

Gambling in the Backroom

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[Bev] 'The lads would stay down the club drinking all night, and we'd have a bloody good laugh and a night out with them all. But that's all stopped'.

My ethnographic encounter was conducted in a former Working Man's Club in a village in the North-West of England; a village I shall refer to as Coketown¹. The Club was built to provide a private, recreational space for male factory workers, the typical role of a Northern Working Man's Club. The factory was built in the 1880s to manufacture industrial cables and was the main source of employment in the village, employing 5,000 men at its peak. Unfortunately, following a series of redundancy initiatives started in 1970, the factory closed in 2002. Despite the closure of the site, and amidst ongoing commercial and residential re-development, the Club just about survived.

I have focused on one group of regulars and one of their recurrent social activities. I will refer to the group as *the lads*, a title afforded to them by other social actors in the Club. Societies contain their own interpretations (Geertz 1972: 29) and central to the lads' social interaction was an emphasis on *having a laugh*; enjoying one's self and generally taking things lightly and humorously.

The Coketown lads inhabited a social construction and regulation of masculinity similar to Mac an Ghail's 'Macho Lads' (1994); both groups were concerned with physical toughness, having a laugh and looking after one another (Mac an Ghail 1994). Furthermore, the Coketown lads structured their social relations in a similar fashion to the principles of Melanesian Big men. In both Melanesia and the Club, certain individuals embodied concentrations of leadership functions and achieved status and influence through the manipulation of a competitive exchange system

¹ The name is taken from Charles Dickens' novel, *Hard Times*, which was set in Coketown, a fictitious, industrialised Northern town. I first came upon Dickens's Coketown under the inauspicious circumstances of a GCSE English exam where it was used as a 'classic' example of Northern England. The name has never quite left my consciousness and, thus, when it came to providing a fictional name for the Village in which I performed my encounter I felt that the name Coketown symbolised everything I wished to evoke.

(Burns, Cooper, Wild 1972: 164); the hierarchy this installed was symbolically played out amongst the lads when gambling. I will refer to two selected moments; the first, a pre-organised game of poker and, the second, an instance of spontaneous betting on televised sport. The importance of these two social actions, having a laugh and gambling, was particularly significant to the lads' interpretation of their own culture (Geertz 1972: 29) since their private Working Man's Social Club had been transformed into an open Community Social Club. The lads had been displaced from the central and largest room in the Club, the function-room, to the smallest and most secluded, the backroom, to accommodate the new, more financially lucrative clientele.

The lads' preference for gambling whilst in the backroom reflects, and is an extension of, Willis' (1977) study of anti-school subcultures amongst working class boys. Willis highlighted a sub-culture within the school system which he too termed 'the lads' (Willis 1977). Willis' lads substituted their own culture of 'having a laff' in place of the dominant school ideology (Willis 1977), a strategy to cope with the monotony of the jobs the lads were likely to end up in (Willis 1977). Willis argued that the lads won space from the school through 'having a laff' (Willis 1977). Similarly, the Coketown lads gambling and having a laugh together is an example of Willis' theory in practice; the working class boys *have* grown up and *have* ended up in menial, labouring jobs. They are subsequently having a laugh as a coping mechanism. By relegating the lads to the backroom from the function-room, the lads were marginalised in a space they thought of as their own.

There is a parallel between the public act of cockfighting in Bali, Indonesia and backroom gambling in the Coketown Club. Both the gambling culture of a Balinese cockfight and the lads gambling is a symbolic performance of either group's culture. Cockfighting was a carefully prepared and ritualised version of Balinese life (Geertz 1972: 25), as gambling was for the lads. In both cases, the functional act of gambling was interpretive (Geertz 1972: 26). Cockfighting and backroom gambling were two separate groups' readings of their own social experiences; a story they told about themselves to themselves (Geertz 1972: 26). Just as Balinese culture surfaced in the

social act of cockfighting (Geertz 1972: 5), the lads' culture surfaced in the act of backroom gambling.

'...Dad what's the name of that fat fella who ran the club before me Mum? Well it was dead easy to fiddle the books if you wanted to'
[Sandra] 'Beverly! You can't say that!'

A conversation with Bev and Sandra

Sandra and Beverly (mother and daughter), with help from John (husband/father), had run the Club before, during and after the closure of the main factory site (1998-2008).

Sandra first 'went down the Club' with *her* John when he worked in the factory. Sandra began working behind the bar after they married. Years later, after Sandra had taken over as Bar Manager, Bev began co-managing the Club when one Friday evening Sandra was too drunk to work. Bev took great delight in revealing this; Sandra denied any recollection.

