



# Entering into, staying, and being active in a group of football supporters: a procedural analysis of engagement. The case of supporters of a French football club

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## ► To cite this version:

Ludovic Lestrelin. Entering into, staying, and being active in a group of football supporters: a procedural analysis of engagement. The case of supporters of a French football club. *International Review of Sociology*, 2012, 22 (3), pp.492-513. 10.1080/03906701.2012.730831 . hal-02087115

**HAL Id: hal-02087115**

**<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02087115>**

Submitted on 1 Apr 2019

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# Entering into, staying and being active in a group of football supporters: A procedural analysis of engagement

## *The case of supporters of a French Football Club*

### **Abstract**

In football (or soccer) stadiums, one of the ends (*virages* in French, or *curve* in Italian) brings together the most organized and ardent fans who support their team *manu et voce*. This article aims to define the dynamics leading individuals to become a part of a group of supporters, an engagement conceived of according to a sequential process. Through a qualitative inquiry, results show the importance of the relational networks in the process of engagement in this type of organization. Moreover, friendly interaction and the levels of sociability encountered over the course of action as part of supporting make up as much incentive to activism as may be understood in the condition of being set back in the general framework of the *supporters' careers*. The article ends with a discussion on the use of the sociology of collective action and mobilization in order to study the world of football supporters.

**Keywords:** sports fandom; supporters; career; engagement; social networks; sociability; collective action

### Reference :

Lestrelin L., 2012, «Entering into, staying and being active in a group of football supporters: A procedural analysis of engagement. The case of supporters of a French football club», *International Review of Sociology. Revue internationale de sociologie*, vol. 22, n°3, p. 492-513.

# Entering into, staying and being active in a group of football supporters:

## A procedural analysis of engagement

### *The case of supporters of a French Football Club*

How does one become a football (or soccer, as it is sometimes known) supporter? The sporting spectacle may be experienced in a number of different ways. This state of affairs is all the more sensitive as loyalty to a club has diversified (Giulianotti 2002). The fact remains that any high-level European football team is flanked by several groups of supporters. Great stage for the sporting spectacle, the football stadium is also the stage for the spectacle of a spectacle – that provided by organized fans who in this way devote themselves to the practice denoted by the term “supporting” (Bromberger 1995). Since the late 1960s, the development of an “international football supporting culture” (Giulianotti 1999, p. 63-65) has generalized the ways to encourage the teams (with cultural differences that still exist between supporters, at the local, regional, national and continental levels)<sup>1</sup>. In all the great stadiums, one of the ends (*virages* in French, or *curve* in Italian) brings together the most organized and ardent fans who support their team *manu et voce*, for example, the Kop of Anfield at Liverpool, the south *virage* at Marseilles, the south *curva* at Rome (Redhead 1993). Why is it that some individuals become a part of a group of supporters, participating in their activities, while others go along to the stadium without being part of an organized group – or rapidly revert to their old ways after experiencing collective action – and, others still, stay sat in front of their

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<sup>1</sup> For example, while in the UK and latterly northern Europe the “casual” hooligan style (with chants, alcohol and violence) holds sway, militant fan sub-cultures of Southern Europe (the *ultràs*) and South America (particularly the *barras bravas* in Argentina) are characterized by a spectacular style of support with chants, flags, banners and fireworks (violence is not the *raison d'être* but can be a part of their match-day repertoire). Although it was born in the UK during the 1960s, today football hooliganism can be also analyzed as a world phenomenon even if there are still differences between countries. See: Dunning 2000, Dunning *et al.* 2002, Spaaij 2006. For the Greek and Italian cases, see: Courakis 1998, Roversi 1994.

televisions? In other words, what is it that prompts an individual to become an active supporter for “his” (or “her”) club and put “supporting” into action?

## **1. Thinking about engagement in a group of football supporters**

To study engagement in a group of football supporters, sociology of collective action and social movements seems interesting<sup>2</sup>. Differences between action and passive participation, in other words why some people engage (and others don't), is a typical question. Indeed, numerous works focus on the general factors that could be at the origin of militancy and enrolment in varied political and associative movements. The engagement in an organized group could at first glance be considered a rational choice: people engage in what is in fact a cost/benefit analysis. Another theoretical perspective emphasizes the role of socialization which predisposes one to being a member of a group. Without denying the interest of such approaches, I would like to look further at the engagement as a dynamic and sequential process by returning to the inheritance of the Chicago sociological tradition.

### **1.1 The rationality of the agent: the costs and benefits of engagement**

Very discussed in sociology of collective action and social movements, the theory of “selective incentives” (Olson 1965) is one answer to the question of what pushes someone to take action and become a member of a group. The premise herein may be summarised as follows: it is not because there are common interests, material or otherwise, that a group will be mobilized unanimously, for the pursuit of the private good rarely coincides with the attainment of a common good. Consequently, the engagement of individuals in collective

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<sup>2</sup> The title of this article is inspired by Siméant 2001.

action is possible only if the group is in a position to deliver common goods and private goods simultaneously. This perspective leads one to think of the agent as a rational and reflective being, who weighs up the costs of collective action (that he seeks to minimise) and the individual profits that he may hope to gain from it (as he seeks to maximise his gains).

For the case of supporting, such a framework for analysis has the undeniable advantage of re-assessing the prospect of engagement not only from the point of view of one's passion for the club but also from that of precise motives (i.e. individual desires and interests). By placing the question of the cost of individual engagement at the centre of the study, this theoretical option seems to be able to account for the driving force behind entry into a collective organization and to bring into focus the various gratifying elements that make up the framework for action, in short, to highlight the fact that any mobilization stems, in part, from the quest for material or symbolic rewards - including in the world of supporting (Lestrelin *et al.* 2006). These rewards may include access to a box office (and the possibility of escaping from the black market)<sup>3</sup>, the prospect of "low cost" group travel to follow the team in its "away" matches, but also acquisition and extension of social capital, an atmosphere of camaraderie and participation in a universe of shared references, among others.

Nevertheless, the objectivist danger of this paradigm must be measured. First of all, it would be quite careless to claim that one motive, rather than another is behind individuals' *passage à l'acte*. Moreover, it is not easy to distinguish between the rewards that were expected before joining and those experienced during engagement. Social agents can reconstruct their motivations *a posteriori* in order to rationalise their practices for an investigator. Should one then regard the supporter as an individual who assesses whether or not it is advantageous to go to the match in the company of the other members of the group to which he belongs before

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<sup>3</sup> In France, as in other European countries, membership of a group of supporters that is recognized by the club managers is a guarantee of access to better price tickets, either because the supporters' organizations have their seats at the ends or because they were able to negotiate reduced prices with the management.

every match? Taking action does not systematically mean seeking to attain objectives and goals that may be clear in one's mind (Elster 1986a, 1986b, Passy 1998)<sup>4</sup>. "The frame of reality perception, through which agents face the problem of engagement and reflect on the possibilities that are offered to them" (Agrikoliansky 2002, p. 142) then remains to be reconstructed. A form of "social action" in the sense of "human behaviour...when and in so far as the agents endow it with a subjective meaning" (Weber 1995, p. 28), supporting also refers to objective dimensions – individuals belong to specific social groups that make them more or less receptive to this practice. One may also infer the existence of a "footballistic past" that determines a "supporting present".

