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Chapter 3

Dangers and problems of doing ‘gang’ research in the UK

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Introduction

Researchers and commentators have raised moral, political and scientific objections to conducting research that is explicitly ‘gang’ research. We begin by discussing the dangers of carrying out gang research; in particular, we focus on the risk of stereotyping communities, ethnic groups, and young people more generally. We sympathize with the concerns raised, but proceed with carrying out research that is explicitly ‘gang’ research in our ethnographic study, ‘Youth Gangs in an English City’, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). We do so for a number of reasons that we discuss in this chapter, but in particular to remedy the predominant focus within research, police, and journalistic accounts on ethnic minority youth and their gang involvement. Our second aim is to discuss the strategies we employ in our research design that explicitly address the concerns with which we contend. In other words, we designed our research with the intention that it not stigmatize individuals and communities, that it paint a nuanced picture of the individuals and places in which we conduct our research, and that it be attuned to complex subjectivities. At the time of writing, we have just completed our data collection, and therefore are in a position to reflect upon the experience of implementing the strategies we employ.
Objections to ‘gang’ research

‘Might not the launching of coordinated gang research in Europe serve inadvertently to create or strengthen the existence of street gangs?’ (Klein et al. 2001: 335). This question was posed in the concluding chapter of the first Eurogang-edited collection in 2001. No other issue at the first meeting of the Eurogang Network in 1998 raised as much controversy. Some researchers were concerned that engaging in this type of research might contribute to the development of moral panics about gangs. It was argued that gang research (1) may stigmatize individuals, communities, or ethnic groups (the last particularly relevant in the context of this book); (2) can reify, and therefore strengthen, gangs and the perception that ethnic minority youth dominate them; and (3) may contribute to unintended punitive policy outcomes. In contrast, others were worried that by denying the problem and neglecting research, uninformed public policy and public opinion could develop (Klein et al. 2001). Almost a decade later, these moral dilemmas and controversies remain, as was made evident in some of the debate during the eighth Eurogang meeting (Oñati, Spain 2005). Need for this kind of discussion remains, particularly in a time when there is growing political debate on immigration and ethnic minority youth throughout Europe.

Resistance to the use of the ‘gang’ label in academic discourse runs strong in Britain (e.g. Campbell and Muncer 1989; Sanders 2002, 2005), where there has been a longer critical tradition within criminology than in the USA and where different sociological traditions for the study of youth and their experiences have prevailed. While much ‘gang’ research with its origin in the USA has delinquent groups/networks of young people as its object of study, British research since the 1960s has focused instead on youth subcultures, differentiated by class, gender, and race, where delinquency may or may not play a key or defining role. British researchers have studied subcultural groups ranging from teddy boys (e.g. Cohen 1972), skinheads (e.g. Taylor and Wall 1976), and punks (e.g. Hebdidge 1979) to the more hybrid ‘rave’ drug, dance and music cultures (e.g. Moore 2003; Thornton 1995). There is an apprehension about gang research among British social constructionists, who argue that such a paradigm further alienates inner-city youth belonging to ethnic minorities and simplifies their experiences (Alexander 2000). The extent to which this ‘foreign’ paradigm is even necessary in the UK has therefore been questioned. Even across the Atlantic, however, where gang research has long been established, some have argued that the gang concept obscures
rather than clarifies the complexities of youth crime and violence (e.g. Sullivan 2006).

In addition, there is a perception among some that many of the most negative aspects of policymaking in criminal justice have resulted from the transfer of ideas from the USA (Newburn 2002; Wacquant 2004). This may lead some to believe that the import of the ‘gang’ label may result in policy outcomes likely to criminalize and further marginalize youth from poor communities (e.g. Hallsworth and Young 2004). In a media and policy context characterized by an undue emphasis on the portrayal of youth as antisocial – ethnic minority youth in particular – this type of reaction to the Eurogang project is not surprising. The ‘crusade’ against youthful antisocial behaviour promoted by New Labour politicians (in government in Britain since 1997) has reached the point that the Chairman of the Youth Justice Board expressed his concern about the risk of demonization of large numbers of youth (The Independent, 23 April 2006) and then resigned in January 2007. This concern is shared by the European Commissioner for Human Rights (Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights 2005).

