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Author(s): Daniel Briggs

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Researching 'dangerous' and 'problematic' populations: Some methodological reflections

Dr Daniel Briggs

Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice

School of Law

University of East London

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Abstract

Ethnography has been an important research method which has given insight to 'dangerous' and 'problematic' populations. Yet, ethnographic methods with such populations are increasingly rare as the governance of social-science research takes on an ever more intensified 'risk-assessment' approach. Based on projects which made use of ethnographic methods undertaken from 2004 to 2008, this paper will try to offer some methodological reflections on working with 'dangerous' and 'problematic' populations such as mentally ill adults, those with ASBOs, crack cocaine users, and gangs. It will call for greater consideration to be given to the use of ethnographic methods with such populations to inform policy and practice.

Key words: Ethnography, ethnographic methods, 'dangerous' and 'problematic' populations, social policy, ethics.

Introduction

Prince had always looked for ways for calming his volatile emotions. In 1984, when he was only five, he moved to the UK to stay with other family members. In his younger school years, “*weed and hash*” calmed angry and violent flashbacks, yet did little to counter the memory of witnessing the death of his mother in his former African home country. With no qualifications from school and after falling into debt with family members, he was made homeless in his early 20s. His mental health problems went unresolved which had implications for his housing predicament:

I didn't have a chance with housing. You go there and they will just turn you away without the ID or whatever, and even if you have it you tell them about your problems like mental problems and it is even worse because you have to prove it, bruv, I did not have a chance.

While homeless, an ex-girlfriend introduced him to crack cocaine. Using crack became the main method of levelling his angry and violent thoughts, and helped him when he was “*stressed out*”. He had frequently been admitted to hospital under the Mental Health Act but often released shortly after. At 28, he was spending £100 a day on crack, had been diagnosed with Bipolar disease (a severe personality disorder), and begun using heroin in the last six months. The “*mood stabilisers*” made some impact but he frequently missed hospital appointments because of crack binges which made him more dangerous and potentially more violent in the community. He had never been to a drug service nor knew of where they were located. His homelessness further jeopardised the harm to himself and others for over the last four years he had “*crashed at women's flats*”. When we met, however, he had walked out of court, unhappy with his negative portrayal by the probation report. He was on a charge of domestic violence (his 8th).

These notes are taken from an ethnographic project which examined vulnerable adults with ‘chaotic lives’ in one London borough in 2008. It is clear from this small excerpt that Prince had some unresolved issues and that, over time, various services at various points had not been able to adequately support him. While it may be that Prince could be considered to be a ‘dangerous’ person, he is someone in urgent need and support. He is unlikely to be someone who would be able to organise his life in accordance with various housing, benefit, mental health and drug services appointments. When we sat down on the streets for an interview, he broke down and cried, showing little sign of the violent person described in the probation report: “*I didn't want to be like this, I just wanted some help earlier*” he said to me. This paper

is about using ethnographic methods with people like Prince in an effort to rekindle some attention to the use of ethnography. In doing so, it is hoped that the reader can see the predicaments of these people in a different light. It will firstly briefly introduce ethnography as a research method, provide a brief commentary on contemporary use of this method before presenting three examples from ethnographic research. These examples will show the benefits of using the method with 'dangerous' and 'problematic' populations.¹ I will conclude by calling for greater consideration to inform policy on these populations through ethnographic research.

Ethnography

The ethnographic method examines the behaviour and interaction of groups in their natural settings, using field observation and open-ended interviewing techniques. The key features of ethnography include its emphasis on people and their behaviours the meanings people attach to their actions and the ways in which social processes emerge and change (Hammersley, 1992). Furthermore, ethnography is particularly suited for examining complex social relations, exposing the intersection of history, institutional forces, culture, and structure as they affect every day interaction (Vaughan, 2005). The ethnographer attempts immersion, to the extent permitted, in local life in order to understand and document 'how things work' and to reach understandings through experiencing the same activities, rituals, rules and meanings as the subjects (Erststoff, 1981). 'They', Erststoff suggests, become the experts and the researcher becomes the student. Adler and Alder (1994) importantly acknowledges that the ethnographer learns by being there, by seeing what people do, by listening to what they say, and by experiencing firsthand the factors that influence their lives. "*It is*", as Ciccarone (2003: 115) has noted, "*the disciplined observation that finds the crucial fact*".

