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'The Way it was': An account of Soccer Violence in the 1980s

Abstract

Causes of football hooliganism are still widely disputed by academics and narrative accounts from reflective ex-hooligans in the public domain are often sensationalized. The aims of this paper are to critically assess some of the main academic theories behind the causes of football hooliganism; and, to consider the value of gathering less sensationalistic in-depth narrative accounts from reflective ex-hooligans in order to further understanding. This has been achieved through presenting findings from a case study comprising interviews and a life testimony from an ex-football hooligan who has become an active member of a Christian church. The methodological value of narrative accounts from reflective ex-hooligans is also discussed in relation to its validity, representation and its general appropriateness towards the study of football hooliganism. A case is made for sociologists to consider using in-depth oral accounts from reflective ex-hooligans in order to ensure theory reflects empirical evidence.

Introduction

Most early academic studies contended that football hooliganism began in the 1960s. However, evidence (from newspaper reports and FA minutes) suggests violence has been occurring at soccer matches in Britain since the 1870s, albeit not under the name ‘football hooliganism’:

contrary to popular belief, forms of it [football hooliganism] have been a frequent accompaniment of association football in this country ever since the 1870s and 1880s, the period when the game emerged in a recognisably modern form...there has never been a period in the history of modern soccer when spectator disorderliness on a greater or lesser scale has been entirely absent from Britain.
Nevertheless, it was not until the 1960s that football hooliganism was recognised as a significant contemporary social problem in Britain. This was originally explained by manner of cause and effect. The permissive nature of the 1960’s gave rise to a vast development of youth subcultures, which were in turn attracted to the football arena. This resulted in oppositional behaviour which was typified by the growing segregation of the terraces within football stadiums. [3]

Although the term ‘football hooliganism’ had been established and used within mainstream vernacular for at least a decade, it is widely believed to have been most prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. Subsequently it was given most government and media attention in the late 80s:

- by the late 1980s, police forces had began to initiate new anti-hooligan measures, such as greater plain-clothes policing, covert operations within hooligan groups, and closed circuit television (CCTV) inside grounds, while the government and magistrates were imposing tougher custodial sentences on violent fans. [4]

Whilst researching football related incidents in Middlesbrough during the 1980’s (the geographical focus of this study), a number of newspaper articles were unearthed to reveal the presence of hooliganism at Ayresome Park, the previous ground of Middlesbrough F.C. [5] For example, after a game when Middlesbrough played Arsenal in the fifth round of the FA Cup on Saturday 19 February 1983, an article in the Middlesbrough Evening Gazette stated the following:

TERRIFIED spectators were pushed and jostled as trouble flared at Boro’s FA Cup tie with Arsenal on Saturday...A gang of about 20 youths burst into Ayresome Park’s North stand minutes before the end of the match in a bid to reach rival London fans. [6]
Although this is an isolated example and cannot be used to claim that football hooliganism was a widespread problem throughout Britain in the 1980s, it is employed here to illustrate the point that football hooliganism had filtered into public discourse within Middlesbrough and its surrounding areas. This coincides precisely with the period when our subject, ‘John’, a self confessed ex- football hooligan was involved in the Middlesbrough hooligan gang known as the Frontline Service Crew.

Prior to discussing the relative value of this case study, the precise focus of this paper should be made explicit. To clarify, a complete discussion of all theories relating to the phenomenon of football hooliganism is not within the scope of this article. Instead, we intend to explore the causes of football hooliganism from the narrative account of a reflective ex- hooligan. Before this is achieved, it is important to map out the main previous, as well as some more current, trends within the study of this area in order to highlight the potential value that a particular type of reflective ex- hooligan account could bring to academic research.

‘Causes’ of football hooliganism: some previous academic contentions

Dunning et al set out a number of academic approaches to the study of football hooliganism in Britain. [7] The earliest of these included Marxist speculations (based on little evidence) which suggested that football violence was a working class phenomenon, predominantly consisting of male proponents who opposed the advancing commodification of the game. It was argued that social circumstance had become a force which had generated a sense of alienation for traditional fans in relation to their local clubs. [8]

In the late 1970s a prominent social psychologist and his colleagues observed and interviewed male fans at Oxford United matches and came to the overriding conclusion that confrontations at football matches were caused by the innate need
for working class male adolescents to release aggression. Although, importantly, these theorists denied the proposition that violence was involved in these confrontations for the most part. [9]

