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Facilitating inclusivity and broadening understandings of access at football clubs: The role of Disabled Supporter Associations

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Abstract

Research question: To which extent do Disabled Supporters Associations (DSAs) contribute to improve access of fans with disabilities to football? This research question addresses two interrelated gaps: The lack of attention to supporters in European policies on inclusion in and through sport, and the excessive focus on physical barriers over other dimensions of access in both policy and research on disability and sport.

Research methods: The study uses visual auto-ethnography. Seven disabled supporters, members of three different DSAs at football clubs in England took part in the study. They were asked to take photographs of their life as a supporter over a period of eight weeks, and were interviewed at the end to discuss and clarify the meaning of the pictures.

Results and Findings: Attention to physical spaces is not enough to ensure inclusivity in the stands. Further dimensions need attention by clubs, including knowledge, relationships and participation, and power of advocacy. DSAs have the potential to play a pivotal role in helping clubs improving their provisions for disabled fans, since they act as both a social forum a point of contact for clubs, but they are hampered for their lack of resources and clubs' almost exclusive focus on physical access. Nind and Seale's multi-dimensional model of access for the disabled is one useful way of interpreting these results.

Implications: Conceptual understandings of access and inclusion can be broadened by using Nind and Seale's model. Policies addressing inclusion in football should focus not only on those doing sport, but also on those spectating.

Keywords: Football, disabled supporters, policy, inclusivity, disability.

Introduction

Claims that sport can enhance social inclusion have permeated political discourses since the 1970s. One of the best recent examples is, probably, the European Union (EU), which has increasingly identified social inclusion in and through sport as one of its priority areas for action in the past ten years. EU Member States have committed to take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to participate on an equal basis with others in sporting activities (Council of the European Union, 2010). Furthermore, the European Commission's White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007, p. 7) states that:

All residents should have access to sport. The specific needs and situation of under-represented groups therefore need to be addressed, and the special role that sport can play for young people, people with disabilities and people from less privileged backgrounds must be taken into account.

The Commission's 2011 communication on Developing the European Dimension in Sport identified two areas of attention in relation to disability and sport: the need for sport facilities and activities to be accessible, and for participation in sport to be promoted to disabled people (European Commission, 2011). This dual focus on accessible infrastructure and the need for inclusive participation in society is also seen in the wider EU disability strategy 2010-2020, which aims to 'empower people with disabilities so that they can enjoy their full rights, and benefit fully from participating in society' (European Commission, 2010, p. 4).

The focus on accessible sporting infrastructure and the benefits of participating in sport for disabled people fails to acknowledge two important issues, though: whether sports are inclusive for disabled people wishing to *support* a club rather than participate, and the extent to which accessibility is understood *beyond physical access* to infrastructure.

This article explores these questions in the context of disabled football supporters and Disabled Supporter Associations (DSAs) in England. DSAs are club-specific supporter groups for disabled fans. DSAs are predominantly self-governing organisations, with their own committee, funding strategy and policies for membership and other aspects of their operations. There are currently 51 DSAs in the English football pyramid (14 in the Premier League, 14 in the Championship, 10 in League One, 9 in League Two and 4 in non-league clubs). The extent to which DSAs are linked to their football club varies considerably, but an

Access Officer (also known as a Disability Liaison Officer or DLO) if the club has one is a common communication channel (Glick, 2011; Long, 2011). DSAs can provide direct communication between fans and the club (Level Playing Field, 2015c; Paramio-Salcines, Downs, & Grady, 2016) and might have the potential to empower disabled fans ‘to establish a relationship and to work directly with their own football clubs and governing bodies’ (CAFE, 2012, p. 14). At the national level Level Playing Field (LPF), a registered charity in England and Wales, acts as a campaigning and advisory organisation for individual DSAs (Level Playing Field, 2016). Though we focus on the English context, DSAs represent a trans-European phenomena (CAFE, 2016) wherefore findings are of broader relevance.

This article discusses the extent to which some DSAs may be able to help football clubs to be more accessible, hence being also a vehicle for the implementation of inclusion and equality policies. This is translated into three objectives: (i) to provide an understanding of the concept of ‘access’ in broader terms than physical entrance to stadia; (ii) to examine the role DSAs might play in broadening this understanding within football clubs; and (iii) to discuss what barriers DSAs face with regards to enhancing access.

A note on language. The literature generally follows the United Nation’s approach of using person-first language (United Nations, 2006); that is, talking about ‘people with disabilities’. For clarity we nonetheless make use the language of ‘disabled person’ in this article. This is because the clubs and associations under scrutiny are situated in the UK where ‘disabled person’ remains common, not least represented in how these associations have formally been titled as DSAs.

We proceed in four steps. First, we conduct a review of available literature and current policies to give a contextual background to understandings of disability, inclusion and access in sport in general, and football in particular, followed by an introduction to Nind and Seale’s (2009) multi-dimensional approach to access. Second, we outline the methods used in this research. Third, we present and discuss our findings around three main themes. Fourth, we conclude by reflecting on the current state of access and inclusivity at football clubs and offer some policy recommendations based on our findings.

