

CASE 3: URBAN EXPLORATION AND CRIMINAL TRESPASS

The case in brief

In August 2012, Bradley Garrett, an urban ethnographer was arrested at Heathrow airport. Four years earlier he had started [doctoral](#) research on ‘urban explorers’ or ‘place hackers’ in London and elsewhere. Underground tube stations proved to be particularly attractive for the research and in due course the British Transport Police (BTP) took note. Following his arrest, the BTP seized field notes and related research materials. Garrett and eight of his research participants were subsequently charged with ‘conspiracy to commit criminal damage’ – a charge which carries a ten-year prison sentence. The BTP also alleged that the amount of material which they had collected from Garrett’s home indicated that he must have been the instigator of the crimes of ‘trespass’ and of the ‘criminal damage’ entailed in gaining access to the sites.

Bradley Garrett’s exploration of British urban space which involved trespass onto land owned by the public transport authority raised a number of concerns for social research. The prosecution argued Garrett’s law-breaking was both unethical and unnecessary since he could have completed the work legally. They might also have pointed to the possibility that repeated trespass would have required the authority to spend more on security, a cost that would have been passed on to passengers. In turn, the defence drew on a range of experts (including members of the British Society of Criminology and the American Society of Criminology). Jeff Ferrell, in particular, indicated that if ethnography were to be ‘deep and full’ it might well require engagement in interactions and situation that are illegal (Ferrell et al., 2015). Garrett himself argued that it was ‘deeply problematic’ to block research by people simply because they lived close to ‘legal boundaries’. He also noted that participant observation with such groups might entail breaking the law. The case ended with Garrett ([2014b](#)) receiving a conditional discharge. One might interpret the result as signifying successful defence of the principles of ethnography and the fact that research can sometimes take people beyond the boundaries of the law. A more prosaic and realistic interpretation might be that Garrett acknowledged trespass and very limited criminal damage but was not found guilty of conspiracy to commit criminal damage.

Public and private discussions about this case have been partly structured around an understandable desire both by Garrett and by those who wrote in support of him to guard against the threat of significant criminal sanctions being imposed. In that context, criticism of Garrett is easily interpreted as a threat to his wellbeing and even as a threat to particular kinds of research. In addition, as Robert Dingwall remarked in 1980, most researchers remain ‘naturally reluctant to shop one another and ethical debate is stifled by a silent recognition that the next time one could be the target oneself’ (p.882).

This study is not concerned with reaching a conclusion on the merits and faults of Garrett’s specific activities. It is a complex and heated case. Instead, it uses the case as an entry point to some of the debates about research ethics that exist within ethnography, particularly as practiced in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, geography and criminology.

In particular, it will explore the justifications that might exist for undertaking covert research, for researchers breaking the law or for doing harm to participants and other interested parties, the ethics of autoethnography, and the dangers of romanticising the subject of research, and the difficulties of negotiating multiple roles.

The issues:



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1. **What ethnographers do**
2. **Covert research**
3. **Engaging in criminal activity as researchers**
4. **Autoethnography**
5. **Romanticisation**
6. **Doing harm**

What ethnographers do

Ethnography generally entails ethnographers taking part in the daily lives of a particular group of people over a lengthy period, watching, listening and asking questions about what they encounter. As a term, ethnography is losing some of its precision and is being used to cover an increasing range of data-gathering activities (Becker, 2017) – while ethnography is often grounded in participant observation, it may involve informal conversation, interviews, group discussions, documentary analysis and an examination of other material objects including digital photography and video. The orientation is generally exploratory. Data collection tends to be unstructured and analytical categories grow from the data rather than being imposed from a pre-existing framework.

Garrett's work was an analysis of recreational trespass by groups of people who spend their leisure time exploring off-limits, closed off areas of our cities, including 'derelict industrial sites, closed mental hospitals, abandoned military installations, sewer and drain networks, transportation and utility tunnels, shuttered businesses, foreclosed estates, mines, construction sites, cranes, bridges and bunkers...' (Garrett, 2014a, p.1). As the list suggests, the incursions included 'infiltration' of 'live' sites currently in use. Garrett spent over three years living and working with over 100 participants, eventually focussing on approximately 24 members of a more active group called the London Consolidation Crew, a group within which he came to take a leadership role.

