commodity in that the symbolic creativity of consumers (i.e. the fans) is part of what one is buying into. Whilst the football contest is temporally and spatially bounded, the meaning of the match depends on how the spectators witness and participate in the event as observers, supporters, and critics (Hughson & Free, 2006). Attending live matches enabled the learning-disabled fans involved in this research to become vicarious participants in the football being watched.

The participants’ appreciation of the meaning of the football matches they attended, and their own involvement in the event, was understood through their discussions of the atmosphere inside Rovers’, United’s and Athletic’s stadiums. This notion of ‘atmosphere’ was used by participants to summarise the general mood within the stadium on match days, encapsulating the level of active participation of the fans (i.e. the amount of noise created). Paul (i2) suggested the atmosphere inside United’s stadium begins to build “when everybody’s coming in and United are in the tunnel and everybody’s screaming and shout[ing]”. During Athletic matches Gavin (i1) said the atmosphere is created when “all the Athletic fans bang on [the stadium]”, “blow whistles”, or generally engage in carnivalesque behaviour (Giulianotti, 1991; 1995a; Armstrong & Young, 1999). Despite not attending many live matches, Sanjay (i2) explains the atmosphere he has experienced inside Rovers’ stadium:

“Alright ‘cos there a load of people there shouting. If they score a goal we stand up. Sometimes we clap our hands. Sometimes they do well. Sometimes they lose. Everybody

there is shouting, screaming. I see people shouting and look at people's faces...uhh...shouting and screaming if they shoot at goal, yeah. I just copy 'em either shout[ing] or clapping if they score. If they miss then we shouting, screaming."

In the creation of the stadium atmosphere it is the choreographed football chant or song, however, that remains the central part of many a match day experience (Armstrong & Young, 1999; Clark, 2006). This was true for all of the participants in this research. Mark (i1) explained his positive feelings towards the orchestrated chants at Athletic matches:

"It feels really good. It's almost, like, a shot of adrenaline, kind of thing. Umm...just go with it, kind of thing. Umm...all the fans will be sing around you, stuff like that, and it just feels really good. But it's definitely better if the ground's full cos...uhh...like, a couple of times when I've been the ground's full and, like...umm...and that's really good cos, like, the whole grounds singing and it really does feel like a massive buzz."

Being able to participate in the singing of songs with lyrics such as 'Rovers 'til I die', for example, was considered a positive and exciting experience. Doing so enable the participants to demonstrate that "you're proud to be a...fan singing 'em" (Gavin, i1).

Although Daniel (i2) thought the songs sung by Rovers' fans were good because everyone was able to "join in with them all", this was not the case. Because he does not attend matches regularly, David, for example, said he did not always know the words to the songs. Similarly, I observed Joe, Sam, Steven, and Paul not participating in the songs and chants of their fellow fans. None the less, this should not be perceived as detrimental to their experience of attending live matches or their participation in the event. Regardless of whether he knew all the words, David participated as best he could. He said: "I kind of join in" (David, i1). In explaining his thoughts about not always singing at football matches, Joe (i3) encapsulated the experience of some of the other participants in this research who made their contribution to the carnival atmosphere in different ways:

Me: That's good. Um...so when you say that you don't join in very often...or when other people are singing...what do you think about that? You say it's good and it helps the team, but does that...do you feel like you're not joining in if you don't sing?

Joe: Umm...not really, cos I do clap.

Me: So just cos you're not singing it doesn't mean you're not joining in?

Joe: No, it doesn't mean that.

Me: But you still feel part of it...all the group of people even though you don't sing?

Joe: Yeah.

Clapping emerged as a dominant alternative mode of demonstrating support for the team and contributing to the atmosphere in the stadium for those less vocal learning-disabled fans. The

simplistic nature of clapping to show support when, for example, the players emerge at the beginning of matches was seen to be important because it is something that all fans are “doing [the] same” (Sam, i3). According to Joe (i1), it is good when “everybody joins in clapping and that”.

In terms of social inclusion, being able to participate in the production of atmosphere during live matches can be seen to be beneficial for the participants of this research. Whether through choreographed chanting or just by making noise in support of the team they became part of a series of luminal events within a community of like-minded others, all of whom are involved in the chaotic and cascading activities (Armstrong & Young, 1999). Football fans use songs and chants to construct their own collective identities (Clark, 2006) and in their own ways, to a lesser or greater extent, the learning-disabled fans involved in the research were able to participate in this. Such commonly used actions, chants, and rituals draw the fans together constructing a sense of shared space (Kytö, 2010; Woodward, 2010). This is incorporated into a complex communal identity which defines ‘us’ versus ‘them’ whose defeat is priority, and is displayed through collective expression of social and cultural identity (Armstrong & Young, 1999).

As well as the benefits of feeling part of a collective, participating in the activities which go together to create the atmosphere in the stadium also has some benefits as a cathartic activity. As Steven (i2) suggests:

Steven: Can get me angry.

Me: Can make you angry?

Steven: Out me.

Me: Oh, you can get your anger out of you.

Steven: Yeah.

Me: Oh, OK. So going to football is good because you can shout and get all your anger out.

Steven: Yeah.

This is not entirely surprising as football has long been an activity at which men have exhibited those emotions they would be reluctant to demonstrate elsewhere (Armstrong & Young, 1999). Even for those fans who would not otherwise engage in such behaviour in public spaces, the football environment provides the opportunity to abandon inhibitions and be temporarily free from self-imposed restraint (Bairner, 2001). Joe, for example, overcomes his “shy side” when he watches Rovers’ play live, joining in “when everybody else does” (Joe’s Father, i1). From my observations, all of the participants I attended a live game with were, at some point, “carried away by the solidarity of the terraces, the binary belonging of being at the game” (Woodward, 2010:76).



At this point, however, it is worth bearing in mind the findings of Milner & Kelly (2009) who suggested that when the learning-disabled people in their study of community participation in New Zealand spoke about experiencing a sense of inclusion, what mattered was that they perceived their participation to be valued. What we have to consider then is a form of feedback loop in which learning-disabled supporters feel “encouraged” (David, i1) to participate as the atmosphere increases and who increase the atmosphere through their own participation. David (i1) explains how he feels about joining in with fans’ singing:

David: Yeah, yeah, I do. And it’s really encouraging as well cos you, kinda, wanna get involved.

Me: You wanna get involved with what they’re all doing?

David: Yeah.

Me: What’s good about joining in with all the singing and things?

David: It helps keep you motivated...uhh...makes you encouraged and encourages the crowd as well.

### ***Too little or too much atmosphere?***

It was apparent that the intensity of the atmosphere within the stadia affected how the participants felt about being in that space. The general consensus, articulated here by Paul (i2), was that “if you get more atmosphere...then [being in the stadium] gets better”. In the first interview with Alex (i1), he explained the atmosphere in Rovers’ stadium:

Alex: Quite noisy. Quite...quite a big ground...uhh...cheering, loads of Rovers supporters cheer when they score on Saturday...uhh...that’s it.

Me: OK. So there’s a lot of people cheering and is that a good thing or is that a bad thing?

Alex: Yeah, I think it’s a good thing.

A common theme in the football fan literature, however, is that since the removal of mass standing areas or terraced ‘ends’ which allowed some freedom of movement, the development of corporate facilities and ‘family stands’ has been detrimental to the atmosphere at live football. The result of these initiatives has been the sterilization of the atmosphere at English football stadiums (Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1998). While football remains “the practical medium par excellence of the continuing expression and celebration of the core practices and concerns of embodied masculinity in a specifically working class variant” (Robson, 2000:X), fans must now survive on a lobotomised reproduction of stadium atmosphere (Eco, 1986).

This point is recognised by Gary who was critical of the atmosphere created at some of United's home matches. He said:

"The other night I was sat in my seat and I swear to God it were like sitting in a bloody church yard. It were, like, dead quiet so I thought...I started singing on me own and I thought 'well somebody's got to'".

He went on to explain that there is often a "better atmosphere at away games then there is down here [at home matches]". This opinion was shared by Hannah, Mark, Gavin, and Joe. Gavin (i2) suggested that away matches were "amazing" because "we sing all the way through the match and we stand up all the way through match". The perception of a better atmosphere at away matches was because "everybody seems more up for away games then they do at home matches" (Joe, i1). Compared to at home matches where fans can be dispersed throughout the stadium, away matches generated more atmosphere because "you're all in the same stand all compact together" because then "it's all like the noise and the singing and chanting is better because everybody is close together and everybody can hear the words what they're singing. You can clap in time then" (Gavin, i2). Nonetheless, the benefits of this increased atmosphere were only available to those learning-disabled fans able to attend away matches.

It would be inappropriate to suggest, however, that a return to terraced ends and unfettered working-class, male aggression would have wholly positive effects for learning-disabled fans. Despite many of the participants criticising a lack of atmosphere at their club's stadium, their perceptions of increased atmosphere were not always positive. The threshold of acceptability for the stadium atmosphere varied between participants. For example, whilst the majority of those involved said the stadium atmosphere "feels good cos it gets noisy" (John, i1) because "then we can do same" (Steven, i3), Sam disliked it "a bit" when the other Rovers supporters where "noisy" (i1). In another example of enjoying only selected parts of the stadium atmosphere, Joe expressed his disdain for the "silly drumming" which he thought should only be played at appropriate times, including "when you get a corner...ummm...or when you score a goal maybe, and then give it a rest" (Joe, i1).

A common concern amongst all the learning-disabled fans involved though was the atmosphere becoming too hostile or aggressive when the other fans began "swearing", "getting drunk", "arguing", "fighting" and "throwing things". Joe (i1) said such behaviour "just spoils it for everyone else". Such behaviour was viewed negatively by other participants in the research because. It did not reaffirm their shared cultural identities as fans of Rovers, United, and Athletic, but reflected the domain of "trouble makers" (Joe, i1). Daniel (i2) said that when attending live matches he tries to avoid getting mixed up with "the rough ones, the people who go there to fight. I...I won't want to go

near them, just stay away from them". Similarly, Gavin and Mark specifically avoid sitting at "the back" of the stand in Athletic's stadium where the "violent" fans are (Mark, i1). Mark (i1) comments about his experiences:

"It's never really gone as far as putting me off matches or anything like that, but...umm...sometimes it make me feel a bit insecure at times. Like, I've sat in the violent part before and that's made me feel, like, insecure and stuff like that"

### ***Response to hostility***

Whilst those engaged in socio-political control believe football should be an occasion for mutual enjoyment and appreciation between rival fans, the metaphorical language through which the atmosphere in the stadium is created is all about social differentiation, defeating the enemy, and reaffirming one's own cultural identity (Armstrong & Young, 1999). Such social processes require opposition fans to be antagonistic, and often offensive and abusive, towards each other. Although the popularity of physical fights between fans has gradually died out, the highly symbolic aspects of cultural identity have been maintained through rituals, swearing, bellowing aggressive abuse, chants and choreographed gestures (Armstrong & Young, 1999). Theoretically this raises some concerns about how learning-disabled people might react to this type of behaviour. Especially considering how apparently similar encounters in other areas of life – including swearing, smoking and threatening behaviour – have resulted in learning-disabled people building up negative perceptions and unwillingness to return to particular social spaces, further entrenching their exclusion (Mathers, 2008).

For the learning-disabled people in this study, many were aware of the negative behaviour of other fans, including people who "get drunk and just start fighting" (John, i1), "swearing" (i2), or "throwing stuff" on to the pitch (Sam, i1). However, although witnessing such behaviour was often "scary" (Gavin, i2), it did not discourage any of the participants from being football fans or returning to their team's stadium in the way Mathers' (2008) findings might indicate. The participants of this research entered the football stadium prepared for the "explosive expletives and common place hostilities" (Woodward, 2010:76) which characterise football fandom. As such, when they have experienced what they refer to as "bad stuff" (Gary, i2), Gary and Hannah, for example, "just block it out of [their] minds and enjoy" (Gary, i2). Even for a fan much less committed to their team than Gary and Hannah, like David, whilst the hostile nature of the other fans could "sometimes make [him] feel a bit downhill", his attitude was usually one of "you just gotta put that behind and think 'carry on supporting the same team'" (David, i2).

Being aware of the antagonistic behaviour one is likely to receive from – and most probably display towards – opposition fans, the participants in this research appreciated that regardless of the venom and the violence inherent in football chants, they only served to dramatise and exaggerate the social identity of fans (Armstrong & Young, 1999). Significantly in terms of their positive perceptions of attending live football matches, none of their participants had ever experienced the ‘normality’ of abuse, discrimination, intolerance, and exclusion whilst supporting their teams that learning-disabled people are often subject to in other mainstream spaces (Clement, 2006). It is questionable what affect being subjected to such abuses would have had on the participant’s football fandom. This is an important area for future research.

## **Social inclusion at live football matches: expanding social networks and acquiring social capital**

Attending live football matches and being part of the crowd offers innumerable opportunities for fans to interact with one another (Giulianotti, 2005). Amongst other things, this includes watching passively, remonstrating with the referee, buying merchandise, and mingling with fellow spectators in walkways. This was true of the participants in this research. Opportunities to interact – specifically the opportunity of “talking to other supporters” (Joe, i1) – was a common occurrence for participants when they attended live football matches, for both those who regularly attended matches and those who did not. Interaction typically occurred whilst travelling to matches “in the car” (Alex, i3) or “sometimes on the bus” (Mark, i1), and then within the stadium with “the people [sat] around” (Sam, i1).

Like Giulianotti’s (2005) analysis of the ‘Tartan Army’ – a subculture of fans of the Scottish national football team – these interactions can be understood as a form of sociability, as “play form[s] of association” that push individuals into common association with others (Simmel, 1949:255). From what I saw and heard, the participants displayed “good form” in their interactions (Simmel, 1949:255). Rather than introducing – to use Simmel’s (1949:256) words – “personal humour, good or ill, excitement and depression, the light and shadow of one’s inner life”, conversations were focused primarily around the football club and the ensuing match. In this way the participants ensured their interactions remained “interesting, gripping, even significant” (Simmel, 1949:259).

Before kick-off, conversation centred on predicting the upcoming performance of the team. Paul (i2), for example, said that he “just, like, predict[s] what United are gonna do, if they win, lose or draw”. This also includes discussing more specific details, such as, “who’s gonna score first for

United" (Paul, i1). During the match, conversation switches to analysing the team's current performance. As Gary (i1) summarised:

"We have a decent conversation about what we think they're doing right and what we think's not going too right, how we would change it if we needed to".

Finally, once the game finishes the post-mortem begins, with participants talking about, for example, "if United played well, if they play well or if they don't" (Paul, i1). This pattern of conversation was also evident for those who did not regularly attend live football. Sanjay (i1), for example, summed up the interactions he has had when watching Rovers play:

"We talk about Rovers and they talk to me. 'Are they gonna win?', 'are they gonna stay up or are they gonna go down if they keep winning or if they keep losing?'. That's what we talk about, yeah".

The participants were also able to display 'good form' in their interactions by engaging in what is commonly referred to as 'banter' or 'crack' (Giulianotti, 2005). On the surface this is simply playful, expressive, and carefree – joking around, essentially – but it serves a deeper purpose to "assist in binding those engaged in social interaction" (Giulianotti, 2005:299). Such sociability was a common theme in participants' experiences of attending live matches. Gavin, Mark, Gary and Joe all explicitly used the term 'banter' to describe how they interact with other fans, whilst the other participants spoke about laughing and joking with other fans. An example of this playful conversation can be seen in the following extract from the second interview with Gary and Hannah:

Me: What about you Gary, do you ever get that, sort of, banter with other people?

Gary: Oh very much so, yeah.

Hannah: He always talks to stewards when we go to away matches

Gary: I do, yeah. I just wish 'em luck before game. I don't mean it like, but I just go (sarcastically) 'Oh, hope you win'.

Gary (i1) also described another example of the 'banter' he experiences when watching United matches:

"I mean I always say to me friend who sits behind me 'I feel we're gonna have a good win today. I think about 3-0'. He says 'If that happens I'll show me bare backside at town hall steps' and all that, so. It's like quirky banter and all that".

Because football fandom remains overtly masculine (despite a growing gender equality), much of the banter engaged in by the learning-disabled football fans at matches was based on sexually orientated, raucous humour (Giulianotti, 2005). When I attended a Rovers match with Joe, before kick-off, as we sat waiting in the car, his father suggested they charm the two women sat in the

adjacent car. This continued inside in the stadium as Joe made several jokes at the expense of the people he was with, as well as being on the receiving end himself. On the drive home, Joe's father and friend were alluding to what amorous activities Joe might get up to on his upcoming holiday, much to Joe's embarrassment.

The most unambiguous example of this type of 'masculine' banter occurred attending a match with Gavin. Once we entered Athletic's stadium, he went for a pint of lager. Whilst drinking it a player from what Gavin described as a rival learning-disability football team approached. He and Gavin proceeded to joke about whose was the better team, as well as guessing at the result of the forthcoming Athletic match. On the way to our seats we stopped to talk to a steward Gavin was friendly with and joked about which cheerleader was the most attractive. (They used rather more sexually explicit terminology). A particularly distinctive feature of this sociability was the increased prevalence of swearing compared to the conversation he and I had a few minutes earlier outside the stadium.

These examples can be contrasted with the experience of sociability for the only female learning-disabled fan in this research. Like the male participants in this study, Hannah also engaged in some more sexualised banter. However, instead of objectifying the other fans or female cheerleaders, she and her friends focussed on the players themselves:

"She made friends with me and now I'm like...we have a good chit-chat about footballers and you know what girls talk about. Like Gary, his friends probably talk about...from a girl's view of the footballers to Gary's, cos he's a lad he's probably..."

The ability of all the participants in this research to engage in such sociable interactions attending live football matches is in stark contrast to the typical experience of learning-disabled people in mainstream leisure settings (Bray & Gates, 2003; Emerson & Mcvilly, 2004). Compared to the descriptions in the literature, participation as part of a football crowd offered opportunities for "people to trust and cooperate with each other" (Coalter, 2007:540). The reason for this is possibly the inherent associational nature of the football crowd that involves participants interacting in an intentional way (Perks, 2007).

Giulianotti (2005) suggests that football provides the strongest form of cultural life through which sociability can be practised, especially amongst males; it is a subject matter used to 'break the ice' between strangers and facilitate conversation during social encounters. This can be seen in Gary's (i4) assertion that the benefits of going to live game include "just being with people that are going to games and that" and "interact[ing] with other people that enjoying the same thing we do". Similarly, for Steven (i3), what makes going to matches enjoyable is "being with" the other supporters. This

provides an illustration of how the interactions created through football fandom can create a sense of collectivism, a significant factor in establishing and maintaining friendly relationships for both people with and without disabilities (Dattilo, 2002; Patterson & Pegg, 2009). In its pure form, such sociability has “no ulterior end, no content, and no result outside itself, it is orientated completely about personalities” and offers people “an emancipating and saving exhilaration” (Simmel, 1949:261).

However, before declaring football fandom the route to social inclusion for learning-disabled people it is necessary to consider *who* learning-disabled fans interact with at football matches and *how* this interaction occurs. The first of these issues is addressed in the next section below, but I will consider this second point briefly here. Simmel (1949) argues that sociability contains an egalitarian and democratic ethos. Sociability “demands the purest, most transparent, most engaging kind of interaction – that among equals” (Simmel, 1949:257). However, in the football environment all this banter has a dark side. Certain forms of informal status is afforded to individual fans according to their perceived level of vocal and symbolic support, the number of away trips they have made, and also to those displaying particular ‘good form’ in enhancing the playful pleasures of the social gathering (Giulianotti, 2005). Gavin (i2) alluded to this when he said “I want to talk to [the] chanter, that’s Tango. I want to talk to him”. Status in discussing the game is also afforded to those who have played football at a relatively high level, or those, as Giulianotti (2005) describes, with a ‘feel’ for football that is confirmed through intimate and longstanding personal participation. Gary (i4) described his preference for interacting with such people:

“The difference is...umm...when you’re at the matches at least the people can comment on what’s actually been...what you actually watching. Whereas, when you talk to people in the pub about the game the problem is they ask you ‘how did it go?’ cos they only see bits of the action on the tele. Whereas we get a better view being there to watch the game”.

The findings of this research suggest that learning-disabled fans are certainly able to develop a ‘feel’ for their clubs. The danger is, though, whether this is recognised by their fellow fans or whether they are perceived as ‘miserable bastards’ (Giulianotti, 2005:296), unwilling (or unable) to participate. Or whether – perhaps more worryingly – learning-disabled fans are viewed sympathetically, being patronised for their contributions.

According to Joe’s father, Joe is considered the “resident expert” on all things Rovers by the people who sit around him at football matches (Joe, i1). As such, his contributions to the group’s sociability are well received. As he says:

“If we’ve signed a player, ‘where’s he from?’ and I tell ‘em, like, for instance, I don’t know, say they’re, like, from, like, Sheffield or something...uhh...I just say ‘they’re from Sheffield

and they've played for Cheltenham Town' and I say 'he's been on loan to somewhere else as well...he's scored so many goals or he's the best defender in the league' or whatever. Things like that" (Joe, i1).

Gary reported similar experiences when he tells all his friends down at his local working men's club about how United have been performing recently and the games he has been to.

Joe and Gary, however, are both relatively eloquent, which has "a tremendous impact on the extent to which [they are] socially integrated and the nature of the social integration" (Mahon *et al.*, 2000:34). A caveat to the results presented here is that whilst all the participants in the research told me during interviews about the sociability they enjoy with their fellow fans, specifically those who sit near to them at live football matches, this was not what I observed during participant observations. For example, although Alex, Sam, and Paul said they interacted with those other supporters around them, it was actually their family and friends whom they attended the match with who spoke most often. These specific incidents may have been the result of my presence disturbing the naturalness of the setting. However, it also reflects the idea that many learning-disabled people with limited verbal communication skills struggle to invest independently in relationships (Zetlin & Murtaugh, 1988).

Nonetheless, whilst discussing international settings, Giulianotti (2005) suggests that where there is no shared language, basic forms of friendly sociability can be established between football fans through swapping essential terminology, such as names of favourite players. This form of interaction was apparent when attending a live Rovers match with Sam and Alex. Although they did not say a lot during the match, they did offer, for example, predictions as to the final score of the match or respond which players they thought were playing well or not. The ethic of fan unification, I would suggest, ensures that individual differences do not produce distinctive dynamics of social differentiation or exclusion as one would find in other recreational settings.

### ***Bonding and bridging***

The majority of the interactions that the learning-disabled fans involved in this research experienced whilst attending live football matches were with people they already knew and held close relationships with. They occurred around what Brown (2008) discusses as pre-modern social bonds based around 'thick' associations of family and friends. This typically meant the people with whom the participants attended matches with. Mark and Gavin were the only exceptions to this as they both attended live matches mostly on their own and so had to interact with other people.

Such interactions can be seen to be beneficial for the participants of this research, helping to reinforce their existing social relationships and contributing towards the building of 'bonding capital'



(Putnam, 2000). Gary, for example, goes to the football with some “very close friends” (Gary, i2) that he has known “through school...all [his] life” (Gary, i2). Although he keeps in touch with them “via Facebook and that” (Gary, i4), attending football matches together helps to maintain their relationships. “More often than not”, when walking to United’s stadium he would “probably bump into [his] mum and her mates” (Gary, i4). For Paul, going to United’s matches was normally the only opportunity he had to see his uncle and cousin. Particularly poignant was Sam’s story:

Me: And what else do you like about it?

Sam: ...buy a new one...new shirt...and go dad.

Me: You like going with your dad?

Sam: ...talking

Me: Talking. Is that with your dad?

Sam: Yeah

Me: Oh, so when you go with your dad you like to go with him because you get to talk to him?

Sam: Yeah

As well as the interactions the participants had with the people with whom they attend matches with, live football provided opportunities to meet up with other existing friends. As John (i2) illustrates, at the United stadium he gets to see “friends who I haven’t seen in a long time. They go to matches and I say ‘hello’”. Many learning-disabled fans of Rovers also saw their football coach at games and got to speak to him “face-to-face” (Sam, i3). It was not uncommon for the participants in the research to see their teammates from their learning-disability teams at matches either. Joe (i3) explained:

“Yeah a couple from...umm...see ‘em from football, you know, disability club. A couple from there they sit in the same stand, but not near us, but see ‘em when waiting for their pie or whatever I see ‘em, yeah”.

Even for those learning disabled fans who did not attend matches regularly, going to watch a match live at the stadium provided opportunities to reaffirm some existing social relationships. Sanjay (i1) said:

“My friend he go to college and I see him in town every time, he supports Rovers. His name is Chris, a different Chris. He support Rovers, yeah. He go to different matches. Every time I went to matches I always seen him there”.

However, whilst these interactions were enjoyable for the learning-disabled fans involved, within the dominant social capitalist policy discourse further ‘bonding’ is unlikely to lead to greater social

inclusion. This is because bonding occurs between similar or homogenous groups who already share the same 'resources'. As such, it would not enable the participants to expand their social networks and gain more social capital. For example, when the fans interact with colleagues from their learning-disability football teams, because they are both already part of the same social networks, both parties are only exchanging the same information resources.

The interactions that the learning-disabled fans in this research experience at football matches were not, however, limited to bonding type relationships with those they already know. Going to football matches also provided opportunities to "get to know" other people (Gavin, i1; David, i1). There were numerous examples of where participants were able to interact with other fans they did not already know, 'bridging' to make new social connections. The most common form of bridging was the sociable interactions participants had with the people in the immediate vicinity. For example, Mark (i1) suggested: "I'll just tend to speak to the people next to me. I'll just ask them their verdict on the game, stuff like that". David (i1) summarised the interactions he had with other fans in the stadium:

"Uhh...we kind of just talked about the game mostly, about if they're not doing really good of if they get a goal, you know, their saying 'come on Athletic! Come on Athletic!' and stuff like that and it...it kinda makes other people, like, socialising with each other in the stadium, talking about the match especially and after the match as well, about whether they're happy or disappointed"

Similarly, Alex (i2) explained the interactions he had with other fans in the stadium:

Me: Is there anyone else that...like the other supporters that sit around you, do you ever speak to them?

Alex: Uhh...sometimes. Yeah, sometimes.

Me: What do you speak to them about?

Alex: Uhh...about Rovers...about Rovers.

Me: You speak to them about Rovers.

Alex: Yeah.

Me: OK. So what do you speak to them about? You speak to them about Rovers?

Alex: Yeah. About...about going to see Rovers all my life.

During the participant observations I was able to observe subtle forms of bridging, with something as simple as a greeting – a nod of the head or a wave – extended to a fellow fan. I also observed how Gavin and Mark interacted and bridged with other people even before they arrived at Athletic's stadium. Observing the established rules of sociability, Mark spoke to a group of Athletic fans while

we were on the tram travelling to the stadium, whilst Gavin bantered with a family of opposition fans about Athletic's impending victory.

Away matches offered a particularly fruitful environment for interacting with and bridging to other fans – at least for the participants able to attend these matches. One reason for this is the extended amount of time the fans of Rovers, United, and Athletic spent together travelling to and from their destinations. When Gavin and Hannah travelled to away matches they said they were able to “talk to ‘em [other fans] on bus” (Hannah, i3). Gavin (i1) explained his experiences of travelling to Athletic's away matches:

Gavin: I been on the train there to Chesterfield and back, but, like, we lost a game and we didn't feel like it, laughing all the way back. Coming back on coach we were all laughing. It felt alright.

Me: If you're on the train or the coach do you talk to...do you talk to other supporters that are around you?

Gavin: Any. You know, they're talking to us, we talk back to 'em. Like we have a laugh, just join in, laughing with 'em. Yeah. You know, we see anyone Wednesday fans going past and we go (wave).Yeah...they wave back to us anyway.

Gavin (i1) also alluded to the fact that because all in attendance had shown greater commitment to support the team (Giulianotti, 2002; 2005; Weed, 2007) there was a greater desire of fans to “stick together like Athletic fans”. This was achieved, for example, when fans on the coach let each other know when “Athletic supporters going past” (Gavin, i1).

The opportunity for such interactions and to 'bridge' with other fans is significant in terms of football fandom's potential to contribute to the social inclusion of learning-disabled people. In mainstream society learning-disabled people are typically likely to experience great difficulty in creating and maintaining friendships and lasting reciprocal relationships (Robertson *et al.*, 2001a; Hall & Strickett, 2002; Solish *et al.*, 2003; Orsmond *et al.*, 2004). Their perceived subordinate role in society may limit the “tendency of people to attach positive values to...[learning-disabled people] in their environment and make contact with them” (McKittick, 1980:18). Comparatively, within the football environment, and specifically within the stadium, the participants in this research were able to engage in interactions with non-learning-disabled people and enjoy relationships of equal status. Mark (i1) explained how he feels about interacting with people at Athletic's stadium:

“Like, I can go and talk to them and stuff like that and I sometimes do do that kind of thing. Like, I talk to some of the Athletic fans on the tram and stuff like that because I feel like...like I can do cos I'm a supporter and they're a supporter so we've got something in common.”

Whilst learning-disabled people are more likely to miss out on certain 'rites of passage', such as moving to a new house, getting a job, going to university, or living independently, where social capital is typically built and lost (Riddell *et al.*, 2001), the findings of this study suggest that during football matches the participants were able to interact with other people: "you're part of the supporters" (Joe, i2). This mirrors Hall's (2010) discussion of an inclusive art project in facilitating interacting and generating social capital between learning and non-learning impaired participants. Whilst those involved in Hall's (2010) research were able to be seen first and foremost as actors within the 'theatre world', the participants of this study were treated as fans. Becoming involved in such a network provided a common ground for interaction and material for conversation (Hall, 2010).

### ***'Season ticket friends'***

Despite being a place where participants were able to interact with their fellow fans, for all but one this did not lead to the expansion of social networks necessary for social inclusion. That is to say, the 'friends' made at live football matches generally lasted only for the duration of a match and did not persist into everyday life. The following extract from an interview with David (i2) illustrates the typical relationship between the participants of the research and the others fans present at live matches:

Me: Do you think you've got to know anybody at the football ground?

David: Uh...not from what I know of but I just had a little chat with some of them about what they think about the match and...yeah. Most of them have been positive as well.

Me: Does it...do you ever talk about anything else, like, do you ever talk about personal things or...

David: No, just talk about the match itself.

Me: So do you ever get people's names...like, any actual details about them like telephone numbers, things like that?

David: No.

Me: So it's just while you're at the game?