Displays of football related violence were later (in the late 1980s) considered to be part of a ‘quest for excitement’ which has been described as a socially constructed psychological need, such as the excitement for battle. [10] Similar to this (albeit using more psychological terms), a prominent psychologist later argued that hooliganism reflects a search for high levels of emotional arousal through risk-taking against a general background of long periods of boredom in everyday life. [11]

More recently, since the 1990s various academics have been involved in anthropological studies of and ethnographies with hooligan groups. These researchers have argued that part of the reasons for gangs engaging in football violence was to defend what was considered to be their club’s, town’s, city’s or firm’s reputation or because of the opportunity it provided for a sense of belonging to a social group, for competition, achieving honour and inflicting shame amongst rival opponents. [12]

Whilst ethnography is increasingly being used to study current football hooligans by sociologists, it is important to recognise a significant point which Richard Giulianotti makes:

> In the UK at least, research with hooligan groups has become an increasingly difficult exercise…throughout the 1980s, the political, media and juridical onslaught on fan violence served to transmute the hooligans’ reception of would-be interviewers and researchers, from the old cocktail of youthful boasting and mockery of outsiders, into an ingrained distrust of these potential ‘grasses’. [13]
In short, researching hooligans using ethnographic methods is dangerous for researchers and new alternative methods are required to help overcome this.

‘Hit and tell’ literature: an alternative source for the academic study of football hooliganism?

One criticism of the sociology of football fan culture, especially in the UK, over the last decade is that it has descended into ‘uncritical journalism’ and neglected sociological theory. Anthony King charged Steve Redhead, Richard Haynes, Rogan Taylor, Richard Giulianotti and Gary Armstrong as being proponents of ‘false populism’ and little more than journalists. King argued that:

Much of the work is insufficiently theorized and does not engage closely enough with the empirical detail of the subject matter under analysis. [14]

Moreover, King asserted:

it is a common academic problem that theories sometimes float unhelpfully above the data, without really assisting in their interpretation. [15]

In what appears to be a response to King’s criticisms of his work, Steve Redhead wrote a review essay on the popular genre of British soccer hooligan memoirs that he termed ‘hit and tell’ books. [16] For Redhead, the soccer culture memoir could be divided into 3 versions: journalistic, novelistic and academic and he discussed the rise of these types of writing in relation to one another. Redhead stated that after Nick Hornby’s memoir *Fever Pitch* a market was created for new football writing.

As the 1990s wore on a market was then created for the ‘hit and tell’ accounts which were often ‘fictionalized’ (certainly in form if not in content). New fiction novels (Redhead cites literary authors like Roddy Doyle and D.J Taylor) painted a more convincing picture of the history of hooliganism than much ethnographic work by
sociologists (though it is not clear whether Redhead is referring to all ethnographic work, or just the earlier studies) or even undercover police and journalists. [17]

This ‘new football writing’ was seen as a new bourgeois genre in literature. Soccer was at this time being modernised and resold to a more middle class family orientated audience. [18] Though what Redhead does not make explicit, is that this modernisation process included within it the soccer hooligan memoirs. This point is made explicit by King:

New football writing has mistakenly taken the new styles of support which were developing in the 1960s (and hooliganism, in particular) for the authentic experience of a traditional working class. [19]

Redhead continues, later cult fiction, such as John King’s *The Football Factory*, created what was seen as a new ‘working class’ fiction around soccer. According to Redhead, this cult fiction was,

explicitly designed to upset the ‘middle class literary set’ in Britain who had embraced this strand of popular culture for a while after Italia 90 and then unceremoniously dropped it. [20]

He argues that writers like John King have produced fiction output and non-fiction drama for TV, film and theatre,

which was actually more evocative of the culture they were describing, and its history, than much of the sociology of soccer culture in the 1980s and 1990s…These cult fiction writers helped to clearly distinguish the ‘hit and tell’ books from ‘new football writing’. [21]

Most of the review essay focuses on the more journalistic confessional accounts from ex-hooligans themselves and Redhead uses his assessment of these amateur
journalistic insider accounts in order to advance the sociology of football fan culture somewhat:

we are better off with the ‘real’ uncritical journalism of the ‘street’ than the allegedly ‘pseudo’ uncritical journalism of the sociologists of soccer culture, including myself. However, there is a desperate need for better sociological theorizing in our academic enterprise of creating a satisfactory sociology of football, and for methodological solutions to the continuing problems of ethnographic work on soccer hooliganism and indeed soccer culture in general…Hit and tell books certainly epitomize the ‘undertheorized’ and ‘uncritical’ criticisms levelled at some sociology of soccer fan culture work…But some of them, at least, help to repair gaps in historical and ethnographic knowledge. [22]

Similar to Redhead, our research seeks to help advance the sociological study of football hooliganism by considering accounts from reflective ex-hooligans. Yet, we seek to begin to achieve this aim through utilising a particular type of oral account from an individual who has undergone a life-changing experience and almost complete behavioural transformation.