Covert research

The default position in most research ethics guidelines is that research participants should consent to their involvement in research. The regulation of consent could operate in such a way that it protects the interests of vulnerable groups from harmful research carried out by government agencies. Alternatively, it could protect powerful agencies from scrutiny by independent researchers by robbing researchers of one of their more powerful methodologies, covert research. Deception could compromise both the informed and voluntary nature of consent, but some researchers have argued consent need not be obtained where any harm caused by lack of consent might be outweighed by the public benefit obtained, and we'll return to this later on. In addition, it might be impossible to gain access to some participants if other people were not deceived. Without covert research, Geoff Pearson (2009) argued, some aspects of society, including harms and injustices will remain 'hidden or misunderstood' (p. 252) and the images that powerful groups wish to project may go unchallenged.

The European Commission's (2010) draft [Guidance Note](#) for social science researchers counselled against allowing powerful figures or organizations the right to withdraw or withhold consent for fear of leaving social scientists 'without even the most basic rights to make enquiries [held] by other social groups, such as investigative journalists, or even ordinary citizens who might confront such figures at public meetings' (p. 11). The Finnish guidelines are explicit in relation to studying more powerful groups: 'As a matter of principle, studies on the use of power should be allowed without the consent of those in power' ([National](#)

[Advisory Board on Research Ethics](#), 2009, s1.5). However, the value of covert research may be broader than 'studying up'. The significance of covert studies has been accepted in the United Kingdom by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in its 2015 [Framework for Research Ethics](#) (FRE) in exceptional circumstances 'if important issues are being addressed and if matters of social significance which cannot be uncovered in other ways are likely to be discovered' (p. 30). The question of what might make something socially significant and how this is to be assessed is left unclear and, without clearer guidance, human research ethics committees might be vulnerable to political and institutional pressure on this matter.

Covert research may be a matter of degree. By the very nature of their activity, many ethnographers cannot seek to obtain consent from all the people with whom they interact, on every occasion. There can be no 'Danger: Ethnographer Present' sign that would make every person passing through a location aware that a researcher might be present. This might be the case because an ethnographer is observing someone's activities in a public location where the presence of other people is incidental to the focus of the study, because revealing their role might disrupt multiple social interactions or endanger the key research participant (Fountain, 1993), or because over time the ethnographer becomes a taken-for-granted part of the setting whose reason for being there is no longer clearly remembered by others.



Garrett's research was not covert in any absolute sense – other urban explorers were aware that he was a doctoral researcher, though it might not have been clear to everyone that he was undertaking research at any particular time or even necessarily that the research directly involved them. It *was* covert in the sense that he adopted illicit means used by urban explorers to gain access to sites, and sometimes that involved misrepresenting himself both as an explorer and a researcher. Indeed, Garrett's own work suggests that, on occasion, he took the lead in the place hacking – which challenges the conventional role of the ethnographer.

Engaging in criminal activity as researchers

It may be tempting to assert that researchers have a responsibility to act as law-abiding citizens. However, some legal provisions such as those associated with committing, assisting in or encouraging the commission of criminal damage in the United Kingdom have been held to cover a very wide range of behaviours (Elliott and Fleetwood, 2017). There is an argument that researchers may need to engage in some illegal activities in order to gain access to and be able to undertake research in those parts of societies where breaking the law is the norm. Indeed, there is a long and celebrated history of important researchers within the sociology of deviance and criminology engaging in illicit activities as part of their studies of matters such as youth gangs, drug use, and homosexuality through the Twentieth Century. More recently, researchers undertaking covert research on football hooliganism or the night-time economy (Pearson, 2009; Winlow et al., 2001) have argued that breaking the law enables them to blend into the field and gain the trust of participants. In his work on criminal activity in the East End of London, British criminologist, Dick Hobbs argued that he had to demonstrate a '...willingness to abide by the ethics of the researched culture and not the normative ethical constraints of sociological research' and that 'a failure to adhere to these norms would have closed the research field' (1996, p. 7). Such research may be important if, for example, it leads

to a better understanding of and better responses by justice institutions to particular groups that could not be studied in any other way.