David: Yeah it is, yeah

Alex (i2) preferred to describe those who sat near him as just "people" rather than as friends. These findings reflect the concerns of Devine & Parr (2008) and Glover & Hemmingway (2005) who both suggest that whilst participation in mainstream leisure activities might provide learning-disabled people with effective opportunities for inclusion in wider cultural spaces, there is a danger that the generation of social capital and social inclusion will become limited to those contexts. Mark was the

exception to this rule, successfully continuing friendship relationships with people he had met at live Athletic matches outside the confines of the stadium. He said there have been “a couple of the teenage lads” he has met up with “sometimes after football and stuff like that and just hung around for a bit” (Mark, i2). However, Mark’s experiences are very much the exception and arguably reflect his higher level of independence compared with the other participants.

In general, it is appropriate to conceptualise the relationships that the participants in this research established whilst attending live football matches as “season ticket friends” (Gavin, i2). Gavin uses this terminology to delineate his ‘real’ friends and those people whom he has a relationship with for ninety or so minutes every other Saturday afternoon during the football season. These types of relationships are not limited to the learning-disabled fans in this study, but reflect more general theories about contemporary football fandom and its associated communities (Crabbe, 2008). As football fans, the participants here are able to meet up with other like-minded people to form neo-tribes or ‘emotional communities’ characterised by “fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal” (Maffesoli, 1996:76). The participants were able to perform, along with their non-learning-disabled peers, all aspects of community and communality for the time they were together ‘as one’, without entering into reciprocal relationships as a result.

“You know, before the kick off they go ‘hiya, how you doing?’. ‘I’m alright’. And we’ll just have a big chat before kick off, before players come out the tunnel. Then after they go ‘OK, we’re going now. Bye Gavin, see you in a weeks time’. I go ‘OK then’” (Gavin, i2).

Football provides a momentary stopping place where fans can identify with one another through their attire and demeanour as a performative community (Crabbe, 2008). Mark (i1) explained the relationship he feels with the other Athletic fans:

“Even if I’m going on my own I know I’ve got people down there who I can talk to and stuff like that. I now can interact with people so...so at first when you get the bus down it feels like you’re going on your own, but as soon as you get close to the ground it feels like you’ve got a good couple of thousand friends there, which is really good feeling”.

Saying “see you next time there’s a match” (Gavin, i1) or even “see you next season” (Gavin, i3) confirmed the fleeting nature of the relationship, but also that it would recommence when the ‘community’ reforms at the next live match.

These gatherings are “not about community in the orthodox sociological meaning” (Crabbe, 2008:436), but rather football fans are “mobile and flexible groupings- sometimes enduring, often easily dissoluble- formed with an intensive effective bonding” (Crabbe, 2008:436). The spectacle of football fandom is somewhere where the participants in this research have been able to unite with other like minded people before going back to their individual lives at the end of the match (Brown

*et al.*, 2008). These football communities arise more out of the continuous interactions of fans at matches and their joint appeal to 'tradition', rather than any prior social facts (King, 2000). When fans – both learning-disabled and non-learning-disabled – of Rovers, United and Athletic are within their respective stadiums they share an "implicit understanding of these particular geographical locations" which leads to "a deep identity formation and the development of a sense of place within the stadium itself" (Penny & Redhead, 2009:757).

However, as has already been discussed earlier in this chapter, elements of the 'traditional' were evident in the football fandom of many of the participants. For example, many were fans of their chosen clubs because they were from that particular place and so had been a fan of that club their whole lives. The significance of this is that whilst proximity to the clubs stadium may have an 'imagined' appeal (Delanty, 2003), they are as much actual conditions of community for many of the participants. This is illustrated by the number of 'real' friends and relatives the participants interacted with whilst attending live matches. This phenomenon is not limited to learning-disabled fans, but is probably a reflection of the football clubs involved in the research. Rovers, United and Athletic all play outside the Premier League and so are not exposed to the hypercommodification that has supposedly eroded the 'traditional' from football fandom.

### ***Attending enough live matches***

The ability of participants in this research to engage in sociability with other fans, establish social connections and make 'season ticket friends' was affected by the number live matches they were able to attend. In general, it was easier for those learning-disabled fans who regularly attended live matches to become part of the 'imagined community' than for those who did not. In this sense, a distinction can be drawn between those with and without season tickets to their chosen club.

For those participants who did not have a season ticket, attending a live match was closer to Milner & Kelly's (2009) assessment of learning-disabled people's involvement in other mainstream 'communities'. It is fleeting and irregular, leaving little time for others to see beyond impairment and for them to be assimilated within the social history of the setting (Milner & Kelly, 2009). Sanjay and Daniel – two non-season ticket holders – suggested that when they did attend live Rovers' matches they were able to interact with the people around them and to feel part of the crowd. However, the difference between having and not having a season ticket was expressed by Mark who transited between non-season ticket holder and season ticket holder during the 2009/2010 football season. He suggested:

“I think it’s changed on quite a large scale to be honest with you because when I used to get the odd ticket I could sometimes talk to people, sometimes I couldn’t. But now it’s...umm...now cos I’ve got a season ticket it’s like...umm...there’s lots more of a chance that people are gonna talk to me and...the way people interact with me, before they were bit shy, a bit off with me, but now cos I normally meet up with other season ticket holders we’ll have more to talk to, we have more connection so...so we’ll tend to chat more than we would if I’d just bought a ticket” (Mark, i2).

I would suggest there are two reasons why being a season ticket holder enabled some of the participants to become more integrated as fans. The first is purely pragmatic; having a season ticket means always sitting in the same seat for live matches and so a “longer duration to get to know people and stuff like that” (Mark, i2). Reflecting on a time when he had to buy single tickets for Athletic matches, Gavin (i2) suggested it was harder to establish relationships with other fans because “you’ve got to sit where your ticket puts you”. Mark explained how the dynamics of fan interaction and sociability changed when he got his season ticket:

“When you’re scattered around you may be able to get to know people for that hour and a half period, but you’re never really sure if they’re gonna be there next time so it’s just like...there’s always the thing at the back of your mind that’s ‘what’s the point of trying to make friends with them when they’re probably not gonna be there next time’. But when you’re in the same seat...after a couple of matches and you start to see the same people there and you start to get to know ‘em” (Mark, i2).

The benefits of having a season ticket in terms of enabling participants to interact with their fellow fans can also be understood in more theoretical terms, as a source of sub-cultural capital. Earlier in this chapter the extra status afforded to certain fans’ sociability based on, for example, their perceived commitment to being a fan of the team was discussed. This extra status can be conceptualised in terms of individuals having more sub-cultural capital within the fan group (Giulianotti, 2002). Whilst fans can easily gain small amounts of sub-cultural capital through consumer practices (i.e. buying club merchandise), both Giulianotti (2002) and Weed (Weed, 2006; 2007; 2008) emphasise the power of more traditional ‘hot displays’ of support, such as continuing to be a season ticket holder season after season. The symbolic meaning placed on these objects and behaviours is then developed and interpreted between fans. The benefits of a season ticket in terms of the aided sub-cultural capital and social status it affords learning disabled fans was expressed by Mark (i2):

“I must say, when you have a season ticket, compared to the odd ticket, you feel like a more dedicated supporter. You feel like you’re more part of it. You feel like you’re almost higher up the ranks of supporters kind of thing. Umm...but yeah, I mean when I used to get the odd occasional ticket I felt...I felt ok, but I didn’t feel as part...as much part of it as I did or as I probably should of done. But when you have a season ticket you really start to connect with people cos the fans around you start to realise that you’re not a supporter that comes to the odd occasional match, you’re a supporter what’s fully dedicated. As far as I know, I’ve

recognised most Athletic fans prefer it if you show dedication to the club. And that's how I get on with people more, stuff like that"

Away from the stadium, having a season ticket and attending more live matches also provided those participants the opportunity to recall events retrospectively to other fans; the ability to say 'I was there when...'. Such experiences and stories can be the source of considerable status in some groups, and as such reinforce the benefits of 'being there' (Weed, 2007).

## **The stadium as a semi-institutional space**

Many contemporary social policies designed to address the exclusion of learning-disabled people suggest social inclusion should occur within 'mainstream' social spaces. Such policies, however, establish criteria for inclusion that many learning-disabled are unable to achieve, as well as marginalising any alternatives (Hall, 2004). The fundamental basis upon which learning-disabled people are meant to be 'included' requires individuals to conform to mainstream notions of normality through, for example, appearance, behaviour, and location (Hall, 2004); something that is challenging for most learning-disabled people and impossible for many (Walmsley, 2001; Macintyre, 2008; Parr, 2008). Expecting people with "severe or multiple impairments to be as 'productive' as non-disabled peers is one of the most oppressive aspects of modern society" (Barnes, 1999:18). Many learning-disabled people have instead aimed to be included in the social networks of fellow learning-disabled people, family, and carers (Parr, 2000; Pinfold, 2000). Within these 'safe havens' (Pinfold, 2000) or 'oases' (Philo *et al.*, 2005) learning-disabled people are able to share experiences, gain support and be safe around one another. They provide a "refuge" (Hall, 2004:303) in which learning-disabled people can establish a sense of community, where their identity can be strengthened before the next encounter with mainstream society (Philo *et al.*, 2002). However, whilst such spaces form a refuge preventing many learning-disabled people 'falling between the cracks' of the social care system (Gleeson & Kearns, 2001), *Valuing People* (DH, 2001), for example, has judged such practices to be isolating, exclusionary, and denying citizenship to learning-disabled people (Burton & Kagan, 2006).

Attending live football matches can perhaps be seen as providing one opportunity to address this problem. As a kind of semi-institutional space, the football stadia of Rovers, United and Athletic provided a context to enable the participants to successfully occupy and participate in the same social space as their non-learning-disabled peers. These stadia are 'semi-institutional' in the sense that acceptable patterns of behaviour and appearance for fans during live matches are modified from the expectations of everyday life, but these 'rules' are also tightly controlled from within the group and externally (i.e. by stadium officials and stewards). Rather than risk being exposed to the



oppressive 'normality' of mainstream society (Walmsley, 2001; Bates & Davis, 2004; Macintyre, 2008; Parr, 2008), being in the football stadium allowed participants to successfully become part of the 'normality' of the mainstream crowd. On match days, the participants were able to establish their identities as fans of Rovers, United or Athletic, make reciprocal and valued contributions to the atmosphere, knowing they had the safety of being amongst like-minded individuals. The fact that the participants' support needs were unremarkable and anticipated – by virtue of football clubs having to comply with equality legislation – added to their sense of inclusion (Wilson, 2006; Milner & Kelly, 2009).

The value of the football stadium as a semi-institutional place lies in its ability to satisfy a need for belonging within a mainstream location, but also with some separateness, privacy and exclusivity from the "stresses of everyday life" (Milligan, 1999:234; Hall, 2004; 2005). Compared to exclusive spaces for learning-disabled people that imply a less valued form of community (Milner & Kelly, 2009), the football stadium can be seen as a location for community engagement. Whilst learning-disabled people may be reluctant to enter other mainstream social arenas where they feel they do not belong (Sibley, 1995; Hall, 2005), the participants in this research considered themselves to be legitimate fans in their teams stadia.

In this semi-institutional form, football stadia appear to provide a form of 'inclusive environment' in which dissimilar people (i.e. learning-disabled and non-learning-disabled) who might otherwise not have met. Inclusive environments are typically not naturally occurring, but require some deliberate action (and specific training) to facilitate (Devine, 2004; Devine & Parr, 2008). With regard to football stadia, this change can be attributed to the switch to all-seater arenas, the decline of the 'traditional fan', and the soliciting of more heterogeneous crowds by football clubs. Although the 'artificial' nature of this context might have perpetuated the idea that learning-disabled people are only allowed to participate because others "let them" (Devine & Parr, 2008:402), this was not the experience of the participants in this research who were able to engage with all the necessary features of contemporary football fandom.

In the long term, the presence of learning-disabled fans in football stadia may be useful for addressing stigma and stereotypes associated with learning-disability. More immediately, being in the stadium on match days provided the participants in this research with opportunities to create bridging capital with other fans. However, whilst the football stadium, like other inclusive environments, "may camouflage societies typical response to individuals with disabilities" (Devine & Parr, 2008:402), the interactions between fans are only useful for creating 'weak' social ties (Devine & Lashua, 2002; Devine, 2004), not the 'strong' ties necessary to tackle social exclusion (Glover &

Hemingway, 2005). However, although inclusive environments aim to promote valued participation by all, they appear to “highlight instead of minimising difference” between people and at times be exclusionary (Glover, 2004; Devine & Parr, 2008:401). For example, during my participant observations with the participants, it was obvious how often they did not interact with the fans around them. So, for example, whilst Joe’s father spoke to his friend, Joe just sat next to them, not interacting.

## Summary

Just as non-learning-disabled fans are not a homogenous group, there was wide variety in the football fandom of the participants in this research. This variation has been conceptualised using Giulianotti’s (2002) taxonomy, showing how the participants display different combinations of ‘hot’/‘cool’ and ‘traditional’/‘consumer’ relationships with their chosen clubs. Whilst this variation suggests football is an environment in which learning-disabled people are able to exercise choice – a key aim of Valuing People (DH, 2001) – the reality for many of the participants is that their fandom was limited by their impairments and personal circumstances. This idea is explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.

The learning-disabled fans choice of attending live matches as the preferred method of supporting one’s team can be associated with the physical proximity between themselves and i) the match itself (i.e. being in the stadium) and ii) other like-minded people. The pleasure of being in the stadium was described through the notion of ‘atmosphere’, which enabled the learning-disabled fans to become participants in the event. Where the participants were unable to perform the ‘choreographed gestures’ of the crowd, the simple act of clapping, for example, appeared to be enough to become a part of the luminal events. Whilst all the fans enjoyed it when the stadium became “noisy”, there was a general concern about when the atmosphere was perceived as too hostile or aggressive. However, rather than being discouraged from returning (Mathers, 2008), the participants chose to ignore any negative experiences in order to persist with their fandom.

As well as the positive emotions generated, attending live matches offered innumerable opportunities for social interaction. To a lesser or greater extent, the learning-disabled fans involved in this research all displayed ‘good form’ in their sociability with fellow fans – bantering about the team, the match, or predicting the score. The benefit of this interaction was that the participants were able to ‘bond’ further with those in their immediate circle and ‘bridge’ to other fans in the stadium. However, reflecting Hall’s (2010) concern about the successful involvement of learning-disabled people in specific leisure settings, it appears that any new relationship the participants

created at live matches existed only within the stadium. The 'season ticket friends' formed by participants at live football matches represent an opportunity for "intense effective bonding" (Crabbe & Brown, 2008:436) followed by immediate dispersal. The ability of the learning-disabled fans to become part of the 'imagined' or 'emotional' community formed during live matches increased with the number of matches attended. Those with season tickets had a distinct advantage in this respect as they had greater opportunities to get to know those sitting near them in the stadium and their sociability generated more sub-cultural capital (Giulianotti, 2002; 2005; Weed, 2007; 2008).

The football stadia of Rovers, United, and Athletic can be seen as forms of 'semi-institutional' space where the participants were able to be included and make a valued contribution to the 'community'. The semi-institutional space of the football stadium allowed the participants to be within a 'correct' mainstream location without being exposed to the oppressive 'normality' of society (Walmsley, 2001; Bates & Davis, 2004; Macintyre, 2008; Parr, 2008). Because expected patterns of behaviour, dress, and appearance differ from everyday life, the stadium brings dissimilar people together, "camouflage[ing] society's typical response to individuals with disability" (Devine & Parr, 2008:402).

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that being football fans and attending matches offered the participants in this research opportunities to have an enjoyable experience, feel part of an 'emotional community' and/or to interact with other like-minded individuals. Although those benefits were more easily achieved by those fans who regularly attended live matches, they were also accessible to those who attended less frequently. The semi-institutional nature of the football stadium, where norms and values within the gathering crowd are different to mainstream society, allowed the participants to interact with and feel a sense of belonging to their fellow fans. However, after the ninety minutes or so, the 'community' disperses and participants (along with everyone else) returned to their 'normality'.

The next chapter of this thesis moves on to consider the participants experiences of football fandom away from live matches and the social benefits this might have.

# **Chapter 5 – Everyday life: learning-disabled football fandom away from live matches and the implications for social inclusion**

## **Introduction**

The late Liverpool Football Club manager Bill Shankly once famously quipped:

“Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it’s much, much more important”.

The moral of Shankly’s celebrated remark is that football is not just about what happens on the pitch during the ninety minute match, but can become a central feature in the lives of those who follow the game. Although originally said in jest, this point has since been made in numerous publications (Armstrong & Harris, 1991; Giulianotti, 1995a; Armstrong, 1998; Robson, 2000; Giulianotti, 2002).

In the previous chapter the experience of attending live football matches and the possible social inclusion benefits this has for learning-disabled fans was explored. Although the spectacle of match-days and the actuality of football teams’ performances and results played an important role in the participants fandom, they may not be the primary aspects of football culture affecting the participants individual notions of self identity, belonging and interpersonal relations. In this context, the recent scholarly call for an analytical shift from the ‘spectacular’ to the social practices of sports fans in ‘everyday life’ seems particularly relevant (Stone, 2007). As Crawford (2004:105) suggests:

“Research on sports audiences has focused almost exclusively on those who regularly attend ‘live’ sporting events, leaving largely ignored how sport is experienced and consumed in people’s everyday lives away from the ‘live’ venues, and in particular overlooks those who do not attend ‘live’ sport”.

The aim of this chapter is to consider the learning-disabled participants’ experiences of football fandom outside live matches – in ‘everyday life’ – and what social inclusion opportunities this presents. This is to be achieved by, firstly, examining the nature of the participants’ football fandom in their everyday lives outside of attending live matches. This will highlight, in particular, the various opportunities for interaction that football fandom presents. The discussion then moves on to consider the persistent nature of some participants’ football fandom as a form of ‘serious leisure’ and the benefits of this as a source of personal and social identity. Finally, the notion of ‘belonging’ is

used to conceptualise the benefits that football fandom can have for learning-disabled people in their everyday lives.

## **Football fandom for learning-disabled people in everyday life**

Attending live football matches was an important aspect in the fandom of the participants of this research. It was a site where individuals have been able to experience the thrill of being in their team's stadium surrounded by like-minded individuals, make a contribution to the spectacle, and interact with people in ways that might not normally be possible. However, despite the significance of 'being there' (Weed, 2007), the football fandom of participants was, in general, not limited in time or space to stadia on match days. To a lesser or greater extent, the participants' experiences of, and engagement with, football fandom persisted into their everyday lives. This reflects Stone's (2007) assertion that football fandom is not spatially or temporally bounded (i.e. within the football stadium on a match day), but extends across activity spaces into peoples' homes, work and other places in between.

Just as the practice and experience of attending live football matches varied for the participants – illustrated previously using Giullianotti's (2002) *Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs* taxonomy – so too did their fandom in everyday life. Looking again at the position of the participants on this taxonomy (see figure 3) gives an indication as to the persistence of their football fandom in everyday life.

For those participants higher up the 'hot'/'cool' vertical axis, being a fan of Rovers, United or Athletic endured more strongly into their everyday lives. The match itself was a consistent physical manifestation that fueled an ongoing process of identity formation within their day-to-day lives (Stone, 2007). Examining the narratives of participants classified as *Supporters* we can see how they all hold what Giullianotti (2002:33) describes as "a long term and emotional investment in the club". For example, Hannah (i1) indicated how she was a fan of United "all the time", and Joe is similarly a "Rovers fan the whole time, not just for one match" (i2). Reflecting Robson's (2000) empirical research on fans of Millwall Football Club, those 'hottest' participants reached a level of commitment allowing the self and cultural symbol to merge and become internalised at the level of personal experience. In other words, being a fan of Rovers, United or Athletic became an essential element for negotiating everyday life for those participants.

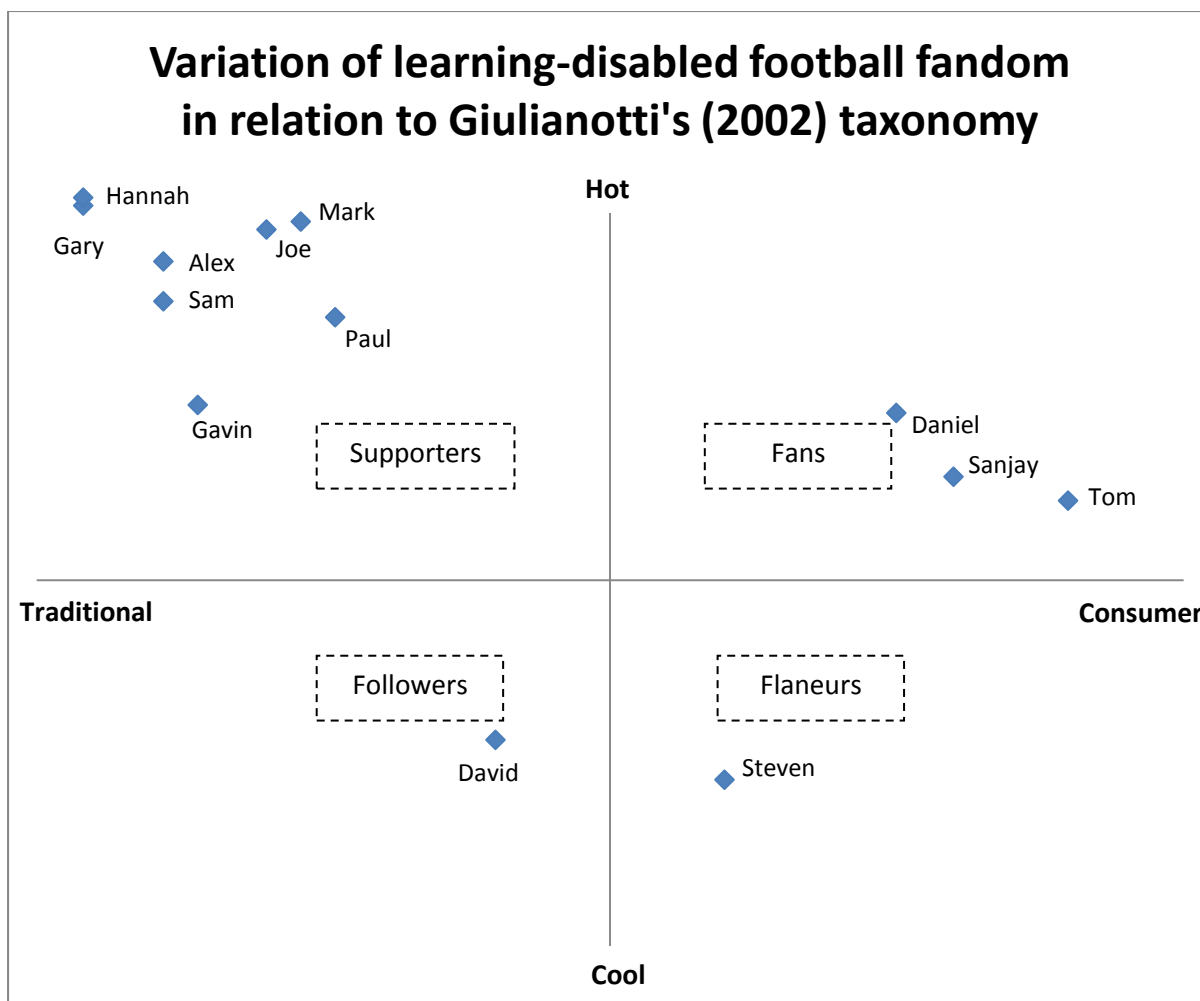


Figure 3 Variation in participant's football fandom in relation to Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy.

Giulianotti (2002:33) argues that for 'Hot' fans:

"Supporting the club is a key preoccupation of the individual's self, so that attending home fixtures is a routine that otherwise structures the supporter's free time".

During the latter rounds of interviews with the participants the 2010/2011 football season was coming to an end, meaning there would be no live matches for participants to attend for about six weeks. In this time I was able to examine how the change of 'routine' affected the participants' football fandom. All of the participants said some of their free Saturday afternoons would be spent playing football for their representative teams at training and in tournaments. Gary (i4) indicated how he and Hannah would be training and have "got tournaments coming up soon our selves, so that's gonna take up most of summer while season's off". Other activities included "going fishing with [my] Granddad" (Paul, i3), shopping "down town" (Alex, i2), and "watch[ing] "speedway" (Gavin, i3). Paul and Joe used the time to go on holiday. However, although these activities occupied some of the time left by not attending live matches, they did not entirely fill the void in the

participant's lives left by their being no football to concentrate on. Nor did they diminish the participants' fandom. Paul (i3) said that he "miss[ed] it going" to live matches, while it made Alex feel upset. He said:

"Just...uhh...I don't know. I feel I do, bit upset sometimes. No matches to watch Rovers on Saturday afternoon. I enjoy it. I think I enjoy it watching Rovers on Saturday afternoon. I like it" (Alex, i3).

Especially for the 'hottest' identified fans, being starved of their chosen club was likely to increase participants' desire and passion towards Rovers, United or Athletic. As Mark (i3) discussed when asked about how the 'off-season' was affecting him:

"Umm...it's not...umm...I wouldn't say it's affecting me, like, as if I'm going further away from Athletic, I'm not. The only thing it's doing is that it's...umm...kinda, like, I've got a eagerness for the season to start again cos I'm missing it quite a lot to be honest. So, I've kinda got , like, a real eagerness for the season to start and stuff like that. But, again, it's...but for me and that eagerness is making me more of a fan than less".

Similarly, Gavin (i3) was quite unequivocal that there being no competitive Athletic matches to attend between the middle of May and the middle of August made him "more" of a fan. He was just eagerly "waiting for new season ticket to come through post...buy shirts and then new fixtures" (Gavin, i3).

Just as Robson (2000:9) suggests that being a fan of Millwall Football Club is "not a discrete or isolated socio-cultural 'event', but rather an extension of the everyday", being a fan of Rovers, United, or Athletic was not confined to attending live games for the 'hotly' identified participants in this study. Even for Sanjay, Daniel and Tom – classified as *Fans* on Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy as opposed to *Supporters* because they did not regularly attend live matches – their fandom persisted into their everyday lives, defined through processes of commemorative ritualisation and embodied cultural practices (Robson, 2000).

Moving down the 'hot'/'cool' axis, both David and Steven displayed less enduring forms of fandom towards Athletic and Rovers respectively. That is to say, their fandom was primarily based around "discrete or isolated socio-cultural 'event[s]'" and not "an extension of the everyday" (Robson, 2000:9). They were likely to only classify themselves as fans when they were in an explicitly football based location or with other fans, such as attending a live match or during football training sessions. David (i2), for example, referred to being a fan of Athletic as a "new kind of hobby that's kind of something to do if I'm bored". He likes going to live matches to "enjoy the football and try and encourage the team to do as well as much as I can possible do" (David, i2), but the result of the match did not affect who he is or his sense of self after the final whistle.

## The day-to-day expansion of social networks

Attending live football matches was shown in the previous chapter to provide learning-disabled fans with the opportunity to interact with other like minded individuals. The benefits of this interaction in terms of increased social networks were limited though because of the temporal and contextual nature of relationships formed as part of the football crowd. However, for those participants whose fandom persisted in their day-to-day lives, an even greater number of opportunities to interact with other fans was apparent. The ubiquity of football in any number of mediated forms offered almost unlimited levels of engagement which could be utilized in different ways, at different times, and for different reasons (Stone, 2007). This is particularly significant considering that the participants in this research might otherwise lead lives isolated from their communities (Hall & Hewson, 2006).

Fan interactions in everyday life occurred between the participants and people already known to them as well as with strangers. In this way, the enduring fandom of many of the participants could be seen as contributing towards the development of 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital. An example of such bonding type interactions was Sanjay's ability to interact with his elder brother about Rovers:

"He said 'Oh, you go to matches'. Then he talk to me and say 'we won'. I say 'yeah'. I said 'they lose'. He said 'Argh'. He said 'They will win next time'. I said 'They won't'. Then my brother just smiling happy" (Sanjay, i2).

Another example was where Daniel's (i2) aunt "keeps talking about [Rovers]" and "when the next game is". Like the relationships formed during live matches the advantage of such interactions was in enabling the participants to reaffirm and strengthen their existing social relationships. This point can be seen explicitly in Sam's story. Sam attended Rovers matches with Alex, his father, and his father's "best mate" Graham (Sam, i3). Because Sam regularly saw Graham during the football season at Rovers' "home matches and [in the] car" on the way to the stadium he considered him to be his "mate" (Sam, i3). Although Sam and Graham did not ordinarily meet during the off-season, Sam spoke about a barbeque him and his father went to at which he spoke to Graham about Rovers.

The 'bridging' interactions the participants engaged in because of their enduring football fandom varied from simply saying 'hello' to other fans to having more in depth conversations. Paul (i2) described his reaction encountering other United fans:

Paul: I usually say 'hello' to 'em

Me: OK. And what...do they say 'hello' back to you?

Paul: Yeah. They usually say 'what did you think of United match?' I say 'they played alright'.



Hannah (i2) also explained how when encountering United fans she did not know she often asked them about “‘what did you think thoughts for the game?’ and I just ask ‘em how they think they played and that”.

In these examples – and those involved in bonding interactions – the same rules of playful sociability which dominated during match days were also the basis of fan interactions in everyday life. As Mark (i1) said, “there’s quite a bit of banter that goes off”. Joe, for example, had “a friend that supports Leeds” and he “just says ‘Oh, rubbish’...and wind me up and say when you lose, stuff like that” (Joe, i2). Similarly, Hannah sometimes got “stick of [her] auntie ‘cos she’ll say ‘what you got that shit on for?’”, referring to Hannah’s United club shirt.

Such forms of sociability benefited the participants in this research, connecting fans within and across spatial barriers to one another and to collective understandings of embodied experiences of fandom (Stone, 2007). However, whilst such playful interactions typically “doesn’t mean anything” other than “what rival fans do” (Joe, i2), ‘banter’ can easily become more vindictive or misconstrued. The following short extract from Daniel’s second interview illustrates the potential negative impact of interactions with other fans in everyday life:

Me: How does that make you feel if people come up to you and say ‘you should wear Man United stuff’?

Daniel: It does feel like I’m getting bullied and I’m in danger.

Me: Feels like you’re in danger?

Daniel: Yeah, people bullying me.

### ***The everyday lives of learning-disabled fans***

Stone (2007) identifies four primary sites within ‘everyday life’ in which football fans interact: home, work, the pub, and other transitional spaces within the city. These spaces appear to not be fully compatible with the experiences of the participants in this research. The home is certainly a space in which the participants interacted – bonded – with other people about their fandom. It is in the home where Sanjay talked to his brother about Rovers, where Daniel (i3) spoke to his aunt about “when the next game is”, and where “a little bit of banter still goes on” between Mark (i1) and his father. When her family came to visit, Hannah (i1) also had the chance to interact about football because “they’re Leeds fans so I give them a bit of banter ‘cos they all say ‘little United’ and I say ‘well, little Leeds”.

