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Research

The Authenticity Problem: Authenticity as a Methodological Trap in People-Centred Research on Working-Class Football Supporting Communities

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Abstract

This paper seeks to make a methodological contribution **AQ1** to archaeological praxis of working-class communities, by illuminating how **AQ2** archaeologists engaged in oral history-based research with working-class communities may encounter authenticity as a methodological challenge. Drawing on my PhD research on football as cultural heritage, I will outline the *authenticity problem* I encountered in the field: the enforcement of hierarchies of authenticity by working-class football supporters in response to their experiences of marginalisation in the sport. In turn, I will not only show how these hierarchies of authenticity present obstacles to researchers looking to build relationships of trust with their subjects, but also indicate some solutions to this authenticity problem. Specifically, I will show how it is often useful to “fall into the trap of authenticity” as a researcher and use the interview setting to discursively construct yourself as authentic on your subject communities’ own terms. **AQ3**

Résumé de Recherche

Le présent article s'efforce d'apporter une contribution méthodologique à la pratique archéologique des communautés ouvrières, en mettant en lumière la manière dont les archéologues se consacrant à la recherche axée sur l'histoire orale auprès des communautés ouvrières peuvent être confrontés à une difficulté méthodologique en raison de l'authenticité. Me fondant sur ma recherche de doctorat sur le football en tant que patrimoine culturel, je mettrai en exergue le problème d'authenticité auquel j'ai été confronté sur le terrain : la mise en place de hiérarchies d'authenticité par les supporters du football ouvrier en réaction à leurs expériences de marginalisation dans le sport. Par la suite, je démontrerai non seulement comment ces hiérarchies d'authenticité constituent des obstacles pour les chercheurs s'efforçant de tisser des relations de confiance avec leurs sujets de recherche, mais je proposerai également quelques solutions à ce problème d'authenticité. En particulier, j'exposerai comment il est souvent utile de « tomber dans le piège de l'authenticité » en tant que

chercheur et d'utiliser le contexte de l'interview pour se construire soi-même de manière discursive comme authentique suivant les critères propres aux communautés de votre sujet.

Resumen

En este artículo se busca hacer una contribución metodológica a la praxis arqueológica de las comunidades de la clase trabajadora, al arrojar luz sobre cómo los arqueólogos que participan en la investigación basada en la historia oral con comunidades de clase trabajadora pueden encontrar la autenticidad como un desafío metodológico. Basándome en mi investigación de doctorado sobre el fútbol como patrimonio cultural, describiré el problema de autenticidad que encontré en el campo: la imposición de jerarquías de autenticidad por parte de los aficionados al fútbol de la clase trabajadora en respuesta a sus experiencias de marginación en el deporte. A su vez, no solo mostraré cómo estas jerarquías de autenticidad presentan obstáculos para los investigadores que buscan construir relaciones de confianza con sus sujetos, sino que también indicaré algunas soluciones a este problema de autenticidad. En concreto, mostraré cómo a menudo resulta útil “caer en la trampa de la autenticidad” como investigador y utilizar el entorno de la entrevista para construirse discursivamente como auténtico en los propios términos de su comunidad de sujetos.

Key Words

Authenticity
Football
Oral memory
Qualitative methodologies
Working-class heritage
Social value

Introduction

As archaeologists have recognised the subjectivity of archaeological understandings of the past, oral history has become a key tool for understanding and collaborating with communities who have been marginalised by the traditional scientific epistemology of the discipline (Jones and Russell, [2012](#), pp. 271–272). As outlined by Tolson, the use of oral history in historical and contemporary archaeology falls into three broad categories ([2016](#), p. 8). First, is the use of existing oral sources as evidence about the past. Second, is the collection of personal testimonies in the context of community involvement. Third, is the collection of personal testimonies as evidence in the interpretation of archaeological material. In all three contexts oral history is perceived as a tool to conduct fully rounded archaeological projects, facilitate an inclusive and collaborative approach to archaeological research and enhance the dynamic interpretation of archaeological finds by working directly with descendant communities and/or local populations (Carlton and Roberts, [2016](#), p. 46; Massheder-Rigby et al., [2020](#), p. 291; McDavid, [2003](#), pp. 307–208). In many cases, this will involve working directly with working-class communities. When engaging with such groups, it is essential that archaeological researchers have a strong methodological framework and are fully aware of the specific methodological challenges of carrying out oral history-based, qualitative research with working-class communities.

For the last three years I have been working on a PhD thesis focussed on cultures of football support in the Northeast of England. To this end, I have spent several months in the field, collecting a series of oral histories from communities of working-class football supporters from across the region. Throughout my months in the field, the largest and most consistent methodological challenge I have faced is that of *authenticity*. Throughout my PhD, I have encountered different standards and scales of authenticity which have been imposed on me by my working-class subject community. I have had to decode, negotiate and ultimately perform my subjects’ understandings of “authenticity” to establish the relationship of trust necessary to collect insightful oral history testimony. In other words, the authenticity problem for archaeologists and heritage researchers working with working-class communities is less about proving the authenticity of their data, but in proving their own authenticity as researchers in relation to pre-existing hierarchies of authenticity of the field. In this sense, this authenticity problem is fundamental to researchers’ ability to procure any meaningful data at all. I believe the ways in which archaeologists may have to negotiate different standards of authenticity in the field is under-theorised. Therefore, it is my intention to not only illuminate just how authenticity may present itself as a methodological challenge for archaeologists or heritage researchers but draw on my experience carrying out oral history-based research with working-class communities to suggest some potential solutions for the authenticity problem.

