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"What have 6 million dead people got to do with football?": How Anglo-Jewish football supporters experience and respond to antisemitism and "banter"

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ABSTRACT
Life-story interviews with 39 Jewish supporters of a football club whose quasi-Jewish identity is the catalyst for antisemitic abuse were used to explain the under-researched everyday experiences among members of the Anglo-Jewish community. All interviewees said their experiences of antisemitism within English men's football supporter culture were much worse than in wider society. All interviewees believed references to Hitler and the Holocaust exceeded any threshold of acceptability and that the death of 6 million people should never be associated with football. While denigration of Jewish rituals and practices was offensive and problematic for some, Jewish stereotypes tended to be downplayed, dismissed, or tolerated by most interviewees as part of the "banter" endemic in English supporter culture to lessen or disrupt the impact of the hate speech they endure. These responses indicate complex processes of anger, acceptance and rationalisation as recipients attempt to make sense of and deal with everyday antisemitism.

Introduction

This interpretative study of life-story interviews with 39 Jewish supporters of a football club with a quasi-Jewish identity uses the sensitising concepts of "banter", racist humour, and mitigation and response strategies, to explain the lived experiences of, and responses to, antisemitism. The scholarly importance and implications of this study are not limited nor restricted to sports. This micro study is important because Jews tend to occupy an ambivalent position with respect to the Black/White binary within studies of race,

racism, and anti-racism due to perceptions of Jewish upward mobility and achievement and "White privilege", coupled with debates around remembrance of the Nazi genocide of European Jews juxtaposed to slavery, colonialism, and decolonisation (Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman 2020; Hirsh 2018; Rothberg 2009). Furthermore, Hargreaves and Staetsky (2020, 2176) note that while, "Patterns of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim attitudes in Western societies are well-documented … it is less clear how the subjects of these attitudes interpret them". They encourage a move "beyond the elitism of academic debates, and towards the consideration of everyday attitudes among Jewish and Muslim communities' (Hargreaves and Staetsky 2020).

This study responds to their call by amplifying some of the "everyday" members of Anglo-Jewish communities, so contributing in an original and meaningful way to a small but growing literature on the lived experiences of Anglo-Jewish citizens. Football provides a prism through which to explain first, how antisemitism finds heightened expression in particular social spaces – despite survey evidence suggesting "sports events' are among the "least likely places' (Boyd and Staetsky 2014) – and second, how victims experience and *respond* to antisemitic abuse and their abusers. As Leets (2002) and Ben (2023) note, how recipients choose to respond to hate speech has important personal and societal implications.

Tottenham Hotspur (Spurs) – who play in the men's English Premier League – is internationally "renowned for its strong Jewish support", despite "the link … constantly downplayed" by successive Jewish chairmen since the 1980s (Clavane 2012, 57, 95)[1]. In Tottenham Hotspur's (2019) survey of their members and season-ticket holders, 11per cent of the 23,354 respondents identified as Jewish, but "the best estimate is a maximum of 5per cent of the crowd" (Cloake and Fisher 2016). Tottenham's quasi-Jewish identity – like Ajax (Netherlands), ŁKS Łódź and MKS Cracovia (Poland) and MTK Budapest (Hungary) – is a catalyst for antisemitic abuse from some rival supporters. Kick It Out – English football's leading equality campaigning organisation – note that the number of reports of antisemitism they receive spike whenever Tottenham play a London club, especially Chelsea or West Ham (Poulton 2020). Tottenham supporters' othering and stigmatisation by rival supporters persists in banal, recycled, and sophisticated formations, as well as more explicit and malign forms. These mention Hitler and the Holocaust and use sibilant sounds to represent the release of Zyklon B in the Nazi gas chambers. But as one of my interviewees pointedly posed: "What have 6 million dead people got to do with football?"

The aim of this study is to provide thick descriptions and rich interpretations through reflexive thematic analysis of the experiences of antisemitic micro-aggressions provided by my interviewees and the explanations and methods they employ to deal with and mitigate them. Burdsey (2011, 278) observes the creation of a "tolerance zone" in which "certain forms of

racism are trivialised or ignored, and particular epithets or actions are exon-erated". Consistent with this, *some* experiences were downplayed, dismissed, or at least tolerated by most of the Jewish supporters interviewed as "humour" (Hylton 2018; Weaver 2013) and part of the "banter" endemic in British sports (Burdsey 2011; 2006) and especially football supporter culture (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001; Cleland and Cashmore 2014; Cleland, Pope, and Williams 2020; Magrath 2018; Millward 2008). These are common mitigation/response strategies employed to lessen or disrupt the impact of different forms of bigotry and hate speech (Ben 2023; Burdsey 2011; Hylton 2018; Leets 2002; Weaver 2013).

Such matters go to the heart of continuing conceptual, political, and legal debates among Jews and non-Jews over definitions of antisemitism and whether it is a form of racism (Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman 2020; Hirsh 2018; Waxman, Schraub, and Hosein 2021), alongside concerns about rising levels of antisemitism (Boyd and Staetsky 2014; Hargreaves and Staetsky 2020). Gaining a better understanding of everyday antisemitism from the victims' perspective could ensure members of minority groups can be better supported, and prejudicial abuse more effectively challenged. As such, this study might offer naturalistic generalisability – in that the micro-aggressions outlined might bear resemblance to others' experiences, or things that they have observed or heard about – and transferability, whereby readers from other minority groups might see overlaps with their own situation (Smith 2018).

Antisemitism in England

Hargreaves and Staetsky (2020) note how attitudes towards Jews in the UK have been regularly surveyed by different organisations over the last decade, contributing to public anxiety, especially within Jewish communities, about antisemitism. While the UK has among the lowest levels of reported antisemitism globally, the Home Office (2022) and Community Security Trust (2022) have recorded annual rises for several years. Incidents range from desecration of public and private property, harassment, abuse, to phys-ical assault. These multiply whenever the geo-political situation in the Middle East intensifies with UK Jews held responsible for immorality and crimes, real or imagined, in Israel. Consequently, anti-Israel and anti-Zionism sentiments render an increased risk of victimisation (Bakan and Abu-Laban 2021; Boyd and Staetsky 2014; Hirsh 2018; Ozcelik 2021).