Like Hobbs, Pearson argued that it was necessary for covert researchers 'to act in line with research subject norms over the entire period of research if s/he wishes to retain trust and access' (p.248). He described how during three years of covert participant observation of football hooliganism he

committed 'minor' offences (which I tentatively defined as those which would not cause direct physical harm to a research subject) on a weekly basis as part of the research routine. My strategy was to commit only the offences which the majority of the research subjects were committing and that I considered necessary to carry out the research. Furthermore, whilst I would commit lesser offences with regularity I would, if possible, avoid more serious ones. (Pearson, 2009, pp.246-7)

So, in contravention of the Public Order Act, Pearson charged across a football pitch with 400 other fans following the final whistle of a match, chasing the opposing supporters and retreating when ordered back by the police. He smuggled alcohol for football supporters onto trains that had been designated as alcohol-free, and threatened a rival group in a public house (calculating that the situation would not escalate).

At some points, Garrett has argued that his group had not done anything criminal.¹ However, Garrett himself noted that 'Ethnographic research in sociology, anthropology, criminology and geography relies on the ability of the researcher to embed themselves within a community and build relations of trust within it' (quoted in Matthews, 2014) and wrote that it would be impossible not to engage in trespass if researching urban explorers, as 'passive "observers" are swiftly identified, censured and disregarded in this community' (Garrett, 2014b). As a result, 'My methodology then, built to satisfy both myself and my project participants, was based around doing urban exploration with them rather than speculating on it from a safe distance' (Garrett, 2014a).

On the other hand, critics of such research have responded that researchers who commit crimes and risk arrest and prosecution might bring their academic disciplines, research institutions and funders into disrepute, thereby undermining the credibility of scientific research more generally among politicians, policy-makers and the general public.

However, in a later piece (Dekeyser and Garrett, 2018), Garrett goes beyond the traditional instrumental argument for law-breaking to align himself with those researchers who have argued that challenging unjust laws is not just defensible but imperative. Of course, some social scientists have gone to prison rather than breach the confidentiality of their participants (Israel, 2015). Other researchers have demonstrated against unjust laws, and most critical criminologists would not find it hard to list a range of laws that they believed we would be better off without. However, critical criminologists have not necessarily asserted their right as researchers to break the law without facing the same consequences as other citizens. The researcher as transgressor, organising pre-meditated breach of specific laws as a (not always political) expression of living life on the edge is less common.

A more coherent argument in favour of law breaking by researchers has been made by Ferrell (2012). Ferrell has been arrested as part of a graffiti crew, convicted and sentenced to one year's probation for destruction of private property in the form of 'graffiti-vandalism' (Ferrell, 1997), and arrested and tried for obstruction as part of mass action by cyclists to challenge the dominance of city streets by cars. Ferrell argued that if researchers were to understand the meaning of social activity, they could not simply observe or document; they also needed to attempt to 'understand the meaning of these interactions for those who engage in

¹ Festival of Dangerous Ideas, Sydney, Australia, August 2014 <https://www.bradleygarrett.com/festival-of-dangerous-ideas/>

them, to participate in the emotions that animate them, and so to capture the human feel and texture of the situations they study' (p223). In his statement for the defence in Garrett's case, Ferrell (2014) argued:

if we reject this approach, we are in effect rejecting the importance of understanding the life worlds and activities of any group that may be engaged in illegal activities, or that the authorities may argue is engaged in such activities. To do so would undermine the disciplinary mandates of sociology, criminology, anthropology, and related fields, and would leave scholars, the general public, and public policy makers ignorant of a wide swath of social life.

Ferrell knowingly and intentionally took part in collective activities that broke laws, albeit often the specific laws whose nature and impact he was keen to understand. However, Ferrell's depiction of painting a piece as part of a graffiti crew, for example, differs in scale from Garrett's portrayal of himself as the planner of a wave of trespasses. In addition, the activities in which Ferrell engaged do not appear to have placed others in physical danger, and Ferrell acknowledged that the ethics of autoethnography involving violent offending might require more thought.

