

Doing Ultrarealist Ethnography: Romanticism and Running with the Riotous (While Buying Your Round)

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This section concerns the praxis of ethnography, or my own doing of ethnography in precarious inner-city locations in central England. When criminological ethnographers write of their own experiences, they often use travel metaphors, and I suppose that I could dress this up in some sort of personal voyage or journey through ethnography, but I hope that the trip isn't over yet, and the problem with such travel metaphors is that they suggest a road travelled, and well, I am not sure that I have gone that far.

I still live in the area in which I have spent most (though by no means all), of my life in. I'd like to think of myself as a sort of pragmatic realist, the sort that recognises paradoxically how crime can be full of wit and humour but also full of viciousness that turns on a knife edge. I have seen the banter of the prison wing turn to a bloody and shocking scene and been laughing watching a football match only minutes later to seeing those I was with kicked unconscious in the street. I have smelled the sweet and pungent aroma of a cannabis factory and heard men laugh and joke as they recount the most horrible acts, and I have sat and heard people's inner fears, thwarted dreams, lost chances and personal tragedies, and occasionally, some of that experience and those stories have been converted into aspects of ethnographic studies. For some, there is no real value in this, but for me I feel 'ethnography' puts me in a unique position. As a researcher I feel I was talking about a number of crime shifts and mutations before others necessarily noticed. My work on eBay and Counterfeits, with the benefit of hindsight, now seems strangely prophetic as there is an acceptance that falls in recorded crime statistics were overplayed and simplistic, simply failing to account for the changes in criminal practice. I have also been able to generate a reasonable publication profile and publish reasonably well based on undertaking ethnography, but I can claim to be no great authority. I certainly have

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not had the success of Alice Goffman or Sudhir Venkatesh, but I keep plying my trade.

That is why here I want to issue a few disclaimers. As I was initially asked to, I have tried to write this in a conversational style, and not be too verbose or grandiose, but it was not a comfortable piece to produce, in part because I still have lingering doubts about my own expertise or my ability to say anything all that profound. That is perhaps why, when I was asked to write this piece by the editors, I suppose I was enthusiastic on one level, but I was, and perhaps remain, a little reticent on the other. The fact that it arrived at all is probably due to the tenacity and persistence of Stephen Rice (some of the best ethnographer characteristics). I held onto it, because as humans we sort of seek comfort in the familiar, what is new to us can be alarming, anxiety inducing, and dare I say it troubling. If that is the case for writing and handing over a book chapter that moves academics away from the tried and tested conventions of using big words, multiple references, assuming a written style that narrowly conforms to a range of conventions, that balancing of achieving an objectivity and formality that many who write professionally do not feel constrained by. That a line in an email ‘Please remember that we’re looking for a tone/tenor foundationally different from most books in CCJ. That is, a conversation’ can cause consternation and force me away from perhaps where I have started to become increasingly comfortable in the academic ivory tower. But I suppose that several projects now and good field data are testimony to the fact that as an ethnographer I am alright, and I think I can hold my own in a conversation, so I will try and do that as much as I can in this piece. The instructions to me in email ‘we want to give the readers a look at the relationship between the research and the person behind the research. Towards this end, several scholars who have submitted their papers have included very few (if any) in-text citations’ from the book’s editors again cause a discomfort. Is this proper academic work, is it just purely self-indulgent or what use is this to anyone interested in ethnography and qualitative research: I still ask myself?

As cultural criminology acknowledges, beyond ‘true confessions’, qualitative fieldwork results from, and at the same time reproduces, the researchers own gendered identity, 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. We make our research and our research makes us.

