Similarity and Difference: The Ethnographer, the Subject, and Objectivity

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Abstract

This paper is based on the experiences of two criminological researchers and their reflections of undertaking ethnographic study. We first set out and briefly discuss our methodological standpoint. Then, by examining the differences in our backgrounds and biographies, we begin reflecting on how these influences have impacted upon our motivations for studying and our choice of research areas. We then consider how our biographies have also influenced the fieldwork conducted. We argue that by viewing the researcher as a ‘subjective subject’ - and therefore an integral part of the research process (together with drawing upon the analytic realist concept of ‘reflexive accounting’ (Altheide and Johnson, 1994)) - it is possible to create a more accurate representation of ethnographic research findings. Furthermore, we argue that similar reflexivity might be employed by other researchers, as this process may in itself yield a rich source of valid data.

Introduction

This article is a reflexive account of the similarities and differences between the interpretations and negotiations of the research fields of the authors, and the implications that this has for ethnography and qualitative research more generally. Although we are at different points on the research journey (Kate was awarded her PhD in 2006 whilst James is in the process of writing up) we draw upon our experiences of doctoral research, from the point of inception, through to methodological engagement and the ‘doing’ of the fieldwork, and finally leaving the field. We have both have begun to disseminate findings, at conferences, amongst peers, and in one case in written form (Williams, 2005; Williams, 2008). This piece originated as an informal collaborative reflection on the research strategies we employed as ethnographers in the field, and how these were the product of differing background experiences and biography, in terms of class upbringing, gender roles and subconscious personal motivations.

After setting out our theoretical standpoint, we begin by reflecting on how biography and background impacted upon the choice of our research. Drawing upon examples from our reflexive journals, we move to consider how these factors influenced conducting the research in terms of access, data gained, techniques and relationships formed. Subjectively, we note that background and biography have actually influenced our research throughout. However, we argue that this does not make the research any less valid. On the contrary,
our belief is that this type of reflexivity should be employed by all researchers, and that this is in fact a rich source of valid data in itself.

The research settings

The doctoral ethnographic research conducted by Kate examined two Street Watch schemes in the UK. Street Watch schemes - created in 1994, and with an estimated 20,000 in existence (Home Office, 2000: 4) - are community crime prevention schemes akin to Neighbourhood Watch, which work in partnership with the police. However, the main difference with Street Watch schemes is that they involve small groups of volunteer local residents actually patrolling the streets. The two Street Watch schemes studied in depth by Kate were situated in the Midlands of England and were created in order to reduce local levels of female street (and in some cases, off-street) prostitution. One was situated in a predominantly white, middle class, leafy suburb, and the other in a neighbouring inner city area with a high Muslim population. Kate spent just over a year in the field, conducting field observation sessions with the schemes, alongside 56 tape-recorded interviews with members of Street Watch organisations, other local residents, the police, and the sex workers who were the target of the groups.

James”s research has involved extensive study of a football hooligan group in the North of England using ethnography in the form of participant observation. Inspired by the changes in ‘the scene’ that arose out of the socio-economic culture of football in the early 1990’s, James was keen to pick up where Armstrong (1998) left off, well aware that there is no such thing as finite culture (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). He recently concluded the ethnographic fieldwork, and is now writing up. His participation over more than two years, relies upon contacts with the firm’s older ‘main faces’, and emerging generation of younger hooligans. James has been concerned with the individual biographies of those men involved in football hooliganism, examined against the socio-structural conditions of late modernity and post industrialism that have given rise to new specific understandings of masculinity and crime.

Realism, ethnography and reflexivity (the ethnographer as ‘subjective’ subject)

We perhaps should start out by suggesting, in a quite uncontroversial manner, that we believe that the sense we can make of the world is one that is constructed; that is, it is socially and discursively created rather than objectively ‘out there’ waiting to be ‘found’ or discovered. Whilst a mathematician might find the answer, the qualitative social scientist arguably does not. We did not seek out the ‘cause of Street Watch schemes or street sex work’, or the ‘aetiology of football hooliganism’. We might have had opinions, but as ethnographers we had not developed fixed hypotheses requiring testing. For the most part, social scientists now accept that the way that we use language and description is both imbued with, and creates meaning. They accept that when we speak or write, we cannot, and do not do so ‘objectively’. Arguably, we cannot escape the predilections, values and cultural assumptions that we bring about with the very words that we select and use. Therefore, as qualitative researchers and ethnographers, what we learn in the field and report back in the academy is not ‘objective fact’, but perspective informed opinion. As Altheide and Johnson (1994) suggest, ‘all knowledge is’. This ‘perspectival nature of knowledge’ must - it follows - be considered ‘an obdurate fact of ethnography’ (Altheide and Johnson, 1994: 490). The combined influence of feminist and post modernist thinking has been the slow-growing recognition of what Naffine terms the ‘partisan’ nature of criminological inquiry (in both quantitative and qualitative form) (see Naffine, 1997). This view has arguably moved from the margins to being commonly recognised in the social sciences, but can accord with the view that Denzin has expressed that ‘in the social sciences, there is only interpretation’ (Denzin, 1998: 313).