There is no question that the issue of gangs is a contentious one to research, and that the concept is conceptually and methodologically slippery, even problematic. Nevertheless, we think that there are a number of good reasons to carry out gang research in Europe. We contend that it is important to marry the best of the American tradition of gang research with the long-standing tradition of particularly British and other European social research on youth groups and subcultures.

Despite the concern of some who state that researchers are creating a moral panic about the gang phenomenon by imposing the term in the British context, the reality is that the term has long had popular currency – and long before British criminologists began carrying out gang research. In cities like Manchester and Glasgow, for example, groups refer to themselves as ‘gangs’, as do police and other community members, and the term has existed in these cities for at least 25 years and probably longer (Mares 2001; Patrick 1973). Social historians, in fact, have documented street gangs in the UK going back to the nineteenth century (Davies, 1998, 2006; Macilwee, 2006).

An important reason for carrying on with the term is to provide balance in the form of academic study that goes beyond the journalistic accounts of gangs that are anyway being produced. Recent accounts include John Davison’s Gangsta (1997), Andy Hailwood’s Gun Law (2004), McLagan’s Guns and Gangs (2006), Tony Thompson’s Gangland
Britain (1995) and Gangs (2004), and Peter Walsh’s Gang Wars (2003). These accounts should be considered problematic for a number of reasons, not least the sour community responses to their publication, which we discuss specifically in relation to Walsh’s Gang Wars below. Such accounts, it can be argued, provide a distorted view of gangs, gang members, and their communities through their sensationalized, skewed, and superficial emphasis on crime and violence. Moreover, some of these publications over-emphasize the relevance of ethnicity or immigration status as factors that ‘explain’ or define gangs.

Objections to gang research also reflect the long-standing view that troublesome British youth groups do not meet the definition of gangs and are instead unstructured, loose-knit and, therefore, different from American gangs (Campbell and Muncer 1989; Downes 1964; Parker 1974). However, American gangs, too, are different from the stereotypical perception of them; instead they are generally ‘unstructured’ and ‘loose-knit’ (e.g. Fleisher 2002). Klein (2001: 7) calls this the ‘Eurogang paradox’. Our view is that if delinquent youth groups or ‘gangs’ in Britain and the USA are different, and this can best be established through empirical observation that provides the benchmark for comparison. While this type of empirical observation has been lacking in the British context, more recently, a number of research studies have been investigating gangs directly, such as the 12 studies identified by Marshall et al. (2005). Moreover, large-scale government data collection initiatives have included questions assessing the prevalence and role of gangs (e.g. NEW-ADAM (Bennett and Holloway 2004) and the Offending Crime and Justice Survey (Sharp et al. 2006)).

As mentioned above, an objection to gang research is that it may contribute to punitive policy outcomes (Hallsworth and Young 2004). This assumes that the only policy outcome that can be associated with explicitly ‘gang’ research is punitive. Punitive policy approaches to youth behaviour, however, have long preceded gang research and are currently developing particularly in the British context – for example, around the use of public space. It is not only possible to do ‘gang’ research in such a way as to be critical of punitive policy directed towards youth, but also it is, arguably, almost inevitable. In fact, American gang researchers have been keen to show how punitive social, economic, and immigration policies can contribute to making gang problems worse by further marginalizing ethnic minorities and young people and legitimizing ‘gangs’ as a source of identity (Fleisher 2002; Hagedorn 1998; Klein and Maxson 2006; Vigil 2002). We aspire to do research that provides a rounded understanding of
the youth who are being targeted by these policies in assessing the impact that these policies are having.

**Our research: problems and our solutions**

At the University of Manchester, we are carrying out a portfolio of ‘gang’ research, including the ESRC-funded ethnographic study *Youth Gangs in an English City*. Here we outline our attempts to design research that contends with the concerns we outlined above, particularly with reference to this ethnographic study. The multiple case-study design based in a northern city (referred to as ‘Research City’) incorporates overt participant observation and 90 interviews in connection to three sites over 2 years and 20 interviews and nine group interviews with community stakeholders. Our aim was to address the following: gang characteristics; the roles of ethnicity and gender; the role of violence, illegal activities and drug economies; relationships between gangs and community; and the process of leaving the gang.