## 1.2 Extending social identity and opportunities for socialization

There is in fact a second option, which looks to the question of socialization by applying group sociology, based on the characteristics of its members' social position. Inspired by the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, an analysis of this kind invites one to place the homology between the experiences incorporated by individuals in the course of their socialization and the project borne out by the organization<sup>5</sup>. It also invites one to consider the idea that investing (i.e. time, attention, money in the game and the expectation of something from it) in a group of football supporters is the result of a particular set of socializations. Familiarity with the world of football, acquired from infancy and through family as both player and regular spectator of matches on television and in stadiums would, for example, be an explanatory factor in the progress of an individual. From this perspective, engagement brought about by

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<sup>4</sup> The work of Hirschman (1983) highlights to what extent militantism can be both its own end and its own recompense.

<sup>5</sup> In France, this area of research has been explored by the sociology of collective action. Several works on the subject of socialist and communist parties have called attention to the fact that the identity-based claims (notably of the working class identity) that are built upon by these organizations for a long time allowed them to recruit individuals who felt they were its bearers on account their social belonging. See Pudal (1989) for example.

practical reason developed since childhood, is a reasonable and coherent activity in so far as it is in keeping with the an individual's universe of meanings (Bourdieu 1998).

This rich perspective is based on a strong sociological hypothesis: if engagement in collective action tendentially concerns certain social agents, it is because the latter, in virtue of their position and social experience see themselves in its future and consider themselves vehicles for its underlying principles. However, it is difficult to evaluate the place of these social determinants in the investment in groups. They doubtless play a role in individuals' "potentialities", but these characteristics are not enough to explain engagement itself, if only because this reading does not allow one to distinguish action from passive participation. Although disposition may account for someone's likelihood and propensity to take action, it does not provide an explanation for the fact that not all of the individuals who display such characteristics engage in supporting. One need not look very far to see that not all the individuals who have been socialised in football, who practice the sport, who watched matches in their childhood or their youth, engage in a group of football supporters. Yet, organizations' differential recruitment is precisely one of the major questions raised by engagement in collective action (Snow *et al.* 1980). Identifying the concrete process by which the predispositions and motivations are activated, leading to engagement seems to offer one solution to this problem.

### 1.3. Towards a procedural approach to engagement

In order to make engagement in a group of supporters intelligible, it seems appropriate to set out two plans, namely "the register of concrete situations of engagement, giving rise to a micro-sociological approach to the contexts of the action, and a second register of biographical variables that calls for social trajectories to be analysed" (Agrikoliansky 2002, p.

143-144). The concept of *career*, originally from the field of interactionist sociology, would seem to be very useful in carrying out this project. The lasting influence of this term is largely thanks to Everett C. Hughes (1937) who used it in his research into the professions. It was, however, through the deviant careers of the marijuana smokers and jazz musicians studied by Howard S. Becker that the concept took on the sense in which it will be used here, i.e. as a sequential model for analysis of human behaviour. One too must therefore adopt the definition attributed by this author: “Objectively...a series of statuses and clearly defined offices...typical sequences of position, achievement, responsibility, and even of adventure...Subjectively, a career is the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his varied attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him” (Becker 1963, p. 102). In order to fully understand individuals’ engagement in supporting, it is suggested here that *supporters’ careers* can be studied, according to the method used by Howard S. Becker in his study of *deviant careers*. This option has already been adopted by some researchers working on the subject of football supporters, namely Marsh (1978) and more recently Jones (2000) and Crawford (2003)<sup>6</sup>.

As Crawford explained the primary interest this concept holds lies in the fact that human action is conceived of as a process. This dynamic vision therefore proffers a consideration of action not as a state but as a progressive process, during which different sequences of engagement follow on from one another. Moreover, action is not seen here as the mere product of a logical calculation of cause and effect, and the weight of social factors proves less “determinist”. In fact, the concept of *career* enables one to avoid considering the trajectory as something conditioned, once and for all by the original social position or initial socialization. Rather, socialization is an evolving process, the product of a series of stages that is to guide to the overall progression. The concept of *career* is thus a tool that enables one to

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of *career* has been used in many works led on militancy in political or associative movements too. See: Fillieule 2001.



understand “how, at each stage of the biography, attitudes and behaviour are determined by past attitudes and behaviour and, in turn, condition the range of those that may be yet to come” (Fillieule 2001, p. 201).

The second attraction of the concept relates to the fact that it allows one to closely link together the objective and subjective dimensions of social phenomena. In practice, this type of analysis does not mean withdrawal to the sole individual sphere because the organization within which careers unfold is present as the backdrop to the process. The individual, as the very unit under analysis, is systematically replaced in collective reasoning, contexts and interaction. For this reason, the concept invites one to explore the collective conditions of action, to draw attention to the organizations themselves and to their history (for it is at the heart of these organizations that careers unfold), and, last but not least to pre-empt disregard for structural analysis. In this way, “the notion of career does not lead one to ignore the structural variables, as a hasty reading of the interactionist paradigm may have you believe, but rather to contextualize the analysis of their effects in practice, during different sequences of action” (Agrikoliansky 2001, p. 31). By taking into account engagement in this way, the juncture of personal trajectories and the organizational reasoning that govern the activity may be continually attained.

## **2. Research Methods and Context**

In France, Olympique de Marseille (OM) is a very popular football team (Bromberger 1995). OM has enjoyed a “long distance” fascination that echoes the geographically diverse support enjoyed by English and Scottish football clubs, which has been documented by other authors (Ben-Porat 2000, Giulianotti 1995, Giulianotti and Robertson 2007, Goksoyr and Hognestad 1999, Hognestad 2003, Hognestad 2006, Nash 2000). The victory of the club against AC

Milan at the European Cup Final of the Champions' League in 1993 means a lot. This victory (watched by 16,6 million television viewers in France) aroused such emotion that it stirred up "*passions transterritoriales*". From about a dozen groups in the early 1990s, the number of groups of supporters established outside the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region (where the club is located) rose to around 40 by the end of the 1990s. Today there are almost 70, scattered throughout France and abroad (in Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg and the USA).

OM is the club of the second largest French city (after Paris). The *Cité du Sud*, as it is known (the City of the South), is situated on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea; Marseilles is also a populous and cosmopolitan city. History has left its mark in the city's reputation for defiant opposition to the capital and centralised power (Cobb 2001). The craze surrounding this team therefore also owes a lot to a set of interlinked representations. OM and the club of the French capital, Paris-Saint-Germain (PSG) are thus systematically and rationally thought of in such a way that identification to the *marseillais* side is linked to divisions between the capital and the provinces but also between North and South, the "establishment" and the little people etc. (Lestrelin 2010).