Certainly, ethnographic research has been the making of me. Without it, I do not know what I would be doing now. I think there is a good chance I would be in prison. I am a pretty average, white English male; I am just above-average height and well built, and I’d say I am probably about average intelligence in an IQ test, but that might be a stretch. I read a bit, like to have fun and like talking; some people would describe me as hard to shut up, and I prefer indefatigable. My salary and status now are certainly not ‘working class’; my mindset and attitudes put me somewhere on a continuum between there and middle class. US readers are probably less alert to those distinctions, framed as they are between blue and white collar, and perhaps regardless of nation, these are just passé when some in sociological circles

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are willing to declare the death of class. Yet class occupies a vital part of English experience, and, some ethnographers would argue, shapes who we English are (Fox, 2004). Of my person I guess some people would say I am alright, and I am sure that some would say I am a total bastard. I can be selfish and massively unswayable and fixated. My wife, who probably knows me better than anyone else in the world other than me (after all I am the only one who spends 24 h a day everyday in my own head), often says I have something of an addictive and totalising personality, and I can see that. I am naturally curious, occasionally perhaps a little bit paranoid and defensive, and I don't always deal well with criticism (I am trying to get better at it, but I am certainly not great). I also tend to identify myself as an academic, and my professional working job title is 'professor of criminology', which doesn't get you free upgrades as much as I would like and comes from a post-1992 university (needs a footnoted definition) that I am fiercely proud of, not least because it is located in one of the most disadvantaged and precarious locales in the UK and draws in a non-typical undergraduate student cohort. For 15 years I have worked and researched in the university sector, at several universities, and have undertaken several ethnographic projects, and I think overall my research is reasonably well received, and those academics I have worked with would be willing to say I am a decent ethnographer, but if I am on a journey, it is one of uncertainty, and I feel slightly uncertain about claiming any expert status.

As a long-term proponent of ethnography and qualitative research, I think I understand at least in part where such insecurity comes from. In public discussion, uncertainty is often presented as a deficiency of research. It's an essential part of scientific research, and the social sciences are no different, except that their matters are human behaviour, with all the nuance, contradiction and complexity that that field brings. Yet it may not come as a surprise to find that while I remain convinced in the scientific merits of my qualitative practices, and will argue that ethnographic and small qualitative research can provide every bit (or more) of a contribution to criminology's theoretical elaborations and ties to policy as can ICPSR mega-downloads, big data sets and quantitative numerical analysis and data modelling, to assert that and make that argument remains complex. One does not need to be an ardent social constructionist or symbolic interactionist to see the 'running conversations' about criminological method remain, as do dominant ideas that science is about numbers. Only a tiny proportion of US and UK criminology is qualitative and features people as complex than them transformed into numbers, despite the fact that crime is every bit a human behaviour that cannot be understood quantitatively or with diagrams and regression analysis alone. Criminology is a discipline with its orthodoxies and its disagreements. I have always seen the likes of Jason Ditton and Dick Hobbs as something of a guiding light and inspiration in that way. They always saw the shifts and changes from the ground and built from there, seeing the world change and issues emerge before the quantitative researchers and policy makers notice, the streets drive the stats, and qualitative and ethnographic researchers have used that intimate connection to social life to drive their own observations, which, while easily dismissed as small scale, micro, subject to regional variation and not representative, also, when taken collectively together showed the very social

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transformations and changes in human behaviour that then, subsequently becomes the stuff of trends and fluctuations.

So, Ethnography *can be* a uniquely useful method for uncovering the realities and meanings of human life. Humans create their social, enacting meaningful processes. Because ethnography provides insight into these processes and meanings, it can most brightly illuminate the relationships between structure and agency and can shine light in deep corners, and it can give us the raw material which we can both build and test theory. At a deeper level, it might shed light on deeper processes too, but given my desire to avoid descent into more complex arguments about the nature of the world and foregoing those here, I simply appeal to those considering ethnographic methods to alert themselves to a theoretical vista beyond social constructionism emerging from the British ultrarealist movement (Winlow & Hall, 2015). For now, it is worth noting that a shared unity in the purpose and validity of the method unite as much as distinct theoretical arguments divide, and at least a shared recognition in broader critical criminology is something to be celebrated. After all, in both the USA and the UK, criminological research relying upon participant observation remains relatively rare (as they should! It's better to study serial killers from a distance than from personal experience). Ethnography's place in the criminological method persists as a peripheral.