[Sandra] 'I remember back in the day when with them all [the lads]; it was so many deep at the bar'

[Bev] 'We used to rule the place. Oh the lads used to be a good laugh back then. We'd drink down there and party down there'

After the factory closed and the Club lost its funding, Sandra and John had to look for other means to support the Club:

[Sandra] '...My John would organise all the entertainment, wouldn't you John?'

[John] 'Aye, I would yeh'

[Sandra] 'John was the one who started letting out the car park to the caravans; made the club some extra money, didn't you John?'

[John] 'Aye, I did yeh'

This caused a problem for the lads; rather than having free run of the Club, they had to stay in the smaller back room to accommodate the new clientele and social events.

[Bev] ‘They [the lads] thought it was just their club though. But when the social nights on Saturdays first started and they would all get kicked out to the backroom, they’d kick off wouldn’t they? [Putting on a deep voice] “Oh bloody hell, it’s our Club, we’ve been coming here for years”. We had a few rows with Jimmy I can tell you, they hated getting kicked out to the back [deep voice again] “You make more money out of us than you do them”; but we didn’t you see, we had to bring the social night in as we couldn’t make the money without it. But they couldn’t understand that, they couldn’t understand that a handful of lads couldn’t make as much money’.

The disposition of their social space served to marginalise and exclude the lads from their own Club; as Connell contends for working class men, ‘the claim to power that is central to hegemonic masculinity is constantly negated by economic and cultural weaknesses’ (Connell 1995: 116). The backroom gambling culture represents the lads’ adoption of a new space in the Club. *Their* poker table and all forms of social betting undertaken in the backroom justified and legitimated the lads’ grip on *their* Club. In London, betting shops are similarly working class spaces (Cassidy 2012: 266).

Saturday night’s alright for gambling

On foot, the quickest route to the Club is to slip through the broken panels in the old industrial fence that skirts the Car Park from the main road, behind which one is confronted with a shanty town array of parked caravans. It’s Saturday evening at about 6.30pm, and as I come closer to the Club, the first people I see are the children and grandchildren of the Club members charging around with a *footy*, yelling and taking advantage of the sun. Next, sitting on the low built wall directly outside the entrance, sit three men, smoking and chatting.

I'm heading for the backroom of the Club through the main entrance. To my right are the double doors into the function-room, which today are flung open and I can make out two motorbikes propped up inside; it's funny who turns up in there. During my first week of study, there was a *bloke* dressed up like Elton John, unaccountably performing a rendition of *Is this the way to Amarillo?*, crow-barred between *Saturday night's alright for fighting* and *Rocket-man*; still no-one seemed to mind and it gave the lads in the backroom an opportunity to joyfully heckle the hapless Elton.

I pass through the smaller door on the left into the snooker hall, holed up in the enclave behind sit a group of *scallies*, their moped helmets proudly displayed on their knees, giggling conspiratorially and trying to look old enough to drink. At the far end of the hall is a single door with a cracked pane of glass behind, which is the backroom. I give the door a good shove because it sticks if you don't. Inside stand four or five *older ex-factory workers*, talking and laughing. To their right, by the dart-board, are four *auld fellas* watching *The Super-League* on the *telly* with a crate of beer between them.

Tucked to the left of the television, around a poker-table, were the lads laughing and bickering loudly; the seating had been easily rearranged to accommodate the poker-table, the physical layout of a setting encouraging spontaneous social interaction through gambling (Cassidy 2012: 275). Cockfights were always held in a secluded part of the village (Geertz 1972: 2) gaining a designated space from the rest of the group; the lads' seclusion from the rest of the Club mirrors the gamblers desire for separateness.

Floating between the lads and ex workers was Jimmy. He too is laughing, joking and drinking but, upon greeting him, I notice there is swelling over his right eye and a tear drop of scabbed blood atop his nose. Turning from the bar he calls over to the group of gamblers, 'Drink Michael?'. 'Please love', is the response.

Jimmy I find out, because of the teasing from the other lads, had been fighting on Friday night. The bruising over his eye was going to be the subject of a lot of jokes about Jimmy slowing down in his 'old age'. In Melanesian society, a Big Man's renown was set up by competition with other ambitious men (Sahlins 1963: 290). A Big Man's leadership, both amongst the lads and in Melanesia, was a

creation, not a social ascription (Sahlins 1963: 290), nevertheless achieved through personal endeavour. Jimmy was a central figure because of his reputation for physical toughness. This reputation afforded him high status, highlighted through the poker.

