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‘You are what you research’: researcher partisanship and the sociology of the underdog

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**‘You Are What You Research’: Researcher Partisanship and the Sociology
of the ‘Underdog’¹**

Abstract

This article contributes to debates regarding the issue of researcher partisanship and bias within social research and situates it within the current trend towards reflexivity. The discussion draws upon the researcher's experiences of conducting fieldwork with the 'boy racer' culture and societal groups affected by their behaviour. In this instance, the researcher unintentionally sided with the 'underdogs' – the 'boy racers'. Hence, it is argued that value neutrality is an impossible goal, particularly in research of a political nature. Social researchers will inevitably 'take sides' whether or not they are willing to admit so. The discussion also touches upon the prevalence of media culture in ethnographic research and the dilemmas faced when making our research public at key moments.

Keywords

Bias / boy racers / ethnography / media / partisanship / reflexivity / 'underdog sociology'

Introduction: Bias, Partisanship and the Reflexive Turn

Led by feminist debates that social researchers account for the influence of gender on the research process and relationships between the researcher and researched (see Stanley and Wise, 1990), qualitative research has for its most recent part been largely dominated by the reflexive turn. We no longer question the need for reflexivity: the question is how to do it (Finlay, 2002). Researchers have chosen to reflect upon their social location and background (including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, social class, religion, political beliefs and so on) and how this may have influenced various aspects of the research process. This involves accounting for the influence of their personal values and beliefs on the research process and their selection of a particular research topic, culture or fieldwork site. Moreover, there has been a proliferation of literature in which ethnographers have reflected upon the emotional

aspects of fieldwork (see Blackman, 2007; Kleinmann and Copp, 1993) and the presentation of self in the field (see Warren, 1988; Van Maanen, 1991). Hence, it can be argued that we now live in the 'reflexive turn' within ethnography and that it is part of good practice (Brewer, 2000). Nonetheless, there are dilemmas to be encountered and pitfalls to be avoided when adopting a reflexive approach to social research:

When it comes to practice, the process of engaging in reflexivity is perilous, full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails... In some ways, embarking on reflexivity is akin to entering uncertain terrain where solid ground can all too easily give way to swamp and mire. The challenge is to negotiate a path through this complicated landscape – one that exposes the traveller to interesting discoveries while ensuring a route out the other side. Researchers have to negotiate the 'swamp' of interminable self analysis and self disclosure (Finlay, 2002: 212).

Researchers who adopt a reflexive approach risk privileging excessive self analysis and deconstructions at the expense of focusing on the research participants and developing understanding (Finlay, 2002: 212). They also risk traversing into the postmodern terrain where 'anything goes'. Finally, there is the added discomfort of confessing to 'methodological inadequacies' in full view of colleagues and the wider academic community (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity can be viewed as either the problem or the solution to issues of legitimation and representation (Brewer, 2000). It can be conceived of as problematic in that the knowledge produced by social researchers is situated and partial, thereby threatening the legitimation of data and their representation. Alternatively, it can be the solution via researchers: '...making explicit the partial nature of the data and the contingencies into which

any representation must be located', hence improving the legitimation and representation of the data (Brewer, 2000: 127).

Reflexivity is a process which continues long after leaving the field and completing the research. Exiting the field is itself problematic and raises questions as to whether the researcher can completely remove themselves from the research, in an emotional or psychological sense. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) claim that ethnographers rarely leave the field totally unaffected by their research experience. The emotional impact of fieldwork continues long after the completion of a research project. Coffey (1999: 1) also draws our attention to the ongoing (re)construction of the 'ethnographic self':

The construction and production of self and identity occurs both during and after fieldwork. In writing, remembering and representing our fieldwork experiences we are involved in processes of self presentation and identity construction. In considering and exploring the intimate relations between the field, significant others and the private self we are able to understand the processes of fieldwork as practical, intellectual and emotional accomplishments.