Boyd and Staetsky (2014) report how British Jews are split evenly on the extent to which they regard antisemitism to be a problem in the country or not. The main contexts where antisemitic statements were heard or seen were on the Internet (68per cent of all respondents), in social situations (41per cent), and in political speeches and discussions (39per cent).

Interestingly, "sports events' were found to be among the "least likely" places in which British Jews encounter antisemitic comments, accounting for just 6per cent of the contexts in which they had been witnessed (Boyd and Staetsky 2014). This qualitative study, building on my previous research (Poulton and Durell 2014; Poulton 2016; 2020), considers their finding within the context of English football supporter culture.

Flax (2021) notes that while there is an abundance of research into other hate crimes, very few academic studies focus on antisemitism from a qualitative perspective. Her study found that while Anglo-Orthodox Jews do not perceive a resurgence of antisemitism, new powerful sites – especially online – have emerged that allow antisemitism to fester (Flax 2021). Importantly, Flax (2021, 1317) emphasises how, "The Holocaust has particular Jewish significance: Jews were murdered because of their Jewishness' and so it understandably holds "a deep imprint in the memory of Jews'. Consequently, the Holocaust and Nazi regime provides many with "a yardstick against which one can measure contemporary antisemitism" (Flax 2021, 1320). In this connection, Burdsey (2011, 274) explains how, "All individuals construct their own parameters of acceptability, which may, in turn, be driven by wider structural forces'. He expands, "Ultimately a "tolerance zone" is created in which certain forms of racism are trivialised or ignored, and particular epithets or actions are exonerated" (Burdsey 2011, 278). For many Jews, irreverent reference to Holocaust exceeds a common shared "tolerance zone".

Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman (2020) theorise academic discussions of antisemitism away from questions about whether specific individuals should or could be described as "antisemites' and whether antisemitic discourse stems from "genuine" antisemitism or ignorance. Their concern is not so much the antisemitism articulated in "limited pockets of committed, ideological antipathy", but that it is more diffuse and manifest in a "deep reservoir of negative and stereotypical ideas about Jews which have accumulated over centuries and are embedded deeply within our culture" from which "people can draw with ease" (Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman 2020, 416). While helpful to a point in understanding expressions of everyday antisemitism, their imagery of a reservoir neglects to recognise the agency involved when people activate these narratives, tropes, memes, and images. Such actions are considered within the social space of football supporter culture.

Discrimination, "banter" and racist humour in football

Contrary to the findings of Boyd and Staetsky (2014) regarding sport being a "least likely" environment to experience antisemitism, the increasing prevalence of reported antisemitism in the UK is mirrored within English football. 82 per cent of reported incidents of abuse categorised as "religion" (NB,

not "racism") by Kick It Out (2022) during the 2018/19 season, and 61 per cent during the Covid-affected 2019/20 season, pertained to antisemitism. These figures indicate antisemitism is the more commonly reported form of ethno-religious abuse by supporters in English football, surpassing Islamophobia (Millward 2008) and Catholic-Protestant sectarianism (Reid 2015).

Antisemitism within sports receives comparatively less scholarly attention than other forms of racism, where the focus tends to be on players, coaches, and supporters of colour (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001; Burdsey 2006; Cleland and Cashmore 2014; Hylton 2018; Lawrence and Davis 2019; Penfold and Cleland 2021). There are emerging exceptions. Dart and Long (2021) interviewed twenty Anglo-Jews who play amateur sports to explore the stereotype of the non-sporting Jew, reporting a decline in the frequency and severity of antisemitic abuse participants had encountered. In contrast, Müller, Haut, and Heim (2022) found members of Jewish amateur sports clubs in Germany are regularly confronted with antisemitism. Brunssen and Schüler-Springorum's (2021) edited book include chapters reviewing the nature of antisemitism within football in Poland (Burski and Wozniak), Holland (Verhoeven and Wagenaar), Germany (Schubert) and England (Poulton). While Poulton and Durell (2014) and Poulton (2016) address the contested uses and meanings of "Yid" within supporter culture – focusing on the controversial appropriation of the term by some Tottenham supporters – and Poulton (2020) critiques attempts to tackle antisemitism in English football, there has been no empirical research to date that consults Jewish football supporters about their lived experiences of antisemitism.

This qualitative study builds upon previous work to rectify this omission and augments the current body of work by gaining a candid understanding of antisemitism from the victim's perspective, considering how they deal with and respond to it. To do so, I utilise the sensitising concepts of "banter" and racist humour. "Banter" is a common mode of British humour, which can manifest as the use of word play, exaggeration, irony, sarcasm, and other comedic themes to tease and (playfully) humiliate (usually acquaintances) as a form of affection (Billig 2005). According to Dynel's (2009, 1293) types of conversational humour, banter is an *exchange* of repartees; the key premise is that "both parties are willing to engage in a humorous frame". In other words, there is mutual give-and-take. Culpeper's (1996) conceptualisation of banter as "mock impoliteness' acknowledges the scope for its more ostensibly aggressive form, which is abusive and disparaging; this contains no humour to be appreciated by the "butt" of the joke and "in the case of putdown, the speaker's genuine intention is indeed to denigrate the butt" (Dynel 2009, 1295) and to ridicule (Billig 2005).

Forms of banter are complex and multifaceted given their polysemic and ambiguous nature and issues of intent, reception, context, and power-relations, especially in competitive sports (Burdsey 2011; Hylton 2018). As

Cleland et al. (2021, 16) have observed in relation to homosexually-themed language used by supporters, which they argue does *not* reflect widespread homophobia, "football culture must be approached in its own linguistic context, in its own particular code of principles, particularly when addressing expressions of language". Particularly problematic is the way the term "banter" has been conflated within sporting contexts – particularly football which is characterised by boisterous partisanship – to include different actions, effects and functions by players, coaches, and supporters. These range from wise-cracks, wind-ups, and reciprocal "piss-taking" to denigrating and insulting others in a ritualised form. So while banter is commonly accepted – and crucially, *enjoyed* as a pleasurable currency and mode of exchange (Cleland et al. 2020) – by many within football supporter culture, it is often distasteful and objectionable (especially to outsiders) and can degenerate into vulgar and derogatory insults that recourse to abuse of a discriminatory nature based on race or ethnicity (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001; Hylton 2018), religion (Millward 2008; Reid 2015), gender (Cleland et al. 2020), sexuality (Cleland et al. 2021; Magrath 2018), and other identity-markers, as a means of ascription and demonisation.

