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Survival of the Fastest: Ethical Dilemmas in Research with ‘Boy Racers’

Abstract

This paper grapples with the ethical dilemmas of youth research and more specifically, ‘edgework’, via an experiential account of fieldwork with ‘boy racers’ in Aberdeen, Scotland. ‘Edgework’ is ethically problematic for those who wish to conduct fieldwork with youths. By engaging in ‘edgework’, researchers can find themselves unwittingly drawn into the deviant activities of youths, as deviance slowly becomes the norm through prolonged immersion in their social world. ‘Edgework’ also blurs the line between insider and outsider status, threatening the researcher’s ability to step back from the field and critically reflect on their experiences. Furthermore, the experiential aspect of the ‘edgework’ method is called to the fore since the researcher’s experiences of risky behaviours (in terms of discomfort) differed from those of the researched (in terms of pleasure).

Keywords

Boy racers; edgework; ethics; ethnography; giving voice; risk; youth

Introduction

According to Stephen Lyng (1998) it is only though social researchers immersing themselves fully in the risky or deviant activities of a particular group, by means of ‘edgework’ that they can understand the situated meanings and experiences. ‘Edgework’ is ‘the exhilarating, momentary integration of danger, risk, and skill – that drives a variety of deviant, criminal, and noncriminal experiences’ (Ferrell, 1998: 28). Dobson *et al.* (2006) argue that youth cultures, as sources of education, are connected with the desire to ‘court risk’. For youths, ‘the pursuit of the will to power is to listen to one’s own drives. It involves the courting of risk – the risk that involves a strong obedience to oneself and in the process daring to overcome oneself’ (Dobson *et al.* 2006: 55). Taking their inspiration from Nietzsche’s

existentialism they argue that risky activities (such as the *grisefest* [pig party] of Norwegian youths in their final year of high school) allow youths to overcome their own ‘passive nihilism’ and actively shape their existence (Dobson *et al.* 2006: 50). Hence, youth cultures and related risky behaviours can be viewed as rites of passage, allowing youths to traverse the perilous path from adolescence to adulthood.

The car is particularly emblematic of this transition, signifying freedom from the parental home and the system of education, and providing youths with the metaphorical promise of the open road. Studies of youth driving cultures draw attention to the risky driving practices of young motorists (see Bengry-Howell and Griffin, 2007; Dawes, 2002; Hatton, 2009; Vaaranen, 2004a; 2004b; Vaaranen and Wieloch, 2002). For instance, Vaaranen (2004b) explains how her research into the street racers of Helsinki was inspired by ‘edgework’. Her insider status as a former street-racing girl was ‘like living in the “unscripted drama”... of a motion picture’ (Vaaranen, 2004b: 93). Hatton (2009: 61) also highlights the importance of fully immersing oneself in the world of ‘boy racers’ and experiencing the ‘thrills (and spills) as the young men engaged in [...] performative, risky practices’.

Hence, ‘edgework’ has become an important means through which to research deviant or risky cultures and activities. However, this method of immersing oneself in the culture in order to understand the motives behind participation throws up a whole array of ethical dilemmas. This paper grapples with the ethical dilemmas of youth research and more specifically the ‘edgework’ method, via an experiential account of fieldwork with ‘boy racers’ in Aberdeen, Scotland. Many of the youths in the ‘boy racer’ scene were seeking the archetypal ‘edgework’ experience via speeding, racing and other risky driving manoeuvres. However, I argue that engaging in ‘edgework’ can be ethically problematic for those who wish to conduct fieldwork with young people. As researchers we have major responsibilities in our work with young people (France, 2004) and this is particularly the case when

researching deviant or vulnerable youths. By engaging in ‘edgework’, researchers can find themselves unwittingly drawn into the deviant activities of youths, as ‘deviance’ slowly becomes ‘the norm’ through prolonged immersion in their social world. ‘Edgework’ also blurs the line between insider and outsider status, threatening the researcher’s ability to step back from the field and critically reflect on their experiences. Furthermore, the experiential aspect of the ‘edgework’ method is called to the fore since in this instance the researcher’s experiences of risky behaviours (in terms of discomfort) differed from those of the researched (in terms of pleasure). During fieldwork with ‘boy racers’, the ethical issues encountered included: potential harm to researcher and participants, responsibility to youths, ‘guilty knowledge’ (Polsky, 1985[1967]) of driver deviance, the privileging of certain voices and their representation in academic and public discourses.