Ethnography with 'dangerous' and 'problematic' populations

Ethnographic research with 'dangerous' and 'problematic' populations has continually raised ethical concerns. While it is not for this paper to delve into such an in-depth discussion of ethical issues, it is worth noting that undertaking such research on such 'sensitive' topics and/or which involve such populations is becoming increasingly difficult to carry out as the governance of social-science research takes on an ever

¹ For the purposes of this paper, 'dangerous' is used to describe those who pose a serious risk to the public (serious violent or/and sexual offences). 'Problematic' is used to describe those who are particular difficult to approach, who are involved in crime and who likely have criminal histories, and/or use drugs.

more intensified 'risk-assessment' approach (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Israel, 2004; Israel and Hay, 2006). In addition, qualitative researchers have been criticised because they tend to prefer 'behind-the-desk' research methods, are more comfortable with interviewing offenders in office settings and fear fieldwork in unpredictable environments (Bourgois, 2002; Curtis, 2002). A commitment, however, to working with such difficult and unpredictable groups, as Agar (1986: 12) has suggested:

...Requires an intensive personal involvement, an abandonment of traditional scientific control, an improvisational style to meet situations not of the researcher's making, and an ability to learn from a long series of mistakes.

Ethnography in these contexts is important because it can offer important insights into 'dangerous' and 'problematic' populations:

It is exciting, unique and instructive to read raw observational accounts of the lifestyles and experiences of drug users and others forced to the margins of society. There are many examples of studies that have provided a rich vein of marvellously detailed data to add to our collective and historical base, in a way that would not be possible without an ongoing commitment to ethnography. (Power, 2002: 330)

Ethnographic methods can penetrate such hard-to-reach groups. For example, Weibel (1990) has suggested that ethnographic and qualitative research is often the only means available for gathering sensitive data from otherwise-elusive populations of substance users. In much of his HIV work, Inciardi (1995: 251) suggested that *"one cannot know, understand and describe a different culture or an alternative way of living without 'stepping into' it, living the life' to the extent that it is legally and ethically possible."* It is therefore the purpose of this paper to draw attention to the use of ethnographic methods and, in doing so, offer some explanation as to why we should continue to use ethnographic research with such groups to inform policy and practice.

Methods

The data used for this paper was gathered from four projects which made use of ethnographic methods. Some description of the projects to contextualise the findings has been placed at the beginning of each example.

Findings

When 'letters' don't work: Getting interviews from ASBOees

In 2005, I was involved in a Home Office funded project which examined the use and impact of ASBOs. The research team were tasked with interviewing people who received ASBOs, policymakers, frontline workers, youth offending representatives and other key professionals. The research took place in seven London boroughs and one Midland borough and canvassed the views of 66 offenders with ASBOs. Overall, 121 interviews and seven focus groups were conducted over a ten-week period from October to December 2005. Initially, we knew that offenders would unlikely respond to participation in the research if letters were sent to their last known address. Many of these people did not have stable housing, were frequently moving between addresses, and some, between homelessness and prison. What was initially qualitative in design became ethnographic in approach because after two letters had been sent out, we had received only one response. It was time to start door-knocking and asking around. Many of these people were considered high risk and/or violent. One of those people was David.

I had spent around two weeks going back and forth to David's last known address, and asking around the local area. When finally, I managed to speak with him on a road nearby his house, he was very cautious with me and told me to come back when his mum was around. It was, however, only after my seventh visit to his house and only after his mother vetted me on the doorstep, that I managed to interview him. His mother said the family were considered to be 'fucking abnormal' by the wider community. She, in particular, felt the family had suffered significantly from his ASBO. The interview took place in his kitchen and quite quickly it was obvious that there was nothing 'abnormal' about this family. I was even offered a coffee or tea:

David's mum: *Tommy K is a totally different kettle of fish. He has been brought up by his sister because his mum can't cope with him. [To Daniel] You've got me. You've been brought up in a good home.*

David: *You got a tape recorder too.*

Dan: *I can't write down everything you say.*

David's mum: *You want tea or coffee?*

Dan: *Coffee would be great. At least I am getting something out of my day. I have been racing around all day.*

