



Emotional grounds: Stories of football, memories, and emotions



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ABSTRACT

Central to the emotional experience of watching sport is memory – the capacity to recall great achievements, triumphs and defeats. For most sports fans, these memories are collective. However, this essay seeks to shed light on the ways in which sporting spaces – in this case football grounds – are also sites of acts of intimate emotional remembering that can exert a powerful hold over individuals even after (or, in some instances, because) many years have elapsed and a certain distance travelled. The essay briefly discusses the sociological significance of emotion, memory and place before adopting a narrative approach to describe and interrogate the author's own memories of particular moments in time and in sporting space. The stories that are told represent an invocation of emotions that are now indelibly associated with specific football grounds at particular times and also, in some cases, with the people with whom the author experienced these places. The essay seeks to demonstrate that the emotions that can be prompted by memories of football grounds often exceed the immediate excitement created by the event and, at least as importantly, necessarily vary from one spectator to another.

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1. Introduction

Memories bind us to particular places. As De Certeau (1984: 108) comments, 'there is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not'. The following stories represent an invocation of emotions that are now indelibly associated with specific sporting spaces at particular times. That said, defining emotions in relation to passions and appetites has long proved problematic (Dixon, 2003). Not every type of feeling highlighted in these stories would fit into everyone's categorisation of emotions. The experience of male bonding, the appreciation of maternal love, a personal reaction to the compassion of others, and a sense of belonging, for example, might all seem too vague as emotional registers. On the other hand, empathy, excitement, fear, and anxiety would almost certainly feature in most such lists. In many respects, the empathy experienced towards an injured peer or as expressed by others on the death of a parent was arguably the easiest sensation to narrate here because kindness makes sense in terms of the social character of emotion. Empathy, according to Hoffman (2008: 440) is 'an emotional state triggered by another's emotional state situation, in which one feels what the other feels or would normally be expected to feel in his situation'. The presence of others is crucial to the recollection of this particular emotion.

The excitement of being at one's first big football match or experiencing initial, and then more recent, feelings of male bonding, have many similar characteristics as does an awareness of maternal love. Much the same could be said about feelings of anxiety and fear although recalling these emotions is rendered more problematic because of the traditional ways in which boys and men are expected to respond to them in certain societies. That said, whilst it is possible (in some circumstances almost compulsory) to hide feelings of anxiety, essentialist readings of masculinity count for far less when there emerge undeniable and inescapable reasons to be afraid. Perhaps in only one of the situations described below was the presence of others largely insignificant. Although the feeling of loneliness that was experienced on one memorable occasion was almost certainly accentuated by a sense that everyone else belonged.

There is no doubt that playing sport can produce emotions, such as intimacy, that go well beyond the immediate excitement of scoring a goal or sinking a putt (Evers, 2010). This essay seeks to demonstrate, however, that the emotions that can also be prompted by and in sporting spaces, in this case football grounds, can actually exceed the immediate and, at least as importantly, can vary from one spectator to another. Many years ago, when I was telling a university class about the sociological insight to be derived from watching football, one female student commented, 'Maybe you just think too much'. Maybe I do. But so, I am happy to say, do most of us. As a man, however, with a certain type of background, the temptation to bottle up whatever it is I am thinking remains strong unless I am talking about subjects such as sport and specifically about memories linked to sport.

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Central to the enjoyment of watching sport is memory – the capacity to recall great achievements, triumphs and defeats. For most sports fans, these memories are collective. We did not watch alone – hence, questions such as ‘Do you remember when...?’ and inclusive comments such as ‘We were there when...?’ which are commonplace in many discussions about sport. In the past, indeed, the only way in which one could refresh one’s memory of great sporting moments was by engaging in acts of communal storytelling.

Today, YouTube and similar tools allow us to revisit moments that we previously only witnessed once, if at all, and persuade us to believe that our ability to remember is even greater than that of our forebears. But what is it that we are remembering? It is the event itself but surely not the emotions that we felt at the time, many of which were almost certainly unconnected to the drama that was unfolding before us and formed the basis of the collective experience? That is why storytelling remains a valuable means of communicating those personal emotions that are always present even in collective experiences.

This essay seeks to illuminate ways in which sporting spaces – in this case football grounds – are sites of acts of emotional remembering that can exert a powerful hold over the individual even after many years have elapsed. Using storytelling whereby the researcher ‘is both researcher and participant in her/his study of a particular phenomenon or phenomena’ (Allen-Collinson, 2011: 53), the essay relies heavily on my own memories of particular moments in time and in sporting space.