Understanding disability, inclusion and access in the context of sport

Current estimates suggest that around 15% of the world population have a disability (World Health Organisation, 2014). Similar figures are reported for Europe, equating to around 80 million citizens ‘who are often prevented from taking part fully in society and the economy because of environmental and attitudinal barriers’ (European Commission, 2010, p. 3). Definitions of disability vary; the United Nations (UN) states that people with a disability are not objects to be fixed by medical intervention, but subjects with rights. In this respect disability is seen as an evolving concept that ‘results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (United Nations, 2006 Preamble (e)). This reflects a shift from the medical model of disability, which frames disability as an impairment that an individual ‘has’, to the so-called social model of disability where it is societal barriers that cause disability, not the impairment (Devas, 2003).

This is important, as it has been argued that the definition of disability as a social category rather than a medical category is vital in understanding how society must adapt to be more inclusive (Charlton, 1998; Devas, 2003). However, the social model of disability has been criticised for underplaying the importance of the lived experience of impairment (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002; Thomas & Smith, 2008). Crucially, current policy draws increasingly upon this social model of disability, evident in guidelines that stress the need to challenge and remove disabling barriers (Department for Education, 2014; Level Playing Field, 2015b; UEFA/CAFE, 2011).

Social inclusion is a contested concept, though, that is rarely defined in policies (Promis, Erevelles, & Matthews, 2001) and particularly in political discourse where it is used with varying meanings (Kelly, 2010). Abbott and McConkey (2006, p. 275) suggest that in relation to disability, inclusion can be defined as ‘greater participation in community-based activities and a broad social network’. Inclusion and access are two terms often used in combination, as to participate in an aspect of society, this must be accessible to people with a disability. For example, DePauw and Gavron (1995) define inclusion as occurring when all persons are able to exercise their right of choice in an *accessible* society. Similarly, in relation to football, Parnell and Richardson (2014) state that inclusion requires *accessibility*, low cost and involvement of all. It seems sensible to suggest therefore that, as well as being inextricably linked, inclusion cannot be achieved without accessibility when framed by the

social model of disability. Thus, given the clear importance assigned to accessibility in any attempts to promote the inclusion of disabled people, it is vital that attempts are made to understand the concept of access in more detail. This is the first gap that this article addresses.

Despite calls for a holistic approach to understanding access and inclusion in sport for the disabled (Devas, 2003; Devine & Lashua, 2002; Promis et al., 2001), research remains dominantly limited to the benefits of *participation* in sport and physical activity. As pointed out above, this is very much mirrored by current policies in Europe, which focus almost exclusively on promoting their access to ‘do’ or ‘play’ sport (European Commission, 2014, 2015).

Sport management’s understanding of accessibility and inclusion

If accessibility is accepted as an essential component of inclusivity (DePauw & Gavron, 1995; Devas, 2003; Nind & Seale, 2009) and a means to empowerment and inclusion (United Nations, 2006), it figures that access needs to be a primary concern to football clubs wishing to be more inclusive (Paramio-Salcines, Campos, & Buramio, 2012). This, in turn, means that management at football clubs are required to develop a careful understanding of the needs of their supporters/customers with disabilities if access is to be ensured. These concerns have been recently picked up by a number of authors within the sport management academic literature. This body of research has shown an interest in how clubs and football organisations manage these issues (Paramio Salcines, Grady, & Downs, 2014; Paramio, Campos, & Buramio, 2012; Paramio-Salcines, Downs, & Grady, 2016; Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2013; Southby, 2011, 2013).

In the work of Paramio-Salcines and colleagues, the key word is undoubtedly *access*. They focus on how disability legislation has been implemented across various contexts, and explore the changing attitudes of sport managers and policy makers in relation to this particular set of customers. However, while the social model of disability is sometimes overtly recognised (Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2013), this work tends to explore (and hence define) access in a limited way, namely relating to infrastructure. Where other aspects of accessibility are considered (for example those related to human resources), they typically relate to the presence of Disability Liaison Officers (Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2013).

By focusing on the accessibility of club infrastructure, the work of Paramio-Salcines and colleagues mirrors much of the current policy discourse at the European level (UEFA/CAFE, 2011; European Commission, 2011). For instance, the UEFA/CAFE 'Access for All' guidance document for football clubs (2011, p. 9) aims to offer 'practical, clear solutions that will help football clubs, national associations and stadium managers to deliver high-quality grounds that are *accessible, inclusive* and welcoming for all' (emphasis added). However, even if these guidelines cover aspects such as etiquette, communication and the importance of welcoming staff, the main focus is quite clearly on physical aspects around the design of the ground, accessible information signs and other facilities. This focus on physical barriers has an impact on how access for disabled supporters is managed. For example, LPF provides information for each club in England and states how they are meeting recommended guidelines (UEFA/CAFE, 2011) by giving the percentage of the recommended number of wheelchair-accessible seats that each club provides. Walters and Kitchin (2009) point out that the focus on quantitative targets do not consider the softer aspects of best practice and cannot be used to judge inclusivity, as little attention is given to quality of experience, service or facilities (see also Paramio-Salcines et al., 2014, 2016).