Yet, if there exist no ‘objective truths’, and value neutrality is an outdated concept then we might ask, do we now need the term ‘subjectivity’, created and fashioned as an opposite? If all knowledge is subjective, what allows the ethnographer to present privileged knowledge? This is not simply an abstract or irrelevant question, but one which came to define debates regarding the theoretical validity of more traditional ‘realist’ ethnographic fieldwork during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. This was brought about as social science was exposed to postmodernist thinking, and ‘anti-realist’ scepticism emerged regarding the validity of what
Clifford Geertz famously called ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973). Indeed, Geertz is worth citing here, because he noted the subjective and interpretive base of anthropological study, believing that analysis of human culture was ‘not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning’ (Geertz, 1973:5). For Geertz, culture was infinite, and infinite novel forms of human life existed; ‘thick description’ was a term he selected to describe the documenting of that cover, because the term explains not just behaviour, but the context in which it occurs and in which it becomes meaningful to an outsider or observer. Geertz argued that as interpreter of action and context, the anthropological ethnographer should describe precisely that action and context in order to give it meaning.

However, a problem arose in part because the interpretive element of Geertz’s theory was to become secondary to a view that ethnographers’ use of thick description made ethnography an objective and realistic representation of authenticity. ‘Realist ethnographers’ were to become associated with a view that they were reporting neutral fact (Brewer, 2000). The problem was that by the late 1980’s, such claims to ‘objectivity, accuracy and truth’ brought about by ‘thick descriptions’ were being challenged by scholars who argued that such accounts did not represent reality as it is. These critics of realist ethnography, termed anti-realists, argued that thick description was often selective and subjective, presenting only one version of reality from ‘the various competing versions of reality that could have been produced’ (Brewer, 2000: 42). In addition - and buoyed by the growth in popularity of the concept of post-modernity - this anti-realist challenge to the realist notion of ‘objective’ nature of ethnography became increasingly influential in the social sciences. By the early 1990’s, ‘realist’ ethnographies and the notion of ‘thick description’ were increasingly criticised for being ‘theoretically naïve and no different from those produced by ordinary people as part of their everyday life’ (Brewer, 2000: 42; see also Hammersley, 1990: 60-5). It was argued that ethnographers, particularly those with realist leanings, occupied no unique position of privilege in terms of the knowledge or theory that they produced.

It was against that backdrop that ‘reflexivity’ came to be an increasingly important concept. Jupp (1996: 344) suggests that reflexivity in criminology can broadly be conceived of as:-

The process of monitoring and reflecting on all aspects of a research project from the formulation of research ideas through to the publication of findings … and their utilisation.

For Hammersley (1990), it is vital that ethnographers outline their theoretical prejudices, and the wider values that they bring to the research process – indeed, this aim was in time to become a uniting feature of the rationale that underpinned a range of perspectives that Brewer terms ‘post post-modern ethnography’ (Brewer, 2000: 48-55). These theoreticians argued that it was still possible for subjective ethnographers to produce versions of reality and privileged accounts, but that the litmus test for valuable and good ethnography was reflexivity. Further, Altheide and Johnson note that ethnographic researchers should ‘substantiate their interpretations and findings with a reflexive account of themselves and the processes of their research’ (1994: 489). There exists now a growing recognition that reflexivity and being reflexive is a way to improve the legitimisation of research material (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; May, 1998).