Yet also as a note of caution, I have long felt that as academics we ought to take care not to conflate ethnography with other qualitative methods, such as interviews. This is something that concerns me, because ethnography is unlike any other method and is about 'living' the research. I still have some reservations about the term ethnography as applied to carceral settings I often now find myself undertaking participant observations in (unclear). While qualitative experience generally might benefit from having something of an ethnographic sensibility, ethnography is not simply qualitative research but is a positioning that uniquely explores lived experience in all its richness and complexity and requires that aim as function.

Secondly, by focusing on my own research journey, I hope to explain what I think ethnography can make to criminology and the academic enterprise more generally. Here, I focus on how both overt and covert processes and meanings structure life. Ethnography allows for both intensive and extensive analysis, and deep details provide the optimal way to illustrate and explicate the oft-stated connection between the life world of a social group and the world they construct, but it is never enough to simply look only over the surface explanations of such constructions as if they are the be-all and end-all. How else better to determine how place and agency intertwine and recreate each other than in examining how different social individuals and groups inhabit, manipulate and articulate their life world, but that articulation does not negate the need to dig deeper. What good ethnography does is to dig deeper.

Yet despite the obvious recompenses of ethnography, it is subject to a continual and ongoing critique, and, indeed, this is healthy and necessary. In the final section of this work, I explore three common critiques levelled at ethnographic work, reflecting upon my own journey as an ethnographer: that it is overly subjective and hence 'unscientific'; that it is too limited to enable generalisation and broader theory construction; and that it ignores the conditions of its own production and thus

unquestioningly reproduces power disparities and representational practices that deserve interrogation. Although these critiques do not lack merit, I want to mount what undeniably is both a defence and a call to arms that we do ethnography better, in both a more real and more honest way. In many ways then, I hope this chapter, based on my personal experiences in the field and outside, helps to that end. The focus and topic of this book, which concerns using ethnography in criminology and the process of discovery through fieldwork, is one which I can relate to. I am no statistician, I balk at regression analysis, but it is ethnography and its methods that frame my career, and in outlining my own personal research journey, I hope to make some broader points about the value and function of ethnography.

The Makings of This Criminological Ethnographer

My personal journey into academia was perhaps unconventional, well if there is a conventional pathway into academia. I grew up in a small area of South Birmingham, England's second city largely in the 1980s in what was a rather typical working-class area. It was by no means the most impoverished part of the city or country but was largely comprised of working-class people (employment principally in Birmingham's manufacturing centre). That time in British history was a turbulent one, both socially and politically. Our neighbours included a police sergeant and his wife and children, and we would play in the streets together, although this ended during the 1984–1985 miners' strike, an epochal moment in many public police relations when the police started to make money and many other people started to regard them as government boot boys. The working-class men on my street begrudgingly tolerated the police, especially the more respectable working class, yet when the police officer bragged about the overtime money he was making, he was so ostracised he had little choice but to move his family to a detached house in a more salubrious area; he became a figure of hate. For most working-class children, the path towards adulthood was standard, primary followed by local comprehensive school; the brightest might study for advanced-level qualifications to better prepare for a well-paid job, aiming towards some better employment outcome, but the university was not really talked about much.

I learned a range of other skills though; as I grew into adulthood, I knew clothing brands and fashion fads, people and faces and how to navigate entrepreneurially. That was expected and normal. Of course, what is more apparent now, in hindsight, is just how much British society was changing in that very period. Those changes might be captured in a plethora of graphs and figures, but really that time was a high point for the Thatcher governments at the 1983 general election, despite unemployment doubling to some 3 million, and went on to win a landslide victory, thanks in large part to labour's divisions and its left-wing policies. That perhaps set the early seeds for my journey into the heart of violent English protest and nationalism decades later, but it also set the stage for much of my early life. Certainly, of my

early life in the midlands, I recall that the middle classes were not that distinct socially, culturally or economically from working-class peers.