The body of literature reviewed in this section has provided a management focus to the study of disability within football. What is evident from this research is that accessibility remains focused on the physical environment that clubs provide. Excluding Southby (2013), the authors that have researched how clubs and football organisations manage disability pay no explicit attention to the lived experience of disabled football customers. This knowledge gap is related to how the work of Paramio-Salcines uses empirical data drawn from observation at stadia, second hand sources and interviews with policy makers and managers (Paramio Salcines, Grady, & Downs, 2014; Paramio, Campos, & Buramio, 2012; Paramio-Salcines, Downs, & Grady, 2016; Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2013). What is missing then is research into how disabled supporters actually experience attending football games and their satisfaction with the services and social environment afforded.

On the other hand, this nascent body of literature demonstrates that sport management research can benefit from work done within the field of disability studies, as this may enable academics and policy makers alike to conceptualise questions relating to accessibility and inclusion in a multi-faceted way. In our case, the article leans on Nind and Seale's contribution (2009) to the study of access for people with learning disabilities. We consider

this provides useful insights for our analysis because it allows to flow naturally from the identified need to approach access multi-dimensionally.

The multi-dimensional nature of access: Moving beyond physical barriers

Nind and Seale (2009, p. 273) note that governmental approach to accessibility in the UK is, in practice, reduced to physical barriers: relying on solutions as ramps, induction loops and 'easy to read' versions for those with learning disabilities. From the review in the section above it can clearly be concluded that there is a risk that football clubs end up in a similar situation.

In response to this narrow understanding of accessibility, Nind and Seale (2009) sought to develop a multi-dimensional model of access. In their work, they encourage policy makers to consider a broader and more holistic approach. Nind and Seale convened academics, practitioners and people with learning disabilities to explore and develop conceptual understanding of access. The chosen vehicle through which this was achieved was a series of seminars structured around a set of questions, in particular: (1) What do we mean by access?; (2) how do people with learning disabilities experience access?; (3) what is worth accessing?; (4) what kinds of access do people with learning disabilities want and how can we make access happen? (Nind & Seale, 2009, p. 275). Thus, this model represents the outcome of participatory research where data-generation and analysis were concurrent, inherently both participatory and theoretical from the outset (Nind, 2011, pp. 355–356).

The multi-dimensional approach to access, as presented and advocated by these authors, includes the following components (Nind & Seale, 2009, p. 277):

- 1) physical access (essential but not sufficient on its own);
- 2) knowledge (finding out things);
- 3) power (the ability to influence access);
- 4) relationships and communication (including interpersonal interaction);
- 5) advocacy (making choices and voicing them);
- 6) participation (in groups and democratic processes);
- 7) quality of life (as a product of access).

Grounded in and emerging from the data, we argue this model is useful for widening the focus away from, first, an able-bodied perspective of access and, second, focusing merely on questions relating to physical access. We do not argue, however, that this is the only model that can help guiding our analysis. One of the caveats to the use of Nind and Seale's research is that it is focused exclusively on learning disabilities. Thus, the authors suggest that their model may be unsuitable as far as other impairments since for 'different problems there are different responses' (Nind & Seale, 2009, p. 284). However, we argue that having regard to the literature reviewed above, Nind and Seale provide a good fit that deserves to be tested and reflected upon. First, the model is useful in avoiding an exclusive focus on questions relating to physical access. Second, the inclusion of managers and users in their research allows Nind and Seale to define access along a number of dimensions that are automatically linked to implementation. In other words, it can be considered to be a managerial-friendly approach. Third, the model provides a relatively simple way to operationalize our analysis. We discuss further this final point in our section on methods below. We also discuss the merits of alternative conceptual approaches to disability in our conclusion.

Methods

In an attempt to gain an understanding of the experiences of disabled fans, a participant-led methodology was devised. Seven disabled fans, members of three different DSAs in England, were recruited with the help of LPF. Our call for participants was disseminated within all the members of the chosen DSAs and participants were recruited amongst those individuals who volunteered freely to participate. This is a form of purposive sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), which was deemed necessary in order to form a sample with the required characteristics to be studied. We of course acknowledge the limitations of our sampling strategy, especially in terms of generalisation of the conclusions. However, we have taken appropriate steps to ensure a sufficient level of naturalistic generalisability (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), as explained below. Participants were both male and female, of varying ages and had a range of disabilities (illness, wheelchair users, learning disability, reduced mobility/ambulant disabled); some held positions on the DSA committee whereas others were just members. Most attended matches home and away, so had extensive experience attending football matches at a variety of grounds (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant demographics

Participant	Level of Club supported	Age	Gender	Season ticket holder
BM	Championship/ PL	65	Female	Yes
AG	Championship /PL	37	Male	Yes
BR	Championship/ PL	65	Male	Yes
RC	Championship/ PL	27	Male	Yes
PW	Championship/ PL	58	Male	Yes
LC	Championship	45	Female	Yes
NS	League two	44	Male	Yes