Analytic realism and criminological research

Here we should stipulate that we have theoretically confronted that challenge head on, because we could not simply sidestep those theoretical challenges to ethnography. We recognise that as subjective producers, ‘our’ (and we take ownership of it) research was never likely to be ‘passive or neutral’ (Rock 2001: 30). Similarly, we reject the view that there exists an unproblematic social reality which can simply be ‘told as it is’, and regard that the most prominent of the ‘many myths’ that exists in the ‘messy business’ (Pearson, 1993: vii) that constitutes the ethnographic fieldworkers’ craft. Instead, we write here as craftspeople intimately connected to the production of the text, hence we are both subjective researchers and - due to our connections to the research – subjects of it.
Before we began undertaking the ethnographic research projects described here, neither of us believed that we were simply to be the conduits of reporting the facts of the field as told or witnessed. The realist tradition in ethnography, which suggests that the fieldworker might go about their business ‘uncontaminated by personal bias, political goals or moral judgements’ (Brewer, 2000: 41) was simply nonsensical to us. That does not mean that we have retreated from the production of ‘thick description’ associated historically with realist ethnographers, but rather that we have had to face some of the theoretical challenges directly. Therefore, throughout the research process we kept reflexive accounts of our fieldwork, but more importantly, we have found a way of making sense of our research by drawing upon the analytic realist version of ‘reflexivity’.

Moving beyond descriptive reflexivity, we aim to arrive at a more analytic form of reflexivity (see Stanley, 1996; Letherby, 2002) and examine how our different gender and backgrounds impacted upon the research. We did not just want to be critical of the data, but critically analyse ourselves, the preconceptions we brought to our work, the broader values, commitments and what Stanley terms the ‘felt necessities’ the researcher has about the topic, essentially the underpinning motivations that propel them toward their study (Stanley, 1996: 48).

From the outset we recognised that we could not simply build theory in a ‘grounded’ fashion, because such a view is underscored by notional objectivity that exists at the commencement of the research project (see for example Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 1998). Therefore, as criminological ethnographers we both extol the virtues of what Altheide and Johnson term ‘analytic realism’ as a methodological underpinning. Broadly defined, analytic realism as a methodological perspective is concerned with, ‘not so much the objective truth of what is being stated as it is the process or way of knowing. We should continue to be concerned with producing texts that explicate how we claim to know what we know’ (1994: 496).

The central issue then, is the world is under symbolic construction, by both the subject and the ethnographer. While the ethnographer’s aim is to obtain people’s view of their social reality, there is a multiplicity of positions, perspectives and voices, and amongst these the ethnographer themselves must also be considered. Therefore, for Altheide and Johnson (1994), the way to identify the ethnographer’s perspective is a process they term ‘validity as reflexive accounting’. Essentially this is a process of extensive reflection, including reflexive writing, where the ethnographer considers ‘the interactions among context, researcher, methods, setting and actors’ (1994: 489). Therefore, ‘analytic realism’ details the view that researchers need to substantiate their findings via a reflexive process - to ‘investigate ourselves while we are investigating others’ (Berg and Smith, 1988) - and it is in that process that ethnography becomes research that is privileged and stands above everyday accepted wisdom and observation, ‘allowing ethnography to rise above the morass and meaninglessness of post-modern relativism and scepticism’ (Brewer, 2000: 50).

Ultimately then, it is this analytic realism that has helped us to come to terms with some of the more complex theoretical debates that underpin our qualitative engagement in the field, and to come to a more reflexive and considered thinking through of why and how we have developed as ethnographers on what have been ostensibly quite different, and yet in actual fact, remarkably similar personal research journeys. The accounts have yielded information on how we think, and how we view and interpret the social world, how we present a representation of our subjects, and the context of our observations. They have contributed to the data from which we built our studies. They have provided us with the empirical material on which we have drawn here.

As aforementioned, while the importance of being reflexive is acknowledged within social science research, the methods and potential difficulties of applying this in practice are rarely addressed in any real detail (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). While of late, criminology has seen a gradual stream of more reflexive accounts of the research process, we would argue that often there is a tendency toward descriptive reflexivity. Here, we aim to take this a step further, and in so doing we attempt also to underline our belief that this exercise can only add to the richness and validity of the data and the growth of the methodological enterprise. We also hope that this piece contributes to bridging a gap between abstract epistemological discussions and the nitty-gritty everyday realities of field research practice.
Biography, background and reflexivity

Goody has noted that ‘criminology, as a social science discipline, has never embraced the idea of research that is based on the study of the individual. There remains an unhealthy intellectual suspicion of what ‘the individual’ or, more damningly, ‘the personal’ has to offer criminology’ (Goody, 2000: 474). If that is true with criminological research concerned with the ‘criminal’, it is redoubtable when it comes to (auto)biography where the ‘criminologist is the subject’. It is there that biography remains, largely, a theoretical or methodological ‘idea’ rather than an empirical practice in criminology (Goody, 2000: 476). While there have been rare forays by criminoologists into autobiography (for example, Holdaway and Rock, 1998; Radzinowicz, 1999), the criminologist’s biography remains an infrequently recognised source of data.