Such othering is sometimes considered by participants and recipients as part of the mutual give-and-take, but not always. English football provides a key site that emboldens participants and affords a degree of "legitimacy" to certain forms of abuse and discrimination – which might not be repeated outside of this cultural context – centrally related to the expression of collective identity and rivalry. In this way, some taunts can be dismissed, masked, or excused – by perpetrators, but also the targeted – as "football banter". As Burdsey (2011, 278) observes, "contrary to their perceived innocent, playful nature, jokes represent a significant means of subjugating racialized groups in sport". Furthermore, this "creative and playful dimension" of football supporter culture also "enables racist assertions and stereotypes to be normalised … in a legitimate way" (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001, 111).

Where humour has been previously examined regarding forms of discrimination in sport, Burdsey (2011), Hylton (2018), Millward (2008), and Reid (2015) all provide insights into the mitigation of racism and bigotry as jokes or disparagement and superiority. Hylton's (2018) study of Black football coaches demonstrates how racialised humour, while used sometimes to ridicule and disempower, can also be used as a foil to stem racial ills. This aligns with Weaver's (2013) rhetorical discourse analysis of online antisemitic and anti-Muslim jokes, in which he considers a technique of reversing the negative effects of racism. Their work illustrates use of mitigation and response strategies by those who experience hate speech (Leets 2002), which will be used to analyse the examples of antisemitism provided by my interviewees.

Methods: Negotiating data collection and analysis as a non-Jew

Life-story interviews are helpful in telling us what is important and personally meaningful to the interviewee, of experience personally felt; they can also act as ciphers for the meta conditions of society, so helping to relate the particular to the general (Smith 2018). Participants have a repository of experiences that can be explored by researchers to offer us an understanding of their thoughts and feelings through telling their own stories, in their own words. This is especially important in learning from, and amplifying, first-hand accounts and impressions of living as a member of a minority group that faces discrimination and hate speech (Burdsey 2006; 2011; Hylton 2018), which is why a qualitative semi-structured interview approach was used.

Ellard-Gray et al. (2015, 6) advocate "development of the sampling strategy for hard to reach, hidden, or vulnerable population should always be an ongoing, iterative part of the research process'. They are mindful of participant mistrust of the research process among immigrant and ethnic minority populations due to concerns over being mistreated, misrepresented, breaches of confidentiality, and a tendency pathologise certain populations. Given these potential challenges, criterion sampling was used to recruit participants based on being Jewish and a Tottenham supporter. I attempted to recruit a non-homogenous sample that represented the characteristics and diversity of gender, age, variety of jobs/professions, and Jewish religiosity.

39 Jewish Tottenham supporters were interviewed in total: 36 males and three females aged between 21 and 73. They reflected the broad scales of religiosity and observance from secular through to practicing Orthodox. One was a rabbi. The majority were current or former season-ticket holders. Initially I had three Jews in my personal network. I recruited six more when I attended an "Antisemitism in Football" event at a Jewish community centre. From this starting point, I was reliant on referrals. I recognise that this may under-represent isolated individuals and lead to self-selection bias, but this sampling method was deemed necessary to recruit enough potentially hard-to-reach and vulnerable subjects from a very small minority group for this qualitative study (Ellard-Gray et al. 2015).

I readily acknowledge my personal positionality and role in the research process as a co-creator of data and knowledge production, and conduit for amplifying the experiences of everyday antisemitism. Given these involvement-detachment tensions, I endeavoured to ensure the interviews and analysis of interview data were undertaken with due care, attention, and rigour to minimise the influence of my own identity-markers as a White, English, female, middle-aged researcher, who is a Tottenham supporter and not Jewish. Being a fellow Tottenham supporter was helpful in developing some rapport with the participants. I was able to share experiences and memories of supporting Tottenham and of witnessing antisemitism.

However, Burdsey ([2011](#), 270) recognises how research in the field of race and ethnicity is "replete with methodological and epistemological conundrums', with enduring issues relating to power-relationships between researchers and participants, and "outsider" analyses of racisms framing the design, fieldwork, and analysis. To help mitigate this, my interviewees were given their transcripts for checking and one interviewee, plus a Jewish academic, peer-reviewed drafts as "critical friends' to alleviate any potential mistrust, misinterpretation, or misrepresentation (Ellard-Gray et al. [2015](#)).

Interview transcripts were subject to a contextualist method of reflexive thematic analysis to try to make sense of the data. This requires "a continual bending back on oneself – questioning and querying the assumptions we are making in coding and interpreting the data" (Braun and Clark [2019](#), 594). Through iterative processes of familiarisation, coding and patterns of meaning across the data were generated (Braun and Clark [2019](#)). The recorded interviews were listened to several times to identify my sense of the participants' intonation, emphasis, and emotions. The transcripts were then re-read numerous times for any repeated patterns of meaning pertaining to definitions of, and experiences of, expressive forms of antisemitism. Initial themes were generated through the interaction of data content, analysis, and conceptual assumptions at a semantic level pertaining to existing definitions of antisemitism, attempting to recognise the visceral experiences directly communicated by my participants (Braun and Clark [2019](#)). The data presented below through selected quotes reflect the overall points made by participants – with pseudonyms provided, plus ages to help consider generational context – and so provide a naturalistic generalisability (Smith [2018](#)).