I took a seat amongst the lads and was immediately offered *a buy in*; I refused on the grounds that I don't understand poker and would only slow the game down. 'Don't be daft matey; it's a laugh; Jimmy can hardly read, and he gets by!'. The games are played in good humour, and I forget that the lads are actually gambling amidst the constant swapping of stories and anecdotes. The lads' solidarity is built up through their communal consumption of gambling and their shared preference for having a laugh (Kenway, et al. 1996: 516). The self-deprecating nature of a culture of having a laugh, nurtured amongst the lads, can be compared to the Mexican tradition of satirically based humour: *Lo Mexicano*, based on the self-perceived Mexican national character (Ferry 2011: 16). *Lo Mexicano* jokes were often formed as a critique toward the indifference of the government towards the Mexican people (Ferry 2011: 18). Both independent, but reflective, strategies, served to relieve and express feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation amongst the lads, as well as the Mexican populace.

Matty won the first pot, provoking teasing, accusations of cheating and being 'jammy'. The game continued at what seems a leisurely pace in comparison to the speed that the rounds of beer are bought. Mikey, a prominent figure amongst the lads, seems to be sat at the centre of the group despite it being a round table. Mike's inability, bordering on refusal to learn the rules is hilarious, as he impishly disrupts the games.

Yet, in one game Mikey manages to crash out at an inexplicably late stage, leaving only Fast Phil and Kersey to battle it out for the pot. The lads and ex-workers alike sat and lent around the table, offering unhelpful and contradictory advice. Cassidy (2012) observed a similar behaviour amongst the machine gamblers in betting shops; whilst the actual betting was an individual endeavour, it was a collective experience at the same time (Cassidy 2012: 247). Central to the entertainment was Kersey's goading of Phil. Kersey, the more experienced poker player of the two, would egg

Phil on to bigger bets; 'Do what you want mate, I'm just saying a real man would put a bet on'. Kersey quickly won the game. The loss was swiftly forgotten, as another drink was bought. This self destructive public exhibition by Fast Phil is also reflected in the method of acquiring status through the ritual destruction of property amongst the Kwakiutl during Potlatch (Boas 1966: 77). Rising socially in Kwakiutl culture was achieved through showing one's self to be superior to a rival (Boas 1966: 81). A chief's disregard for his own material property asserted his power over his rival and 'flattened' him through a ritual act of destruction (Boas 1966: 93). The destructive nature of the Potlatch was important because of its ceremonial publicity (Connerton 1989). This need to defeat a rival regardless of personal loss was also considerably clear in Phil's refusal to stop gambling, despite the inevitability of his financial loss. This significantly functioned as a public reflection of Phil's status as a 'Big Man' amongst the lads.

When Jimmy went outside to smoke, some of the lads commented that Jimmy only played if he was 'banker' and, thus, in control of the cards and the money. Some of the lads agreed to secretly play against him to *beat the bank*. When Jimmy re-entered and joined in the poker, he assumed the position of banker; this provoked one of the lads to demand to know why Jimmy was banker. Jimmy retorts that it's because 'you can't count high enough to be banker, you tit'. The hierarchy amongst the group was declared: Jimmy was in charge. Despite the other lads' efforts, the game came to a conclusion and Jimmy won the pot. In Melanesia the characterisation of a Big Man flowed public actions; designed for a competitive comparison and showing a standing above the rest of the group (Sahlins 1963: 289). Jimmy's dominance had to be constantly on the offensive and defensive in this instance (Kenway 1991) to contend with the formalised challenge of the other lads. The competition central to gambling was key to the accomplishment of masculine identity and operated as a defining feature in the lads' social relationships (Kenway, Reay, Youdell, Gillborn 1996:516).

Geertz never witnessed a dispute regarding an umpire's interpretation of the rules arise during a cockfight (Geertz 1972: 10); in contrast the lads would often fall out during poker games. The main cause of contention and confrontation were disputes regarding the rules. Through cockfighting and backroom gambling both of

the groups' cultural experiences were played out. The gambling provided status rivalry, excitement and competition, all bound together into a controllable, though volatile, symbolic system (Geertz 1972: 27).

Chip barms and Speedway

I arrive at around 4pm and enter discreetly through the open fire exit into the men's toilets, leading to the back room: the route I had learnt from the lads. Sitting to the left of the television are the lads themselves, the most prominent of whom is Mikey, arms stretched comfortably behind his head and his flip flopped feet are perched on the back of a chair. He is a labourer by trade and had been enjoying the weather. He is laughing his way through an anecdote as he sees me slip in through the door: 'Heyup Al'. As I'm sitting just to the right of Mike, I notice a yellowing smudge on Mikes left ankle. I look again and snort with laughter; Mike has a small tattoo of a pint of lager on his ankle. Noticing my direction of gaze Mike laughs; 'Don't join the army, bud'.

At 6.30pm, I'm sent off for *chip-barms* from the takeaway, about a five minutes' walk away. Jimmy pays for mine and has *a pint* waiting for me when I return; Jimmy, it is worth noting, has bought all of my drinks. Several times I try to buy him one back, and am told 'not to be daft'. Both the lads and Melanesian Big Men establish relations of loyalty and obligation on the part the group, so that their production can be mobilised (Sahlins 1963: 292).