Just such a point has been made more recently by advocates in the sphere of ‘cultural criminology’ - most notably Presdee (2004), who has argued that to cultivate a deeper understanding of crime, and its realities of crime as a ‘lived experience’, we need to understand both how people live, and the ways in which they make sense of their lives. To this end he argues, ‘(auto)biography is raw material; but it cannot stand alone, it needs to be worked on’. For him, it is that working that must be the practice of the criminologist. In Presdee’s approval of biography, he notes that the life history and (auto)biography of the researcher also invariably shapes research processes, and is the product of interaction. It is only by recognising this that the discipline can come to a fuller understanding, and entrees an impassioned plea that criminoologists:

Listen to the crime stories of both others and ourselves and begin the long difficult process of ‘working it out ’… We need to be close to all those living the crime story, including ourselves, and work it out together (Presdee, 2004: 47).

There is recognition both here, and in analytic realism that good ethnography arises from the personal skills of the researcher. These skills are not simply inherently held, but arise out of personal backdrop and background, because the representation requires understanding. As Altheide and Johnson (1998: 297) note:-

Good ethnographies reflect tacit knowledge, the largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humour and naughty nuances. It is necessary to give an account of how we know things, what we regard and treat as empirical materials – the experiences from which we produce our second (or third) hand accounts of ‘what is happening’.

Hertz (1997: viii) further explains that, ‘the reflexive ethographer does not simply report “facts” or “truths” but actively constructs interpretations of his or her experiences in the field and then questions how those interpretations came about’. Indeed, to be reflexive is not only to be continually questioning, interpreting and revealing, but can also at times be extremely demanding. Hertz (1997: viii) emphasizes the thorough nature of reflexivity that is required from the researcher, from the need to be aware of ‘the questions they ask to those they ignore, from who they study to who they ignore, from problem formation to analysis, representation, and writing – in order to produce less distorted accounts of the social world’.

However, while reflexivity might seem to be a broader practice concerned with all aspects of the research process, we have already suggested that ‘what gets reflected upon’ is often more limited. Two questions infrequently considered by ethnographers are how our biographies impact upon the issues that we select to research, and how our biographies impact upon the way in which we study. That is what we now turn to.

Getting personal: why do we study what we study?

So often, academic researchers do not question in any depth why we select our areas of interest (unless of course, it is prescribed by financial incentives). What draws us to certain topics? Can something be inherently ‘interesting’, or must we be drawn to it for a reason? Indeed, for us, it is only now that we have attempted to enter a somewhat uncomfortable position of trying to ascertain why we choose, and have chosen these particular topics to fill several years of our lives.
Kate is still not quite sure of the answer(s), and needs to trace her research journey back to the beginning to gain some greater understanding. After all, during the process of a doctorate, debatably the researcher does change; as with any relationship, attitudes, knowledge and opinion develop and alter, and we may no longer be able to see what attracted us in the first place. Kate’s original introduction to the subject area had been simply because she lived a few miles from the research site, and whilst studying for her Master’s Degree, was involved in a local crime prevention panel. The members of this panel were aware that she was in search of a topic for (at that stage) her MA dissertation, and several ideas were suggested. However, her eventual research topic was suggested to her by a then Chief Inspector of the local police, who was also on the panel. In hindsight, this police officer clearly did not anticipate that she might be critical of the scheme; indeed, his unhappy reaction on reading her completed MA dissertation was delivered to her one evening, in the car park after a panel meeting. He told Kate that he could not quite work her out; and was debating whether she was a “stupid little middle class girl who knew nothing”, or alternatively a “feminist lesbian”.

In hindsight, some ten years later, Kate now feels that she should not have been so upset at his remark, as he had indeed made more of a valid point than she could have ever previously realised. Perhaps this research had been purposely suggested to her because she was indeed perceived to be a ‘stupid little middle class girl who knew nothing’ – and moreover, at some stage, perhaps she had been just that. A not altogether illogical alternative for an innocent middle class girl like Kate then, had to be that all this academic study had ‘turned’ her into a feminist; perhaps, to some extent, it had, or perhaps she had become a mixture of the two. Indeed, his initial perceptions had been well grounded; Williams was then in her early twenties, blonde, from a relatively privileged background, had a nervous laugh, and took the Minutes for the Panel conscientiously. Her polite, well groomed and smiling exterior had obviously indicated that she would produce a research report worthy of the same description. Shockingly, she had not; leaving it understandable that some sort of explanation had to be formulated by the local police - particularly as her young researcher’s naivety in being a little too blunt with her (although substantiated) findings may have caused some unexpected and uncomfortable ructions.

