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You Are What You Research: Bias and Partisanship in an Ethnography of Boy Racers¹

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Introduction

Despite social researchers directing a great deal of attention to methodological and theoretical arguments relating to bias and partisanship, and the reflexive turn within the social sciences, explicit reflections of the operation and experience of these in criminological research have been scarce. In a sense, partisanship is frequently presented as if it needed little supporting argument and is discussed in ways that cover over controversial issues. These arguments are not taken seriously by social researchers because they are seen to have been undercut by developments in the philosophy and sociology of science (Hammersley 2000). According to Hammersley (2000, 11): 'Nor do we find, in the literature on researcher partisanship, explicit value arguments about what goals research ought to serve. Instead, "whose side to be on" is treated as a foregone conclusion, as if the world were made up of "goodies" and "baddies"'. However, when conducting ethnographic research on deviant or criminal cultures the researcher can be required to balance the interests of powerful or elite groups with those of the less powerful or the 'underdogs' (Gouldner 1973). Thus, it is essential that the criminologist is visible in the text in order to ensure that they do not exploit their authorial position (Brewer 2000). According to Devine and Heath (1999), the best way to proceed is not to pretend to be value neutral, but to be honest about one's own perspectives and beliefs on any given research topic and then seek to represent the data in as objective a way as possible.

This chapter offers a retrospective analysis of the role of bias and partisanship in criminological research with boy racers and social groups affected by their behaviour

(including local residents, police, council officials, journalists and politicians) in Aberdeen, Scotland from 2005 to 2008 (see Lumsden 2013a). Boy racers (as they are referred to in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand) are viewed as deviant and problematic due to their occupation of urban space and the public highways. They contest the normative practices of car culture via their engagement in the ritual of car modification² and supposed participation in illegal and risky driving behaviours such as speeding and street racing. The boy racer label denotes a combination of themes including youth, masculinity and deviance which are intertwined with the car (and car cultures) often resulting in 'moral panics' (Cohen 2002[1972]) over youths' appropriation of this highly valued consumer good (Lumsden 2013a, 2). My interest in the issue was spurred by the increased visibility of the subculture in the local and national press which resulted in a regional 'moral panic' concerning Aberdeen's boy racers (Lumsden 2009, 2013a).

In this study, the decision was made not to side with those research participants in powerful or superior positions (such as politicians, journalists, or the authorities). This resulted in an unconscious siding with the 'underdogs' – members of the boy racer subculture. However, it is argued that certain social situations require the researcher to engage in advocacy and give voice to marginal or subordinate groups (Lumsden 2013b). The discussion also touches upon the prevalence of media culture as well as the dynamics of making our work public at key stages of the research process.

An Ethnography of Boy Racers

Since the late 1960s, young drivers have collectively gathered at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard in order to socialise with like-minded car enthusiasts, display their modified cars, and engage in daring driving manoeuvres with the aim of receiving public acclamation from

fellow drivers and spectators. These boy racers, or as they are locally known, 'Bouley Bashers', are firmly cemented in the history and lore of Aberdeen. Generations of youths have participated in the car (sub)culture. At night, the Beach Boulevard comes alive to the sound of revving engines, roaring car exhausts, and the blare of music from car stereo systems. The subculture has at its centre the prop or totem of the car: a ritualistic symbol which helps frame the behaviours, dialogue, and practices of its members. Moreover, although it is largely a male-dominated subculture, a growing number of females participate. In the eyes of the media, local community, politicians, and authorities the 'Bouley Bashers' are the villains of this narrative.

The purpose of the research was to shed light on the unexplored world of the boy racer in Aberdeen. It was a Friday night in September 2006 when I first met the gatekeeper Debbie:³

I had to drive around the block a few times because I couldn't find a space to park, nor could I see Debbie's car. She had told me to look out for a red modified Seat Ibiza. Eventually I spotted her driving behind me we both parked up on the tramlines⁴... Debbie invited me to sit in the front passenger seat of her car so we could chat. She apologised for being late but said that she was being careful because the police were watching her... She told me that you have to watch out for the police. They've told the drivers that they are allowed to park on the tramlines but it is illegal to drive on pavements so if they catch them doing so then they'll fine them £30... They also aren't allowed to park beyond the pedestrian crossing because it's dangerous. Unfortunately she can't ensure that everyone knows the rules and obeys them just like the neighbourhood police officer can't make sure that all of his officers know the drivers at the Beach Boulevard and whether to fine them, warn them or use

discretion. She said: 'It's very much an "us and them" situation'. (Fieldnotes, September 2006)