David: *You were after Tommy K and Tommy B.*

Dan: *They won't talk to me...[they also have ASBOs]*

David's mum: *Do you want to see Gerry [David's brother who is also has an ASBO]?*

Dan: *Yes.*

David's mum: *He is in prison and has just got remanded again. He has been picked out for a robbery from an ID parade which he didn't even do.*

David: *Lets get this thing started.*

Dan: *Alright, so what does your ASBO forbid you from doing?*

Daniel's ASBO was issued for persistent drunk and disorderly behaviour in the nearby area. Despite alcohol being the underlying problem, alternative welfare sanctions had not previously been considered and were quickly dismissed as 'not effective enough' to curtail David's 'violent and unpredictable behaviour'. He was quickly served an ASBO – with the help of the wider community:

Dan: *Did people complain about you?*

David: *Yeah, every single person.*

David's mum: *Yeah, I was shown it on the day the order was put on them and the officer said "have you seen this?" and it was everybody's statements from around here and I couldn't believe it. I was shocked.*

Dan: *[To David], how did you feel?*

David: *I don't know mate. It meant I was obviously some nuisance, weren't I. If you think about it, I wasn't doing no good...*

[Interrupting]

David's mum: *The thing is it has labelled us as a family, and I can understand that people that don't know me, would label us but I was upset that the fact that they thought we were a scummy family, and we're not. We got complaints like "our dog is vicious". Look at the dog, it is as soft as shit.*

Dan: *The one that just gently brushed its head on my leg?*

David's mum: *Yeah and they said that we set him [the dog] on people. We became labelled as a troublesome family and basically it was him [points at David] and his silly friends making a nuisance, like kids do, over in the estate and I can understand that but people that knocked at my door were quite amicable with them and people were shocked because they expected me to be some ferocious mother of these twins. I said I don't condone what they do, of course I don't but the things that they did do like they had mopeds and they had them over in garages or they'd sleep in an abandoned garage, it suddenly became more than it was – they [the police] said they smashed the garage up; that the car that was in the garage originally, that they nicked it and burned it out and it wasn't like that. It was an empty garage which they used as a camp and everything became built up to make this great big story which we now know was for them to put an ASBO on them.*

Clearly reflective of his actions, he felt, however, that he had grown out of the behaviour. But David was angry: angry that he now had criminal convictions; frustrated that he had been blamed for things he didn't do and that he had brought disrepute to the family:

Dan: *Because when I came last, and we spoke briefly on the door, you said the ASBO had good and bad implications to it.*

David: *Yeah but when the police stop you and they see the ASBO they look at you a different way. Like my ASBO is one of the longest ASBOs. Did you see the TV? The kids on ASBOs? Mate, I've grown out of it. I am mature, I don't need to go over there so it is not a problem. My drinking is the problem, when I drink. When I drink, I am violent, when I don't I am a nice person – you know what I'm saying?*

Dan: *Yeah, yeah.*

David: *I can't be doing with that anymore. I just want a job now.*

Dan: *When you got the ASBO, did you feel like there was more police concentration on you?*

David: *Yeah, definitely mate...*

This wasn't really the 'dangerous and unpredictably violent youth' the youth offending worker had warned me about, but a vulnerable young man who needed intensive intervention and some life direction. This 'violent' character came out when David drank yet he had not been referred for any treatment or counselling for his drinking problems. Indeed, while the sanction may have satisfied the wider community's hunger for blame, it had inadvertently exacerbated his personal circumstances and alcohol issues.

Dan: *Are you still drinking now, yeah?*

David: *Haven't drunk mate for a couple of days.*

Dan: *So it has calmed down. Since you come on the ASBO, have you stopped drinking as much?*

David: *No, it has got worse. I wasn't drinking half of what I drink now.*

Dan: *Why?*

David: *Stressed and that.*

[Pause in interview]

We can see from this example that if we cannot mobilise a more proactive means of researching, through ethnographic methods, then we run the risk of inadvertently leaving people like David without a voice.