This paper seeks to make a methodological contribution to archaeological praxis of working-class communities, by illuminating how archaeologists engaged in oral history-based research with working-class communities may encounter authenticity as a methodological challenge in the field. I will use my research with working-class football supporting communities to explore how archaeologists may encounter authenticity as a methodological challenge in oral history-centred research with working-class subjects. Specifically, I will outline how hierarchies of authenticity, enforced by working-class football supporters in response to their own experiences of marginalisation, present obstacles to researchers looking to procure insightful data. I display how the defensive, binary hierarchy of authenticity enforced by my working-class subject communities carried the possibility of me being deemed ‘inauthentic’. This had the potential to undercut my ability to build productive relationships with my interviewees. In turn, I outline how I sought to deal with what I would term the authenticity problem—by drawing on my insider status to present myself as an authentic, traditional football supporter, per my subject community’s own standards of authenticity. I also highlight the net positives of keeping authenticity at the forefront of my methodological concerns, including the ability to establish relationship of trust with interviewees, creating deeper and more insightful data, and invitations to unexpected opportunities with further fieldwork. **AQ4**

Defining Authenticity

Authenticity is a slippery concept, encompassing diverse meanings including genuineness, truthfulness, accuracy and originality (Theodossopoulos, [2013](#), pp. 338–339). The diversity of meanings attached to authenticity has led many historical and contemporary

archaeologists and heritage scholars to question the utility of such an unstable, nebulous concept (van de Port, [2004](#), pp. 19–20; Wood, [2020](#), pp. 8–9). However, if heritage is to be understood as the use of the past in the present, it is fundamental that individuals and communities consider the past around which they coalesce to be (at least partially) truthful, genuine and ‘authentic’ for it to have any meaning or agency in their social worlds and lives (Wood, [2020](#), pp. 14–16). In this sense, authenticity remains a crucial component in the experience, management and study of heritage. Historically, the literature on archaeology, heritage and authenticity has drawn on the fields of anthropology, tourism and philosophy (Wood, [2020](#), pp. 8–9). As a result, much of the historic work on authenticity in heritage scholarship and policy has focussed on *objective authenticity*, a measurable sense of realness of originality intrinsic to physical objects (Wang, [1999](#), pp. 351–352). However, in contemporary heritage studies and the wider social sciences, understandings of authenticity are shifting from a *traditionalist* focus on objective authenticity, towards a *constructive* understanding (Silverman, [2015](#), pp. 69–70; Wang, [1999](#), pp. 351–352). This shift can be traced through the Nara Document on Authenticity, the definitive piece of heritage legislation on authenticity in global heritage management. The Nara Document asserts an understanding of authenticity as pertaining to credibility and truthfulness and re-affirms authenticity as a broadly desirable characteristic. However, the crucial innovation of the Nara document was the enshrinement of the understanding of authenticity as a dynamic and situated concept, a point which is fundamental to understanding authenticity in the context of this project (ICOMOS, [1994](#), pp. 2–3). Whilst it may broadly pertain to truthfulness or genuineness, authenticity is neither fixed nor absolute. It is subject to continual processes of (re)interpretation and understanding. In short, authenticity is a constructed concept, with multiple meanings (Rickly-Boyd, [2009](#), p. 1; Silverman, [2015](#), pp. 84–85). Crucially, the meanings that authenticity may encompass are entirely dependent on the specific location and context in which those claims of authenticity are made (Theodossopoulos, [2013](#), p. 339).¹ In this sense social-scientific understandings of authenticity have moved from a sense that authenticity represents a singular truthfulness inherent to a specific object or person, towards a sense of authenticity which is dynamic, performative, culturally situated and historically contingent (Silverman, [2015](#), pp. 69–70; Wang, [1999](#), pp. 351–352). Therefore, for the purposes of this project, my working definition of authenticity can be summarised as: the quality of being real, genuine, or truthful within a specific given context.

Given that the central focus of this paper is how authenticity may obstruct archaeological and heritage researchers in the field, it is also pertinent to briefly consider how and where authenticity has been treated in social-scientific methodological literatures. Authenticity has long been a central concern for scholars seeking to use people-centred, qualitative research techniques, such as ethnography and oral history. However, much of the methodological writing on the subject has only considered authenticity in terms of the reliability of data (Ritchie, [2014](#), pp. 9–10; Shannon and Hambacher, [2014](#), p. 1). Here, authenticity is promoted as an objective, singular, idealised end destination pertaining to the quality, genuineness and credibility of the research data, with a view to ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Daza, [2008](#), p. 71; James, [2008](#), pp. 157–158). Specifically, there is little to no work on how researchers may encounter or subjected to locally embedded hierarchies of authenticity, which they must negotiate to procure meaningful data. In short, this paper represents a new effort to start filling this gap in the methodological literature. It aims to not only outline the significant challenges that locally embedded standards of authenticity may present people-centred archaeological researchers of working-class communities, but also lay out some potential solutions to those same challenges by analysing my own performance(s) of authenticity throughout my oral history research on football supporting communities.