It was during my first meeting with Debbie and through hearing her account of various outside groups that I was reminded of the political nature of the research. Upon commencing the fieldwork the topic was already highly contentious in terms of local politics, policing and the public imagination. For instance, a local newspaper the *Evening Express* reported:

A major route through Aberdeen could be closed to traffic every night under controversial proposals being drawn up by a city councillor. To prevent boy racers using the Beach Boulevard as a night-time racetrack, Councillor Jim Hunter has hit on a radical plan... The plans were revealed last night at a highly charged meeting to discuss the impact of the so-called 'Bouley Bashers' on the beach area... More than 50 locals and business people joined Member of Parliament Frank Doran and representatives from Grampian Police to discuss the boy-racer situation. Many claimed the noise from the racers' exhausts and from their car stereos kept them awake until the early hours. They said gangs of youths had been spotted jumping on car bonnets, littering the area and racing along the streets as late as 4am. One hotel manager insisted he was losing business – five guests had walked out over the weekend after protesting about the noise from cars... (*This is North East Scotland* 2004)

The boy racers were socially situated as the 'underdogs' in terms of the silencing of their voices and the privileging of the voices of the outside groups in public discourse(s) such as media reports and reality television *exposés*. There were attempts by the police to include the

drivers at community meetings and through participation at the Grampian Police Drivers' Group.⁵ However, the authorities were mainly representing the interests of local residents and businesses. The implementation of powers under the Antisocial Behaviour (Scotland) Act 2004 (including Seizure of Vehicles, Dispersal Orders and Antisocial Behaviour Orders) also heightened the political and public visibility of the research topic. The use of this legislation in Aberdeen was highlighted at the Prime Minister's Question Time in June 2005 where the Labour Member of Parliament for Aberdeen South stated:

The people of Beach Boulevard in Aberdeen have been able to sleep at night for the past three months because of the implementation of a dispersal order against the boy racers, or as they are known locally, Bouley Bashers, who have made residents' lives a misery for years.

Then Prime Minister Tony Blair responded:

I strongly support anti-social behaviour legislation... I urge communities to look at the available powers and make sure that the police, local authorities and local residents are using them properly... The idea that these powers are an affront to civil liberties is patently absurd, because they protect the civil liberties of the decent, law-abiding majority. (Engagements 2005)

The longitudinal nature of this qualitative study meant that I was witness to the discussion of these issues among social groups, the proposal and implementation of measures, the effect these had on the group, and the reactions and views of the young motorists. Each group had a

vested interest in the issue and thus an awareness of this on my part was necessary from commencement of the fieldwork.

The study consisted of participant observation with the subculture at Aberdeen's seafront and at various car shows and events across Scotland, and semi-structured and ethnographic interviews with the drivers. 150 hours were spent in the field and eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with the racers. Access was granted via the Grampian Police Drivers' Group in which police officers regularly met with a group of young drivers from the beach area of the city. Ethnographic research was also conducted online and involved observation of websites⁶ hosted by the two gatekeepers, Debbie and Robert.

In terms of the outside groups, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four local residents (and one group interview with four residents present), a Member of Parliament, a Member of the Scottish Parliament, a local councillor, three journalists, two council officials and four officers from Grampian Police. These were conducted at the beginning of the research, before access had been negotiated with the subculture. Participant observation was also conducted at a community meeting involving these groups. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Content analysis was employed to over 200 newspaper articles which focused on boy racers in Aberdeen from daily local newspapers the *Evening Express* and the *Press & Journal*, weekly local newspapers the *Independent* and the *Citizen*; and national media outlets such as *BBC News*, the *Scotsman*, the *Guardian*, and the *Times*. The following section provides an analysis of the influence of bias and partisanship in research with the outside groups before considering fieldwork experiences and dissemination of research findings via the media.

Siding with the 'Underdogs'

The Outside Groups: 'What Angle Are You Taking on this Issue?'