**Oral history, memories and narratives in the sociology of football hooligans**

In response to recent calls for more empirical and academically sound work on football hooliganism, we believe small-scale, nuanced narratives from in-depth interviews and testimony are required from hooligans or ex-hooligans themselves in order to gain a better understanding of the causes of football hooliganism in the past as well as today:

Oral history offers a chance to challenge over-generalisations about how people remember collectively and highlights how people within cultures can respond quite differently to the same historical events. [23]
It is only through collecting a diverse amount of such accounts and reviewing their validity and relevant contributions to aspects of the topic that we can further understand this persistent social problem. In considering testimony from reflective ex-hooligans, however, we must take into account how their current social situation might influence how they remember significant events as well as other life changes they have undergone since life events occurred:

our memories do not live in the mind as once and future thoughts but are permanently re-negotiated in the light of our changing circumstances and personal understandings. [24]

The inclusion of the term ‘meta-narrative’ is the knowledge that behind the existing social theory on football hooliganism there lays, not only individuals, but also their stories. In order to evaluate some of the theories regarding the causes of football hooliganism we have briefly provided some specific examples which are illustrative of the case study that was conducted. The aim is not necessarily to disprove existing theory, as this may not be entirely possible with one narrative, but to examine where narrative and theory merge and/or disagree. The use of more similar narratives would perhaps build a more cogent attempt at challenging or supporting particular theories.

A rationale for the use of narratives

Narratives are widely used as a valid method for gathering information for academic research. For instance, health publications use narratives to add meaning and gain insight into experiences of illness and disability. [25] One of the most intriguing, if not disturbing, examples of the use of meta-narratives in the twentieth century is the Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938 in the United States. With the historical back drop of slavery as a root cause of racial tension in the States, the narratives of the Federal Writer’s Project bring our perception of this whole issue
into life, provoking a range of emotions and immediately highlighting the value of the meta-narrative of slavery:

When I was six year old, all of us children [11 siblings] were taken from my parents…I can’t describe the heart break and horror of that separation. I was only six year old and it was the last time I ever saw my mother for longer than one night. [26]

In the same way that disability, illness and slavery have been richly, and rightly, augmented by the inclusion of narratives it is argued that this method can be applied equally within the context of football hooligan research. Therefore, we argue that a similar method of exploration will provide both insight into football hooliganism (in the 1980s in Middlesbrough) and perhaps material with which to measure the value, if not accuracy, of existing theory.

The, ‘natural world of language and words’, extrapolated from the narrative of John arguably generates, ‘rich textual or observational data.’ [27] Whilst the existing literature and theory on the causes of contemporary football hooliganism have largely been written purely from an academic perspective for an academic audience, not withstanding some participant-observation, the intention of this study has been to provide something that will be considered of additional value to social scientists studying the phenomenon. [28]

There is almost a demand generated from academic literature to establish more empirical evidence. As such, more evidence will test existing theories and possibly generate new ones. Therefore ‘validity is thought to be improved by the use of narrative’. [29] This empowerment of research subjects has an obvious ethical element in that any research can be exploitative in nature and if football hooligans are a legitimate target for social research then perhaps they have been given a right to have their say within the discipline that gains so much from their existence. It is
this issue of empowerment that supports the rationale for using a narrative methodology for this piece of research.

It is our intention to produce a piece of research that illustrates the experience of being a football hooligan through the narratives of ‘John’ - an ex-hooligan turned Christian, in order to explain his own reasons for becoming and remaining a football hooligan for a period of approximately 10 years (from 1980-1990). We have attempted to highlight this by providing evidence / data on four related themes or codes. These codes have largely arisen from the data itself, but clearly involve the authors’ own interpretations based on our understanding of football hooliganism. Nevertheless, they help build a picture of the realities of life for ‘John’ before his conversion to Christianity.

