



# Researching 'Problem' Young People: More Harm than Good?

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# Introduction

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- Based on findings of fieldwork conducted for a PhD at Goldsmiths College.
- Focused on the implementation of the 'anti-social behaviour' legislation under the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act.
- Used a detailed ethnographic study of the policing of young people on a so-called 'problem estate'.
- Presentation will focus on the fieldwork with young people.



## Introduction cont...

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- Will explore several ethical dilemmas encountered as a result of focusing on a 'heavily-researched' community.
- Issues include:
  - Managing relations with research subjects
  - Dealing with concerns about intrusiveness and remuneration
  - Concerns about the impact of the research on the young people themselves.



# Overview of the fieldwork

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- Legislation such as ASBOs under the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act can be described as part of a contemporary *'youth 'anti-social behaviour' agenda'*.
- The agenda greatly increases opportunities for intervention with young people.
- In the light of this, the research was especially concerned with the effects of the 'agenda' on the everyday policing of young people in communities that have historically been stigmatised and criminalised.



# The Ashton Estate case study

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- Chosen because of history of stigmatisation along lines of race and class.
- Research methods included:
  - Depth interviews
  - Shadowing of police patrols/response teams
  - Participant observation with young people
  - Observation of community/stakeholder meetings
  - Analysis of policy documents.



## Concerns about *access*

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- Concerns about distinguishing myself from previous research that had paid 'lip service', and excessive attention from the media.
- Decisions about anonymity.
- Importance of how the research was presented to the young people, including being clear about what it would/would not achieve.



# Managing relationships with research subjects

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- Was of particular significance because of the duration of the fieldwork.
- Importance of:
  - Regularly reiterating my role as a researcher especially to ensure informed consent
  - Being honest about the aims of the research
  - Maintaining an impartial standpoint.



## The effects of the research on the young people themselves

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- Concerns about the risk of becoming part of the process by which the area's notoriety is reaffirmed.
- Managed by:
  - Using a broader research focus
  - Using research as a tool to encourage 'critical reflection'
  - Importance of being aware that this might not be fully resolved.



## Conclusions: Researching 'problem' young people: more harm than good?

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- Detailed community-based research raises a number of complex ethical dilemmas, however such research is vital in examining the empirical effects and contexts of social policy implementation.
- There are clearly ways in which ethical issues can be managed but we must be aware of the limitations of this.



## Conclusions cont...

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- Issues of intrusiveness, confidentiality and anonymity, relationships with research subjects, informed consent and the purposes of research should always be considered, but probably more so in considering research with heavily-researched and stigmatised communities.
- However, if a key aim of social research is to challenge stereotypes and promote social justice, then perhaps it is especially important to pursue qualitative research in so-called 'problem' communities.



## Conclusions cont...

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- To conclude, conducting detailed qualitative research with stigmatised groups is extremely valuable but must always be approached with a strong commitment to research ethics.