These participants were a sub-group of a larger project in which 60 football supporters across four European countries were recruited to research their day-to-day views on the way football is organised and managed. Researching the experiences of disabled supporters and the role of DSAs was one of the objectives of the project from the outset, though. Thus, this part of the larger project was fully designed with the reality of the disabled supporters in mind. It can be considered and analysed autonomously. Participants were asked to take photographs of their football experience over an eight-week period at the end of the 2012-2013 season. This auto-ethnographic visual method was used in an attempt to give a depth of insight into the lives of these football supporters. A follow up photo-elicitation interview was conducted with all participants to enable meanings to be assigned to the photographs by the image makers rather than the research team (Pink, 2013). Both pictures and interviews (the latter once transcribed) were analysed in two stages. First, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke for thematic analysis (2006, p.87): 1) Familiarising with the data; 2) Generating initial codes; 3) Searching for themes; 4) Reviewing the themes; 5) Refining and naming the themes. This

allowed us to approach the data without pre-conceived categories, hence performing an *inductive* thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83; see also Braun, Clarke and Weate, 2016).

A second stage was necessary, though, to enable us to use the data for the purposes of this article. Issues of access and inclusivity in the club environment were transversal to the experiences of our participants, but were not excessively coherent as presented in the initial themes, which had a focus on governance, activism and social interaction. One way of making deeper analytical sense of themes and building a more coherent narrative was via Nind and Seale's (2009) dimensions of access. Without claiming that their model is the only way to make sense of the data, or that it can offer the final word, following the development of themes and used in an inductive manner Nind and Seale's (2009) dimensions of access helped move the thematic analysis away from providing a simple description of the data to an interpretation of it (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016). In addition, because of the inherent limitations of Nind and Seale's contribution, our research presents an opportunity to discuss how far it can be stretched in order to further research in this area.

Before highlighting the results, it needs stressing that we do not claim that this research is generalisable in the statistical sense. There is of course other kinds of generalisability that is more applicable for qualitative research (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). One of these is known as naturalistic generalisability. That is, the results provide people with a vicarious experience and resonate with readers who are in similar situations or know of people like the participants. In other words, it is the recognisability of research findings that can contribute to the generalizability of qualitative research. In terms of this study, a large group (over 50) disabled fans have seen the research results. For example, the findings were shared during a panel on disabled football fans at a conference dedicated to football. The panel as well as the audience consisted of disabled fans. All participants stated that the results directly overlapped with their own experiences of being a football fan and produced a vicarious experience of being a supporter. Many disabled fans have echoed these views. Moreover, our findings were discussed with a number of key stakeholders. These included senior management of the Centre for Access to Football in Europe (CAFE) and LPF, chairpersons at two DSAs and academics with a proven track record in disability research.

Results and discussion: Access and inclusivity in football clubs

In this section we present and discuss our findings. The narrative is structured around three themes, obtained using Nind and Seale's dimensions as explained above.

Beyond the status-quo: Access and information

In their access model, Nind and Seale (2009, p. 277) point out that removing physical barriers is the dimension of access most commonly addressed in practice. It is considered essential, but 'not sufficient'. Our literature review revealed that this focus on physical barriers is the most commonly used by football clubs (Southby, 2011).

This first theme links, therefore, to the physical access knowledge dimensions identified by Nind and Seale. Participants were in agreement that, as put by BM 'some efforts' are being made. They were unanimous, though, in their assessment that even provision of good quality physical access including a variety of disabilities is, at best, variable across the country.

One important and innovative point uncovered by this research is the differences between facilities for home and away supporters. Participants were unanimous in saying that their away experience tended to present more difficulties. For example, some clubs do not have provision for disabled supporters for away teams to sit in the away seating area, so instead they are seated with the home fans. UEFA/CAFE (2011) state that disabled fans should be able to sit with their own fans; non-disabled fans would not be made to sit with the opposition. This could even be considered discriminatory treatment, and therefore a breach of the English Equality Act. This raises questions as to whether clubs are actually taking seriously their requirements to segregate supporters of rival clubs (police and local council authorities normally impose clubs the need to segregate fans, based on the powers introduced in Section 3 of the 1975 Safety at Sports Grounds Act), let alone to equality.

Beyond physical access to stadiums, disabled supporters need to be able to gather the information required to attend matches. This includes details about buying tickets, what to expect at the stadium (essential for away fans) and who to contact for further information. Here, the secretary of one DSA described how communicating essential information was a vital function of the DSA and felt this was particularly important for the members when travelling to away matches:

‘Like away games when we’re going to their stadium, if we just need to find out you know what sort of access requirements they’ve got there and parking arrangements and that kind of thing so, a lot of the time I’ll perhaps contact their DSA, building up a network of contact points within the away clubs I need to deal with ... [members have] got another port of call’ (AG)

This saves individual DSA members having to contact football clubs prior to away trips. It also has the potential to make easier for clubs the dissemination of essential information. But there can be more to it. The participants in our research felt that the work of a DSA, together with a clear link to the club, empowers disabled supporters and makes them feel a part of their club. Through these communication channels, the supporters felt they are more than mere ‘customers’ of the clubs.