**John as a case study**

‘John’ has been a Christian now for approximately 10 years and gave his life testimony in a Teesside church in 2003. He heads a church-based prison ministry in adult prisons and young offenders’ institutes throughout the north east of England. The life testimony that John gave has been digitally recorded and has been transcribed for the purposes of the study with John’s permission. In addition to this, John was interviewed in 2005 specifically about his involvement in the Middlesbrough Frontline Service Crew during the 1980s. [30]

Although such narrative accounts have much to offer one must proceed with caution. For instance, John’s conversion to Christianity has made him reconsider the way he lives his life and also, significantly, the way he used to live his life. As a Christian it seems that John has found a new sense of belonging which enables him to reflect in a certain way. Perhaps if John had not become a Christian then he would reflect with more anger and more in line with much of the other ‘hit and tell’ testimonies by
glorifying the violence he was involved in and sensationalising his past exploits. Instead, John now travels around the North East of England using his experiences to advise prisoners of all ages on how to turn away from a life of crime and contribute positively to society. His life story is therefore unique and very different from other narratives by reflective ex-hooligans.

**Early need to belong**

It became apparent that John was continually searching for, in his own words, ‘happiness and love’, throughout his childhood and even into adulthood. He became involved in youth gang culture as it was something he could belong to, or at least feel some sense of belonging to (although he may not have recognised this at the time, this is how John now interprets and explains his life before becoming a Christian). John went to live with his grandparents at the age of 9 after his father had gone to prison for bigamy and rape and his mother had remarried and moved away from him. He describes his teenage years, just before and then after being excluded from school like this:

on this estate it wasn’t hard to be the hardest lad...because no one really wanted to fight, no one was game for it. So I started seeking other places, and at the age of 13 I was already fighting with quite a lot of people, in trouble at school – I was always getting the cane...And so it went on, and finally they didn’t want to know me in this school, they wanted rid of me...so they kicked me out of the school. And I didn’t care less because while I was at school I didn’t wanna be there...Times at school was just boring to me. Whatever they were telling me to do, I wouldn’t do because no one told me what to do, I was free.

My nana actually didn’t care less what I did because she was usually unconscious...When I got in on a night, at 9 o’clock, all I had to do was put her to bed, carry her to bed, and then I could do whatever I wanted because my granddad worked a lot of hours, and so what I did was just went out and burgled schools and
youth clubs and drank and nicked cars and things like that with my friends who were from another estate...So life for me was to do whatever I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it and do it to whoever I wanted to...and at the age of 15 I got arrested for breaking into schools and youth clubs...And...so that was the type of thing I was looking for, I was looking for happiness and love and anything else other than the truth really. Anything else than authority was my game.

I remember I used to look at doormen, nightclub doormen, when I was 13, 14 and 15 and thinking that they had so much love and so much respect, that that’s what I wanted...I was totally deceived...but the other thing that was totally done to me was I was totally messed up, I was totally mixed up, I was totally messed up and mixed up. I didn’t feel as though I belonged to anything - my name was different, my mum had got married again, my nana and granddad were kind of non-existent at times. My granddad worked all the time, my nana was drinking all the time and going to get things done to her. [31]

So John did not want to listen to authority due to the feelings of rejection he’d had in his early life. He found respect from others through fighting and participating in other crime. So, a lack of authority, feelings of rejection and a willingness to engage in violence and robbery culminated in a significant time in prison (approximately six years) or in police custody, but also a feeling of belonging to a group where he felt recognised and respected by his peers:

my past comes from not belonging to owt really. I always felt as though I didn’t belong somewhere you know?...I became a skinhead from about ten year old onwards until I was about fifteen and I knocked about with the skinheads in Middlesbrough town centre and we were involved with violence then. There was gang fights ya know, and I started meeting lots of people in the town and I had a bit of a name for myself as being game.
John first got involved in football hooliganism after he was asked by some of his friends, who had seen him fighting, to go to a football match:

when I got out of the detention centre, I was only out about two days, and I got asked if I wanted to go to a football match...I met these lads in a pub...a lad came in with another lad and asked me if I wanted to go to the match with them all after we’d had a few pints.

John decided to go with them to see what it was like. He remembers going to the match and then to a pub to fight. He was then asked to go to a nightclub with these new friends and finally he was invited to go to a park where everyone was to meet up on the next day - Sunday. He recalls:

I think that was the start of it... I felt as though there was more excitement and more...more to offer really there, you know, in that...setting. And especially that Sunday afternoon, cos it...was something you didn’t do as a skinhead. As a skinhead you’d never meet on a Sunday, until a Sunday night, so you’d just be sat, sat at home [chuckles] on a Sunday, you know what I mean? But all these lads and lasses were meeting at this park and it was something new. And it was a good laugh you know? We all had a kick-about and that, and then everyone goes their own ways. And then the other thing is, they have special discos that you go to as a football hooligan in Middlesbrough...So there was little different things that [you] didn’t see as a skinhead.