Results: Experiencing and responding to antisemitism

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data presents several key findings revealing complex processes of anger, acceptance and rationalisation as recipients attempted to make sense of and deal with the everyday antisemitic micro-aggressions they endure. The interviews generated the following themes, which help structure what follows: (1) Middle Eastern geo-politics; (2) Jewish stereotypes and slurs; (3) Jewish rituals; (4) Hitler and the Holocaust; (5) "banter" and genuine "Jew-hate". Each of these is explained through reference, where appropriate, to the sensitising concepts guiding this study to help understand the participants' direct and indirect experiences of antisemitism, as well as their responses, often through mitigation strategies.

Without exception, all interviewees said their experiences of antisemitism within football were "much worse" than they had experienced in wider society, both in nature and prevalence. This was encapsulated by Ossie (44):

> There's no question what I've experienced football-related is way, way on a different scale than I've experienced elsewhere. If I added up my top 100 experiences of antisemitism, 100 of them would be at football grounds, outside of getting a bomb threat at the building I work in!

The bomb quip is illustrative of how most interviewees downplayed and normalised their encounters with everyday antisemitism because it was so routinised. Most of their experiences related to being a Tottenham supporter due to the club's quasi-Jewish identity, with perpetrators not necessarily knowing that they were Jewish yet targeting them by association. Jimmy's (67) observation indicates the agency underpinning antisemitic abuse: "I think everybody's got their own personal story which relates to when they first heard Spurs being abused. That shows there's always this undercurrent of antisemitism around and that people just choose to articulate that against Spurs'. These personal stories are underscored by one, or a combination of, discrimination based on religion (anti-Judaism), ethnicity (racism), or, to a much lesser extent within the context of English football, the geo-politics of the Middle East and anti-Zionism. For those who are well-travelled "home and away" supporters, antisemitic abuse is commonplace. As Harry (mid-20s) summarised: "I can't think of many grounds where I haven't one way or another heard something antisemitic. You always get it, even if it's just one comment". These expressive forms will now be analysed thematically.

1) Middle Eastern geo-politics

Hargreaves and Staetsky (2020, 2178) question, "How do "everyday" Jews … define antisemitism and the links between antisemitism and anti-Israelism and anti-Zionism?" These phenomena underpin the acrimonious debates over the widely adopted International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) "Working Definition" of antisemitism and its scholarly critique by the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) (Waxman, Schraub, and Hosein 2021). Several interviewees made comments regarding Israel and the conflict in the Middle East, which some perceive as an undercurrent of contemporary antisemitism (Bakan and Abu-Laban 2021; Boyd and Staetsky 2014; Hirsh 2018; Ozcelik 2021).

Ledley (early 20s) emphasised, "I must stress that I don't see hatred or abuse of Israel to be antisemitic". This was echoed by Justin (mid-20s), who said, "I feel very uncomfortable within the Jewish community when people deem anyone who's a vocal critic of Israel as an antisemite". These comments seem to align with adherents to the JDA. Lily (31) defined antisemitism as: "A statement or comment which is derogatory towards Jewish people, the religion, Israel", adding: "Caveat: Israel from a non-political criticism of Israel". Micky (mid-60s) expanded:

> If you criticise the State of Israel and thereby the Israeli Government on what they do on the West Bank settlements, that to my mind is not antisemitic. That's criticising a government. If you say Israel should not exist and why don't Jews go all over the world, that is antisemitic because that's why the State of Israel was established to prevent that happening.

Joe's (40) position perhaps reflect IHRA's "Working Definition" (2016) regarding criticism of Israel: "There's a lot of people who have said things publicly that I, as a Jew, I would consider to be antisemitic. They will often try and qualify it by saying, "No, no, I'm not antisemitic; I'm just anti-Israel". Ricky (mid-40s) believed the Arab-Israeli conflict presents people with an opportunity to express their Jewish prejudice: "I think people use Israel as an easy backdrop to have a dig at Jews because I think there's this underlying view". This upset Glenn (41): "When you see some of the anti-Israel stuff, that's pretty grim. It's not a whole step removed from the old-style antisemitism. That has caused me a lot of pain over the years'.

According to most interviewees, there were fewer mentions of Israel and Gaza within the context of English football supporter culture than in wider society. Robbie's (mid-30s) explanation was: "I don't think that the antisemitism at football make those links. Sadly, I don't think the people that chant that stuff are intelligent enough. I don't think they would say, 'Oh, we're singing that song because we disagree with the occupation of the Palestinian territories'". Others disagreed. Joe recalled: "During the first Gulf War, Spurs played Chelsea in the cup and all the Chelsea fans were singing, 'Send more scuds to kill the Jews', stuff like that". Harry's (mid-20s) recollections were more recent:

> I've noticed a lot more antisemitism in the seasons following troubles in Gaza and Israel. I think because when the whole Israel thing is in the news more, then people associate that with Jews and people associate Jews with Spurs and then that's a sort of way to verbally attack us, in person or online.

The difference with Harry's memory was that the more contemporary songs and chants from opposition supporters did not explicitly pertain to the Arab-Israeli conflict itself, but he believed it fuelled and increased the prevalence of antisemitic discourse towards Tottenham. This echoes the findings of Boyd and Staetsky (2014), Flax (2021) and Weaver (2013) who found social media has increasingly become a platform for antisemitic rhetoric, with a disproportionate focus on Israel. This is especially evident on social media platforms where Tottenham supporters – particularly those with a Star of David or Israeli flag emoji in their bio – are regularly abused by those displaying or posting Palestinian flags. This connection has also been more pronounced when Tottenham compete in Europe, where supporters have been greeted with Palestine flags by Ultras in, for example, Italian stadiums.

1) Jewish stereotypes and slurs

What was acutely apparent from the interviews was how football provided a specific, some suggested "convenient", space for negative comments and routinised Jewish stereotypes, motifs, and slurs to be deployed. This aligns with research on other forms of discrimination in football supporter culture (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001; Burdsey 2006; Cleland and Cashmore 2014; Lawrence and Davis 2019; Magrath 2018; Millward 2008; Penfold and Cleland 2021). Paul (mid-20s) recollected choruses of, "What's it like to be a Jew?". Harry (mid-20s) recalled the chant, "I'd rather be a Paki than a Jew", which simultaneously abuses two minority groups. Glenn (41) relayed an altercation with two Arsenal supporters, which he reported to the police:

> They didn't call me "Yid" – which I don't mind because the word itself isn't anti-semitic, the context in which it's used can be – he called me, "You fucking Jewish cunt". That's antisemitic. If someone substituted "Jew" for "Arab" or "Black" or "Paki", that's racist. If they'd have said to me, "You fucking Spurs cunt", that's abusive but fair enough, but why did they need to add in the "Jew" bit?