**Representations of ethnic minorities and immigrant groups**

Media accounts (e.g. Davison 1997) and police accounts of British gangs emphasize the ethnic dimension of gangs (Marshall *et al.* 2005). This emphasis has been heavily criticized by sociologists who argue that doing so simplifies the issue and contributes to the stereotyping of ethnic minorities (e.g. Alexander 2000). It is true that ethnographic research documents that gangs often emerge in areas populated by ethnic minorities and immigrant groups (e.g. Moore 1991; Vigil 2002). Certainly, the marginalization of ethnic minorities and conditions in the communities that receive immigrant groups play a role in the understanding of gangs (Vigil 2002). However, some criminologists have criticized the ethnographic tradition of ‘sampling’ primarily or exclusively ethnic minority gangs because doing so may reinforce the notion that gangs are solely an ethnic minority problem (Martinez and Lee 2000).

Indeed, gang research more generally suggests that the relationship between ethnicity and gang membership is complex. The ethnic composition of gangs tends to reflect the ethnic composition of the neighbourhoods where they appear (Fagan 1996). Moreover, self-report surveys employing more representative samples do not find ethnicity to be such a strong predictor as these ethnographic studies might be.
interpreted to imply (Esbensen and Winfree 1998). Ethnicity may also not be such a strong predictor of gang membership in England and Wales, a less segregated context than the USA (Peach 1996), where most gang research has taken place. Indeed, research on gangs in Britain provides evidence for this view: south Manchester gangs are ethnically mixed when the neighbourhood is ethnically mixed (Tilley and Bullock 2002), whereas in the more ethnically homogeneous Edinburgh, gangs tend to be mostly white (Bradshaw 2005).

In 2004, the Home Office, in collaboration with researchers at the University of Manchester, conducted the first representative survey of England and Wales incorporating gang membership questions (Offending Crime and Justice Survey). Results showed that only a tiny minority of youth gangs in England and Wales were exclusively from ethnic minority groups. Among those delinquent youth group members who stated their group was ethnically homogeneous, 60 per cent of groups were white only, 3 per cent were black only, and 5 per cent were Asian only. Just under one-third of respondents in youth gangs (31 per cent) said their group included a mix of different ethnic groups. The ethnic composition of gangs is not widely divergent from the ethnic composition of other youth groups in England and Wales (Sharp et al. 2006).

In our research, we were determined not to fall into what we perceived to be the ‘trap’ of directing our gaze only towards gangs dominated by ethnic minority youth, and in particular, towards specific areas of Research City that had already suffered considerable stigmatization. In other words, while there is a demonstrated empirical link between ethnicity and gangs, we take the view that it is important examine the limitations of this link at every turn. Our decision to focus on three different sites follows from this determination. We used a template laid out by other researchers (e.g. Sullivan 1989) designed to allow us to capture and represent ethnic and other diversity and to develop a better understanding of how diversity plays a role in gang dynamics. Putting this strategy into place, however, was surprisingly difficult (see as well our discussion on community issues).

In Research City, criminal justice professionals generally have a fairly clear idea of what a ‘gang’ is. Prior to carrying out our research, our administration of the Eurogang ‘expert survey’ (which involved us additionally probing agency respondents for their definitions of a ‘gang’) (Medina and Aldridge 2004) demonstrated clearly that, for practitioners, gangs were groups that formed in ethnic minority neighbourhoods, since they are the ones that, ostensibly in Research
City, carry firearms. For local agencies, it would seem, therefore, firearm possession is a defining element of the gang. Using our purposefully very broad working definition of gangs, we took great pains to make clear to our professional respondents that our desire was to focus on youth gangs wherever they exist in Research City, and not only on gangs involved in firearm use, in contrast to local agency definitions. Even still, we were constantly ‘guided’ by these community professionals toward these ethnic minority groups. In fact, not only did we find white youth gangs in predominantly white areas, but also that some of these groups carried and used firearms. It may be fair to ask the question as to whether local police were either inadequately applying their own definition, or unconsciously using ethnicity in their very definition of gangs.

