

Facilitating Social Inclusion of Young Adults with Learning Disorders Through Football Fandom

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Young people with learning disorders often remain on the fringes of society, feeling that they do not fit in. Sharing hobbies with other members of their community can help them to become part of a mainstream group. Football (which is called “soccer” in the US and parts of Canada) is a popular sport, especially among men. Identifying as a fan can serve as an icebreaker to get into conversations and provide opportunities to participate in various cultural activities. In the present study, we interviewed two German young adults about how being a supporter of a fourth-division football team (Al-Emannia Aachen) helps them to participate in “normal” social life. The interviewees emphasized the critical role that being a fan played in their active participation in society and appreciated the validation that they received from being a part of a community of like-minded people. The article concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research directions.

Keywords: Learning disorders, social exclusion, football fandom, qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

The active, intentional, and ongoing removal of all barriers to full participation of persons with disabilities in every aspect of life is a guiding principle underlying all human rights conventions (United Nations, 2016). However, the inclusion of people with disabilities into all aspects of society remains a challenge. Most individuals with physical or mental impairments are still disadvantaged socially, economically, educationally, and vocationally (e.g. Hassanein, 2014). One group of people who often finds it especially challenging to feel a part of society includes individuals with learning disorders, who face difficulties developing the knowledge, abilities, willpower, and self-regulation needed to succeed in common academic tasks. For example, these learners struggle to acquire basic mathematical concepts, fundamental literary language abilities, and social skills (Grünke & Cavendish, 2016).

Internationally, there is no consistently agreed-upon definition of the term learning disorders (Al-Yagon et al., 2013). In this paper, we have adopted

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a concept that is commonly used in Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and a number of other countries, meaning that individuals with this disability demonstrate intellectual skills below average (Grünke & Cavendish, 2016). Because educational success is crucial in all knowledge-driven cultures, failing to meet commonly accepted standards in terms of academic performance can be damaging across the lifespan. Thus, Southby (2013) concluded that people with learning disorders are by and large more likely than individuals with other kinds of disabilities "... to live their lives on the fringes of society" (p. 1386).

Results from research on peer relationships have shown that inclusion and acceptance into a social group is not only based on shared values or ethnic backgrounds, but also to a large part on shared hobbies and interests (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006; Stark & Flache, 2012). Among these, sports play an important role. Thus, "... sport has become a means of social integration of disabled people ... [and] facilitates the social inclusion" (Balan & Marinescu, 2015, p. 112). This seems to be especially true for team sports, which often create a strong feeling of belonging and foster group identity. While increased opportunities for participation in team sports-based leisure activities do not automatically lead to greater social inclusion for people with disabilities (Waring & Mason, 2010), nevertheless, it is one of the most effective tools for overcoming barriers to feeling isolated (Dashper & Fletcher, 2014). Moreover, the potential of team sports to bring together people of diverse backgrounds and create a sense of community does not only apply to active involvement in physical activity but also to supporting and watching sports as a fan or spectator (Southby, 2013). In fact, identifying with a group who all root for the same team – especially during actual attendance at a sporting event or during a shared experience at home, in a sports bar, a community center, or elsewhere – opens great opportunities for people in marginal positions to feel part of a group (Weed, 2007).

Based on tracking the most visited sports news websites from 16 of the world's largest countries, the web portal www.biggestglobalsports.com concluded that football (also known as *soccer*) is currently by far the most popular sport around the globe (followed by basketball and tennis). Many scholarly papers have focused on the fascination that football creates in most parts of the world (e.g., Al Ganideh & Good, 2016; Dixon, 2015; Hughson & Poulton, 2008; Merke, 2007). However, little is known about the inclusive potential that supporting a football team has for people with learning disorders. A June 2016 literature search of the database PsycINFO using the search terms "Soccer" OR "Football" AND "Fandom" AND "Learning Dis*" yielded only one empirical study (Southby, 2013).

In this qualitative analysis, Southby (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with 13 British football fans with learning disorders, who supported a local team from the country's highest division – the Premier League. Using a

taxonomy developed by Giulianotti (2002), 11 out of the 13 participants were classified as exhibiting “hot” forms of identification with their favorite team, meaning that they took their support very seriously. The author concluded that “... football fandom appears more effective than the majority of leisure programs offered to learning disabled people, which tend to be more ‘casual,’ passive, and solitary” (p. 1396). The reasons seem understandable: Attending or watching games together with others on television offered the interviewees the opportunity to participate in highly symbolic aspects of a cultural ritual, like collectively singing the team’s official anthem, joining in football chants, or rhythmic clapping. Further, identifying themselves in public as supporters of a specific team by wearing a jersey or other merchandise often served as an icebreaker in conversations. Unlike in other contexts, the participants felt their opinions were valued as they expressed their views about the team lineup, player transfers, or predicted scores. In short, they accumulated enough “subcultural capital” (knowledge about their team, the league, and the sport in general) to experience a feeling of being full-fledged members of a mainstream group.