When researching the outside groups I was aware of attempts by respondents to steer or influence the research, since each had their own interests to protect. When interviewing politicians, each respondent attempted to alter the interview schedule and only answered the questions they were comfortable with. Local journalists answered questions in such a way that it reflected the editorial view of the newspaper in question. In these cases, it was clear that the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee rested with the interviewee, who attempted to control the format and content of the interview. Since the subculture was highly visible in politics, the media, and the public imagination, respondents used the interviews to convey particular messages. During interviews respondents often asked me: 'What angle are you taking on the issue?' My answer was that I was researching each of the groups involved in the issue, including the boy racer subculture. Hence I was choosing to adopt a neutral and unbiased stance.

When attending a public road safety event held by Grampian Police at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard, an intended forum through which young motorists could meet and talk with police officers and members of the local community, a police officer informed me:

'There have been a large number of complaints from residents and businesses in the area and as a result of this something has to be done. Residents have paid large amounts of money for flats with nice scenery not to have it ruined by Bouley Bashers. We – the police – have always let boy racers get away with being at the beach but we won't any longer. The council's idea of planting flowers all the way down the Boulevard won't work because they will just be vandalised. We'll be using ASBOs⁷

in the area so anybody causing a nuisance can be sent away from the area until 8am the next day. We're trying to be fair to both the Bouley Bashers and the residents because we understand that people spend a lot of money on their cars for them to look nice'. However it didn't seem this way to me. (Fieldnotes, February 2005)

From this point, I had developed an understanding of the boy racers as the underdogs through the reaction of social groups, such as the authorities and local residents, to their presence. Related to this were the numerous measures adopted in order to deter them from Aberdeen's seafront. In another conversation with a local police office I was asked what my opinion was regarding the proposal to close the Beach Boulevard road each evening:

I was asked by Officer [...] what my opinion is of the road being closed at night. I had to try not to appear to have an opinion on it so tried to give an answer which meant that I agreed with Grampian Police but also thought there are some reasons why it should be open. I answered something along the lines of, 'Closing the road would probably benefit certain groups such as the residents but I'm sure there are also a number of good arguments as to why it should be open. I don't really know enough to fully answer'. (Fieldnotes, July 2006)

When negotiating access there was also an underlying presumption from members of the outside groups that I would be sympathetic to their cause and 'take their side'. When conducting the research, I believed that my awareness of these attempts made me more conscious of my own values, beliefs, and background and how these may influence the research, my relationships with respondents, and my accounts of the outside groups and the

racers. Although this is the case, it resulted in what Gouldner (1968) terms, a 'sociology of the underdog'.

The Researcher as Spy: Trust in the Field

On commencing the fieldwork with the subculture research participants seemed suspicious of my intentions and the purposes of my research. This has previously been reflected upon elsewhere (Lumsden 2009) where I note that the group's reluctance to participate in the research may have been linked to the tendency for the media to misrepresent and misquote members of the group. For instance in the *Press & Journal* (2003) it was claimed that: 'Last night drivers were defensive about the scheme and were unwilling to speak to the media, claiming that they did not want their comments to be "twisted"'. Hence, participants, including Robert and Debbie, were critical and suspicious of my research as a result of my 'outsider' status. Robert accused me of being a 'narc' and a 'spy for the authorities'. Trust had to be built up and (re)negotiated with research participants throughout the course of the fieldwork.

Research participants continually highlighted their victimisation and stigmatisation at the hands of the outside groups including most notably, and because they had more contact with them, the police and local residents. On the first occasion I met Debbie she informed me in relation to the subculture and the police that it was: '...very much an "us and them" situation'. Paul also had a negative view of the police:

While we were sitting watching the cars drive past Paul pointed over to a grey Nova in the distance driving along the seafront. A police car followed closely behind for a while before the officers decided to stop the driver of the car. Paul laughed and

remarked: 'There they go again. They'll probably pull him over for whatever reason they can come up with'. (Fieldnotes, November 2004)

I had to prove to the drivers that I did not belong to one of the outside groups, nor was I spying on behalf of the authorities. The racers also applied the 'us and them' distinction to certain individuals within the subculture who they did not class as legitimate participants. They experienced this exclusion at various car shows. For example, at an Italian car show in St Andrews, Scotland in 2007, the Fiat Group's presence was challenged by those belonging to other groups such as the Alfa Romeo group. A feeling of camaraderie and belonging was also evident in terms of their public performances on the roads and the reaction from other motorists to the modified car which can be viewed as a symbol of resistance against bourgeois means of consumption (Vaaranen 2004). Hence, as Gouldner (1973) notes in his critique of Becker (1967), the labelling theory of deviance does not account for 'underdogs' as rebellious or resistant to the status quo, which members of the subculture often were.

