

## **An Ethnography on Pool Playing**

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In the north of Scotland there is a very small, picturesque town called Ullapool where locals earn their main source of income through the fishing industry and summer tourism. Ullapool is small enough for the majority of the town to know each other on a first name basis. The primary form of socialising is in the thirteen pubs that are scattered throughout the town and this is where I decided to carry out my fieldwork.

One of the popular pubs, the Caledonian or 'the Caley' as it is known by the locals, almost always has local men in it, either having drinks at the bar or playing a game of pool. As I have lived only a short distance from Ullapool my entire life, I am a regular at this pub both in the busy summer and empty winter and it is one of the only bars in the town to have a pool table. My ethnographic research is based upon the social relations that arise when playing a simple game of pool which took place in The Caley. The aim was to try and grasp what social relations exist when men play men at pool, in comparison to when men play women at pool. Whilst there are rather obvious differences, I was surprised to find one social reality that existed in both cases, and that is the presence of a hierarchy. The following will illustrate how I came to this conclusion, and in addition I will try and suggest whether the social structures claimed are created individually or by larger social influences. Most of the men I encountered knew one another and moreover knew me. During my fieldwork I both observed and played a number of games of pool. I stated that I was going to be doing some work at the bar whilst chatting and playing pool with the men, but this was all that was said and there was no further enquiry. This will hopefully have allowed me to be less influential upon their social interactions and thus the encounter would remain minimally affected by the presence of an official anthropologist.

As with many sports today, pool involves a green rectangular playing area and the objective is to score, or in pool specifically 'pot' balls. Unlike many other sports however, people play it on a day-to-day basis, indoors, with alcohol flowing and with commonly uncompetitive motives. Fifteen balls are set up in a plastic triangle, seven yellow, seven red and one black. Each player has a wooden cue with a chalk tip, which is used to hit a white ball in order to hit the colour designated to the player. Each player's colour is decided when

a person pots the first ball and from then on has to aim for the balls of that same colour. Once players pot all of their colours, they aim for the black and the first one to pot this wins. Each game now costs roughly fifty pence, depending on the pool table and there are six pockets where balls can be potted. The men I encountered played pool on a very informal, relaxed basis and it was always accompanied by alcohol. Due to the scope available, only a small number of encounters are described below and were chosen because they reflect all the social relations that I witnessed most extensively when narrowed down to but a few games.



Ullapool

Two local men are playing pool in the bar area. Basher, the younger of the two, is around forty years old and most certainly looks the trendiest of the pair wearing a light blue shirt tucked into navy denim jeans and clean, white trainers. He is well shaven and his hair is short and neat with some gel holding it in shape. Robbie, aged in his late fifties is a local fisherman wearing light blue jeans, large green welly boots, a dark blue fleece and a summer hat. He has a grey moustache, a thin pony tail falling from behind his hat and when he smiles - which he does so often - a number of gaps can be seen where teeth used to be. There are only a few locals in the bar and it is quite quiet besides the jukebox music humming in the background. I have been sitting at the bar for half an hour, talking to a few of the local men and to the two who are now playing pool. Basher has potted three red balls and Robbie has potted one yellow. After each red was potted, Basher went up to the bar and gulped his lager, whilst saying to Robbie 'It's a dreich day today' the first time, the second time saying 'have you collected your new boat yet?' and the third time just whistling. Robbie answered in a friendly, very comfortable manner; they are just two friends playing some pool and 'catching the craic'. Basher now looks at the table and aims for the bottom right pocket. Once he pots the red he looks up to Robbie with a grin. Robbie barely changes his already grinning expression, or his position, and then lines up his next shot once Basher misses. After potting his second yellow, Basher says 'good shot', as Robbie mumbles aloud to himself and looks on to plan his next move. He pots another yellow and Basher says 'Good shot Robbie'. The next one is missed and when Basher pots the next two shots he walks to the bar as before and he and Robbie talk to the barman about how many people are being made redundant. Basher exclaims 'Aye, this bloody year has forced lots of people on their arses. Old Robert's Mrs lost her job in the centre and is now working in her friend's fish and chip van. It's bloody ridiculous'. Robbie agrees and claims 'the fisherman haven't done too badly out of it though' and drinks more from his pint as Basher moves toward the table again. He misses, and Robbie pots one more yellow. Basher once again comments, saying 'that's a squeaky clean shot Robbie' with his lager in hand, and after Robbie misses his next yellow Basher wins the game by potting the rest of his reds and finally the black. They shake hands at the end and Basher says 'good game', Robbie replies the same and they both walk to the bar and begin talking just as they normally do, about the work, the weather and various other relaxed topics.