Giving social life, 'life': Understanding pressures of the crack scene

This project was funded by a south London DAT and sought to examine the reasons why crack cocaine users were not engaging with local drug services. The ethnographic fieldwork took place from September 2004 to May 2005 and 54 interviews were undertaken with crack cocaine users. In the borough in which this research took place, there had been a dramatic increase in the use of punitive measures to deal with 'problem drug users' and their activities such as begging, petty street crime and anti-social behaviour. By focussing on enforcement rather than prevention, many of these social problems were either displaced or exacerbated because both local authorities and the police were failing to address the root causes of the problem. The increased presence of police, CCTV, increased community stigmatisation meant that many of the spaces drug users used became pressured risk environments – including crack houses, public settings and temporary

accommodation. These spaces were characterised by high levels of paranoia, risk and mistrust as I was to experience when I met Shake early in October 2004.

Shake, who was homeless for the best part of the early fieldwork period, was often seen next to the bank opposite the park. It had become somewhere people knew they could, within a day or so, connect with him. Recent initiatives to disperse 'problematic populations', however, meant he was frequently moved on to other areas in the borough. His daily life was characterised by unpredictable moments often driven by a lifestyle around crack, heroin and other social influences. One day in December, I met Shake as he went to score crack and heroin from a dealer in a hostel. Having left the bus, we crossed the road to a hostel where I waited outside while he went inside. The dim street lighting was a hint that dusk was approaching. Two minutes later, he came back and said we had to wait which did not help his situation. Suffering from withdrawal from heroin and crack, the sun was setting over his chances of a 'daylight fix'. We went in a second time, and passed a man on the stairs who acknowledged us, then went down to a basement room which was poorly lit only by the fading light from a small window in the corner:

Shake put his stuff on a flat door in the centre and went for a piss in the enclosed area. I started looking around at the paraphernalia on the floor. Some syringes had needles, others hadn't. There were tissues with blood stains on, empty citric packets, a few plastic crack pipes and another couple of extra strong beer cans. Shake maintained that he alone used the room but when I saw the needles he used, I remembered seeing different sizes in the room. Maybe he was convinced it was his spot? [16.12.04]

Feeling nervous but trying not to show it, I shone the light on the spot where he had started to rummage through his paraphernalia and he began to 'cook up' the crack. This process did not involve heating the crack but just mixing it with citric and injectable water. He was clumsy in tearing out the filter. At first he tore one that was too small and found it difficult to draw the crack substance into the syringe. Showing visible frustration, he cut out a second filter. I got the impression the process was hurried because he 'wanted it':

He stood up and quickly undid his trousers and dropped them slightly so the veins were free on the groin...He then put the needle to the area of the vein. I kept looking at the door to see if there was a shadow overlooking the light but there was only the noise of the police cars outside.

I angled my torch so he could see whether he had the vein. He injected. In his hurry, however, he forgot to prepare a swab to prevent the blood from leaking from the vein and frantically lent forward to rummage in his bag while the needle and syringe hung from his groin. Complaining that *"it shouldn't be done like this in these circumstances"*, he blamed the crack for his impulsiveness:

His legs started to bend and in the dark and I could see him staring at the floor. He started to dribble and his legs started shaking slightly. He started talking as he was shaking and saying the environment was *"all wrong"*. He then said he wasn't enjoying the buzz. I wasn't sure whether it was because I was there or some paranoia was kicking in.

It was at this moment that he stooped again and started to prepare the heroin injection. Motivated to *"put the moment right"* he started heating the heroin, but was frustrated when the metal spoon he had got from a drug service heated too quickly and burnt his fingers. I felt that someone could walk in but maybe it was because Shake had said when we entered that *"anyone could come in, and anything could happen"*. Once he had injected the heroin he put all the equipment away and with relief said: *"they [the police] can't do anything now, they're not going to approach me with a needle"*. I was sure that the constant police sirens outside did not help the process because he started to accuse me of being a 'copper'.

Later, in January 2005, our paths crossed again. When he told me he had an appointment at another drug service at the other end of the borough, I was surprised. This was because his local service had expelled him because he had some disagreements with other drug-using clients. On this cold, winter morning, he was due at his appointment, he said, at *"11am"* (which we later learnt was actually 10am). It was just before 10am when we met:

Shake was suffering when I saw him first – his eyes were watering, he nose running and his hands shaking slightly. He held his stomach in pain [because of the drugs]. He had mustered up £10 and I let him use my phone to call the dealer. He tried one number and it failed so he called another and was told to walk up the road. In a change to his normal dealing routine, we walked round the corner from towards a pub.

