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## **From gatekeeper to friend and back again: Embracing the world of the street drug user**

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### **Abstract**

*Purpose* - Ethnographic research with street drug users is becoming increasingly difficult to undertake. In the main, it is perceived as 'too risky' and frequently raises practical, ethical and emotional issues for ethnographers, however, this doesn't mean it is impossible. Indeed, one of the most challenging areas is the management of field relations – especially with gatekeepers. The main aim of this article is to provide an account of how gatekeeper field relations are developed and experienced in the context of researching street drug users.

*Design/methodology/approach* - Reflexive account/commentary

*Findings* - I examine how field relations are influenced by the specific social and structural contexts in which the project took place and make critical reflections on how these relationships impacted on me – professionally, personally and emotionally.

*Originality/value* – The article will be useful for academics or researchers who are looking to study similar social groups.

**Key words:** Ethnography, street drug users, field relations, gatekeeper, emotions.

**Word count:** 5,455 excluding references.

## Introduction

I initially met Cuz in prison when he was 'drug free'. Eighteen months later, late in 2004, we were reunited:

I didn't recognise him at first. He was skinny and his eyes seemed to have sunken into his head. It must have been a year or two since I last saw him in prison. His skin looked glazed and plastic; he had lost loads of weight but he recognised me. He told me how he had been homeless, had lived in a crack house for months, was thrown out of residential rehab and how he had to give his flat back to the council. [Fieldnotes]

Cuz looked a young 37 and had a complicated past. Originally from Cyprus, his family were involved in the operation of large-scale consignments of heroin from Turkey and Cyprus. Having abandoned school at an early age, he had little idea of work other than the family business. Until the age of 25, he worked for his family in these operations but started to experiment with heroin and was ostracised by the family. He became homeless in south London and started using crack cocaine ('crack' hereafter). The years that followed largely composed of prison sentences for robbery, burglary and shoplifting and several drug-free spells in prison. He had also had some attempts at 'getting clean' from drugs and had attended several rehabs: he was accused of theft and disqualified in one and relapsed several times in others. After recently attempting to engage with community drug services in south London, he was excluded after missing three appointments. He was made homeless again in February 2004, and started injecting heroin and crack before gaining hostel accommodation in July 2004. These experiences had severely dented his trust in mainstream drug services and programmes designed to help him find a way out of his predicament. While it had also made him angry, he seemed extremely enthusiastic to help out in my research on crack users.

Drug addiction, crime, violence, victimisation, and imprisonment do destructive things to people and in return they, in turn, often replicate this destruction on those around them and themselves (Bourgois, 1995; Wacquant, 2002). Therefore stepping into these worlds, observing and being part of these interactions can be difficult for ethnographic researchers because of the intimate contact they make with those they study (Fielding, 1993). Aside from the ethical and personal considerations involved in undertaking ethnographic research with street drug users (STUs) like Cuz, perhaps one of the most challenging aspects is to manage research relations (Anderson, 1990; Maher, 2002); in particular, with gatekeepers (Bourgois, 1995; Jacobs, 1998; Sluka, 1995).

The main aim of my article therefore is to provide an account of how I developed and managed field relations, and experienced the research process with my gatekeeper, Cuz. I also examine how field

relations were influenced by the specific social and structural context in which the project took place (Bourgois, 1995; Kraska, 1998) and make some reflections on how these relationships impacted on me – professionally and personally. I firstly present my reflexive commentary within a framework of emotions and embodiment in the context of field relations before discussing ethnographic research experiences with Cuz. Critical reflections follow in the discussion.

### Field relations, emotions and embodiment

Cultural criminologists suggest that the ethnographic task is embodied in the concept of criminological *verstehen* (Ferrell, 1997; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Ferrell et al., 2008). In the context of drug ethnographies, this would mean to closely consider participants actions against various socio-structural processes which emerge and change (Bourgois, 1995). Essentially, ¶ this means that using ethnography is “to humble oneself before those being studied, to seek and respect their understandings, and to take notes of the cultural nuances” (Ferrell et al., 2008: 178). Therefore, they argue that in order, “to take notions of *verstehen* seriously, we must find emotional affiliation with the various moments of crime and crime control in order to understand them” (Ibid: 211). This is important because the focus of ethnographic research tends to be on narrative, story-telling and personal reflection as the primary means of generating description about behaviour and context (Bourgois 1995, Rhodes and Fitzgerald, 2006). Therefore:

*It has become increasingly fashionable for individual researchers to ‘personalise’ their accounts of fieldwork. But there has been little systematic attempt to reflect upon their experiences and emotions that are reported in any overarching collective or epistemological sense. (Coffey 1999: 1)*

Nonetheless, there are a number of good reasons for not publically reflecting on our emotions as researchers (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). On one hand, we can be accused for lacking objectivity, while, on the other, we risk revealing ourselves to not be sufficiently emotionally engaged (Agar, 1986). Furthermore, in conducting research with STUs, reflecting on *our* trials and tribulations can seem foolish compared to the suffering of those we study (Briggs, 2011b; Ridge et al., 1999). But there are those that argue that we cannot easily ignore our emotional feelings from in such settings and social encounters both during and after ethnographic studies and that these feelings do not simply disappear (Ellis and Bochner, 1999; Stoler, 2002). This has led some to write more confessionally about their research experiences with marginalised groups (Mattley, 1998; Tunnell, 1998; Maher, 2002). However, in this article, I am informed by an interactive account of emotions (Hochschild, 1979; 1983). This epistemological position considers that rather than being merely an individual and internal response to external factors, the researchers’ emotions are shaped by social

**Comment [AK1]:** Always good to read words from the old language in the academic lexicon but suggest you explain the difference between understanding and knowledge and how this relates to the meaning research subjects construe of their own action in relation to drugs and offending.

DAN: I think the sentence which follows seems to explain what you want me to take further when I talk about being among the study. I’ve added another sentence between that to tease out what I think you want me to address.

**Comment [AK2]:** Do you know any non emotional feelings?

DAN: I’ve corrected this to ‘emotions’ and reconfigured the sentence.

relationships and norms that are contextually specific. I now turn briefly to the aims and methods of the project.

### Aim and methods of the study

Crack users were (and are still) considered to be the most problematic drug user with the poorest retention rates in prison and community drug treatment programmes (Briggs, 2012). ~~Indeed, I had come to learn that the way in which crack addiction in the UK was understood seemed totally quite bent from reasonable explanation by because the undertaking epidemiological drug studies I had been undertaking in prison were not asking the right questions about the crack or the contexts in which it was used about levels of drug use and effectiveness of drug programmes (Briggs, 2011a).~~ At the time of my research in 2004/5, studies consisted mainly of one-to-one interviews conducted in clinical settings. A more open, qualitative study based on observation was needed to find out why this particular cohort of drug users continued to end up in prison with exacerbated health problems. Getting a closer insight into this problematic behaviour pattern found so often among crack users was the rationale for my ethnographic study.

Briefly, my fieldwork examined the nature of crack use in one London borough. Other aims were to look at the relationship between crack and crime and to get more information on crack houses. My nine-month fieldwork was conducted in crack houses, hostels, alleyways, council estates, derelict sites, parks and car parks (see Briggs, 2012 for more details on the methodology). The sample was predominantly obtained by 'snowballing'. Achieving reliability through the data was possible through an 'open-minded' research approach; the ability to connect and listen to participants, lending an impartial ear which allowed information to flow between researcher and participant; and cross-examining accounts with other accounts to test for contradictions/similarities. Discussing drafts, reviewing emerging findings, and multiple interviews enhanced the accuracy of the data. My reflections from my research follow an important consideration of the structural conditions of my research.

### The structural context for research relations

This research was situated in one south London borough ('Rivertown' hereafter). In Rivertown, however, there had been a dramatic increase in the use of punitive measures to deal with visible STUs. While Borough's Crack House Closure Protocol (2003) was concerned with emptying crack house residents on to the streets, other legislation (Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003) was concerned with moving visible street populations out of the community's eye. By focussing on enforcement

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Comment [AK3]: This sentence is a bit clunky, can you rephrase

DAN: How is this? Accept the changes and I think it reads better. I can't seem to get rid of the yellow background though, sorry.