The research presented here was carried out over three years between 2001 and 2004, with a group of supporters in the North of France, in the city of Rouen in Upper Normandy, which is more than 900 kilometres away from Marseilles. Created in 1997 and now about 100 members strong, the association organizes regular trips to the stadiums visited by the team (in France and abroad). Becoming a member involves nothing more official than signing an information sheet and paying a fee. Seven people in charge share the management of the group. Two leaders (a President and a Vice-President) organize the journeys to see OM play, book the buses, the seats in the stadia, and handle the accountancy. An editor takes care of the *fanzine* (Haynes 1995).

I made twenty-four trips with this group, most of them in coaches. Participation in travel activities was accompanied by observation of instances in the day-to-day life of the association, such as general meetings and nights out which were attended. Aside from observation, accompanying the group on its journeys made it possible for several informal discussions to be had along the way, in the bus, or in the stands, before, during and after the matches. Based on ordinary forms of social exchange, the aim of these conversations was to uncover trajectories. With a direction for the conversations in mind, certain responses based on a regressive principle were used, i.e. “and before that?”; “since when?” etc.

In addition to the observations, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the aim of retracing individual pathways and reconstructing the meaning that actors accorded to their activity as supporters. A thematic interview guide had the aim of identifying the successive stages that had led the individuals to engage in supporting. The individual itineraries of the members of the groups were then compared and contrasted in order to try and touch on a global understanding of the phenomenon together with its constants and irregularities.

Twenty-six supporters were interviewed face-to-face using structured and follow-up questions. All interviews were recorded. First, I interviewed sixteen members of the group with no special responsibilities. The president and vice-president, responsible for organising travel arrangements (booking coaches and seats in the stadiums), funding and the maintenance of a website, as well as the events manager (nights out, tournaments etc.) were also interviewed. In addition, seven supporters that had spent a long or short while in the groups (as members for between one and three years) were contacted in order to understand the reasons for their departure and to reconstruct their experience of collective action. Using the list of members between 1999 and 2004 (which also gives details of age, sex and place of residence) I tried to model the sociological diversity of the association. The interviewees were aged between 16 and 63 (12 of them were between 20 and 35 years of age) and male (there is

nonetheless one woman in the group), having left their local identities “at the door” (they have no present or past link with the city of Marseilles). They are, for the most part, from working class backgrounds (a significant number are blue collar workers and employees; there are also university and high-school students) which confirms the idea that not everyone is “eligible” to participate in the practice of supporting and to what extent individuals are dependent on their social properties and dispositions<sup>7</sup>. The vast majority of members are marked by precocious initiation to football in which regular interaction with the world of the football stadium played a sentimental role. One must also highlight the fact that from a reading of the pathways of individuals encountered over the course of this investigation, it would seem that rewards, both material and symbolic make up a sizeable part of the declared reasons for membership of the association. However, as with other types of investment, engagement in a group of supporters is neither the mere product of social determinisms nor of rational calculation. Rather, it must be thought of as a social activity where different sequences follow on from one another.

### **3. Sequential and contextual division: entering, staying and taking action**

The first fundamental sequence, the conditions of membership to the group, must be reconstructed. In other words, it is necessary to clarify the context in which, on the one hand, propensities to act are activated and, on the other, the motivations appear as a desirable possibility. The recruitment and communications efforts carried out by the group of supporters shall be explored, with the assumption that these activities are founded on a certain rationale. Can one not assume that it is above all those who are in a position of greatest contact with the group (and its members) who are most often mobilized? At this stage of the

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<sup>7</sup> For the demographical profile of fans in Western Europe, see: Waddington *et al.* 1998.

process of engagement, I believe that insertion into social networks is a determining condition of enrolment in the organization (McAdam 1988, Snow *et al.* 1980, Stark and Brainbridge 1980).

### 3.1 Entry: social networks and recruitment

To demonstrate this, by drawing inspiration from the sociological theories of Erving Goffman (1973), one may divide up the space of social existence along a continuum that goes from “public places” to “private places”. The former include, for example, the streets, shops or, in the case of football supporters, the tiers at a football stadium, bars etc. The latter refer to all closed areas that one may not enter without prior permission or invitation, such as houses, flats, but also clubs and circles amongst others. In addition, two types of communication may be distinguished. On the one hand, there is “face-to-face” communication, which includes all the verbal and non-verbal information exchanged between two (or more) people in the presence of one another. There is also what I call “mediatized communication”, which relates to all the more or less institutionalized forms of distribution of information via tools such as newspaper articles, posters, advertisements, letters, the telephone and, these days, Internet sites. One may thus classify the various modes of recruitment, promotion and diffusion employed by an organization (table 1) in one of four types (Snow *et al.* 1980, p. 790). *Public proselytism* refers to events in which the group of supporters takes part, puts itself on display or in which it takes centre stage. *Private proselytism* denotes all the different modes of circulating information about the group, that are used by the members and/or founders in addressing contacts, be they family, friends or professional. *Media promotion* denotes all forms of communication which borrow channels and technological supports allowing it to disseminate messages in the direction of a wider audience. Lastly, *direct promotion* describes

the immediate communication that ensures interactivity and real-time exchange between a member and a potential recruit.

*Insert here table 1*

Which mode of recruitment is favoured by the group in Normandy? As direct promotion is non-existent, media promotion is more frequent. When the association was launched towards the end of the 1990s, the group resorted to the classified ads to “canvass” members. The magazines aimed at OM supporters are then a preferred target. Aside from the advantage of a nationwide readership, they address a “specialized” and interested public. Twelve enthusiasts joined up to collective action through this method. Although the Internet is now a tool that groups of supporters use in order to promote their activities, this recruitment method is nevertheless an exceptional resource<sup>8</sup>.

This is not the case with public proselytism which is a common mode of enrolment (affecting thirteen members). The presence of the group in stadium tiers can draw the attention of isolated supporters. Sometimes, it is the more trivial events in which the group takes part that act as a trigger prompting individuals to become members. This was the case for Sebastien, 26, who heard about the Normandy-based group through participation in a football tournament in the area around Rouen, with some friends:

We made up a team that we called "*les Marseillais*". The name immediately draws the attention of group members who take part in this competition each year. There were members there. They came to see us and they asked us why we were called "*les Marseillais*". We explained that we were all essentially fans of OM. They told us that there was a group in Rouen that we didn't even know about. I became a member immediately ... So it's quite lucky that I met these members because I would never have imagined that one day I would belong to a group of OM supporters.

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<sup>8</sup> This recruitment method applied to one person. However, more generally, supporters' groups Internet sites tend to have a more internal purpose of a *mise en scène* of the group. They are essentially a tool for memory that contributes to the development of a narrative of collective adventures and the construction of an ennobling/glorifying “mythology”.

Although there are many different ways of enlisting members into a group of supporters, the most commonly practised forms of recruitment belong, for the most part, in the upper right hand corner of table 1. In other words, social contacts outside the group, what I previously called private proselytism, are the primary source of recruitment as this applies to 39 members (table 2).