These ethical issues are conflated when the research topic is of a political, sensational or sensitive nature, as was the case with Aberdeen’s ‘boy racers’ (Lumsden, 2012). The researcher may be required to balance competing voices, ensuring that the voices of the youths are not overshadowed or silenced. This is particularly the case in youth research of an applied nature where policymakers, government officials, politicians, youth or community groups, and citizens in general may be seeking solutions as to ‘what can be done’ about various ‘problematic’ or ‘worrying’ aspects of youths’ lives. In their research on teenage reformatory school residents’ understandings of violence, Honkatukia *et al.* (2003: 323) discovered that ‘the actual act of asking young people to speak about violence can be (re)traumatizing’. They were faced with the problem of misusing the youths’ participation in the study and of ‘giving space for voices to be heard’ (Honkatukia *et al.* 2003: 323). This highlights the problem of an ‘authentic voice’ and also of research as ‘interaction between equals’ (Honkatukia *et al.* 2003: 325). Hence, the central tenet of many forms of youth research – ‘giving voice’ to youths – leads to questions surrounding their expectations or

interpretations of the study, how we interpret their voices, and how we present them in academia and beyond.

The first part of the paper provides an overview of ‘boy racer’ culture and the methods adopted. It then outlines studies of deviance in which the authors draw explicit attention to their experiences of risk in the field and engagement in ‘edgework’. The paper then offers an experiential account of fieldwork with ‘boy racers’ and the ethical and moral dilemmas encountered. It concludes with recommendations for future youth research and those wishing to adopt the ‘edgework’ method.

Youth Driving Cultures

Known in the United Kingdom as ‘boy racer’ culture, the image of a young male driving a modified car with a spoiler, alloys, lowered suspension, and loud exhaust and stereo system has permeated the public imagination. As a collective cultural practice, the culture emerged from unauthorized gatherings of young people in modified cars, which occurred in retail parks and industrial estates late at night during the 1990s (Bengry-Howell, 2005). These gatherings provide an outlet for youths who wish to socialize with like-minded car enthusiasts, while they have increasingly been presented as a social problem by the authorities and the media. The discussion focuses on ‘boy racers’ in the city of Aberdeen, Scotland. The public performances engaged in by these youths (such as speeding, illegal street racing and car modification) were important rituals through which they constructed masculine identities and maintained a sense of camaraderie. Most participants were male and aged 17-25 years old.¹ However some participants were over 25 years old and a growing number of females participated as ‘girl racers’, girlfriends and/or passengers in cars.

The research employed ethnographic methods which allowed an in-depth look at the everyday lives of the drivers. 150 hours were spent with the group over a one-year period,

from September 2006 to August 2007. The role of overt participant observer was adopted. I spent weekend evenings in the main setting of Aberdeen Beach and also attended 'Drivers' Group' meetings, car shows, and informal meetings (referred to as 'meets' or 'cruises') across Scotland. Fieldwork also involved socializing with members of the group, as well as accompanying them to scrap-yards and garages. Internet sites created by the two main gatekeepers to the culture – Debbie and Robert – were also a source of data collection. Access to the group was initially aided by Grampian Police who regularly met with a group of drivers from the seafront area of the city. These 'Drivers' Group' meetings took place every three months and were attended by a Neighbourhood Officer and drivers. The police officer who organized these meetings introduced me to Debbie, the main representative of the culture. She became my initial gatekeeper and was essential in helping me negotiate access. Debbie introduced me to the setting and her friends, while providing vital information to guide me through the field. She also introduced me to Robert, the second gatekeeper, who hosted a website centred on Fiats and also attended 'Drivers' Group' meetings.

Research also consisted of eight semi-structured interviews (which were recorded and transcribed). Debbie was the only female who agreed to a formal interview and thus the majority of data from the female participants had to be gleaned from informal chats. With the exception of Debbie (who was 33 years old), interviewees were all aged 20-25 years old. However, some members of the culture were unwilling to participate in formal interviews and accused me of being a 'spy for the authorities'. Hence, it proved easier to collect data on participants' viewpoints via informal chats.