Even though Southby’s (2013) study offers valuable insights into the potential benefits of football fandom for people with learning disorders, much remains unknown. The purpose of the present paper, therefore, was to extend the existing findings by conducting a qualitative study on the experience of two young adult German football supporters with learning disabilities. England as the “motherland” of football is known for its excitement about this sport. However, due to the elimination of standing terraces and a huge rise in ticket prices over the last decades, English football stadia are suffering from a decline of attendance and, therefore, team spirit and atmosphere (Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1998; Goulding, 2012). Against this background, it seemed interesting to examine the experiences of fans from a country, Germany, in which the most fervent supporters still stand on old-fashioned terraces and often pay the equivalent of less than 15 US dollars for attending a first-division game, making visits of live matches affordable even for people who are not very well off financially.

METHOD

Participants

Our subjects, Chris and Tom (names changed to preserve their anonymity), were two dedicated fans of Alemannia Aachen, a club located in the very western part of the German federal state of Northrhine-Westfalia, close to the borders between Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The team is part of one of Germany’s five fourth divisions (Regionalliga West). Even though Alemannia Aachen currently plays only in a minor league, it has a long and rich history, as well as a very strong fan base. In 1969, Alemannia Aachen placed second in Germany’s first division (Bundesliga). After being dropped from the

Bundesliga in 2007, the club experienced a rapid decline, ending up in one of the fourth divisions in 2013. However, the team is still remarkably popular, with an average attendance at its home games of almost 8,000 people in the last season (<http://www.reviersport.de/fussball/regionalligawest-1516-zuschauer.htm>).

Chris. Twenty-one years old, Chris (born in Aachen) was diagnosed with a learning disorder when he was a preschooler. He allowed us to review his most recent doctor's report (dated 2013), which revealed that his intellectual capacities were about three standard deviations below average and bordering mental retardation. In addition to his learning problems, Chris suffered from symmetrical polyneuropathy (a malfunction of peripheral nerves throughout the body), a visual impairment (caused by an atrophy of the optic nerve), and an expressive language disorder. At the time of the study, he worked at a sheltered workshop performing assembly line work. Chris was a very active young man with many hobbies. He regularly participated in swimming contests, frequently undertook bicycle tours with his parents, and attended weekly yoga classes with his father. Chris visited most of the home matches of Alemannia Aachen and even some of the away games.

Tom. Nineteen years old, Tom (born in Stollberg, a town near Aachen) was diagnosed with a learning disorder before he started elementary school, like Chris. According to Tom's most recent doctor's report (from 2014), he exhibited an IQ level of about two standard deviations below average. Due to his cerebral palsy, he was bound to a wheelchair. At the time of the study, Tom was in his last year of attending a special school for students with physical impairments. In his spare time, he enjoyed playing wheelchair basketball and table tennis. In addition, he attended all home games of Alemannia Aachen and whenever possible, he also visited away matches.

Chris and Tom were referred to us by their former and current teacher, respectively. When asked, both immediately agreed to take part in our study. Participating in our interview was seen by them as a welcome opportunity to talk about one of their favorite topics in life – their love for Alemannia Aachen.

Development of Interview Questions

In preparation for the study, we developed a semi-structured interview manual. While leaving a lot of room for the participants to elaborate on subjects that they wanted to bring up, the conversations were loosely guided by a list of open-ended questions derived from a brainstorming process among the authors after individually delving into the scholarly literature on football fandom and the social inclusion of people with disabilities through sports-based leisure activities (e.g., Brown, 1998; Collins & Patmore, 2014; Dashper & Fletcher, 2014; Southby, 2011, 2013). The leading questions that eventually made up the interview were as follows:

- 1) **Involvement as a fan**
 - What does it mean to you to be a fan?
 - How often do you attend home games of your favorite team (Al-Emannia Aachen)?
 - How often do you attend away games?
- 2) **Interactions with other supporters**
 - Who accompanies you when you go to see the matches?
 - Who would you consider your peer group during stadium visits?
 - What is your relationship with other fans with disabilities?
 - How does being a fan help you to feel part of a group?
 - What is your relationship with other supporters?
 - In what way do you associate with fans outside the stadium?
 - To what extent has attending games helped you to meet new people?
- 3) **Experiencing acceptance or rejection as a supporter with disabilities**
 - To what extent do you feel accepted by other people that you come in contact when attending games?
 - What problems, if any, have you encountered in terms of getting accepted by other fans because of your disabilities?
 - What incidents, if any, have you experienced where other supporters with disabilities had problems getting accepted by fellow fans?
 - What negative comments, if any, have you overheard about people with disabilities by nondisabled spectators?
- 4) **Connection with and expectations on the club**
 - Do you associate with officials, players, or coaches of the club?
 - In what way do you see the club take an active effort to integrate people with disabilities?
 - What could the club do better to support fans with disabilities?

The questions were not asked in a specific order or exactly in the way they are phrased in the list above. Instead, they served as reminders for the interviewers to touch on different topics and as a help to keep the conversation going. Due to the limited intellectual capacities of the participants, questions often had to be rephrased to enable them to grasp the meaning.

Data Collection

Chris and Tom were interviewed by the second and third authors, respectively. The interviews took place in the participants' homes and were voice recorded. Chris's interview lasted 30 minutes; Tom's lasted 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

The conversations were transcribed verbatim based on the voice recordings, and the data were analyzed in a step-by-step process using an approach de-

veloped by Tesch (1990). Specifically, we started out by reading through the interviewees' comments and isolating each passage that contained a discriminable statement (a so-called "empirical indicator"). Such statements usually consist of several adjunct sentences, but may be shorter. The decision on what constituted an empirical indicator was made independently by the second and third authors. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion. Next, we randomly chose an empirical indicator and defined it as the first element of a first-theme category. We then turned to a second empirical indicator and decided whether it was part of the same cluster as the first one. If it addressed a different topic, we designated it as the first element of a second category. This process continued until all empirical indicators had been assigned to a cluster.

To verify our classifications, we reviewed the interview material a second time, using a different random order to allocate statements to categories. Both the first and the second cycle of arranging the empirical indicators were conjointly carried out by the second and third authors. Again, any disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Thus, we achieved 100% agreement in terms of interrater reliability for the decisions on what constituted an empirical indicator and on which of them belonged to what category.

RESULTS

The qualitative data analysis of the interview transcripts yielded the following four overarching themes:

1. Life as a fan (made up of 24 empirical indicators)
2. Identification with the club and the team (made up of 15 empirical indicators)
3. Social contacts (made up of 17 empirical indicators)
4. Social rank within the fan community (made up of 21 empirical indicators)

Initially, these categories existed independently of each other. However, during the course of the data analysis, it became apparent that some of them overlapped. What follows is a description of each of the four themes, illustrated with verbatim quotes from the two participants, excerpted from the empirical indicators that seemed especially representative to us. Whenever we thought that a statement was not comprehensible to the reader without providing some context, we added a short explanation in squared brackets. The quotes were translated from German into English, which involves the potential of missing some of the intended meaning. However, the two interviewees' statements were quite unsophisticated and, therefore, were very clear and unambiguous with little room for misunderstanding.

Life as a Fan

Both Chris and Tom emphasized how much it meant to them to be part of the fan culture of Alemannia Aachen. They tried to find ways to make it to as many games as possible.

I attend most home games ... But if my team plays in Dortmund, Düsseldorf, or Cologne, I go to away games, too. In case my grandma can't take me, I'll get in touch with a group of other fans and travel together with them on a bus. (Tom)

The participants appreciated receiving the support they needed in order to get into and out of the stadium smoothly. Being in a separate section of the stadium designated for people with disabilities was not seen as an act of discrimination for them. Rather, they appreciated the fact that the fan experience was safe for them.

There are always people who help you. I am able to walk for short distances. Thus, I don't need any help getting into my seat. But if there is anyone who can't walk at all, there are always two people who help you to move around. They even carry you. That is no problem whatsoever. (Tom)

Some fans don't just go to the stadium for the game, but also to cause trouble. That is one reason why I am happy that we as wheelchair users have our separate area in the stadium. I don't want to be among goons. (Chris)

Communicating with other fans before, during, and after games was important for Chris and Tom. They both looked for opportunities to get in contact with fellow "Alemannians."

I would be happy if they reached out to me to sing football chants together. (Chris)

Yes, I talk to other fans. You turn around and you get to know other supporters who sit around you. You greet them, and I enjoy that. (Tom)

But life as a fan was not limited to game days. Supporting Alemannia Aachen was often the basis for conversations with all different kinds of people in the daily lives of the interviewees.