Instances of where participants were able to interact with other fans at work or in the pub were not as common. This is possibly due to participants in this study experiencing a different ‘everyday life’

to the non-learning-disabled fans Stone (2007) discusses. Gary was the only fan to regularly frequent a public house during his day-to-day life. None the less, his description of this experience demonstrated the benefits of his enduring fandom:

“What actually happens is some of ‘em in the pub where I go to, not before a game, but...a couple of days after, well Sunday after a Saturday, they say to me ‘you been to the game yesterday?’. I said ‘aye’. They said ‘what were it like?’. I said...if they’ve been bad I’d say ‘how long you got?’ and if they’ve been good they said ‘did they deserve to win?’ and I said ‘yeah’”.

Although none of the participants were in full or part time employment – a not uncommon experience for learning-disabled people (Hall, 2005; Brindle, 2006; Hall, 2010) – Sanjay and Joe both had opportunities to interact with people where they volunteer about football. Sanjay (i2) said:

“Yeah. I like to talk to people at work or to Rovers people if they support ‘em. If they don’t support ‘em, they support different teams. Sometimes they say they support Leeds or Rovers or Birmingham, that’s what they said. They said ‘who do you support?’. I said “Rovers”.

Similarly, Joe (i2) explained:

“My mate...where I volunteer at the same as me...uhh...It’s called...we do gardening...he’s a Leeds fan, but we talk about Bradford City and we talk about Leeds an all and things like that. I just, they just say when we had a good run that other week ‘Oh Rovers are doing well aren’t they?’. I just said ‘yeah, yeah they’re doing alright’. Uhh...and they ask me things if, like, if ...they want the manager to go and they said ‘what do you think?’ and I said ‘I think...I think he’s had his chance, but, you know, I think he’s just there till the end of the season’”

It was predominantly in the other ‘transitional’ spaces where participants were most able to interact with other people about football (Stone, 2007). This included at college, the town centre, at bus stops or on the bus, outside and inside shops, and at the gym. Such opportunities for interaction emerging from enduring football fandom can be seen in Gavin’s account of when he went shopping with his Mother. He said:

“He went ‘which team do you support?’. We went ‘Athletic’. He went ‘Nice one’. I went down the road today, I were waiting for me mum in this shop, I was sat outside and this guy came out, he went ‘nice, nice, best, best, best Athletic shirt son’. I started laughing” (Alex, i3).

Gary had a similar experience in a shoe shop:

“Funny thing was I were talking to this women in shoe shop that me and me mum go and see and she said “I’m a football fan. Who do you support?” I said “United”. And to be honest, she said to me “have you got another team that you support?” and I literally answered “yeah, I do actually. I have got another team I support. I support me legs!”. She thought “ha ha” (Ian, i5).

Perhaps specific to the participants in this research, a common location for interacting with football fans in everyday life was during football training sessions for their learning-disability football teams. Hannah, for example, spoke “to someone on a Monday night that go to group or at [training] cos some of the other players watch United” (i3). The same is true of Tom (i1) who talked “to the people at training” about “how well I support Rovers” because “they see what’s inside my heart”. Whilst these interactions had significant benefits for the participants, within social inclusion policy discourses such learning-disability exclusive spaces have little value (Hall, 2004; 2010).

As well as interacting with other fans in the physical spaces identified by Stone (2007), some of the participants also interacted online, occasionally in chat-rooms but predominantly on the social networking site Facebook. Daniel (i1) illustrated how he interacted with other people in cyber-space about being a fan of Rovers:

Daniel: Umm...I literally do it on the internet. Just tell people why I like Rovers and I show ‘em myself.

Me: What do you mean you do it on the internet?

Daniel: I go on Facebook and tell ‘em why I like Rovers and...I send statuses out to my friends. Like I’ll say ‘did you see what happened at Rovers?’, ‘have you seen that new player they’re wanting to get?’. And...umm...‘the manager’s ace, isn’t he, what they’ve got?’. And then people write back, like, funny messages like ‘have you seen the new burgers they’ve got today?’. Like, jokes. So we just, like, makes jokes with stuff.

Similarly, Tom (i1) often told his ‘friends’ on Facebook “I do support Rovers a lot in my heart and...umm...I just tell them and play hard”.

Whilst the online interactions of football fans are not yet fully understood (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010), this type of communication reflects more recent views about post-modern football fans that congregate in non-territorial spaces, specifically the internet, as readily as in football stadium concourses and stands. This is perhaps no more true than for Gary and Hannah who are both part of a Facebook ‘group’ called ‘[Player’s name] for England!’. In this example we can see how they are both not just interacting with other people online, but are using that space to purposefully congregate and associate themselves with other people with the same opinion about a football related issue. However, Sam, Alex, David, Paul and Sanjay did not have the necessary literacy skills to access these online spaces and so missed out on the benefits of interacting in this fashion. Just as verbal interaction is not as accessible for learning-disabled fans with more limited verbal communication skills, the online environment was limited to participants with access to the internet and the necessary literacy skills to engage with it.

## ***Social inclusion through interaction in everyday life***

In terms of affecting the social exclusion of learning-disabled people, the benefits and draw backs of interacting in everyday life about football – whether face-to-face or through social networking websites – can be seen to be broadly similar to the interactions experienced at live matches. The participants were able to increase their bonding social capital through interacting with close friends or family members about their favoured team. Also, being a football fan was evidently an effective ‘ice-breaker’, enabling the participants to engage in pleasurable conversation and enhance their bridging capital. This could be as simple as acknowledging or saying ‘hello’ to fellow fans. Fandom that endures into everyday life also provided a topic for longer bouts of sociability. As Mark (i1) explained:

“[Being an Athletic fan] gives me quite a lot to talk about depending on the situation...umm...cos what I’ve found out with Athletic is, like, there’s quite a few good things to talk about at the moment. We’ve just got out of admin, which is good, and stuff like that. There’s new faces and stuff like that. Like, the new owner and stuff like that”.

Paralleling the participants’ experiences at live matches, these interactions brought the participants of this research and other fans together briefly as a performative ‘cloakroom’ community around their shared interest, without entering into ‘thick’ reciprocal relationships (Crabbe, 2008). This finding differs from Brown et al’s (2008) assertion that such cloakroom communities are too self contained (i.e. within the match day experience) to be reciprocated elsewhere.

The interactions and sociability experienced by participants outside of live football matches may not have been as “intensive” (Crabbe, 2008:436) as those formed within the emotion and excitement of the stadium. However, conducted away from any “discrete...socio-cultural ‘event[s]’” (Robson, 2000:9), such interactions were more “mobile and flexible” (Crabbe, 2008:436) than those that characterised ‘community’ during live matches. This means that such interactions are unlikely to contribute to the permanent expansion of the participants’ social networks necessary for social inclusion. Nonetheless, whilst such relationships will probably be even more fleeting – especially as there does not appear to be a ‘season ticket friend’ equivalent – there is likely to be many more of them. However momentary, participants had opportunities to interact with other people through the course of their everyday lives because they were fans of Athletic, Rovers, or United. These day-to-day experiences of ‘cloakroom communities’ were also accessible to those learning-disabled fans unable to attend live matches.

## Football fandom as serious leisure

The enduring nature of the participants' football fandom in everyday life suggests it may be considered a form of 'serious leisure'. Although Patterson & Pegg (2009:390) explicitly refer to "people going to see their favourite football team" as "casual leisure", this is to misunderstand the significance of football fandom in the lives of those involved (Giulianotti, 2002; Brown, 2008; Millward, 2009). For those participants most 'hotly' identified, football fandom is an activity sufficiently "substantial and interesting in nature for the participant to find a career...acquiring and expressing...its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (Stebbins, 1992a:3). Comparatively, those fans only 'coolly' associated with Rovers, United or Athletic, or those whose fandom is expressed in purely 'consumerist' ways, can be considered only 'casual leisure' participants.

Whilst historically learning-disabled people have not been seen to have the commitment or perseverance to engage in leisure activities long enough for them to be positive or meaningful (Mcgill, 1996), this is an outdated view. Sam and Alex, for example, have both been fans of Rovers, consistently attending home matches, for over fifteen years. Whilst the other participants in the research had not been attending live matches as long, being a fan of one club "all my life" (Gary, i1), for example, or at least over a number of years was common. This parallels the findings of Aitchison (2003) who identified learning-disabled people participating in their chosen leisure activities for between two and fifteen years, and from five times a week to once every two weeks.

This commitment and perseverance to Rovers, United or Athletic can be encapsulated as the participants' serious leisure 'career' (Green & Jones, 2005), which includes various stages of achievement and reward. The term 'career' is used to show that leisure time is not time off, but a specific form of informal labour (Rojek, 2010). As Mark (i1) described:

"With Athletic you always go through your highs and lows cos we win big matches, we think we're really good, we lose against teams we shouldn't, we go down, we go up, stuff like that".

The 'career' of a football fan includes being present during (or at least being aware of) the significant moments in the narrative of one's chosen club. Examples of this include Sanjay recounting Rovers' numerous managerial changes, Gary and Hannah discussing an historic victory over Liverpool the previous season, and Gavin (i1) describing Athletic's ongoing struggle to escape being "in debt".

Such commitment and perseverance to Rovers, United, or Athletic has allowed the participants, to varying degrees, to develop the skills and abilities necessary for participating in the serious leisure activity (Green & Jones, 2005). These include, for example, the ability to display 'good form' in

sociability and appropriate knowledge of the club and its players. Furthermore, the behaviour of many of the participants continually engaging in fan activities, both during and away from live matches – as well as during and between individual football seasons – can be seen as them trying to enhance their fan ‘careers’. Reading about Rovers in the local newspaper, as Daniel and Sanjay often did, or going onto the club’s official websites to “see if [anything’s] happening down there [at the club]” (Gary, i1) or “if we’re signing any new players” (Paul, i1) allowed those participants to advance their ‘careers’.

Missing out on significant events was perceived by some participants – particularly those considered *Supporters* on Giulianotti’s (2002) taxonomy – to be damaging to their ‘careers’. This is because such significant events are experienced by hundreds if not thousands of other fans, each attempting to use the experience instrumentally to enhance their own status (Giulianotti, 2002). Gary (i2) described this as one of his main motivations for continually attending United matches:

Gary: If I manage to complete this year, all the games, I’ll of been to every game for 5 years and I’ve not missed a match.

Me: Why would you be so determined to go?

Gary: Because...just say they won 5-0 and I missed the game I’d feel “damn! I missed 5 goals; nightmare”.

For Gary, not attending a United match means running the risk of not ‘being there’ (Weed, 2007; 2008) during a significant moment in the clubs history, where sub-cultural capital is accumulated.

There was an observable difference between those participants more ‘hotly’ identified to Rovers, United or Athletic in their desire to enhance their fan careers compared to the ‘cooler’ fans. This is illustrated in the way Mark and David described, in varying levels of detail, the significance of “Athletic versus Crystal Palace last season” (Mark, i1) when Athletic “didn’t get the result they wanted” (David, i1) and so were relegated a division. Mark, who is hotly identified with Athletic, said:

“I had to go to it. I didn’t know what the outcome was, but if Athletic had stayed up I would of felt a bit annoyed and upset with myself that I didn’t actually go. And I wouldn’t of felt like a proper supporter either, that I missed out on that” (Mark, i1).

Comparatively, the more coolly identified David (i1) described how “there was a lot of violence involved” as the fans invaded the pitch after the final whistle, which “kind of...it made [him] upset that they were violence on the pitch”.

As a form of serious leisure, participants invested a significant amount of personal effort in their football fandom (Stebbins, 2000; Green & Jones, 2005; Patterson & Pegg, 2009). The most

prominent example of this was travelling to live matches. Mark, for example, travelled for over an hour, on a bus and the tram, to and from each of Athletic's home games. Gary (i1) described his and Hannah's most arduous journeys to United's away matches:

"I mean the two longest matches away trip we been on were Plymouth, one year where we set off from [United's stadium] at 5 o'clock Sunday morning and we were back...for 9 o'clock the same night, and then the furthest one we went to last year we went to Bristol City, where...on the coach there were only 14 on the coach".

There are also more subtle forms of effort expended by participants in pursuing their 'serious leisure' fandom. Sanjay and Paul, for example, both have limited literary skills, yet invest time trawling through newspapers and the internet to find information about Rovers and Athletic respectively. This can be seen as an equally significant investment in their serious leisure football fandom.

Finally, the football fandom of participants can be seen as serious leisure because of the unique ethos within the activity and the distinct 'social world' that they become part of (Unruh, 1980; Green & Jones, 2005). The idea that participants have been able to connect with other like-minded individuals inside and outside of the stadium has already been explored with the notion of 'cloakroom communities'. In the language of 'serious leisure', these same formations are described by Unruh (1980:3) as:

"Large and highly permeable, amorphous and spatially transcendent forms of social organisation made up of people sharing common interests and sharing common channels of communication".

The social worlds surrounding football fandom as a form of serious leisure have no formal membership – at least not in their contemporary form (Brown *et al.*, 2006; Crabbe, 2008). For example, participants were able to communicate with other fans at many different times and in various locations without any formal planning or organisation. However, just as Green & Jones (2005) suggest that within the social worlds of serious leisure organised groups will often exist with their own structure and hierarchy, the same formations were evident in the participant's experiences of football fandom. The difference between season ticket holders and non-season ticket holders, in their ability to "feel part of it" (Mark, i2), being a prime example.

Not all the participants involved in this research engaged in football fandom as serious leisure. Despite displaying some characteristics of serious leisure, the fandom of David, Daniel, Tom, and Steven might be more appropriately portrayed as 'casual leisure'. That is to say, their fandom was more focused around engaging in "immediately intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little of no special training for its enjoyment" (Stebbins, 1996:5). This

extract from an interview with Daniel (i1) demonstrates how his fandom is perhaps more casual than serious:

Me: OK. Well how important would you say it is...how important is being a Rovers support?

Daniel: Umm...quite important...not that quite important, but it is a little bit if you do like Rovers.

Me: How important is it to you, to who you are, to be a Rovers supporter?

Daniel: Very. In between actually.

Me: What do you mean in between?

Daniel: Like, I like 'em and sometimes it can be a bit down so I don't...you go off the edge for a bit, just say "oh, they're doing rubbish".

Similarly, David (i2) told me how he "started to lose an interest" in Athletic when they were relegated, although he has since thought "I may as well give it another try, see how they do". Such variation is not surprising but conforms to the broader understanding of heterogeneous fandom in the contemporary football landscape (Brown *et al.*, 2006; Brown, 2008).

### ***The benefits of 'serious' football fandom for learning-disabled people***

Rojek (2010) suggests that leisure is the paramount setting for developing the people skills that translate into the prized cultural capital needed for the labour market and social networks. By engaging in leisure activities individuals acquire the necessary skills and values – how to look after one's self and others – to effectively participate in Western (i.e. paid employment) society (Rojek, 2010). It is conceptualisations of leisure participation similar to, and including, Rojek's (2010) that have come to dominate political discourses around social exclusion and inclusion. However, the benefits of football fandom as a leisure activity for learning-disabled people are not simply a linear transition from participation to skill acquisition to expanded social networks to employment.

Rather, in line with Patterson & Pegg's (2009) conclusions, the benefits of football fandom as a leisure activity for the participants included an enhancement in self-concept, self actualisation, self enrichment, self expression, feelings of accomplishment, enhanced self image and self esteem, and social interaction around 'our' team. These positive outcomes are more readily available to 'serious leisure' fans compared to participants whose fandom was more casual, where short-term enjoyment was the primary outcome. As such, 'serious' football fandom for the participants can be seen to be more beneficial than the majority of leisure programmes offered to learning-disabled people, which tend to be more 'casual', passive and solitary (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005).



Although none of the participants involved in this research gained employment through their fandom, by becoming a central life interest (Stebbins, 1992b; 1992a), serious leisure increased their social competencies and provided similar individual benefits to those achieved through open employment. Gary (i1), for example, suggested being a fan of United was “what I like to class as my religion”. Alex (i3) also said that being a fan of Rovers was “important in [his] life”. The following abstract indicates how being a Rovers fan is central to Joe’s life:

Joe: Umm...it means that because...umm...it means a lot because it’s my local team.

Me: Yeah, OK. So how much would you say on like a scale of one to ten, if ten was loads and loads and one was nothing, how high would you be?

Joe: Ten

Me: A ten?

Joe: Yeah

Me: So it’s really important to you?

Joe: Yeah

Serving as a non-paying substitute for work, ‘serious’ football fandom was a possible means for the participants to regain positive feelings of dignity and self esteem in contributing to their community settings (Patterson, 2001). Gary (i1), who is not in full or part time paid employments, suggested:

“[Being a United fan] makes me feel important. Get up either Saturday morning thinking ‘three points today please’ or a Tuesday night”.

These results reinforce the conclusion of Patterson & Pegg (2009) and lend heavy support to theoretical propositions about the importance of serious leisure in the lives of learning-disabled people (Patterson, 1996; 2000; Stebbins, 2000). Whilst it is impossible to speculate about the participants’ lives if they were not football fans, fandom appeared to provide the opportunity to communicate with a range of people, provided a source of accomplishment, self-esteem, dignity, a network of friends, and pride, which in turn facilitated some form of inclusion in community settings.

However, there is a caveat to these results regarding the participants in this research. Whilst ‘serious’ football fandom is more advantageous as a conduit for improving quality of life and self-worth (Patterson & Pegg, 2009), those more ‘casual’ participants should not be blamed for failing to achieve these benefits. Instead, it is important to consider the constraints that individuals’ learning-impairments placed on their football fandom. For example, Joe, Sam, Alex, Hannah, and Paul were able to rely on the assistance of close family to satisfy the demands for consistent effort, devotion and the occasional need to persevere that serious leisure requires. Conversely, where this assistance

was not available for Sanjay, Daniel, and Tom, the practicalities of engaging in football fandom as a form of serious leisure, such as attending live matches, were beyond their reach. This issue is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

### ***'Passionate' football fandom – another (similar) explanation***

Exploring many of the same features found in Stebbins' (1992a) idea of serious leisure, Vallerand et al (2008) use the notion of 'passion' to explain what drives individuals to invest so much of themselves in watching other people to engage in sport activity. They define a passion as a strong inclination towards an activity that individuals like (or even love), that they value, and in which they invest time and energy (Valleranda *et al.*, 2008). They suggest being passionate leads individuals to identify with a team, to dedicate themselves to the team they love, and even to organise their lives around the team's schedule. Vallerand et al (2008) suggest that there are two types of passion; one associated with adoptive (positive) outcomes and the other with maladaptive (negative) ones. An 'obsessive passion' is an uncontrollable urge to engage in the activity that one loves. Obsessive passion results from a 'controlled internalisation' of the activity into one's identity or because the sense of excitement derived from engagement in the activity becomes uncontrollable. Individuals with an obsessive passion develop ego-invested self structures and eventually display rigid engagement and persistence towards the passionate activity. Such rigidity can lead to a less than optimal functioning as people feel compelled to engage in the activity as their internal contingencies come to control them (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003; Ratelle *et al.*, 2004). Conversely, an 'harmonious passion' allows individuals to freely accept that an activity is important for them without any contingencies attached; it remains in harmony with other aspects of the person's life. Individuals engage with harmonious passions in a flexible manner, persisting in the activity only if positive returns are expected. According to Valleranda (2008) although both harmonious and obsessive passion entails the internalisation of the football club into one's identity, it is only an identity fuelled by harmonious passion that leads to positive psychological outcomes.

That said, it is questionable whether the committed fandom of some of the participants was harmonious or obsessive, and whether their fandom had positive or negative affects for them. The fandom of Mark, Gavin, Gary, and Hannah, for example, was quite rigid, to the point where they organised their lives around their clubs' fixture list. Hannah (i1) told me:

“For me being a fan right, Kris, I had the opportunity to go on a weekend away, United were playing so I said ‘No, I want to go watch United’. So I put United before me going away for a weekend. So I'd rather watch em than go on a weekend”.

Gavin and Mark both also prioritise attending football matches and supporting their team over other social activities. Gavin (i2) said “if I’m meeting somebody I cancel it. If there’s a match at home I cancel it, me. Go to the match”. Similarly, Mark (i1) was adamant that “I’ll always go, no matter what. If I’ve got a holiday, I will cancel it to go!”. Even illness does not seem to prevent the more passionate – what we have previously described as the ‘hottest’ (Giulianotti, 2002) – participants from expressing their fandom. Hannah (i1) has been to live matches with “an ear infection” and Gary (i1) still attends United matches with “man flu”. Although Alex suggested he preferred live matches over other leisure activities, such as going “down town” (Alex, i2), it is hard to suggest whether other season ticket holders, such as Sam and Paul, would be willing to organise their lives around their clubs’ playing schedules in this manner. This is because their match-day attendance is organised by other people – their parents and support assistance – on their behalf.

The more passionate participants can be seen to be on “an affective roller coaster that is contingent on their teams performance, ranging from high pride following success to persistent negative affect following a loss” (Vallerand et al, 2008:1290). Alex, Joe, Sanjay, and Gary all said they felt sad if their team lost, and Sam supposedly always comes home “in a strop” (Steven, i1) if Rovers lose. Rather than occupying an important, but not overwhelming place in their identities, football fandom appears to be an obsessive passion for many of the participants in this research. Although such a rigid and controlled passion is typically associated with negative outcomes (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003; Vallerand *et al.*, 2008), given learning-disabled people’s relative lack of social opportunities (Macintyre, 2008) any negative outcomes are arguably outweighed by the positives of football fandom.

## **The identity of learning-disabled fans**

Inherent within the idea of serious leisure – and indeed within football fandom (Giulianotti *et al.*, 1994; King, 2000; Clark, 2006; Brown, 2008) – is the notion of acquiring an ‘identity’. In earlier historical moments, when peoples’ position in society was more stable, the self-image they portrayed to themselves and the world – their identity – was more or less fixed (Howard, 2000). However, in modern, post-industrial society – ‘liquid modernity’ as Bauman (2000) calls it – the concept of identity has grown to locate people in social spaces by virtue of the relationships that these identities imply, and are themselves symbols whose meanings varies across actors (Howard, 2000). Despite being viewed as trivial and unimportant compared to the ‘seriousness’ of work, family, or religion, leisure is increasingly viewed as a site for the development and expression of one’s identity (Gillespie *et al.*, 2002; Green & Jones, 2005).

Football fandom has long been held up as a highly vibrant area for developing and negotiating popular cultural identities; firstly in relation to the contingencies of working-class masculinity (Taylor, 1971a; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; Armstrong & Harris, 1991; Armstrong, 1998) and more recently as an embodiment of the collective symbols of identification associated with 'community' (King, 2000; Giulianotti, 2002; Fawbert, 2004; Brown *et al.*, 2006; Weed, 2008). As a form of identity, being a football fan is clearly very important to participants involved in this research. For example, Mark (i3) suggested about being an Athletic fan:

“Umm...it is, like, a big part of my life, being a Athletic supporter. So, like, if people accept me for who I am then stuff like that. One of the things is that I'm a Athletic support and it's, like, a big part of me”.

This statement echoes Wann *et al.*'s (2003:407) definition of sports team identification (STI) as “a strong sense of psychological connection to a team...a central component of their self-identity”. Several other participants also said being a fan of United, Athletic, or Rovers was “important” (Alex, i3) to them, a “big part” (Hannah, i1) of who they were, and that it “means a lot” (Joe, i3) to them to be a fan. Of course, football fandom will not become a central feature of identity for every learning-disabled person interested in football. If we refer back to where each of the participants fall on Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy of football fans we can see how for the 'hottest' fans their club forms a significant part of their identity. Conversely, 'cooler' identification meant football fandom was perhaps not a significant part of David or Steven's sense of personal identity.

Given that developing a social identity based on serious leisure is generally more complex than just a sudden acquisition of that identity (Green & Jones, 2005), my initial interpretation of these results was that the importance of football fandom to the participants sense of identity was related to their length of support. That is to say, the longer a person has been a fan of a particular club, the greater role the club played in their sense of identity. This was partly due to Giulianotti's (2002) suggestion that *Supporters* – those most highly identified to a club, and the most populous categorisation of the participants in this research – have a long-term commitment to their clubs. However, this was not a definitive correlation. Mark (i3), for example, has only been a fan of Athletic for a couple of years yet he counts them as a “big part” of who he is as a person. Comparatively, Sanjay and Daniel have been fans of Rovers for longer, but do not identify as 'hotly' with the club.

A more appropriate interpretation was that the most highly identified participants to their particular clubs were those with season tickets, who regularly attended live matches. This is because Sam, Alex, Joe, Mark, Gavin, Gary, Hannah and Paul, by virtue of being season ticket holders, experience more regular exposure to the 'social world' of the fandom in their clubs and so can progress more

quickly through the stages of identity development (Green & Jones, 2005). These are: 'pre-socialisation', which involves the acquisition of knowledge about the serious leisure identity; 'Recruitment' or entry into the social world; and 'Socialisation', where individuals gain knowledge of norms, values, and roles and become assimilated in the social world. In the context of watching a live match this includes gaining knowledge of, for example, how to communicate with other people in the stadium (i.e. banter), the expected behaviour of fans at a given moment (i.e. when and how to cheer), and displaying one's allegiance in the appropriate manner. Even amongst participants with season ticket, we can see a general correlation that the more matches participants have attended, the 'hotter' their identification. Gary and Hannah, who are the most 'hotly' identified fans, have consistently attended United home and away matches for a number of years. This compares to Paul, who's identification with United is 'cooler', who has only had a season ticket to home matches for a season or two.

In the highly commodified, modern world of football, however, entry into the social world of football fandom and the acquisition of a fan identity is not limited to attending live matches (Giulianotti, 2007). Although 'traditional' means, such as attending live matches, supposedly make a more significant contribution towards identity formation (Giulianotti, 2002; 2007; Weed, 2007), participants were still able to acquire a fan identity through more 'consumerist' practises. Sanjay and Daniel, for example, are unable to regularly attend Rovers' live matches but still identify quite strongly with the club through watching highlights on television, listening to matches on the radio, browsing the club's website and wearing Rovers emblazoned clothing. Although such consumer focused behaviour is often derided by more traditional fans (Giulianotti, 2002), in terms of identity formation, these practises have still enabled Rovers' to become a relatively significant part of Sanjay and Daniel's sense of self.

Nonetheless, regardless of how participants' fan identities have been formed, identity confirmation is not an end-point where fans are satisfied with the role of the club in their personal identity. Rather, it is a continual process whereby the participants showcased their skills and knowledge of appropriate values and behaviours in order to continually reaffirm to themselves and others their identity as a United, Rovers, or Athletic fan.

### ***Transmitting identity through interaction and merchandise***

As well as just *being* a fan, participants enjoyed performing and having their fan identities confirmed and reinforced by other people. This was achieved through stylised, ritual displays intended to *show* other people they were a fan of Rovers, United or Athletic (Clark, 2006; Brown, 2008; Derbaix &

Decrop, 2011). Although he struggled to fully articulate himself, this short extract from an interview with Alex (i3) indicates how he likes people to know that he is a Rovers fan:

Me: Do you like to show other people that you're a supporter?

Alex: Yeah

Me: Do you like other people to know that you support Rovers?

Alex: Yeah I do.

Me: Why is that?

Alex: Uhh...why is that...uhh...all [my] life. I supported Rovers all [my] life.

Me: All your life. And do you like people to know that you've supported Rovers all your life?

Alex: Yeah

Me: And why is that? Why do you want people to know?

Alex: Why? Because I do...uhh...I do, yeah.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Sajay (i3) who felt "happy" when people recognised him as a Rovers fan, Joe (i2) who said it makes him "feel good" to be recognised as a Rovers fan, and for Gary (i5) to whom being recognised as a United fan "means a lot".

The interactionist literature on identity articulates the construction, negotiation, and communication of identity directly through interaction and discursively through various forms of media (Howard, 2000). At the most straightforward level, the point is simply that the participants actively produced and communicated a 'fan' identity through their interactions with other like minded individuals (such as those discussed previously). Gary (i5), for example, said it "means a lot for me to tell them (other people) I follow my local side and they like taking an interest". Similarly, Sanjay explained an incident where he was interviewed by a newspaper reporter about being a Rovers fan.

Communicating his fandom in this way made him feel "happy" (Sanjay, i3). (In the same way, participation in this research can be seen to benefit the learning-disabled fans involved: they spoke to me as football fans, reinforcing this identity). However, because such direct verbal and written interactions may be quite difficult for those fans with limited communication skills – or those with limited opportunities to interact – the creation and reinforcement of a fan identity this way may be hindered.

Fortunately, as well as being constructed through direct interactions, the necessary self-presentation or impression management for establishing one's personal identity can also be achieved through the display of appropriate 'symbols' (Howard, 2000). The most significant instance of this is the symbolic

meaning associated with certain kinds of dress in communicating, maintaining, and repairing identities through a 'rhetoric of review' that provides grand rules for critical assessment of appearance (Hunt & Miller, 1997). Whilst Hunt & Miller's (1997) work focuses specifically on American sorority women, this concept has been applied equally to football fandom (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011)

Looking at the experiences of the participants it is possible to see how clothing emblazoned with symbols of Rovers', United's, or Athletic's – either the club logo or club colours – are used to demonstrate fandom and one's identity as a fan of that club (King, 2000; Giulianotti, 2002; Sandvoss, 2003; Giulianotti, 2005; Sandvoss, 2005; Williams, 2006; Stone, 2007; Brown, 2008; Millward, 2009). The most common item of clothing to demonstrate fan identity was the clubs' official playing shirt; something all the participants possessed. Gary and Hannah, for example, said they had "got all the shirts that have been out" (Hannah, i1), a not uncommon experience for the most 'hotly' identified fans. Other items of clothing also included Rovers, United, or Athletic branded coats, rain coats, hats, caps, gloves, scarves, and tracksuits. (It is worth pointing out that some fan sub-cultures reject consuming/wearing branded clothing in favour of a more 'casual' style, although this was not evident in this research).

In their 'cultural form' – as opposed to their pure commodity form – these items attain meaning through an expanded "use value" (Willis, 2000:55). Football fans put them to work in creative ways in order to convey meaning and status to others (Sandvoss, 2003). An example of identity construction was when Mark (i2) suggested:

"sometimes I'll get out my Athletic shirt and stuff like that just so everybody knows that I'm a Athletic supporter, stuff like that....so always like showing off my Athletic shirt just to let people know I'm a Athletic fan and proud of it".

Gavin (i2) also said, when he is not attending live matches he maintains his support for Athletic through:

"Wear[ing] me [Athletic] shirts. When they're in wash I still support, just put me [Athletic] jumper on. I wear me Athletic jacket. All the way through the week I put me jacket on all the way through the week".