It seemed odd to see him scoring in such a well-to-do area. After about 10 minutes, I walked up the road – the dealer had not arrived. Shake was waiting but he had been accompanied by Gary, who had recently come out of Brixton prison a week ago. Gary was 'clean' and had been given a DTTO on condition that he turn up five days a week, although in truth he was only expected two days a week for a *"swab and a*

chat.” They had been talking about ‘the best deals’ in crack. As I approached, Shake introduced me and then the dealer pulled up in a white maintenance van. The van beeped and Shake leapt in. Shake was driven down the road 50m or so then he got out:

We left Gary and walked back up to town. I was looking at my watch and thinking ‘he would never make his appointment’ – it was about 10.15am and he hadn’t even taken the drugs. Before he went to inject in McDonalds toilets, he introduced me to another chap, Kenny, who used ‘the white’ [crack] and drank heavily. Shake disappeared for 20 minutes or so while I was talking to Kenny.

It was now just after 10.30am and Shake came out of the toilets in a real mess. He could hardly stand up or talk properly. He almost fell in mid-walk. We walked slowly to the bus stop and I agreed to cycle to the Service 5 to inform them he would be late. I arrived only ten minutes later at around 10.45am – the appointment needed to be rescheduled. I ran inside to re-arrange it. It was about 10.55am when Shake arrived and he was 55 minutes late for his appointment – even though he thought it was at 11am. For some reason, he had delayed himself further by getting off the bus early. He was clearly still in muddle, affected by the crack and heroin injection:

He got out his appointment time card (which fell out of his diary loaded with drug dealer phone numbers). He was told, quite politely actually, that he could have an appointment tomorrow for 1.40pm with the doctor. He was sitting in the waiting room with me trying to speak clearly but he was still struggling from the heroin and crack but I wasn’t sure why we were waiting other than to wait for his recovery. Maybe he would have to make a similar journey tomorrow? [18.1.05]

However, he didn’t make the appointment and I didn’t see Shake for the next three months because he was arrested and imprisoned. In prison, he managed to ‘get clean’ but on release faced similar problems of unstable housing and strong social pressures of the crack scene:

As I walked back to my bike, I passed the social security office and saw Shake - he was well, healthy and had put on weight. He had only managed to use drugs once since release from prison which I thought was impressive given the pressures....Later that day, however, I saw him in his ‘old area’, outside the bank opposite the park. He looked desperate and was late for something. He asked me to look after some money. We argued and I eventually refused, persuading him to give it to his girlfriend. Some guy called Abdul started to linger in the background and I got the impression he was hanging around because he knew he had money. He managed to get rid of Abdul but as we were about to get the bus, two younger crack users whom Shake had met in prison, came up to him. They pestered him for drugs.

Shake sent them along their way, turned to me and said *“they are like demons, they’re all around me.”* [21.4.05]

This example shows that by going there and experiencing firsthand ‘what goes on’, we can glean a clearer picture of the unstable environments which support crack cocaine use and how the incessant pressures from other crack cocaine users influence the intentions to ‘get clean’ and ‘get to appointments’.

Caught in the middle of a ‘beef’ ting: New insights into street crime

Concern about young black men’s over-representation in street robbery offences provided the impetus for this project in a south London borough. Over three months, 40 young black men were interviewed in pubs, cafes, streets, parks, the youth offending team (YOT) and their homes. The interviews were open-ended and examined their involvement in street robbery, street crime, knowledge of gangs, their experience of mainstream services and thoughts for interventions. Many of these young people involved in street crime and gangs in Borough had disrupted family backgrounds. Many also had a difficult relationship with schools feeling that institutional routes to success were either unavailable to them or would require them to make a choice between the institution and the ‘street’ where they could build respect and achieve status (‘rep’). For many, a culture in which ‘dropping out’ or being excluded from school and being self sufficient, with the ‘odds stacked against you’, came to be viewed as the only way to retain self-respect and the respect of others. For many of these young people, life revolved around establishing and maintaining a ‘rep’ among peers:

Say all girls talk about me, because girls talk more than boys, but say they talk to their girls, they talk to their boys, so every girl and boy knows about me and what I did and do, they know about me now. It creates a whole stereotype about that person that makes them big high status gangster and if that person finds out about that image he is the most powerful person on his ends [streets]. People know him, they are afraid of him. He doesn’t have to punch people no more – he can walk up to people and walk up to six people and ask ‘give me your phones’, and they won’t do nothing. Because he has the status. They would not dare touch him because of what they have heard. It is hype. [Paris]

In this world, money and style were central to the maintenance of ‘rep’ and young people required material goods to appear ‘fresh’ and maintain a lifestyle far beyond that which they could actually afford. However, maintaining ‘rep’ required money and displays of power and authority:

Dan: *So why are chasing respect?*

Jorden: *Just to be known, just to make people scared of them. Like they really intimidate people or fight them like because people in my school yeah are stupid because everyone knows this boy carries around knives and guns and stuff and the way he asks people for their phones, they just give it to them.*

Dan: *So his status makes it easier for him to rob people because he is using it.*

Jorden: *He walks around like nothing has happened. He is intimidating, nasty. He makes them, it is like slavery. He is making them do send out stuff for him those that want to join him.*

Dan: *How old is this guy?*

Jorden: *14.*

Nevertheless, this is the socio-cultural context of young people in this borough (described elsewhere in more detail – see Pitts, 2007; Briggs, 2008; Briggs, 2009). 'Rep' and its establishment are therefore important in young peoples' day-to-day experiences, and perhaps more so among gang members, as I was to learn one day in June 2007. I had been hanging around with Jerome in the month prior to this focus group which was undertaken in McDonalds. Jerome's fellow gang members Ashley and Kam also took part and turned up stoned. We firstly began by talking about street crime and then moved on to talk about gang participation:

Kam: *Can't trust newcomers, or outsiders.*

Dan: *Are there different roles?*

Ashley: *There are different personalities. Everyone has got differences. Some are aggressive, some have got more heart and are there for mans [their people] whatever.*

Kam: *We are not trying to bring no 50 cent shit like that. We are trying to get food, bruv.*

Dan: *Do you see your lives like rap stars?*

Ashley: *Not at all. Them rap stars don't even live this shit. Most them don't, they chat bullshit.*

Kam: *They get a limo from their yard and say stuff like "I just came back from ends where people were roadside shanking [stabbing] bare bodies" and it is like what a joke.*

Jerome: *We are not on a joke, we are the truth, blood.*

Kam: *Truss.*

Dan: *You mention that people had been snakey [backstabbing]. Do people go from gang to gang?*

Kam: *No, niggas just watch you and if they see you doing things they will fuck you up. Like or they don't like mans or they had a brother.*

Dan: *Why would they snitch or be snakey?*

Kam: *Because you don't know the man or the snake, bruv. No one here ain't no snake so we don't know their patterns.*

Ashley: *They could be sitting with us now.*

Kam: *We would be on him, we would be like 'what is going on?'*

Dan: *You guys been victims of robbery?*

Ashley: *No, never.*

Kam: *[Laughs proudly] Nah.*

Dan: *You are happy about that, aren't you.*

Ashley: *Here comes one of my victims now.*

[Three boys enter McDonalds and there is silence as they come over to our table where we are talking. There are some brief, aggressive and abrupt exchanges then they move over to the neighbouring table where they just stare at us. Their eyes do not move and all continue to furiously engage in a 'ball off'. Somehow the conversation continues]

Dan: *What situations have you been in when you have managed to avoid street robbery?*

Ashley: *The worst is when 30 people tried to rob me.*

Dan: *What did you do?*

Ashley: *Ran out of there after swinging a few punches. Slipped because there was only four of us.*

[One of the three boys then approaches the table. The other two follow closely behind]

Other boy: [Accusingly] *What you talking about?*

Jerome: [Aggressively and standing up, moving towards the boy] *Let him do his thing, its research man. He ain't the feds [police].*

[Boys retreat back to the table but both groups continue staring]

Jerome: Loudly and pointing at them] *These lot are jokers, man.* [To me] *It is cool man, don't worry.*

Dan: [matter of factly and under my breath] *Ok, so they looked a bit fierce.*

Swipe: *Just a little beef ting so nothing to worry about.*

Jerome: *Lets finish this.*

When we finished the interview, I was concerned it was to 'kick off' but the groups went their separate ways. Unfortunately and tragically, three days later, on a Friday evening, Ashley was stabbed and killed. When Jerome phoned me on Saturday morning in a complete mess, I too was devastated. He said someone had done it because of some 'beef ting'. In this example, we can see that spending time with young gang members offers important insights into the day-to-day pressures that potential rival 'others' pose, and significance which is given to gang life and the maintenance of 'rep'.