One of my teachers is a fan of Mönchengladbach. Another supports Cologne. I get along very well with both of them. We tease each other and I joke with them whenever their teams lose. (Tom)

Identification With the Club and the Team

Chris's and Tom's feelings about their team were very intense. They had been fans for the greatest part of their lives and had decided to root for Alemannia Aachen because they were very attached to their native area.

I have been a fan of Alemannia Aachen since I was 10.
(Chris)

Initially, I was thinking about becoming a fan of Dortmund, but my attachment to my hometown Aachen and my home region prevailed. (Tom)

During the interviews, both participants kept highlighting how important football and Alemannia Aachen was for them.

Yes, football is extremely important to me. I have been attending school for 13 years now, and it gets on my nerves at times. Whenever I didn't have a chance to go to a match on the weekends, I am missing that balance in life. (Tom)

I would say that I need football. I need it to find some ease of mind. At night, I am playing with my PlayStation ... But it is football that provides some balance in my life. (Tom)

The stadium of Alemannia Aachen was a very special place for both interviewees. They became exceptionally passionate whenever they talked about their most favorite place on earth.

The stadium is like a living room to me. It is my home away from home. My greatest dream in life is to live in the stadium forever. To rent a suite there and then to move in with friends. (Chris)

The stadium is my second home. I love to be there. I have already taken a stadium tour four times, but I would do it again and again even though I know more about the arena now than the guide. (Tom)

Social Contacts

The social network of both Chris and Tom consisted largely of fellow (non-handicapped) supporters of Alemannia Aachen and even players.

I definitely feel part of the group. The same is true for my grandma. (Tom)

I know all the players. But I also know a lot of the fans.
(Chris)

I have had a pretty good relationship with the players over the last couple of years. Because we got relegated [moved down to a lower division], everything has become a bit more friendly and casual. When we still played in the second division, the players came across as a bit arrogant and detached. In the third division it became easier to build ties of friendship with them. (Tom)

I take the bus to home games. Sometimes, my mother takes me to the little town where Oliver lives. He is one of my caregivers. Then he and I go to the games together. (Chris)

Dominik Ernst is one of the players. He comes up to greet us before every game. Whenever he sees us, he gives my grandma a hug. It is a close relationship. I have the cell phone number of Felix Korb, another player. These are players that are not big stars, but it's great to stay in contact with them. (Tom)

Social exchanges between Chris, Tom, and other fans were not limited to stadium visits that usually happened on Saturdays. The (non-handicapped) people that both participants got to know through being fans of Alemannia Aachen were also their peers during the week.

We stay in contact through Facebook. We write each other to send birthday wishes or for no particular reason. Yes, we stay in contact all the time. (Tom)

You exchange views and ideas about basically everything. About things that don't have anything to do with football. (Tom)

I used to have a steady girlfriend who lived close to the stadium. I got to know her through football. (Tom)

Social Rank Within the Fan Community

This last category is composed of empirical indicators that contain statements about how the participants perceived their social status within their peer group of fellow supporters. As illustrated below, they expressed deep feelings of belonging and inclusion with the community.

In the stadium, most people don't view me as a person with a disability because I don't take my disabilities too seriously and can laugh about myself and I can get up from my wheelchair if I have to ... I can tell that other fans accept me as I am. (Tom)

Interestingly, both interviewees repeatedly expressed their satisfaction with situations in which they felt that they were in an exceptional position as fans with disabilities. They did not see themselves as excluded. Rather, they voiced contentment about the privileges that they enjoyed in the stadium.

We sit right next to the pitch. No one who doesn't belong there should be in our section because it is easier for us to get out of the stadium in case of an emergency. Right above us is the section for families. We can talk to the people there and they can come up to us before the game. Nobody complains. A lot of people want us to have some kind of a bonus. After the game, the players come up to us and give us a high five. (Tom)

I am happy that we have our own section in the stadium.
(Chris)

Both Chris and Tom emphasized numerous times that other supporters seemed to envy them because of all the concessions that they received. They enjoyed this role.

I have the impression that everyone in the stadium is envious of us because we have the best contact with the players. (Chris)

People have gotten envious of me because so many players have given me their jersey and because I maintain such good contact with them. Frederic Löhe is our goalkeeper. He knows me and he knows my story. We made a promise to each other that if I was ever able to walk again we would hang out together. (Tom)

The participants even used their exceptional status as people with a disability to benefit their non-handicapped friends.