Tom (i1) wore his Rovers shirt and tracksuit because it "show's 'em (other people) that I'm a Rovers supporter and I just love the team". Similarly, Paul (i2) wore his United shirt "'cos I wear it then they know I'm a supporter". Using Bourdieu's (1977:72) concept of 'bodily hexis', which is an "attempt to account for the ways in which the habitus inscribes social consciousness, meaning and identity in the body itself", we can see how these participants have embedded their identity within their bodily displays (i.e. wearing club-branded clothing), which is conveyed to and understood by others.

Robson (2000) suggests a similar identity of 'Millwallism' embedded within the ritualised movements and behaviours amongst fans of Millwall Football Club.

As well as being used by the participants to demonstrate their own identities as football fans, the same cultural commodities mark out other like-minded football fans. Even a moderately identified fan like Tom "can just tell [when someone is a Rovers fan] if they wear a shirt...hats, the flags, the coats, something like that". Joe (i1) often "see[s] people with the old Rovers top", indicating they are a fan too.

Not every 'symbol' the participants employed to convey their fandom carried the same 'use value', however. In general, those items that could not be bought from club shops, for example, were thought to carry the most value (Giulianotti, 2002; Crawford, 2004). They implied a more passionate and committed fan identity, and carried more sub-cultural capital amongst other fans. Examples of such 'symbols' were evident amongst participants considered *Supporters* (Giulianotti, 2002). Hannah (i1) prized her "signed United shirt and personalised Christmas card" from one of the United players, whilst Gary (i1) had a "signed football at home", and Joe (i1) an "autograph book". One of the most interesting examples was Mark (i1), who not only bought "all the vintage stuff", but also "a part of the pitch" when the old turf was auctioned. Although these items were purchased from the club, and so might be described as consumerist, who but the most committed of fans would value a six inch square piece of old turf?

Other significant markers of this more passionate and committed fan identity were those which outwardly demonstrate the individual acts people had done in support of their team (Weed, 2007; Brown, 2008). For example, Hannah had collected United's commemorative scarves from when they played Chelsea Football Club and Liverpool Football Club in The F.A. Cup. Gary (i1) described a t-shirt he brought which suggests the same thing:

"I think it were something daft it said on it 'ticket for Wembley £40, train fare to London £60, beer money £100, knocking Liverpool & Chelsea out of F.A. Cup, priceless'".

Whilst these objects may have a relatively low monetary value, for the participants and their fellow 'hot' fans of Rovers, United or Athletic, they are more valuable than 'consumerist' items. This is because their value is in the message they convey about the bearer to other fans.

Finally, some of the 'hotter', more 'traditional' participants in this research not only displayed symbols of their fandom in highly visible locations (i.e. wearing branded clothing in public), but also to "humanise, decorate and invest with meanings their...life spaces" (Willis, 1990:2). The most prominent example of this was at Joe's house where, to paraphrase Willis (1990:113), he had



created a “private temple” to Rovers. He and his dad converted their garage into a Rovers themed “little bar” (Joe, i1), decorated with pictures of past and present players, flags and ornaments, complete with television and a fully stocked drinks bar. They originally did it as a space to watch the 2010 FIFA World Cup, but now use it to “watch football” and “play games and stuff” (i1). This location does little to enhance Joe’s status as a Rovers fan as very few people are invited in, but served as a constant reinforcement to his self-perception as a highly committed fan.

### ***Importance of football identities for inclusion***

The advantage of participants establishing an identity as a football fan of Rovers, United, or Athletic was that it enabled them, to a lesser or greater extent, to distance themselves from the constraints of their ‘disabled’ identity (Lesseliers *et al.*, 2009). That is to say, when all their ‘symbols’ were on display the participants were viewed first and foremost as ‘fans’ – leading to interactions and sociability with others – and not through the stigma of disability (Bedini, 2002). Significantly, even for participants with a ‘cooler’ relationship to their chosen clubs, there appeared to be little to no conflict between being a fan and being learning-disabled. Joe (i3) said that having a learning disability “doesn’t matter” when you’re a fan of Rovers. Participants generally felt there was “no difference really” (Gary, i5) between themselves and other non-learning-disabled fans. Instead there was a feeling of being “together” (Paul, i4) and “all together as one” (Gary, i5). Daniel (i3) described his feelings about himself as a learning-disabled fan: “Part of being a Rovers supporter just like everyone else and that and just being a person whose there to watch”. The participants’ successful adoption of ‘fan’ identities was, according to Mark (i3), due to:

“All the Athletic supporter and stuff like that, kind of...umm...all the...they all accept, kind of thing, no matter if...it doesn’t matter who you are, what skin colour, anything like that, it doesn’t matter. All of us will, like, accept you and acknowledge you kind of thing”.

Within the growing equality of football fandom (Giulianotti, 2007) the structural boundaries of race and gender were also not a barrier to the construction of a fan identity for the participants in this research. Whilst fandom has traditionally been considered a male interest, Hannah (i3) was able to establish a place for herself in which she developed “a girl’s view of football”. She continued to participate in the chanting and passionate vocal support for United, but this was accompanied by “having a good chit-chat about footballers and you know what girls talk about” whilst at live matches. This reflects a growing literature on female football fandom, such as the work of Ben-Porat (2009), and of women’s football in general, in which participation is negotiated between dominant feminine discourses (Jeanes, 2011; Ratna, 2011).

Sanjay, who is of Pakistani-Muslim ethnic heritage, can be seen as part of a wave of British-Asian

football fans increasingly engaging in varied forms of contemporary football consumption (Burdsey, 2007). Although he was aware that he was in a minority as a non-white-British fan of Rovers (Fawbert, 2011b), he was “alright” (Sanjay, i3) about it. He suggested that although some “Muslims don’t like supporting Rovers” (Sanjay, i3), being Muslim did not prevent him from being a fan. For Sanjay (i3), “liv[ing] in [town’s name] and... supporting Rovers” did not conflict with his Muslim heritage or affect his interactions with other fans, but appeared part of a more complex identity formation process (Burdsey & Randhawa, 2011).

Establishing such a serious leisure identity facilitates the expression and affirmation of an individual’s talents and capabilities, provides them with some form of social recognition, confirming their central values and beliefs (Shamir, 1992). This confirms previous suggestions that football fandom enables the construction of resistant identities among marginalised groups (Giulianotti, 2007). However, as with the other social benefits associated with football fandom for learning-disabled people (i.e. opportunities for social interaction) the question remains to what extent are these fan identities temporally or spatially bounded?

Blommaert (2005:209):209) argues that “society is full of niches in which highly particular identities can and need to be performed, using resources that have no such positive identity-performing value elsewhere”. This suggests that whilst many participants portray themselves as being highly identified to Rovers, United, or Athletic, once removed from any “critical space” (Giulianotti, 2007:257) or “discrete or isolated socio-cultural ‘event’” (Robson, 2000:9) associated with fandom (i.e. a live match) these identities and the symbols that mark them out have no value. Such an interpretation is perhaps true of the more ‘coolly’ identified participants who can be seen to appropriately perform their football identities in the stadium during a game, for example, before being altered in accordance with the known expectation of how to behave back at the family home or at work (Stone, 2007). An example of this can be seen in my final interview with Tom. In our first interview he spoke quite passionately about his “love” of Rovers, but in the final interview – in which his Mother was present – he was much less forthcoming. This can be seen as a point at which the fan identity he wanted to portray to me came into conflict with the identity he portrayed to his family, and the latter won out.

This understanding of identity suggests that football fandom can help learning-disabled people distance themselves from the constraints of their ‘true [disabled] self’, but only while they remain within a space –interacting with people – where that football identity is recognised and valued. Because of this, learning-disabled football fans might find themselves experiencing simultaneous inclusion and exclusion according to specific power relations (Elling & Knoppers, 2005). Considering

again Sam's story of when he attended his father's friend's barbeque and was able to speak to his father's friend, whom he also attends live matches with. In this instance, it is possible to see how Sam and his father's friend, because they both recognise and value the symbols associated with being a Rovers fan (i.e. discussing the team), saw each other being a Rovers fans before any other type of identities. Conversely, although it is only speculation, it is plausible to suggest that other people at the party did not see Sam in the same way; perhaps identifying him as 'learning disabled' before anything else. Such mechanisms of exclusion cannot always be clearly identified due to intersections and often hybrid forms of traditional hierarchical and binary social categories within society (Elling & Claringbould, 2005).

However, the proposition that sport, particularly football, is embedded within societal structures of British day-to-day life suggests that identities constructed thusly have the potential to cross structural boundaries and social groups (Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009). Because of the ubiquity/popularity of football in British society, even away from football specific "critical spaces" (Giulianotti, 2005:257) the identity of a football fan can still be recognised. Many of the examples already discussed of where participants have been able to interact with other people about Rovers, Athletic or United at bus stops, in shops, or on the street can be seen as examples of where their identity as a fan of a particular club was recognised.

In terms of any social benefits that a football fan identity might hold, this suggests that participants for whom being a football fan is not "a discrete or isolated socio-cultural 'event', but rather an extension of everyday" (Robson, 2000:9), such as Gary, Hannah, Mark, Gavin, Sam, Joe, and Alex, may be able to access the benefits of identification more of the time. This is because being a fan of Rovers, United, or Athletic is a consistent part of everyday life, leaving less opportunity for other people to identify them as 'learning-disabled', thus avoiding more of the social stigma associated with that label.

## **Belonging with the fans**

The evidence presented so far has suggested that football fandom on its own is unlikely to lead to lasting social inclusion for learning-disabled people. The benefits of football fandom for the participants in this research included greater opportunities for valued interaction with other people – both at live games and in everyday life – and the establishment of a fan identity, reducing the stigma of being seen as learning-disabled. However, neither of these outcomes results in the permanent increase in social networks or social capital necessary for 'inclusion' (Labonte, 2004). Like other inclusion policies, it was arguably overly romantic to suppose that by becoming football fans

learning-disabled people would then be able to engage in self-reliant participation in employment, the 'community', and independent living (Labonte, 2004; Burton & Kagan, 2006; Hall, 2010). Rather, the true lasting benefits of football fandom for the participants of this research appears to be how it made them feel about themselves and about their place in society. Football fandom was a site where they felt they belonged. Just as sports participation in general (Delaney, 2001) and football fandom in particular (Stone, 2007; Blackshaw, 2008) offers non-learning-disabled people a sense of belonging and security increasingly absent in other aspects of life, football fandom provided the participants in this research an environment in which they could fulfil their desire to be "deeply understood and deeply accepted" (Goble, 1970:30).

Joe (i2), for example, spoke about how, as a Rovers fan, he felt part of "a big group". In perhaps the most passionate display of belonging, Hannah (i1) described her fellow United fans as "like a family". She said: "I know they're not me brothers, but I think it's like a big...it's like a family going to watch United" (Hannah, i1). Whilst Alex was not able to articulate his feeling of belonging as succinctly, the following passage taken from his first interview illustrates the positive feelings he also associated with being in the company of other Rovers fans:

Alex: Uhh...happy means...not lonely, not upset, it's happy for people to be...I walk with the people to the ground, for me.

Me: OK. So is it happy to be with the other supporters?

Alex: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Me: OK. So is it better that there's lots of supporters all going together?

Alex: Yeah

Me: Is that better than if there was no supporters?

Alex: I think...happy with their supporters to watch the game.

Through their bodily displays and adorning themselves with the appropriate symbols of fandom – as discussed previously in this chapter, such as wearing particular clothing, behaving a certain way, or attending live matches – participants were able to make themselves recognisable to other parties as someone they 'know'. In this way they overcame their ascribed social identities based on gender, ethnicity, and impairment, predisposing them to mutual approval and interaction. Though participants might otherwise be part of a stigmatised social group, projecting a Rovers, United or Athletic identity communicates "the knowledge that he/she belongs to a certain social group with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership" (Tajfel, 1982:31).

This type of acquaintanceship (Tonnies, 1974) or group categorisation and identification (Tajfel, 1981; 1982) was manifest in the more 'hotly' identified fans perception of fellow Rovers, United, or Athletic fans as being less akin to strangers. However, not all participants were as successful or motivated at, to paraphrase Donnelly & Young (1988), presenting themselves as authentic members of fan 'communities'. This can be seen in the way David chose to not always wear Athletic merchandise to display his fan identity. This less consistent display of fan identification reduced David's sense of belonging with other Athletic fans – at least in his day-to-day life – and the subsequent opportunities to use membership of that group to enhance feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.

The belonging that participants felt towards and with their fellow football fans can be seen in the use of phrases such as 'we' and 'our' when referring to their favoured clubs. These possessive and collective pronouns were used in relation to the other fans, such as "we've got a band" (Gavin, i1) and "we'd all be there" (Gavin, i1), but more often in relation to the club as a whole, including "We needed Chalton to beat 'em" (Hannah, i1), "we might be a small club but we're not bothered" (Hannah, i1), "we were twelfth in table" (Sanjay, i1)", and "if we're losing" (Gavin, i2). The use of such terms was most common and most frequent amongst those more highly identified participants. Gary, Hannah, Alex and Mark almost exclusively referred to their favoured clubs as 'we'. Conversely, those slightly less identified were more likely to use more disconnected terminology, discussing 'Rovers', 'Athletic' or 'United' instead of 'we', 'us' and 'our'. The use of phrases such as 'we' and 'our' demonstrated that many of the participants did not think of themselves just as individual fans of a particular football club, but that they formed part of a collective allegiance with their fellow fans and the clubs they follow (Stone, 2007).

The final evidence that participants successfully experienced a sense of belonging as football fans is in their comparison and perceived distinctiveness from 'other' fans (Tajfel, 1982). In general, participants held positive perceptions of the social group they were part of (i.e. their fellow fans) compared to their negative perceptions of other social groups (i.e. fans of other clubs). Miller (2006:112) describes this as "in-group out-group categorisation where inter-group comparisons necessarily leads to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination". Mark (i1) quite passionately distinguished fans of Athletic being much friendlier, kinder, and generally nicer people compared to fans of their cross-town rivals. He said:

"Something I found a big difference as well between Athletic and [their rival] is that...when you're a [rival] supporter and you see Athletic supporters they're not bothered by you. They don't really acknowledge you, but they're not bothered by you. Cos they won't come up to you and they won't start chatting banter or..."

He went on to suggest that Athletic fans are more considerate because if they are engaging in banter “but [those involved] don’t find it funny they’ll stop” (Mark, i1). This compares to fans of other teams who he suggested would not be so thoughtful. Furthermore, whilst he only “bumped into” other Athletic fans, fans of other teams always “pushed their shoulder into me and stuff like that” (Mark, i1).

For the most ‘hotly’ identified fans, this in-group/out-group distinction also extended to the apparent unfair treatment of Rovers, United and Athletic by the football authorities. Hannah (i1) was adamant that United “can’t seem to get good officials”, alluding to what she perceived as favouritism towards other clubs. The conspiracy extends to United’s mascot not being invited to a charity mascot race. The following brief passage shows her and Gary discussing it:

Hannah: We went to Plymouth, there were a mascot race, weren’t there Gary?

Gary: Oh, I know.

Hannah: And we were wondering why they didn’t invite [United’s mascot]. It were a charity thing so Gary said they should of invited United.

Gavin (i1) also indicated how he felt Athletic were more likely to “get blamed” if fans “start fighting at the end of the game and before the game”. From his perspective, Athletics’ “firm” – a common pseudonym for football hooligans – only try to “protect Wednesday fans” (Gavin, i1), whereas other teams’ firms are the ones causing trouble. Similar positive perceptions of their in-group were even evident amongst the more ‘coolly’ identified participants. Daniel, for example, highlighted the benefits of being a Rovers fan compared to other teams. Despite never having experienced a live match at another team’s stadium he was adamant that “you won’t go to another game where people throw sweets for you” (Daniel, i1).

This in-group favouritism also extends to the local area around a club. When asked why they felt connected to other fans or why they felt part of a larger collective as a fan of Rovers, United, or Athletic, a frequent response was being “proud to come from the town” (Gary, i1). Joe (i2) said “it makes me feel proud because...umm...I’m supporting me own local team”. Sanjay, Sam, and Alex all repeatedly emphasised how they had been born in the town in which Rovers were situated. This contradicts the assertions of much of the contemporary literature on football fandom that geographic locality is growing increasingly unimportant. Hannah (i3) almost explicitly rejected this notion:

“Cos they’re in our town and we’re supporting them. A lot of people are like Man U or that and it’s nice to have United rather than be brainwashed with Man U like a lot of people”.

This high degree of localism amongst participants can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, none of Rovers, United or Athletic plays in the F.A. Premier League so are unlikely to have experienced hypercommodification (Giulianotti, 2002). Secondly, due to the way participants for this research were sampled, those more passionate – possible more ‘traditional’ fans – were more likely to volunteer themselves.

The belonging that participants experienced as part of the ‘emotional communities’ formed between fellow fans (Crabbe, 2008) is comparable to the findings of Parr (2008) and Hall (2010) with regard to excluded ‘others’ finding acceptance in leisure spaces. Parr (2008:19) identified how some mental health patients achieved “some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places or modes of being” through engaging in community art and gardening projects. During the project they were able to experience friendships and communal support from those taking part, and irregular possibilities for inclusion and belonging within the wider community. Similarly, Hall (2010) identified how in a learning-disabled exclusive arts and crafts organisation the members (as participants are known) experienced feelings of attachment and belonging (Hall, 2010). This is not traditional ‘social inclusion’, but rather inclusion within particular spaces and groupings, where learning-disabled people are valued and celebrated.

The findings of this research are particularly significant because, whilst Hall (2010) and Parr’s (2008) case studies were places learning-disabled people could attain feelings and states of belonging, this was only possible within these learning-disability exclusive spaces. Comparatively, the advantage of participants experiencing belonging through football fandom is the ubiquity and popularity of football in contemporary society. Rovers’, United’s or Athletic’s football stadia provided a topophilic focus for this sense of belonging. Mark (i2) identified belonging with other Athletic fans during a live match:

“With Athletic as soon as you go in [to the stadium] you’ll almost feel, like, home, kind of thing. You’ll feel welcome. You’ll feel part of the crowd straight away...we’re all a big club together. We push forward as a unit”.

But compared to other projects where learning-disabled people are limited to certain ‘other spaces’, the participants in this research also experienced belonging and a sense of insiderness and proximity to people, activities, networks and spaces in their day-to-day lives. Being football fans, therefore, created more opportunities for the participants to challenge and dismantle the deeply-set stereotypes and intense ‘othering’ of learning-disabled people that is closely linked socio-spatial exclusion (Hall, 2010: Sibley, 1995). It also appears to provided a means by which learning-disabled people could safely expose themselves to the rigours of mainstream society (Hall, 2004).

A further point of consideration is that, compared to the case studies of belonging by Hall (2010:54) and Parr (2008), which were focused around the arts, football fandom is an activity not typically “valued...by the dominant middle classes”. Although football has becoming increasingly gentrified, with fans no longer being entirely stigmatised as hooligans, fandom is still synonymous with, and embodies many elements of, working class culture. It is not possible to draw any further conclusions from this evidence, suffice to say it raises possible questions about how far ‘belonging’ with a football fan community would be explicitly encouraged by policy makers.

## Summary

This chapter has examined the participants’ experiences of football fandom away from live matches – in ‘everyday life’ – and the social inclusion opportunities this presents. The football fandom of those involved was not confined to ninety minute matches on Saturday afternoons, but persisted day-to-day. Such enduring football fandom presents opportunities to interact with other like minded individuals in ‘everyday life’ (Stone, 2007). Whilst learning-disabled people might otherwise be restricted to smaller interpersonal networks with limited exposure to new people and places (Milner & Kelly, 2009), the benefit of this persistent fandom was to recreate the ‘cloakroom communities’ experienced at live matches. Whilst the ‘communities’ created in everyday life may not have been as intense as those formed within the passion of the football stadium, they were considerably more numerous. Such opportunities also existed in non-traditional spaces, such as the internet, although this was limited to those fans with sufficient literacy and computer skills.

The nature of many participants football fandom, both at and away from live matches, may be considered as a form of serious leisure. The commitment and perseverance displayed, the significant personal effort expended, and the unique ethos showed by fans indicates football fandom may be considered a powerful central life interest. Engaging in football fandom as a form of serious leisure can be seen to have many social inclusion benefits for the participants in this research, including an enhancement in self-concept, self actualisation, self enrichment, self expression, feelings of accomplishment, enhanced self image and self esteem, and social interaction, especially in comparison to the ‘casual’ activities they would otherwise engage in. However, it is questionable whether football fandom had become an ‘obsessive passion’ for some fans, actually having adverse social effects. Not all participants in this study engaged in fandom as a serious leisure activity. Whilst for some this was through choice – they just were not that into it – for others it was questionable how much their impairment prevented them from attaining these benefits.

Football fandom, especially for those engaged as serious leisure, also appeared to offer participants a source of personal identity. This identity is reaffirmed and transmitted to others through the



continuous display of appropriate 'symbols', such as clothing emblazoned with club logos. Reflecting their position on Giulianotti's (2002) *Supporters, Fans, Followers, and Fans* taxonomy, participants employed different symbols to convey their varied identifications with Rovers, United and Athletic. Other factors more traditionally associated with identity formation (i.e. religion, gender, disability) appeared not to be a significant barrier to the acquisition of a fan identity for participants in this research. As a source of identity, football fandom appeared to have significant social benefits for participants, principally in relation to breaking down the stigma of 'learning disability' and allowing individuals to be seen as fans first. As a source of personal identity, being seen as a football fan also gave the participants more confidence when entering mainstream social spaces.

The significance of football fandom as part of personal identity is that it allowed participants to feel they 'belonged' amongst their fellow fans. Feelings of belonging occurred within specific social spaces, such as during football matches, but also persisted to enable participants to feel a connection to their fellow football fans throughout their daily lives. This is significant for learning-disabled people who might otherwise experience a powerful sense of difference or consider themselves 'other' in mainstream society.

The next chapter of this thesis will move from examining the experiences of the learning-disabled football fans involved in this research to considering how their fandom is facilitated.

# **Chapter 6 – The inclusion of learning-disabled people as football fans**

## **Introduction**

As has been shown in the previous two chapters, football fandom had social benefits for the participants in this research, particularly in relation to increased social interaction, a source of personal identity, and a sense of belonging with other fans. However, what was also equally clear is that these benefits were not shared equally by all the learning-disabled fans in this research. The variation in football fandom demonstrated by the participants indicated that the ability to engage in certain fan activities allowed some fans greater access to the social benefits compared to those that were unable. Principally among these was the ability of some learning-disabled fans to participate in the most passionate and intense moments of fan identification and interaction attending live matches. As such, in order to maximise understanding of the potential social inclusion benefits of football fandom for learning-disabled people the aim of this chapter is to consider why this variation exists and what might be done to allow all learning-disabled people equal access to all aspects of football fandom – and ultimately, gain the associated benefits.

This will be achieved by, firstly, re-examining the variation in the participants' football fandom through the lens of Sen's (1987) Capability Framework. Doing so will help conceptualise the varied football fandom of the participants involved in this research, providing a theoretical base to analyse the appropriateness of the different support mechanisms designed to facilitate learning-disabled fans. The chapter will then move on to examine specifically what the individual clubs involved in this research – Rovers, United and Athletic – do to 'include' learning-disabled people as football fans. The value of being a football fan, in terms of the associated social benefits, will be shown to not be recognised by these football clubs. Finally, the ineffectiveness of treating learning-disabled people as just another type of customer, at least in relation to tackling social exclusion, will be critiqued.

## **Re-examining the barriers to learning-disabled football fandom**

One of the key findings from this research is that there is no ideal type of learning-disabled football fan. The evidence suggests that whilst there are many similarities in the football fandom of learning-disabled football fans – and to non-disabled fans alike – the participants in this research exhibited a

cornucopia of behaviours, attitudes, values and experiences linked to Rovers, United, and Athletic. This includes quantitative differences, such as the number of games individuals' attended, who they attended those games with, the club merchandise they consumed, and how they displayed their allegiance to a particular club. For example, Gavin and Mark attended every Athletic home match and some away matches by themselves, while Paul attended United matches with his uncle and cousin, while Tom hardly ever attended Rovers matches. The variation in the participant's fandom also included more qualitative difference relating to their personal experiences of being fans of United, Athletic, or Rovers, and the extent to which they identified with the club and their fellow fans. Although this variation has been described in detail in the previous two chapters, less time was dedicated to considering the causes.

In the leisure studies and learning-disability literature a number of factors have been consistently identified affecting learning-disabled people's ability to engage in leisure activities in mainstream settings or with other non-disabled people (Bramston et al, 2002). These includes a lack of choice about leisure activities (Hatton, 2004; Schelly, 2008; Milner & Kelly, 2009), the financial cost of participating (Reynolds, 2002), insufficient social support to enter mainstream locations (Mathers, 2008; Peterson *et al.*, 2009; Mcconkey & Collins, 2010) and inappropriate transport provision (Reynolds, 2002). To various degrees, these factors also affected the participants' experiences of football fandom.

## ***Choice***

Personal choice evidently plays some part in explaining the different behaviour of learning-disabled fans. For example, David did not have a season ticket to attend all Athletic's home matches because "it doesn't really matter to [him] that much" (David, i1). Although he enjoyed attending live games, he preferred to pick and choose which matches he attended:

"To be honest...if I miss a game it doesn't really matter, but if I go to another game same, like, a month later or something then I'll try and catch up with it, yeah...Not all the time, but some matches" (David, i2).

Tom (i2) expressed a similar sentiment about preferring not to attend every Rovers match:

"No, no. I'm not bothered. I'm not bothered that I...if I don't not to go to a match, that's fine with me, but as long as I do go to some matches with my football team. And that's kind of awesome with me and them".

Another example of where participants tailored their fandom was seen with those who had season tickets to attend their clubs home matches, but were not interested in travelling away. Alex (i2), for

example, when asked about whether he would like to attend away games said: “No, no. I just...I don’t know, not sure. I just...I don’t know...I think just home matches this time”.

However, whilst each of the participants were able to shape their own fandom to varying degrees, their choices were limited. Rather than being able to freely choose how they would express their fandom, the participants were ultimately restricted in what they could or could not do. These findings mirror the general consensus in the learning-disability literature that learning-disabled people are likely to face restricted choices about their own lives and leisure activities (Schelly, 2008; Dowse, 2009). For example, given the free choice, Sanjay would have loved to attend all the Rovers matches he could, just as Gavin would have preferred to attend more of Athletic’s away matches. Daniel said that he would have liked “to go [to live matches] more often to get back in the spirit of being Rovers” (i2) and that when he is unable to go he felt “upset” because he had “missed out on something that [he] wanted to go to” (Daniel, i3).

A significant avenue in which learning-disabled fans’ choices were restricted, particularly amongst those who regularly attended live matches, concerned who they were able to go to matches with. Gavin and Mark have some autonomy with regard to who they attended live matches with. Mark normally goes by himself unless he can convince his friend David or some other “personal mates” to attend as well (Mark, i1). Gavin also normally attended Athletic’s matches by himself, but on one occasion he was able to choose to attend with someone else. He said (Gavin, i2):

Gavin: Can’t wait for this Saturday though.

Me: Who you playing this Saturday?

Gavin: Rochdale. I’m going down with 2...uh...3 of me friends. Going with 2 of me college friends and 1 with me team mate. I think we all gonna sit all together.

Me: So it’s different when you go with all your friends than when you go by yourself?

Gavin: Yeah. I haven’t been with my friends yet. I thought ‘I’m gonna try it’.

Such autonomous acts are likely to lead to highly self-valued forms of participation (Milner & Kelly, 2009). Conversely, Sam, Alex, Joe, and Paul – as well as Sanjay, Tom, Steven and Daniel when the opportunities arose – had less control over who they attended live football matches with. Both Paul and Joe suggested that rather than always going with relatives or parents they would like the opportunity to go with their chosen friends. Paul (i2) said about going with his friends: “It’d be good...Like, meeting friends at bus station and walk up to ground. Some of [my] friends who I see at [the Leisure Centre]”. Similarly, Joe (i1) said:

“If there was somebody else going, like one of my friends or...I don't know, anybody from disability football club, if they were going, I'd go with them. If there were some way of my friends going in a group I'd go, but I wouldn't go on my own.”

Joe also went on to describe the few times he had been to Rovers matches with his teammates from the Rovers learning-disability team. Although they had only been “the odd time”, in the future it would “be good if we could get a group of us going and then...organise it and just go as a group...as friends” (Joe, i1). Not being able to choose who they attend live football matches with might be seen to adversely impact the quality of these participants' football fandom (Hatton, 2004). Such an absence of control might even result in football fandom being experienced as demeaning and disabling (Milner & Kelly, 2009).

Both Paul and Joe, however, explained why they usually attended matches with relatives and not their other learning-disabled friends. Paul (i3) suggested it was “more safer” with his uncle and cousin to help him cross the roads. Joe (i1) said that it would be difficult to arrange because his friends have “all got season tickets you see and you've got to sit in certain seats aint you so it's not probably easy as that”. Joe was also slightly more sceptical as to the reasons him and his friends from the Rovers learning-disability team could not go together, suggesting it depended on their parents' perceptions. He said “[my] dad would worry” if he did not accompany Joe (Joe, i1). He explained that “I think if I had somebody to go with, like friends...some friends or...then I think he'd (Joe's father) let me go” but only if “my dad can trust them to take me and bring me back” (Joe, i1). In our second interview Joe suggested it was the same story amongst the other parents:

Joe: I think it's because like...uhh...loads of people there and the people's mums and dads, some of 'em, are a bit funny. They don't like 'em to go out on their own.

Me: Oh right. But you actually, you think that would be...but you would enjoy doing that?

Joe: Uhh...yeah...umm...depends on parents don't it?

This reflects the idea that many learning-disabled peoples' lack of autonomy is as much due to a shortage of appropriate support and information as it is their individual impairments. It also reinforces Burton & Kagan's (2006:305) critique of the “utopian vision” of Valuing People (DH, 2001) that envisages learning-disabled people “making choices about activities in pleasant neighbourhoods with plentiful community resources”. Morris(2001:19) suggests that one of the biggest barriers faced by learning-disabled people is when “it is assumed that impairments mean that it is impossible for [them] to make choices”. However, because their dominant experience may be compliance with others' goals and agendas (Reynolds, 2002), it appeared that some of the participants experienced difficulty expressing their individual needs and views about their football fandom. If we look again at

Alex's previous 'decision' not to attend Rovers' away matches, when asked about it in a later interview he expressed the opposite choice:

Me: Have you ever thought that you'd want to go to an away match?

Alex: Umm...yeah, just...yeah. I think about it sometimes.