It was not only police and community professionals whom we discovered to have entrenched notions of the importance particularly of black British ethnicity in understanding gangs; grass-roots community organizations did also. We observed a community meeting aimed at dealing with the problem of gun crime and attended by police, statutory community agencies, and grass-roots community groups. While a number of views were expressed about causes of and solutions to the problem of guns and gangs, the problem was clearly seen by some community groups to be located particularly within black ethnic minority culture; this view was held in spite of the fact that gun crime and gang activity in Research City are not the preserve of ethnic minorities.

**Community concerns**

Communication and engagement with relevant voluntary and statutory organizations commenced 2 years before the research began; in particular, as we began to make access arrangements during the process of preparing our research proposal in 2003. In the months before the project, we attended local events, such as community-based antigun and anti-gang workshops, as well as various conferences and meetings, including those with local politicians and community groups. The response to our research was different throughout the sites. The site with the largest black British communities (‘Inner West’) had been extensively researched and had received considerable publicity due to its ‘gang problem’, and therefore was ‘research weary’ and sceptical. A second site was exclusively white (‘South City’) and undergoing a process of heavy investment for urban redevelopment. Statutory and voluntary agencies in this site could be thought of
as ‘research wary’ because of concern that their participation might result in negative publicity as a result of the identification of their area as one with a ‘gang problem’. This wariness continued in spite of our assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and it eventually resulted in our abandoning data collection at this site in the greater depth we had planned. The almost exclusively white area that we relocated to (‘Far West’) was, by contrast, ‘research craving’. Its communities recognized the growing gang problem and thought that our research could help raise the profile of the issue and result in more official attention, thereby allowing them to deal more effectively with what they perceived to be their own gang problem. Crucially, it is these latter two predominantly white areas that have, up to now, received little official attention to their gang problems, by researchers, the police, other local agencies, and the media.

In ‘Inner West’, we were often faced with questions such as, ‘What will your research do for us?’, ‘What’s in it for us?’, and ‘What will it change?’ People were quick to understand that their cooperation would result in our work’s being completed and published, and that, in turn, would benefit our academic careers. What reasons could we provide for these stakeholders to risk their reputations and personal safety by endorsing our research and introducing us to gang members? There was an onus placed upon us to prove we cared, had a genuine desire to make a difference, and were not just ‘another’ research team only trying to advance our careers. This sceptical and suspicious reaction often resulted in our backgrounds and motives being questioned. In this respect, employing local researchers helped to provide common ground with community members.

Residents in ‘Inner West’ believed that two decades of media and research attention focused on their neighbourhoods had resulted in little change. We have witnessed similar community reactions in Manchester, where our university is located. Peter Walsh’s *Gang Wars: The Inside Story of the Manchester Gangs* was published in 2003. This journalistic account provided locations of specific, often notorious incidents, along with photographs and names of individuals purported to be involved. People we spoke to accused Walsh of exploiting the community by making the author a substantial amount of money off the back of other peoples’ suffering, yet putting back little, if anything, into the communities he had exposed and further stigmatized. The book was viewed by many as inciting fresh gang rivalry by providing a new generation with ‘war stories’ of old incidents and by publishing details of murders and their perpetrators. Community members also believed that Walsh’s book contributed to
the stigmatization of certain areas of the city and of ethnic minority groups, particularly those of Afro-Caribbean descent. The legacy of *Gang Wars*, which became something of a regional best-seller, was felt even in Research City; community members did not distinguish between an academic approach to research and the journalistic approach of Walsh, in which he ‘named names’ and included pictures. Therefore, it was not surprising that we had considerable work to do in order to allay fears among community members that our research would result in a similar kind of publication.

Local residents and community leaders in Research City also provided many specific examples of (primarily journalistic) research that failed to inform those who had taken part of the findings or even how the data were going to be used. One horror story occurred when both current and ex-gang members agreed to be interviewed on camera but were then dismayed to discover that their interviews had been edited into a film shown in local schools. One ex-gang member recalled walking through his estate when a group of young children started shouting: ‘Hey you’re famous! You’re the guy who was on TV in our school the other day. You’re a gangster, aren’t you?’ [Fieldworker notes]. This ex-gang member told us that he was never informed that his interview was going to be used for this purpose and had no idea it had been. In such instances, we highlighted the distinction between academic research and non-academic investigations, particularly and especially popular media reporting. In addition, we were asked for reassurances and promises that we would keep people informed of publications and outcomes. We also determined that any profits that might result from our publications would be given to local charities.