We all largely attended the same (or similar) schools and lived on the same streets or at least nearby, at least in part because of the kind of egalitarianism of the late 1970s held sway and British people were statistically about as equal as they had ever been (and potentially, will ever be). After this period, the post-war consensus began to be eroded most notably by Thatcherism, deindustrialisation gained pace and poverty rose, as did crime. The stage was being set for the criminologists of the future, and while I played football on game fields looking at the stolen and burned-out Astros, Metros and Escorts, I was schooled alongside and amongst many that would go on to serve time in Her Majesty's prisons.

The social and economic uncertainty wrought in inner cities such as Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool during that turbulent period connected with my inquisitive mind, as during my early years, unbeknown to me, I undertook what was arguably was the perfect process of apprenticeship for criminological ethnography in English inner cities. This thing, which some academics tend to suggest of as some mythical process that involves learning the local language and argot, participating in daily routines and becoming sufficiently part of the local social environment to be a convincing insider and outsider, is also just the process of growing up. What you do not get told much in reflexive accounts is which criminologists went to poor schools and who had their education paid for privately and if their father taught them the workings of the old boy network or how to roll a spliff (in US parlance a joint). Yet if we accept that crime as conventionally understood and defined is a phenomenon that tends to be associated with and constructed as predominantly the preserve of the lower social strata of men and the lower social classes, then those factors are important. My own education yielded a couple of good GCSEs from a comprehensive school that had a reputation in the 1990s not for turning out finished young men, but the best TWOCers, ram raiders and robbers in England's second city. I first got into trouble on my first day of secondary school, and I don't think a week passed where I was not in some sort of trouble. My school fed the ranks of the infantry and the last vestiges of the car production line at Rover, but it largely did not send its alumni into university. It sent more to the region's prisons.

Alice Goffman's recent experiences may show that it is not always prudent to confess to a crime in print, but it is sufficient here for me to say that between my teen years and my twenties I was myself no angel but had a gift of sharp enough intellect to remain largely uncaught and undetected when I did commit offences. While ethnography tends to self-flagellate a little about the ethical and legal implications in general of breaking the law or acquiring 'guilty knowledge' during fieldwork, we think little about what the necessary attributes are to do good ethnography in the first place. [And besides, it's beyond the statute of limitations.]

Let's be honest for a moment; some people will make awful ethnographers in some contexts, perhaps removed and placed in an alternative setting they would function, but ethnography is perhaps more art than science, that art of balancing ability to understand the emic and etic, the inside and out and of talking to people not with a condescending tone or full of insincere sympathy but reasonably. That

making of personal bonds is easier, arguably if there is something that is shared. Yet as Goody long ago suggested ‘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 damn-

[AUS](#) ingly, “the personal” has to offer criminology’ (Goody, 2000, p. 474). My first experiences of doing ethnography involved MA and then PhD research, the latter of which involved an extensive study of a football hooligan group in the North of England using ethnography in the form of participant observation. Inspired by the changes I saw on the streets and amongst my own friends on ‘the scene’ that arose out of the socio-economic culture of football in the early 1990s, I was keen to pick up where Gary Armstrong’s inspirational ethnography (1998) left off. My participation over more than 2 years relies upon contacts with the firm’s older ‘main faces’ and top boys, many of whom I counted already as contacts. I went to matches, got stopped and searched and behaved as if I was back in a period of school-like adolescence while remembering to make field notes and write up. I couched the study academically in that complex language of 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, but really what I did was to translate my own understanding of what was going on into an accessible form of relevant, real-world criminology of the sort that I had read that had inspired me. I had no doubt that they had really met real, active proper criminals. I doubted that a great many academic criminologists had, and even when they did, I doubted their ability to separate the reality from the bullshit. I felt I could and, in the first instance perhaps, was too guilty of regarding ethnography merely of being the process of showing what was happening but without that wider meaning. However also I knew, but lacking the academic words to show it, that also I wanted specifically to say to criminologists that what seemed to be happening was that the concern with violence and team loyalties that once underpinned football hooliganism was mutating into a more orchestrated and organised form of violence, which in turn seemed to be serving as something of an apprentice to the world of more serious instrumental and organised crime. Yet, even then such an aim troubled me. It did not necessarily fit with the academic discourse constructed around social research that so frequently stresses the essentiality of ‘grounded theory’. Surrounding me in academia were far more intelligent people, people schooled and knowledgeable in the conventions and terminology of social research. I am not so sure now though that those people would have coped quite so well with having a pint glass thrown at them or would have fared well in a violent confrontation. That is not to try and celebrate the more machismo elements that sometimes arise out of ethnographies’ tendency to tell glorious and exciting war stories. Anyone with enough modicum of intelligence to produce good ethnography in unconventional and sometimes risky settings will know full well that violence is not glorious, and they might know that real pain hurts and that real violence is not merely a social construction. Such experiences tend to confound the point that, as qualitative researchers and ethnographers, what we learn in the field and report back in the academy is not ‘objective fact’ but rather is