***Insert here table 2***

The individuals are typically recruited by one or more people who are already members and with whom they have interpersonal relations outside of the group. In other words, individuals' engagement in a group of supporters depends primarily on social processes of interaction that "are used as footbridge to connect the structures to the agent's intention" (Passy 1998, p. 80). The potential participant must be informed of the existence of the group, perhaps of its operation, and brought into the core of the group. Networks of family and friends seem to be of utmost importance. Thirty members (according to the information available) entered the group by this method. Entry can be made via the family in which case it is a close relative who recommends membership. This is usually how it works for women (who numbered 8 of the 106 members in 2004). The majority of them accompany a husband, a boyfriend, a father, a brother, etc. Others (fifteen, to be precise) come through the interlocking of a network of friends. Sometimes, arrival in the group occurs through professional relationships (which was the case for nine people).

So, structural and relational proximity seems to be the defining features in the sequence of individual careers that is examined here in isolation. Social networks, which are fundamental to the work of mobilising support, tap the new members and act as "recruitment mediators". Family, friends, work colleagues, schoolmates are not only opportunities for socialization but also vectors for contact with the organizations. Hence the interest of the sequential breakdown applied in a detailed understanding of engagement in collective action. Analysis in terms of

social networks “offers the advantage of thinking of collective action as the product of the mutual influence exerted by individuals in a situation of interdependence and not as the product of an isolated calculation or as the mechanical product of a built-in constraint” (Agrikoliansky 2002, p. 195). It also makes it possible to understand how motivations and predispositions, in terms of values and identity, can be activated (or not) and lead an individual to effectual membership adhesion of an organization. But there is more. If the individuals who make up the group of supporters are then brought into the framework of the social networks within which they find themselves inserted, it is also necessary to consider the contribution of the latter over the course of the following sequences of the *career*.

### 3.2 Staying and taking action: close-knit relationships and loyalty to the organization

In truth, aren't interpersonal networks formed as much out of the incentive to go beyond the simple symbolic step of membership as to remain a member of the group?<sup>9</sup> Three arguments may be put forward.

First of all, recruitment by the group can allow for representations linked to the group to be redefined prior to entry into collective action. Entering a group of supporters alone has been likened to “a leap into the unknown”. The main concerns are often related to safety during travel. It is therefore easily understandable that such a perspective may appear risky and is enough to put individuals off. Moreover, finding the group's contact details, approaching the person in charge and going on the first trip alone are also procedures that may be experienced as obstacles to participation. Arriving with at least one other person, with friends or family thus seems to serve the purpose of reducing the uncertainty and costs linked to the nature of the engagement.

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<sup>9</sup> This is one of the lessons from the work carried out on solidarity movements in Switzerland (Passy 1998).



In addition, social networks contribute to an individual's self-definition, which is at stake at the point of membership. If the suggestion of mobilization emanates from those close to the individual who share a passion for OM, then the meeting of "real social identity", which is defined as the sum of attributes "that an individual could be thought to possess", and "virtual social identity", which denotes the characteristics attributed to someone that are reflected by others (Goffman 1963, p. 12), occurs. Thus defined through the eyes of close friends or family who know, share and encourage this "footballistic inclination", the individual can actually think of himself as a supporter foremost, from then on displaying his passion for all to see and thereby committing to supporting.

Finally, and most importantly, certain social networks, notably those of family and friends, are thought to have guided individuals towards this engagement. The principle behind mobilization must be thought of as far more than individual calculations. Rather, one should speak of "emotional membership". Relationships with a close friend or relative exclude all logical calculations and all reasoning in terms of costs and advantages. The invitation is readily accepted because it is issued by a person that is trusted by the individual. In exchange, it generates obligations and the person "receiving" the invitation being obliged to the person who offered it. Family relationships and friendships, which imply an emotional force, somehow increase and intensify the social pressure to live up to the commitment. This mode of recruitment brings rationales of solidarity into play, which can encourage membership and participation.

Yet it is easy to demonstrate that being invited is not enough to build a lasting engagement. This may be noted in the frequency of departures, renewals and compensation by new arrivals, in short by the rhythm and intensity of the turn-over within the group (tables 3 and 4).

***Insert here tables 3 and 4***

There is a significant turn-over of members because the departures at the end of every season involve a large number of supporters. More than half of the members left the group in June 2000 (58 % to be exact) and the rate of departures is still relatively high in the years that follow (around 40 %). Nonetheless, the start of every season sees new members arrive in significant numbers as new arrivals systematically make up almost half of the members between 1999 and 2003 (from 44 % in July 2003 up to 50 % at the opening of the 2001 season). Analysis of the flow of membership and disengagement reveals a high level of reversibility of the engagement. The number of members who only briefly pass through the group is high (table 5).

*Insert here table 5*

The number of stable members of the group, the sort of “hard core” members, remains limited. Thus, during the 2003-2004 season only 17 % of members (eighteen of the 106 registered members) were already members four years before, 6 % three years before and 13 % two years before. Evidently, the group operates with only a small number of stable and active affiliates, a fact that is confirmed by the number of trips made by each of the members in a sporting season (table 6). Even though this indicator of actual participation in the functioning and organization of the group is not altogether low, the level of frequency of trips often coincides with the level of activism.

*Insert here table 6*

Thus, the level of attendance on trips is fairly modest. 40 trips were organized during the 2003-2004 season, (25 of 38 championship matches, 12 European Cup fixtures and 4 national cup matches). The average number of trips per member is 3.8. Out of 106 members, 23 went on just one trip (often to a stadium near to Rouen), 17 members failed to participate in even a single trip and only thirteen members were recorded as having attended ten matches. The vast majority of affiliates (44, to be precise) made between two and five trips.

It is important to point out that regular and active support in the stadium demands financial investment. This constraint is even stronger for the members who are under eighteen or who are still engaged in a course of school or university education<sup>10</sup>. Being a secondary school or sixth form student is not easily reconciled with so passionate an engagement. Financial autonomy is therefore a fundamental necessity for being more active. The explanations offered by individuals for their weak investment in the group highlight the question of economic means (table 7).

***Insert here table 7***

The activity of the Normandy-based group relies on the activism of a relatively small circle of members. Should one of them disappear or take a step back from the group, the very future of the association could be in peril. In order to understand the conditions for the passage to activism, one must now turn to the organizational context and the internal *modus operandi* of the group. Increasingly, it is the game of “militant interaction” that takes shape at the heart of the circle of active members that demands closer inspection. I believe that these factors actually give rise to as many incentives for activism.