The essay does not seek to add new insights to the existing body of literature on either space or emotion. Rather the intention here is to argue that research into the social significance of sport, and specifically of fandom, should be more aware of that literature and demonstrate a willingness to think in terms of individual emotional experiences in addition to collective emotions. The contention is that sports stadia, and specifically football grounds, provide spaces in which people gather, ostensibly and in large part, with a shared set of feelings but which are such that it is also possible for the individual to experience emotions that are purely personal. This is facilitated by the fact that our interaction in such settings is not only with other people but with the physical environment in which we find ourselves and it is commonly recollection of that space which reminds us most vividly of the emotions felt on particular occasions. To explain this further, it is important to consider the sociological importance of emotion memory, and space and, more importantly, of the interplay between the three.

2. On emotion, memory, and space

Collins (1990: 27) argues that ‘emotion potentially occupies a crucial position in general sociological theory’. But how are we to demonstrate this potential? According to Denzin (1990: 86), ‘emotion must be studied as lived experience’. For the overwhelming majority of the world’s population, lived experiences are situated in social space. ‘Space and place’, according to Tuan (1977: 3), ‘are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted’. Yet, space is only natural in part for, as Lefebvre (1991: 77) observes, ‘social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information’. Furthermore, ‘vis-à-vis lived experience, space is neither a mere “frame”, after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it’. It is in this sense, for example, that ‘the city is a place, a center of meaning, par excellence’ (Tuan, 1977: 173) – a symbol in itself and also the location of numerous highly visible symbols. Not surprisingly, therefore, social spaces such as cities

and, I would argue, football grounds, are hugely important in the construction and reproduction of memories and identities (Bale and Vertinsky, 2004).

The analysis of social space, Lefebvre (1991: 226) argues, ‘involves levels, layers and sedimentations of perception, representation, and spatial practice which presuppose one another, which proffer themselves to one another, and which are superimposed upon one another’. As for public spaces (a description that applies, at least in part to British football grounds), ‘from the greatest public square to the smallest public park these places are a product of, and internally dislocated by, heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting social identities/relations’ (Massey, 2005: 152).

Urry (2007: 89) notes that public paths and pavements may provide ‘moments of joy and surprise’. Yet, how often do what we see and the emotions that are conjured up by our physical surroundings, become a matter for sociological analysis? Writing in 1995, Jenks (1995: 145) noted that ‘sociology has long since evacuated methodological sites that claimed any correspondential relation with the “seen” phenomenon’. In response, Jenks (1995: 145) sought ‘to reconstitute the analytic force of the *flâneur*’. One recognises, however, that there remains considerable suspicion in conventional social scientific circles about the role of the *flâneur* and the validity of his activities. The *flâneur*’s ‘discoveries’ are undeniably impressionistic rather than realistic but that is arguably their greatest strength (White, 2001). Impressionistic as they are, they represent place in sociologically interesting ways (Bairner, 2011). They offer an alternative vision, one which is, according to Jenks (1995: 149), ‘more optimistic than that founded on “power-knowledge”’.

As Bale and Vertinsky (2004: 1) observe, ‘the significance of space and place as central dimensions of sport is well recognised by scholars who have addressed questions of sport from philosophical, sociological, geographical and historical perspectives’. More specifically, sports grounds are always emotive places. This is often because of the ebb and flow of the sporting event itself. However, there may also be evidence of emotional responses to particular landscapes (Bairner, 2009; Bale, 2003). The first of these explanations is more likely than not to result in collective feeling, the second in emotions inspired by the surrounding environment that are almost certainly more personal and confined to the individual. Furthermore, it can even be argued that sporting spaces, even heavily populated ones, can be sites for individual emotional experiences which have only marginal links to the occasion and/or the place.

Emotional experiences associated with specific places can be immediate – of the moment so to speak. However, at least as often, if not more so, they are produced and reproduced within individual memory. The sociological significance of this should not be underestimated. Huysen (2003: 11) claims that ‘one of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years has been the emergence of memory as a key cultural and political concern in Western societies, a turning toward the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth-century modernity’. Memory itself can best be understood as a social activity inasmuch as ‘the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society’ (Halbwachs, 1992: 51). Indeed, it is for this reason that emotional experience is often to be found at the interface between memory and space. As Johnson (2002: 294) argues, ‘the concept of social memory has been linked to the development of emotional and ideological ties with particular histories and geographies’. As a consequence, Hoelscher and Alderman (2004: 348) suggest, ‘social memory and social space conjoin to produce much of the context for modern identities – and the often – rigorous contestation of those identities’. The question is how best to capture the dynamic relationship between emotion, memory, and space.

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