Introducing My Research

The data at the centre of this paper is drawn from my PhD project. My PhD seeks to examine the heritage value and social impact of cultures of football support in the context of deindustrialisation in the North-East of England. Specifically, I seek to examine the ways in which communities of football supporters perceive their support of specific football clubs as intangible cultural heritage, and in turn, explore how support of a football club may help supporters establish a sense of cultural resilience against the traumatic changes wrought by deindustrialisation (Holtorf, [2018](#), p. 639). My primary data collection method was oral history-style interviews, using semi-structured, conversational interviews to help the subject articulate their underlying assumptions, taken-for-granted beliefs, and common-sense thinking (Palmer, [2009](#), pp. 130–131; Sørensen, [2009](#), p. 171). My oral histories involved capturing a general life history exploring participants’ family history, connections to their hometowns and general background, before a more focussed session of questioning focussed on capturing the structure, dynamics and meaning their support of a football club takes in their lives. All interviews were carried out throughout 2023.

At the time of writing, I have collected a total of 31 oral history interviews—14 in Newcastle and 17 in Grimsby. My particular focus was a sub-group of participants in football culture I would define as “traditional football supporters”. Traditional football supporters have come to be a particular focus of my research as they are the most committed participants in the subcultures of football support that are the focus of my PhD. Traditional supporters comprised 21 of my 31 interviewees and can be characterised by their strong solidarity with the club, their grounded, topophilic relationship with the locality and routinised match attendance (Giulianotti, [2002](#), p. 31). This group was overwhelmingly white and male—only 1 of the 21 “traditional” supporters came from a global majority background, and only 3 of the 21 were female. Crucially, these “traditional” supporters were also overwhelmingly working-class. Football has traditionally drawn the crux of its supporter base from the skilled and semi-skilled working-classes, with the game’s reputation as a sport for the masses broadly rooted in the fact that football’s cultural compass has been set by the working-classes (Goldblatt, [2015](#), p. 9; Nayak, [2019](#), pp. 13–15). Eighteen of the 21 interviewees I identified as “traditional football supporters” mentioned either being ‘working-class’ or having a ‘working-class background’ during oral history interviews. This suggests that working-class identities and social background are not only high status within cultures of traditional football support, but hegemonic. For this reason, I believe my heritage- research with working-class football supporters provides an ideal case study for exploring how authenticity represents a methodological challenge in people-centred, oral history-based archaeology more widely.

An Authenticity Problem? Encountering Authenticity in the Field

Authenticity and Football Culture

To understand the ways in which ‘authenticity’ has become a central feature of contemporary football fandom cultures, especially amongst traditional supporters, it is important to outline the contextual factors driving this trend. Over the last 40 years, English football has been transformed from a fusty, provincial affair, to a global commercial phenomenon (Bland, 2023, pp. 6–7). Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the development of English football can be charted through three broad periods (Bland, 2023, pp. 6–7). First, came a post-war consensus boom, marked by huge attendances and football’s status as an authentic working-class cultural realm. Then between the 1960s and the late 1980s, football, and more importantly football supporters were demarked as an enemy within the UK, following two decades defined by hooliganism, racism on the terraces and stadium disasters such as Hillsborough, Heysel and the Bradford Fire (Goldblatt, 2015, pp. xix–xxii). From this nadir, football entered a third phase of transformation. A combination of post-Hillsborough governance reforms (specifically those outlined in the Taylor Report) and the establishment of the Premier League in 1991 paved the way for simultaneous processes of globalisation, commodification, gentrification, diversification, and medialisation of football culture. These changes were driven by football’s governing bodies, elite clubs, and TV broadcasters (Crabbe, 2009, p. 126; Goldblatt, 2015, p. xix; Tobar and Ramshaw, 2022, pp. 433–435). Resultantly, since 1992, the cultural compass of football has been reoriented away from its traditional geographically rooted, working-class demographic, towards a more economically diverse audience, generating new social relations and encodings of the game on a global scale (Williams, 2013, pp. 200–201). As a result, the traditional supporters who form the subject demographic of my PhD are experiencing increasing marginalisation within football—at both a macro and micro level. On a macro level, supporters have been typically excluded from decision-making processes, both within their clubs and within the wider game. This means the profound changes wrought on the game since the late 1980s of football have proceeded without the express consent of football’s traditional, working-class supporter base. On a micro level, these nonconsensual processes of marketisation, globalisation and gentrification have subjected supporters to rising ticket prices, the touristification of the in-stadium experience, an inability for many locals to access the stadium and—perhaps most damagingly—a perceived change in meaning of football culture itself (Bland, forthcoming; Shaw et al., 2020, pp. 98–103).

Encountering Standards of Authenticity in the Field

If traditional supporters are experiencing significant marginalisation within football culture, many are actively resisting. This has manifested in several forms—including protest movements, the foundation of new representative institutions such as the FSA (Football Supporters Association) and even some groups of supporters taking ownership of their own clubs. However, more interestingly for the purposes of this paper, traditional supporters have also resisted their marginalisation discursively, through the enforcement and promotion of their own counter-understandings of football culture (Bland, forthcoming). It is here that authenticity has become central to football supporting cultures. When interviewing “traditional supporters” in my research pool, a broad discourse centred around the theme of ‘authenticity’ emerged, in direct response to the increasing marginalisation of traditional supporters in modern football (Bland, forthcoming). Specifically, through my oral history interviews I found traditional supporters coalesced around a sense of *defensive authenticity*—enforcing their own counter-understandings of what it is to be a ‘real fan’ as a protective measure to sustain the agency, relevance, and cultural hegemony of traditional, working-class forms of fandom in a globalised modern game. In this sense, traditional supporters can be seen to be enforcing a hierarchy of authenticity, with themselves at the top.