The supporters that I was able to interview highlighted, of their own accord, the very uneven investment made by members of the group. And yet, it is possible to gain a position of responsibility within the group, even a minor one, relatively easily, for example, participating in the organization of a trip or a night out, managing the treasury, but also being put in charge of driving the minibus or contributing to the decoration of a banner or flag. Regularly

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<sup>10</sup> There were 106 members during the 2003-2004 season and about half of them were sixth-formers or students. In addition, the Normandy-based group is characterised by a high number of people between the ages of twenty and twenty-four. In 2004, they numbered 28. Nevertheless, the association displays relatively homogeneous distribution across four discreet age categories: there are twelve aged 15-19 (seven are minors), sixteen 25-29 year olds while those aged between 30-34 and 35-39 make up ten and eleven of the affiliates respectively. It is so homogeneous that the average age of the members of the Rouen group is twenty-six years and five months. A balance between the oldest and youngest members may be noted, even if a quantitative dip clearly comes after forty. This characteristic is stable through time. In previous seasons, the group showed the same proportions. With regard to the geographical distance separating these supporters' places of residence from the city of Marseille, membership required a considerable degree of autonomy. One may also suppose that the issue of income and financial autonomy is masked by age.

attending their outings to follow the club and expressing an interest in the experiences of the older members of the group is usually enough. Entry into the close circle of “militants” most often occurs through a process of “spotting” by one or several already active members. Just as in other types of organizations and the individual is usually invited to take on responsibilities because he has been “spotted”. It is all the more common when potential candidates are scarce and so there is little or no competition.

Indeed, there is no rivalry for the allocation of responsibility (as they are heavy burdens). An individual may then swiftly progress from a position of basic membership to one of active militant endowed with powers, as this type of member is under-represented within the group.

The president explains that:

The leaders are elected every year at the general meeting. We have a set of statutes and are officially registered as an association with legal status. There is an office team with a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and an events manager. It's all very symbolic. Decisions are made by all five together. We put together the minutes of the general meeting and open the book of accounts. It's the members' money. I am merely their representative. I am accountable to them and I take decisions in their name. They know that their voices are heard.

The general meetings organized every year are never a cause for rivalry of any kind. Personal ambition seems to be suspended. The positions at stake are in fact minor and with the exception of resignation by one of the committee members, their mandates are never called into question. Election is by co-optation of votes by a show of hands and decided unanimously. The process seems to be nothing more than a formal chapter that could otherwise easily be passed over, as the expression used by the president “*it's all very symbolic*” suggests. When a member comes forward for a position, the bid has already been solicited, encouraged and validated by the committee even before the vote.

To be sure, access to responsibility may encourage activism in so far as the crossing of this threshold allows one to benefit from symbolic rewards (the gratification linked to status with

responsibility) and material rewards. A significant investment authorises one to pay a reduced fee or to be altogether exempt from payment for travel arrangements or match tickets

Whoever plans a trip to the European cup is on the phone every day, for up to three or four hours a day, over two months, so it's quite appropriate that he should travel for free. (Jean-Marc, president of the group)

However, one would be wrong to look at things only from the point of view of instrumental rationality in order to understand the activism displayed by certain individuals. The nature of the close relationships between the active members can take into account the question of differential activism.

The most engaged members get together very often, know each other well (sometimes from before joining up to collective action, as highlighted above), contribute to the running of the association, spend time together, maintain close ties and, finally, come to progressively value one another. Strong bonds are formed, as Stephen, 37, who goes on more than twenty trips each year, explains:

When you go on trips for ten years, having good times and not so good times and spending twenty hours on a bus with other people - affinities will develop.

Indeed, the sense of camaraderie has, over the course of time become extremely meaningful for these individuals.

What's more, these social relationships are progressively thought of in a familial register.

Statements by active members are loaded with this vocabulary:

I think we have a great team of friends. The president is like my brother. We have very close ties and the fact that the association is still running and still going strong is also related to this. (Bruno, vice president of the group)

Together with other members we see each other outside of trips to matches. We go out together, we go round to each other's houses, we have meals together. One year, I went away on holiday with the president and his wife and kids. It was really great, we get on well. This actually helps you get to know people who you can relate to. It's a real family. It's much more than a group. It's a family. (Philippe, the events manager)

The feeling of sharing the same existence progressively comes to the surface. The collective practice of supporting is thus inseparable from the building of shared identities, representations and a common world of meaning. As a result, the circle of members also operates as a “circle of recognition”. The feeling of being among themselves is a source of gratification that, through regular experience, enables one to feel that “others can come and ratify the self-image that each aspires to”. In other words, engagement in the group is also “a mode of access to reciprocal exchange and esteem” (Traïni 2000, p. 11). These fundamental relations of sociability are “the achievement of a relationship that somehow seeks to exist only as a relationship and in which what would otherwise be a simple form of reciprocal action becomes the self-sufficient substance” (Simmel 1981, p. 133)<sup>11</sup>.

More than rewards, these social links also generate “obligations”. Friendship, a relationship of equality, “is therefore incompatible with authority and hierarchy, but does not exclude being influenced by it. Friendship is reciprocal... [And yet], as the relationship is thought to be fundamentally reciprocal it is actually solidarity. In one register as in the other, playing the role of a friend means being capable of “paying someone back”” (Degenne and Forsé 2004, p. 38-39). It is then one of the meanings of commitment that is put forward here (Becker 1960), in so far as “committing to something is not only espousing a cause and devoting some of one’s time to it, but also taking on a role and a social identity, subscribing to a system of reciprocal exchange and obligation, in short making commitments with regard to others” (Duriez and Sawicki 2003, p. 18). Having become friends, it seems natural for active members to maintain their commitment over time and to put in the effort in order to keep the association alive. For the stakes are as follows: the group must be stimulated in order to last. This load, which has many burdensome aspects (for each match coaches need to be booked, prices negotiated, bookings confirmed with members, payments collected etc.) must be

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<sup>11</sup> See Simmel (1949) too.

carried collectively. Activism is experienced in the mode of duty and devotion – one must do one's duty and put in the effort to satisfy these intense social exchanges. Once caught up in these interactions it is difficult for the individual to get out of them. It would mean leaving a place where one feels at home and where one has friends.

Although these “exchanges of good practice” are not considered or represented on the level of moral imperative obligation by individuals, the fact remains that feelings of loyalty and fidelity and a sense of duty towards others and the group act as powerful incentives, at the very least, for the maintenance of the engagement and ideally for seeing it through to the end (Taylor 1989). Nonetheless, we also measure the limits and fragility of these incentives. Should one of those with whom they like to get together decide to distance himself, it is no longer a rationale of generosity, solidarity and duty towards others that dominates for the individual, but rather the costs that resurface and take over his perception of action. In order to complete the understanding of *careers* in supporting, one must finally understand how and why some people get caught up in the “militant interactions” and these reciprocal obligations.

### 3.3 Activism in relation to biographical trajectory: achieving engagement

Having reconstructed the development of *career* within the group, I will now address *career* in terms of the anterior trajectory which, of course, did not begin with entry into the group. All the members were followers of OM through the intermediary of newspapers and television first. Some to them were able to arrange travel arrangements, alone or with friends, in order to attend matches and follow the exploits of OM from close quarters even before joining the group. Even so, the significance that membership of an association of supporters takes on and the activism that is expended there can be better understood if past itineraries, i.e. the *supporters' career* may be reconstructed. Such an approach will enable me to

complete the analysis of activism and shed more light on it. Thus far, the analysis has revealed that the vast majority of the most active members are individuals for whom entry into the group is an extension of a prior engagement. Representations and identity are then progressively composed and defined throughout this process.