'Boy racers' are viewed as a deviant culture due to their involvement in speeding, illegal street racing, and other risky driving manoeuvres (such as wheel spins, handbrake turns, doughnuts, and revving engines). Through modifying their cars they challenge and invert the norms of mainstream car culture. They are also reportedly involved in forms of

‘anti-social behaviour’ such as littering, urinating in the street, gathering in large groups, and the noise nuisance of loud exhaust and car stereo systems. In Scotland, authorities utilized powers under the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004, such as ‘dispersal orders’ and ‘seizure of vehicles’, to tackle the problem of ‘boy racers’. I was conducting research with a youth culture which was publicly imagined as ‘deviant’. Hence, this study was concerned with ‘giving voice’ to young drivers in order to promote greater understanding of their social world (France, 2004). When we are faced with a sensational topic which is high on the media, political and public agenda we must consider questions of a political nature. It is important to understand the circumstances of youth cultures, particularly when they are the focus of government regulation and media moral panics. In this instance, attempts were made to balance the voices of the various interested parties, while not overshadowing those of the young people themselves.

Gaining access to deviant groups is fraught with difficulties. They have little to gain by allowing researchers access to their daily lives and activities (Winlow *et al.* 2001). Access proved problematic from the outset and various attempts were made prior to successful negotiation through the ‘Drivers’ Group’. Although I knew a number of individuals who had once participated, it was difficult to find anyone who still frequently participated and was willing to let me accompany them. This was compounded by the fact that youths tend to only participate in the group for a short period of time (between the ages of 17 and 24) and that for most participants, frequenting the Beach Boulevard tended to be casual in nature and was not always planned in advance. Thus, to benefit from using ethnographic methods, I had to gain access to individuals who were not on the fringe of the group and participated regularly. Gaining access via the ‘Drivers’ Group’ ensured that I was not placing myself at risk, since the members of this group were more willing to accept outsiders and disclose sensitive information. I believed that this group could be trusted to introduce me to the setting and

guide me through the fieldwork period. However as the research progressed I found myself having to constantly renegotiate access. After six months in the field it seemed that Debbie, my initial gatekeeper to the setting, had lost interest in helping me. I was still invited to 'Drivers' Group' meetings, however she no longer invited me to the Beach Boulevard at weekends and I often had to turn up alone, hoping that I would be welcome. Gaining access through Grampian Police may have resulted in feelings of mistrust and I felt that efforts were made to exclude me from certain 'backstage regions' (Goffman, 1959). However I was able to strike up rapport with Robert, which opened up further avenues for the research. Maintaining access here also proved problematic when Robert was banned from driving for four months after being found guilty of a road traffic offence. He was no longer allowed to participate in the 'Drivers' Group' and as a result, had a disagreement with three members. It became difficult to maintain access to both sides of the group. While Robert was banned from driving I provided transportation to Fiat meetings. This research bargaining helped to place me at the centre of the group's activities. Access to the Fiat group was also possible because I owned a Fiat Punto. For Robert, my car became the focus of a project to clean it up and improve its appearance with various modifications. It was important to show respect and admiration for their interests and behaviours in order to be accepted into the group. Credibility and relationships were thus established via these forms of research bargaining.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (2002).² The following guidance is offered in relation to researcher safety: 'Social researchers face a range of potential risks to their safety. Safety issues need to be considered in the design and conduct of social research projects and procedures should be adopted to reduce the risk to researchers' (British Sociological Association, 2002: 2). Efforts were made throughout the course of the fieldwork to ensure the safety of the researcher. As stated, owning a car became an important means by which to conduct research in this setting. I adopted a deontological

approach to ethical practice within ethnography, which focuses on the inherent rights of research participants, such as the right to privacy, the right to respect, or the right to self-determination (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). Personal information that was given to me in confidence was omitted from fieldnotes. Pseudonyms have been used in order to protect individuals' identities. The group names have also been altered however they still reflect the brand of car or leisure pursuit which they were geared towards (such as the Fiat Group and the practice of car modification). The locations, times, and types of cars have not been anonymized.