Throughout my oral histories, the interviewees collectively narrated a view of modern football as a distortion of the traditional game. Their testimony revealed their perception that the boundaries of a traditional, historically rooted, “authentic” football culture were defined against a modern, “inauthentic” football culture across a series of binaries. By extension, these traditional fans prescribed what it was to be an authentic, real supporter. In particular—three specific characteristics of real, authentic fandom were prescribed by traditional supporters: identification with locality, affiliation with working-class culture and performance of fandom through committed consumption rituals—especially match attendance. First, where traditional, authentic football is seen to be defined by a strong connection between clubs and their localities, modern football is seen as global, and devoid of deep local imbrications:

“I always say, the fact that football clubs had the name of the city largely in their name, that's not accidental. You know, it's a projection of the area. It's, it's having pride in the area.” – Chris Tait, Newcastle United

“We kid ourselves...you mentioned two other clubs...Grimsby [will be identical] to Wimbledon, to Burnley, to Oxford...We're clinging to stories that we believe in. We believe our story is better than your story – but we're all identical.” – Eddy Hope, Newcastle United

These quotes are deeply reflective of supporters’ perception that it is increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of (place) identity attached to their football clubs, in an ever more homogenous culture, devoid of place referents. In other words, these supporters find themselves dispossessed in what Massey describes as the power geometry of time–space compression, articulating a perceived lack of ability to formulate a sense of place against a context of the geographical fragmentation which they are powerless to prevent (Massey, 1991, pp. 25–26). In articulating their sense of dispossession, these supporters also assert a reactionary standard of fandom, whereby the authentic, real fan should be bonded not just to their club but tied to and actively identify with the club’s locality—either geographically or historically. More than simply asserting the importance of football clubs’ imbrication with locality and place, supporters also emphasised the importance of class. Here, the authentic game is seen to be emergent from working-class culture; an idealised cultural realm in which the main participants are themselves working-class. Conversely, modern football culture is seen to have been ripped away from this deep class relationship, with working-class supporters seen as increasingly priced out of the game:

“...the danger is you price people out the game. Yeah, I mean, prawn sandwich brigade...as soon as the middle classes became involved, for people with lots of disposable income, then it was harder for the working people. But I think it's much more important for Newcastle to hang on to that, really, because that is our heritage” – Chris Tait, Newcastle United

Finally, having emphasised how authentic football supporters should exhibit strong affiliations with specific place and class identities, traditional supporters in both Grimsby and Newcastle emphasised the importance of performing your loyalty to the club and the depth of your sport through specific consumption patterns. Of specific importance here is regular match attendance—with traditional

supporters emphasising the need for authentic supporters to prove the fact that they are not “plastic”, and not only interested in the club when they were doing well on the pitch:

“The first round of [the Auto Windscreens Trophy in 1998], we played away at Chesterfield. There were 29 fans there that night, of whom I was one...We enjoy that, because those are the true fans. As opposed to, at the minute there's a bit of jumping on the bandwagon. Lots of people wanting to go to away games, but not necessarily for the football...but you know, for me that spoils it. I'd much prefer to go when it's the regulars” – Moira Tabois, Grimsby Town

“So I've sat in the same seat...this is my 31st year in the seat that I bought that year [1992]...I think you just have to pay your dues really. Yeah. You know, and if you've just joined in the last few weeks, and everything's going rosy, well, okay. But when it's less successful, that's when you find out the real fans, really” – Chris Tait, Newcastle United

Throughout this selection of quotes, modern football is constructed as a distortion of the traditional game, across a series of binaries:

local/global, working-class/gentrified² and match-attending/plastic. On the one hand this creates a stirring narrative of football's departure from an authentic, golden cultural age, and speaks directly to the very real marginalisation traditional supporters are experiencing within the sport. Crucially, my interviewees also concurrently constructed a prescriptive image of what it is to be an “authentic” supporter. Here, they continually emphasised their own highly localised, inter-generational, ritualistic, and deeply participatory way of supporting the club as the correct way to support the club, and the gold standard of authentic fandom (Bland, forthcoming). In this sense, the traditional supporters I interviewed were enforcing a specific hierarchy of authenticity, with themselves at the top, in both Grimsby and Newcastle. Given the contextual changes football has been subject to since 1991, this hierarchy can be seen as a defensive step by communities of traditional supporters—a counterclaim of ownership—with supporters seeking to shore up their continued relevance and agency against a context of rapid change.

Resultant Methodological Problems

This defensive hierarchy of authenticity enforced by working-class supporter communities has huge implications for football culture and its stakeholders. For one, the enforcement of specific standards of authentic fandom acts as a tool for traditional supporters to impose a cultural hegemony within the game. Here, traditional supporters promote their own culture of fandom as the singular legitimate way of engaging with their football club, potentially marginalising other groups who may not be working-class, may not be local or may not have the means to access match tickets (Bland, forthcoming). In this sense, the notion of authenticity espoused by traditional, working-class fans can be seen to reinforce a social hierarchy, cutting across gender, location and—most-importantly—class identities (Petersen-Wager, 2019, p. 58). More specifically, the overwhelmingly white, male, working-class demographic of traditional supporters means that any claims of ownership attached to their defensive standards of authenticity work to consolidate the image of football as property of the white, male working-class (Brooks, 2019, pp. 46–47).