Whilst Kate had potentially been chosen to deliver a ‘safe’ report, the question still remains of why she may have been interested in doing so in the first place. Why would this ‘good little middle class girl’ be interested in launching herself into researching an alien world of sex work? Perhaps it was that she was originally the product of a very traditional and moral upbringing, not only in terms of acceptable sexual behaviour for women, but also in the sense of the importance of altruism towards those less fortunate. Was it therefore that the naïve Williams had been brought up to be a ‘good girl’, ‘with a passion to fight for the rights of the oppressed’ (Bindel, 2006), imagining herself as some sort of pioneering campaigner, akin to a 21st Century Josephine Butler?

In contrast, for James, the rationale for his study was never altruistic, nor was it to attempt to understand something so different from his experiences; rather it was a result of the fact that biography had opened up a rich field of potential research topics (in criminological terms), and moreover, that it was a world that had been very similar to his. Before embarking on a criminology degree at university he was the product of some similar experiences to those that criminologists often describe of the traditional ‘subject’. During the mid 1990’s he worked as a nightclub bouncer after having been through a tough comprehensive school in the city. Through his mid and late teens and early twenties he spent hours in boxing and kickboxing gyms, pubs and clubs and held a number of very dubious contacts as close friends. Suffice it to say that what sociologists call ‘the criminal milieu’ was not – unlike Kate’s experience - that alien. If anything, the field within which James moved was one that at times had perhaps been too familiar; but how better to understand than through ‘appreciative’ ethnography (Parker, 1974)? It could be argued though that there is nothing like recognising that one might easily have been the subject of the study, rather than the author of it to ensure a degree of reflexivity (Winlow, 2001).
James’s familiarity with the social world where men walk with exaggerated swaggers in their attempt to maintain the presence of a heavily managed ‘front’, gave him a certain amount of knowledge that cannot be generated in academia. As Hobbs (1988, 1993) has noted, violence can be quite a salient feature of working class life, and from James’s younger years, he learnt to use it. By his teen years he had learnt that violence was not glamorous but painful, especially if too much on the receiving end. But he had also learnt that violence did not particularly bother him, whether it was witnessing or doing it. Moreover, he knew that if he was threatened with violence, he had either to get away quickly, or hit hard and first, not giving an opponent the chance. He had learnt how to be around hard men, and not to ‘take the piss’ or ‘fuck them off’. The one place that he was different from some of his contemporaries was inside the university, and it was there he learnt that he had something many of his peers did not have: he didn’t mind being around threatening situations and people. Potentially these ‘qualities’ were useful raw material for him as an aspirant ethnographer. As Hobbs (1993: 62) again, has noted:-

Machismo, as well as a veil of eccentricity, is responsible for the cult of field work, as some of the grime of real life is brought back to the office… fleeting acquaintance… often shapes the master status of the academics as they grow paunchy on their six months or a year spent in the recess of what is sometimes referred to as real life. Those they leave behind on the streets, who experience real life every day of their existence find heroic status eluding them in the daily grind of survival, while the ethnographer, who was nearly arrested, almost beaten up and didn’t quite go crazy builds a career on a youthful flirtation with the terrible uncertainty of life amongst the lower orders.

That machismo might not be a good thing, but where some criminological research is involved, it is arguably necessary. It is perhaps also better to have been a purveyor of it than to have to learn the rules in the field, with prior knowledge of the culture under study providing valuable insight into how to manage risk. Fieldwork can be dangerous, and in some cases the risk of violence is real. Yet as Willis notes with reference to violence, ‘we cannot avert our gaze selectively and conveniently when trouble looms and miss out on whole tracts of social symbolic landscape which actually constitute the terrain underfoot as well as, often, the effective horizon, for many people… though this does not mean that we applaud or support such activities’ (Willis, 1990: 99). But then, reflexively, perhaps in some ways James did ‘applaud and support’ - if not now, then once. Might it have been over appreciation that drew him back to the subject where violence is not irregular?