For Coffey (1999: 5) it is important to acknowledge the complexities of identities, roles and relationships which can characterise fieldwork. Certain aspects of this may not become evident to the researcher until he/she has acquired spatial, temporal, emotional, and intellectual distance from the field, research topic, and research participants. Therefore retrospective analyses of research experiences can help to shed light on the culture in

question and to make sense of the decisions made by ethnographers. This reflexive approach is the solution to the problems of legitimation and representation.

This paper offers a retrospective analysis of the role of bias and partisanship in ethnographic research with the 'boy racer' culture and various societal groups affected by their behaviour. Despite social researchers directing a great deal of attention to methodological and philosophical arguments relating to bias and partisanship, and the reflexive turn within the social sciences, explicit reflections of the operation and experience of these in social 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 because they are believed to have been undercut by developments in the philosophy and sociology of science (Hammersley, 2000). Moreover: '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"' (Hammersley, 2000: 11). 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). When conducting research which is political in some way, it is essential that the ethnographer is visible in the text in order to ensure that they do not exploit their authorial position (Brewer, 2000). 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 (Devine and Heath, 1999: 27). Although partisanship has been widely discussed in methodological and philosophical terms, it seems that ethnographers have

largely neglected to discuss the ways in which they operationalised, experienced and dealt with issues of bias in the course of their fieldwork.

This paper thus adds to discussions of bias and partisanship in social research in light of the reflexive turn. The argument presented concerns the overrated and impossible nature of objectivity. In research involving a plethora of societal groups, the researcher will inevitably 'take sides'. Actively striving to mitigate bias can ironically result in us aligning ourselves with an alternative set of values thus resulting in unintended consequences. 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' culture. The systematic attempt to avoid partisanship resulted in the privileging of the voices of the unheard. However, it is argued that certain social situations require the researcher to engage in advocacy and 'give voice' to marginal or subordinate groups. Finally, this paper also touches upon the prevalence of media culture in ethnographic research as well as the dynamics of making our work public at key stages of the research process. The media interest in 'boy racers' influenced the researcher's engagements with the researched and the ways in which she 'gave voice' to research participants. The following section begins with an overview of the critical sociology of Alvin Gouldner and his discussion of 'underdog sociology'. The latter half of the paper focuses on the role of partisanship and bias in research with the 'boy racer' culture and various societal groups.

The Sociology of the 'Underdog'

In his essay 'Anti-Minotaur', Alvin Gouldner (1962; 1973) analyses the doctrine of value freedom as an occupational myth or ideology of American sociologists. This myth of a value

free sociology which is found in Max Weber's (1949) seminal book *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, is, for Gouldner (1962: 199), 'a conquering one': 'The image of a value-free sociology is more than a neat intellectual theorem demanded as a sacrifice to reason; it is, also, a felt conception of a role and a set of (more or less) shared sentiments as to how sociologists should live'. Gouldner (1973) criticises Weber's myth of value free sociology for while it seems to appeal to reason, it ignores experience. It is also dualistic in that it encourages a separation of facts and values instead of emphasising their mutual connectedness. Gouldner (1973: 63) writes:

To overcome his experiences of the world as grotesque, Weber formulates an incipient utopia in which the impure world is split into two pure worlds, science and morality. He then attempts to bridge the cleavage he has created by pasting these two purified worlds together, so that each is made sovereign in a different but adjacent period of time. The incongruity of the world has not so much been overcome as transcended in myth. The experienced unmanageability of the one world gives way to the promised manageability of the two worlds. The reality gives way to the myth, but the grotesque-ness abides.