These arguments about the ability of people to deploy their role as researchers to defend themselves against criminal charges might become even more important in societies where on the one hand authoritarian populism mobilises support around attacks on science and research and, on the other, researchers are drawn to investigate both authoritarian politics and the use of the criminal justice system to delegitimize opposition.

As an aside, my questions about the interventionist position that researchers take as researchers, also extend to those who justify harming others while engaging in covert research on law enforcement officers. As a PhD student, Miller posed as a 'confidential informant' to narcotics officers in the United States, participating in 28 narcotics cases and setting up 'reverse sting' operations. This involved persuading people to buy illegal drugs from undercover officers. Agents would later move in to arrest the buyers and seize any of the buyer's assets or cash involved in the deal. Miller was highly critical of these operations and justified his use of covert techniques as a way of exposing 'this expensive and dysfunctional drug enforcement strategy' (Miller and Selva, 1994, p.323). Miller did not discuss the direct impact his work could have on suspects. Miller engaged in what other jurisdictions might term entrapment. In one case, for example, a small-time user and possible dealer of marijuana was arrested, his cash and truck were seized. Miller and Selva acknowledged that 'the buyer might never have acted on his intentions to purchase a felonious quantity of drugs if the researcher and the agent had not presented him with such an opportunity' (pp. 324–5).

Autoethnography

As the term implies, autoethnography draws on both autobiography and ethnography. Autoethnography is a way of doing and writing research – it is both a process and a product of a systematic analysis of personal experiences in order to make sense of cultural experiences. Autoethnographies can be created by one person or collectively.

Autoethnography involves an explicit rejection of the positivist approach to science and its emphasis on objectivity and impassive neutrality, preferring to acknowledge standpoint specificity and give space to previously silenced voices, the emotional impact and therapeutic nature of research, and the researcher's impact on the research context. Autoethnography moves beyond immersion and the long-established social science practice of participant observation to document the experiences of researcher as fully engaged in the social activity. As Ferrell (2012) noted, all ethnography involves some autoethnography as many ethnographers participate in or influence the setting that they are studying, and their reflections on

their own position in relation to the topic and setting help a reader assess the nature and value of their account. In ethnography, these self-reflections can be used as emotionally-evocative 'narrative hooks' to draw in the reader, before the analysis extends to matters beyond the immediate experience of the autoethnographer.

Autoethnography is not only the telling of stories, though the evocative and aesthetic way in which a story is told is important; it has to illuminate and provide new perspectives on cultural experience. For its advocates, individual and collective autoethnographies offer

ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us. (Ellis et al., 2011)

These positions pose significant challenges to what social scientists might traditionally have considered as being research let alone the practices of disciplines outside the social sciences. They also raise challenges for the ethics of social research.

While autoethnographies may well focus on the self, other people are often present in the narrative and just because it is the narrator's story, does not mean that the views of others carry no weight:

the rights of the 'other' in autoethnography are weighted against the interests of the self when the starting point of research is one's own sociological imagination and is likely to involve others. (Tolich, 2010, pp.1599)

Autoethnographers often rely on retrospective consent – having encountered an experience worth recounting, they may then seek consent from other people to whom they will refer in their account. However, there is a risk that presenting a deeply personal account in which the researcher has invested considerable time and emotional labour to people with whom the autoethnographer has a strong relationship may be coercive. People may find it difficult to refuse permission to their partners, parents or children, particularly when the autoethnographer may need to publish the story for their own career advancement, a matter that their family may also be invested in.

It may be extremely difficult to disguise the identities of other people when the name of the autoethnographer is known. Even if the autoethnographer adopts a pseudonym, members of their family or close friends may well recognise others who appear in the narrative and some of the insights offered may be hurtful or damaging. Many of those whose identity might be inferred from the narrative will not have given consent – how can an autoethnographer seek consent from all those with whom he or she has come into contact and to whom he or she wishes to refer (the neighbour who plays loud music; the primary school teacher in whose class the autoethnographer was 30 years ago; the cousin who shouted random obscenities out of a car window; the mother who died).