Community members, particularly those in the steering group for our research, not only voiced fears that our research could harm them, but also demanded that we clarify how we could help them. This presented us with perhaps an even greater challenge: can we as researchers ever guarantee to have a genuinely positive impact on the communities we research and the lives of the individuals in them? We are not naive enough to believe that our research is going to change the lives of individuals and communities in Research City, and we were honest about this with the people who asked us. All we could do was to provide assurances that we care about their plight, and that, unlike previous researchers, we were not going to ‘disappear’ from the community once this project was completed. We actively engaged community stakeholders in deliberations about directions of the research by including them on our research steering group, we provided respondents with the opportunity to comment on
our emerging explanations and understandings, and we promised to follow a strategy of dissemination that will reach policymakers and local practitioners alike. In other words, we know that our behaviour as researchers has effects – what we have sought to do is reduce, as far as possible, the negative effects of our presence, and increase the possibilities of positive benefits.

As discussed above, some community members initially identified researchers they had encountered over the years as ‘outsiders’: white, middle-class academics carrying out research on them – part of the ‘gang industry’ that includes professionals working in the police, the probation service, and the media, who ‘make a living’ from the troubles of those in Research City. In spite of this, our research team was not identified within the communities in which we conducted our research in this way; we think this was for a number of reasons. First, although four of us are white, one is mixed-race, and this fieldworker was able to discuss shared experiences with mixed race informants. Most importantly, two members of the research team were ‘from’ the research sites, which resulted in at least some shared backgrounds, acquaintances, and understanding between ‘researchers’ and ‘researched’. We did face criticism in not involving the community ‘from the start’ by allowing them (exclusively) to define our research objectives, and by not employing all who may have wanted employment to carry out the data collection. We were praised, however, for using the experienced and professional researchers we did, especially the two who were indigenous to the communities we researched, and also for providing training and employment to local community people for additional data collection later in the project. Interestingly, many of the gatekeepers we encountered were trained as local youth and community workers and had taken on board principles of community ‘action research’, in which community members are involved in the design and implementation of research projects. While we did not hand over control of the project and its aims and objectives to these community members, they saw from a very early stage that we were willing to compromise. The paradox, perhaps, is that this ‘research-weary’ community does want research, and even research involving collaboration with ‘outsiders’, but research in which they hold a greater degree of control from inception to implementation, analysis and dissemination.

Attending community events and meetings and seeing the same faces that at first were suspicious of our motives enabled others to see the commitment and community relationships we had built. The same people who were at first wary became the ones who introduced
Dangers and problems of doing ‘gang’ research in the UK

our fieldworkers as ‘sound’ and ‘from the street’. Even so, the generally negative view of researchers/academics remained evident, as they described us as ‘not like your typical academic’. This type of validation from key individuals made subsequent relationships of trust much easier and facilitated further links with gang members. Obtaining such levels of trust and acceptance takes time and commitment. Our research team engaged in voluntary work at youth clubs and community centres and worked alongside community groups who directly addressed gun crime and gangs. We also helped with funding applications for them to continue their work and with designing and evaluating local research projects.

Avoiding stigmatization

The primary strategy we adopted to reduce possible stigmatization was our plan not to disclose publicly the city in which we conducted the research. It is important to point out that we positively and voluntarily adopted this strategy; it was not designed to satisfy the requirements of an ethics committee. The city is known instead as ‘Research City’ in all our public references to it. A similar strategy has been successfully adopted and carried out by other researchers in the UK (Hobbs et al. 2003; Measham et al. 2001). We know, therefore, that maintaining location, site or setting anonymity in research is possible; we did not know how feasible it would be with our particular project in Research City. There are two aspects to maintaining location, site or setting anonymity: in publications that emanate from the research, and in the communications made during fieldwork itself. Anonymity in dissemination is by far the easiest, although even here there are variations among researchers in terms of approaches to doing so. At the simplest level, the researcher can simply use pseudonyms to replace actual names of people and places. In addition, it is possible to change identifying details in relation to them (where doing so is not important to the context), effectively to mislead readers who might otherwise be able to make identifications based on published descriptions.