In 'The Sociologist as Partisan', Gouldner (1968; 1973) revisits and extends his early work on the myth of value free sociology. He outlines his concern: 'In a nutshell: I fear that the myth of a value-free social science is about to be supplanted by still another myth, and that the once glib acceptance of the value-free doctrine is about to be superseded by a new but no less glib rejection of it' (Gouldner, 1973: 27). The 'glib rejection' which worried Gouldner can be found in Howard Becker's paper (1967), 'Whose Side Are We On?', where Becker

claims that no matter which perspective a sociologist takes, their work must be written from the standpoint of subordinates or superiors. The standpoint adopted by Becker is referred to by Gouldner (1973: 29) as a kind of 'underdog identification'. However, for Gouldner (1973: 34): '...sociological study from an underdog standpoint will be intellectually impaired without clarifying the grounds for the commitment. A commitment made on the basis of an unexamined ideology may allow us to feel a manly [*sic*] righteousness, but it leaves us blind'. In response to the sociology of deviance adopted by Becker and colleagues, Gouldner (1973: 37) also remarks:

It is my impression, from many years of reading their researches and of talking with them, that their pull to the underdog is sometimes part of a titillated attraction to the underdog's exotic difference and easily takes the form of 'essays on quaintness'. The danger is, then, that such an identification with the underdog becomes the urban sociologist's equivalent of the anthropologist's (one-time) romantic appreciation of the noble savage.

He points to their implicit critique of lower-middle class ethnocentrism and their focus on the 'underdog' as the victim (Gouldner, 1973: 38). Key is his observation that 'underdogs' are not always victims (nor may they conceive of themselves in such terms):

...the emphasis in Becker's theory is on the deviant as the product of society rather than as the rebel against it. If this is a liberal conception of deviance that wins sympathy and tolerance for the deviant, it has the paradoxical consequence of inviting us to view the deviant as a passive nonentity who is

responsible neither for his [*sic*] suffering nor its alleviation – who is more ‘sinned against than sinning’ (Gouldner, 1973: 38).

From this standpoint, the deviant is conceived of as someone who is ‘mismanaged’ by the bureaucratic apparatus, rather than someone who ‘fights back’ (Gouldner, 1973: 38). For Becker (1967), this hierarchical relationship creates a ‘hierarchy of credibility’ where the subordinates’ version of reality does not have the same credibility as the version of the superordinates. Hence by taking the side of the ‘underdog’ and studying social problems from below the sociologist is, to a certain extent, able to correct this imbalance. Gouldner did not disagree with Becker about the imbalance in the hierarchy of credibility, but argued that this did not necessarily mean that a sociologist had to take sides. To conduct a study of social issues and social problems one could, and should, present the ‘underdog’s’ case, but one could not identify oneself with the ‘underdog’ because one was not an ‘underdog’ (Jamrozik and Nocella, 1998). However, an ‘underdog’ standpoint is beneficial in that it gives us new information concerning social worlds which many members of society know nothing or little about (Gouldner, 1973). It can also grant us new perspectives on these social worlds and, as such: ‘...taking the underdog’s standpoint does indeed contribute to the successful fulfilment of the intellectual obligations that we have as sociologists. It helps us do the distinctive job we have’ (Gouldner, 1973: 35).

Hammersley (1999) views Gouldner’s reflexive analysis of value freedom as an occupational ideology. He criticises Gouldner for using sociological knowledge about the functions of this doctrine as an evaluative standard by which to judge it, for this results in ‘moral gerrymandering’ (Hammersley, 1999: para 4.4). Nonetheless, it can be said that Gouldner’s work is useful in that it encourages a self-aware and critical approach to social research. For

instance, reflexivity in this sense is associated with: ‘...a critical attitude towards data and anxiety over the authority, status and standpoint the data possess (the concern over legitimation)’ (Brewer, 2000: 128). Moreover, Gouldner offers a valuable analysis and critique of the works of Max Weber and Howard Becker; and has consequently influenced the work of standpoint feminists such as Dorothy Smith (1987). The standpoint feminist critique aims to question the privileged position accorded to the sociologist’s observations against those of the ‘voiceless subjects’ and encourages a self-critical approach on the part of the researcher (Brewer, 2000: 128). Early feminist researchers argued that all knowledge, and hence all research, is carried out in the interest of particular people or groups (Skeggs, 2007[2001]: 429). Therefore no research can claim to be value free or objective. Feminist standpoint epistemology gives priority to the voices of the less powerful and the marginalised, although the definition of experience varies within feminist standpoint theory (Skeggs, 2007[2001]: 432). Empiricist feminists such as Smith (1997) believe that knowledge springs from experience and that women’s experience carries with it special knowledge which is necessary to challenge oppression. Thus the work of Gouldner (1973: 53) is useful in that it calls for a ‘tempered’ and ‘reflective partisanship’ which does not necessarily impair the reliability or validity of research. Thus, as part of the reflexive turn, researchers should be open to an examination of the influence of their values on (amongst other things) the research process, their representations of the researched and the dissemination of research findings.