However, beyond the impacts for other stakeholders, the localised hierarchies of authenticity enforced by traditional working-class supporters also created significant methodological problems in the context of my project. Most crucially, localised standards of authenticity threatened my ability to build productive relationships of trust with my subjects. At any one-time, individual researchers are subject to competing authenticities. This means that a singular action, value, or behaviour may be seen as authentic or inauthentic depending on the context in which the researcher finds themselves (Daza, 2008, p. 78). Crucially, these different standards of authenticity are shaped contextually and locally, and it is essential for researchers to quickly get to grips with local cultural modalities and authenticities to ensure effective research (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2021, pp. 157–158). During my research, I quickly found that the most pressing problem I experienced relating to authenticity in the field was rooted in a combination of my academic institutional affiliation to Cambridge, and the strongly rooted culture of anti-intellectualism within football supporting and working-class cultures more broadly. Take the following quote from Malcolm Glennie, who is expanding on a question I asked about how he feels the industrial past still dominates the cultural landscape in the Northeast:

“I think people still to some extent value - and to some extent I think they're right to do it! - proper, tangible, graft! Like people who build things, like people who work in a factory and build things like the Hitachi train factory in Aycliffe. Or people who have a practical skill, like being a business electrician, or a plumber or something, rather than doing something I do - working in a bank or university like yourself - which seems a bit fuzzy and a bit, you know, sort of pretend! [Laughter] ...like you know, I often say “I don't have a proper job.” – Malcolm Glennie, Newcastle United

Malcolm's quote testifies to a strong culture within football of anti-intellectualism in football, and a more deferential attitude towards people who manifest a wider, authentic working-class identity through manual or other traditional forms of industrial labour. The use of the word “graft” here is particularly interesting. “Graft” is a regional slang word, both a verb meaning to work hard and a noun, meaning ‘hard work’ or ‘labour’. In this context, “*proper, tangible graft*” is a reference to the traditional manual labour, such as engineering and mining which has historically dominated employment in the Northeast of England, which is deliberately juxtaposed with the lesser status white-collar employment of both the interviewer and interviewee. Rather than simply representing a phenomenon isolated to football supporting cultures, this culture of anti-intellectualism reflects what Todd describes as a wider working-class anti-intellectualism in England, rooted in the working-class' inter-generational experiences of inequality and traditional industrial labour (2015, pp. 71–76). As outlined in the previous section, traditional supporters typically see working-class affiliation or identity as fundamental to authentic football support. Despite my own background growing up in a mining town in the Midlands, my status as an academic—specifically an academic based at an institution with an elitist reputation—proved a significant hurdle. Interviewees frequently questioned my intentions, seeking clarifications on the axiology of my project, expressing suspicion over my use of their testimony, and probing my credentials as an authentic supporter. This suspicion should be understood against the context of the long history of football supporters being maligned in the British press as folk devils, with traditional working-class communities of supporters frequently conflated with hooligan sub-cultures by journalists, politicians, and academics alike (Poulton, 2005, pp. 27–35).

Crucially, the culture of anti-intellectualism amongst traditional football supporters— itself a result of the hierarchies of authenticities at play in the field—was a huge threat to my ability to sustain an image of authenticity with my interviewees. In turn, this threatened my ability to build relationships of trust with subjects. Any qualitative research project fundamentally relies on a strong relationship of trust between researcher and participant, and building strong relationships with interviewees can add huge richness and depth to oral history data (Atkinson-Sheppard, [2021](#), pp. 163–165; Jessee, [2011](#), p. 296). However, if research collaborators see the researcher as inauthentic—in other words, untrustworthy, insincere, or lacking empathy with their socio-economic reality—it becomes difficult to build the very relationships of trust between researcher and subject that people-centred research relies on (Wood, [2020](#), pp. 14–16). For this reason, the localised standards of authenticity at play in the field—especially considering my institutional affiliation – became a significant challenge to be negotiated.

Dealing with the Authenticity Problem

If my biggest difficulty in the field was building and sustaining relationships of trust considering the standards of authenticity being enforced by subject community, how did I set about dealing with this authenticity problem? My solutions were formulated with the creation of productive relationships of trust between myself and my subjects as my top priority. As a result, I chose to undertake a strategy that represented a fusion of Yoshino’s idea of “covering”, and Theodossopoulos’ “falling into the trap of authenticity” (Theodossopoulos, [2013](#), pp. 344–347; Yoshino, [2006](#), pp. ix–xi). Rather than remaining neutral to the standards of authenticity enforced by my subject community, I actively attempted to embrace and perform them. Here, I attempted to use locally meaningful terms and emphasise elements of my character which matched with the standards of authentic fandom my subjects enforced. In this sense, throughout the interviews, I practiced a kind of code-switching—or what Yoshino would refer to as “covering” (Daza, [2008](#), pp. 81–82; Yoshino, [2006](#), pp. ix–xi). *Covering* refers to the ways in which hegemonic social norms within any given society or context force individuals to highlight or obscure specific traits, behaviours, and values. Yoshino’s theory of *covering* is primarily formulated as a device to highlight unequitable power relations in Western societies—exhibiting how specific populations are forced to acquiesce to demands for assimilation based on white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and imperialism. However, Yoshino does highlight how in specific circumstances, covering and assimilation to specific social norms may be necessary—even desirable—to facilitate smooth social interaction. Here, my covering—in essence using my habitus and conversations to highlight my status as an authentic, traditional supporter benefitted my research.