Giving a Voice to the Racers

Further evidence of partisanship and the influence of my values can be found in my contact with gatekeepers after leaving the field. Importantly, this concerns the opportunity to involve research participants in media discussions regarding their subculture. The first opportunity occurred in 2007 while I was still in the field. I was contacted by producers at *BBC⁸ Radio Scotland* who were including a discussion on the implementation of seizure of vehicles powers under the Antisocial Behaviour (Scotland) Act 2004 in their lunch time *Scotland Live* programme. The interview included participation from a politician, a representative from a road safety charity, (minimal participation from) myself, and a group of three drivers from Aberdeen, including Debbie. Although the producers had specifically requested that I ask the

drivers if they would participate, I also felt that this would be an ideal opportunity for them to liaise with the media in attempts to explain the reasons for their participation in the scene and their views on Antisocial Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). Hence, I believed this would allow them to voice their thoughts, which had been largely silenced (or misconstrued) in the local and national press. Overall, the interview was positive with the drivers feeling that they had successfully communicated their views in the short segment which was available to them. However, on reflection this event along with the next sheds insight into my views of the media, the drivers, and other social groups during the research. My attempts to positively promote the subculture via their involvement with the media raise issues regarding partisanship and also highlight the feelings of guilt which go hand-in-hand with ethnographic fieldwork. In a sense, I felt that this was one means by which I could repay research participants for granting me access to the subculture.

The second incident occurred in 2009 (a year after leaving the field) when I was contacted by a reporter for the Scottish section of the *Times* who wanted to feature an article on 'girl racers' (see McIntosh 2009). She had become aware of my research and the subculture of boy racers through an interview I had taken part in for *BBC Radio 4's Thinking Allowed* programme. Again, I contacted Debbie who I believed would be interested in promoting a positive image of the subculture (and the car modification scene), especially given the gender-related angle the newspaper wished to take. Debbie and other female car modifiers were willing to be interviewed and to have their cars photographed for the report. They explained that this would hopefully allow them further positive exposure in the public eye with regards to a pastime which they took seriously and invested a great deal of time and money in. Yet again, this example highlights my unconscious decision to side with the 'underdogs' with regards to encouraging them to have their own voice through not just

myself as a researcher, but also the media. Reflections such as these highlight the need for criminologists to view their own beliefs and decisions with the same critical attitude as they do those held by others (Gouldner 1973).

Discussion: Unintended Consequences

The work of Gouldner (1973) and Becker (1967) helps highlight the ambiguities and dilemmas which arise from partisanship. Criminologists should not avoid 'taking sides' in research. Value neutrality is a myth and attempts to mitigate bias are largely unrealistic and thus doomed to fail. Research: '...will inevitably be affected by the values of the researcher – regardless of whether their value position is made explicit. Moreover, a researcher's own values and biases may lead them to prioritise certain accounts over others – even if unwittingly (Devine and Heath 1999, 39). Perhaps researchers should stop worrying about achieving that mythic objectivity and instead focus on the construction of various kinds of texts – realist tales, confessional tales, impressionist tales, layered accounts, autoethnographies, journals, performance texts and so on (Van Maanen 1988).

Although the racers were socially situated as the 'underdogs', they were not always passive and entered into a dialogue with the police for instance. They were aware of their marginal position within society and their labelling by 'outside' groups. As a result of this, I had to gain their trust in the course of my fieldwork. My interactions with the groups involved clearly influenced my representation of the subculture when writing up and disseminating findings via academia and the media. I went into the field with the assumption (gleaned from popular representations of the boy racer in popular culture and the media) that the subculture was problematic and that in terms of their driving behaviours boy racers were dangerous, reckless and irresponsible. This image of the boy racer was largely taken-for-granted and

unchallenged by members of the outside groups. In my interactions with certain research participants, such as journalists and politicians, I did not feel that I was receiving an honest response. Unsurprisingly perhaps, they were 'towing the line' in terms of their position within society. They were representing their own professional interests. They were explicit in their expectations that I would take their side in response to the boy racer 'problem'. However, I was somewhat naive in that while I was aware of partisanship on the part of the outside groups, I did not consider this in relation to the subculture. This is evident in my fieldnotes where I reflect on bias and values in interactions with social groups, but not with the drivers themselves. This highlights what Gouldner (1973) draws our attention to - the tendency for sociologists to engage in a type of 'underdog identification'. Those involved in the research each had their own expectations about my role in the research and whose story I should privilege. The researcher is thus required to walk a tight-rope in that they cannot threaten access or interactions with the researched by directly challenging them, but they must also attempt to remain true to their own values and beliefs.