The remainder of this paper is concerned with the role of bias and partisanship in ethnographic research with the ‘boy racer’ culture and various ‘outside’ groups including local residents, police, state representatives, journalists and businesses in Aberdeen, Scotland. By drawing upon the critical sociology of Alvin Gouldner and adopting a reflexive approach the paper highlights the importance of reflecting upon our values and beliefs. It highlights the

unintended consequences which can arise from attempts to avoid partisanship. Before doing so, the following section will provide a background to the research area and outline the methods adopted in this study of ‘boy racers’.

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 (such as speeding and illegal street racing) 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 this particular area of Aberdeen. Generations of Aberdeen’s youths have participated in this car 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 culture 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 culture, a growing number of females participate in the culture. In the eyes of the media, local community, politicians, and authorities the ‘Bouley Bashers’ are the villains of this narrative. Their occupation of urban space and use of the automobile are deemed problematic by the ‘outside’ groups. ‘Boy Racers’ are thus ‘folk devils’ and the symbol of the ‘boy racer’ denotes danger, risk, youthful deviance, and anti-social behaviour. Through their appropriation of the automobile the youths plunge the public roads into chaos and disarray.

In sociological terms, this particular form of youth culture or car culture has remained largely unexplored. The purpose of my research was to shed light on the undiscovered world of the

‘boy racer’. It was a Friday night in September 2006 when I first met Debbie,² one of my two gatekeepers into the ‘racer’ culture:

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 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 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).

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 this research into ‘boy racers’. Therefore, the discussion which follows is based upon doctoral research conducted with the ‘boy racer’ culture in the city of Aberdeen, Scotland, and members of the various societal groups affected by the culture from 2005 to 2008. This included local residents, police, council officials, journalists, and state representatives. My interest in the issue was spurred by

the increased visibility of the subculture in the local and national press (and the previous neglect of automobility by sociology, criminology and cultural studies). 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 MP⁴ 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...⁵

The 'boy racers' were societally 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'.⁶ 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 [ASBOS]) 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.

Prime Minister Tony Blair responded:

I strongly support antisocial 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.⁷

The longitudinal nature of this qualitative study meant that the researcher was witness to the discussion of these issues among societal groups, the proposal and implementation of measures, the effect these had on the 'racer' culture, 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 the part of the researcher was necessary from commencement of the fieldwork.

The study consisted of participant observation with the ‘racer’ culture in Aberdeen and semi-structured and ethnographic interviews with the drivers. In total, 150 hours were spent in the field and eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with the ‘racers’. Access to the culture 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. The fieldwork consisted of participant observation at Aberdeen’s seafront and at various car shows and events across Scotland. Ethnographic research was also conducted online and involved observation of websites hosted by the two main gatekeepers - Debbie and Robert.

In terms of the societal groups, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four local residents (and one group interview with four residents present), a Member of Parliament (MP), a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), 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 societal groups. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Content analysis was employed to over 200 newspaper articles which focused on the ‘boy racer’ culture in and around Aberdeen from daily local newspapers including the *Evening Express* and the *Press & Journal*, weekly local newspapers including 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 with the ‘boy racer’ culture and the related 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 certain state representatives, including MPs and MSPs, 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 ‘racer’ culture 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 ‘racer’ culture. 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 vandalized. We'll be using ASBOs⁸ 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 societal 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 I had to balance neutrality and bias with appearing to be sympathetic to certain groups' causes. Although this was accepted, there seemed to be an underlying presumption from members of the 'outside' groups that I would be sympathetic to their cause and thus take their side. At the time of 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’. However, as the next section shall first illustrate, in negotiating access to the ‘racer’ culture, trust had to be won in light of the drivers’ views of the authorities and other ‘outside’ groups.