Discussion

In writing this paper, I hope that most will read and be motivated to endorse such methods because we can see that the ethnographic method can give voice to 'dangerous' and 'problematic' populations: their lives, situations, dilemmas and ambitions. These examples show that, in spending time with them, we can understand what shapes their lifestyles and the decisions they make. Ethnography can give us important insights into their position, how they got there, their responses to their position and interactions in their environments. Undoubtedly, such an approach does relies on an 'improvisational' style (Agar, 1986) and requires qualitative researchers to come out from behind their desks (Curtis, 2002; Bourgois,

2002) but how else might we know what is going on unless we get close? (Weibel, 1990; Adler and Adler, 1994; Inciardi, 1995)

Engaging with such populations using such methods, however, as some commentators have suggested (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Israel, 2004; Israel and Hay, 2006), now requires qualitative researchers to satisfy 'risk-assessment' procedures - which have perhaps, in turn, had implications for the fieldwork boundaries which such researchers are prepared to cross. Nevertheless, a potential solution would be to show university ethics committees how such research can be (and has been) successfully undertaken with such groups and this paper shows that this is entirely possible. In addition, we can also look to equipping qualitative researchers with the individual and practical resources to undertake ethnographic research in such contexts.

These people may be 'dangerous' and 'problematic' in other contexts and I don't ignore this fact but in the ten years I have researched such groups, I have never felt personally threatened by them. Many of these people have not shown direct aggression towards me or my intentions as a researcher. Therefore as researchers, policymakers, frontline workers, we should not fear them. We should look to dispel myths about them and help policymakers devise strategies which will improve their position. We should also look to be more creative and proactive in canvassing their views. So if the letter doesn't arrive, its time to phone. If there is no answer, then its time to call round to the address. If they are not there, it is time to call back and/or find out where they are because if we don't canvass the opinions of the 'hard-to-reach', 'dangerous' or 'problematic' groups, then we will continue to produce policy which does not honour their life situations and dilemmas. I have always found that when it comes down to it, these people do want to talk about their dilemmas if it means their views might go some way to changing policy for the better. Just ask the crack cocaine users I have spoken to:

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 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. I really do because a lot of people to find out about this shit have to start smoking it and I respect you because you can sit there and watch other people smoke and not even have a little line. [Cuz]

I mean, coming to me because I mean then most people on the street, who would be writing down this and writing down that, would not come near me. A person is not going to go up to them who uses drugs, you know. I mean 'cos, I'm doing drugs which is a mind altering thing, you know. You coming to me, you know, I think that's terrific, and if more people approach drug users, I think they would get more results in a way. [Mr Lee]

I acknowledge that, while on one hand, we must have appropriate ethical procedures, but on the other, we need to look for ways to improve the position of such populations. So if we want to get the bottom – to the root causes – of social problems and understand them in their entirety, we do need to overstep some boundaries but this paper has shown that this can be done. I often ask myself: what I have learnt from spending time with these 'dangerous' and 'problematic' people? Precisely this: that these people are people and with patience and empathy, we can engage with them. We can find ways to talk to them which do not patronise them or try to moralise their life choices. We should listen to them because they are telling us a story; a story which should say to us that things need to be done better for them and that blaming them for their predicaments is unhelpful. I am not trying to dissolve responsibility for their actions but merely reminding us that it should be on our shoulders to make things happen because we are the frontline workers, we are the researchers, we are the policymakers – we have the power so therefore we should take the action. So if you want to find out about why offenders reoffend, why they break orders, why they miss their drug appointments, and everything associated with why they may continue in their pathway, then I urge you to give further consideration to using ethnographic methods.

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