The people who make up the limited sphere of active members think of themselves as “supporters at heart”. “*This is my passion*”, they declare, obstinate and insistent. The words of supporters who have few past experiences of supporting, in contrast, shed some light on this attitude.

For the moment, I am too young to be a true supporter. In order to be a true supporter I would have to follow the club for at least ten years...but I haven't been in the group for very long, so I cannot define myself as a true supporter”. (Julien, 19 years old, member of the Rouen group)

Like other less committed members, Julien compares his engagement in the club to that of the active members by referring to the exclusivity of his passion, in the sense of rejecting anything external to the sphere of supporting, and ultimately dependence or even impoverishment that opposes the active and inactive members. He continues as follows:

For the most *engagé*, being an OM supporter means being one every day. You have to be really into it. For us [speaking for the less committed members], there is OM, but there are also other things besides. We have other interests. Not them. They are only interested in OM. That's what makes the difference. So there is an imbalance”.

It is thus easy to grasp how Julien presents his identity here. He does not reduce himself to merely his practice of supporting.

For the most active, this passion, which has engulfed them for some time is, on the contrary, a significant and essential dimension of their image and identity, something they do not hesitate to proclaim. They look on the practice of supporting as a noble activity, whose watchwords are sincerity of sentiment, fidelity to OM and disinterest. In sum, authentic passion is made up of as many elements as the high moral exigencies allowing it to be defined in opposition to the timorous and vapid engagement of “*platonic supporters*” (according to the term used by a



highly active interviewee), which is to say that the passion of many of the supposedly more versatile followers, which fluctuates depending on the club's success, has not achieved completion. These individuals identify with the project and the values represented by the group, whose objective is to support OM in all stadiums, whatever the circumstances, side by side with the local supporters. The group is thus perceived by these individuals and an ideal of action.

It is in light of one's past itinerary as a follower that these representations may be clarified. There are two main models of progression: either, these people have, for some years, made occasional journeys, individually (or with a few friends), to go and see OM play, or they were inserted into collective action at the centre of associations whose activity was considered especially disappointing (these two types of engagement may follow one another). In the accounts given by these individuals, prior experiences are subject to negative evaluations in retrospect and relegated to an incomplete and inadequate form of engagement – they could not go and see OM play regularly or else, they were frustrated by the model for engagement offered by the groups of which they were members. Investment in the Rouen group is thus literally modelled on its past experiences. Their perception of action and engagement is built on the basis of the latter (these categories of judgement are reproduced in box 1 below, through the progression of an active member).

***Box 1: Le Normandy group or engagement “with a difference”***

Bruno is 42. The son of a labourer and a housewife, he is today married with three children and lives in a working-class suburb of Rouen. Bruno has been a factory worker in the automobile industry for 21 years. He has had a passion for football since childhood. As a teenager, he was initially an admirer of AS Saint-Étienne, all the while consistently following the matches of FC Rouen [the club nearest to his place of residence] by his uncle's side throughout the 1970s. He became interested in OM towards the end of the 1980s, when the team racked up a series of national triumphs. He attended his first OM match when they played FC Rouen for the French Cup in 1993: *“they beat Rouen one - nil”* he recalls. *“I was not yet in the stands of the OM supporters because I didn't have a membership card to a supporters' association. So I was in the gallery of the Rouen supporters. When OM scored, I was the only one to cry out in the stand. Everyone looked at me.”* In 1994, at 31 years of age, he went to the OM stadium (*Stade vélodrome* in French) in a car with some friends for the first time. When the club was relegated to the second division at the end of the 1993-1994 season, Bruno became a more regular supporter and went to watch them play more often. *“It was hard to follow the club. It was madness.*

*You couldn't get tickets. Everyone wanted to see the club which was in the second division. All the stadiums were full."*

In 1995, Bruno decided to sign up to *Teen Tribute*, a group of OM supporters based in the North of France, two hundred and fifty kilometres from Rouen. *"I saw an advert in a magazine devoted to news about the club. I initially approached them alone, then my uncle and some friends followed me"*. Created in 1988, by 1996 the group brought together almost 800 members and organized about a dozen trips each year. To being with it proved to be a good way of following the club as a group and of getting tickets for matches more easily. *"We didn't have much choice. At the time, this was the only group that offered trips to go and see OM play"*. But Bruno was quickly disappointed by the group. For one, supporting OM was not their main activity (originally the goal of the association was to organize social and cultural events for young people), but they also defied the norm of personal disinterest that is the mark of real fans. According to Bruno, *"Teen Tribute was a bit odd as supporters' clubs go. The association was run by some guy and his wife. They did it for the money. It was expensive. They didn't have other jobs, that was all they did. They made a lot of money with every trip – it was a business."* The second thing was that it wasn't that easy to get tickets for OM matches: *"Sometimes, there was only one coach and maybe around 200 who wanted to go. So you had to book well in advance. For the big matches, it was awkward. In theory it was first come first served, but there was skulduggery and favouritism. We always came after the others."* Ultimately, the group enjoyed neither the recognition of those from Marseilles nor the legitimacy of supporting: *"The group was not serious about supporting. It was not recognised. It was not a big group of OM supporters, just a little one. At the Velodrome Stadium we were not even allocated stands. For me it wasn't a real supporters' club. When we went to get our tickets at the Velodrome Stadium we looked like idiots. When we said we were from Rouen and that we belonged to Teen Tribute, the people in Marseille didn't even know who we were"*. Bruno gave up his membership in 1996. *"It was very disappointing. We were being had. The whole thing was a scam and we had been had. Anyway, everyone got the message and pulled out pretty quick"* (the group has since ceased its activities).

The following year, in 1997, the Rouen group was founded by former members of *Teen Tribute* that he had spent time with on trips. Bruno learnt of its existence while leafing through the pages of a magazine about OM. He made a few trips that turned out to be conclusive: the model of engagement proposed by this group fulfilled his every wish. *"I saw immediately that the managers in Normandy were not like those of Teen Tribute. They were not in it for the money. We get tickets more easily, we can call them up and we can see them. Sometimes they even call me to offer me tickets. With Teen Tribute, you had to ring up ten times, and really insist – even then you were not sure to get a ticket."* The group quickly proved that it was the *"ideal group"* to carry through his passion. This ideal of action is perceived through numerous details tested during journeys to follow OM. *"For example, we have clothes marked with the name of the group in flock lettering. I have the jacket and a few T-shirts. We have an identity, which was not the case before. Thanks to the group, we receive the merchandise catalogue. We can get tickets. When we travel, we are recognised. I wanted to be part of a group to go on trips, but also to feel like I belonged to a real group of OM supporters"*. Bruno's trips are thus mounting up. *"With Rouen, it's nothing like what I experienced previously. It corresponds to what I expect from supporting"*.