perspective informed opinion. As Altheide and Johnson (1998) suggest, 'all knowledge is'. This 'perspectival nature of knowledge' must – it follows – be considered 'an obdurate fact of ethnography' (Altheide & Johnson, 1998, p. 490). [AU9]

The point I make here about method, and perhaps the best lesson I can teach anyone, is that ethnography, while seemingly democratic, inclusive and open, is put simply 'not for everyone'. The field isn't for everyone, some won't like it and some won't get it. They will see the surface, but not the deeper issue. That said, I do not think I elected to use ethnography out of some zealous drive to campaign or show resistance and reliance in working-class communities. So often, academic researchers do not question in any depth why we select our areas of interest. What draws us to certain topics? Can something be inherently 'interesting', or must we be drawn to it for a reason? Is it just familiarity and comfort, and if the latter, how does that impact on seeing the bigger picture?

It is only recently that criminologists have attempted to enter a somewhat uncomfortable position of trying to ascertain why we choose and have chosen these topics to fill several years of our lives. It is notable, for example, that I might have been as usefully employed as an ethnographer if in the 1990s I moved to London, took a job as a trader and awaited the onset of a global financial crisis. If you want to understand the harms wrought by crime, then political special advisors might be as worthy a group of study as street gang members. That raises the additional question of how much criminological research is truly objective in acknowledging the underpinning of the social, economic, political, moral and cultural standpoint of the researcher open to real, proper scrutiny. How much can we say that of any social research? While in the world of postmodernism and identity politics, standpoint sociology is coming a little cleaner about the values of the producer. Yet paradoxically a drive towards ever-greater 'reflexivity' in ethnographic work has not necessarily produced more honesty or transparency, so too there is a horrible certainty and very intolerant, zealous and conviction-driven agenda that drives some of the supposedly more liberal criminology and sociology, but that may be a matter for elsewhere. [AU10]

For me, as an ethnographer of lower-strata criminality in deindustrialised and precarious locales, a core theme that has united much of my research, a thread that runs through and unifies it, I suppose, is physical violence or the latent threat thereof. By my teens I had learnt that violence was not glamorous but painful, especially if too much on the receiving end. I learned to box and kickbox from my early teens and engaged in numerous heavy sparring sessions. I was thrown in with older and bigger boxers, and while I learned to like the experience, seeing your face smeared in blood and feeling the pounding in the skull that comes afterwards, I also developed a reputation for having a fair amount of tenacity and courage that could open doors for me and put money in my pockets. In those settings, in low-lit gyms in backstreets and under swimming pools and on industrial units, I also had learned a range of other skills that were equally useful, how to crack a joke, how to navigate 'banter' and when to speak up and shut up: I had learnt that violence did not particularly bother me particularly, whether it was witnessing or doing it, but I had also learnt how to be around hard men and not to 'take the piss' or, as importantly, have

people take it. I still do not mind being around threatening situations and people, but I am also realistic and grounded; I have seen things turn quickly, and sometimes being a good ethnographer is knowing when to walk away, at any stage in observations. While I am comfortable in my own abilities as an ethnographer, I am not complacent when in places and spaces marked by precariousness. That closeness also brings with it a real consideration of ethics, because I have long believed that true ethical practice is more likely when relationships are meaningful and when research subjects can't be left in the field, because going native is not a fear if you are born and raised amongst the group.