Yet, it is naïve to suggest that it is necessarily right for people who are unschooled or uncomfortable in such realms to attempt to study them. Not all academics will feel comfortable in such settings, but James found ‘rough pubs’ more comfortable, initially at least, than academia. Studying football hooliganism then, was a fairly easy step back into a world which was not entirely unfamiliar; James found that he did not stick out like a sore thumb, but could pass amongst the lads easily, without needing to ‘plan’ ‘his dress, speech and other behaviour’ (Polsky, 1971: 134). More importantly, knowledge of the culture was beneficial in so far as it served as a means of minimising the risks encountered in the field, and shielded him from some of the mistakes that those unfamiliar with such settings might make, as we discuss in further depth below.

The personal becomes practical: how we study what we study

These backgrounds had very different forms of influence on how we went about our fieldwork. Indeed, research cannot be divorced from the researcher, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2000: 16) argue:-

Social researchers are part of the social world they study … what this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics.

Further, Hammersley and Atkinson (2000: 92) recognise that:-
Although it would be wrong to think of the effects of these as absolutely determinate or fixed, such characteristics as gender, age, ‘race’, and ethnic identification may shape relationships with gatekeepers, sponsors, and people under study in important ways.

Access to the research field is clearly a significant point in question. Underlining the potential importance of ‘perceived identity’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2000: 63), Kate could never have passed herself off as someone comfortable mixing with football hooligans, whereas James may never have been accepted into the tightly guarded and defensive world of the middle class Street Watchers. Indeed, as Kate notes elsewhere (Williams, 2005), these middle class Street Watchers were indignant and resentful that they should feel little choice but to be patrolling the streets in the first place, let alone to attempt to rid their leafy neighbourhood of sex workers. Kate’s initial difficulties in accessing this particular Street Watch group were only facilitated by a local policeman explaining to them that she lived in a middle class area of Birmingham. Similarly to the experience of Sanders (2005: 28) when she found that, ‘informants were more intent on establishing who I was’, the first ‘vetting’ meeting was successful – largely due to the establishment of rapport and trust, aided greatly, Kate believes, by her being of a similar background and therefore potentially less threatening, leaving access to the rest of the group as straightforward. Indeed, Kate felt comfortable and at ease with this Street Watch group, as they did with her. Despite the fact that they were from an older generation (some had children Kate’s age), these were the types of professional middle class people Kate had mixed with all her life. She could identify with their views, and they understood that. They didn’t need to ‘watch’ what they said, but could be open and honest with her.

In contrast, Kate’s other Street Watch group was less straightforward to infiltrate primarily due to the potential ‘social distance’ (Andersen, 1993: 41). In essence, she was a young, single white female, and they were mainly Muslim men, who had been accused of vigilantism against the primarily young, white female sex workers. The similarities here were clearly not to act in her advantage in terms of access to the field, or gaining acceptance within that field. She still managed to gain significant data through interviews conducted during the day time at a local centre, documentary analysis and limited observation. However, Kate chose not to enter into extensive ethnography late at night with the group during their patrols - as she had with the former scheme - believing that establishing rapport on a level advantageous to data collection in this scenario could be at best uneasy, and at worst, hostile and personally dangerous.

So, how then did Kate get on interviewing sex workers? Her first attempt at this was certainly a steep learning curve, having never – unlike James – been in the type of world that the research demanded. Yet, Kate believes that not only her gender, but - perhaps surprisingly - her background, did assist with the data collection.

At the time of her first set of fieldwork in 1997, the inner-city area concerned was very much a high crime red-light district, with many sex workers and drug dealers on the streets regardless of the time of day. Unfortunately for Kate, the address that she had been given by her research contact for the sex worker willing to be interviewed was incorrect. Perhaps unwisely, yet certainly in a determined fashion, Kate wandered around in the hope of finding her interviewee, and most probably because she did not ‘fit in’, was stopped by a local drug dealer. He noted that she was not from the area, and asked her what she was doing and what she wanted. Whilst some may argue she was simply lucky, Kate believes that had it not been for the fact that she was a clearly nervous outsider and ‘helpless female’, he may not have taken pity on her and been so helpful in directing her to the sex worker she was trying to find.