Glenn compared antisemitism to other forms of racism and inferred they are not always treated with equal gravity amidst debates over a hierarchy of racisms and remembrance of the Holocaust vis-à-vis slavery and colonialism (Hirsh 2018; Rothberg 2009).

Common objects, phrases, traditions, and insults are regularly used to emphasise and/or ridicule the "Jewishness' of Tottenham supporters, whether or not opponents *know* their targets are *actually* Jewish or discriminate *by association* with the "Jewish" football club. There is a crucial agency involved here as perpetrators choose to activate antisemitic stereotypes and narratives; something that Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman's (2020) analogy of a reservoir does not recognise. These cultural reference points include thriftiness, haggling, *kvetching* (persistent complaining), and imitating Yiddish phrases like "oy vey". Another signifier is the racialised perception of visual symbols like the caricatured "Jewish" hooked nose, with a convex nasal bridge and downward tip. This popular ethnic stereotype – a form of embodied racism (Weaver 2013) – is indicative of how both biological and cultural discourses are invoked in the racialisation of ethno-religious minorities like Jews and Muslims (Egorova and Ahmed 2017; Meer 2013).

Graham (65) suggested, "As a race of people we are probably easier to identify because of facial characteristics', while Glenn (41) reflected, "I'm not sure I look particularly Jewish?" Regardless, he said, "You always get the big nose comments'. Ledley (early 20s) said "big nose gestures' were common at Chelsea, West Ham, and Leeds. Steve (mid-20s) reminisced:

> One story that always sticks out in my mind is the FA Cup semi-final 2010, playing Portsmouth. Walking up Wembley Way, one Pompey fan shouts, "Oi

you, where's your Jewish nose?" I pointed at my nose and said, "Right here". I chose not to let him goad me. He didn't really respond. I don't think he was expecting a response from me.

This interaction exemplifies how while some Jewish supporters are prepared to challenge or report their abusers, Jewish stereotypes in football tend to be dismissed, downplayed, or tolerated as part of the sardonic humour and "banter" that are characteristic of established-outsider relations (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001; Cleland et al. 2020; Millward 2008; Magrath 2018; Reid 2015). Examples provided by my interviewees illustrate how sometimes situated and nuanced formations of discriminatory abuse are expressed rhetorically, with wit, "not always couched within abusive forms of "hate speech" or harassment" (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001, 111). However, the denigration of Jewish rituals is more offensive and problematic for some Jewish supporters.

1) Jewish rituals

Mocking Jewish rituals and practices is highly prevalent in songs, chants and social media aimed at Tottenham supporters, whether they are known to be Jewish or not. These centre around *kosher* and *treyf* food stuffs (especially pork) and *brit malah* (Jewish male circumcision). Joe (40) shared a memory of an incident that had angered him travelling home from a Tottenham-Chelsea match: "They just came up to us and started chanting, "Have you ever eaten bacon in your life?" right in my face … That's not funny. It's just racist". Ossie provided an anecdote, which he found amusing:

> The Chelsea fans were above us and at a coordinated moment they threw over pork pies in wrappers, thinking that was their idea of a joke and having a pop. I was with a bunch of visiting Israeli fans who were very secular, who picked them up and gestured, "Thank you", then opened them and ate them.

Ossie's response illustrates how many Jewish supporters' response strategy is to laugh off/at antisemitic rhetoric and behaviours as part and parcel of football banter. In this connection, Hylton (2018) highlights the use of techniques of humour to enable feelings of subordination and humiliation to be transposed into forms of resistance. Another example of this mentioned by several interviewees pertained to *Shabbos*, the Jewish Sabbath, an important holy day for religiously observant Jews. *Shabbos'* time-frame – from Friday sunset until dusk on Saturday – clashes with the traditional English Saturday afternoon professional men's football match (see Dart and Long 2021), although contemporary scheduling by broadcast media companies renders this less problematic. Ricky (mid-40s) commented on a chant aimed at Tottenham supporters over the last seven decades, generally considered amusing by most interviewees: "If somebody chants, "Does your Rabbi know you're

here?" I'd laugh that off. It's potentially, mildly offensive, but actually, if you're playing on a Saturday, they've got a point".

There were more diverse responses to another song sung by rivals about Tottenham supporters that maligns Jewish male circumcision – to the tune of the children's song *Coming Round the Mountain* – with a boast about having an intact prepuce. Gary (mid-60s) was unmoved by the song's lyrics: "Somebody singing, "I've got a foreskin, haven't you?" – is that antisemitic? I don't know. It's just stating something factual to be quite honest. I don't take that as abusive". Ronnie (mid-60s) offered some circumspection: "Songs about circumcision are ignorant. They're not funny. And, ridiculously, more people are circumcised today than ever before, Jewish or not". Pat (59) was angered due to the symbolic significance of this rite of passage: "Because Judaism as a race is so important to me and my being, things that are part of Judaism, like circumcision, is an important thing. If people use things like that as a way of getting at you, then I do take exception". Ricky made a comparison to a popular misogynistic chant "Get your tits out" he found offensive, as he recounted:

> I remember this Man U guy walking with his son who must have been 12 years old and his son shouts, "Get your foreskin out", and his dad's laughing at him. Another time on the train, these utter scumbags singing, "Stand up if you've got foreskins'. It's just filth. There's probably an underlying undercurrent of anti-Jewish feeling there, isn't there? Because how would a 12-year-old boy know that a Jew doesn't have a foreskin? I think it shows it's a society issue if his dad chuckles along with him.