‘Edgework’ and Ethnographies of Deviance

The risks and dangers of conducting research with deviant or criminal groups, or in dangerous settings, have long been reflected upon in sociology, anthropology and criminology. Notable examples include Becker's (1963) study of jazz musicians and research on delinquent gangs (Fleisher, 1998; Thrasher, 1927), hustlers (Polsky, 1985[1967]), high steel ironworkers (Haas, 1977), and drug users (Adler, 1985; Jacobs, 1998; Weisheit, 1998). Additional risky research settings have included policing and the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland (Brewer and Magee, 1991; Sluka, 1990) homelessness (Arrigo, 1995), security staff (Winlow *et al.* 2001), graffiti artists (Ferrell, 1998), pizza delivery employees (Kinkade and Katovich, 1997), bicycle messengers (Fincham, 2006), white-water rafting (Holyfield, 1999) and the shipping industry (Belousov *et al.* 2007; Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Thus fieldwork remains, no matter what its risks, the essential method for uncovering the situated meanings of crime and deviance (Ferrell and Hamm, 1998). Experiential immersion on the part of the field researcher can begin to unravel the lived meanings of crime and criminal justice. Weber's notion of *verstehen* is adopted with the context of criminological research to denote 'a process of subjective interpretation on the part of the social researcher, a degree of

sympathetic understanding between social researcher and subjects of study' (Ferrell, 1998: 27). Lyng (1998) argues that it is only through immersing oneself fully in the dangerous or risky activities of a particular group, that we can understand the situated meanings and experiences. He proposes the method of 'edgework' as a means of addressing or adding to the call for reflexivity in social research:

The archetypal edgework experience is one in which the individual's failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death or, at the very least, debilitating injury... The threat of death or injury is ever-present in such activities, although participants often claim that only those 'who don't know what they're doing' are at risk. (Lyng, 1990: 857)

This form of research 'unavoidably entangles those who practice it in complex and ambiguous relations to subjects and situations of study, to issues of personal and social responsibility, and to law and legality' (Ferrell, 1998: 25). The researcher can decide beforehand not to partake in any illegal or deviant activities, however their mere presence will introduce ethical issues. They must decide that when necessary they will "obstruct justice" or have "guilty knowledge" or be an "accessory" before or after the fact, in the full legal sense of those terms' (Polsky, 1985[1967]: 139). 'Guilty knowledge' involves having an awareness of any deviant or criminal activities of the group or individual under study, despite not having personally been involved. As mentioned in the Introduction, some previous studies of youth driving cultures have adopted the 'edgework' method. Despite the ethical issues which arise from this, little has been said about them and what other youth researchers can learn. The following section addresses these issues through an experiential account of research with 'boy racers'.

Survival of the Fastest: Research with ‘Boy Racers’

It was a Friday night in September 2006 when I first met Debbie, one of my two gatekeepers:

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 tramlines³... Debbie invited me to sit in the front passenger seat of her car so we could chat. She apologized 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 its 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)

Upon first meeting Debbie, my attention was drawn to the antagonism between the drivers and the authorities, and also the internal conflict within the culture. The group is more heterogeneous than commonly portrayed in the media and popular culture. The drivers who took part in this research viewed themselves as 'respectable' members of the culture and distanced themselves from 'rough racers' who were seen to give the culture a bad name via explicitly and deliberately flouting the rules of the road, thus jeopardizing their use of public space. The difficulty experienced in gaining access only served to heighten my sense of

trepidation on entering the field. Some drivers frequently contravened road traffic laws and engaged in behaviours classified as 'anti-social' such as noise disturbances, littering, and gathering in groups. I was concerned that through my proximity to the group I would be seen as 'one of them', thus potentially jeopardizing my research with the residents, police and politicians. Driving my car in the beach vicinity meant that I could be seen as part of the culture and therefore would be at risk of suspicion and observation from outside groups. For example, on one particular weekend I spent the Friday evening interviewing a local resident who watched and filmed the drivers on the Beach Boulevard from his balcony. The next evening I was at the beach conducting fieldwork with the culture and when driving past the block of flats, saw the resident standing on his balcony watching the cars drive by. Balancing the interests of each group concerned was an issue throughout the research period. There was also the possibility that the police might check my car to ensure it was taxed, insured and road worthy.