Two points are crucial here. First is that the sense of authenticity I sought to portray was not conjured out of thin air but reflected my own very real cultural and socio-economic background. Indeed, I would define myself as a ‘traditional supporter’ of my own team, West Bromwich Albion (or West Brom), who fundamentally meets the criterion of authenticity laid down by my interviewees through their testimony. Second, though I was aware of the shared socio-cultural background between me and my research participants before my interviews, the sense of authenticity I sought to portray to my subjects was not formed a priori. Instead, my authenticity as a traditional supporter emerged discursively, through the interview and social interactions I had with my subjects (Daza, [2008](#), p. 71). Here, I leaned on specific behaviours and discursive tropes within the context of the interview to establish and perform my authenticity as a fellow “traditional” football supporter. In the rest of this section, I want to highlight three specific techniques and tropes I used to discursively perform my authenticity as a fellow “traditional” football supporter, to create a relationship of trust with my interviewees.

My first technique involved engaging in informal conversations centred on specific element of my subjects’ clubs’ culture before the interview, providing a huge opportunity to immediately emphasise my own credentials as an authentic *traditional* supporter. Here, I specifically drew on Atkinson-Sheppard’s work on relationship building in qualitative research in Southeast Asia. Specifically, I took inspiration from her use of the Bangladeshi concept of *adda*—an idea which can be roughly translated to mean small talk or informal, current-affairs focussed chatting ([2021](#), pp. 163–165). With these informal, pre-interview chats, I aimed to demonstrate a broader knowledge and understanding of broader football culture, as well as the histories and current issues facing each specific club. See the following two examples:

JB: *You’ve got Brighton at the weekend, right?*

MG: *Yeah! Have you been to Brighton... [One of my favourite memories as a Newcastle fan was in Brighton], it was fantastic! It was the year we both came up. And we were both battling it out for like top spot, but neither of us had completely secured promotion yet....*

JB: *Yeah... Is that the game where there was an absolutely...like a freak goal?*

MG: *Yeah! Diame! Yeah! That! It was...we were 1-0 down from the first half, and we score 2 in the last 10 minutes to beat them.*

[37 minutes later in conversation, during recorded break between official “interview”]

MG: *Yeah, that was good knowledge – you’ve got really good knowledge!*

JB: *[Laughter] ...I'm so proud of myself for remembering that Mo Diame...*

— Recorded pre-interview chat with Malcolm Glennie, Newcastle United.

MS: *“I mean, we finished...I'm sure we finished 5th. I mean, we beat Chelsea away. We beat Man City here. You know we did fantastic.”*

JB: *“You did us [West Brom] a couple of times.”*

MS: *“Yes! I know they did! That's right. And then the big revival came when Alan Buckley came. I know he doesn't rank well at West Brom. But his football...his football was the best I think I've ever seen. We had some good cup results, you know, and he then, then obviously he left for West Brom...he just didn't work out, did it?”*

JB: *“I think he's one of them because...he not only left, he brought half the team with him to the Albion.”*

MS: *“That’s right. That’s what he did. And it rankled a lot. Good memory, mate!”*

— Recorded pre-interview chat with Mike Swales, Grimsby Town.

Here, an informal pre-interview chat about the history or contemporary state of my subjects’ supported clubs helped establish connections between myself and the interviewee. This unscripted preamble provided a perfect chance to draw on football’s power as a social shorthand or lingua franca, and provided a context for me to discursively construct myself as an individual who is authentically knowledgeable about the game. Though I did possess a strong ambient sense of the history of both clubs through my own broader fandom of the game and my deep historical research for my research project, I ensured that I was confidently conversant on the club’s history and the contemporary issues facing each club. I achieved this through the consistent consumption of local news, following club specific accounts on social media, signing up for supporter forums. The results were often successful, ice-breaking conversations in which I was able to exhibit my knowledge, thus proving my authenticity as a researcher and a fan of the game.

Beyond conveying my knowledge of my interviewees’ clubs in informal pre-interview chats—I also aimed to construct myself as an “authentic supporter” throughout the interviews themselves. Here, I emphasised my own compatibility and alignment with the characteristics of *traditional* football support championed by my research subjects. Whilst I did not consistently make interjections into my subjects’ testimony, I was careful to pick one or two moments to reflect and mirror my interviewees own stories or reflections on their *traditional* support of their football club with similar stories from my own life. Specifically, I took care to emphasise stories and or bring up reflections which revealed my own performance of my support through match attendance and strong rootedness in the locality of my team, two of the most vital elements of ‘authentic’ football support:

MS: *I respect anybody who supports [their local team] ...that to me is being a fan. That’s being a supporter.*

JB: *It’s just so fulfilling as well.*

MS: *Exactly!*

JB: *I mean, I feel very blessed to have been...I support my local team, but I’m just blessed to have been born with a local team, like the Albion...I’ve had a season ticket since 2004, so 19th season [this season]. And for 14 of those 19 seasons, we’ve been playing Premier League football. I’ve seen us win at Stamford Bridge and seen us win at Anfield and Old Trafford, so it’s just this like, Golden Age. Now...we’re probably gonna go into admin, but it doesn’t change and if anything, makes it sort of more satisfying when [you do win]?*

MS: *I get it! You’re in trouble then?*

JB: *Big time.*

• Interview with Mike Swales, Grimsby Town.