Indeed, the drug dealer’s guidance to the location of the particular sex worker had been correct, and Kate found her interviewee. Whilst similarity in terms of gender may have been advantageous for the removal of potentially threatening or questionable agendas related to sex work itself, Kate believes that here also, it was at least in part, her honest and obvious ignorance, and yet genuine open minded interest and desire to listen and understand that established a highly beneficial friendly rapport with this particular sex worker. Indeed, she – like others – was happy to explain everything to her with a somewhat sympathetic ‘what would you like to know?’ attitude. For example, this particular interview extended to instructions of ‘make yourself at home’
whilst she attended to a client, and when Kate asked further questions about what service the man in question had received, the offer of ‘well, why didn’t you say? You could have watched – he’d have liked that and paid more!’ Perhaps the reaction of clear shock on Kate’s face which demonstrated just how out of place she was, yet combined with her non-judgemental friendly manner aided the role of interviewee-as-educator, together with the added rapport-builder of shared humour.

Despite James’s potentially advantageous background for his particular research, ethnographies of violent male groups are not without ethical dilemmas or risks to the researcher (Armstrong, 1993; Calvey, 2000; Winlow, 2001), whether conducted overtly or not. However, risk and ethical dilemmas are not constrained to this style of research; rather, it is frequently the case that ethnographers choosing to study such topics must defend themselves more vigorously, or face the charge that they have ‘gone native’ and therefore, by implication, are incapable of offering any form of objective insight. The reality is that like many other parts of fieldwork, broad categories exist more for academic convenience than in reality. When James commenced the fieldwork, despite a brief respite from the setting he studied, he was perhaps more native than outsider. Yet all researchers play a selective part in their topic, and all researchers act as self gatekeepers. It is only ethnography where knowledge is dismissed because it is close and borne out of proximity and understanding.

James recognised that while mostly overt in his researcher role, this did not mean that all participants in the scene were equally aware of the rationale for his presence. Indeed, risks of violence towards him were commonplace, given that it would have been fairly difficult to persuade the ‘rival lads’ looking to fight the firm he was associated with that despite his similar clothing and physical association with the group, he was simply an ‘observer’. Moreover, he did not necessarily seek to promote what he was doing, nor did he seek necessarily to shield it away or be covert about it. However, James’s familiarity with the setting and a confidence borne of background in terms of awareness of the culture, its norms and standards did aid in the negotiations in the field, as an example from his fieldwork diary demonstrates:-

I go into [pub name] and get a drink, hang around at the bar. There is the normal business going on, duty free tobacco and counterfeit DVD’s are being traded in a fairly blatant manner, but I don’t stick out. It is crowded but I don’t spot any of the lads I know, but there are a few likely football lads drinking in the corner. I go outside and try to call [name of member] again on my mobile, but end up pacing up and down the street, leaving him a voicemail. I finish the call and drop my phone in my pocket, but as I try and re-enter the pub, find my path blocked by a stocky looking lad in an Adidas top, shaved head. I don’t know him, but he stares straight at me.

Stocky lad: ‘Alright fella, who are you?’
JT: ‘What?’
Stocky lad: ‘I said, who are you?’
JT: ‘I heard what you said, what is it to you?’
Stocky lad: ‘I saw you on the phone, who you calling then?’

At this point, I realise that he thinks that I am spotting/scouting – a practice of going ahead of a larger firm, locating rival lads to fight then telephoning back with details. However, I don’t know which of the firms he belongs to, so feel it is better to be vague with my answers, though I know now that there is the threat of violence from him, and others with him.

JT: ‘What’s that got to do with you?’
Stocky lad: ‘Calling your Welsh mates were you?’

I decide here that as it is simply the two of us, not backing down is a better approach.

JT: ‘Do I fucking sound like I’m from Wales? I’m fucking English. I was calling me missus; and no disrespect, but I can’t see what the fuck that has to do with you.’
This exchange is followed by some staring, and a seemingly long pause, that in reality is probably only seconds. I know it is important I don’t back down; I have learnt that weakness is a sign that it is not wise to show. This isn’t methodological knowledge; I simply know that this lad recognises that if he does decide to have a go at me, that I am not likely to easily back down, I want him to have second thoughts if he is thinking about trying to drop his fist on my jaw.

It is just then I start to feel a surge of adrenaline, that ‘fight or flight sensation’ that the door of the pub opens. It is [name of one of the lads I know]. He has seen me outside from in the pub, and has sent the stocky lad to find out who I was, not recognising me from a distance and believing that I am a spotter. He quickly put a stop to the stare down, and finds the whole thing hysterical. However, the benefit of my actions are that the lads seem to warm to me even more.

I felt relieved, it was a good call to act that way, but it is as much luck as skill. It is luck as much as skill that keeps you one ever one step removed from having your facial features re-arranged.