The risks associated with dangerous driving practices on the part of the youths were considered before entering the field and thus led to the utilisation of my own transportation whenever possible. I had considered the physical risks of being involved in a collision, however I had not anticipated the emotional risks associated with hearing stories of road traffic accidents and fatalities,⁴ and also from witnessing deviant driving behaviour on the part of some (but by no means all) of the youths. During the course of fieldwork I was often regaled with stories of road traffic accidents or 'brush-ins' with the law involving either the youths themselves or a friend or family member. For instance, Brad informed me during an interview that his friend had been involved in a car crash on the rural roads in Aberdeenshire:

It's tragic really... makes you think about your own driving and how something like that affects the entire family. It was ironic because Jay wasn't wearing his seatbelt

even though he was driving at the time and he came out of the wreckage with hardly a scratch on him. But his mate who was in the front passenger seat was wearing his seatbelt and he died at the scene...

During fieldwork at Aberdeen's seafront, the following incident also occurred:

Robert's cousin drove a Noble. He told us he'd just been stopped by the police on the way there because he had removed the front licence plate. It just didn't look right with it on though, he told us. The police gave him a producer to make sure it was put on in seven days. He laughed and said he'd showed them the license plates which were sitting in the back of his car. The cops are my mates like, he said, good to just humour them. They guys were nice enough to me though'. Robert said that they would have targeted him because it's a sporty performance car. His cousin stayed for about five minutes and then headed home. He sped off the trammers and swerved round the roundabout. He almost crashed into it. Robert laughed. 'See what he's like now? Crazy!'... After his cousin left Robert asked me: 'Did you see all the folk rubber-necking when they drove by'. 'They were all looking at his car. That's what always happens - whether it's here or in town. I remember one time when we drove through the town he kept having to restart the engine because there was something wrong with the coils. His car has about six coils where as one like ours, only has one coil I think. Anyway, you could imagine every time he started the engine the noise was so loud and everyone on the street looked over at us'. (Fieldnotes, October 2007)

This incident reflects the propensity for some of the youths involved in this research to drive recklessly at times. As noted above, many of the youths were concerned with pushing the

limits of their cars and their driving abilities via their engagement in 'edgework'. Although I chose not to consciously engage in these activities via my own driving, I was still witness to them when a passenger in their cars and thus had 'guilty knowledge' (Polsky, 1985[1967]: 135). This 'guilty knowledge' consisted of awareness of participants' illegal activities both on and off-road. Participants bragged about their driving exploits and the exploits of their friends. In the early stages of my fieldwork Paul recounted an incident involving his friend Liam:

On the way home from the Fast & Modified car show, Paul told me about his friend Liam who used to own a Cosworth. Liam decided to see how fast it could go on the motorway and was able to reach 160mph. At this point the traffic cops spotted him but they couldn't catch him. A couple of their friends who were driving around in another car at the time had a police scanner and were listening to events as they unfolded. Paul said that he was really scared because once the car reached 160mph it felt like it lifted off the ground and you weren't even going that fast... (Fieldnotes, July 2005)

When recounting this incident, Paul initially seemed eager to brag about the speeds reached by his friend and the fact that they managed to evade the authorities, but also to hint that he would not partake in such driving behaviours. However Paul demonstrated the opposite when driving us back to Aberdeen after a car show:

On our journey home from the car show we had almost reached Aberdeen and were on the dual carriageway passing the small town of Stonehaven. At this point there are two hair pin bends, one going downhill and then an uphill one at the other side. I'd

never enjoyed driving this stretch of road, especially in the rain, and always felt the need to slow down. I could feel the car accelerating and watched the needle of the speedometer climb up to 90mph. Paul seemed unfazed as he negotiated the bends while I felt sick to my stomach and a complete loss of control due to my position as merely a passenger. An image flashed through my head of a police officer whom I'd interviewed recounting the consequences of a car crash at this very spot in which the female passenger of the modified car had died while the driver, her boyfriend, lived. I asked Paul why he felt the need to drive over the speed limit. 'I love the thrill of driving fast'. Paul exclaimed enthusiastically. 'It'd be great to try parachuting but I'd never go on those rides in the theme parks like rollercoasters... I mean, you never know what might happen if somebody does something wrong. I've had my licence for over four years now and I know how the Vectra handles. So I know how fast I can accelerate into these bends at and the limits of the car...' (Fieldnotes, July 2005)