MG: *Geordies are not like... people often make a mistake in ignoring very distinct identities in the Northeast...subtle differences between like the Mackems, Geordies, Teesiders. And I’m a... if you want a word that’s very little known... it’s a Pit Yacker, which is one of the ones you use for people from Durham...*

JB: *I sympathize. Because obviously, I’m a West Brom fan. I mean, I was born in the Black Country, I sometimes downplay the accent, which I regret...*

MG: *You just get called a Brummie?*

JB: *Yeah, well, exactly. And I really love Birmingham - so I’m like, “whatever yeah, fine I’m a Brummie.” But like the difference between Black Country and Brummie, sounds the same as the subtle differences you’re talking about...*

• Interview with Malcolm Glennie, Newcastle United.

My final technique was the use of code switching and the manipulation of my habitus during the interview to emphasise my own status as an authentic supporter. Here, I drew on Bourdieu’s idea of habitus—the learned norms, values, and behaviours of specific social groups, which then become manifested in different reflexive behaviours—and code my behaviour in two specific ways to emphasise my status as an authentic supporter (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 27; Maton, 2012, pp. 49–51). First, I wore specific branded apparel, namely retro football shirts and clothing displaying the crest of my own team—West Bromwich Albion. I adopted this tactic after one of my first interviews, with Newcastle supporter Malcolm Glennie. Upon seeing me wearing a West Brom hat on arrival for the interview, Malcolm immediately started a conversation focussed on the mutual fortunes of our respective teams and the general direction of football culture. With subsequent interviewees, I found football-related clothing to be a useful tactic in providing a basis for off-the-record, *adda-inspired* conversation before interviews started to relax my subjects. As outlined by Baker, football apparel—especially replica shirts—are material objects which are an integral part of fan identities, inscribing an individual’s fandom of a specific team onto their body as a marker of belonging (2019, pp. 631–632; Bland, 2023, pp. 23–25). This specific cultural property of sporting apparel was particularly useful, as it allowed me to non-verbally project my belonging to the community of traditional supporters connected to West Bromwich Albion. Furthermore, given West Bromwich’s location (and by extension my own personal roots) within the Black Country—an industrial area in the Midlands—my clothing also carried the implication my roots were in a predominantly working-class area, defined by industry, creating a natural common ground with interviewees in both Grimsby and Newcastle. To complement my sartorial choices, I also chose to emphasise my regional, “Brummie” accent during interviews. As a matter of routine, I typically downplay my regional accent, for fear of its perception as low status in academic settings. However, in the context of football interviews—I found my accent to be an important pillar of my performance of authentic support. Here, my regional accent worked in tandem with sartorial choices to project an image of

me as someone who is firmly rooted in and identifies with the locality of the football team I support. In this sense, my habitus, body language and accent were as important in communicating and producing my status as ‘authentic’ within the interview setting as what I communicated during the interview itself.

Impacts on My Research

My dual techniques of “falling into the trap of authenticity”, covering, and code-switching had a huge net positive impact on my research, which can be split into two inter-linked categories. First, I found that my attempts to emphasise my status as an authentic supporter of West Bromwich Albion helped build connections between myself and my subjects. Specifically, I found that once my interviewees found out that I was a “traditional” supporter who matched up to their hierarchy of authentic support, they more readily gave detailed testimony centred on the changes afflicting football culture, the emotionality of their experiences connected to the club and the meaning the club held to them personally. Specifically, I would argue that this propensity to open up was rooted in my subjects’ sense that I could empathise with and understand their experiences due to my own authentic support. Take the following selection of quotes:

“You’re experienced as a West Bromwich fan, you’ll get this...we become familiar with places – or I do - that we’ve never even visited or even go to, because of the results are read out. And I sense Grimsby benefit an awful lot from that...that’s particularly relevant in Grimsby, I think” – Mark Hodson, Grimsby Town

“If you support West Brom...you know the misery of what relegation means, and the impact that it has on your community, as well as your own personal life and your moods. You know that feeling!” – Nigel Lowther, Grimsby Town