While the last paragraph suggests an element of luck, the reality is that the resolution of the situation might have had far more to do with familiarity with setting and working class male gendered norms. For James then, it was not naivety but familiarity which was used as a tool to elicit understanding. Instead, there were occasions where he simply listened quietly and pieced together information from overheard conversations, but knew it was best to ask no questions. Through hours spent living life amongst the subjects on housing estates, in pubs and clubs, at and around football matches, on trains and in mini-buses, and in their own homes sleeping on their floors, he gained access to the ‘everyday world’ that the ‘lads’ lived in. Crime is a regular and frequent and salient feature of that life, and one James re-familiarised himself with. Given that his aim was to provide a richer empirical picture of zeitgeist in a working class male culture and its criminal undertones in modern urban Britain, arguably access was always to be about similarity and ‘fitting in’. In that sense, James used his appearance - tattoos, scars, shaven head; knowledge of designer clothing; and ability to drink large quantities of alcohol to his advantage, enabling the gathering of rich ethnographic data; something which Kate would not have been able to accomplish, even if she had wanted to.

Conclusions

Drawing on our research experiences, here we have reflected on the practice of ‘reflexivity’. The strategies employed within our research can be compared and contrasted because of issues of gender and class, and certainly have not yet been developed to their fullest extent at present; but this for us is perhaps the start of a journey rather than the end-point. Whilst we originally came from very different starting points, we found ourselves sharing not only agreement on the methodological standpoints discussed in this paper, but also similarities in our experiences of choosing – or being chosen by – our fieldwork, and managing that fieldwork through utilising our gender and background. Unlike some, we maintain that accounts employing analytical reflexivity such as these are worth telling, for they shed light on the subjects of the research; namely the contextual realities of those that we research, and us as researchers - with regards to why and how we do what we do.

Therefore, we argue that research methods and strategies are not just neutral techniques. They reflect, and are imbued with conceptions of subject and subjectivities. Yet despite a growth in recognition of the value of reflexivity, to date in criminology practical observance of analytic reflexivity is still rare enough to be notable as the exception. Perhaps as Letherby suggests, ‘despite increased support for auto/biographical approaches, many people still feel uncomfortable with this way of writing’ (2002). Yet as has clearly been suggested elsewhere, employing the concept of reflexivity to produce first person data that challenges the traditional binary between objective and subjective, produces accountable knowledge, and contextualises reasoning and researching processes (Brewer, 2000; Letherby, 2002). We have tried here to produce accounts of ourselves, not out of self absorbed egocentrism, but because we believe that it moves us as researchers, and the reader
toward a better and clearer understanding of our work. It might also encourage greater criticism, but this in itself is no bad thing, as it is of course criticism and debate that propels our study of crime forward.

Whilst here we have begun discussion of how our different gender and class impacted upon the choice of research, access to the field, and some fieldwork negotiation, further qualification needs to be added in respect of other social structures such as ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality and age; and also our account needs to move further throughout the research process, including further exploration of fieldwork, analysis and interpretation. These factors are an interesting further future dynamic for other criminological researchers also to consider. As cultural criminology acknowledges, beyond ‘true confessions’, qualitative fieldwork both results from, and at the same time reproduces, the researchers own gendered identity (See Ferrell and Hamm, 1998: 8) and our reflections here would seem to lend support to that assertion. Arguably this is true of all manner of experiences and facets of the criminological researcher’s background. The research we undertake is both a part of us and a part of making us what we will be – and thus it is biographical in every sense, and subjective in every sense.

We believe that true reflexivity within research can be an extremely difficult process for the ethnographer, or indeed any researcher – and it is not one that we claim to have achieved to its greatest possible extent in this paper. However, we hope to have underlined the importance of the researcher as a subject within their own research, and the richness of the further data about the particular field being studied, and the social world more broadly, that this allows. It also moves us toward a more transparent criminology, one whereby we explicate how we construct our differing interpretations, giving reasons for the standpoints and conclusions of our work. Perhaps that is a daunting process for some, but it is ultimately more rewarding in terms of the advancement of our subject, and might result in a richer qualitative criminology, that is an end that we hope most would willingly accept.

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1 We use the term ‘subject’ in this context aware that convention dictates that it is normally reserved for research ‘participants’, where so often the researcher is regarded as having a passive role in the research process. The point here though, is that the ethnographer as researcher is not passive but is a participant in the field to a similar degree that the conventionally understood research subject is; and there exist no passive participants.