Here Ricky reflects on the agency involved and motivation of those singing songs or making such comments, suggesting that this discourse is beyond the realms of football banter and mirrors prevailing antisemitic sentiments within wider society (Egorova and Ahmed 2017; Flax 2021). Micky (mid-60s) also discussed the stimulus behind antisemitic rhetoric, proposing that a distinction could not be made about the gravity of offensiveness, but that the *intention* to offend might be a consideration: "There might be two categories: one which is malicious intent, and the other one which is ignorance and not realising what they're doing".

For Glenn (41) the "ridiculous foreskin song is the thin end of the wedge, and the thicker end of the wedge is the Auschwitz stuff, the hissing, the Nazi salutes, West Ham fans singing that "Adolf Hitler's coming for you"". Glenn distinguished between the range of antisemitic discourse that Tottenham supporters endure and ruminates an inferred scale of acceptability – what Burdsey (2011) refers to as "gradations' – which several interviewees mentioned. Considering opponents' repertoire, Pat (59) observed, "There's definitely a grading of offensiveness'. Harry (mid-20s), who "took on the chin" ridicule of Jewish rituals, alluded to how the social space of football

allows for the heightened expression of discriminatory abuse: "People say stuff at football which you can't say anywhere else, but the only time it angers me is when it's a Nazi salute or hissing. That goes too far". The realms of acceptability are discussed next, with consideration given to issues around intent, reception, and context.

1) Hitler and the Holocaust

Denial and trivialisation of the Holocaust are common antisemitic motifs that induce anxiety and anger among most Jews (Boyd and Staetsky 2014; Flax 2021). Holocaust trivialisation is one way in which the scale, nature and meaning of the Nazi attempt to exterminate European Jews is diminished and the memory of those who perished and who survived is insulted. Levity, wilful abuse, and the instrumentalisation of Holocaust imagery and language – what Boswell (2012) conceives as "Holocaust impiety" – invoke a horror and painful history that is hurtful and insulting to survivors and their relatives (Flax 2021; Rothberg 2009; Boyd and Staetsky 2014). All interviewees considered words, images, and deeds pertaining to Hitler, the Nazi regime and Holocaust as the most pernicious form of antisemitism they experience, breaching their tolerance zone. All testified to the prevalence of such discourse in men's English football supporter culture, much more than in wider society. This was shared across the ages and generations, reflecting supporters' experiences over different decades, with older participants tending to be most aggrieved.

For Danny (mid-60s), "The worse of the antisemitism I've faced was, still is, always predominantly from Chelsea and West Ham who make the hissing sounds. It was pretty bad in the 1970s and 1980s. It's nowhere near as bad as it was, but still happens'. Gareth (late 40s) remembered, "In the 1980s, early 1990s, Chelsea singing songs about gassing us in the chambers: "Spurs are on their way to Belsen" – they're awful songs'. Ledley's (early 20s) "earliest memory of it was Wolves away in the early 2000s. I was only a young teenager but remember a Wolves fan standing on his own doing a Nazi salute to us. He got chucked out, but I was shocked it happened". A more recent testimony, evidencing this is still a contemporary problem, came from Steve (mid-20s): "Last season away at Leicester … one of their supporters did a Nazi salute at us'.

Several interviewees suggested stewarding, policing and surveillance has "improved", but also changed the nature of some supporters' behaviour. Ben (39) explained, "They don't tend do it at the ground anymore, but it's still in the streets, pubs, stations and tube". Ossie explained how rival supporters had found astute means to antagonise Tottenham supporters with covert antisemitic rhetoric:

> Away fans tend to be a bit clever. West Ham fans sing songs where you can't say they're singing the words; they're doing the illusion. They go, "You know what you are!" [meaning: 'Jews'] and "We're not allowed to say his name [Hitler], he's coming for you!"

The torment and emotion were writ large as my interviewees recounted rival supporters invoking the Holocaust. Ossie lamented:

> The last time I went to West Ham around 2000, I vowed I'd never go again … The Holocaust stuff, it's just on such a different level. It's not banter. It's vile and I wouldn't ever take my son into that environment.

Gary (mid-60s) was incensed, "Alluding to a horrendous event that took place and singing about Hitler gassed them then, maybe they should gas Tottenham supporters now: that is antisemitic. I find that very offensive". Jan (early 60s) described an experience involving Chelsea supporters: "There was more than 100 of them. It was quite a noise, this gas chamber hissing. It was so unpleasant and I just hated them doing it". Ronnie (mid-60s) encapsulated the malevolence:

> Anything about World War II and the Holocaust, for me, they're the most treasonous. It's horrendous. It not only tarnishes the memory of those who died in the Holocaust and in the conflict, but it's a disgrace to the memory of the soldiers who fought. It's a disgrace to their forebearers.

The tolerance zone of all interviewees was breached when frivolous disrespect is shown towards incidents involving fatalities. This is especially true of the Holocaust, given Jewish sensitivities to this attempt to exterminate them (Flax 2021; Boyd and Staetsky 2014). Ricky (mid-40s) asked:

> How can anybody sing about anything that's linked to death, the Holocaust, Hitler, and think it's amusing? There's a line. It's a bit like with Man U when people start singing about Munich. There's a line there because you're talking about death and people dying and celebrating people dying and you must be thick if you think that's funny.

Ricky draws parallels with the 1958 Munich air crash which, like the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster, is subject to "tragedy abuse" by a minority within men's football supporter culture. English football authorities and clubs try to discourage this, and participants are often called out by other supporters (both in crowds and online) for having "no class'. This informal self-regulation gives an indication of how and where the boundaries of acceptability and (poor) taste are constructed within supporter culture.

Although trivialisation of the Holocaust is said to be felt most acutely by older Jews who are survivors or close relatives (Flax 2021; Boyd and Staetsky 2014), my youngest participant, Hugo (21) provided a succinct observation about when and how the acceptable parameters of "banter" are broken: "I think it's a mentality where people are willing to go

out and abuse people, rather than just have a bit of banter. But people have to draw the line. What have 6 million dead people got to do with football?" My eldest interviewee, Bill (73) provided an equally sobering and poignant observation about Holocaust trivialisation juxtaposed Holocaust denial:

> When I hear the Chelsea and West Ham supporters with their hissing and the gas chambers songs, strangely enough, I've got less angry with that as I've got older. And the reason why I've got less angry is it means they know it happened. I have more time for them than a Holocaust denier. At least they know it happened and they just want to wind us up.