LPF (2013, 2015a) advocates that clubs should nominate specific disability liaison officers in order to liaise with DSAs. One of the advantages of club-DSA relations is that it can establish a two-way communication channel:

‘I think it is vital really. I really do. We’re able to offer support to members and liaise with the club then to iron out any problems that they might have. We’re there to play an advisory role with the club on processes and latest legislation and all that as well so yeah I mean I think they’re [DSAs] vital and all clubs should have them’ (AG)

DSAs have the potential to structure a link between the club and the fans, so aspects that are problematic can be communicated to the club:

‘Some of our members wanted to sit at the side of their wheelchair, it’s not just like coming as the carer, but it might be your husband or your wife or your mum or your dad, you know what I mean so they want to sit with you ... sitting behind them is a bit difficult because if you are in the middle of a row, and something happens, you can’t get around so have now this season, the end of this season put all these seats in, so it’s now wheelchair, person, wheelchair, person’ (BM)

‘The old grandstand, we’ve got visually impaired [seating] over there, and one of our [DSA] committee member[s] at the time, said ‘it’s a bit dark going down the steps’. So we thought oh, great idea, why not put an extra light up? Did that. Solved the problem. [laughs] So until people come to you, you don’t know’ (NS)

These examples show how having a channel of communication with disabled fans, through a DSA, helps clubs stay informed and address not only physical aspects of their stadium. This is important because, as Southby (2011) points out, football clubs will be limited in their ability to provide an inclusive environment for supporters if they maintain their current focus on physical aspects of the football experience. Because of the reliance on the social model of disability, access is predominantly understood as the responsibility of the facility provider – i.e. the club (Devas, 2003). However, our participants suggest that supporters can be involved in this process as well. This will move current *status-quo* towards a more inclusive experience, with the objective to achieve not only access, but also real inclusion.

This, however, is probably easier said than done. Long (2011) points out that a move by the Premier League to redefine the Disability Officer as an Access Officer would narrow understandings of disability and inclusivity to that of access to the physical environment only. Here, the social model of disability, so central to policy thinking in Europe (Priestly, 2005; UEFA/CAFE, 2011), implies that the removal of barriers to participation will automatically result in accessibility and inclusion, which our data suggest not to be the case.

DSAs and stadiums as inclusive social spaces

The second area of relevance in our findings relates to the importance of football as a social activity, and the role that DSAs and the match-day experience have to play in ensuring social inclusion of disabled supporters that goes beyond merely being able to watch the game. This relates to the dimensions of participation and relationships and communication (Nind & Seale 2009). The concept underpinning all this is the social nature of football for supporters. Welford, García and Smith (2015) argue that one of the motivations of supporters to follow their teams is that football gives structure to their social life. This is even more important for disabled supporters, as some of the quotes below demonstrate. Thus, access needs to be understood also as providing opportunity for social interaction and participation.

All participants described DSAs as vital in that regard. The most common reason given was for the social space they provide. Fans spoke at length of the importance of DSAs in providing a social space for disabled fans to interact and build relationships. Importantly, they outlined this goes beyond match-days:

‘The association [DSA] is great to meet with the other disabled fans ... there’s a lovely sort of social element to it going on, which I think is great’ (LC)

‘We [DSA members] see a lot of each other, game by game, but then we also try and organise social events, quiz nights, question and answer session with a first team player or manager, when we can all get together’ (AG)

This resonates with previous research, which demonstrates that the benefits of sport participation for those with a disability are often very social in nature (Darcy & Dowse, 2013); we would suggest that this can be extended to supporting as it is an inherently social activity. Indeed, the single most reason mentioned by our participants to attend football matches was to get out of their normal routine and meet their friends:

‘That’s the good thing about football, really, is the people you meet, you wouldn’t meet them at your home, would you? And it’s just nice, to get out and about, all the time. [...] Because your facilities are adequate enough for wheelchair users or any disability really, it encourages people to come to football. Because rather than coming to football everyone’s probably just sat home, like myself, I’d be just sat at home doing nothing, getting bored, just watching TV or whatever. Football gets you out and about doesn’t it? Like I said, it allows you to meet people, so it’s a social thing as well’ (NS)

‘Football does help me through my autism, I cope with it really well thanks to football and going to games [...] Football is my life, in my heart, that will always stay there, football will always be there along with my support workers, my girlfriend, my friends, everybody that knows me’ (RC)

The DSA provides an opportunity to participate in a group that, in turn, facilitates access to matches, both in the physical sense but also in the social meaning. DSA members often travel,

socialise and sit together during the match and outside match days. This shows how these dimensions of access are not independent, but interrelated. One fan with a learning disability described excellently how the DSA helped him to attend away matches:

‘I’ve not been to many away games until I started to be with them [DSA], I asked [DSA chair] about it and I had to fill in an application form for it, and it was quite good’ (RC)

If fans are not comfortable travelling with people they do not know, they are unlikely to take up the option of transport provided by the club, even if the club coaches are physically accessible. By providing transport, clubs might be addressing accessibility to away matches. However, for fans who may not be in the position to travel independently, being part of a DSA allows them access to a group that facilitates numerous requirements to attend a game (transport, arranging tickets, providing care/supervision). Beyond this, DSAs provide a social structure that encourages participation, which may be a greater step towards an inclusive environment (Abbot and McConkey, 2006). Thus, if clubs understand the importance of that social element, they may well decide that the optimal policy in relation to away travel for disabled supporters is not to provide a means of transport for individual fans, but to support a group of disabled supporters to organise the travel. This would make the experience not only accessible, but also inclusive.