The most active members of the group are united by relatively similar past trajectories. Having encountered numerous problems and obstacles to their support and following of OM, the Normandy-based group is seen, by them, as a space for action that meets their aspirations: making regular trips to go and see OM play "live", in all stadiums, at Marseille or at "away" games, not merely as spectators, but as a fan sitting side by side with the local supporters (from Marseilles and the surrounding area). Taking part in collective action is, for these

individuals, a form of practical adherence to what it means to be a footballer, a definition built from past experiences. Moreover, as these members know only too well from their own experience, the group offers them the opportunity to do things that would otherwise be very difficult or even impossible to achieve alone. These individuals have great value for the honest and disinterested ties of friendship and loyalty that unite them. Active engagement is thus taken to be the defining feature of “true OM fans” and “loyal devotees”. For the most active, engagement in the Normandy-based group is far more than a mere extension of prior engagement but the culmination of it.

#### **4. Reading supporting through sociology of collective action and mobilization**

Engagement in a group of football supporters can be conceived of according to a sequential process. In order to disentangle the threads of *supporters' careers*, two directions were undertaken. Firstly, attentions were focused on the stage of membership, which deals with the conditions that make it possible to pass from a state of passive proximity to actual participation in the association. The second stage of the analysis involved trying to understand why it is that once they have crossed the line and become members of the association, some become active members whereas others quickly abscond. These two phases of the analysis correspond to two sequences during which differentiated factors weigh on the action of the individuals. The investigation puts particular emphasis on the importance of the relational networks in the process of engagement in this type of organization. Certain social networks direct the individuals towards this engagement. Moreover, friendly interaction and the levels of sociability encountered over the course of action as part of supporting make up as much incentive to activism as may be understood in the condition of being set back in the general framework of the supporters' careers.

In future it would be advisable to find out whether social networks are always of paramount importance (and necessary) for collective action of this kind to develop and to endure. One hypothesis that could be tested might stem from the idea that close ties (to family, neighbours, work colleagues or schoolmates) facilitate the creation of the group of supporters and its launch, but that prolonging collective action in the long run depends on the arrival of new members, from beyond the personal networks of the group's founders and initial members, who are motivated by the general objectives of association, which would be seen as an opportunity to settle the particular problems with which they had been confronted for many years (as the last part of this article suggests). Contact with the association might be made through other means (articles read in the local press, for example) or through a voluntary arrangement<sup>12</sup>.

These questions are not specific to the case of supporting. On the contrary, they are typical of the sociology of collective action and social movements, the favourite fields of which are usually political parties, unions, associations, voluntary aids. To establish a connection between these forms of engagement (in particular in political, militant and associative sphere) and supporting could embarrass. Therefore, the comparison can be relevant because supporting is more than a pastime or leisure. Far from being reduced to the consumption of a spectacle, supporting means organizing, mobilizing and socializing.

First of all, why not recognize that groups of supporters are able to get organized according to political principles? In Italy, France or Germany, for example, *ultràs* form strictly structured associations, have premises, distribute membership cards, collect subscriptions, plan the division of the militant tasks, organize general assemblies or debates. The functioning of these groups appears as an initiation to the political and democratic life. So the question of the political socialization is raised. Supporters experience collective action. In stadiums, which

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<sup>12</sup> These perspectives are inspired by Duriez and Sawicki 2003.

are theatres of expression, they stage their relationship to the society, challenge the authorities. For that purpose, they take from the repertoire of collective action of the “classical” militancy (Tilly 1986). Songs, banners, flags are important to express themselves (Roversi and Balestri 2000, p. 187-188). But tracts, meetings, strikes and marches are used to develop a critical activity with social and cultural dimensions: protest against commercial strategies and “football business”, the defence of a “popular football” and the price of tickets for everyone’s pocket, the fight against the main shareholders of clubs, but also the opposition to policies of fight against hooliganism. Organized supporters see themselves as defensive pressure groups and try to develop forms of collective action around a cause. As in other forms of mobilization, supporting produce strong collective identities and feelings of membership in a group. The spirit of group and solidarity is very developed. Lastly, the activity in stadiums sometimes goes on by an engagement in the life of the city: the construction of relations with associative and political actors, the implementation of social and charitable actions, antiracism, etc. Following the example of the “new social movements” (Touraine *et al.* 1984), supporting could work as an outset in politics for numerous young people<sup>13</sup>.

From a theoretical point of view, comparing supporting and other forms of mobilization is a way to refuse sociological specialization and to be limited to sociological works on football supporters. We may think that supporting can be analyzed, without any theoretical loss, with

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed there are bridges between stadiums and politics. For example in the 70’s in Italy, the end of student and worker protest movements corresponds to the birth of the “militancy” in the stands, as if stadiums were the continuity of streets. The words “ultràs” and “autonomous” are directly borrowed from the climate of political antagonism and activism, in particular extreme left-wing (Roversi 1994). The names given to the first *ultràs* groups recall this political origin. *Brigate Rossonere* of AC Milan, *Nuclei Armati Bianconeri* or *Potere Bianconero* of Juventus Turin are not without calling back *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades), *Nuclei Armati Proletari* (Nuclei Armed Proletarian) and *Potere Operato* (Worker’s Power). In France, it is interesting to see that many groups of football supporters (*ultràs* particularly) were created in the 80’s whereas political parties and politics have been progressively rejected and removed from their pedestal. Due to “Mai 1968”, if being a member of political parties or unions was perceived as a distinctive engagement in the 70’s, commitments in subculture movements were more attractive in the following decade: associations, alternative rock, squats, antifascism (the 80’s were the years of the rise of the “Front national” party) or supporting. Further details about this period in: Juhem 2001.

concepts and theories used to study other objects of research. Actually, mobilization in supporting can be studied as a question relating to the general problems met by the sociology of collective action. And it is possible to take advantage of experiences of the theories, tested on political parties, unions, associations, to question supporting, in particular recruitment and membership. It seems to me all the more necessary as, on the one hand, the sociology of collective action is not used for studies on sport and, on the other hand, words such as “partisan” and “militancy” are present in the works led on football supporters without being questioned<sup>14</sup>.

Last but not least, this perspective breaks with a relaxing and play vision or a destructive and violent vision of supporting. It is a way to assert that stadiums are a political place where supporters are actors able to be organized, able to express demand, able to discuss and act. Such a perspective does not mean denying the specificity of supporting, but thus allows renewing the way to consider the world of the stands of stadiums. Maybe it could also stimulate the sociology of collective action.

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<sup>14</sup> See Bromberger 1995.