This one game of pool was chosen out of eleven games that I observed as it best encompasses the mannerisms, attitudes and relationships that all eleven games seem to involve. All the games involved only men. After witnessing a few games with Basher playing, it became apparent that he continuously commented on the shots of his competitors or on the shots that he observed between games that did not involve him. Robbie and two other local men who were frequently in the bar also watched games being played, but never once commented on the shots between the men playing. I became curious as to why some individuals such as Basher commented on the shots, and others such as Robbie did not. Perhaps it is simply that all men are individual and so act and socialise in different ways. This notion was confirmed to me by a young man called Kyle, also a local fisherman, aged twenty two, who commented on the various shots of men he was playing against. A game against the young, new barman was filled with remarks such as 'good shot', 'nice one' and 'that was close'. Kyle and Basher appeared to simply be two individual personalities who vocalised their opinions on the games, whilst others remained quieter and less vocal.



Pictures of the Caledonian: The quieter period before the touristic summer.



However, a rather different picture emerged after I researched how men played pool against women. After watching men play for a number of days, I ask Robbie for a game of pool. He immediately takes money from his pocket, sifts through to find a 50p coin and when I offer to pay he looks at me with his forehead creased and says 'don't be so silly'. He places the coin on the pool table to book the next game for us and goes to have a cigarette outside. When he returns it is our turn and I have set up the balls so we are ready to play. He tells me that I can break and so I go right ahead. It is only us two and seven middle-aged local men, with broad northern accents, in the pub. A man named Ian watches us play and the rest are talking amongst themselves. I pot a yellow. I then pot a second yellow in the middle left pocket and Robbie nods his head and says 'good shot'. I chalk the cue and say nothing whilst Robbie takes a sip of his beer, then miss the next shot. Robbie puts his beer down and looks at the table, with the pool cue standing vertical on the floor between his two hands and mumbles something to himself. He takes a shot and misses, still grinning nonetheless and moves toward his drink on the bar and watches as I try to figure my next move. The man at the bar called Ian turns and looks at the table, saying 'oh, not looking good there Robbie', and Robbie simply replies 'there's still time yet'. I pot a yellow in the top left pocket and Robbie says 'fucking good shot', and when I smile he says 'I've never known you to be so quiet Lorraine' and the men at the bar all laugh, as do I. The atmosphere feels very relaxed. The game continues this way and I win with Robbie saying 'good shot' almost every time I pot a yellow.

I played fifteen games of pool altogether. Six men were involved over three days and the social interaction with me stimulated a very different outlook to the one I had before. Almost every time I potted a ball there was a positive or surprised remark from my male competitor or from men at the bar. On one game when I potted two balls Ian said 'Who taught her how to play pool?' with a slightly confused expression on his face. On another occasion, I had to consider my next move more carefully as there were no shots in sight that I thought it would be possible to pot. I then said 'I have an idea' and snookered my competitor - meaning I hit the white into a position that meant he could not hit any of his balls without a struggle. There was then an uproar between the three men, Robbie saying 'You bastard', Basher saying 'It'll do you no good in the end. Fucking good shot though' as well as three men at the bar laughing, as one said 'that's a devious move right there lassie'

and another saying 'sneaky'. From watching games between men, snookering did not seem to produce this reaction; in fact it was very common. Finally, during another game, Kyle told me 'I won't go as easy on you as those guys', but even after seeing me defeat the two previous players, he still insisted on suggesting certain shots to take and telling me the force I should hit the ball with. He also gave me his own better, personal pool cue and took the regular one from the bar for himself.

Now it is necessary to state that when observing men playing pool, a number of commonalities arose as well as rules that all the men followed unquestionably. Firstly, the loser of one game pays for the game that follows if it is with the same person. If it is a new person, the new person plays against the winner of the previous game and that new player pays. Secondly, the winner of the previous game always breaks and if it is two new players, they toss a coin. Thirdly, if a man brings in his own pool cue he is the one who plays with it and no one else would ask or be offered to use it. Thus as witnessed in this encounter, there clearly appeared to be different rules when playing with women and I asked two female friends to come and play a few games on the final day, to ensure it was not just me specifically that triggered these different attitudes. The games followed the same patterns and all the men commented, paid and insisted on helping with certain shots. When looking back at the games I observed between men, these types of interaction were absent. There was only commenting from Basher and Kyle and all others remained relatively quiet until they stood by the bar. If all men had the capability to comment and have an opinion on the shots, why did some only do so with women and some do so with men and women alike? Moreover, why were there different rules and conducts when playing with women?