His friends became the only ones who looked out for John and him for them. So he formed close-knit friendships broadly based around violence, drug-taking, excessive alcohol consumption and organised crime, but overall it was based on John finding somewhere where he felt he belonged. For example, one of the interviewers asked John:

Would you say you had a lot of friends...you made a number of friends through being part of the crew?
John replied with the following:

Yeah, I reckon that’s so…one of the things I always plug at with our lads is… [32] there was a social life as well; do you know what I mean? You went drinking together, you met on the park on a Sunday with your girlfriends and you went for meals together. And so, they were kind of like your friends you know? You’re not just involved with the violence, you’re friends.

**Being a hooligan: an expression of an identity/habitus**

A ‘myth’ which has been commonly purported in the media and even by some academics studying contemporary football hooliganism in its early years, is that violence only occurs at or near football grounds and that it can be ‘caused’ by incidents of violence on the field of play or by incompetent refereeing. [33]

The evidence obtained from John’s involvement in football related violence throughout the 1980s does not indicate that incidents on the field of play ever ‘caused’ this kind of behaviour and it seems that an equal amount, if not more, of the fighting he was involved in occurred away from the football grounds and not necessarily even on match days. Much of the fighting was highly organised beforehand and one or two representative members of rival crews or firms would often meet up at ‘neutral’ locations, such as pubs, to arrange mass fights:

you’d never meet at your ground you know. You’d meet miles away or a mile away, or at the coach park…and it’s all arranged…Someone’s been down and arranged where you’re gonna meet…And even when you went there you’d have a pint and have a chat about where you were gonna meet on a Saturday, Tuesday, or Wednesday night…shake hands and go off…then kill each other on the ground!

When one of the interviewers asked John:

What would you say it was then? Because there’s lots of different definitions of what constitutes football hooliganism.
John replied:

Organised violence...without a doubt...It was organised that we would go and meet them and fight with 'em. That's what we were going for.

This supports the argument proposed by Dunning et al which suggests that football hooligans in the 1970s and 80s were not a kind of 'working-class resistance movement' as was asserted in early research by Taylor when he spoke about hooliganism as a response to the 'bourgeoisification' of football in the 1960s. [34] Instead there was more evidence to suggest John's crew fought against other crews in organised encounters. Fracas with the police and authorities in and around football grounds were merely responses to attempts by these authorities to restore public order when fighting was unplanned.

However, when there was nothing organised, fighting did sometimes occur in or around the ground:

If it wasn't an organised thing...you'd have to go near to the ground to find some kind of ruckus you know, some type of hassle or some type of fighting.

Those who were recognised as 'game' for a fight and always in the middle of fights when they broke out seemed to be John's closest friends and those he respected most. He would look out for them when they were in trouble and he trusted them to do the same for him:

I think it does get to you, you know...My mate 'Dave'...he got cut up by some...fans...at this service station. Dave got caught with this Stanley knife, which cut him across here [points to left cheek]. And I remember the jelly, like clots of jelly falling on the floor, you know, his blood? So I remember one of the lads got his face, shut his face like that [John tries to show us with his hand pressing against his cheek] and tried to wrap something round his face to hold his face together cos it wouldn't knit cos it was that much of a sharp, neat cut...I remember that and I was thinking
don’t die, you know what I mean…don’t, cos it would have really affected us you
know. But, it was just…everything around it was me just trying to belong to
something…But it gets deeper than that as well, when you start seeing your mates
going hurt.

This was part of the sense of belonging that John felt among this group of football
hooligans and this can be related to what some of the later anthropological and
ethnographic studies suggest is one reason why individuals get involved in football
hooligan gangs. [35]

**Defence of place**

From an early age John remembered feeling a very strong personal bond with
Middlesbrough as a place through football, despite the fact that he was not really a
football fanatic:

now actually, even though I went to the matches with my uncle…and me mum
worked in the Boro shop, I wasn’t a great football fanatic…And I remember about ten
year old, it’s like a really vivid memory, Boro played Scotland at Ayresome Park…
[36] And I remember there was a load of Scottish football supporters drinking and all
shouting abuse and all that, and something stirred up inside me about it, do you know
what I mean? I felt really stirred up about what they were doing you know and I think
there might have been something in me then…I was angry…I was angry about it,
shouting against the Boro peoples.