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rather than prevention, many STUs were displaced to other areas of Rivertown because both local authorities and the police were failing to address the root causes of the problem. This meant that many of the spaces STUs used (or at least tried to use) became pressured environments where they felt more paranoid, anxious, intimidated and violent. This was why there was immense pressure for them to find some safe sanctuary to take drugs like crack and heroin. They wanted privacy because they didn't want to be in public view for fear of arrest, social stigma on their actions, and the sheer shame and embarrassment of using drugs in quite intimate body places (for example, some injected crack and heroin in their groin and neck). Fortunately, v~~v~~ery often, it wasn't long before 'word on the street' indicated where other potential places to use drugs became available and it was in these conditions that the social networks of the street drug scene tended to thrive. Nevertheless, it didn't mean that it was impossible to research. This was largely thanks to my main contact, Cuz.

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**Comment [AK4]:** A kwik word why they need a place to use drugs – why not do it at home (homeless) or is there a social dimension to shared use.

DAN: They needed a place because they didn't want to be in public view for fear of arrest, stigma on their actions, and the sheer shame and embarrassment of using drugs in quite intimate body places. I have made this clear in the paragraph.

#### **My first meetings with Cuz: Prison and the drug service**

By the time I first met Cuz in 2003, I was already quite tired of undertaking prison studies: there was never enough time to do justice to our 30-40 minute interviews. Not only did we have to try to fit their lives into statement boxes but we were asking the wrong questions – a recipe for limited findings and skewed social policy. Nevertheless, that was the nature of working on short-term government contracts; you're always looking over your shoulder at potential redundancy while simultaneously sniffing around for further research funds. From 2001 to 2003, I had been doing these sort of studies which had meant visits to about 25 different prisons around the country; a mixture of juvenile facilities, female institutions, YOIs and male prisons.

On the day I met Cuz, he was wearing a grey tracksuit littered with stains and I was turned out in jeans and a shirt. He was about my 5' 8, of stocky build and had numerous teeth missing. He had defensive tone to start with in the interview, probably because I was asking similar questions which so many had asked – how long have you used drugs, which drugs do you use, etc. Nevertheless, after a bit of banter about the screws (prison guards), the image barriers lowered and Cuz started to open up about his experiences in prison. Cuz was on remand in Brixton prison for burglary but was enthusiastic about his chances of staying drug free. While he had managed to come off drugs, he was nervous of his impending return to the community:

*I am frightened, I am clean now and I know my life be different and I am scared of what is out there. I don't know what will happen so I gave my flat back to the council so I don't go back to where I live, finished with my girlfriend. I want to find new people, clean people.*

While prison offered him the comfort of an everyday routine around training and education, he was still offered heroin and other drugs. He had managed to fight off the temptation:

*I have come a long way and have got much help from these people, from NA and myself. I am 36 and have been doing this [crime, drugs and in and out of prison] since I was 20. I have never had any education and my dad used to beat me up and I have always looked at life as 'fuck everything else'. I have had enough, I want to sort out my life. I want to get up and have a cup of tea instead of heroin and crack.*

Nevertheless, his intentions seemed sincere. He was eventually sentenced to a Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO) and ordered to attend rehab, which was where I next met him for my follow-up interview some months later.<sup>1</sup> While in the rehab he seemed to be progressing well, comfortable with the programme and the company he said. Familiar problems unfortunately started to surface and he didn't complete the rehab programme, forfeited his DTTO and went missing. This was the last I heard from him until we met outside the local social security office in Rivertown, late in 2004. By this time, I was two months into my ethnographic research on crack users.

#### Cuz and the research endeavour

I had begun my research on crack users in the face of immense opposition. University ethics committees turned me down, colleagues doubted my capacity to undertake the work, friends struggled to understand why I would want to 'hang around with the scum of the earth' and my family were just generally worried. I wasn't too concerned about what colleagues and friends thought but the ethics committees were problematic. I knew from experience that the people using these drugs were quite misunderstood and misrepresented from numerous projects I had undertaken in prison. It was during these projects that I saw how people responded and behaved during interviews did not reflect their character or even their 'drug-taking experiences'. After numerous interviews, I often went off and spent time with these people on the wing, seeing their cells, playing pool and eating chips with them (see Briggs, 2011a). I was convinced of their human nature rather than their potential 'danger'.

Still—So when ethics committees turned me down, I joined a private drug and alcohol research company. After a year working in this private company, I had managed to win some funding from of a local authority to investigate the issue crack cocaine. I signed an insurance liability waiver – so I was responsible for myself – and instead revisited ethical challenges reflexively as the research unfolded.