A second aspect that relates to football’s social enjoyment is that disabled fans should have access to the full match-day experience once inside the ground. Yet, this is also under-explored, as most research and policy focuses on participation focused on playing or doing sport, rather than supporting a team (Promis et al., 2001). For policy-makers, this needs to be a wake up call in order to consider whether they may be missing an important element in their policies and programmes to promote inclusion in and through sport.

How can disabled supporters participate of the fandom experience then? At Manchester United, a disability lounge is considered as representative of the club’s commitment to inclusivity (Paramio-Salcines et al., 2016). It is questionable, however, whether such a disability-specific facility allows disabled fans to truly ‘participate’ in the football experience if they are participating in a different way to other fans: segregation can emphasise disabilities and thus limit inclusion (Promis et al., 2001). A necessary facet of an inclusive

environment is participation alongside able-bodied individuals (Devine & Lashua, 2002). Our data facilitates an understanding of whether this may be possible at football clubs.

One of our participants, NS, from a small community-owned club where the DSA had a strong presence, believed their club was succeeding in integrating disabled and non-disabled fans thanks to the visibility of the DSA:

‘If everybody’s treated the same, I would say really, it builds a friendly club and that’s one of the reasons behind that thing of being friendly, and then, when I used to use my manual chair I’d have a friend coming round with me pushing me, instead of them talking to me, they’d be talking to my mate behind me who’s up here. And I’m thinking I’m here! And a few times he’s said to them, sorry you’re meant to be talking to him, not me. You don’t get that here [at the football club]. The team manager goes past you, the players go past you, they don’t look over you. They’re looking straight at you. And that’s what you want’ (NS)

Although fans spoke about how they felt included at DSAs, questions remain over how inclusive football clubs, and the football crowd in particular, really are (The Guardian, 2015, 23 February; BBC, 2014, 21 May). This is clearly one of the limitations of the DSAs revealed by our research, and it needs to be stressed. Following our results we argue DSAs have potential to produce positive benefits for integration of disabled supporters, but we need to be clear: There are also important barriers. The case we have just referred to in the quote above involves a small supporter-owned club, and may be seen as an exception. In a larger number of cases, though, the safe and inclusive environment provided by the DSAs is not so easily transferred to the rest of the stadium. In other words, DSAs may be a safe space but the football ground *per se* is not:

‘One of the other things that, experience that we’ve had, which was awful, was taking the lads with Downs Syndrome and somebody in the crowd behind us referring to the players as mongrels and that was really difficult because, I mean I was annoyed and upset about it, the guy who’s, probably didn’t understand, but at the end, after it had happened several times, I had to turn round and, you know I just couldn’t stand there and let it happen, so I did turn round [...] And the two men that were doing it, the one

was mortified and was apologising, the other one was, 'uh political correctness' ...
And I'm saying, it's not political correctness, just think, just think' (LC)

Football policies often profess a romanticised view about how the sport can enhance social inclusion (Tacon, 2007), but this has been found to be limited outside very small groups (Southby, 2013). Despite describing the inclusive nature of her DSA as providing a safe space for those with a learning disability to experience football, LC highlights problems that can arise outside of this space. One limitation of DSAs in terms of achieving inclusivity is that interaction with able-bodied fans is limited after all, which will then make the stadium (as a whole) a less inclusive space. Our data suggests more integration could be achieved, but only in very specific conditions when the club is fully committed to give visibility to the disabled supporters, and this is further complicated given the funding structures discussed below. At the moment, this theme suggests that, whereas DSAs are spaces for social interaction of football supporters, the wider stadium might be accessible, but our participants feel it still is far from being truly inclusive.

The power to promote change

In this final sub-section, we discuss the power of advocacy that DSAs might enjoy. Power and advocacy, if truly effective, could be seen as reaching the highest levels of inclusion. Thus, how do our participants rate the relationship of their DSA with their club?