Attempts were made to give voice to participants via the media in addition to the dissemination of research findings. Some social situations call for advocacy and the inclusion of marginal or subordinate voices as a means by which to dismantle unjust power structures. In this instance, it was necessary to take the side of the 'underdog' – the boy racer. This reflexive approach is beneficial in that it gives us new information concerning social worlds which many members of society know nothing or little about. This was the aim of my research: to gain a detailed sociological understanding of this hitherto unexplored social world, to glimpse the internal dynamics of the subculture, to gain understanding of youths' participation and how social characteristics such as gender, class, regional identity, ethnicity and age played out. Was the public perception and media representation of the subculture

accurate in terms of the youths' driving practices? Was the response of outside groups accurate in terms of the threat it was claimed the boy racers posed? Was there evidence of a 'moral panic' concerning this youth subculture? Through adopting the standpoint of the 'underdog' it is possible to explore these questions. However, this must still be done from the position of the 'outsider'. I could not identify myself with the 'underdogs' since I was not a member of their group. I could only present their case. Moreover, through adopting an 'outsider' status, it was possible to retain a certain intellectual and emotional distance from the researched, and to successfully negotiate the problems of representation and legitimization which ethnographers face.

Conclusion

The above examples demonstrate that I chose to side with the boy racers who were socially situated as the 'underdogs' in contrast to the outside groups. In research involving a plethora of actors – from the racers, to the police, local residents, businesses, journalists, politicians, council officials and general public – it was impossible not to be influenced by my values and beliefs and the expectations of the social actors I was observing or interviewing. As criminologists, we are shaped by our interactions with the researched and we form our own opinions about the group we are studying and their treatment by those in positions of power and privilege. The subculture was already politically contentious and thus high on the public and media agenda(s). Hence, the idea that I could successfully conduct ethnographic research without being influenced by my values and beliefs or those of a particular group was, in this case, unreasonable. Ethnographers will undoubtedly take sides in the course of their research investigations whether they are willing to admit this or not.

A final important point raised concerns the dissemination of research findings. The discussion highlights the issues encountered when we liaise with the media in criminological research. Whether I liked it or not, the media were intertwined with this research from the beginning to the end (and beyond in terms of dissemination of research findings). The media interest in the issue of boy racers had fuelled my curiosity into their world. Ironically, in the end, the research findings and the voice(s) of the researched fed back into the apparatus of the mass media. Interactions with the media were an explicit attempt to debunk the myth of the boy racer via research findings and by giving a voice to those research participants who had helped in the course of the fieldwork. Reflecting on these can help us to unravel the role of our values and beliefs in research and how these are further shaped by the researched. In this instance, I pursued these avenues for dissemination as an additional means to give voice to the 'underdogs'. This was tied to notions of research bargaining and in giving something back to those gatekeepers who granted me access to their social world. Thus, criminological research does not occur in a vacuum and more reflection is needed on our experiences with the media and other stakeholders when disseminating research findings. Our engagements in 'public criminology' raise a whole host of methodological, philosophical, political, moral and ethical dilemmas which must be the subject of further debate and scrutiny.

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² 'Modding' involves taking a standard car and altering its physical appearance (including the interior and exterior) as well as its performance. Typical exterior modifications include tyres and alloys, lowering the suspension, bigger and louder exhausts, tinted windows, smoked-out lights, body kits, bumpers, spoilers, bonnet vents and under-car neon lights. Interior modifications include sports seats and in-car entertainment (ICE) such as stereos, sub-woofers, speakers, amplifiers, DVD/Blue Ray players, games consoles or computers (Lumsden 2013a, 114).

³ Pseudonyms are used in order to protect the identities of research participants.

⁴ The tramlines ('trammers') are an area at Aberdeen's seafront where the last remnants of the city's old tram lines remain. Drivers use this space to socialise.

⁵ Consisted of local police officers and representatives from the subculture (including my gatekeepers) who met approximately every three months to discuss issues pertaining to the Beach Boulevard.

⁶ This included a website dedicated to the hobby of car modification and one dedicated to Fiats.

⁷ Antisocial Behaviour Orders.