



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

---

Dr Joanna Sadler  
PPRG, Middlesex University

SRA Conference December 2005



# Introduction

---

- 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...

---

- 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

---

- 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

---

- 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*

---


- 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

---

- 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

---

- 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?

---

- 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...

---

- 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...

---

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