Similar emotions were experienced when a female member of the group sped along the Beach Boulevard road:

After the 'Drivers' Group' meeting Robert and Debbie both wanted to go into the centre of town for food because they hadn't eaten before the meeting. We both got into Debbie's Seat Ibiza, Robert in the front passenger seat and I in the back. On the way back to the beach Debbie reached the roundabout at the top of the Beach Boulevard. When exiting the roundabout, she accelerated rapidly down the first part of the Boulevard. The speedometer reached 50mph before she jokingly commented: 'Oops! I better calm down after what Officer [...] said in the meeting...' (Fieldnotes, September 2006)

In each of these examples, the sense of fear and trepidation which I experienced was largely due not just to youths' propensity to speed, but also due to the fact that I was only a passenger in the cars and hence not fully in control of the situation. The above comment by Paul about his friend in the Cosworth also highlights his experience of this. In these instances I chose to tolerate the driving behaviours of the youths in contrast to challenging their behaviour. I had not fully anticipated the emotional consequences. One also has to wonder if the presence of a (female) researcher influenced or amplified the risky driving behaviours of the youths to some extent, particularly those who were keen to 'show off' in the presence of peers. On the other hand, it is possible that an over-awareness of potential risks related with being a passenger in their cars resulted in preconceptions regarding the level and types of risks I could encounter. Fincham (2006: 195) highlights the potential pitfall in the reporting of potentially dangerous fieldwork situations – 'namely that the risk is exaggerated'. Therefore: 'When the researcher encounters possible danger, care must be taken to properly evaluate any situation – for example, there are instances when the researcher may be worried because they are expecting to be worried, not because a situation is dangerous' (Fincham, 2006: 195). Nonetheless, the expectation of risk also undoubtedly influences our interactions with the researched and thus should be acknowledged.

The more time spent with the group, the more I found my behaviours approximating closely to those of the researched. I was more forgiving and tolerant of their driving behaviours, which at the beginning of the research had struck me as extreme and wild. This highlights a danger in conducting ethnographic research – the danger that the researcher will become too comfortable in the research setting. By immersing myself in the group I was compromising my ability to retain an objective insight. However, I would argue that objectivity and value neutrality are impossible goals in social research, particularly when

dealing with topics of a political or sensational nature, as was the case with the ‘boy racers’ (Lumsden, 2012). An incident which occurred when I was driving Robert to a meeting in Stirling for the Fiat website, demonstrates the ease in which I would get caught-up in the driving behaviours of the group:

On the way to Stirling Andrew led the way because he knew a short cut. This involved using one of the country roads instead of sticking to the motor way. We ended up stuck behind a jeep towing a horse box which meant sticking to 40mph all the way. Robert panicked slightly that we weren’t going to make it there for 3pm as planned. While on this road a Saab from behind my car decided that he was going to overtake me, Andrew and the horse and box with the jeep towing it all at once. I saw him pull out and thought something is going to happen here. Then I spotted a green car coming towards him on the opposite site of the road. The driver of the green car beeped the horn and flashed the lights at the Saab driver who was now alongside me. I had to back off from behind Andrew’s car and let him in to avoid a major accident. The Saab wasn’t there for long though and as soon as there was a space overtook Andrew and the horse box. Andrew later explained that he didn’t know what was happening because all he saw was the green car flashing its lights. Then when he looked in the side mirror he spotted the Saab. Andrew hadn’t wanted to overtake the horse box because he was waiting for a gap long enough for the both of us to go past so that we wouldn’t get left behind and end up lost. Robert laughed and remarked that it was a good thing there wasn’t an accident because Andrew wouldn’t be able to fix his brake pads from a coffin. (Fieldnotes, April 2007)

In addition to the potential danger posed by other motorists, there was a tendency for the youths to become wrapped-up in trials by speed due to them 'egging each other on'. As a participant observer, it was easy to allow this mentality to leak over to my own driving behaviours. Utilizing my own car did not always necessarily free me from the physical risks posed by the youths driving behaviours, the risky driving behaviours of other motorists, and the potential to become caught-up in the competitive and exhibitionist behaviours of the group.