Years later, after John had become involved with the Middlesbrough Frontline
Service Crew, there was much evidence to suggest that part of the attraction of being
involved in the violence was that he felt he was fighting on behalf of Middlesbrough
as a place. Perhaps the best example is the following extract:

I’ve always had Boro on my heart…I’m a Boro lad! You know, as far as I’m concerned
I’m TS1 [the postcode for the centre of Middlesbrough], you know what I mean?
Or…Boro Service Crew…my heart is in the town centre. Even now, as a Christian, I
tell people I’m from Middlesbrough… I’m proud to be from the Boro…it’s a depressed
place, but we stood up for our town you know.

It also became apparent that it was important for John and his crew to be ranked
highly amongst hooligan groups and by the media as being ‘game’ for a fight and well
dressed. Prior to the main interview, the research team collated evidence of football
related violence (from the 1980’s) as reported through local newspapers such as the
Northern Echo and the Middlesbrough Evening Gazette. John was shown an extract
from the Northern Echo regarding the 1983 FA Cup match against Arsenal. [37] He
was sure that the paper had downplayed the incident involving his crew:

it says twenty lads trying to get in their end. I know one hundred per cent there was
more than twenty trying to get in their end…So they try not to glorify it, which is right, I
know that to be right now, but you wanted to be known you know. We’ve got a good
crew or we got the fashion. Cos you know the laugh was that we, we still had donkey
jackets and skinheads, you know, and boots, that’s what they thought about us. We
wanted them to know that we were up in the rankings…I think we got angry about not
being mentioned as much as we should have been…And so, if there was any media
on football violence it was always West Ham, Chelsea, Millwall, Liverpool, Tottenham,
you know, it was always to do with them in the national press and so we didn’t get a
mention really…even though we were up there with it.

Similarly, John also remembered how he and his crew used to get annoyed that
Middlesbrough football matches were never played on the BBC programme *Match of
the Day* in the 1980s:

Jimmy Hill never ever played Boro matches. So it was as though we didn’t exist, and
that was a bad thing as well for us.
So, defence of Middlesbrough as a place seemed a key part of being involved in football hooliganism for John and this is one of the main underlying causes highlighted by some of the more contemporary studies on football hooligans. [38]

Region over nation

A final and pertinent part of this case study relates to the significance that John and his crew placed upon the region above and beyond any national ties. It was clear that violence (for the crew) was rooted in regionalism with the members willing to fight on behalf of Middlesbrough (TS1) rather than on behalf of England:

Chelsea, Millwall, West Ham, Arsenal, Tottenham all get big names cos they’re England…because they’re close to England, you know, close to Wembley. There’s a lot of England fans there who travel the world to watch England and cause trouble. For Boro, for us to travel to England matches is a lot of money; do you know what I’m saying? For them to jump on a tube and go to England matches is nowt, do you know what I’m saying? So there’s only a few of our crew that were England fans really. We liked England, watched ‘em, and if they were playing local to us we’d go and fight. But we had one purpose and that was to fight for Boro you know, and that was it.

This could suggest that fans (including hooligans) in the north develop strong bonds to their club and region, but much less to their nation because of their distance from London. This idea is perhaps similar to what King is suggesting when he refers to the specifically Mancunian ‘post-national identity’ of many Manchester born Manchester United fans. [39] This evidence is also perhaps an early example of an important point made by Redhead in relation to much of the insider accounts in the ‘hit and tell’ literature:

Club rather than country is what matters…Few of the people seriously involved in casual firms up and down the nation since the late 1970s have had much concern with the England national team…This particular club versus country conflict mirrors a deep seated aspect of fast changing modern soccer fandom more generally and is
more often than not resolved in favour of club. Territory, represented by the local football club, was and is, acutely regional for the casual crews. [40]

Problems with theories on ‘causes’ of football hooliganism

From the brief examples provided it appears that John’s story can both add weight to some of the academic contentions regarding the causes of football hooliganism, yet it also serves to dispute many of the contentions that have been made. For instance, the results contest those researchers who have suggested that hooliganism was a working class resistance movement caused by commercialisation of the sport; that football violence acted as a way to release innate aggression; and, that the violence was engaged in to reflect boredom. They did not appear to be ‘causes’ of football related violence for John. Rather, it seemed as though John felt he needed to defend his crew’s reputation as well as that of Middlesbrough as a place. Fighting for a cause that he felt part of therefore provided John with the sense of belonging that he perhaps lacked in his family/home life and early childhood and teenage years.