Me: Sometimes?

Alex: Yeah, sometimes.

Me: What do you think about?

Alex: Uhh...alright. I enjoy it. I enjoy it very much.

Typically Sam's father arranges which Rovers matches Alex attends and so, from these two extracts, we can perhaps see how Alex was unaccustomed to making such decisions himself. During the interviews it was apparent to me that Alex was somewhat taken aback when asked about whether *he* would like to attend away matches.

### ***Financial cost***

Financial cost also appeared to be a significant factor differentiating how the participants in this research experienced Rovers, United or Athletic. This was particularly the case with regard to the cost of attending live matches and buying official club merchandise. For Tom (i1), the reason he had not got a season ticket to attend Rovers matches was because "I've been thinking that they might be too expensive to buy". Similarly, Daniel did not have a season ticket and did not regularly attend live football because "[he] couldn't afford the money" (Daniel, i2). It was a similar story for Sanjay and Steven who said "I think they cost a lot of money, they're too expensive" (Sanjay, i2) and "it's too much money" (Steven, i3). David described how he had to ration his attendance because of the costs of buying tickets. For this reason he preferred watching Athletic play in the Johnston's Paint Trophy because "it's quite cheap and it's good to see them do well to win a trophy" (David, i1).

It is not surprising that these learning-disabled fans could not afford to regularly attend live football matches to support their teams. Learning-disabled people are amongst the poorest people in British society, which continually prevents them exercising choice in their leisure activities (Reynolds, 2002). Simultaneously, football fandom is increasingly characterised by rising costs (Fawbert, 2011a) and the neglect of the 'grass-roots' custodians – the fans – in pursuit of more affluent clientele (Martin, 2007).

It would be inappropriate to suggest that learning-disabled fans are entirely priced out of attending live football matches, however. Mark, Gavin, Sam, Alex, Hannah, Gary, Joe and Paul all had season

tickets to their chosen clubs. The financial barriers that these fans faced are associated with the peripheries around going to watch live football and the cost of away matches. Gary (i2) suggested that before every United home match he normally had “a bit of dinner at home ‘cos I’m not paying their prices [for food in the stadium], no way”. This sentiment was shared by Joe and his father about the prohibitive cost of food in Rovers’ stadium, leading to their routine of buying sandwiches outside the ground. Hannah (i2) summarised the additional costs associated with regularly attending live football when she said:

“Watching United doesn’t come cheap...Like programmes. When you work out how much programmes are for a full season it’s nearly £200, you know”.

The cost of attending away matches also provides a barrier to how learning-disabled football fans are able to engage in fandom. Gary and Hannah (i1) discuss the effects the cost of watching United play away had on them:

Hannah: We go to a few away matches as well. We try to get to most, but...depends on price.

Gary: I mean, obviously...

Hannah: Cos for Leeds this year it’s £42

Gary: Then that’s just for the match, that doesn’t include coach fare.

Hannah: Then you’ve got a programme.

Gary: Exactly.

This experience was shared by Mark (i1) who said “I occasionally go to away games with some mates and stuff, but yeah, it mainly depends money wise, to be honest”.

Whilst it was not an explicit aim of this research to provide an in-depth analysis of the finances of the participants, there is enough evidence to say that the associated costs inhibited the football fandom of those involved in this research. On the one hand this is not surprising, as none of the participants were in full-time paid employment. Rather, given that all of the participants were in receipt of financial benefits designed to enabled them to “lead their lives like any others” (DH, 2009:11), this lends weight to questions already raised about the cost-effectiveness and success of these Individual Budgets (IB) (Glendinning *et al.*, 2008).

Dominant political discourses of individualism, active citizenship, globalisation, and privatisation (Cameron, 2005; Redley, 2008; Dowse, 2009) might suggest that those learning-disabled fans are to blame if they cannot afford “the same opportunities and responsibilities...as others” (DH, 2009:11) to attend live football matches. Their Individual Budgets are supposed to counter the standardised

responses of service providers (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003). However, the reported ineffectiveness of just giving people more choice/control over money (Abbott & Marriott, 2012) was evident here in that – with the exception of Mark, David, Joe, Gary and Hannah – the participants did not appear to understand the value of money nor the cost of their football fandom. For example, despite suggesting that cost was a significant barrier to him attending more of Rovers’ home matches, Tom (i2) later said: “I don’t know if the tickets are expensive”. Sam, Alex, Steven, Tom, Sanjay, Daniel, and Paul were not directly involved in paying for their fandom. Paul (i3) said that he gets the money for his season ticket from “me hole in the wall” and that the money is “just in the bank”. Also, whilst Alex (i3) said he pays for his season ticket using money from “[my] EMA” (Education Maintenance Allowance), his mother subsidises the cost of the ticket. It would appear then that the participants, particularly those with more significant impairments, continued to receive inadequate financial support, preventing them exercising choice in the use of their leisure time (Reynolds, 2002). Those who were able to regularly attend live matches relied on the financial and logistical assistance of family members.

### ***Social support***

A third factor evidently causing the observed variations in learning-disabled football fandom concerns the differing social support mechanisms each participant was able to utilise. This reflects a common observation that learning-disabled people are often reliant on the appropriate assistance of, most commonly, family members, caretaking staff, and other learning-disabled people to engage in leisure activities (Robertson *et al.*, 2001b; Mathers, 2008). The support that those involved in this research received to facilitate their fandom manifested most prominently in the varied assistance received to attend live matches, including arranging ticket and travelling to stadia.

With regard to arranging tickets for live matches, Alex (i1) talked about how he gets his season ticket “off Sam’s dad Ken...uhh...Ken, he’s ordered me a Rovers season ticket...Ken got it”. He went on to say that, without Ken’s support, he would not be able to arrange his season ticket himself (Alex, i2):

Me: So do you...if Ken wasn’t there to get you a ticket, to get the season ticket and things, would you be able to get it? Would you know how to do it?

Alex: Uhh...no.

Me: No?

Alex: No.

Me: OK. So Ken...cos Ken does it for you?

Alex: Yeah



Me: Has Ken always done it for you?

Alex: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Me: And who pays for the ticket, do you know?

Alex: Uhh...Ken, I think.

This experience is shared by Paul, Sam, and Joe who were also totally reliant on their parents 'instrumental support' – the provision of tangible resources or aid (Peterson *et al.*, 2009) – arranging their season tickets. Gavin and Hannah suggested that they would probably be able to collect their season tickets themselves, but enjoyed what Peterson *et al.* (2009) refer to as the 'emotional support' of family members. Hannah suggested that because she was apprehensive about being confronted about her impairment and not being able to prove her eligibility she preferred to "go down [to the ticket office] with [her] sister" (Hannah, i3). Although family members overwhelmingly provided the participants support to attain match tickets, David's experience suggests that other learning-disabled peers were also able to provide assistance. He said: "my friend normally buys me and him a ticket and then we both go together" (David, i1).

Because social support is an important aspect in the leisure behaviour of learning-disabled people (Messent *et al.*, 1999; Frey *et al.*, 2005), the participants who did not have anyone to assist them in getting tickets, such as Sanjay, Tom, and Daniel were unable to regularly attend. Once or twice a season though their learning-disability teams were able to support them with promotional tickets. The following short extract from an interview with Daniel (i2) clearly illustrates this predicament:

"Yeah, don't have no season ticket. I always have to always ask [the coach] for a ticket...I only go then, but, like, I've not been to one with my family because I don't have season ticket and I don't know where to get 'em from".

Not all the participants needed assistance to make arrangements to attend to live matches. Both Mark and Gary were able to do this independently. Mark (i1) said that to get tickets for away matches he would "go down to the mega store or if I can't be bothered to do that I'll just get it off the website". He would, however, still rely on his mother's 'informational support' to look after his season ticket between matches (Peterson *et al.*, 2009), although this may be less to do with his impairment and more to do with him being a young man with an extremely messy bedroom.

Social support travelling from one's home to the football stadium to watch Rovers, United, or Athletic play in live matches can also be seen as a cause of the variation in the fandom of the participants in this research. Whilst Gavin, Mark, and Gary travelled independently – either walking or using public transport – to their teams' stadium on match-days, Hannah, Sam, Alex, Joe, and Paul were all taken by a parent or family member. David was assisted travelling to and from United's

stadium by his friend Mark. Although he suggested he was normally quite independent, when walking to watch United he felt “more confident with Mark because we can usually talk to each other about stuff” (David, i2).

As with arranging to attend live matches, where the necessary assistance to travel to stadia was not available Sanjay, Daniel and Tom were unable to attend live matches (Reynolds, 2002). Both Tom’s parents worked at weekends and therefore were unable to assist him travel to Rovers’ stadium. He said that without their help, “even if I did have a season ticket I have no idea how to...I know I’m an independent, I just don’t know which bus to catch to the stadium” (Tom, i1). Sanjay (i1) said that to attend live Rovers matches he needed someone “to take me, to pick me up, to drop me [off]”, which his parent’s and family did not do. When he was able to get to Rovers matches it was with the help of “just [his] friend” who, he said, “pick me up and drop me off if he had some tickets” (Sanjay, i1). For Daniel (i1), living outside of town, away from Rovers’ ground, prevented him from attending more matches.

“Cos I live quite a long way...I live in [this area] and it’s quite hard for me to get over to Rovers and get a season ticket and go back over to [this area]. I can’t do that because I need help getting over to Rovers and back”.

Not being able to travel over long distances also related to some of the participants’ experiences’ of away games, when their team is playing in the opposition’s stadium. Those who travelled independently to watch Rovers, United, or Athletic at home can be differentiated based on their experiences of travelling to away matches. For example, whilst Gary (i2) walked by himself to United’s home matches his mum insisted it was “better” if he and Hannah were accompanied to away matches:

Hannah: Cos either me mum or dad goes with me. We wouldn’t go on us two selves, we take somebody with us.

Gary: Yeah. Or sometimes your sister’ll come

Me: So you always go with someone else did you say?

Hannah: Well Gary’s mum says it’s better for us.

Examining Gavin’s story more closely illustrates the difference having appropriate travel support can make to a learning-disabled fan’s experience following their team. Although he travelled down to United’s stadium by himself, he did not regularly go to away matches because “some are too far away” (Gavin, i1). He had been to “what’s in [the local area]”, but only when accompanied either by his father (now deceased) or his cousin (Gavin, i1). Having to rely on the support of others to travel to away matches meant he was not always able to attend the games he wanted. When I first

interviewed him, Gavin was looking forward to an away match against Huddersfield Town Football Club. He intended to travel on the train, with “[his] mum putting [him] on this side” and “some relatives are meeting [him] the other” (Gavin, i1). However, when his relatives were not able to meet him at Huddersfield train station Gavin was unable to attend the match. To help overcome this problem, for next season Gavin’s mother had arranged a personal assistant (PA) for him. Gavin (i3) intended to “just take him to away matches...Yeah, he’s got a car...I can manage to go to home ones, it’s not that far away”. This provision should make it easier for Gavin to experience football fandom in the way he would prefer.

Whilst appropriate social support enabled many of the participants in this research to attend live football matches, having to rely on the support of others left some of the participants vulnerable to the influence of those assisting them. Mathers (2008) refers to this as the negative connotations of dependency, including restrictions, rules, routine and control imposed on the assisted by the assistant. This can be seen to varying degrees in the examples of David and Alex. For David, deciding which tickets his friend Mark should go and buy was a collaborative effort:

“Well I...uhh...decide it with my friend and then we both agree to go to that match then he’ll buy the tickets then me and him will go and then we’ll go and watch the match and then...umm...the we must enjoy it from there” (David, i1).

In this case, whilst David was able to make a significant contribution as to which matches they attended together, he was still somewhat at the mercy of Mark’s perceptions (Heller *et al.*, 2002). Similarly, when talking about which matches he attended, Alex (i2) indicated that it was “up to Ken”. He said “Sam’s dad Ken [has] to arrange that for me. I think that’s Ken that arranged it for me”.

## ***Impairment***

Finally, having a learning-impairment has been shown to affect more general levels of community participation (Milner & Kelly, 2009). This can also be applied to the case of football fandom. However, it is an oversimplification to suggest that impairments alone determined how the participants in this research engaged with and experienced Rovers, United or Athletic. It is also inappropriate to suggest that being ‘more’ or ‘less’ impaired results in more sustained, dedicated, ‘authentic’, or ‘traditional’ fandom. For example, both Sam and Alex’s impairments are significantly greater than David’s, yet they have been committed and passionate Rovers fans for over fifteen years. Comparatively, David only goes to live Athletic matches occasionally.

Where learning-disabled people are unable to attend live football matches, for example, it is inappropriate to think this can be ‘fixed’ with individual policies designed to address singular aspects of their lives. This belief ensures that the perceived failure of learning-disabled people to live up to

their role as, in this case, 'football fan' is blamed on their individual impairment(s) (Brittain, 2004). In actuality, it is a complex interplay of factors – including choice, money, support networks, and impairments – that affected the participants' football fandom.

## **Varied fandom, inequalities and Capabilities**

The varied football fandom of the participants in this study can be interpreted as a form of inequality. That is to say, the experience of being a fan of Rovers, United or Athletic, specifically of attending live football matches, was not equally available to all. Understanding the cause of this inequality is particularly important for this study with regard trying to make the social benefits of football fandom available to all learning-disabled people in the future. As a form of inequality, the identified factors that affected the participants' fandom – cost, choice, social support, impairments – can be understood in more abstract terms using different theories of social justice.

Utilitarianism suggests that measuring individual 'utility' – individual happiness, satisfaction and fulfilment of preferences - is the best way of assessing whether someone is advantaged or disadvantaged. The problem with this theoretical framework is that it focuses on mental characteristics as adequate evidence of the overall advantage/disadvantage different persons have, overlooking the fact that, as Sen (2004:7) suggests, people's utilities "adapt to adversity". That is to say, whilst Alex, for example, suggested he was happy – and therefore not disadvantaged – not going to Rovers' away matches, this might be because his pleasure and desire to not engage in this activity adjusted to his circumstances. Alex knows he is unlikely to go to away matches in the future and so is now happy with not going. Choice, empowerment, and quality of life for learning-disabled people must take into account their impairments and the impact these have on their perspective (Schelly, 2008).

Theories of social justice based on wealth and opulence focus on income and the distribution of income as the cause and solution to advantage and disadvantage. However, as we have just seen, although some participants had enough money to pay for their fandom, for others just having enough money to, for example, buy a ticket did not mean they were able to attend a live match. Wealth or income is not valued for its own sake. A person with severe impairments is not judged to be less disadvantaged than a "thoroughly fit person" just because they have a higher income (Sen, 2004:3). As well as an 'earnings handicap', making it harder for learning-disabled people to achieve and hold down employment, the participants in this research also experienced what Sen (2004:4) refers to as "conversion handicap". This means that to do the same thing as non-learning-disabled fans, some of the participants needed more income. For example, both Gary and Paul have season

tickets to United. Yet while Gary achieves this independently, Paul requires the assistance of his family to help him buy the ticket, travel to the stadium, and support him during matches; these factors are all intertwined and interrelated. This criticism echoes the idea of the social model of disability in that the amount of resources a person needs to avoid disadvantage depends on personal characteristics *and* on the broader social, physical and economic environment (Burchardt, 2004; Burchardt & Zaidi, 2005).

Rawlsian theories of social justice based on equal distribution of primary goods, including “rights, liberties and opportunities, income and wealth, and the social basis of self-respect” (Rawls, 1971:60), are equally ineffective at explaining the varied football fandom of learning-disabled people. The basic problem is that, like theories based on income, Rawls’ primary goods do not capture what a person can or cannot do with the assets they have (Sen, 2004). Defined independent of a person’s characteristics, ‘equal’ opportunity to, for example, attend a football match is still subject to a conversion handicap.

In traditional welfare economics, income is used as a proxy for utility as having enough money supposedly affords individuals greater opportunity to fulfil individual preferences (Burchardt, 2004). However, it is inappropriate to discuss the variation in the participants’ football fandom, and their access to the social benefits, this way. As with examining social advantage and disadvantage more generally, to understand the observed variation in learning-disabled football fandom it is necessary to analyse the participants’ overall capacity to be fans of Rovers, United or Athletic in the way they want. This requires looking at personal characteristics as well as income, social support, and individual agency. As Sen (2004:8) suggests:

“If we are concerned with substantive freedoms, then we have to look at the actual freedoms...that people have. Social attention to disability cannot really be submerged and downsized through opting for the relatively distant perspectives of incomes, primary goods or pleasures”.

Sen’s (1980; 1987) Capability Framework (CF) challenges such utilitarian and income based ideas – most notably the importance of goods themselves – providing a scaffold to analyse the participants’ football fandom as a result of personal, social, economic, and environmental barriers (Burchardt, 2004). Each participant in this research can be understood to have a unique capability set compiled of their functionings – everything that individual can be or do – such as being a football fan and attending live matches. Whether or not individual participants are able to, for example, attend live matches, now or in the future, can be seen to be dependent on both them possessing the necessary functionings in their capability set and for external factors to be amicable (Sen, 2004).

## ***Variation in fandom and varied capabilities***

At the beginning of chapter four the variation in the football fandom of the participants involved in this study was described. Bearing in mind each person's capabilities provides a new interpretation of the participants' fandom. Here I reinterpret the participants' experiences through a 'capability lens'.

Gavin started supporting Athletic when he was younger, taken to matches by his father. Now eighteen, he was able to attend Athletic's home matches independently; walking to the ground and using public transport to get home. When at matches, because he is an eloquent talker with a large knowledge of Athletic, he has been able to develop personal relationships with the "badge lady" and his "season ticket friends" (Gavin i2). Gavin's capabilities to be a football fan were enhanced with support from his mother to buy his season ticket and to pay for his Athletic merchandise – the symbols he used to display his fandom. Gavin's current capabilities, however, have meant he has been limited in the number of away matches he could attend, only going when family members can assist. However, with his mother's assistance in arranging a personal assistant for the next season Gavin's capability set has expanded, affording him the opportunity to attend more away games. Away from live matches, Gavin was able to find new information about Athletic through the television and internet, which he used to further enhance his sub-cultural capital.

Mark's capability set was arguably greater than Gavin's. Although he has only been a fan of Wednesday for a few years, because his impairment was relatively mild he was very independent and has been able to dictate which Athletic matches he attended. Because Mark did not have a job whilst he was at college, he relied on his mother paying for his season ticket. He earned extra money to spend at matches and on Athletic merchandise by doing household chores. Like Gavin, when at live matches Mark was able to seamlessly blend into the crowd through his appearance and relevant sub-cultural behaviours, including joining in with football chants and 'banter'. Again, browsing the internet to follow the latest news story concerning Athletic or communicating with fellow fans on Facebook was not a problem for Mark.

The final Athletic fan I spoke to was David. Unlike Gavin and Mark, David's capability to attend Athletic matches was adversely affected by his parents not being able to afford to buy him match tickets. Although he was not always that bothered about going, when he did attend matches it was normally restricted to the cheaper Johnstone's Paint Trophy games. David was independent enough not to have to rely on his parent's to transport him to and from Athletic's stadium on match days. However, David did prefer walking down with his friend Mark rather than going alone. Inside the stadium, because he had not been to many matches compared to Mark and Gavin, and also because he came across as quite reserved, David was less confident interacting with the other fans. Away

from live matches, David was very capable of engaging with football fandom through other media (i.e. television, radio, internet), but he chose not to. In general, whilst their levels of impairment were broadly similar, due to wider factors concerning their family's household income David could be seen as relatively capability-poor as a football fan compared to, for example, Gavin.

As fans of United, although their learning and physical impairments were quite different, Gary and Hannah both had roughly the same capability sets as fans. Gary was the more independent of the two, walking to United's ground by himself for each home game, whereas Hannah was driven by either her dad or sister. To accommodate the extra conversion handicap of needing to be supported inside the ground Hannah had a 'disabled' ticket with which she gets a free 'carer' ticket. Because of her instability when walking long distances, Hannah's capability as a football fan was best served sitting in the designated 'disabled' area. Whilst she talked to the people at the ground, Hannah's opportunities to interact were therefore limited to other 'disabled' fans. Comparatively, Gary sits with his "old friends" (Gary, i1) and was able to freely communicate with all those around him. Whilst neither Gary nor Hannah had the capabilities to travel to United's away matches independently, they were able to go together if either of their parents facilitated.

Much like Hannah, Paul's capability set to be a United fan was largely supported by his parents and family. His mother or father drove him to near the stadium where he walked the rest of the way with his cousin and uncle whom he also sat with. His mother also helped – financially and logistically – in buying his season ticket. Paul had been to one away game, but this experience was organised by his cousin. Although it inhibited his ability to independently attend United's matches, a common behaviour associated with Paul's impairment was that he has an extremely cheerful demeanour and ease with strangers. Both during and away from live matches this opened up numerous opportunities for brief interactions with his fellow fans.

Considering now the fans of Rovers involved in this research, Joe was dependent on his mother and father to facilitate large parts of his fandom. His father organised and paid for Joe's season ticket as well as being the one to drive Joe to every home game. Joe's written and verbal communication skills were sufficient that he was able to take in new information about Rovers – and football in general – from the internet and other media outlets and share it with his fellows fans either face-to-face or through the internet. Although Joe would like to attend some Rovers home games with his friends rather than his father, his capability to do so was limited both by his impairment and his father's protective nature.

Sam and Alex's impairment were relatively significant (certainly the most significant of all the learning-disabled fans in this research). Despite this they have both been consistently attending Rovers matches for fifteen years. This was because, where Sam and Alex would be unable to organise and pay for their season tickets and travel to the stadium independently, Sam's father facilitated on their behalf. When they were at live games they had very little interaction with the other fans beyond saying 'hello' to those around them. Again, however, when I was at the game with them, Sam's father was very active in trying to involve them in 'banter', telling those around what the Rovers learning-disability team had been up to. Because of this support, Sam and Alex's capability sets as football fans were much greater than their impairments would suggest.

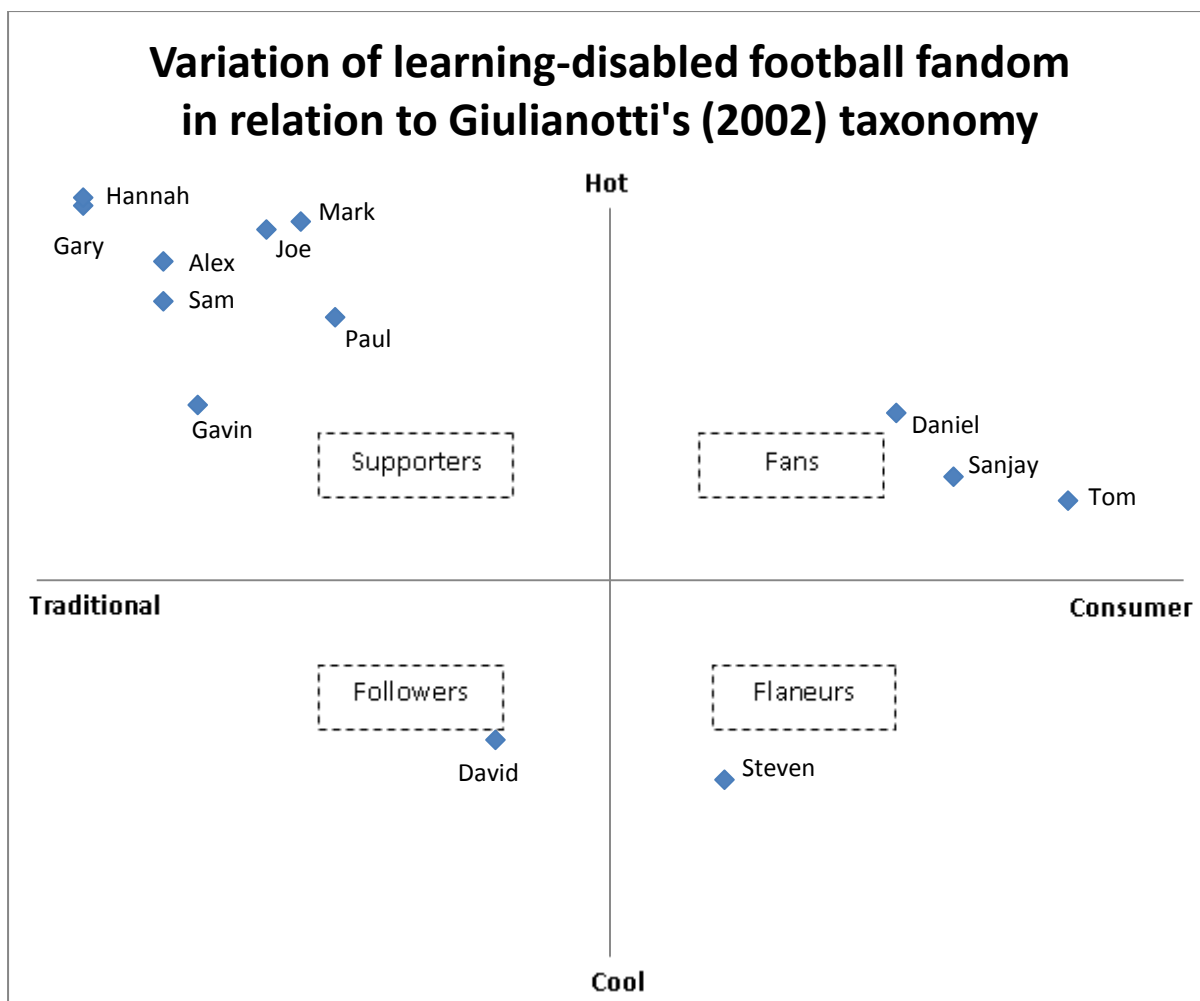
The remaining participants who were Rovers fans can be seen to have more limited capabilities. Sanjay, Tom, Daniel and Steven had neither the money for tickets nor the necessary support to overcome their conversion handicaps to regularly attend their preferred live matches. In order to watch Rovers play live they had to wait for their learning-disability team to be given promotional tickets. These instances involved additional support from football coaches, parents and more independent peers. Whilst Tom and Steven were quite content with not regularly attending matches, Sanjay and Daniel's football fandom was seriously adversely affected by their capability poverty.

The significant and various affects that the participants' capability sets had on their football fandom can be displayed visually using Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy of football fans. In Chapter 4 each of the participants in this research were plotted onto the taxonomy based on their observed position along the 'hot'/'cool' and 'traditional'/'consumer' dichotomies (see Figure 4).

Whilst this diagram was employed effectively in the preceding chapters to illustrate the variation in the participants' football fandom, it does not tell the full story. The participants have been placed along the two scales based on how they have behaved and their feelings as football fans without considering, to paraphrase Sen (2004), their personal characteristics. In other words, the participants were designated as *Supporters*, *Fans*, *Follower* or *Flaneurs* based only on their current functionings as football fans, ignoring their broader capabilities. For example, Sanjay was categorised as a *Fan* because of his lack of 'traditional' behaviour (i.e. attending live matches). But this says nothing about his desire to attend more Rovers matches or the reasons he is currently unable to attend.

Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy can be used, however, to demonstrate how the participants' football fandom would change if they were to become more 'capability-rich' or 'capability-poor'.





**Figure 4** Variation in participant's football fandom in relation to Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy

Considering its prominence in affecting learning-disabled peoples' access to leisure opportunities (Messent *et al.*, 1999; Robertson *et al.*, 2001b; Frey *et al.*, 2005; Mathers, 2008; Peterson *et al.*, 2009), let us look at the example of social support. The participants in this research all received various levels of social support to engage in football fandom. For some, such as Joe, Sam and Alex, this was sufficient to overcome their conversion handicaps, allowing them to attend every Rovers home match. Conversely, Sanjay and Daniel only received sufficient social support when the Rovers learning-disability team attend matches all together. Otherwise they did not receive the necessary social support to overcome their conversion handicap. In this regard, social support can be viewed as a 'valuable functioning' or, to paraphrase Clark (2005), a constituent element of football fandom for the learning-disabled people in this research. Figure 5 illustrates how the participants' football fandom would – hypothetically – change if they were to all receive the same social support as Alex and Sam, Paul, or Hannah. That is to say, if they all had a parent to organise their match day attendances, arrange payments for tickets, drive them to and from the stadium, and accompany them into the stadium.

When originally devising the idea for this diagram I intended to show significant increases in the number of live matches participants could attend and the subsequent changes to their classification. However, because we are only looking at changing capabilities in one respect – increased parental support to attend live matches – most of the participants are still affected by their capability poverty in other areas. Tom’s fandom has changed quite considerably. This is because a significant barrier to him attending live football matches was both his parents working weekends. I have also assumed that with the possibility of attending more live matches becoming reality he would be more passionate about going. The diagram also suggests that with increased social support Steven would attend more live matches. Although he said the cost was his main prohibiting factor, he is also normally limited because Ken – his housemate, Sam’s, father – does not have space in his car when he takes Sam and Alex to Rover’s matches. Despite suggesting they would love to attend more of Rovers’ live matches, neither Daniel or Sanjay would be able to with just increased social support. This is because their capability poverty also encompasses not having the money to pay for tickets.