Participants revealed interesting cases where the DSA played a role in empowering disabled fans. In so doing, they highlighted that exercising power in varying degrees is possible and always tied into social relations. For example, at one club where the DSA had only been set up that season, LC explains how the process had been 'a really good experience because it's got us to know people at the club, and actually we have already made quite a few changes, influenced change'. At another club, NS explains how through the DSA at his club, fans who might normally be overlooked can have a genuine say:

'[DSA members] have already said to me that if it wasn't for them getting involved in the association, they would still be in their little shell a little bit, and it pushes them out, and puts their view across and were taking it on board, and they've got as much say as anybody else' (NS)

Fans discussed how through the link that the DSA has with the football club, they have been able to highlight and address the all important non-physical barriers to their match-day experience:

‘Another change inspired by the dialogue of our DSA with the club is the change in the paperwork to obtain reductions in season-tickets [...] This year, through the DSA actually, that’s another change we’ve made. They [the club] were insisting on us providing the evidence [of the disability, in order to apply the concession to the season-ticket’s price] every year, and when you have got somebody with Down’s syndrome for example, that is not going to get changed, is it? So, we’ve managed to get the agreement that if they [the disabled fans] have an indefinite DLA [Disability Living Allowance] award, then they don’t need to keep sending new evidence. They’ve accepted the evidence from last season’ (LC)

Changes like this exemplify perfectly a wider definition of access, as it removes barriers not to enter the ground, but to obtain tickets. This suggests a power within social relations to affect change beyond the *status-quo*. Thus, DSAs can help ensure that the needs of disabled fans are (and remain) on the agenda for clubs, preventing issues from being overlooked. As NS stressed, a united voice is much louder than an individual voice:

‘The idea behind the [Disabled Supporters] Association mainly, is to give disabled supporters a greater voice. Because one person, just myself doing it, is not that massive. But when you’ve got a load of people behind you, wanting the same thing, you’ve got a bigger voice, and that’s why our motto is ‘a voice to be heard’ (NS)

However, as can be seen in the examples above, many of the changes that DSAs have influenced at their club were low cost or free. In other words, it was an almost irresistible message for the clubs, which had nothing to lose and much to win from a public opinion perspective. For projects in need of funding, the co-operation of the clubs was less clear. Indeed, it was often the DSAs themselves that raised the funds. Interestingly, our participants did not seem to be critical of this. It was a common theme that they did not expect football clubs to fund their DSAs. Actually, some of the participants were happy that clubs did not

make promises they could not be able to keep, and view this as a positive feature of their relationship with the club:

‘The club are very open with us and keep reminding us that it is a business and it’s a commercial business, and if we ask for things that cost money then, we’re ... But then we’re told at the start, no, so, they haven’t made any promises that they haven’t fulfilled’ (LC).

Such data could be interpreted as contradictory or, simply, as evidence of DSAs’ failure to affect real change. It is slightly more complicated, though. One implication of having a close relationship with the club was that DSAs and their committee members, particularly at smaller clubs, understood how the club worked financially and, therefore did not expect to be in receipt of significant funding:

‘You always have to keep your mind it [football club] is a business, you can’t forget that, and you can’t ask them to give away more than they can afford’ (BM)

‘It’s all volunteer-led, that we do ourselves, you know, things that we provide is out of our own pocket. There are no funds there at all’ (NS)

Furthermore, participants felt that in raising their own funds DSAs have control over how the budget is managed, allowing them to exercise more autonomy. The reality, though, is that this lack of funding severely limits the actions of DSAs and the changes they can do to increase their club’s inclusivity. It also demonstrates that this DSA-club relationship is clearly skewed in favour of the club, as the latter has much to gain but, in exchange, it is not necessarily providing many resources. Whereas DSAs may have significant potential in relation to advocacy, they face bigger barriers in relation to power due to their finite resources. At the same time, though, it highlights how power is always, as a Foucauldian inspired critical disability studies analysis might say, relational and negotiated, rather than as a ‘thing’ people simply ‘have’ and exercise passively ‘on’ other people.

DSAs are, by nature, independent organisations outside the structures of the club. As such, they can promote their own agenda, but do not benefit from direct funding from clubs. If they were part of the club, then they might have funding but could lose independence. In this

relationship, DSAs are a weak link. They could decide to pursue a more assertive stance towards their club. But they risk losing their existing channels of communication, even as weak as some might be. Here, DSAs are prisoners of the typical football activist dilemma, whereby protest is not an option because of the emotional attachment to the club (García & Welford, 2015).

On the other hand, this begs the question of what is the point of legislation such as the Equality Act (2010) if specific sets of supporters have to raise funds themselves to provide a level of access that, arguably, should be provided for them. A business case could be made to football clubs to strengthen their relationship with DSAs, as it will only be to their benefit. Otherwise, perhaps a legal one could be made, but this is something individual DSAs find difficult to do.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that members find DSAs useful in terms of improving their football and social experiences. Further, some DSAs have the potential to address issues of information, knowledge, communication and, to a certain extent, provide scope for advocacy. Thus, DSAs can be another resource for football club management, so they can broaden their understanding of access. However, we also need to be clear before rushing to any triumphalism: DSAs face significant barriers due to lack of resources, reduced membership and a very diverse level of engagement and support from clubs. This means that not all DSAs are likely to be able to fulfil these roles. The potential is there to harness, though, and that should be a call for reflection to policy-makers, football authorities and further academic attention.