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Cuz was the only person from London from my small cohort that I could track down once released from prison. The rest did not show up for their appointments at the respective drug services.

**Comment [AK5]:** I would like you to enlarge why and then explain how you continued with the research in spite of being turned down

DAN: Emphasis added.

However, in the first two months of my research, I struggled to find an effective gatekeeper or someone reliable who could help me make sense of this world. I had already been to some crack houses and had a small cohort of contacts but the pressures of the funders to obtain 50 interviews meant I couldn't just hang around with them all day in a flat, watching them have petty squabbles over crack and think about innovative ways of getting the next pipe. So when I met Cuz for the first time in 18 months, I was relieved. It was one of those moments when you see someone you recognise but have not seen for sometime; yet somehow you instantly take forward your relationship despite the absence of time. As I was walking out, he was walking in and as we passed, he put his arm on my shoulder and said "I know you". He pulled me aside and I explained what I was doing. The reasonably calm, reflective person I had interviewed twice in clinical conditions was now furious about what had happened to him. We went to a café to continue our discussion. There he told me how he wanted to help with my research because he felt the issue of crack use was poorly understood:

*Obviously there are things that I don't know what I'm talking about but if you asked me something that I didn't know I'd sit there and admit that I didn't know what to say. But on this sort of subject – crack cocaine – I do know what I'm talking about and it's something that I can stand up and get a microphone and speak it because I really do want my voice to be heard. Do you understand what I'm saying? I really do want people to understand what this [crack cocaine] is all about. It's not a fucking joke – put it that way. It's serious and I want people to realise. Do you know what I mean? [Gritting his teeth] And it is time for these people [starts pointing at people around the café] to understand that, as I said, it ain't a joke. Ok you can say 'Well, they're doing it themselves. It's self-inflicted', but at least you've got to give them some sort of help because the help we've got now is all bollocks.*

Indeed, very soon after meeting him once again, my involvement with him grew considerably. We hung out together almost every day for about four months. He had automatically taken it upon himself to introduce me to potential interview research candidates and escort me into crack houses.

He became the gatekeeper and seemed to enjoy the kudos which came with it, feeling that he was identified with someone who 'didn't take drugs' and that, for this reason, seemed to automatically elevate him above everyone else that did. He appeared to respect me for being 'drug free' but also because of my efforts to represent people like him who were engaged in heavy drug use and a volatile street drug-using scene:

*Yeah because you've opened your eyes. That's why I respect you because you're willing to come out here, that's what I keep saying to everybody, you're willing to come out here and see – not take it [crack] – because a lot of people see this life, what we're doing, and they*

**Comment [AK6]:** What kudos – did he get respect from other crack users? Or did he simply like the idea of having a role as a fellow researcher?

DAN: He liked the idea of being identified with someone who didn't take drugs. He felt it elevated himself above everyone else. I have made this a little clearer in the following sentence.



*have to take it but you ain't. You've gone another way and you're willing to sit down with us and see what it is happening, how it is and I respect that.*

He had a way of convincing people of my research intentions so that the pathway was laid for lengthy interviews, conversations and observation moments. This excerpt, recorded by chance while I was in the toilet in a crack house, seemed to confirm this:

**Cuz:** *The good thing about it is he's [me] making these people know what it's really about. He told me that he went out with all these bankers – all these rich people – and they kept lining up in the toilet and he asked me why would they line up in the toilet. Taking crack – not crack – powder snorting it and he said to me “do you know how much money they were spending?” Hundreds of pounds. They've got it, these cunts. They've got it and they think we're bad because we take the crack. Them cunts don't know anything.*

**Twitch:** *You get fucking judged by everyone.*

I was flattered when I later played back the tape. I don't think I was doing anything particularly special when we were together to forge this relationship; just listened and empathised with him and avoided value judgements. We frequently discussed findings over cheap fish and chips, and found some weird enjoyment touring sink estates and derelict sites. He even gave me recorded conversations of counselling sessions with his psychologist. The conversations always had me in the topic: “I've met this guy, he's different. He don't use drugs but he is a diamond geezer [good person]” one excerpt said. This didn't mean, however, that Cuz treated everyone like he treated me; after all, I was not completely part of the unruly social world which he had to fend off each day.