While no interviewees explicitly suggested that the Holocaust should be ineffable, there was a palpable sense that evocation of this horrendous episode should be respectfully "off limits' within football supporter culture.

1) "Banter" and "genuine" antisemitism

Although Gidley, McGeever, and Feldman (2020) suggest that establishing whether specific antisemitic remarks stem from "genuine" antisemitism or ignorance may be futile, a recurring discussion that arose during my interviews was whether the antisemitic rhetoric that is prevalent within English football is genuine anti-Jew hate. A slim majority of my 39 interviewees believed that the underpinning intention is usually an expression of footballing rivalry and/or animosity and mitigated as unlikely to be considered *by the perpetrator* as "antisemitic". Joe (40) commented: "It's rivalry. It's just a lot of fans of Chelsea and West Ham happen to express that by anti-Jewish chants. I don't know why, but I think it's more anti-Spurs than anything genuinely antisemitic for most of them".

Justin (mid-20s) was "not convinced how much antisemitism there is in football". He doubted "that it's actually picking on Jews because they're Jews, because people hate Jews', explaining how, "Football fans will pick on anyone because of their differences'. Notwithstanding this, antisemitic rhetoric is weaponised towards Tottenham supporters because of the "Jewish club" tag. Erik (49) concurred: "Football brings out bad things in people. They're trying to find a weak spot. They're trying to find a place that can hurt the opposition fans. We sing about Chelsea having no history and the "rent boy" stuff". Here Erik acknowledges that some Tottenham supporters target rival clubs' identity and heritage, which can include homophobic slurs (Cleland et al. 2021; Magrath 2018). Indeed, football supporters deliberately taunt their rivals by going for their perceived Achilles' heel or what will be the most provocative, often to gain an advantage (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001; Magrath 2018).

Ledley also candidly recognised how football supporters target their opponents, ascribing this as the traditional "banter" endemic in English

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supporter culture designed to antagonise opponents and highlighting the concept of intent:

> I don't think that the majority of the antisemitism Spurs fans receive is intended to be an anti-Jewish slur. I think if you asked these people face-to-face what they meant, they'd have no idea. They probably see it as football banter just like we would call West Ham "pikeys" or tell Liverpool fans to "sign on" [for state benefits]. I would rather it not happen, but I don't take it too personally.

The difference between Justin, Erik and Ledley's viewpoints is that the latter maintained the use of such discourse was still antisemitic – with the wider potential impact, not intent, the driving factor – even if the perpetrator refutes intentionality under the name of "banter". This exemplifies Back, Crabbe, and Solomos's (2001) observation that football supporter culture enables, even emboldens, racist assertions and racialised stereotypes to be normalised and legitimised. While Joe maintained "that racism, antisemitism, is not a football problem, it's a society problem", he believed, "People are using football as a place to express their views'. Graham (65) concurred, "There are people who behave very differently in a football ground than they do in their normal walks of life" and that the "unnecessary direct remarks are still antisemitic". However, again recognising the principle of intent, he conceded, "Do they actually *mean* to be antisemitic? Half of them probably don't even know why they're hissing, but they're following the numpty next to them".

Micky (mid-60s) did not "believe that 95per cent of Chelsea and West Ham fans are *really* antisemitic; they get caught up in it". Ronnie (mid-60s) was more sceptical: "When you look at them, you can tell whether there's real hatred there or not and I suspect for some of them, there is real vitriol, real prejudice. I hope that for the majority, it's just banter, or they see it as banter, but I'm not convinced". Ossie believed some opposition supporters harboured anti-Jewish sentiments:

> Do I think those people saying those words are trying to be offensive to Jews? No, they're trying to be offensive to Spurs and they'll sing anything. But if you were a genuinely decent, non-racist person who doesn't have any antisemitism in you, you wouldn't sing songs about Hitler, Auschwitz, the Holocaust … If you're okay with that, there's some form of antisemitism going on there.

While no interviewees thought that there were any neo-Nazis within English football supporter culture (which is unlikely), Jimmy (67) detected there was a suspicion or dislike of Jews underpinning the most overt expressions:

> I can understand why they might tell you to F-off because they hate Spurs. But why have they got to do Nazi salutes? I think the people doing that would do exactly the same if they were in Stamford Hill and a member of the Hasidic community passed by because that's how they see Jewish people … Those people use signals like that towards the Jewish community/Spurs because, to them,

they are superior. So, when they see us [Spurs] as representing Jewishness, that's why they do it.

Younger supporter Harry (mid-20s) agreed, proposing that Tottenham's quasi-identity as a Jewish club was an opportune vehicle for articulating Jew-hate:

> I think a lot of fans who do hate Jewish people use Spurs as a way of disguising that, or they find an acceptable way of attacking Jewish people is through Spurs. They might not like Jewish people, but they wouldn't say it in the streets. But at football and against Spurs, it's sort of acceptable.

Ben (39) attempted to distance himself from the antisemitic abuse, juxtaposed an interpersonal attack, while acknowledging the magnetism of Tottenham's Jewish association: "They're not singing at me because they know I'm Jewish. They're singing it because I'm identified with a Jewish club. But it's just an all-round horrible experience". Gareth (late 40s) lamented: "Just because Spurs fans have got that identity doesn't legitimise the virulent antisemitic abuse that goes on". Nevertheless, the vivid accounts of my interviewees demonstrate the regular utility of football to allude to and reflect prevailing negative sentiments towards ethno-religious minorities. This is despite – or perhaps, in spite of – anti-discrimination campaigns and athlete/supporter activism such as "taking a knee", which have brought a heightened awareness of racism(s) across contemporary sports and signal shifting tolerance zones, with much more "calling out" all forms of discrimination.