The fieldwork also presented gendered risks. I have reflected elsewhere on my experiences of 'sexual hustling' and 'sexist treatment', which also led to me disliking certain participants (Lumsden, 2009). However, further gendered risks were experienced at moments when I was alone with the male drivers in their cars. Retrospectively, another incident occurred during my fieldwork in June 2005 when I conducted observation at Aberdeen's seafront by accompanying Paul as a passenger in his car. Clearly, being alone in the private space of these youths' cars presents the researcher with ethical issues in terms of gender. Nothing untoward happened and my fears could be argued to be entirely irrational. I also realise that I may only have experienced anxiety over this due to my awareness of ethics and advice regarding ensuring the safety of the researcher. Again, it is important to ensure that we do not exaggerate the risks of fieldwork (Fincham, 2006). However, this reinforced the importance of ensuring my safety in the field.

Discussion

This experiential account sheds light on the myriad ethical issues encountered in youth research. When youths are engaged in risky or deviant behaviours the ethical implications for researcher and researched are amplified. Full participation in the activities of the driving culture would have violated research ethics and the laws of the road, thus putting the

researcher and youths at risk. In these contexts engaging in 'edgework' is ethically, morally, legally and professionally questionable. Although attempts were made to avoid harmful situations, this was not always possible in practice and physical and emotional risks were presented via the youths' engagement in speeding, illegal street racing and other dangerous driving manoeuvres. Experiencing these activities at the hands of the youths resulted in feelings of fear, discomfort, anxiety, and loss of control. Unanticipated gendered and emotional risks were also encountered due to the experiences of 'sexual hustling' and 'sexist treatment' and of being alone in cars with young males. The dangers faced during research are thus also shaped by the identity of the researcher. The ways in which the researched identify with them will frame interactions and potentially jeopardize research if the ethnographer finds them difficult to tolerate (Lumsden, 2009). Placing myself unwittingly in situations where there was the potential for harm or injury resulted in emotional dissonance. In contrast, for the young drivers these rituals of resistance were largely pleasurable experiences. Hence this raises questions as to the applicability of 'edgework'. Even if we are to fully immerse ourselves in 'edgework' as researchers, are our experiences of these not likely to differ from those of the researched? This raises further questions as to how we 'give voice' to the youths.

The line between insider and outsider status is also blurred. Exposure to risky or deviant behaviours can heighten the likelihood of youth researchers being drawn into the deviant activities of the group. In this case, the researcher found she became increasingly comfortable with the risky and deviant driving manoeuvres when she was participating as a fellow driver and thus in control of the driving experience. An awareness of the tendency to get caught-up in these risky behaviours meant that I was reminded of the necessity of drawing the line in order to preserve professional, ethical, legal, and moral obligations. Adopting an outsider status enables us to step outside the field and fully reflect on our

experiences and their ethical and methodological implications. The ethnographer needs to be intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness. 'Edgework' could obfuscate these insights because it involves full immersion in the risky behaviours of a group.

Due to the naturalistic essence of qualitative research the issue of ethics must be revisited throughout the research process. By naturalistic essence, I refer to the way in which the social world we are studying shapes and changes the research as it progresses. This can be a result of our relationships with respondents and other gatekeepers, our personal preferences, social background, and the opportunities which arise in terms of access and routes to data collection. How the issue is dealt with by the outside world (for instance whether it is sensational or controversial, as was the case with 'boy racers') will also influence how we 'do' research, the political angle we approach it from, and how findings are disseminated and received in academia and in the public realm. Youth researchers will inevitably 'take sides' in their research, whether intended or not. Value neutrality in social research is a myth (Lumsden, 2012). Moreover, we cannot anticipate the unintended consequences which our decisions may have ethically and morally. As Honkatukia *et al.* (2003: 336-37) write:

Our concern is... whether any research involving human beings, especially those living in vulnerable settings, should ever be assessed only by academic standards. Our aim of 'giving voice' to the youth as individuals and as a group sharing the same social situation was accepted with interest and devotion by some young residents, and in those cases, our research could be seen as ethically sound. However, giving voice also meant intervention on several levels and in different ways, which might entail the possibility of misuse as well. Unfortunately, we have to be aware of the possibility that we harmed someone or something by our research.

It was my aim to represent the (hitherto silenced) voices of the youths as accurately and ethically as possible, in order to challenge public perceptions of the group and thus police and government responses to them.