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***Table 1 - The four types of recruitment by a group of supporters***

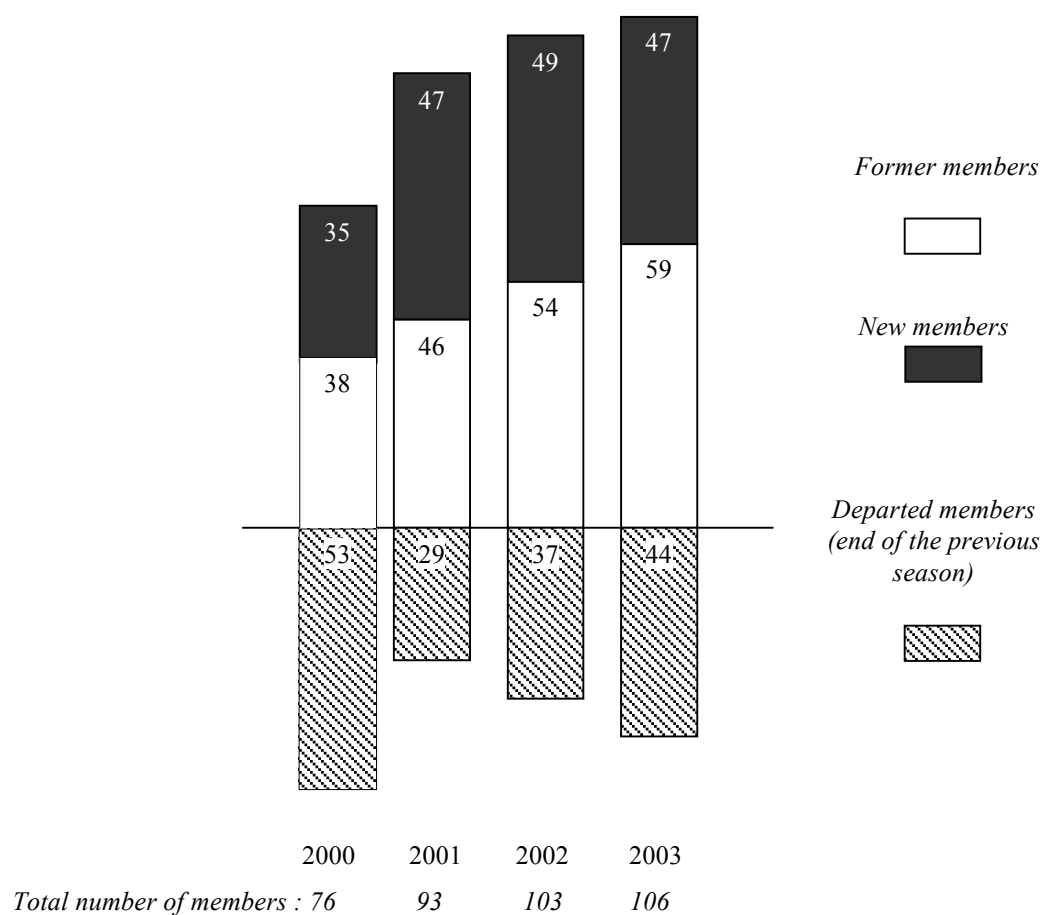
FACE-TO-FACE	
Public proselytism: the match, supporters' bar, various public events such as football tournaments, nights out, parties.	Private proselytism: information and discussion with family, professional contacts, friends (any relationship outwith the group).
PUBLIC SPACES	PRIVATE SPACES
Media promotion: recruitment via newspapers (articles, advertisements, interviews), Internet sites, radio.	Direct promotion: recruitment via letters, telephone.
VIA MEDIA	

***Table 2 - The modes of recruitment of the members of the Rouen group***

(Source: interviews and observations of 64 people; the group's founders are not included)

	Number of people
<i>Private Proselytism</i>	39 total, of whom 15 from spheres of friends /leisure 15 from sphere of family 9 from school and professional spheres
<i>Public Proselytism</i>	13
<i>Media Promotion</i>	12
<i>Direct Promotion</i>	-

**Table 3 - Group Composition: arrivals and departures**



Reading: the Rouen group has 93 members at the start of the 2001-2002 season. 46 individuals were already enrolled the previous year, 47 have signed up for the first time and 29 of those enrolled in 2000-2001 did not renew their membership.

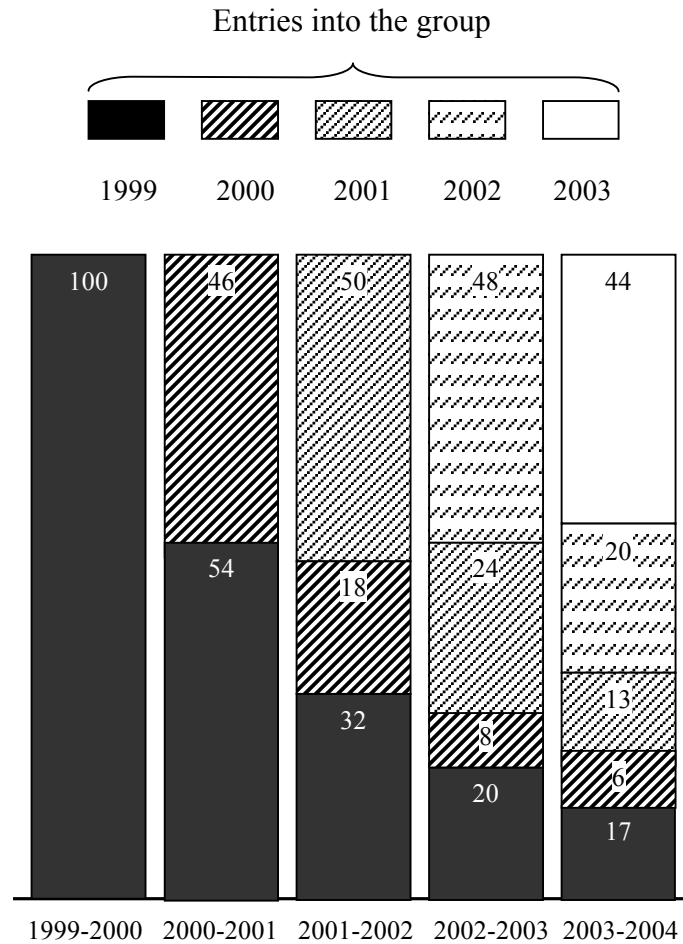
***Table 4 – New Members and Cancellations (1999-2004)***

(Source: group listings)

Year	Total Members	New members (at the start of the season)	Non-Renewals (end of the season)
1999-2000	91	<i>data unavailable</i>	53 or 58 %
2000-2001	76	35 or 46 %	29 or 38 %
2001-2002	93	47 or 50 %	37 or 40 %
2002-2003	103	49 or 48 %	44 or 43 %
2003-2004	106	47 or 44 %	<i>data unavailable</i>

**Table 5 - Membership Renewals (1999-2004)**

(by percentage)



Reading: during the 2002-2003 season 48 % of members join the group for the first time; 24 % of members already have one year's experience in the group (they joined in 2001), 8 % have two years' experience and 20 % have been in the group for three years or more.

***Table 6 –The number of trips made by members***

2003-2004 Season

(Source: records entered by the group's president)

<i>Number of trips</i>	Members
<i>0</i>	17
<i>1</i>	23
<i>2 to 5</i>	44
<i>6 to 10</i>	10
<i>11 to 15</i>	7
<i>16 to 20</i>	2
<i>&gt; 20</i>	3

*Average number of trips per member: 3.8*

Total: 106 members

***Table 7 – Reasons for non-participation or little investment***

(Source: 21 interviews)

Reasons	Frequency
1. Lack of financial means	11
2. Lack of time	9
3. Risk practice/physical fears	4
4. Pressure from close friends/family	2
5. Not knowing anyone in the group	1
6. Don't know/other	3
(several reasons could be mentioned)	