The Club is beginning to fill up, and the noise from bingo flows through from the function-room. *Speedway* racing has come on the television in the backroom and the lads spontaneously set up a betting game centred on the racing. *Speedway* seems to consist of a couple of laps between four drivers; as there was by now only four of the group left (including me), each of us would choose a racer (handily, each race comprised a red, blue, white and green racer) and put 50p on the table. I remember doing very well for a bit, and then not winning again; 'You're rubbish at this Al'. The game served to facilitate a lot of jokes and teasing; in Balinese culture to be teased was to be accepted (Geertz 1972: 4). Conversation was focused on which one looked confident at the beginning of the race, and we all agreed the white one was always the worst, except for when he won, in which case he was not. Similarly, the

spontaneous nature of this gambling is recognised as being an important element in prisoners forming social bonds through gambling (McEvoy and Spirgen.2011.72).

Cockfights were 'focused gatherings' (Goffman 1961: 9-10) in which a set of persons in a common flow of activity related to one another in terms that flowed (Geertz 1972: 10); this was the case when the lads betted on the *Speedway*. In Balinese gambling culture, the monetary exchange was of symbolic importance as well as financial (Geertz 1972: 16). This too was evident in the lads' mode of gambling; money was put into a *pot*, but was just used to buy everyone *a round*. What made the money symbolically important in both contexts was what it caused to happen (Geertz 1972: 17). Cassidy commented that despite gambling being financially detrimental, the machine players could ameliorate the effects of the short term gambling losses not just by sharing their winnings, but also by plugging into networks that provided access to loans and favours (Cassidy 2012: 271). The lads were involved in the same process; each knew that they weren't making any profit on the *Speedway* betting, but continued because of the bonhomie and access to communal rounds of beer which the involvement afforded them.

[Bev] 'You want to do a project on the Club? Just talk to Jimmy; you could fill a book with that lad!'

To conclude, in the particular instances of gambling addressed, I attempted to draw out and magnify the underlying subtleties of social relations amongst the Coketown lads. In doing so, I also hoped to reflect that, despite the initial differences between the pre-organised poker and the spontaneous *Speedway*, both forms of gambling served the same social purpose: a means of connecting the lads to one another through a shared social action, whilst also reflecting the lads' own interpretation of their social reality. By concentrating on the act of gambling as a particular means of establishing social relationships, I hoped to reflect the lads' backroom culture as a whole.

As it would be impossible to show all the disparate elements of the individual's social relations within the Club in my ethnography, I chose to give voice to the lad's backroom culture through two specific instances of social gambling. I wished to

create a picture of the wider organisation of the lads' social relationships, both amongst themselves and within the Club as a whole. Gambling, examined as a closed social act, provided a framework from which to consider the lads' social world: the parameters of establishing a specific game and placing a monetary bet excluded outsiders from this social interaction, coupled with the isolated position in which the gambling took place (in the backroom). I, therefore, hoped to reflect the position the lads held within *their* Club as a whole and the organisation of the lads as a social group's own internal relations, also as a whole, through just one area of their social interactions: gambling.

A comparison of both forms of gambling, the poker and the speedway, reflects the underlying similarities of the social relations formed amongst the lads. Each act of gambling served the same comparative social purpose: to establish stronger kinship links and also hierarchical positions amongst the lads themselves and to provide a means by which to have a laugh, the importance of which was magnified through the lads' forced displacement and migration to the backroom, from what was once the social sanctuary of the Club. The movement from the main function-room to the backroom reflected the lads' tenuous grip on their social space, a grip attenuated by the lads' economic and cultural weakness.

By describing the lads' practices and roles in the act of gambling, I hoped to reflect that these roles had major consequences for the way the group functioned as a whole; in particular, the importance of being linguistically quick, witty and physically tough, and that these traits were highlighted, accentuated and played out in the act of social gambling. The social performance this entailed, and the social meanings revealed from it, were at the heart of the lads' conceptualisation and practice of their social relationships.

The possibility of an alternative gaze

Nearing the end of an interview, I asked Sandra about her current involvement with the Club;

[Sandra] 'Very rare I go down; most of my friends don't anymore...except on a Monday for the bingo...oh and for bridge on a Friday upstairs'

[Bev] 'You make a few quid from that, don't you Mum?'

[Sandra smiles conspiratorially and gives the enormous dog at her feet a pat] 'No not really love; it's just a bit of a laugh with the girls...'

Gambling as form of social exchange occurred throughout the Club; Sandra's social group, for example, could add a female voice providing one of many potential comparative aspects to the narrative of social gambling within The Coketown Working Mans Club;

[Me] 'You're not going this Friday, are you?'

[Sandra] 'Should be, love'.

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