Whilst we must be careful not to overstate these findings (due to John perhaps reflecting on his previous life from his current position as a Christian), what has been presented here is part of a detailed account of a life involved in a largely misunderstood social practice. We do not intend for this to be indicative of all hooligans in the 1980s, or even of those who formed John’s particular hooligan firm in Middlesbrough. This paper merely highlights a case study that can be used to evaluate some of the most influential writing on one of Britain’s most long-standing social problems. This study therefore makes a small, but significant nonetheless, contribution to the study of an aspect of football fan culture (football hooliganism) in response to criticisms from King of much of the existing sociological work on the topic. [41] With this in mind, another large aspect of our argument calls for more detailed life histories to be gathered from reflective ex-hooligans in order to
understand some of football hooliganism’s central causes. It is only through collecting in-depth data from valid sources that this can be achieved.

**Problems with ‘hit and tell’ literature**

In addition to these arguments, we also feel that this case study has a certain integrity that strengthens its validity beyond so much of the other ‘hit and tell’ literature in the public domain. The problem with much of this literature is as follows according to Redhead:

- Hit and tell literature is unashamedly partisan and boastful, recounting 20 years, or more, of violent male football fandom associated with a particular British league club and its ‘mob’. They are written in the form of fan memoir. None of them have any pretensions to ‘academic’ style or protocol. They are often formularized and written in deliberately ‘trashy’ formats. Quotations and conversations are seemingly made up at will. The authors are almost always male and in their late 30s or 40s, old enough to have ‘been there, done that and bought the T-shirt’. By virtue of their age they have become self-styled oral historians and archivists of a period when post-industrial Britain, and its soccer culture, was undergoing fundamental ‘modernization’. But these writers, for the most part, baulk at expertise, criteria for measurement and learning. Indeed academia, like the media, in many ways is the enemy, partly responsible for the myriad misrepresentations of soccer fan culture and its history which these books perceive as a fundamental problem and consequently seek to put to rights. The hit and tell books celebrate and romanticize a whole hooligan subculture. [42]

This is precisely what the current study has aimed to avoid. The subject used in this case study was never boastful of his illegal and violent activities as a member of a hooligan crew in the 1980s. None of what he said involved the use of foul language and it seemed clear that he was not sensationalising like so many other accounts from ex-hooligans have done.
Conclusions and future directions

Through analysing John’s recollections on his entire life so far (not just that as a football hooligan), the sense of belonging John felt as part of the Middlesbrough Frontline Service Crew, coupled with feelings of rejection and a lack of authority in his early life, appeared to be the main reasons why he felt that he needed to become and remain involved in the violent behaviours of this hooligan gang for a period of approximately ten years. This finding is therefore similar to what some of the more recent anthropological and ethnographic studies have found to be one of the main reasons that individuals become involved in football hooligan gangs – to fulfil a need to belong. [43]

Defence of Middlesbrough as a place as well as fighting for the region over and above the nation were also significant reasons that caused John to remain involved in the hooligan firm for such a long period of time (ten years). This is related to what authors such as Armstrong and Giulianotti say is a reason for remaining involved in hooligan gangs. [44]. Furthermore, this finding can be related to the recent work of King on ‘post-national identity’, as well as what appears to be cited as a significant reason to be involved in football related violence in much of the ‘hit and tell’ genre of books reviewed by Redhead. [45]

Moreover, we have argued that the continuing problems of ethnography within hooligan gangs, in short, the potential danger to researchers, means that gathering reflective accounts from ex-hooligans is a much safer methodological approach to studying this phenomenon. We are currently following up potential access to at least two more ex-hooligans that now work to help young people on behalf of their Christian churches. These individuals are willing to share their life stories and these new narratives can perhaps be used in future studies to further understanding on why individuals become and remain involved in football hooliganism.
However, whilst we are pushing for a consideration of the use of more in-depth oral accounts from reflective ex-hooligans, it is also important that researchers become aware of how memories can change over time and how, due to changing social circumstances, they are not fixed. Rather, memories are continually renegotiated and evoked in different ways depending in which context they are being recalled. [46]

Reflective accounts from ex-hooligans are thus important to inform our understanding, but only if they do not purport to apply to every case like so many of the earlier theories about hooliganism’s causes did; and, if they do not endeavour to sensationalise or glorify violence like so many of the other ‘hit and tell’ genre of books, films and video games that increasingly appear in the public domain tend to do. [47]

Therefore the potential access to new types of reflective ex-hooligans, such as ex-hooligans turned Christians (which could be termed a ‘hit and repent’ group), is central to gaining new understanding and new ways of viewing past life events and as Markula and Denison state:

> It’s important, then, that qualitative researchers celebrate the unique access they have to people’s lived experiences and try to evoke those experiences with as much drama and detail as possible. One way of doing this is by crafting stories from people’s experiences to show how lives are lived and understood as complete wholes from the inside. [48]

That is why using oral histories and focussing on individual lived experiences is so important for gaining a more in-depth understanding of the realities of being a football hooligan at a particular time and place.
Notes

[1] For example, in 1971 Taylor asserted that pitch invasions by spectators were a ‘new development’ - Taylor, “Football Mad”: A Speculative Sociology of Football Hooliganism’, 353. The popular British meaning of the term ‘football’ is used throughout this paper to refer to soccer, the abbreviation of association football.