Institutional ethical frameworks can also complicate or obstruct research with children and young people, at the same time as attempting to protect those subjects of research (Skelton, 2008). Academics conducting research on youths are required to 'follow their political respect for the rights of their research participants at the same time as meeting the strictures of research practice defined by their institutional ethics committees' (Skelton, 2008: 21). The ethical guidelines of universities, research groups, professional organizations, and funding bodies, as well as being overly constraining at times, also only provide sketchy advice with regards to certain issues. The blanketing nature of research ethics also tends to disguise the unpredictable nature of most (qualitative) youth research. A well-formulated research design which takes account of ethics is crucial, but so is the ability of the researcher to think on his or her toes and continually reflect upon and revise ethical decisions in light of these challenges. One means of overcoming this dilemma is to adopt both a 'situated' and 'rules-based approach' with regards to youth research ethics (Heath *et al.* 2009). The rules-based approach involves 'a notion of ethical absolutes in relation to classic concerns such as informed consent, avoidance of harm, and guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity' while the situated approach 'emphasises the importance of making judgements based on the very specific context of any given ethical dilemma: in other words, there are very few, if any, absolute rights and wrongs in relation to ethical practice' (Heath *et al.* 2009: 22). In this research, in addition to a 'situated approach' a 'rules-based approach' was established. This involved revisiting ethics in light of fieldwork experiences and the related physical, emotional and gendered risks.

Conclusion

‘Edgework’ has been proposed by some as a valuable method for understanding the situated meanings and experiences of particular groups via immersion in deviant or risky activities, and also of addressing the call for reflexivity in social research (see Ferrell, 1998; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Lyng, 1998). However, through a discussion of the ethical issues encountered during research with ‘boy racers’, this paper has demonstrated that engaging in ‘edgework’ can be ethically problematic for those who wish to conduct fieldwork with young people. ‘Edgework’ blurs the line between insider and outsider status, thus threatening the researcher’s ability to step back from the field and critically reflect on their experiences. The researcher can find themselves unwittingly drawn into the deviant activities of youths, as ‘deviance’ slowly becomes ‘the norm’ through prolonged immersion in their social world. As researchers we have major responsibilities in our work with young people (France, 2004) and this is particularly the case when researching deviant or vulnerable youths. Furthermore, the experiential aspect of the ‘edgework’ method is called to the fore since the researcher’s experiences of risky behaviours (in terms of discomfort) differed from those of the researched (in terms of pleasure). During fieldwork with ‘boy racers’, the ethical issues which were encountered included potential harm to researcher and participants, responsibility to youths, ‘guilty knowledge’ (Polsky, 1985[1967]) of driver deviance, the privileging of certain voices and their representation in academic and public discourses. When engaging in research of a sensational, political or sensitive nature these issues are conflated and further entwined with the researcher’s views on value neutrality and objectivity.

Moreover, careful research management, planning, preparation, and risk assessment is vital so that ethics are not dealt with in an ‘*ad hoc*’ fashion’ during the research (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000). Risk assessment of the setting, the respondents, and related activities, must be sensitive to the naturalistic essence of many forms of youth research. Institutions,

funding bodies, and individual youth researchers have a responsibility to ensure that ethics are dealt with before, during and after the research. However, they must also acknowledge the ‘situated’ and thus context-specific nature of social research. Thus, this paper highlighted the importance of both a ‘situated’ and ‘rules-based approach’ (Health *et al.* 2009). Rules should be revisited and revised in response to ethical issues arising during our research with youths.

Notes

1. As Jones and Wallace (1992) note there is much debate over when the youth phase starts and finishes. In this paper youths are defined as those aged 17-24 years old. The driving culture is understood as providing a rite of passage for moving these youths into adulthood.
2. The PhD was self-funded therefore external funding agency requirements did not have to be considered, only institutional guidelines and the professional guidelines of the British Sociological Association (2002).
3. The ‘trammers’ are an area at Aberdeen’s seafront where the last remnants of the city’s old tramlines remain. Drivers use this space to socialize.
4. These emotional repercussions did not only pertain to stories regaled by the young drivers, but were also related to sobering discussions with traffic officers who related during interviews the effect that road traffic accidents had on survivors, relatives, friends, and also members of the emergency services who were called to the scene of collision.

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