Our plan not to divulge the location of Research City has been met with surprise, and not a little scorn, by colleagues at conferences, who spoke to both the impossibility of such a task and its undesirability. We were warned of the likelihood that most people in our various audiences, from readers of academic journal articles and books, to community practitioners and even gang members themselves, would nevertheless recognize the locations. We accept that some locals or
insiders may make educated guesses, but we will falsify identifying details, as other researchers have done, in order to work against a definite identification.

The undesirability of maintaining location anonymity referred to by colleagues is clear, because what we give up is not trivial. We will be unable to provide accurate maps of the city. Maintaining location anonymity also raises challenges in terms of how we talk about the local history of the areas within the city and make reference to the work of others who have, or in allowing other researchers specifically interested in accounts of Research City to use our work to infer local knowledge. Even providing descriptive demographic and socio-economic statistics becomes tricky. In other words, it becomes more challenging — but not impossible — to situate our research findings within literature and data that provide historical, geographical, and socio-economic context. But what we gain is far more important. This strategy has already been key in garnering support and collaboration from key community stakeholders who did not want more publications that further stigmatized their communities and glorified particular gangs as ‘brand names.’

Maintaining location and site anonymity in communications made during the fieldwork itself is perhaps trickier. The reality is that our research has involved talking to many individuals all over Research City: asking questions, checking stories, and verifying our developing understanding. There was no way to do this without, at least to some extent, identifying communities and areas within the city in conversations with others also working and living in Research City. Our approach has been to limit this kind of ‘identifying talk’ as much as possible, and with a view to remembering that long after our actual time spent in the field, the only thing that will remain is our written accounts of it; over these, we have much more control.

A clear advantage of anonymizing research location is that we are much less likely to fall into the trap of glamorizing or strengthening gangs through explicit attention, a problem that has been demonstrated by other researchers. Klein (1971), for example, in his evaluation of a programme that attached street workers to particular gangs, found that the programme contributed to increasing the cohesiveness of the groups themselves, perhaps reifying those structures. There is anecdotal evidence that in Manchester the book Gang Wars (Walsh 2003), through its identification of people and places and historical criminal events (including murders), may have functioned to increase the reputation of certain gangs as brand names, creating renewed rivalry between younger generations. It may not be only through
publication that named gangs are strengthened by research. Perhaps simply receiving attention from professionals keen to listen and understand without judging is what strengthens gangs. In other words, we may not be able to avoid glamorizing or strengthening gangs if it is just the fact of our carrying out research, rather than the manner in which we do it, that creates it.

**Conclusions**

We concur with those commentators who have pointed out that studying gangs might be ‘dangerous’; for us, it is important to take the point seriously when designing research on any youth behaviour that involves delinquency. We acknowledge the risk of reification (Sullivan 2006), and the duty to take steps to reduce its risk when conducting this sort of research. In the 8 years of the Eurogang Network’s existence, considerable energy has been devoted to developing research instruments and protocols for studying gangs and youth delinquent behaviour; however, ethical issues in relation to these have not received enough explicit attention. A (re)opening of ethical debates might help to build bridges with critics who remain sceptical about the Eurogang enterprise, as well as with researchers in Britain coming from different intellectual traditions that have historically eschewed the ‘gang’ label when studying youth behaviour.

Certainly, one of the dangers of gang research is that it might, if not conducted and disseminated properly, contribute to the stereotyping of ethnic minorities and their communities. Here, then, the issues of ethnicity and ethics go hand-in-hand. This is particularly pertinent in Europe within the context of demographic changes, the growing movement of immigrants, the politicization and representation of immigrant groups, and changing sentiments about foreign nationals (Semyonov et al. 2006). We have developed a research protocol that has ‘worked’ without (so far) alienating the communities in which we conducted our research, and that works to engage directly and productively with those critical of conducting research that is explicitly and self-consciously ‘gang’ research. Our experiences thus far in the communities we are researching leads us to conclude that it is possible to conduct research that is explicitly ‘gang’ research even in research-weary communities with savvy and sceptical community members who have wholeheartedly rejected the efforts of previous journalistic and other research approaches.
Street Gangs, Migration and Ethnicity

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Dangers and problems of doing ‘gang’ research in the UK


45
Street Gangs, Migration and Ethnicity