After asking the local men questions about the game, a new thought emerged. It turned out that in a pool competition two weekends before, Basher had won £120 for winning first place in the competition and Kyle had won £40 for coming second. I then asked who the best pool players in the town were and all five men at the bar, including the barman, agreed it was Kyle, Basher or another man called Andrew with whom I had never met. This thus suggests another notion about pool playing, tied in with the way that men treat women when playing. In the first account with only men, I observed that only Kyle and Basher commented on shots taken. With women, the two men continued to do this, but the

other men did too. This, I believe, is because there is a definite hierarchy that exists when people play pool in this small town pub. I don't think it is a coincidence that only Kyle and Basher commented on shots with men. When considering games with women, it can be seen that the other men do not remain quiet because they are incapable of projecting their opinion. On the contrary, when they play with women their games become fuelled with comments, advice and authoritative mannerisms. There is a confidence they have with women during this game. When I posed questions such as 'how often do women come here and play pool?' the responses from the separate men were 'never', 'hardly ever' and one went so far as to say 'women don't know how to play, just us old men'. It suggests that women are not expected to play pool, and if they do, they are not expected to play well. Thus the men have experience and knowledge of the game that women do not have, and appear to be aware of this, thus a hierarchy is formed. Why do they not commentate when playing men? I would like to suggest that this is because just as there is a hierarchy when playing women, there is also a hierarchy between men. This would account for the best players' commentaries and the other players lack of vocalisation.

There are two theorists that I feel could help further explain how and why hierarchies arise when playing pool. Max Weber claims that social relations are created primarily by individuals and that the structures that exist in societies come into being through individual perceptions and attitudes. People attach meanings to certain aspects of life that in turn cause society as a whole to think, act or feel a certain way. Weber highlights how it is individuals that create the views of society and enough people must conform to a given idea in order for it to become valid within society such as the way that men all appear to conform to a set of unwritten rules when playing pool. Only the best pool players would be confidently vocal when watching or playing pool. In comparison, the others would not comment, which I believe is due to them not having the authority to do so, almost as if they know their place without it being said aloud. It is the individuals who must recognise that the authority is binding and agree that the behaviour that corresponds with the authority is 'worthy of imitation' (Weber, 1962:72). Although Weber is referring to governance here, the same can be applied to pool, whereby each individual is accepting a certain role, designated according to their skill when playing pool, and this forms the hierarchical social structure that exists.



Emile Durkheim would perhaps have an alternative way of looking at relations when playing pool. He states that 'collective tendencies have an existence of their own; they are forces as real as cosmic forces, though of another sort; they likewise affect the individuals' (Durkheim, 1952:273). From this point of view, it is society that forms the relations that individuals experience. It is not due to their individual choices, but is caused by an overarching societal influence. As seen above, each incident appeared disconnected and it could be claimed that some men were more vocal than others or simply more opinionated. Yet when looking at the instances where women were involved, there was evidence that the men who remained previously quiet were not in fact indifferent. Thus it appears that there exists another reason that goes beyond the individual because all of the men I encountered followed the same behaviour. This could be in fact because there are social norms whereby the best pool players have the right and respect to remark subjectively on a game. All others conform to this, whether through awareness or not. Thus contrasting with Weber, the hierarchies exist prior to the specific individuals who are playing and each one acts accordingly.

A feminist approach may also help back up Durkheim's notion. Sherry Ortner claims that hierarchical power and domination by men is in fact caused by cultural constructions. This simply means that the 'ideas that give social meaning to physical differences between the sexes...appear reasonable and appropriate' (Ortner, 1972:83). Although culture is different from the social, it reiterates the same idea that the attitudes that exist between opposite sexes are due to realities that are outside the individual. Furthermore, when considering the unfair treatment of women in Kaulong of Melanesia due to menstruation (Moore, 1988), or females in the Hagen society of the highlands of Papua New Guinea due to gender categories created by symbols of clan territory (Strathern, 1998), and then comparing it to the Western world which has completely different gender relations, one can again see how certain societies construct certain, society-specific perceptions upon individuals - in this case gender specific individuals - and ultimately shape the beliefs and thoughts that exist in societies. Therefore the hierarchies when playing pool, between men and men and women and men, can also be seen as being constructed by society and therefore appearing as social norms.

Ultimately, there is no right or wrong answer to this scenario. Hierarchies may exist due to other factors that I have not accounted for such as wealth or social status. When women are involved, the special treatment may be due to sheer courtesy or attraction to certain women. Moreover, assuming there are hierarchies existing due to the reasons I propose, it cannot be proven how and why they are formed. Durkheim and Weber most certainly allow the suggestion of it being due to social collectivities and individual perceptions. As a growing anthropologist, I am aware that it is a matter of perception and results will emerge depending on how I approach the field and where I find my resources. Why hierarchies exist is debatable, but the social theorists I selected certainly provide ideas as to why there are hierarchies during such a relaxed game. I may not be able to fully account for why such hierarchies exist, but through the data that I have collected in the small Caledonian bar of Ullapool, one thing I can say for sure is that there are definite hierarchies in existence between people when playing pool.



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