These findings, crucially, can be related to broader policy debates. If one regards accessibility as an essential component of inclusivity (DePauw & Gavron, 1995; Devas, 2003; Nind & Seale, 2009) then our findings reveal that football clubs are falling short of promoting a truly inclusive environment. Football clubs tend to understand access mostly as just concerning removal of physical barriers. Whereas physical access to stadiums is improving, provisions still remain very variable, with away fans suffering the most. However, our research shows clubs are not necessarily becoming more inclusive, in the sense of facilitating greater participation and broader social networks (Abbot & McConkey, 2006, p. 275).

In that respect, it is necessary to critique the ‘managerialism’ which football clubs approach disability, access and inclusion with. Our results confirm the institutional pressures identified by Walters and Kitchin (2009), whereby football clubs follow a quantitative assessment of the number of seats reserved for disabled fans. If clubs and governing bodies were to adopt a definition of access including other dimensions, they might (in turn) be encouraged to develop a more holistic approach to. We would also recommend management professionals to design qualitative assessments of their policies (e.g. perceived service quality assessments), focusing on assessing quality of experience, or diversity of services (Paramio-Salcines et al., 2014). As pointed out above, this links directly to human resources issues: a dedicated liaison officer for disabled supporters and a well-trained team of disability stewards would be a way to start developing such as a strategy.

The multi-dimensional model of accessibility proposed by Nind and Seale (2009) provides one valuable conceptual extension, specifically as a ‘normative’ lens to analyse and critique perceptions and arrangements relating to access and inclusion. Our discussion of the problems that DSAs and disabled supporters continue to face leads us to agree with Nind and Seale (2009) that there is no simplistic solution to access issues. Indeed, our research suggests it is difficult to develop a single model able to cater for the accessibility of every person with disability. Nonetheless, we argue that Nind and Seale’s model is useful for identifying and categorising problems of access, and we would encourage further research to continue testing its validity. As our research has shown, such multi-dimensional models of disability can enrich academic debates on football, social inclusion, and even fan and (disabled) customer management.

This said, we do not claim that Nind and Seale’s (2009) model is the only way to help make sense of the data. Additional interpretations grounded in other work, such as working within disability studies and critical disability studies, could also be put forth (Smith & Bundon, in-press). For example, earlier we noted the importance of power and how, after Foucault (1979), on-going relations between people and organisations are vital to understanding restrictions of activity that disabled fans can face. In so doing, the interpretation suggests that disabled fans within social relations are not simply passive or acted on, but rather may exercise power in varying degrees. The social relational model (Thomas, 2007) and the human rights model of disability might also be called upon to interpret results.

Building on the social model, the social relational model proposes that disabled people can experience various forms of indirect or direct disablism. Disablism is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments *and* the socially engendered undermining of their psychological or subjective wellbeing (Thomas, 2007; Smith & Bundon, in-press). For instance, as indicated in the results, disablism can involve having restricted access to transport and economic capital, being rendered invisible during conversations whilst watching a football game, being ignored in customer management, or not feeling safe in stadiums due to social oppression. The human rights model is embedded in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). It promotes change at a national and international level through eight principles. These are: (1) respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons; (2) non-discrimination; (3) full and effective participation and inclusion in society; (4) respect for difference and acceptance of disabled people as part of human diversity and humanity; (5) equality of opportunity; (6) accessibility; (7) equality between men and women; and (8) respect for the evolving capacities of disabled children and the right of disabled children to preserve their identities (Smith & Bundon, in-press). The human rights model in terms of football fans may be useful in that it can be called on by disabled fans, club management or policy-makers in legal or political actions to legitimately counter disablism faced. As a legal convention, it may help enable disabled fans and organisations to claim their rightful place in society. Instead of disability being considered a 'special need', the model places sport within the usual activities of citizenship. Thus, whilst with rare exceptions the social relational model and the human rights have rarely been used within the sport sciences (see e.g., Misener & Darcy, 2014; Smith, Bundon & Best, in-press), the two models might be harnessed to provide additional layers of complexity to understanding disability, sport management, and football fans.

This article has also reflected on the interest that sport management literature pays to disability issues. In that respect, this article specially contributes to the research by Paramio-Salcines et al. (2014, 2016) and Southby (2011, 2013) in that we have added the voices of the customers (i.e. the disabled supporters) to the mix. This article also suggests a different way to conceptualise access, so it can be better reconciled with wider inclusivity. We would specially call on colleagues working in the field of disability and sport management to consider using Neale and Sind model, so it can be further tested and, perhaps, reformulated.

Finally, our article contributes in raising the profile of the DSAs as valuable objects for research.

This research has also important policy-implications. We have clearly demonstrated the benefits that spectating has for the disabled supporters. This is an aspect that sports policy and practice tends to forget when focusing on social inclusion through active participation. Disabled supporters receive minimal acknowledgement in policy. At European level, the flagship EU programme for sport, Erasmus+, aims to promote social inclusion and equal opportunities. However, of the 10 projects funded focusing explicitly on persons with disability, all projects serve to promote *participation* in sport (European Commission, 2014, 2015). They all focus on people doing sport, but not on people spectating. The implication of this is that governments and clubs across Europe are missing an important trick in their efforts to produce social inclusion.

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