#### Cuz and the hostel residents

The problem which Cuz had, despite his intentions of a drug-free life, was that the life he wanted to avoid was all around him. In other research, I have documented the kind of volatile relations which exist between drug users residing in temporary accommodation (Briggs et al., 2009). Quite often, the most vulnerable are victimised and become the prey for other residents. This seemed to be the case for Black Eyez, one of the hostel residents where Cuz stayed. Black Eyez had suffered sexual and physical abuse, homelessness, drug and alcohol use, schizophrenia, and was in significant debt. He had a reputation, however, for carelessly placing trust in people and hassling them for money, drugs, and paraphernalia. He was also constantly victimised, bullied and harassed. Many other hostel dwellers laughed behind his back and relished in the stories about him.

Cuz, the main projector of these stories, couldn't stop talking about Black Eyez favourite activity which was smoking crack and masturbating. This made him a 'freak' in the eyes of most. Cuz also said he often searched other people's bins for used needles when he was 'clucking' (withdrawing from drugs). This mostly triggered resentment and stigmatisation among others in the hostel which was further augmented by his mental health disabilities. Such disabilities, however, entitled him to around £200 a week in benefits which made him the envy of the hostel. When he was first beaten outside the social security office for money, Cuz saw an opportunity and offered to 'protect' him. Yet, although Cuz maintained that he looked out for him, the type of 'protection' he offered him involved selling him bogus crack and 'looking after' his money which was spent on crack.

As his reputation for vulnerability spread, others also took advantage of him, yet still he lent them money. Indeed, many ended up by having significant debts to Black Eyez. Three weeks later, Black Eyez fought back by beating someone up over the amount they owed in money. A week later, however, he had left the hostel – the receptionist informed he had disengaged. Crucially, with this, went his forms of social support such as social security, disability allowance, mental health medication and methadone prescription, and also engagement with drug support services. I found it difficult not to judge Cuz in this respect. He had almost single-handedly taken advantage of someone more fragile than he was, and inevitably exacerbated his circumstances. Still what could I do? What could I say? Such treatment, however, was not exclusive to those in the hostel.

#### Cuz and drifting relations

People, it seemed, preferred to have Cuz as an ally rather than as an enemy. While I probably naively thought that we were 'good friends', I was to learn that I was just as disposable as everyone else. Distance in our contact started to become evident when he met a woman called Babe and got caught up in all-night sex and crack binges. Consequently, excited by this new relationship and the prospect of smoking significant amounts of crack, he started to neglect the research agenda – not that I should expect him to help but it seemed to strange to see his enthusiasm switch so suddenly from helping me make sense of the crack world to pretty much returning to it, all guns blazing. As our daily contact became once a week, he continued to play down his relations with her.

However, in the excitement of his new relationship with Babe, Cuz's absences from the hostel were noted by the staff. He received a letter notifying him of eviction for unpaid debts. He was angry and this resulted in further crack binges for some days. He also threatened to burn down the hostel and

the people in it. This anger also appeared to be unloaded on to others in the hostel because in his frustration of being hassled for drugs by a fellow hostel resident, he had battered someone. Relations soured further when his 'old friend' Tooth failed to pay back £20 worth of crack. A week later, I helped arrange a meeting with the hostel manager. Cuz managed to come to some agreement to pay back the debt over the next few months and had a further 28-day period in which he had to display good behaviour otherwise he would be evicted.

Nevertheless, the prospect of crack smoking with Babe seemed to complement this unstable period and he continued to neglect his hostel place. Consequently, our relationship continued to drift. When I did see him, he confessed that he was still angry with the hostel and was using crack 'day in, day out' with Babe. With no favours to call on and poor staff relations, there was little to motivate him to return. A week became a fortnight and despite repeated phone calls, hostel visits, and asking around, I couldn't locate him. He was evicted from the hostel. Several people said they didn't know where he was but suggested he was 'in love'. This unstable period characterised by heavy crack binges and one-man shoplifting operations in Hamleys all seemed to have started when he got involved with Babe yet really cascaded into chaos when he received the hostel letter. By now, however, he was also wanted by the police for DTTO breaches, yet he was still prepared to risk collecting money from the social security office. It was not until well into the New Year that we were reunited and our relationship seemed to have drifted significantly and his relationship with Babe seemed to have become closer:

Somewhere along the line Shake had bumped into Cuz and Babe and said I was up the road. When I first saw him he looked as if he had lost a lot of weight – his torso was very thin...Babe wanted to get some money from her account as her disability [allowance] had gone in [to her account]. Again, I was curious about this as they looked highly suspicious while withdrawing the £200 and they wanted to do it quickly. She had the pin code on her hand and kept looking around while Cuz typed it in – for some reason, he was doing it instead of her? Why didn't she do it since she was probably used to it? Cuz was fiddling with the £200 – he pocketed some from her. I didn't want to make judgements but Cuz had already told me he was kind of with Babe for the money and well, I wasn't sure what to think. [Fieldnotes]

We next saw each other a month later. Still wanted by the police, he didn't seem overly excited to see me. He had moved into Babe's flat. Having left Babe at the prescribing service, he was distinctly

**Comment [AK7]:** Surely he has been all along for breaching his DTTO? So what happened, was there a visit by an officer?

DAN: Emphasis added but not sure what you mean about visit by an officer? Hopefully this is enough to respond to what your raise here.

proud of securing accommodation with Babe and a lion's share in her benefit allowance for his crack use. He had managed to persuade her to put him on the tenancy agreement so that if they split up the council would immediately re-house him. He laughed and called her a "stupid fucking mug".

#### Cuz and the naïve researcher

By now, Cuz was involved in significant amounts of crime with Babe and almost every day blurred into one lengthy crack binge. It was on one particular day, late in January, that our paths crossed for the penultimate time. It seemed like I was more eager to see him because his responses were standoffish. Cuz and Babe said they wanted to treat me to lunch – I was not sure why this was but maybe it was a reformed-status gesture – 'we've got money at our disposal so we're going to treat you'. After lunch, things got a bit ugly:

As we walked down the road, Cuz walked past a man near a motorcycle – he half-joked to him saying that something he dropped belonged to Cuz. The man turned round and said jokingly "I'll fight you for it" but Cuz just switched. He suddenly became very aggressive and said "Yeah I will then". The other guy called him a cunt and Cuz said he was "really going to do some damage" to him. Cuz then chased him round the pavement and on to the road in front of a bus. There was a scuffle and I went to pull Cuz back, so did Babe. We managed to calm him down and tell him it wasn't worth it. He still persisted and made threatening movements towards the guy. [Fieldnotes]

When with me, Cuz had been able to hold himself back in moments of frustration. Yet now, his attitude seemed different. Despite this, he asked me if we could meet tomorrow. The next day came and I waited but never saw him. I was still pretty naïve to it all until I met another contact, Fam, some weeks later. Fam was a 44-year-old crack user who had managed to keep his flat and avoid another visit to prison despite breaking the conditions of his DTTO on several occasions. He ran a credit card fraud operation and a crack house which was only known to certain customers. When with Fam during an all-night crack session, some sort of version of the truth then became apparent. Cuz appeared to have fallen out with him when Fam claimed that Babe (Cuz's girlfriend) had not been fair in distributing the proceeds over a ~~planned~~ handbag theft. Fam also said Cuz had invented a story to account for our lack of contact which had been fed to other STUs. This story involved my persistence in 'demanding' to listen to his psychologists tapes which, of course, wasn't true. In the process of this description, he had called me a "cunt." Would my friend really say this? Was this really true? Was he my friend? What was he to me and I to him? Suddenly, I was reconsidering the whole relationship. The next day, I saw Cuz for the last time on the main road. Despite my efforts to hide my disappointment, the conversation didn't last long. I felt stupid, cautious and paranoid but

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**Comment [AK8]:** Could we have a line or two about Fam?

DAN: Added context provided.

**Comment [AK9]:** How can there be proceeds from a planned theft?

DAN: Word planned deleted

more than anything else it left me confused because it felt like I had lost a friend – not a research informant or a gatekeeper – a friend.