What is notable here is how all the comments or insights offered by my participants above are prefaced with a statement of solidarity, an acknowledgement that as a West Brom supporter, I am subject to the same social, cultural, and emotional experiences as themselves. This fact not only suggests I was consistently able to exhibit my own credentials as a traditional supporter by living up to their own hierarchy of authenticity but exhibits how I was able to build a mutual understanding and relationship of trust with my participants. In this sense, my interview techniques enabled me to develop a strong connection and relationship of trust with my interviewees, based on my perceived authenticity as a supporter, and implied knowledge and experience of the same cultural experiences as my interviewees.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of my covering and code switching was how it opened unexpected fieldwork opportunities, in both Grimsby and Newcastle. On the one hand, this led to me being able to practice snowball sampling, with subjects introducing me to interviewees who were previously off my radar, whilst in the field. For example, my interview with Mark Hodson in Grimsby led to him introducing me to two members of his family, one of whom became one of my interviewees. Furthermore, in both Grimsby and Newcastle—I found subjects were willing to sacrifice large amounts of time to provide me with insider insights into local history and culture. In Newcastle, my interviewee Michael Wood provided a personalised tour of Newcastle city centre as a space to continue an off the record conversation about the central themes of our interview. Equally, my interviewee Gordon Wilson offered me a personal tour of the Grimsby, Grimsby’s historic playing fields and access to an extensive collection of poetry he’d written about the club. Most crucially, the relationship of trust I built with my interviewees resulted in invitations to football specific events with them during my fieldwork, enabling me to supplement my data with extensive participant observations (Kusenbach, [2003](#), pp. 463–465; Walker et al., [2021](#), pp. 55–56). During my pre-interview chat with Paul Hambling, I was invited to attend a Newcastle United Women’s game with United with Pride (NUFC’s LGBTQ+ positive supporters’ group), as well as to watch Newcastle’s game against Tottenham Hotspur with Paul and a group of his Newcastle supporting friends at the Strawberry. Furthermore, during my tour of Newcastle with Michael Wood, I was invited to a recording of a live Newcastle United podcast during which I met 2 further interviewees. Perhaps most excitingly, my continued visits to the football memorabilia shop *The Back Page* to meet potential interviewees Chris Tait led to an invite to watch Newcastle play Everton at Goodison Park. This was especially valuable given how difficult match tickets are to come across for Newcastle away matches, with the club’s away membership scheme currently having a 3-year waiting list.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined what I see as the ‘authenticity problem’ facing archaeologists and heritage researchers carrying out people-centred, qualitative research with working-class communities. Drawing on my own PhD work with football supporting communities in Grimsby and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, I have outlined how my oral history focussed project necessitated me grappling with the concept of authenticity as a central methodological concern. Here, my focus was less on ensuring the factual veracity of my data, and more on maintaining relationships of trust with my subject community, as I encountered and negotiated the highly localised hierarchies of authenticity enforced by my interviewees whilst I was in the field. Specifically, the traditional football supporters at the heart of my project displayed a strong sense of anti-intellectualism and promoted a prescriptive sense of authentic fandom based on ties to locality, working-class identity, and regular match attendance. Crucially, both factors threatened to undermine my ability to sustain relationships of trust and mutual respect with my interviewees, especially given my academic institutional affiliation. As my research progressed, I found the most effective and rewarding response to this authenticity problem was to meet the hierarchies of authenticity I encountered in the field head on and attempt to perform them in the context of my interview. Here, I took a policy of ‘falling into the trap of authenticity’ and drew on my own very real experiences as a traditional football supporter in a post-industrial area of England to perform my own status as an authentic, traditional supporter. This involved me employing techniques of covering and code switching, as I emphasised specific aspects of my own personality and discursively engaged with my research subjects to construct a sense of myself as an authentic football supporter. Of particular note here was how I used *adda* inspired informal pre-interview chats on my subject clubs’ culture and history to emphasise my own knowledge of the subject, used narrative mirroring whilst in interviews to reflect my interviewees experiences with my own as an authentic supporter, and specifically crafted my habitus—altering my dress and emphasising my regional accent—to portray myself as a locally embedded, match-attending supporter. What is notable here is how I built a sense of authenticity with my interviewee discursively, with a sense of mutual respect, trust and solidarity generally emerging between myself and the interviewee as the interview and conversation progressed. The net impact of me successfully establishing my own authenticity as a traditional support was my ability to

procure more insightful, meaningful data, uncover new paths for research and—most crucially—draw on my newly established relationships of trust with my subjects to recruit new participants and engage in unexpected fieldwork opportunities.

Authenticity remains a central concern to historical archaeology and heritage research, but for too long researchers in the field have limited their methodological analyses of authenticity to the truthfulness and reliability of data. As heritage-from-below research and more holistic approaches to historical archaeology based on collaboration with local stakeholders becomes more commonplace, it is vital that researchers start focussing on the ways in which they will encounter different standards of authenticity within the field. Even more crucially, those involved in people-centred **AQ5** archaeological research must start developing methodological frameworks for negotiating and dealing with such challenges. Specifically, there is a need to further study how researchers may discursively construct images of the self-whilst in the field. As a first step, I would advocate an exploration of the authenticity problem in the context of research projects where the researcher does *not* have a degree of insider status to lean on as I was able to in this project. **AQ6**

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¹—This perspective has been elucidated in a strand of anthropological heritage-focussed literature which seeks to explore “Eurocentrism” in heritage management by exploring and comparing Eastern and Western perspectives of authenticity in the context of World Heritage management (see Deacon & Smeets, [2013](#); Gao & Jones, [2021](#)).

²—‘Gentrified’ is chosen as the binary opposite of working-class here in reference to the changing demographics of those who consume football and participate in cultures of football support. Specifically, this is a reference to football’s history as a primarily working-class participatory culture, and the changes which have been wrought to the game by the sport’s governing bodies (medialisation, heightening of policing, sanitisation, commercialisation) which have reoriented the game as a middle-class entertainment spectacle, as outlined in the “[Authenticity and Football Culture](#)” section.