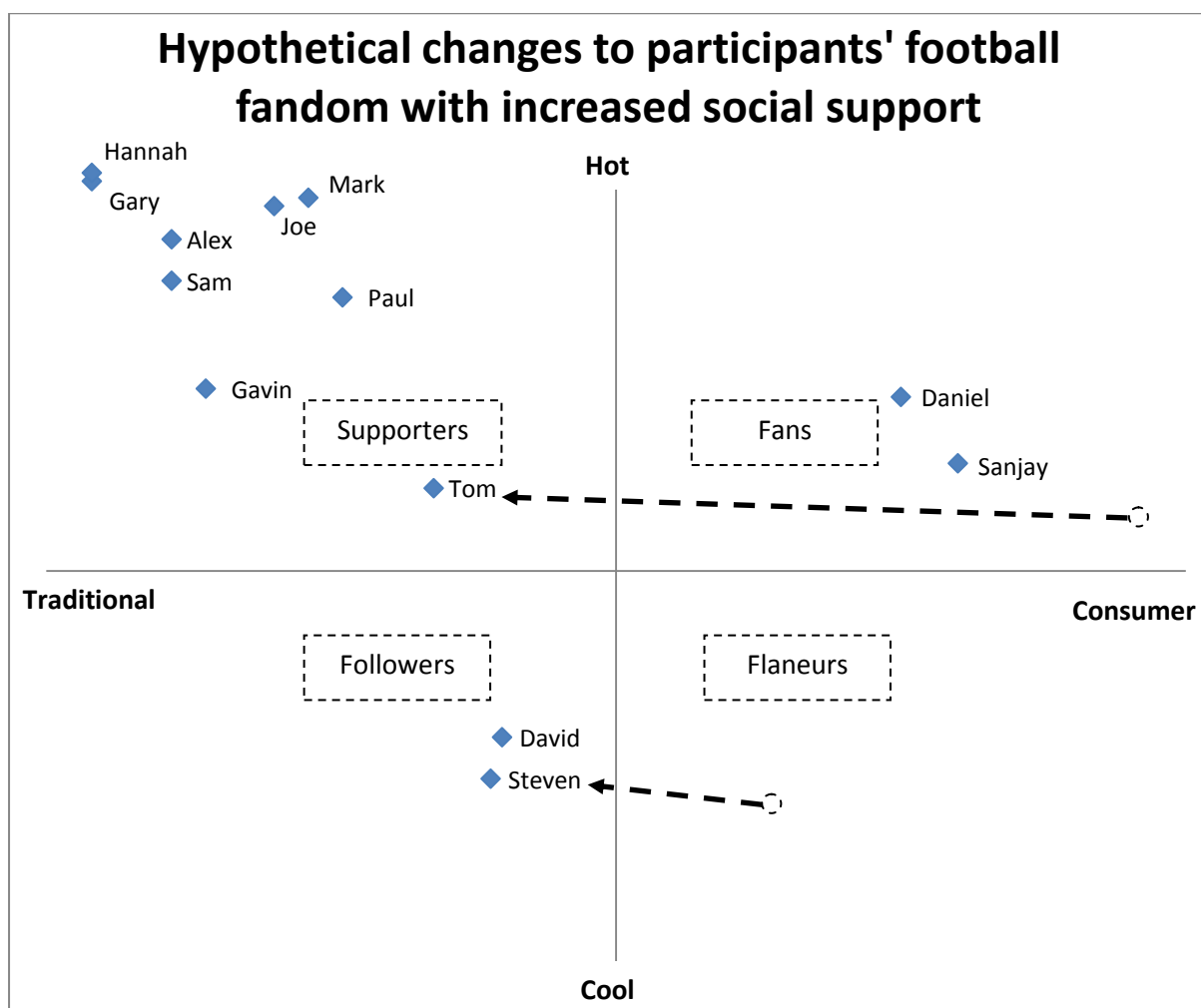
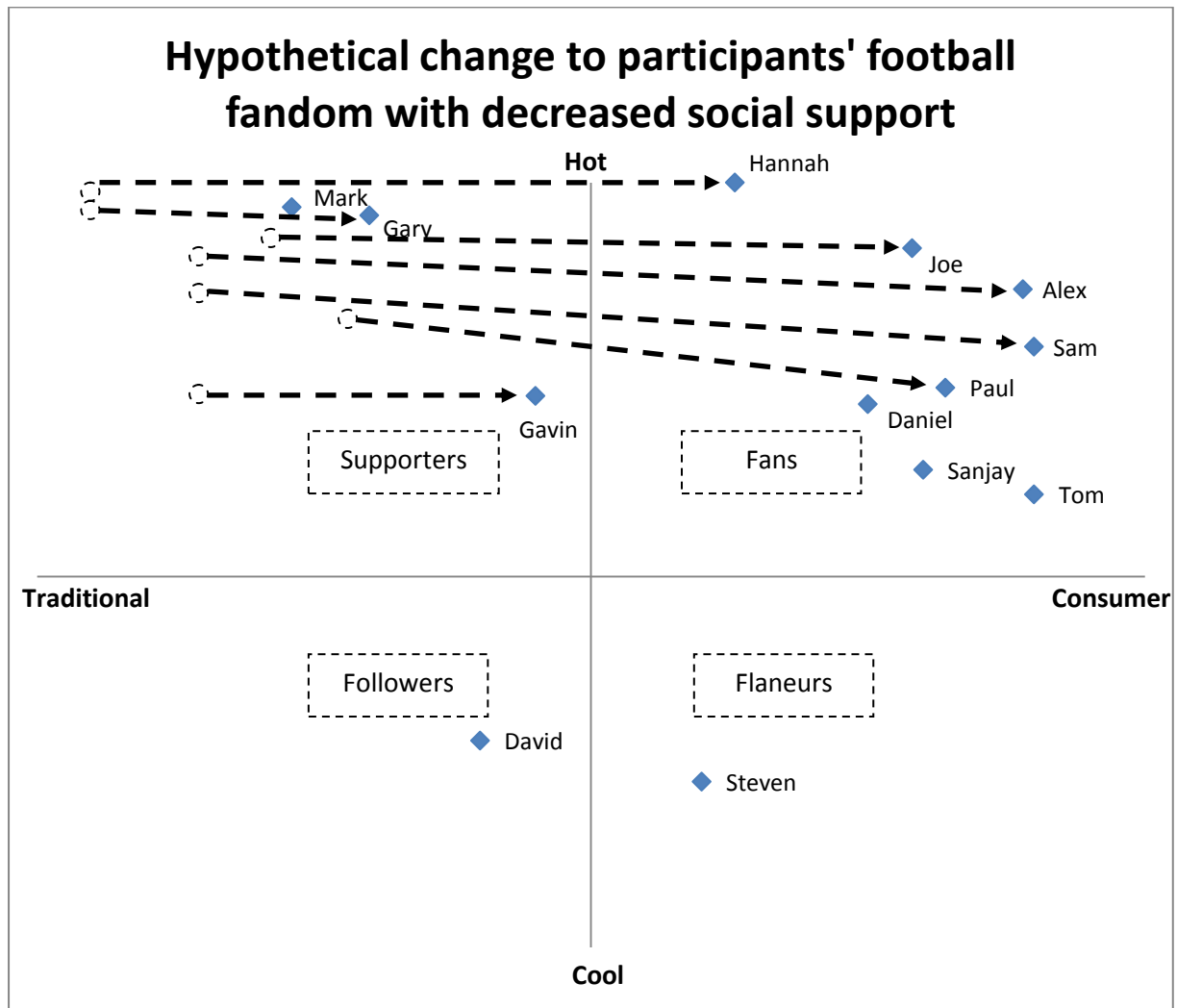


Figure 5 Hypothetical change to participants' football fandom with increased social support

The significance of the participant’s current social support from their families in enhancing their capability sets as football fans to overcome their conversion handicaps can, however, be seen if these are – again hypothetically – removed. Figure 6 shows how the participants’ football fandom would change if they each received the same social support from family members as, for example, Sanjay. That is to say, very little.



**Figure 6 Hypothetical change to participants' football fandom with decreased social support**

What we see in Figure 6 is that without any social support from family, seven of the participants – Hannah, Gary, Joe, Alex, Sam, Paul, and Gavin – move towards the ‘consumer’ end of the Traditional/Consumer axis as they are no longer able to engage in the ‘traditional’ act of attending live matches in the same way. This suggests that social support to attend live matches is an important ‘valuable functioning’ for the participants. For Joe, Alex, Sam, Paul and Hannah, without the support of their families to arrange their season tickets and take them to live matches, football fandom is radically different. This demonstrates how significantly their capabilities are enhanced

through appropriate intervention. Gary and Gavin's fandom becomes only slightly more 'consumer' as they would still be able to independently attend some live matches, although probably not as many and definitely not away from home.

Similar changes to the participants' fandom would be observed if we were to consider the financial barrier of being a football fan (Reynolds, 2002). What these examples demonstrate is the multitude of different barriers the participants faced in order to be football fans and the inequality of resources different individuals drew on to enhance their capabilities. Whilst some participants were faced with significant conversion handicaps, their personal, emotion, and social situation were such that they could overcome this deficit. Comparatively, others were in 'capability poverty' such that they were unable to overcome relatively small conversion handicaps. This research has not been design to illicit a comprehensive list of 'valuable functionings' for the football fandom of learning disabled people. However, in order to better develop and guide policy thinking regarding the football fandom of learning-disabled people this should an aim of future research.

## **Modifying capabilities and facilitating football fandom**

Focusing on capabilities has shown how the participants' football fandom was affected by interactions between personal characteristics and wider social, economic, and environmental barriers (Burchardt, 2004; Burchardt & Zaidi, 2005). This suggests that the participants capability sets to be football fans might be improved through appropriately designed interventions to address these wider social factors and reduce their 'conversion handicaps' (Sharma, 2005). Although impairment will not be prevented or removed by this, disability should be significantly reduced. Doing so effectively, however, would require significant inter-sector collaboration between government, private sector, political organisations, legal organisations, and social institutions (Sharma, 2005). This has left such approaches based on capabilities – and the social model – often misunderstood or ignored by those rooted in more traditional medical model and neo-liberal economic perspectives (Burchardt, 2004). An example of this is the introduction of Direct Payments, designed to enhance the capabilities of learning-disabled people by enabling them to exert greater control over the assistance they received. However, this failed to take account of the support required to make use of Direct Payments in the first place (Boxall *et al.*, 2009).

### ***The role of football clubs***

There is already a body of literature discussing the capabilities framework and learning-disabled people, some of which has been introduced here (i.e. Nussbaum, 2000; Baylies, 2002; Burchardt, 2004; Sen, 2004; Sharma, 2005). What I consider here is the role of the football clubs in this research

– Rovers, United, and Athletic – in facilitating the participant’s football fans. Discussing in particular what they do, or could do in the future, to reduce or remove the conversion handicap for learning-disabled people wanting to be football fans and attend live matches. The ultimate aim of which is to identify how the recognised social benefits of football fandom might become more accessible to learning-disabled people.

Until the late 1990s the interests of learning-disabled people in football were represented rather haphazardly by a host of individual charities and private organisations. The creation of the English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) – an umbrella organisation for disability sport in the United Kingdom – in 1998 and the establishment of the Football Association’s (F.A.) Football Development department in 1999 subsequently led to the creation of ‘Ability Counts’, the first coherent strategy regarding the involvement of learning and physically disabled people in football in Britain. By 2001, after consultation with stakeholders and in response to various Government documents (including Bringing Britain Together and Game Plan), a key objective in the F.A.’s Football Development Strategy emerged to increase participation, quality and enjoyment of football using four key strands. One of these – ‘Opportunities for All’ – committed the F.A. to ensuring everybody has the opportunity to play, coach, manage, referee and be spectators regardless of their race, culture, religion, gender, ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity or social status. Complimenting this, the ‘Disability Football Strategy: 2004-2006’ was the first step in integrating the needs of learning-disabled people into the mainstream of football administration.

Nowadays the interests of learning-disabled players, coaches, administrators and fans are integrated within the pyramid structure of British football administration. At the top, the F.A.’s ‘Disability Development Strategy: 2010-2012’, developed with the support of partners and major stakeholders, is “committed to football being inclusive and providing a positive experience for everyone involved in the game” (The F.A. 2010a:23). Below the national F.A. lie individual country F.A.’s, responsible for carrying out the dictates of the nation body. Independent, but still accountable to the F.A., lie the two administrative bodies for professional football leagues in England; the Premier League and the Football League – in which United, Athletic, and Rovers all play. These organisations share and perpetuate the discourse that the “power of football” can be used “to make a real difference to the lives of people...inside and outside the game” (The Football League, 2012b). As the General Manager of the Football League Trust suggested:

“That’s what we do. That is what we do. It’s a fundamental theme that runs through all our 72 schemes that they will literally turn round issues that governments and local authorities and schools or whatever who have tried extremely hard but have not had the successes...the

success being delivered through community schemes and community staff across such a wide range actually do make a difference and change people's lives".

Through the Club Mark scheme, the Football League credits its member clubs with either Gold, Silver, or Bronze status based on the work they do in six key areas – sports participation, health, social inclusion, education, disability, and the environment – to “broaden the relationship between professional football clubs and their local communities” (The Football League, 2012a). Individual clubs are then able to access funding proportional to their Club Mark status from the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) and the Solidarity Payments from the Premier League.

Seeing themselves as the “hub” (Rovers’ Community Foundation Manager(CFM)) or “focal point of the community” (Athletic’s Corporate Responsibility Officer(CRO)), Rovers, United and Athletic all aim to deliver a range of “specifically targeted projects” to engage with socially excluded groups through the medium of “a professional football club” (United’s CFM). The General Manager of the Football League Trust described the role of football clubs:

“So, the football club becomes the hub of the activity that once every fortnight a football match actually breaks out on a Saturday afternoon. So it is this embracing type of organisation that we’re trying to establish through all the community programmes”.

While football clubs are inevitably bound historically and geographically to certain physical spaces (Crabbe & Brown, 2004; Taylor, 2004; Wagg, 2004), Rovers, Athletic, and United all aspire to create an appeal beyond the cultural histories of their geographic areas. Compared to the areas around their stadia that may be divided into race, religious, or class based communities, the football clubs try to represent “an opportunity for people to come together in a neutral space” (Rovers’ CFM). United’s CRO said that “everybody that comes in [to the club]...they’re part of the community”. The Social Inclusion Officer (SIO) at Athletic illustrated the point about their ‘community’:

“Well I suppose it depends what you define a community as, but you could say any football club has a big community and I suppose if people want to be part of something they’re buying into being part of it. If they didn’t want to buy into it they maybe wouldn’t attend sessions or come to events of what we do”.

In providing the “neutral space” (Rovers’ CFM) in which disparate people can come together, Rovers, Athletic and United perpetuate the notion that participation in sport and leisure creates social connections between people, builds reciprocal trust and social capital (Perks, 2007; Waring & Mason, 2010; Putnam, 1995; 2000). Indeed the notion of “utilis[ing] the game of football...as a vehicle for improvements in education, health, social inclusion and participation” (Athletic, 2010:4) has become part of standard operating procedure and officially enshrined within club charters and documents. This belief reflects Wagg’s (2004) suggestion that football clubs are able to penetrate spheres of life traditionally hard to reach through traditional political means. The General Manager

of the Football League Trust, again, outlined the intended benefits of this for learning-disabled people. He said:

“Like people with learning difficulties, for example, who may well have all sorts of problems, but because of some of the things the community scheme do it will bring them into the fold and enjoy the potential way that you get people into... Football is a great magnet. Football community operations...brings people into the mainstream activities and it’s where you bring them into the mainstream activities”.

The extent and range of these ‘community programmes’ differed between Rovers, United and Athletic depending on their funding and the availability of facilities. At Athletic, for example, they have an on-site vocational training centre with facilities for “hairdressing, catering, construction”, enabling service users to “have something to eat or mum and dad can have their hair cut, or whatever they want, and the rest can come and watch football” (Athletic’s CRO). Comparatively, at Rovers, the CFM bemoaned not having “great facilities on site”, which affects how many people they are able to engage with. Within this environment it is easy to see how the “mechanisms of diversity have become routine”, focused mainly on ‘race’ and ‘ethnic diversity’ (Joppke, 2004; Woodward, 2007:768). As a result, whilst each club employ a Disability Officer (DO) connected to their community programmes, efforts to introduce learning-disabled people into these football ‘communities’ varied between Rovers, United and Athletic.

### ***Inclusion through playing***

Nationally, the “signature project” for learning-disabled people involved in football is Every Player Counts, which aims to “ensure that people with disabilities [are] actually facilitated to have the opportunity to...engage in sport” (General Manager of the Football League Trust). At Rovers, United, and Athletic this was focused on involving learning-disabled people as football players in their learning-disability teams. Rovers’ learning-disability provision is described as “quite a big carry on” (Rovers’ CFM), with over sixty players of varied impairments and ages. As well as the “seven teams now...in the leagues” they also “play in different tournaments around the country” and have travelled “to Holland last year [and] again this year. The younger ones are going to Germany” (Rovers’ CFM). The provision at Athletic is similar, but with fewer participants:

“We’ve got a disability team, which is an adult team so they train down here once a week. They’ve got a range of people...they’ve got a range of, I suppose, mild learning difficulties and behavioural difficulties that they’ve got in there. So they’ve got a team that represent Athletic on a Sunday. So they’re in a, I think it’s a pan-disability league” (Athletic’s CRO).

At United, whilst they also have a similar number of teams playing in the Ability Counts leagues as Rovers, these are run by a local parent-run group using United’s training facilities free of charge.

Whilst it is not the aim of this research to analyse the social benefits of playing football for learning-disabled people, these teams are evidently places in which some of the goals of Valuing People (2001) and Valuing People Now (2009) might be met. Through their football teams, the participants were able to engage in leisure behaviour together and enjoy the positive physical, cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes of recreation participation (Schleien *et al.*, 1994; Waring & Mason, 2010; Grandisson *et al.*, 2012). Comparable to the observed experiences of fandom, playing in the learning-disability teams enabled participants to make friends and feel they belong. As just one example, when talking about the Rovers' learning-disability team, Daniel said: "once I came to this club I found all these people that I'm, like, friends with". There is a suggestion though that such activities only serve to "perpetuate the myth of community" (Delanty, 2003:128). This may be true with regard to the participants not entering into reciprocal relationships with non-learning-disabled outside the football environment. However, playing for Rovers, United's or Athletic's learning-disability team still became an expression of collective allegiance and a symbolic representation of individuality (Stone, 2007) for participants; they were still able to feel 'part of something'.

None the less, in the words of Athletic's CRO, "the old scenario of a community programme being [solely] about playing football has gone". As well as their representative team, Athletic also did projects with learning-disabled people for "work experience", "reading sessions", "how to read labels right, what's good for you, what's not good for you", trying to use the club to "raise their aspirations" (Athletic's CRO). At United, because they did not run their learning-disability team themselves their main community programme concerned encouraging healthy lifestyles. The United Disability Officer (DO) explained this provision:

"We do have adults that come here weekly anyway with learning disabilities, and they come and get weighed, have blood pressure and then healthy eating workshops and they play some sport. So they come here and get a bit of knowledge around what's got fat in and what hasn't. It's been quite basic, but they're starting to learn now about what food's good for them".

United also ran a project "taking [learning-disabled people] other places, like the [leisure centre] for swimming" (United's DO). Whilst they were "trying to address" (United's DO) the limited social opportunities of learning-disabled people in their area using the popular appeal of the United brand (Wagg, 2004), this was only likely to have limited effects on the participants day-to-day exclusion (Devine & Parr, 2008). This is because these strategies only focus on involving learning-disabled people in exclusively learning-disabled spaces and not into more 'mainstream' spaces.

Significantly for this research, despite the observed social benefits of football fandom, a commonality between Rovers, Athletic, and United was not having any programmes aiming to



directly engage learning-disabled people as football fans. This is not surprising however considering no such policy exists anywhere. At a national level, whilst, for example, the Respect campaign preaches tolerance amongst both players and fans, this is not specific to learning-disability issues, nor does it seek to enhance the capabilities of learning-disabled people as football fans.

### ***Value of fandom is not recognised or promoted***

Rovers, United, and Athletic all have specific commitments to encourage more people to be interested in their clubs. The Athletic Customer Charter, for example, sets out the clubs' aims to "encourage more people to become interested in and support [Athletic]" (Athletic, 2010). The Rovers' CFM explained that the "bottom line" of all their community programmes was "to try and get more people to come to games". However, despite these professed goals, neither Rovers, United nor Athletic ran any projects designed specifically to engage learning-disabled people as fans or enhance their capabilities to attend live matches.

Despite the benefits of being football fans and attending live matches for the participants in this research, Rovers' CFM quite frankly explained he did not "spend masses and masses of time trying to get people...to try and watch Rovers 'cos I know that it's gonna be difficult". Although getting people to attend games to "fill the stadium" is "one of [Rovers'] main aims" – they have done "alright with families", getting "quite a lot more ladies...and a few kids" – Rovers' CFM explained that it is difficult to target people just as fans.

As such, Rovers, United and Athletic emphasised trying to enthuse the participants in their football programmes – including learning-disabled people – to attend matches themselves. It is a "by product of what we do" (Rovers' CFM). United's SIO described this situation when asked about whether they ran any projects or programmes designed to directly involve learning-disabled people as fans:

"Directly...I suppose not directly. A lot of things will be indirectly. All the work that we do in schools and as different projects, one of the rewards is getting to see the game".

The CRO from Athletic explained the reasoning behind this approach was that if they could get learning-disabled people to attend their football training sessions and "you're coming to the ground every now and then and you're seeing this stadium" then "you'll more than likely go 'well if there's a game on we'll come and watch it'". He referred to this process as trying to attract "future fans". This individualistic discourse reflects contemporary political notions of social inclusion and exclusion (Cameron, 2006; Dowse, 2009), implying that the blame lies with learning-disabled people who are unable to attend live football matches. The suggestion here is that having extra, or specific, provision

in place at the stadium on match-days to facilitate learning-disabled fans is unnecessary without the initial demand. Athletic's CRO said:

"They're not gonna get future fans to even have that problem if we don't do our job and go into schools and special schools, working with Autism Plus, working with mental health, working with disability. It won't work because you're not gonna get the future fans".

This trickle-down approach was endorsed at a national level by the Football League Trust:

"So as a result you may well find that if you're engaged with 'Every player counts' and you're working with people with disabilities, if they then want to go to the match they are then absolutely free and in a position to go along to watch the match on a Saturday afternoon. And that's how we try to operate. If you've got people who maybe not fans of the club, but they're actually working and playing and resting and everything in the club environment they may then suddenly be attracted and think 'well, let's go and have a look what happens on a Saturday afternoon'" (General Manager of the Football League Trust).

United, Athletic, and Rovers often tried to encourage people along this process by giving complimentary match tickets to the participants of their community projects. United often gave match tickets away to the learning-disabled people in their projects to "try and keep them coming every week" (United's DO). Similarly, at Rovers, if a particular project had got "a bit of money [they] might bring people to the game" and "hopefully one of them might come again" (Rover's CFM). Whether it is realised by the clubs or not, providing these tickets was an effective way of enhancing the capabilities of those that would otherwise not be able to attend live football matches. Sanjay, Tom, and Daniel, for example, relied on these complementary tickets to attend live Rovers matches. On the one hand, the tickets are free, helping those who would otherwise not be able to afford them. Also, the participants attend these matches as a team, meaning those without the necessary support networks to normally attend matches are supported by club staff, peers, and other parents.

A significant benefit of clubs giving out these complementary tickets is in enabling whole learning-disability teams to attend matches together, providing the opportunity to extend the 'imagined community' of the training ground to another social space. As Tom (i3) said

"When [the coach] hands out tickets that's kind of cool that...that's kind of cool, going to Rovers game with your teammates and having a lot of fun...When I go to the match with my teammates that's okay with me. I don't care if I don't see a match on my own. The point...the thing is, when I go to see a match with my teammates it feels like that...that means we're spending the day together".

Even for those learning-disabled fans who regularly attend live matches, going once or twice a year with their teammates provides an opportunity they would otherwise not have. However, whilst this approach had a positive effect on the capabilities of the members of the learning-disability team, it

was limited only to those who played on the team – who will be given a ticket and supported to attend – and only for one or two matches.

United piloted a project in which learning-disabled people were introduced to the process of attending live matches over an eight week period. This included them “com[ing] along, play some sport, can do ground tours to get them familiar with the environment” and then “supporting them to a match day at the end of the block” (United’s DO). The significance of this project is that the club were attempting to minimise the conversion handicap by ‘guiding’ participants through the whole match day experience, including providing tickets, arranging transport, and having an ‘expert’ to explain the match. This would appear to have significant benefits in terms of enhancing the capabilities of those that would otherwise not be able to attend. However, as with the approaches implemented by the Rovers, United and Athletic, United’s DO explained there is no ongoing encouragement or support to remove logistical and interpersonal barriers faced by learning-disabled people (Solish *et al.*, 2010) to attend live matches.

Athletic have somewhat recognised the limitations of just giving people a free ticket. The SIO outlined how:

“There’s been loads of times where we’ve given tickets to a group, they’ve come along to watch the game, great, they’ve had a great time, don’t come back again...umm...don’t come back to watch for whatever reason”.

They have implemented a “bit of a mentoring scheme” where people are offered the chance to attend a live match through a community programme and they had a “mentor with them, which could be a season ticket holder...or some of our staff” (Athletic’s SIO). This approach recognised some of the more subtle or informal barriers that prevent people from attending matches. For example, in the same way David felt more confident when he was with his friend Mark in the Athletic’s stadium, mentors had “a lot of knowledge of Athletic” that they could pass on to their mentee (Athletic’s SIO). However, despite the benefits such a project could have for learning-disabled football fans, it was only “targeting certain areas of the city with high...BME (black minority ethnic) populations” (Athletic’s SIO).

## **What do clubs do to include learning-disabled football fans?**

As part of the cultural revolution that has seen football clubs adopt new corporate images as leisure companies and not just sports teams (Giulianotti, 2007) – and that has seen football clubs become vehicles for achieving policy goals – Rovers, United, and Athletic promoted themselves as ‘inclusive’.

“We’re trying to create an atmosphere where you can come here as a family. Where the sports hall at the back is there’s an on-site VOX centre which does hair dressing, catering, construction. So you can come with your family and have something to eat or mum and dad can have their hair cut, or whatever they want, and the rest can come and watch football. So it’s more about family atmosphere that we’re creating than you pay £28 and you just sit and watch an hours football, or 90 minutes” (Athletic’s CSR officer).

In a similar vein Rovers’ ‘Policy for Disabled Supporters’ stated the club is “committed to extending football and the facilities at [the stadium] to the widest possible contingency of supporters”.

However, given that Rovers, United nor Athletic had attempted to directly facilitate the football fandom of learning-disabled fans through their ‘community programmes’, what has been done to enhance the capabilities or reduce the conversion handicap of learning-disabled fans? Or, to put it another way, what have Rovers, United and Athletic done to “ensure that [learning] disabled fans are...fully facilitated” (General Manager of the Football League Trust)?

The Football League requires its membership – including Rovers, United, and Athletic – to “abide by its regulations regarding disabled fans” (Football League email). This includes, for example, regulation 32.2.13, which states that:

“At every home match a minimum of 10% of the total disabled spectator accommodation must be made available to disabled supporters of the away club” (Football League Regulations).

These Football Leagues regulations principally cover the ‘reasonable adjustments’ clubs have to make to ticketing and stadium access in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Equality Act (2010). Further best practice guidelines have “been produced in association with the National Association of Disabled Supporters (NADS)...[providing] key knowledge on specific disability matters relating to the football industry” (Football League email). Guidance from NADS – now called ‘A Level Playing Field’ – provides support for clubs in understanding the legal and moral case for providing “good customer service for disabled fans” (Football League email). However, the standard of facilities and other customer care issues are “the responsibility of clubs (as individual businesses and service providers)” (Football League email). The Football League only offers “best practice guidance and recommendations...in improving the standard of disabled customer service” (Football League email).

United, Athletic and Rovers all adhere to this minimalist approach through the provision of certain ‘disabled facilities’, which involves having a designated disabled seating area within the stadium “close to stairways and lavatories in order to reduce the need to use stairs” (Rovers’ Disability Policy). United’s Club Liaison Officer for Disabled Supporters – a voluntary position – described how of the several hundred ‘disabled’ seats available in United’s stadium, only “about ten to twelve” are

occupied by people with learning-disabilities. Hannah was one such person to utilise this provision when she attends United matches. Given her limited mobility she found the location convenient. However, all the other participants preferred sitting in the public seating areas. This reflects Milner & Kelly's (2009) assertion that many learning-disabled people are aware that involvement with other 'disabled' people implies a less valued form social participation. There was also some evidence that the areas designated for disabled fans were controlled in ways that diminished the wider experience of fandom. For example, United's Club Liaison Officer for Disabled Supporters explained: "When they come out with the four letter [swear] words...they're not allowed to do that". This was not "the club that's talking" (Liaison Officer for Disabled Supporters) but a rule she had introduced to the disabled area herself to prevent bad "language when there's ladies and young girls about". To ban disabled people from expressing their emotions in such a way may be viewed as controlling and infantilising (Leonard, 1984).

At Rovers, to assist learning-disabled fans wanting to sit elsewhere in the stadium, stewards charged with keeping order were "all qualified or working towards the NVQ Level 2 in Spectator Safety" (Rovers' Policy for Disabled Supporters), which included a unit on equality and diversity. If a group of disabled fans planned on attending a live Rovers match and had pre-booked their tickets, details would be included in the Stadium Managers pre-match briefing and supervisors would be instructed to "contact and liaise with group organisers" (Rovers' Operations Manager). Although this provision might facilitate learning-disabled fans attending Rovers' matches in friendship groups, for example, by providing additional social support, it did not work as effectively as perhaps it should. At the beginning of my data collection I had the opportunity to attend a Rovers match with the learning-disability team as part of their end of season celebrations. There were approximately fifty of us attending the match, made up of the team's coaches, parents, and players of a range of ages and impairments. Our seats in the public seating area had been pre-arranged with the club. However, we had significant trouble entering the stadium. The group organiser had a letter from the Operations Manager stating that, because some of our party had difficulty climbing stairs, it would be no problem for us all to enter through a side entrance and walk around the edge of the pitch to our seats. However, only those in wheelchairs or using walking frames were allowed to enter this way. Those that did not appear to be 'disabled enough' had to walk back around the stadium to the designated entrance on our tickets.

In line with equality legislation, Rovers, United, and Athletic all have a ticket policy that involves giving a free 'carer' ticket to anyone who buys a disabled ticket. In the Rovers Policy for Disabled fans, for example, it states:

“Where a spectator in a wheelchair requires the support of a carer, a complimentary ticket for a specific seat near to the wheelchair position will be provided. The carer will be expected to provide any support required for the spectator in a wheelchair including assistance in the need for an emergency evacuation”.

Whilst the policy mentions only wheelchair users specifically, a caveat is provided at the end to say “the same provisions as those specified to spectators in wheelchairs will apply to ambulant disabled”. Such an approach recognised that learning-disabled fans are often unlikely to be able to attend matches independently and so takes positive steps to improve their capabilities in this respect. Addressing some of the extra costs associated with different personal characteristics and the social, physical, and economic environment, this ticketing policy goes some way to overcoming what Burchardt (2004:740) terms the “extra cost of living with an impairment”.

Getting to this point, however, had, according to the General Manager of the Football League Trust, been a “significant learning process” to “ensure the person with the discretionary price was the carer” and not the disabled fan. The President of the Athletic Disabled Fans Group told me that “up to two or three years ago it was free for [disabled people] and the carer paid”. The charges were reversed following advice from NADS “that disabled people ought to be paying towards their own tickets” (President of the Athletic Disabled Fans Group). As the Rovers Policy for Disabled Supporters now states:

“Rovers does not offer concessions to [learning-disabled] spectators...all tickets are charged at the price appropriate to the stand in which spectators...are accommodated including, where appropriate, concessions for children and/or senior citizens”.