#### **Discussion: Critical reflections**

The article has examined how gatekeeper field relations develop and subside in the process of ethnographic fieldwork among STUs (Anderson, 1990; Maher, 2002) in the context of gatekeepers (Bourgois, 1995; Jacobs, 1998; Sluka, 1995). In doing this, I have tried to reflect on my experiences and emotions (Coffey, 1999). This is because I tried to get close to people in this world – perhaps too close at times – but this was not deliberate. I would like to think that my actions went some way to attaining criminological *verstehen* (Ferrell, 1997; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Ferrell et al., 2008) in an area poorly researched and misunderstood. After all, that was the main reason I hung out in crack houses – because no justice was being done to the same people when they went to prison and had to sit through a survey asking how much they had spent on class A drugs in the last 30 days.

When I first met Cuz, I had no idea how significant his role would be in my ethnographic research. However, in that short period which was two interviews, we must have bonded in some way. Perhaps he respected me for the lengths at which I went to undertake the follow-up interview with him. Or maybe he just wanted the tenner? Cuz started out as the perfect gatekeeper, giving me to lowdown on people and places, talking me through practices, helping me see the world from the STU. At first, I think he tried to defuse some of the anger at his situation by helping me with the research. However, I can't be sure because he continued to exercise intimidation and hostility over others in the same social space; this is, after all, the brutal world of STUs who practically live by dictions of violence and victimisation (Bourgois, 1995). However, although Cuz wanted me to understand how frustrated people like him were, his enthusiasm started to dissipate as the pressures of the street drug scene intervened on his intentions to stay clean in the hostel (Briggs et al., 2009). This was further exacerbated when relations evolved with Babe, the hostel kicked him out and his anger seemed to intensify. Maybe he missed his 'street image' which brought with it a sense of power and identity. Or perhaps he just reckoned that 'fuck everything else' was the way to go when things didn't work out.

I therefore think my critical reflections are confessional (Kane, 1998; Maher, 2002; Mattley, 1998; Tunnell, 1998) and highlight the volatile nature of relationships with my Cuz (see Bourgois, 1995; Jacobs, 1998). In doing so, I feel that this goes some way to understanding what drug addiction, crime, violence, victimisation, and imprisonment does to people and how such suffering is

incorporated into daily life; most poignantly manifested in the damage such populations do to themselves and to those around them (Bourgois, 1995; Maher, 2002). This was particularly evident in Cuz's predicament.

My relationship with Cuz was as much shaped by my research efforts as it was by the socio-cultural relationships with others in the same social space but also the structural conditions of the study (Briggs, 2012). STUs are a difficult population to study ethnographically; what they do and how they act are bound up with all manner of micro power relations. Therefore being in that world demands that the researcher try to retain his/her etic<sup>2</sup> position so they can see clearly the interactions within which they become embroiled. Although, as I have shown, it becomes increasingly difficult as relationships and emotions develop. Once I had started to spend more time with Cuz, I found it exceptionally difficult to separate my personal feelings. This is because I tried to be part of Cuz's life so I could document his experiences. Indeed, as Jacobs (2006: 160) notes: "*where others fear them or ignore them or want to lock them up, you're trying to tell their story*". I tried to do this in a way which did not make value judgments on his actions – even though what he did to others was quite brutal. Philippe Bourgois (1995: 15), it seems, would certainly agree:

*Most ethnographers offer sympathetic readings of the culture or people they study. Indeed, this is enshrined in the fundamental anthropological tenet of cultural relativism: cultures are never good or bad; they simply have an internal logic. In fact, human suffering is usually hideous; it is a solvent of human integrity, and ethnographers never want to make the people they study look ugly.*

I have shown that it is important to show emotion in the field (Burr, 1995; Campbell, 2002) because it goes some way to showing those we study of our human intentions and emotions as well as our research aims. And it can be emotionally draining and potentially traumatic (Dickson-Swift et al. 2008; Roberts, 2007) but these feelings are not individual (psychological) elements and are instead connected to people, relationships and the research setting (Hochschild, 1979; 1983). Thus understanding how a researcher's emotional involvement such a field is part of the research process (Ridge et al. 1999) which is reflexively revisited (Ellis and Bochner, 1999; Stoler, 2002). By considering this, an embodied, emotional understanding of these individuals in their enacted worlds becomes available. Otherwise it is just a research project. So as ethnographers and researchers, we should continue to go out of our way, do favours, show empathy, not only to earn respect, but because we care about what we are doing and the people who give us time in their worlds.

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<sup>2</sup> Analysis of phenomena from the perspective of one who does not participate in the culture being studied as opposed to an emic account coming from a person within a culture.

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