For my part, I feel that I have always been relatively grounded in my experiences as a criminologist; rather fortuitously my biography had opened a rich field of potential research topics (in criminological terms), and moreover, the milieus in which I have moved have never been totally alien. Certainly, before embarking on a criminology degree at university, I was the product of some similar experiences to those that criminologists describe amongst their offender 'subjects'. The wasted hours I spent in gyms and pubs I cannot count. Occasionally, I hit people or engaged in instrumental criminal practices (which only sometimes proved profitable). I had been arrested but had been lucky to navigate without the wholesale stigma of a serious criminal record, less lucky when it came to acquiring good tattoos, but my background and experiences taught me a bit of humility, and as I realise that I might as easily have been the subject a criminological study, I have attempted to present the worlds I describe realistically and fairly.

That reference to realism is an important one, as theoretically and empirically I now find myself perhaps more sympathetically orientated towards ultrarealist ideas than ethnographies' familiar place with social constructionism. For me, rather than just an abstract and highbrow theoretical argument, it has become evermore pressing to resist the worst excesses of a constructionist narrative that stresses resistance against conformity, freedom against narrow restrictions, because put simply some things might be more important than social construction, and having spent years in lower-class milieus, political economy seems just that. When some Marxists criticised ethnography for documenting only the surface of events in local settings, rather than seeking to understand the deeper social forces that shape the whole society and that operate even within those settings, they may have had a point. Good criminological ethnography for me is that which shows not only the action but the mundanity of crime that captures its nuances and contradictions but does not reduce everything of our ethnographic efforts to mere grounded analysis of everyday experience. Good ethnography aims to provide a convincing written and textual analysis and description that provides insights into the relationships between human actors, their motivations, daily practices, structural conditions and meaning. The profoundly unsettling transformations that have reverberated throughout the social, economic, political and cultural world and a well-developed theoretical and analytical context that capture a world in flux are needed to make good ethnography great. If both the powerful and those at the lowest points in the social strata experience important real and universal forces and these impact upon psychosocial drives,

human behaviours and cultural-economic conditions, then ethnographers can show this; good ethnography links the theory to the practice.

Going Right, After a Riot

Occasionally though for all that background might count, the aspirant ethnographer may be presented simply with an opportunity too good to miss. If opportunity ‘makes the thief’, it also sometimes might make the ethnographer. It was just such opportunism that underpinned the ethnographic work that I undertook on the English riots with Dan Briggs, Simon Winlow and Steve Hall, which also became part of the empirical base of the book *Riots and Political Protest* (Winlow, Hall, Treadwell, & Briggs, 2015) alongside the work on the English Defence League (EDL).

The riots research was also used for the article *Shopocalypse Now: Consumer Culture and the English Riots of 2011* (Treadwell, Briggs, Winlow, & Hall, 2013). That research happened because I just happened to be in Birmingham City Centre at the right time to watch things kick off, but I also suppose that, by that time, I had developed something of an instinct for searching out violent disorder. Having spent a few years previously largely avoiding police attention during public disorder around football helped me mingle and talk to people. Of course, such research and the immediacy of the decision to stay and watch were never going to pass before an ethics committee and are risky; I could hardly be sure that my own front door would not be opened by what police call their ‘big red key’ in subsequent days. Certainly some of those I spoke to experienced that and subsequent jail terms. For my part, I did no violence, stole nothing and largely watched, the lowest risk strategy I could adopt, but that does not mean that a riot is a good place to be. I saw others around me robbed at knifepoint, but fortunately seemed to carry enough presence to not be directly threatened myself. A blackberry mobile phone and voice notes, pictures and text notes did the rest, an approach to data collection that I had practised well in my PhD studies. Yet this brings me to another important aspect of ethnography and perhaps the revision of prior made points.