Importantly there is no restriction on where someone with a ‘disabled’ ticket and their ‘carer’ can sit in Rovers’, Athletic’s or United’s stadia. Again, the President of the Athletic Disabled Fans Group describes how this situation has changed over the past few seasons at Athletic:

“No, if you’re ambulant you can go sit anywhere in the stadium basically. It used to be you had to – up to two, three years ago all the ambulant [disabled people] were sat in one area. Then we thought ‘yeah, that doesn’t look right’. So what they did was say they can sit anywhere they want. It depends what you call disabled ambulant you see. Some are in the disabled wheelchair space – not space, but seats – and some other ambulant supporters go and sit in the top of the stand. So there’s no restrictions on where they can sit. Obviously, there’s restrictions on where wheelchairs can go, obviously. But ambulant, yeah, anywhere in the stadium and the ambulant also get a free carer”.

This ticketing policy strives to offer learning-disabled fans some flexibility in their fan experience (i.e. where they sit in the stadium), while also allowing them to be supported in the stadium. However, my experience suggests that this policy is not always well known by learning-disabled fans or those who assist them. For example, after speaking to Paul about whether he had a ‘disabled’ ticket or not, his mother (who buys his ticket for him) explained that Paul has a ‘normal’ ticket because she did not

think it fair to make the people Paul goes to United matches with – his uncle and cousin – give up the seats they had occupied for countless seasons to sit in the ‘disabled’ area with Paul.

Of course, such a policy assumes that learning-disabled people – whether they require a carer or not – are able to afford the price of a ticket. This is evidently not the case for participants in this research. In response to this, Rovers had “on occasions, allowed supporters and groups with learning difficulties to come to the games and provided tickets at reduced rates” (Rovers’ Operations Manager). However, this had usually been instigated by the groups of fans rather than Rovers actively seeking them out. Such arrangements have been made on a more ad hoc basis rather than as part of any defined ticketing strategy.

### ***The limitations of an ‘open access’ approach***

Rovers’, United’s and Athletic’s approaches to their learning-disabled fans is best described as ‘open access’. In line with the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and Equality Act (2010), they have attempted to remove some of the barriers that might have previously prevented learning-disabled people accessing their football stadia. On the Football League website, information is provided:

“For clubs and fans on disabled facilities at each Football League stadium...This information is used for the benefit of disabled spectators and other clubs alike. Information includes key disability contacts for each club, their pricing policies, wheelchair bay, parking, sensory disabilities information and more”.

Through ticketing, stadium facilities and stewarding provision, the clubs perceived they had done their part. They had opened up access to their stadia and it was now up to individual learning-disabled fans to seek out clubs with provisions to suit their needs and to engage with them like any other customer. Within this discourse – reflecting the ideologies of individualism that pervade contemporary society – the failure of learning disabled people to, for example, attend matches is thus blamed on them (Brittain, 2004). Penny & Redhead (2009) suggest that such changes have made football stadia more hospitable places for older people, children, and disabled spectators. However, aside from disregarding the personal and intimate relationships that some of the participants in this research held with a particular club – to be a fan of another team because their stadium had better ‘disabled’ facilities would be anathema to them – Rovers’, United’s and Athletic’s provision was primarily concerned with enhancing the capabilities of people with *physical* impairments. Within their policies there was a tendency to “group all people with disabilities as disabled and attribute the same meaning” (Allender *et al.*, 2006). That is to say, they had not considered the individual needs of learning-disabled fans separately from those of physically disabled people. As Rovers’ Operations Manager suggested:

“We have a policy for disabled spectators but in the main this tends to concentrate on wheelchair users, ambulant disabled and those with a visual impairment. The policy does not cover, to any great degree, supporters with learning difficulties”.

As such, whilst the provision for disabled people per se is often criticised for being added on to policies, as opposed to forming an integral part of sports development strategies (French & Hainsworth, 2001), the consideration of the experience learning-disabled football fans is simply added on to the clubs’ disability strategies.

Such focus on removing physical barriers to cater for “wheelchair users” and those with “sensory disabilities” (Football League Email) has resulted in the wider social barriers and implicit discrimination faced by learning-disabled people going unchecked (Allender *et al.*, 2006). It is not simply a matter of installing ramps and modifying physical facilities (French & Hainsworth, 2001). Given the general lack of consideration from policy makers as to the participatory barriers faced by learning-disabled people (Allender *et al.*, 2006), these results are perhaps not surprising.

Bailey (2005) has pointed out that, to achieve social inclusion targets, such ‘open access’ approaches are too simplistic and overlook the important distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions for participation. For example, through their disabled-ticketing policies, Rovers, United and Athletic recognised that it is necessary for some learning-disabled fans to be assisted to attend live matches. However, simply providing a free ticket is not sufficient to reduce the conversion handicap of those fans without anyone to accompany them. This raises the question of how far Rovers’, United’s and Athletic’s responsibilities to their learning-disabled fans extends. Direct Payments, for example, are provided so that learning-disabled people can arrange their own personal assistance. Gavin intends to attend more Athletic away matches in the future with his personal assistant. However, compared to some other participants, Gavin is fortunate that his mother supports him to make productive use of his Direct Payments (Boxall *et al.*, 2009).

### ***More proactive approaches to learning-disabled fans***

Rather than assuming that participation will automatically follow ‘opportunity’, Coalter (2007) suggest sports clubs should engage in extensive targeted outreach work. There were some limited examples of where United, Rovers and Athletic have been more proactive to “address the multifaceted barriers to participation” (Waring & Mason, 2010:527) experienced by the participants in this research. The most obvious of which was United’s latest project, as discussed earlier in this chapter, to encourage local learning-disabled adults to play some sport and then “support them at a match at a weekend” (United’s DO). This represents the first proactive steps taken by any of the clubs involved in this research to actively involve learning-disabled people as fans. After thinking



“about the match day experience for particular adults with learning difficulties”, United’s DO recognised the limitations of their dominant ‘open access’ approach. She appreciated the capability poverty learning-disabled people may find themselves in, suggesting many learning-disabled people “don’t want to go to a match on their own because of past experiences” or that “maybe they don’t have parents or somebody who would take them every week” (United’s DO). She has also recognised the potential social benefits of attending live matches along with the limitations of sitting in the ‘disabled’ area.

“We do have quite a few adults that already attend...umm...there’s the disabled stand that they tend to go in. So they’re not actually mixing at the minute with the other supporters, it’s their little group. So that’s what we’re trying to overcome” (United’s DO).

United’s proposition to enhance the capabilities of some of its learning-disabled fans is for the clubs’ “staff and volunteers” to “actually take them to a match until they get comfortable to go on their own” (United’s DO). The project is hoped to expand to include a “social aspect” (United’s DO):

“We’ve also put in there for, like, a mentoring scheme, so if any of the old participants want to come back and mentor the new ones, then hopefully get quite a bit of a social aspect for them and meet new people. Eventually have a bigger group that are coming to the matches cos I know at the minute we’ve just got the ones that come, but just go in the disabled stand, so the wheelchair use or any other disability, but they just stick to that stand. But we want to expand it and get more people in”.

This project is a positive step towards United trying to include learning-disabled people as football fans by actively enhancing their capabilities. None the less, whilst it is currently only a pilot project, the current format appeared unlikely to have long-lasting effects. They only intended to take a group of “about 20 people” over “2 years” to one game after an eight week block linked into other club activities (United’s DO). United’s hope that these people might “carry on and go with friends they make as part of this project” (United’s DO) seems to ignore the barriers these people faced prior to entering the project and that will still exist upon exiting.

A more advanced version of this project has been run successfully at Wigan Athletic Football Club since 2009. ‘Never Watch Alone’ (NWA) is run in partnership with A level Playing Field, Wigan Warriors Rugby League Football Club, Wigan Athletic Football Club and the Wigan Disability Partnership Board. Through a network of ‘buddies’, NWA enables fans with learning-disabilities to go to games, not with a professional carer or family member, but with a fellow fan, someone who shares their passion for the club and the camaraderie before and after the match. A report on the Sky Sports News website, posted the 29<sup>th</sup> October 2009, suggests the project has already been successful at “bringing those with learning difficulties into the wider community and connect[ing] supporters”. The project appears cost effective to the club as the buddies are all voluntary and any

support and responsibility is handled by “professionals” from the Wigan Disability Partnership Board. Similar NWA projects at Rovers, United and Athletic might enable fans without the necessary support networks, such as Sanjay, Tom and Daniel, to attend more live matches, as well as enhancing the experience of the participants who wanted to go to matches with friends rather than parents/carers. Such an approach is limited, however, to those learning-disabled fans whose conversion handicap could be overcome with just the support of a ‘buddy’.

The purpose of the Never Watch Alone project is to recreate the relationships and socialising that would otherwise normally emerge between football fans (Blackshaw, 2008), to purposefully make football more of an inclusive leisure environment (Devine & Parr, 2008). This role might also be filled with the introduction of ‘fans clubs’. Athletic have a dedicated disabled fans group, which serves to help its members access the football stadium more easily. For example, for those people who need a carer to accompany them to matches the fans’ club have a list of family members of people that are members who can step in:

“They ring me up and say “I haven’t got a carer”. We’ll say “right, someone will meet you outside the ground and take you in”. So it’s not a big problem. I just get a list. I ring ‘em up and say “can you take so-and-so in?”. They say “yeah, no problem, I’ll meet them outside the shop, take ‘em in and look after ‘em”” (President of the Athletics Disabled Fan’s Group).

However, whilst this organisation “try and do what we can for people” (President of the Athletic Disabled Fans Group) they are almost entirely focused on physical impairments. Like the club itself, they do not “do anything on the learning difficulties side to be honest” (President of the Athletic Disabled Fans Group). A significant area for future development could be the provision of learning-disability specific fans groups. Whilst this may be seen in policy discourses to further exclude participants into exclusively learning-disability spaces (Burton & Kagan, 2006; Milner & Kelly, 2009), in the same way as participants in this research were able to make friends through playing in their learning-disability football clubs, learning-disability fan groups might enable those involved opportunity to belong and “[hang] out together” (Johnson *et al.*, 2012:338).

The final example of provision which proactively addressed the capability poverty of the participants in this research was at Rovers where the football coach for the learning-disability team had recognised that “some of the lads...would like to come [to live games]...but they can’t always know how to buy a ticket” (Rovers’ CFM). To help overcome this barrier the coach had “gone downstairs [to the ticket office], done some of the deals...bought say twenty tickets and dished them out on a Friday night, said ‘who wants to go? You give me £2.50’”. Such an approach was not officially recognised as part of the club’s inclusion or disability policy, but required the coach, with his

intimate knowledge of the players and their capabilities, to begin this process. As Rover's CFM suggested:

"I think [the coach] has done that off his own back, which is great really cos I never just...it's like you said, it's either they wanna come and they're fans or they don't wanna come, do you know what I mean? I didn't get that middle ground where [the coach] thought 'well hang on a minute, if we ask them, we'll buy 20 tickets and we'll give them to 'em on the day. He's coming and he's coming and he's coming'. So [the coach] sort of sussed that out himself, found that middle ground, whereas I thought they'll come if they wanna come and if they don't like coming they won't come".

This method of distributing tickets by by-passing the ticket office and approaching learning-disabled fans directly has had some success: "a few of them are coming now and they're coming as a social group. They're sitting together then they're going off and having a few beers or whatever afterwards" (Rovers' CFM). However, it is limited to those who attend the clubs football training sessions. It also only helps learning-disabled fans able to attend live matches independently. Whilst overcoming the barriers of buying match-day tickets, it does little to assist those learning-disabled fans who might need support attending.

### ***Why are clubs not more proactive?***

Rovers, United and Athletic were all keen to suggest that they try to "provide everything for every supporter" (Athletic's CSR Officer). This included everything they can to facilitate the inclusion of learning-disabled fans. Considering some of the examples of how clubs might enhance the capabilities of learning-disabled fans discussed previously, including Never Watch Alone and learning-disabled fan groups, this is not the case. Indeed, as Burchardt (2004:740) suggests:

"If transport were accessible, personal assistance was provided free at the point of use, and household items were designed to be inclusive, the extra cost of living with an impairment would be considerably lower".

Instead Rovers, United and Athletic had only facilitated the inclusion of learning-disabled fans "in limitation" (Athletic's CSR Officer). On the one hand, this 'limitation' can be seen as the result from Rovers, United and Athletic not having "the where-with-all" – the knowledge and expertise – to engage learning-disabled people as fans (Rovers' CFM). As the General Manager of the Football League Trust indicated, he believed that clubs were including people "in the right way". However, to suggest they were unaware of what extra provision they could put in place to enhance the capabilities of learning-disabled fans would be untrue. For example, Rovers' CFM spoke about previous suggestions the club had received about enhancing the experience for learning-disabled fans from A Level Playing Field:

“They try and get you to have a disabled supporters club, but it’s difficult. Somebody’s got to do that job and organise it all so we’ve not actually got a disability supporters club at the moment”.

The Rovers Disability Policy also outlines how after a disability access audit in 2010 carried out by “an expert approved by the National Association of Disabled Supporters” the provision in the stadium for disabled people was deemed “adequate”, highlighting “further improvements that could be considered”. It details how these improvements will be “prioritised and implemented as funds allow”. Considering this information and the fact that learning-disabled people typically require more financial, structural, and cultural investment to achieve the same outcomes as their non-learning-disabled counterparts (Elling & Claringbould, 2005) the extra cost and effort required to facilitate learning-disabled fans is a significant limitation.

With regard to finances and structural limitations, I would suggest however that the main reason why there are no programmes delivered at Rovers, United or Athletics designed to facilitate the inclusion of learning-disabled people as football fans – by attempting to enhance their capabilities – is because of an internal structural division that exists within these, and all, football clubs. On the one hand there are the football clubs themselves, as businesses; what shall be referred to as the ‘Club’. Rovers, United, and Athletic as Clubs are concerned with performing well in the Football League, signing players, and filling their stadia on match days. On the other side of the divide are the Rovers, United and Athletic Trusts. Trusts are technically independent charitable organisations that operate under the banner of the club. They use the appeal of the club to deliver their social programmes. It is the Trusts job to, as Athletic’s CSR Officer puts it, “deliver the message”. He said:

“You see the brand as football whereas I see the brand as engaging the community. Use the brand to deliver the message about we are not just a football club taking your money to watch football, we are also about a football club that will give something back to a community”.

Through this research a grey area has been uncovered. Whilst the Trusts are responsible for promoting the inclusion of learning-disabled people, the Clubs take responsibility for most elements of fandom – ticketing, merchandising, organising the stadium on match-days etc. This means that, as things stand, the instrumental use of football fandom is not possible. I encountered this division when trying to sample staff at Rovers, United and Athletic. When I asked about fans and attending matches I was told to speak to staff from the Club (i.e. stadium managers, ticket office managers), but when I asked about learning-disabled people or social exclusion/inclusion I was directed to the Trust (i.e. Social inclusion officers, disability officers). An apparently simple yet highly significant example of the operational division between Trusts and Clubs concerns how they define ‘learning-

disability'. This difference has clear implications for any potential social inclusion through fandom programmes that would cross into both camps.

Rovers', United's and Athletic's Trusts, by and large, utilise a broad definition of 'learning-disability' based on the social model. In order to take in Rovers' current social inclusion programmes – run by the Trust – participants only have to “self identify” as having a learning-disability (Rovers' CFM). Rather than any strict definition based on impairments, the learning-disability football team, for example, is available to anyone “who's uncomfortable to play in a mainstream team...because of the limitations of their disability or uncomfortable because they just don't feel comfortable” (Rovers' CFM). This approach is employed so that the benefits of participation might reach the most people. This contrasts with the definitions employed by the Rovers 'Club', with regard to eligibility for a 'disabled' ticket, which is aligned more closely to the medical model. The Rovers Football Club Policy for Disabled Supporters states:

“For the purpose of the implementation of this policy, Rovers defines a spectator with a disability as being:

- An individual who is in possession of a valid Disabled Living Allowance (DLA) at an appropriate level. Under current provision this would include individuals who obtain the DLA mobility component at the high rate, the mid or high rate of the care element or the War Pensioners' Mobility Supplement

OR

- An individual with a written statement from a qualified medical practitioner that he/she suffers from a condition that reduces mobility and/or requires assistance with activities that are relevant to attending a football match

OR

- An individual who is registered as blind”

The reason that Clubs operate in this manner is to ensure that, as businesses, they are maximising their income. The President of the Athletic Disabled Fan Group explained why Athletic are so strict on their definition of 'disability':

“If you say at the beginning of the season “I want a carer” ...uhh...because I think about what was happening was a lot of it was being misused. People saying “yeah, I might need that, I'll have a carer”, who then only comes to certain matches like derbies. So, you can't blame Sheffield Wednesday for saying “OK, if you need a carer, you tell us you need a carer and you bring one”.

Through a normalisation lens it is possible to view this approach as positive for learning-disabled people. They can be viewed as just another one of football's customers looking to buy tickets and consume their way into the 'community' (Giulianotti, 2002; Oppenhuisen & Van Zooman, 2006).

They should therefore be treated no differently to the other customers. This is the approach currently employed with regard to learning-disabled fans; 'reasonable adjustments' are made so they are not considered disadvantaged compared to their non-learning-disabled peers. However, because most people in football "assume that disability means someone in a wheelchair" (General Manager of the Football League Trust), such an approach does little to enhance the capabilities and reduce the conversion handicap of the participants in this research.

Issues concerning how individual club's understand 'learning disability' and the problems this can cause were raised by Gary and Hannah (i1):

Gary: It frustrates [my] mum when I tell her.

Hannah: Gary's mum said 'is it cos they're scared about word disability. Aint they been told about it?' She said she wonders if they know what it really means.

Hannah went on to recount how she was caught up between the different definitions employed by United:

"Well when I first went down for me season ticket me and [my] mum ended up having a do with them down at [the ticket office] cos I'm not in a chair. Bought paper work with me to say I could sit there, this particular women were a bit abrupt so my mum asked to see the main women and she said 'well, she fits category, she can have a seat', but that's women's attitude because I weren't in a wheel chair...I don't think you have to be in a wheelchair to...football, this if for football, if you're not in a wheelchair they don't class you as disabled".

Rovers', United's and Athletic's Trusts receive public money and so required by their funders to "work actively to engage those who have been excluded in the past" (Pat10, 1999:5). Conversely, the Clubs – who are responsible for fandom – are private businesses and under no obligation to actively take steps to enhance the capabilities of learning disabled fans through, for example, offering them tickets in accessible locations and at accessible prices, or having learning-disabled supporters clubs to expand fans' support networks and provide a social aspect to match days. As such, it is perhaps not surprising they are disinterested in the taking on a more proactive role in the provision of leisure opportunities for learning-disabled people (Patterson & Pegg, 2009; Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009). Social inclusion is not necessarily "part of *their business*" (Pat10, 1999:5, emphasis added).

## Summary

This chapter has analysed how football fandom is facilitated for learning-disabled people. In previous chapters we have seen how participant's football fandom varied considerably. This can be understood in terms of personal choice, the cost of attending matches, availability of support

networks, and individual impairments. However, the most helpful way of understanding this variation is through the capability framework (Sen, 2004). This suggests that those able to attend matches and support their team in the way they would like can be described as 'capability rich', whilst those unable to can be described as 'capability poor'. By looking at individual fans' capabilities we can clearly focus on what social, economic, individual and environmental barriers affect learning-disabled people's football fandom. As such, we can also understand what is being done to modify these capabilities.

The findings of this study suggest that suggest Rovers, United, and Athletic are not intent on including learning-disabled people as football fans but as players or in healthy eating/lifestyle programmes. Whilst clubs do what they are legally obliged to do to offer access for learning-disabled fans, this is mostly focused on removing physical barriers. United have taken the initial steps to proactively engage learning-disabled people as football fans, but only as part of a Trust project and not integrated into the operating procedure of the club as a whole. Similarly, a football coach at Rovers has taken steps to enhance the capabilities of his players who are unable to attend matches independently. Again, however, this is an informal procedure and not officially endorsed by the club.

The reason clubs take an 'open access' approach to football fandom, as opposed to a more proactive approach, is because of the extra resources necessary to overcome the varied conversion handicaps associated with football fandom for learning-disabled people. Priority appears to be given to the commercial interests of football clubs over non-commercial interests. These include not bringing the benefits of inclusion to a wider range of fans whose opportunities for access to football fandom involve considerations that go beyond physical presence at live football matches.

# **Chapter 7 – Learning-disability, Football**

## **Fandom & Social Inclusion: Opportunities**

### **and Constraints**

#### **Introduction**

Since 1997 the social isolation experienced by learning-disabled people has been reconceptualised as ‘social exclusion’. As part of wider governmental discourse of harnessing the social benefits of sport and leisure, the Football Association has attempted to utilise the popularity of football to “create opportunities at all levels for anyone with a disability to get involved in football- whether as a player, referee, administrator, coach or spectator” (The FA, 2010b). However, until now many of the claims made in football inclusion policies have been rhetorical, as rigorous evaluations of the social benefits of involvement in the ‘football environment’ are yet to be carried out. The aforementioned policies appear to adopt a somewhat romanticised view of football fandom and its potential for social inclusion (Coalter, 2001; Tacon, 2007), suggesting learning disabled people can integrate into the existing community of established fans. Through the collection of empirical evidence from learning-disabled football fans about their experiences as football fans and their involvement in football fan communities, this thesis has examined for the first time the reported positive relationship between learning-disabled people, football fandom, and social inclusion/exclusion. In doing so, it has addressed a significant gap in the academic literature and provided more robust evidence of whether participation as football fans can contribute to addressing the social exclusion of learning-disabled people. The aim of this chapter is to summarise the empirical study and its findings in relation to research questions, highlighting the original contributions to knowledge and conceptual contribution of this thesis. The practical implications of the findings are presented, along with recommendations for future research.

#### **Summary of thesis**

The chronic marginalisation of learning-disabled people is well documented, including the work of Hall (Hall, 2005; 2010), Brindle (2006), Macintyre (2008) and Parr & Butler (1999). These authors highlight how the marginal position of learning-disabled people has not existed in a fixed state, but changed over time to reflect changing understandings of learning-disability. After centuries of impairments being seen as judgements from a higher power, the emergence of medical discourses



at the beginning of the twentieth century led to conceptualisations of learning-disabled people as less than whole, with medical 'knowledge' determining response and treatment. This so called 'medical model' justified the detention and institutionalisation of 'mental defectives' in specialised institutions where the "particularly troublesome" (Scull, 1979:240) were prevented from being a burden on the rest of society.

Growing criticism of the 'institutional solution' in the 1950s and 1960s led to the emergence of normalisation/Social Role Valorisation (SRV) and 'social model' discourses of disability. Gradually this social analysis of disability – which drew a distinction between 'impairments' and the social barriers that prevent full social participation – gained greater recognition in Government discussion papers and among welfare professionals. Rather than being seen as oddities, out of place in society, there was a desire to integrate learning-disabled people into their communities through the removal of social barriers and programmes of 'community care' "promoting choice and independence" (DH, 1989:4). However, even by the 1990s, after twenty years of the social model and normalisation, learning-disabled people continued to occupy only marginal positions in British society.

It was not until the 1997 election that New Labour introduced the term 'social exclusion' into British political discourse, which located learning-disabled people alongside other isolated groups as the victims of dynamic social processes beyond their control (Byrne, 2005). The cause of this 'social exclusion', although inherently contestable, was attributed to a lack of 'social capital' as envisaged by Robert Putnam (Putnam, 1995; 2000). However, whilst the perceived goal of social exclusion policy – as set out in *Valuing People* (DH, 2001:22) and *Valuing People Now* (DH, 2009) – has been to help learning-disabled people "lead full productive lives as valued members of their communities", the delivery of these policies has been to promote 'inclusion' into employment, the 'community' and independent living (Labonte, 2004; Barnes & Mercer, 2006). Expecting learning-disabled people to conform to mainstream notions of 'normality' and to be as productive as their able bodied/minded peers reflects a certain romanticism about the nature of learning-disability (Hall, 2004; Burton & Kagan, 2006; Shakespeare, 2006). As such, learning-disabled people have typically remained absent from 'mainstream' spaces and social networks, faced instead with unseen barriers and experiences of 'othering' (Hall, 2005; Mathers, 2008; Milner & Kelly, 2009; Hall, 2010).

Based on Robert Putnam's (Putnam, 1995; 2000) social capital discourses of social exclusion, the role of sport and leisure has become increasingly prominent as a site for enabling learning-disabled people to become involved in mainstream communities. Whilst there are some examples of where inclusive leisure settings have been able to generate 'bonding capital' between learning-disabled and

non-learning-disabled people (i.e. Parr, 2008; Hall, 2010), learning-disabled people continue to face many barriers to participation in sport and leisure activities (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005).

As the most popular sport in Britain, football has been at the forefront of this drive to use sport and leisure to tackle the social exclusion of learning-disabled people. Whilst there is some evidence of the social benefits of playing football for learning-disabled people (Tacon, 2007), there is no supporting evidence as to the benefits of fandom. More concerning is the fact that despite the emphasis on creating “opportunities at all levels for anyone with a disability to get involved in football- whether as a player, referee, administrator, coach or spectator” (The FA, 2010b), there is no explicit strategy as to how learning-disabled people are to be involved as fans.

Football fandom has long been recognised as a site for non-learning-disabled people to establish popular social identities and reap the rewards of participating in fan ‘communities’ (Armstrong & Young, 1999; Brown, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2008; Mellor, 2008). However, football fandom has undergone a paradigm shift over the past twenty years (Giulianotti, 2002; Williams, 2006), possibly eroding these identities and ‘traditional’ communities. This calls into question the appropriateness of assuming that becoming football fans will enable learning-disabled people to integrate into the existing community of established fans and expand their social networks and social capital. More specifically, it raises three important questions that this research has sought to answer:

- 1) What are the experiences of learning-disabled people as football fans?
- 2) How do these experiences contribute to social inclusion, specifically in terms of increasing social capital, social networks, and community membership?
- 3) What, if anything, is being done to facilitate learning-disabled football fandom?

### ***Research methodology***

Based at three professional football clubs in the English Football League – anonymised as Rovers, United, and Athletic– this research was an inductive exploration of the relationship between learning-disability, football fandom, and social inclusion/exclusion. The study involved a combination of semi-structured interviews, photo-voice, and participant observation with learning-disabled fans, semi-structured interviews with club ‘officials’ responsible for facilitating the inclusion of learning-disabled fans and the collection of relevant documentary evidence. For ethical and political reasons I tried to adhere as closely as possible to an inclusive ethos (Walmsley, 2001). This entailed trying to establish a more equitable researcher-participant relationship. However, throughout the research process I experienced an ongoing tension between wanting participants to be “engaged as fully as

possible in the research process” (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004:214) but not having the necessary experience to relinquish control. On reflection, whilst the research process did not qualify as participatory or emancipatory, it was conducted in accordance with the three core beliefs of inclusive research: that (I) the conventional research relationship of researcher as ‘expert’ and informant as ‘object of investigation’ is inequitable; (II) that people have the right to be consulted/involved in research relating to their own lives; and (III) that the quality of research improves when people are involved in research concerning their own lives (Stalker, 1998). In practice this meant establishing research relationships with the learning-disabled participants based around trust and a rapport that was developed gradually over several weeks (Stalker, 1998). Data analysis was a balance of inductive and deductive coding, with the highest order themes forming the basis of the findings chapters.

### ***What are the experiences of learning-disabled people as football fans?***

Since the gentrification, commodification and sterilisation of football stadia following the Hillsborough stadium disaster in 1989 and the formation of the F.A. Premier League in 1992 (Armstrong, 1998; Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1998; Wells, 2006; Brown, 2008; Fawbert, 2011a) the composition of football fandom has become increasingly heterogeneous (Williams, 2006). Just as non-learning-disabled fans are not a homogenous group, the participants in this research demonstrated a wide variety of football fandom in terms of duration, intensity, and participation. This variation is best conceptualised using Giulianotti’s (2002) taxonomy of *Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs*. The fact that majority of the participants in this research were characterised as *Supporters* – they held an “intense kind of identification and solidarity with [their] clubs” as an “emblem of [the] surrounding community” (Giulianotti, 2002:31 & 33) – can perhaps be attributed to sampling bias associated with asking participants to volunteer.

Amongst the variety of fandom displayed by participants, many of the “traditional” ideals (Williams, 1999a:35) and ‘invented traditions’ (King, 2002) of football fandom were upheld. This included an awareness of the binary distinction between so called ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ fans (Robson, 2000), some participants frequenting public houses as part of the “male holy trinity of alcohol, football and male bonding” (Weed, 2007:400), and attending live matches as the preferred medium for consuming football (Nash, 2000; Crabbe & Brown, 2004; Stone, 2007).

The participants’ preferred choice of attending Rovers’, United’s or Athletic’s live matches – as opposed to watching highlights on television or listening to commentary on the radio – can be associated with the physical proximity achieved between themselves and, both, the match and other like minded individuals (Boden & Molotch, 1994; Urry, 2002; Penny & Redhead, 2009). Attending live

matches enabled the participants to become vicarious participants in the live event. The choreographed football chant or song was the most enjoyable part of the stadium 'atmosphere'. Even where participants were unable to participate fully, they were able to contribute to the carnival in different ways. Clapping emerged as a popular way of demonstrating support and contributing to the atmosphere. Whilst all the participants enjoyed it when the stadium became "noisy", there was a general concern about the potential for the atmosphere to become too hostile or aggressive. Significantly, ignoring any negative experiences whilst attending live football matches (Mathers, 2008), the participants persisted with attending live matches as their preferred means of fandom. Away games were considered by some learning-disabled fans to have more atmosphere. However, only two of the participants were able to regularly attend away matches.

Like their non-learning-disabled peers, the football fandom of the participants was not limited to match days, but persisted into their everyday lives (Stone, 2007). Using Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy, for those learning-disabled fans higher up the 'hot'/'cool' vertical scale, their fandom was likely to endure more strongly in their day-to-day lives. Whilst their 'everyday lives' were likely to be different to those non-learning-disabled fans described by Stone (2007), participants were still able to perform their fandom through talking to other people about their clubs, the consistent display of club symbols to demonstrate allegiance, and continuously endeavouring to stay abreast of the latest club news.

This analysis has so far painted an almost entirely positive experience of football fandom for the participants. The reality for all of the participants, however, was that their fandom – like other opportunities to engage in leisure activities (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005) – was inhibited by their impairments and personal circumstances. This was most palpable with regard to the participants' ability to attend live matches. There was a reliance on others – typically family and friends – to facilitate these experiences.