The Researcher as Spy: Trust in the Field

On commencing the fieldwork with the ‘racer’ subculture in Aberdeen, research participants seemed suspicious of my intentions and the purposes of my research. This has previously been reflected upon elsewhere (see 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 culture. For instance in the *Press & Journal* 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”’.⁹ Hence participants including the main gatekeepers – Robert and Debbie, were, at the beginning, critical of my research and suspicious of me as an outsider. For instance, 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 victimization and stigmatization 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 culture and the police that: ‘It’s very much an us and them situation’. Paul also explained how he viewed the police reaction to the drivers:

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).

Thus, in a sense, I had to prove to the drivers that I did not belong to one of the 'outside' groups neither was I taking their side. The 'racers' also applied the 'us and them' distinction to certain individuals within the culture 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, 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 (see Vaaranen, 2004). Hence, as Gouldner (1973) notes in his critique of Becker, the labelling theory of deviance does not account for 'underdogs' as rebellious or resistant to the status quo, which many members of the subculture and certain actions seemed to indicate. The 'boy racers' were not always situated as passive dupes in relation to the 'outside' groups.

The researcher's proximity to the 'racers' and the time spent in the field also undoubtedly influenced her taking their side. Being accepted as one of them may have made it easier to empathise with their position. This was coupled by a reading of Becker's (1967) discussion of partisanship. However, it is also worth noting that definitions of 'underdogs' and

'overdogs', were not as straightforward as they first appeared to be. A plethora of groups were involved in the debate surrounding Aberdeen's 'boy racer' culture. This included the drivers themselves, local police, journalists, politicians, council officials, businesses, local residents and also the wider public.

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 culture. The first opportunity occurred in 2007 while I was still in the field. I was contacted by producers at *BBC¹⁰ 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 my gatekeeper, 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 culture and their views on antisocial behaviour orders. Hence, I believed this would allow them to voice their thoughts, which had been largely silenced (or misconstrued) in the local and national media. 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 societal groups during the research. My attempts to positively promote the culture 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 (and the culture in general) for granting me access to their social world.

The second incident concerning the media 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 culture of ‘boy racers’ through listening to an interview with myself and Laurie Taylor 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 culture (and the car modification scene), especially given the gender-related angle the newspaper wished to report on. Debbie and other female car modifiers were willing to be interviewed and to have their cars photographed for the report. They reiterated 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 sociologists to view their own beliefs and values with the same critical attitude as they do those held by others (Gouldner, 1973). It is not possible to mitigate the influence of personal values on our research and attempting to do so can result in unintended consequences.

Discussion: Unintended Consequences

The work of Gouldner and Becker helps highlight the ambiguities and dilemmas which arise from partisanship. Ethnographers 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). Thus, Gouldner and Becker are correct that objectivity may not just be overrated – it may be nigh impossible. Perhaps social 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 (see Van Maanen, 1988).

The examples which I have reflected upon demonstrate that I chose to side with the ‘racers’ in contrast to the ‘outside’ groups. My own values and beliefs led me to prioritise the accounts of the ‘racers’ (who were societally situated as the ‘underdogs’) over those of the societal 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 is impossible for the researcher not to be influenced by their own values and beliefs. Research itself is a political exercise – and hence what we choose to investigate is determined by the way in which we perceive the world (Green, 1993). As ethnographers we are shaped by our interactions with the researched and we form our own opinions and beliefs about them in the course of our fieldwork. The ‘boy racer’ culture was already politically contentious and thus high on the public and media agenda(s). Hence, the idea that the researcher could successfully conduct ethnographic research without being influenced by their own values and beliefs or those of a particular group was, in this case, unreasonable.