My time undertaking covert ethnography with the EDL was similarly connected to personal contacts and focused on the uncertain state of the social world. The English Defence League (EDL) is a far-right street protest movement which focuses on opposition to what it considers to be a spread of Islamism and sharia in the UK. It describes itself as an anti-racist and human rights organisation, but its longstanding ideology is a belief that the religion of Islam ‘challenges an English, Christian way of life’. The group has had confrontations with various groups, including Unite Against Fascism (UAF), and for several early years I was at the centre of several of its branches undertaking ethnographic research. Again, the data I gathered has been used in several places but perhaps most significantly as part of *Rise of the Right* with Simon Winlow and Steve Hall (Winlow, Hall, & Treadwell, 2017).

What becomes apparent during that research was that much of what had drawn me to ethnography now lacked appeal. In the EDL I did not see a kindred identity

with which I felt any unity. Rather I saw something that made me profoundly uneasy. Claims to be 'non-racist and non-violent' made by many of its early rank-and-file supporters were utterly transparent. It also highlighted for me another issue which perhaps ethnography ought to become better at acknowledging openly. While [\[AU12\]](#) there is extensive literature that talks of the risk of over-familiarity or 'going native' (a term I dislike for all its imperialistic overtones' and for reasons I have already [\[AU13\]](#) begun to outline). The negative occurrences that exist in ethnography when there is biographical congruence and proximity between the researcher and the researched, similarity and proximity do not always create solidarity or shared sentiments. More compelling accounts of 'the self' in criminological research have tended to show how the individual impacts upon research processes and the production, and it is sometimes noted how orthodox criminology and its focus on 'objectivity' in 'methodology' and 'restrained language' effectively 'discourage any form of biographical or emotional intrusion by the researcher' (Jewkes, 2012, p. 65). Of course, these biographical processes can be heuristic, but not only in creating a congruence. I grew up like so many of those who I encountered in the EDL; I lived on the same sort of former council estates in Birmingham. Was I ever at risk of going native? I do not think so. I didn't like them. Much of the guidance on undertaking ethnographic research generally will stipulate that the basic ethical principles which are to be adhered to and maintained throughout the process of fieldwork include honesty and transparency, and the ethnographer should aspire to doing good, not doing harm and protecting the autonomy, wellbeing, safety and dignity of all research participants. They will stipulate that researchers should be as objective as possible and avoid judgements. What then of the ethnographer faced with a group of regressive, violent racists willing to make sweeping statements and pour out simplistic, narrow platitudes? While occasionally I met those who I could separate from their narrow racism, the fieldwork dragged me down further; being in a dark place too long makes ones' outlook on life dark. In and amongst the EDL, I lost weekends and evenings to dimly lit drinking holes, sessions of alcohol and cocaine and hours of racist, angry diatribes. While many talk excitedly of fieldwork and it becomes the stuff of conference talk and ethnographic stories, told and re-told, the field can be a place that it can be hard to leave, especially if one starts close to it.

We often do not discuss what happens when a researcher does not like his or her participants, but perhaps we should, especially in criminology. After all, it is likely to be the biggest factor that impacts upon the subsequent framing of the presentation of the study. Most ethnographers are at least willing to admit that they are not value-neutral and perhaps not all are willing to admit to their own prejudices, yet in subjectively focusing in too much upon the self, to look at either one's personal history or the emotive processes that arise outside of and inside of fieldwork, there is the clear risk that the researcher disconnects themselves from their wider social setting. I didn't like the EDL, but I knew where they came from; I also knew that they were not representative of many white and ethnic minority working-class men. I hold strongly a conviction that any move towards the subjective must not render the researcher blind to the often very objective and real social suffering that criminological research is frequently concerned with, and the micro and macro social

processes that drive action, and while I found I disliked the EDL, their complaints, their directionless anger, their ignorant prejudices, racism and insularity, I could see the drivers of it; they were all too apparent, again because of the congruence with my own experience and biography and background. I am pretty sure Steve Hall and Simon Winlow felt the same, and we captured all the essence of that in *Rise of the Right* (Winlow et al., 2017).