[5] Due to a number of incidents of overcrowding (culminating in the 1989 Hillsborough disaster which led to the death of 96 football supporters) thought (mistakenly) by some to be caused by hooliganism, a government report conducted by Lord Justice Taylor called for significant stadium redevelopments - most notably replacing the standing room only terraces with all-seater stadiums - Taylor, Lord Justice, The Hillsborough Stadium Disaster: Final Report, 104. Middlesbrough F.C. later moved to the outskirts of Middlesbrough to a new ground called ‘The Riverside’ in 1995. This was in fact the first stadium to be build in line with the Taylor report - Middlesbrough Football Club, ‘Stadium: The Riverside Stadium’.


[8] Examples of the Marxist approach to football hooliganism were the original works of Ian Taylor on the phenomenon – Taylor, “Football Mad”: A Speculative Sociology of Football Hooliganism; and, Taylor, ‘Soccer consciousness and soccer hooliganism’. The approaches used by Clarke,
[19] Ibid., 183.


[21] Ibid., 395.

[22] Ibid., 399-400.

[23] Seaton, ‘Do you really want to know what your uncle did?’ Coming to terms with relatives’ war actions in Japan’, 54.


[25] For example see Smith and Sparkes, ‘Men, sport, spinal cord injury and narratives of hope’.


[27] Franzosi, ‘Narrative Analysis – or why (and how) sociologists should be interested in narrative’, 518. Elliot, Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 2.

[28] Participant observation has been used by such authors as Armstrong, Football Hooligans: knowing the score.

[29] Elliot, Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 23.

[30] Informed consent was obtained from ‘John’ (the subject’s name as well as all those he mentions have been changed in line with institutional ethical guidelines regarding research involving people) to use his life testimony given at a Teesside church in December 2003 as well as a set of three in-depth interviews we (the researchers named in this paper) conducted at the University of Teesside in August 2005. The Frontline Service Crew is an organised gang, a football firm that swear allegiance to Middlesbrough F.C.
They engage in fights with firms supporting other clubs. See Lowles and Nicholls, *Hooligans 2, The M-Z of Britain’s Hooligan Gangs*.

[31] John’s grandmother was mentally ill and was often required to go into hospital to have treatments which sometimes lasted for weeks, if not months. Therefore, John did not see her for long periods of time.

[32] By ‘our lads’ John is referring those he works with in young offenders institutes and prisons across the north east, as well as some youths from his home estate in Teesside who he also supports. Some of these boys have become members of his church.


[36] John was probably confusing a team like Aberdeen from Scotland with the Scottish international team. Middlesbrough met Aberdeen in what was the Anglo-Scottish cup. Middlesbrough won this competition in 1975 after beating Aberdeen at Ayresome Park in the quarter finals on 16 September (their only home fixture in this competition against a Scottish team in 1975). This may have been the game John was recollecting as he would have been ten years of age in 1975. This information was acquired from *the-english-football-archive.com*.

[37] ‘Probe into riot stadium urged’, 7. This is a different article reporting on the same match mentioned previously in the ‘introduction’ section to this paper.

King, ‘Football fandom and post-national identity in the New Europe’.


King, *The End of the Terraces*, 4.


See Armstrong, *Football Hooligans: Knowing the Score* in particular.

See Armstrong, *Football Hooligans: Knowing the Score* and Armstrong and Harris, ‘Football Hooliganism: theory and evidence’; as well as, Giulianotti, *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game*. These researchers have argued that part of the reasons for football hooligans engaging in violence was to defend what was considered to be their club’s, town’s, city’s or firm’s reputation or because of the opportunity it provided for a sense of belonging to a social group, for competition, achieving honour and inflicting shame amongst rival opponents.


See Crawford, *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture* (Chapter 9 in particular).

Markula and Denison, ‘Sport and the Personal Narrative’, 165.
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Middlesbrough Football Club, ‘Stadium: The Riverside Stadium’ *mfc.co.uk*. http://www.mfc.premiumtv.co.uk/page/Stadium/0,,1,00.html. [Date accessed: 31/07/2006].