Although the ‘racers’ were societally situated as the ‘underdogs’, they were not always passive in relation to societal groups and entered into a dialogue with certain groups such as the local police. They were largely 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 various groups involved clearly influenced and shaped my values and beliefs throughout the course of the fieldwork. I went into the field with the assumption (gleaned from popular representations of the ‘boy racer’ in popular culture and the media) that this 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 ‘boy racer’ culture. This is evident in my fieldnotes where I reflect on bias and values in interactions with societal groups, but not with the drivers themselves. This is evidence of what Gouldner (1973) draws our attention to - the tendency for sociologists to engage in a type of ‘underdog identification’. Those involved in my research each had their own expectations about how my biases, values and beliefs should play out in the course of the research. The researcher is thus required to walk a tight-rope in that they must not 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 in the course of the research.

The researcher attempted to ‘give voice’ to participants via various media outlets 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 present the voice of the ‘underdog’ – the ‘boy racer’. As Gouldner (1973) points out an ‘underdog’ standpoint 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 into ‘boy racer’ culture: to gain a detailed sociological understanding of this hitherto unexplored social world, to glimpse the internal dynamics of the culture, to gain understanding of youths’ participation in the culture and how social characteristics such as gender, class, and age played out. Equally important was my interest in the behaviours of the ‘racers’ in terms of their driving practices. Was the public perception and media representation of the culture 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 culture? Through adopting the standpoint of the ‘underdog’ it was 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 legitimation which ethnographers face. As Gouldner (1973: 56-57) writes:

Granted, all standpoints are partisan; and, granted, no one escapes a partisan standpoint... This does not mean that the sociologist should ignore or be insensitive to the full force of the actors’ standpoints. But it does mean that he himself [*sic*] must have a standpoint on their standpoint. Objectivity is indeed

threatened when the actors' standpoints and the sociologists' fuse indistinguishably into one. The adoption of an 'outside' standpoint, far from leading us to ignore the participants' standpoint, is probably the only way in which we can even recognize and identify the participants' standpoint. It is only when we have a standpoint somewhat different from the participants' that it becomes possible to do justice to their standpoints.

A final important point raised in this paper concerns the dissemination of research findings. The above discussion highlights the issues encountered when we liaise with the media in ethnographic 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 the world of 'boy racers'. 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. Hence, social research does not occur in a vacuum and more reflection is needed on ethnographers' experiences with the media and other stakeholders when disseminating their research findings. Our engagements in 'public sociology' (Burawoy, 2005) (particularly via the media) raise a whole host of methodological, philosophical, moral and ethical dilemmas which could be the subject of further debate and scrutiny by qualitative researchers.

Conclusion

This article has reflected upon the issue of partisanship in ethnographic research into the social world of 'boy racers'. It is suggested that value neutrality is a myth and an unattainable

goal in qualitative research. Ethnographers will undoubtedly take sides in the course of their research investigations whether they are willing to admit this or not. My own assumptions and biases played an important role in research with the ‘boy racer’ culture. In striving for value neutrality, I was faced with unintended consequences. This paper has also highlighted the role of the media in the dissemination of research findings and raised questions concerning our obligations to the researched in this context. Our engagements in ‘public sociology’ (via the media) have implications for those who are the subjects of our research investigations. Reflecting upon 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, the researcher 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 access to their social world.

¹ An earlier draft of this work was presented at the British Sociological Association Annual Conference, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK, April 2010.

² Pseudonyms are used in order to protect the identities of research participants.

³ 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.

⁴ Member of Parliament

⁵ *This is North East Scotland* (2004) ‘Plans to Close Beachfront Road in Bid to Stop Disruptive “Bouley Bashers”’, (21 September 2004). URL (consulted January 2005):

<http://www.thisisnorthscotland.co.uk/new/util/content/jsp?id=10989735>

⁶ 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.

⁷ Engagements (2005) *House of Commons Debates* (15 June 2005). URL (consulted July 2005):

www.TheyWorkForYou.com

⁸ Antisocial Behaviour Orders

⁹ *Press & Journal* (2003) ‘Gathering of City Boy Racers is Hailed as a Success’, (3 June 2003).

¹⁰ British Broadcasting Corporation

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