### ***How do these experiences contribute to social inclusion, specifically in terms of increasing social capital, social networks and community membership?***

The experience of the participants in this research suggests football fandom can have many social benefits for learning-disabled people, both while attending live matches and in their everyday lives. As well as the positive emotions generated (Ismer, 2011), attending live matches offered innumerable opportunities for social interactions, for those with season tickets as well as those who attended less frequently. These interactions generally adhered to Simmel's (1949) notion of

sociability. The participants were able to display the necessary “good form” (Simmel, 1949:255) engaging in ‘banter’ about the team, the match, predicting the score, or sexually orientated, raucous humour, which served in “binding those engaged in social interaction” (Giulianotti, 2005:299). Even for learning-disabled fans with limited verbal communication skills, basic forms of sociability were established through, for example, swapping essential terminology, such as the names of favoured players (Giulianotti, 2005). The experiences of the participants in terms of the inherent associational nature of the football crowd is in stark contrast to the typical excluded experience of learning-disabled people in other mainstream leisure settings (Bray & Gates, 2003; Emerson & Mcvilly, 2004).

Interactions during live football matches enabled the participants to ‘bond’ further with those they already knew, such as their supporters accompanying them to the match, and ‘bridge’ to other fans in the stadium. ‘Bridging’ can occur through very subtle means, including a simple nod or wave to greet a fellow fan. Whilst learning-disabled people typically miss out on certain ‘rites of passage’ where social capital is gained and lost (Riddell *et al.*, 2001), participants were able to relate to their fellow fans through their mutual interest in Rovers, United or Athletic. For the two participants who regularly followed their team away from home, away matches were especially fertile environments for interaction and ‘bridging’ with their fellow fans..

However, the relationships formed through football fandom seemed unlikely to result in the permanent increases in social capital and social networks required for ‘social inclusion’. Football fandom is especially unlikely to lead learning-disabled people into employment or independent living (Labonte, 2004; Barnes & Mercer, 2006). Reflecting other studies about the participation of learning-disabled people in mainstream leisure settings (Glover & Hemingway, 2005; Devine & Parr, 2008; Hall, 2010), relationships that participants formed during live football matches were likely to be limited to those contexts. The ‘season ticket friends’ formed by participants at live football matches represented an opportunity for “intense affective bonding” (Crabbe, 2008:436) followed by immediate dispersal. These types of relationships are not limited to the learning-disabled fans in this study, but reflect more general theories about contemporary football fandom and its associated communities (Brown *et al.*, 2008; Crabbe, 2008). The ability of the participants to become part of the ‘imagined’ or ‘emotional’ community formed during live matches did, however, increase with the number of matches attended. Participants with season tickets had greater opportunities to get to know those seated near them in the stadium and to display more sub-cultural capital in their sociability (Giulianotti, 2002; 2005; Weed, 2007; 2008).

Whilst many mainstream social spaces establish criteria for inclusion that learning-disable people are unable to achieve (Walmsley, 2001; Hall, 2004; Macintyre, 2008; Parr, 2008), the football stadium

can be seen as a form of semi-institutional space where the participants were able to make a valued contribution to the 'community'. The value of the football stadium as a semi-institutional place lies in its potential to satisfy a need for presence within a 'correct' mainstream location, but also with some separateness, privacy and exclusivity from the "stresses of everyday life" (Milligan, 1999:234; Hall, 2004; 2005). In the 'inclusive environment' of a football stadium, expected patterns of behaviour, dress, and appearance differ from everyday life (Devine, 2004; Devine & Parr, 2008), bringing dissimilar people together and "camouflage[ing] society's typical response to individuals with disability" (Devine & Parr, 2008:402).

Away from football stadia, being a football fan appeared to offer the participants further social benefits, especially for those whose fandom strongly endures in everyday life. Compared to what might otherwise be isolated social lives (Hall & Hewson, 2006), the ubiquity of football in any number of mediated forms offered the learning-disabled fans in this research almost unlimited levels of engagement which could be utilized in different ways, at different times, and for different reasons (Stone, 2007). Just like at live matches, their football fandom provided opportunities for the participants to 'break the ice' and practise their sociability with other like minded individuals (Giulianotti, 2005; Stone, 2007). These interactions can be seen to bring the participants and non-learning-disabled fans together as a performative 'cloakroom' community without them having to enter 'thick' reciprocal relationships (Crabbe, 2008). Whilst they may not be as "intensive" (Crabbe, 2008:436) as those formed in the emotion and excitement of the stadium, conducted away from any "discrete...socio-cultural event" (Robson, 2000:9) these interactions were evidently more "mobile and flexible" (Crabbe, 2008:436). Such opportunities also existed in non-traditional spaces, such as the internet, although this was limited to those participants with sufficient literacy skills. As such, these fleeting, day-to-day experiences of 'cloakroom communities' are also more accessible to those participants unable to attend live matches.

While these 'communities' are unlikely to contribute to the permanent expansion of participants' social networks necessary for social inclusion, the participants' persistent fandom carries other social benefits. Considered as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992a; 2000), football fandom can be seen to have benefited the participants in this research in terms of their self-concept, self-actualisation, self-enrichment, self-expression, feelings of accomplishment, enhanced self-image and self-esteem, and social interaction (Rojek, 2000; 2010), especially in comparison to the 'casual' activities they might otherwise engage in (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005). Whilst being a football fan ran the risk of spilling over into an obsessive passion, adversely affecting participants' social functioning,

given learning-disabled peoples' relative lack of social opportunities (Macintyre, 2008) this is perhaps outweighed by the positives of football fandom.

Football fandom, especially for those engaging in it as serious leisure, also appeared to offer participants a source of personal identity. This identity is reaffirmed and transmitted to others through stylised performances and ritualised 'symbols' designed to demonstrate association with a chosen club (Clark, 2006; Brown, 2008; Derbaix & Decrop, 2011), such as clothing emblazoned with club logos. From the limited sample, other factors more traditionally associated with identity formation, such as gender and ethnicity, appeared not to be a significant barrier to the acquisition of a fan identity for the participants of this research. Indeed, football fandom appears to have significant social benefits for participants in relation to breaking down the stigma of 'learning disability' and allowing individuals to be seen as fans first. This in turn, appeared to give the participants in this research more confidence entering mainstream social spaces.

The lasting benefit of football fandom for participants in this study appears to be how it makes them feel about themselves and about their place in society. Whilst the starting point for learning-disabled people might typically be "in varying degrees 'other' ...beyond the bounds of normal society according to some narrower definition of normality" (Sibley, 1995:61), football fandom provided the participants an environment in which to fulfil their desire to be "deeply understood and deeply accepted" (Goble, 1970:30). These results reflect the findings of Parr (2008) and Hall (2010) with regard to excluded 'others' finding acceptance in mainstream leisure settings. However, because of the ubiquity of football in British society, the participants in this research were also able to experience belonging, a sense of being insiders and proximity to people, activities, networks and spaces in their day-to-day lives. Football fandom is an activity that, according to the evidence gathered, provides a means for learning-disabled people to safely expose themselves to the rigours of 'normal' society (Hall, 2004).

### ***What, if anything, is being done to facilitate learning-disabled football fandom?***

This study has shown how the football fandom of learning-disabled participants varied considerably. This variation can be understood individually in terms of personal choice, the prohibitive cost of attending matches, the availability of support networks or individual impairments. However, conceptualising this variation using the Capability Framework – as opposed to other theories of inequality, such as utilitarianism or John Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971) – most successfully explains the interactions between individual impairments and wider social factors. This analysis suggests that

the participants able to express their fandom in the way they want and attend live matches can be described as 'capability rich', whilst those unable to – for whatever reason – are 'capability poor'. The significance of this capability analysis is that, in accordance with the Social Model (Burchardt, 2004), it suggests that through interventions to address wider social factors and reduce 'conversion handicaps' (Sharma, 2005), football fandom might become more accessible to more learning-disabled people.

The interests of learning-disabled people involved in football are integrated at all levels of the football administration pyramid. However, from the Football Association, to the Football League, to individual clubs, the emphasis of inclusion policies is to involve learning-disabled people as players or in healthy eating/lifestyle programmes. The potential for wider social benefits of football fandom for learning-disabled people does not appear to be recognised by the football clubs involved in this research. Beyond conforming to the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Equality Act (2010) through the removal of physical barriers, disability ticketing policies and some training for stadium staff, there is no concerted effort to improve the capabilities of learning-disabled people as fans. Rather, there is an assumption that if given the opportunity learning-disabled people will attend live match just like any other customer. Whilst such an 'open access' approach may be appropriate for involving physically disabled people (Penny & Redhead, 2009), this misunderstands the nature of many learning impairments and the barriers people face to access mainstream leisure (French & Hainsworth, 2001; Allender *et al.*, 2006).

There was some evidence of football clubs beginning to engage learning-disabled people proactively as football fans, addressing wider social factors to reduce their 'conversion handicaps' (Sharma, 2005). United is piloting a project in which learning-disabled people who have not been to a match before are 'guided' through the experience by an 'expert' from the club. Similarly, a learning-disability football coach at Rovers has taken steps to enhance the capabilities of his players who are unable to attend matches independently by selling them match tickets at football training rather than them having to go to the ticket office. However, these projects are not currently fully integrated into the clubs' operating procedures.

Whilst Rovers, United and Athletic stressed their keenness to provide for the needs of their learning-disabled fans, somewhat contradictorily they were only committed to doing so in moderation. As things stand, Rovers, United and Athletic fulfil their legal and moral obligations to their (physically) 'disabled' clientele, without taking extra steps to enhance the capabilities of their learning-disabled fans. Whilst they may be unaware of the more subtle barriers affecting learning-disabled football fans, the predominant reason football clubs do not adopt more proactive approaches is because of



the extra resources needed to overcome the varied conversion handicaps associated with football fandom for learning-disabled people. Football club Trusts – the charitable arms of football clubs – are obliged by their funding bodies to take extra steps to include learning-disabled people in their playing schemes. But the match day experience is run as a commercial interest and facilitating the inclusion of learning-disabled fans, by taking steps to reduce their conversion handicaps has not yet been implemented. Either such provision comes at too high a cost or the clubs are still to fully consider many learning-disability related issues.

## **Contribution to knowledge**

The originality of this research lies in three areas:

1. Whilst there has previously been a large literature devoted to the football fandom of non-learning-disabled people, this is the first example documenting the experiences of learning-disabled people. Results suggest that learning-disabled football fans are able to share the same variety of engagement as their non-learning-disabled counterparts, albeit this engagement is dependent on their Capabilities.
2. The second contribution to knowledge lies in the description and analysis of the social benefits available to learning-disabled people through football fandom. Whilst these are unlikely to result in the permanent increases in social capital and social networks necessary for ‘social inclusion’, being a football fan can be seen to offer learning-disabled people opportunities for social interaction and involvement in football’s ‘imaged communities’ at live matches and in everyday life. Football fandom can offer learning-disabled people a source of social identity and the chance to create a sense of belonging that may otherwise be absent from their lives.
3. The third and final contribution to knowledge is in critiquing the role of football clubs in facilitating the involvement of learning-disabled people as football fans. Results indicate that football clubs’ inclusion programmes for learning-disabled people only extend to increasing participation as players as part of initiatives to improve health through participation in sport. It appears that trying to increase the capabilities of learning-disabled people as fans and reducing their conversion handicaps to attend live matches is yet to be considered.

This thesis thus makes a significant conceptual contribution regarding the understanding of what, if any, social benefits learning-disabled people can gain from football fandom and the affect this has on their social exclusion. Football fandom should be viewed as a social space in which learning-disabled fans can participate physically (i.e. as part of the ‘carnival’ inside football stadia) and

symbolically (i.e. displaying club paraphernalia) alongside, and engage and interact with, their non-learning-disabled peers.

Football fandom emerges as a source of identity to rival and possibly replace the stigmatised identity of being learning-disabled. By performing and displaying the appropriate symbols of fandom (i.e. chanting, singing, wearing club shirts and other branded clothing) learning disabled people can present themselves as, first and foremost, football fans. As a slight caveat to this, it is not possible to generalise how learning-disabled people are actually viewed by their fellow fans. This is because this research was focused specifically on the experiences of learning-disabled football fans, not the perceptions of non-learning-disabled fans towards their learning-disabled counterparts.

Nonetheless, it is reasonable to conclude that *feeling* less of an 'other', being a football fan enables learning-disabled people to engage with the positive emotions associated with community membership.

The shield of football fandom, which serves to protect learning-disabled fans from the stigmatising gaze of mainstream society, can, however, slip. That is to say, the positive identity of a learning-disabled fan is only sustained whilst their performance as a fan and the symbols on display are recognised and valued by others. In this regard, football fandom is similar to other leisure activities, such as theatre and gardening groups, where learning-disabled people have been able to feel they belong in a specific social context. However, football fandom, and the associated social benefits for learning-disabled people, can be seen as somewhat distinct from other leisure activities that learning-disabled people may engage with.

Firstly, based around an explicitly competitive activity and defined as 'us' versus 'them', football fandom allows learning-disabled people – and others – to take on a much greater collective identification and sense of togetherness compared to, for example, music or film fandom. Secondly, the ubiquity of football in contemporary British society, in terms of its popularity and growing media exposure, offers learning-disabled fans numerous and various opportunities for engagement with their club(s) and other like minded individuals. Thirdly and somewhat related to the previous point, while football is ostensibly confined to individual seasons, in reality football fans are able to continuously engage with their club(s) and each all year round. Individuals can develop a 'career' from fandom that is a permanent and continuous feature of their lives. Fourthly, although status is afforded to fans' expertise, knowledge and ability to converse about one's team, football fandom is also defined and valued based on the emotion and passion individuals are seen to display. This is significant because, whilst a lack of verbal fluency, for example, may result in some learning-disabled

people being seen as deviant and 'other' in mainstream society, screaming, shouting and making noise is explicitly encouraged (and valued) in football crowds.

As a source of personal and collective identity, football fandom can therefore be seen to offer learning-disabled people an occasion to experience an emotional connection to their favoured club(s) and fellow fans, and possibly a uniquely continuous feeling of acceptance and belonging in their lives. Whilst football fandom is unlikely to result in learning-disabled people expanding their social networks and gaining the necessary social capital to become 'socially included', fandom can be seen as a location and activity in which learning-disabled can feel less 'excluded'.

The benefits of football fandom are not shared equally by all learning-disabled fans, however. Instead access to the social benefits appears to relate to individuals' level of engagement as fans. That is to say, the more an individual learning-disabled person 'performs' the role of a football fan by, for example, attending live matches and chanting and singing, consuming club products, or interacting with other fans, the more they will feel they belong within the club and amongst their fellow fans. This is not directly correlated to individuals having more or less significant impairments, but rather those with the greatest 'capabilities' – reflecting their personal and broader social situation – will have the most opportunities to *be* football fans and gain the associated benefits.

## **Limitations, Implications, and Future Research**

Beginning this research I envisaged the results would have practical benefits for learning-disabled people, possibly offering football fandom as a partial solution to social exclusion. After three and a bit years – some of which has flown by while other parts seemed to be never ending – I feel I am in a position to offer some realistic recommendations for increasing awareness of the benefits of football fandom and how it might become more accessible to learning-disabled people in the future.

However, before espousing the policy and practice implications of this research, it is necessary to contextualise these recommendations by discussing the limitations of the research.

### ***Limitations of the research***

Like a lot of qualitative research (Bryman, 2008), the findings of this research are limited by the small, purposively selected sample, which means conclusions cannot be drawn and generalised across a larger population. The participants in this research were all already fans of Rovers, United, or Athletic and played for learning-disability teams associated with their chosen clubs before I entered the field. This meant they all held particular relationships to their clubs as both fans and players. Whilst the participants were able to gain social benefits from their fandom, these social

benefits might not be available to all learning-disabled people. It would be inappropriate to suggest that football fandom can engender a feeling of belong amongst *all* learning-disabled people because, at the simplest level, not everyone likes football. The findings of this study give no indication as to the social benefits of football fandom for a learning-disabled person who, for example, does not play for a learning-disability team associated with a professional club or who may have only just started taking an interest in football.

From a methodological perspective, the inclusive approach of this research was limited. I set out with good intentions to conduct the research in the participatory tradition, but when it came to doing the research I was unable – or perhaps subconsciously unwilling – to hand control over to the participants. I attribute this to my inexperience. Rather than creating more equitable research relationships by, for example, allowing the participants to control the research instruments used, I had already planned the use of semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation and participant observations. I then only gave my sample the choice of participating or not. From an inclusive perspective, at best this approach failed to empower the participants while at worst it may have served to further disempower them. However, unlike other authors, such as Miller & Gwynne (1972), who have been described as “basically on their own side” (Hunt, 1981:39), I ensured the learning-disabled participants were treated with the same respect and status as their non-learning-disabled peers.

### ***Policy and Practice recommendations***

Based on the limitations of this research, recommendations refer to enabling learning-disabled people who are already football fans to access the social benefits of fandom. The differentiating feature between those participants able to access the benefits of football fandom – principally from attending live football matches – and those unable appears to be their capabilities (Sen, 2004). That is to say, some learning-disabled people receive the necessary support from family and friends to overcome the ‘conversion handicap’ to attend live football matches, while others do not. Although it is not the responsibility of football clubs alone – enhancing capabilities requires significant inter-sector collaboration – I would suggest that professional football clubs are in a powerful position to further facilitate learning-disabled people as football fans. This need not be overly expensive, but could be better achieved with a few small changes to their operating procedures. In the process clubs would also open themselves up to a new fan base and the receipt of positive publicity.

The first recommendation of the research is that at a policy level, both within individual football clubs and within national bodies, such as the Football Association and The Football League, learning-disability issues need to be understood as important in their own right, distinct from physical

disabilities. If not, clubs' 'disability policies' will continue to privilege wheelchair access despite barriers that go well beyond physical access. Also, with regard to their social inclusion strategies, the documented benefits means football fandom should be recognised as a legitimate social tool, not just encouraging learning-disabled people to play football.

Secondly, at a practical level, establishing learning-disability fan groups or clubs might extend the camaraderie within clubs' learning-disability football teams to the fan environment. Learning-disability fan clubs could meet before and after live matches, enabling those learning-disabled fans already able to attend to spend more time with friends in a 'mainstream' social environment, whilst providing a valuable support network to other learning-disabled fans. Thirdly, introducing a 'buddy system' like that in use by Wigan Athletic Football Club should move the experience of football fandom on from being something enjoyed with parents or carers towards an activity enjoyed with friends. Ideally buddies would play a vital role in overcoming the conversion handicap of organising and travelling to live matches. Finally, as part of their more proactive approach to facilitating learning-disabled fans, clubs could be more accommodating with regards selling tickets to learning-disabled people. In the same way that the Rovers football coach sold match tickets to participants in the learning-disability football team, football clubs could increase their match day attendances of learning-disabled people by recognising that the ticket office is a barrier in itself. Although tickets can currently be bought online, this is restricted to those people with the necessary literacy skills and confidence to shop from clubs' websites.

### ***Future Research***

Of course, the results of this research are not comprehensive; there are still many facets of the football fandom of learning-disabled people to be explored in detail, and their effects on social exclusion. Because it was not one of the aims of this research, only a cursory mention of learning-disabled people's personal finances was given in this thesis. However, considering the 'earnings handicap' (Sen, 2004) that learning-disabled people face and the rising costs of football fandom (Fawbert, 2011a) this is an area in need of further investigation. Any future research exploring the finances/financial implications of football fandom for learning-disabled people could make a significant contribution to current discussion about the appropriateness and effectiveness of Direct Payments, especially in light of recent welfare cuts.

This thesis has only attempted to capture the experiences of football fandom of a specific group of learning-disabled people; those who were already fans of their chosen club. Arguably this reflects the state of knowledge in the football fan literature more generally, focusing only on select sub-cultures of 'exceptional fans' at the expense of understanding how football fandom affects "the

actual patterns of sociability” of everyday life (Giulianotti, 2005:289; Sandvoss, 2005; Horne, 2006; Schimmel *et al.*, 2007). In order to develop a fuller picture of football fandom and the associated social benefits for all learning-disabled people priority should be given to examining the experiences of learning-disabled people who do not already like football or who are only just becoming interested. Also, because ‘learning-disability’ encompasses such a broad demographic of people, it is necessary to explore the experience of football fandom from a greater range of people with various degrees of impairment, including those with profound or multiple learning-impairments.

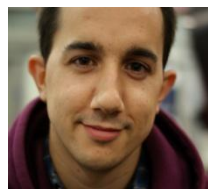
A second area for future research is to explore the perception of non-learning-disabled fans towards learning-disabled fans. Whilst I dismissed this source of data between research proposal and conducting the research – on the basis that there is no collective ‘community’ with the ability to grant or deny access – going forward it is necessary to examine in more detail how learning-disabled and non-learning-disabled football fans interact on a macro level. This ties in to evaluating the possibility of hate crime occurring during football matches or in periods immediately before and following matches when fans are engaged in social practices associated with fandom.

Finally, as part of my research methodology I attempted to use a photo-voice technique, with limited success. Nonetheless, this is clearly an exciting and invaluable tool for researching with learning-disabled people, as evidenced by the work of others researching with learning-disabled people (i.e. Hwang & Charnley, 2009; Charnley & Hwang, 2010). It was evident to me, if only from a small number of examples, the effectiveness of this method at facilitating communication between a researcher and less verbally articulate participants. I would suggest that any researchers trying to capture the lived experience of learning-disabled people should look to utilise this methodology. This can be within an inclusive research paradigm, empowering participants to record their own images, or with a more traditional research-participant relationship. However, my success with this method was affected by my inexperience – with the method and at conducting social research generally. Future users should be mindful of what they want to achieve with photo-voice techniques – whether empowerment of participants or to facilitate communication – and be mindful of their own abilities. Establishing the right balance between independence and necessary support for participants is crucial to the success of this approach.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1

### Information sheet for learning-disabled participants ('Easy-read')



Hello, my name is Kris Southby. I am doing some research at Durham University about football supporters.



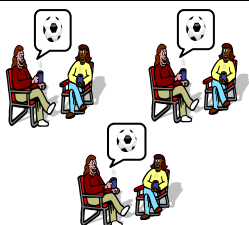
Because you are a football supporter I would like to talk to you about (Team Name).

Team  
Badge

I would like to find out why you think it is good to support (Team Name) and what it is like if you go to matches.



I am trying to find out whether going to football matches is a good place to make friends and meet people.



I would like to talk to you about 3 times over the next year about what you like and dislike about watching football.



You could also take pictures of when you go to football matches which we can talk about.



You do not have to talk to me if you do not want to, but it would be really helpful if you could.

You can ask me any question you want about what might happen.



I will be at the (Day) training sessions or you can phone me.

My telephone number is 07905412296.

### **Information sheet for learning-disabled participants (Standard prose)**

Dear Sir/Madam

#### **Phd research: Social Inclusion through Football Support: The Experience of People with Learning Difficulties**

As a researcher at Durham University I am currently doing a project exploring the social benefits of being a football supporter for people with learning difficulties. This work involves trying to understand how people with learning difficulties support their favourite clubs, their experiences of going to matches, and how they interact with other supporters. The work is being carried out in conjunction with several professional football clubs in Yorkshire, including Rovers, United, and Athletic.

Spread out across the 2010/2011 football season, the research will involve a series of short, informal interviews with supporters with learning difficulties. It may also involve participants taking a camera (that I can provide) along to any games they attend to take photographs of everything important to them.

If you have any questions at this stage please do not hesitate to contact me (details below) or either of my supervisors at Durham University, Helen Charnley (h.m.charnley@durham.ac.uk) or Dr. Emma Poulton (e.k.poulton@durham.ac.uk). In addition, [REDACTED], Disability Development Officer for the [REDACTED], can be contacted at [REDACTED].com.



I do hope you will consider taking part in this important study and I look forward to speaking to you further.

Yours faithfully,

Kris Southby

16 The Point, Wakefield, WF2 9AP.

Tel: 07905 412296

Email: [kris.southby@durham.ac.uk](mailto:kris.southby@durham.ac.uk)

## ***Appendix 2***

### **Learning-disabled participant consent form**

#### **Consent form**

#### **People with learning difficulties as football supporters: Implications for social inclusion**

I agree to take part in the above study. I confirm that I have received an appropriate information sheet and that I understand, and have had the opportunity to ask questions about, the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. I agree to interviews being audio recorded and for the use of anonymised quotes in future publications. I confirm that any views expressed are mine alone and do not represent anyone else.

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Name of Participant	Date	Signature
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Kris Southby	Date	Signature
--------------	------	-----------

Phd Student, Durham University,  
16 The Point  
Wakefield,  
WF2 9AP  
Tel. 07905412296

## ***Appendix 3***

### **Information sheet for club 'officials'**

#### **PhD research: People with learning disabilities as football supporters: Implications for social inclusion**

I am sure you are aware of Government and football club policies that suggest involvement in football has beneficial social inclusion effects for people with learning difficulties. However, there has been no formal analysis of the impact of these policies. Last year I carried out an in-depth study of Brighton and Hove Albion's work in this area and I have now been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to explore the strengths and limitations of football supporting as a way of achieving social inclusion for adults with learning difficulties.

Drawing on the invaluable experiences of football clubs and governing bodies, the research aims:

- to understand the positive achievements of football clubs in supporting adults with learning difficulties to feel included as fans,
- to identify challenges for clubs in supporting fans with learning difficulties,
- to share examples of good practice across the country.

The study will be carried out over the 2010/2011 season, and involve interviews with club officials, supporters with learning difficulties and supporters who do not have learning difficulties. I am writing to you now to ask whether you would be willing to participate in this research. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you, or a colleague, to discuss the research design and to consider suggestions you may have for ways in which the research can be of maximum benefit to football clubs. I would be grateful if you would let me know whether you or a colleague would be willing to meet me.

If you have any questions at this stage please do not hesitate to contact me or either of my PhD supervisors, Helen Charnley (h.m.chnrnlr@durrham.ac.uk) or Dr. Emma Poulton (e.k.poulton@durrham.ac.uk). In addition, [REDACTED], Disability Football Development Manager at [REDACTED], is willing to share her experience of working with me. She can be contacted at [REDACTED].com.

I do hope you will consider taking part in this important study and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

Kris Southby

Tel: 07905 412296

Email: [kris.southby@durham.ac.uk](mailto:kris.southby@durham.ac.uk)

## ***Appendix 4***

### **Consent form for club 'officials'**

#### **Consent form**

#### **People with learning difficulties as football supporters: Implications for social inclusion**

I agree to take part in the above study. I confirm that I have received an appropriate information sheet, have had the opportunity to ask questions, and that I understand the purpose of the study. I confirm that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. I agree to the interview being audio recorded and for the use of anonymised quotes in future publications.

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Name of Participant	Date	Signature
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Kris Southby	Date	Signature
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Department for Sport  
School of Applied Social Sciences  
Durham University  
32 Old Elvet  
Durham  
DH1 3HN  
Email: kris.southby@durham.ac.uk  
Tel. 07905412296

## *Appendix 5 – Interview schedules for learning-disabled participants*

### **Interview schedule – round 1**

**Aim: Build up an overall picture of participants' fandom.**

- When did you first become a fan?
- How long for?
- What's it like to be a fan of...
- What do you do as a fan?
  - Matches – which, with who? What happens? What's it like?
  - Other than matches
- Being a fan in everyday life?
  - What do you do?
  - Showing support
  - Meeting people

### **Interview schedule – round 2**

**Aim: Understand the participants' experience of match days.**

- Recap of last interview – clarify details of length of support, going to matches, etc.
- What is your experience of match-days...

- Describe going to games, travel, routine, being in the stadium, other fans, how it makes you feel, activities, “walk me through a match day...”
- If you can't go...
  - Why not?
  - What do you do instead?
  - How does that make you feel?
- Consuming matches/club through other media
  - Television, radio, internet
  - How does this compare to live matches
- Experience of attending live matches
  - How does it make you feel?
  - Meeting/talking to people?

### **Interview schedule – round 3**

**Aim: Does being a football fan create opportunities to meet people? To tackle social exclusion?**

- Recap – what's do you do on match days – go to games? Stay at home?
- Does being football fan create opportunities to meet people and make new friends?
  - Who, how, where?

- Longevity of relationships – long-term friends?
  - How do you feel about this?
- Showing support for team
  - How?
  - Being recognised as a fan? By whom? How do you feel?
- Identity
  - How important is being a fan?
  - What does it mean to you?
  - Affect of/on being 'learning-disabled'.



## *Appendix 6 – Interview Schedule for ‘officials’*

### **Interview Schedule**

**Aim: Is fandom a tool for social inclusion and what do you (the club) do to include learning-disabled people as fans?**

- What do you do?
- Defining social exclusion/inclusion?
  - How? Who?
- Motivations for this – from policy directives?
- ‘Learning-disability’
  - Definitions
  - Inclusion programmes
  - Programmes other than playing?
- Supporting – what do you do?
  - Ticketing
  - Stewards
  - Signage
- Community Foundation relationship to the ‘club’ – difficulties? Conflicts of interest?
- ‘Community’
  - What does this mean?

- Being apart of...
- Engagement – proactive or not?

## ***Appendix 7 – Initial transcript codes***

<p>Policy  Clubs responsibilities  Defining LD  Encouraging LD fans  Informally arranging carers  No consideration of LD specific fans  Other LD programmes  Role of disability club  Separation between club and FITC  Social inclusion and disability as different issues  Supporting linked to playing  Ticket prices  Value of supporting itself not recognised</p>	<p>Supporters  Activities in post-season  Atmosphere  Away matches  Being a disabled supporter  Being identified as a supporter  Better at away games  Better at home matches  Clubs recognising barriers  Commitment to supporting the team  'Community' of fans  Cost of attending  Cost of supporting  Day out  Dependence on others  Difference between season ticket &amp; non-season ticket  Emotionally involved  Empowerment through choice  Enjoy going to games  Enjoying the atmosphere  Every one doing the same  Experiences, anecdotes of going to matches  Favourable feeling to loyal fans  Feeling happy when supporting  Feeling part of the collective  Feeling proud  Feelings about talking to others  Feelings when seeing other fans  Feelings when talking about team  Getting &amp; buying tickets  Getting there early  Going with friends, not parents or carers  Length of support  Merchandise reinforcing support  Making friends through support  Muslim  Negative experiences not affecting support  Negative opinion of other fans  Non-traditional fan behaviour  Other social activities  Parental influence  Personal importance of supporting  Positive perception of club  Radio  Reason for getting into support  Reason for talking to others  Reciprocal relationship between fans and players  Reinforcing existing relationships</p>
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	Relationship with other fans Routine of going 'Season ticket friends' Showing support for team Singing at matches Stadium Supporter identity Supporters being the same Supporting as a hobby Supporting at stadium vs. at home Supporting is cathartic Supporting multiple teams Swearing Talking with others about team Talking with others at games Television Using internet for support Wanting to go to away matches Wanting to go to matches Wanting to go with friends 'We', 'our' Who do you go with Wider football issues
--	--



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