I was asked by some people if I would be willing to go up to Max Kruse [a German international] and ask him for his autograph after a pre-season friendly game. They wanted me to make use of the fact that I have the "advantage" of being a disabled person and it's hard to turn me down. I did that and asked him. (Tom)

One particular advantage that the interviewees highlighted was the fact that they received preferential treatment from police officers or security personnel and that they often got away with rule violations during stadium visits.

Usually, everyone gets frisked before entering the stadium. But not us. We as disabled people can bring anything with us, even pyrotechnic articles and what not. Nobody keeps tabs on us. But that's fair. I think that's okay. Even the bags and handbags of my grandma don't get checked when she is with me. (Tom)

Once we got chased by the police. But as a person in a wheelchair, you are lucky. It is easy to talk yourself out of trouble or to get away quickly when you are in a wheelchair and disabled. (Tom)

DISCUSSION

The present qualitative study explored the meaning that football fandom has for the social inclusion of young adults with learning disorders. We conducted open-ended interviews with two supporters of a German fourth-division team (Alemannia Aachen), who not only exhibited intellectual deficits but also suffered from physical and/or sensory disabilities. Our findings support the strong potential of football fandom to prevent young people with learning disorders from living a marginal existence in today's society.

The data analysis yielded four emergent themes that dealt with (a) the fan experience in general, (b) attachment to the club and the team, (c) ties with other fans and other people that arose through being a supporter, and (d) the social position that the interviewees occupied in their peer group of fans. Our two participants pointed out how being a fan helped them to get in contact with

people, how being a supporter shaped their personal identity, how stadium visits enabled them to balance out their everyday routine, how most of their social network members were somehow associated with their fondness for Alemania Aachen, and how being a supporter with a disability allowed them to gain a social position in the fan community that gave them a sense of importance and validation. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of Southby (2013) as well as with the literature on sport and inclusion, as presented in the introduction.

Nevertheless, the study is subject to certain limitations. First of all, due to the qualitative nature of our inquiry, the number of participants was limited. With only two interviewees, our findings are neither generalizable nor transferable to all football fans with learning disorders. Chris and Tom were both in their early adulthood. Moreover, they were both supporters of a local fourth-division team. Finally, the two young men both exhibited disabilities in addition to their learning disorders. Had they been part of a different age group, supporters of a nationally popular first-division club, and not exhibiting multiple disabilities, they would probably have experienced their fandom differently. Especially the last aspect seems to be of particular relevance: The privileges that our participants talked about were not primarily associated with their learning disorders but with their additional physical disabilities. Thus, the experiences of our two interviewees cannot automatically be applied to adolescents who “only” demonstrate severe academic and intellectual difficulties.

Another limitation pertains to the kind of the data collection and analysis used. Qualitative studies are by nature subjective, conducted to describe and give meaning to life experiences, cultures, or historical events (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Hence, our results are not independent from the way the second and third authors carried out the interviews and the mode of data analysis. The way the conversations were conducted was very flexible, allowing interviewees’ responses to determine the nature and direction of the discussion. Our findings, therefore, are inevitably shaped by the uniqueness of the interaction between certain individuals with their inimitable personalities.

Furthermore, we chose a rather economical way of appraising and interpreting the transcripts by utilizing a relatively simple procedure, as outlined by Tesch (1990). There are many other and more elaborate ways to transcribe, analyze, and interpret the interview data. Thus, more ingenious and sophisticated methods might have yielded more in-depth insights into the minds of football fans with learning disorders.

Regardless of the limitations, our results are novel and help fill the research void on how identification with a football club can help a population at risk for being marginalized to stay as or become members of mainstream society. To our knowledge, ours is the only published study apart from the survey by

Southy (2013) focusing on the experience of adolescents with learning disorders as football fans. Pursuing the research agenda of shedding light on the potential of different interests, hobbies, and leisure time activities to pave the way for young people with learning disorders to come together with non-handicapped peers is certainly worthwhile.

Future studies should replicate our findings with additional samples and in different contexts. We need more insight into the conditions that make equal and full participation of individuals with learning disorders in social life possible. Most societies have still a long way to go toward ensuring that those at risk of social exclusion get equal opportunities to learn, work, and associate with others. Identifying areas of life that connect people from all segments of a community and finding options to use the unifying potential of these areas to further foster full participation of everyone is one of the most crucial objectives of the academic discipline of diversity and inclusion research and related branches of science. Because of the enormous connecting power of football fandom, this topic plays a critical role in this context and should be pursued further.

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