But where I certainly was by the time that my work with the EDL was ending was somewhat adrift. I had a young daughter at home but had spent weekends and evenings not at home with my beautiful wife and child but in pubs and clubs, at angry demonstrations full of sweat, testosterone, flying spit, punches, lager and cocaine. I was depressed, I had put on weight, I wanted out and I headed back to the gym. When I first stepped back through the doors of a mixed martial arts gym at the end of the EDL work, 3 min of vigorous exercise nearly killed me. Within a year, I had lost what I estimate to be about 25 kilos in weight and was fighting in MMA bouts, my mind was clearer and I was again enjoying ethnography, back in the field, but this time in the context of a prison and even enjoying being hit in the face and keeping a reflexive journal for an ethnography of the less salubrious side of British MMA which I hope may yet come to see the light of day. The darkness had lifted, and I felt ready to return to the field. That setting was prisons, again looking at violence with Kate Gooch, and it is prison research in an ethnographic manner that has been the basis of my most recent research projects. If ethnography needs to be integrated into or combined with other kinds of new theorising and new theoretical perspectives that are better suited to studying whole institutional domains, national societies and global forces, as ultrarealists have started to suggest, then the USA and UK as places share much, and yet the UK does not, in recent years perhaps, share quite the same commitment to a political ethnography built at and around imprisonment, and that is where my journey seems to be taking me next. I suppose in those lines I betray my view on the issue of whether ethnography ought to be theoretically neutral or whether it has an essential affinity with particular theoretical orientation, but that is perhaps a longer story in the making and one that still lacks a conclusion as yet, but the road travelled so far has taught me a few lessons for the aspirant ethnographer that I think might be well worth sharing.

Don't be afraid to call bullshit on your participants: you do not have to be aggressive or disrespectful if you do this, but a lot of people will have preset narratives, and it would be remiss to just take these on face value and accept them. Do not be afraid to challenge people or dig deeper in terms of what they are saying; sometimes people will get a little animated, or even possibly angry, so as and when you do this, tread carefully, and you might want to be respected in the field, but ethnography is not about just hearing what people tell you.

You have two ears and one mouth, normally best used in that ratio, but don't be afraid to talk about yourself, if you expect people to open to you, you must be willing to do them the same courtesy. Prepare to be bored, frustrated, angry, annoyed, disappointed, frustrated, upset, anxious and perhaps occasionally depressed and frustrated. The ethnographic adventure is often presented as very exotic and exciting, but a lot of it is repetitive, monotonous and just, well, a bit dull. Be ready for

this. Be prepared to not like all or some of your participants: some ethnographers have a habit of puffing up their own credentials or ability as researchers by emphasising the close relationships they had with their participants and how friendly they were and the bonds they formed. What they don't mention is that this can be and sometimes is exaggerated, and they often thought their participants were arseholes and did not like them at all. You will think this about research participants just as you do about colleagues, family members and friendship groups. Not having a close emotional connection with your participants does not make you a bad ethnographer, a close one doesn't make you good. The most important part is that you are there and there consistently and that by being there you get the chance to speak to people. Sometimes it is better if you just go with the flow. Don't waste your time and energy defending what you do too much to doubters and detractors, critics and naysayers. The best ethnographers have spent plenty of time dealing with these folk, but then they also come to realise that not only are their opinions as unwarranted and unneeded as they are unsolicited, but to deal with them too much expends better time that you will never get back. If they want to challenge you, tell them to do it in print. You might get a citation that way. Get into the field; lots of people can offer you advice, but the best way to get better at anything is through practice. And finally, as just my dad taught me, always buy your round.

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Author Queries

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| AU1 | Please check and confirm if the affiliation is presented correctly. | |
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