Conclusion

Drawing upon sensitising concepts of "banter", racist humour, and mitigation strategies, this interpretive qualitative study examines and amplifies the under-researched everyday interactions and lived experiences of antisemitism among members of the Anglo-Jewish community. Football provides a prism through which to explain how antisemitism finds heightened expression within particular social spaces and advances understanding of how victims of antisemitism experience, and respond, to the abuse they receive. Reflexive thematic analysis of life-story interviews with 39 Jewish supporters of Tottenham – a professional men's club whose quasi-Jewish identity is the catalyst for antisemitic abuse from rival supporters – presents four key findings.

First, all interviewees said their experiences of antisemitism within men's English football supporter culture were "much worse" than they had experienced in wider society, both in nature and prevalence. This finding contradicts Boyd and Staetsky's (2014) claim that sports events are a least likely place in which British Jews encounter antisemitism. The partisan and

aggressive nature of men's football supporter culture provides a fertile, possibly convenient, arena for negative comments and routinised Jewish stereotypes, motifs, and slurs to be deployed, normalised, and mitigated by perpetrators (and often victims) as humour and banter (Burdsey 2011; Hylton 2018; Weaver 2013). While there was a sense that the current scale was not as bad as it was in previous decades, some interviewees observed how perpetrators had developed sophisticated, covert means to antagonise Tottenham supporters. Middle Eastern geo-political discourse was experienced much less as an expressive means of antisemitism within English football than outside of this context (Hargreaves and Staetsky 2020; Flax 2021). However, some interviewees felt that escalations in the Arab-Israeli conflict fuelled and increased the prevalence of antisemitic rhetoric towards Tottenham from rival supporters.

Second, there was consensus among all interviewees that references to Hitler, the Nazi regime, and the Holocaust exceeded the threshold of acceptability even within the normatively "generous' tolerance zone of football banter. This is because such antisemitic motifs induce considerable anxiety and anger among most Jews (Boyd and Staetsky 2014; Flax 2021). There was unanimous dismay and disgust at "tragedy abuse" about Nazi death camps and the odious imitation of the gas chambers. This was regardless of interviewees' age and generational closeness to the Holocaust. My youngest interviewee encapsulated this as he pertinently questioned the relevance of the deaths of 6 million Jews to the sport of football. It is wholly inappropriate at best, and callously insensitive at worst, to refer to this horrific genocide as an expression of sporting rivalry or football banter. Evoking the Holocaust and Hitler's regime insults the traumatic memory of those who perished and distress the survivors and their ancestors, with the impact felt well beyond football supporter culture. Any piece of work attempting to combat antisemitism in football would do well to remember this and review the focus and target of their attention.

Third, while the denigration of Jewish rituals and practices such as male circumcision was offensive and problematic for some Jewish supporters due to their cultural and religious significance, Jewish stereotypes and slurs tended to be downplayed, dismissed, or at least tolerated by most interviewees as part of the "banter" endemic in English supporter culture. These testimonies reinforce the conceptual argument raised earlier that a key strategy in mitigating the effects of antisemitism is to lessen the seriousness or disrupt the impact of the hate speech they endure and locate them within discourses of football banter (Burdsey 2011).

Fourth, most interviewees thought it more probable that antisemitic rhetoric is employed by *most* perpetrators to signify collective identity and express club rivalry and hostility, especially towards Tottenham because of its Jewish association. Chants, songs, and social media posts that deploy

Jewish stereotypes and slurs or ridicule Jewish rituals might be understood in this context as usually *intended* to "wind up", taunt and provoke Tottenham supporters, rather than as malevolent racialised othering with pernicious intent towards Jews *as Jews*. It was considered unlikely that most antisemitic rhetoric in the context of contemporary English football, or even physical manifestations like the symbolic performance of a Nazi salute, are politicised or reflect neo-Nazi sympathies.

However, while a greater number of Jewish supporters felt that antisemitic discourse was intended as "anti-Spurs' – born out of ignorance, or malice – some believed Tottenham's symbolic identity as a Jewish club was a convenient vehicle for expressing *genuine* Jew-hate. Using Tottenham supporters as the target of abuse and vitriol proceeds from a real or assumed "Jewishness'. Antisemitism can be directed at those who are *perceived* to be Jewish, rather than predicated on the principle of "Jews as Jews'. Most Tottenham supporters are not Jewish, but the club's quasi-Jewish identity renders them the target of antisemitism. This abuse will be most keenly felt by Tottenham's Jewish supporters, which is why their everyday interactions and lived experiences were sought, but is likely to affect others too. Further research is needed on the wider impact, and on the experiences and feelings of Jewish supporters of other clubs.

The scholarly significance and implications of this study are not limited or restricted to football. The study enhances in an original and meaningful way the body of work in studies of antisemitism, racism, and ethno-religious minorities by amplifying the everyday experiences and attitudes among members of the Anglo-Jewish community. The interview data reveals complex processes of anger, acceptance and rationalisation as recipients attempt to make sense of and deal with everyday antisemitism. These findings present an opportunity for Anglo-Jews – and those entrusted to take care of them – to empirically assess the nature of antisemitism in the country today. A key question that emerges for English football's governing bodies and anti-discrimination campaigners is how they preserve the witty, give-and-take banter and partisan characteristics of supporter culture that many supporters value and avoid accusations of the sanitisation of football. This must be counterbalanced with respecting cultural and ethno-religious differences because football should have nothing to do with 6 million dead people.

Note

1. Tottenham Hotspur FC Women in the English Women's Super League do not appear to have this quasi-Jewish identity. Nor is antisemitism, like other forms of racism, a feature of women's football supporter culture at the time of writing, which tends to be characterised by a more "relaxed", carnival-like, "family atmosphere' (Williams, Pope, and Cleland 2022).

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Ethics statement

Ethics approval for this research was granted by the School of Applied Social Sciences' Ethics Committee, Durham University. All participants (who have been given pseudonyms) were informed about the purposes of their interviews and how their responses would be securely stored and used and gave consent.

Disclosure statement

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