Critical of the failure of many autoethnographers to explore these ethical questions effectively, Tolich (2010) offered 10 foundational guidelines for ethical use of autoethnography:

1. Respect participants' autonomy and the voluntary nature of participation, and document the informed consent processes...
2. Practice 'process consent', checking at each stage to make sure participants still want to be part of the project...
3. Recognize the conflict of interest or coercive influence when seeking informed consent after writing the manuscript...
4. Consult with others...
5. Autoethnographers should not publish anything they would not show the persons mentioned in the text...

6. Beware of internal confidentiality: the relationship at risk is not with the researcher exposing confidences to outsiders, but confidences exposed among the participants or family members themselves...
7. Treat any autoethnography as an inked tattoo by anticipating the author's future vulnerability...
8. ...no story should harm others, and if harm is unavoidable, take steps to minimize harm...
9. Those unable to minimize risk to self or others should use a nom de plume...
10. Assume all people mentioned in the text will read it one day...

Over the course of his doctoral work, Garrett (2012) shifted from ethnography towards autoethnography. He 'sought to completely collapse my identity into the group, to become the researched..., to write from a life of direct experience', going

beyond the participant/observer relationship to becoming an active producer and reproducer of the culture under study. In effect, over the course of my research I rendered myself invisible in the study group as a researcher... (pp.44-45)

Garrett (2014a) described how while taking part in the planning of a new wave of trespass, transgressing the space of 'every under-construction skyscraper, utility, water and transportation network possible', his ability to maintain critical distance from the activity 'started to slip': 'I myself was reluctant... I also was not sure what I was doing was legal or ethical anymore in terms of my research praxis.' He also acknowledged that by 2012 he had moved towards become a 'central character' in the activities of the LCC, a position acknowledged by academic reviewers of his book:

Urbex has attracted a huge following online, while much of the media, even those at the centre and right, have enjoyed spinning out a series of nerdy hero/playful anarchy storylines with Garrett front and centre. (Hall, 2013)

It was also a matter that one urban explorer pointed out to Garrett, and that Garrett at least partly conceded in his thesis conclusion:

I met with Marc Exp[lo] as I was rewriting the conclusion to this thesis. I told him that, as I wrote earlier, I felt I was quite lucky that I met "Team B" when I did and that I was able to integrate myself into the culture as I had done. He responded, "Brad, you didn't integrate yourself into the culture, you created the culture so that you would have something to study" (Marc Explo, January 2012). Marc's comments haunted me for weeks. Although I think most of what happened would have happened with or without me (as evidenced by what I missed over the summer of 2011 while I was away writing), there is no doubt it would have happened in a different way. Perhaps if I had not started this research, there would be no LCC. Whatever my involvement triggered, I do believe it's a vital component of my ethnographic work to acknowledge that role in the rise and fall of the "Team B" and the LCC... (Garrett, 2012: 329).

In a later article, Garrett and a colleague described scaling the walls of the decommissioned Maze prison in Northern Ireland, 'sweating, bleeding hands sliding down wet, springing rope, the barking getting louder and closer' (Kindynis and Garrett, 2015: 15). Only later did they reconsider the event as fit for autoethnography: 'That exploring the Maze might comprise autoethnographic "data" for a criminological journal article was, to be frank, an afterthought' (p.11).

Romanticisation

Beyond academic journal articles, Garrett created and co-created a series of videos about his crew's activities as a place hacker. Sometimes, this was part of his visual ethnography, sometimes part of the collective activities that some participants engaged in, sometimes possibly a benefit he was able to offer

other urban explorers in exchange for his participation in the group. However, filming is also part of the performance of trespass, making public the success of his group in breaching security at iconic London sites.

A criticism made of Garrett's work is that at times it appears to become less about the nature of transgressing space and more a breathless autoethnographic exploration of adventure-seeking (Iphofen, 2014). One of the more vivid examples of this in an academic journal can be found when Garrett (2012) described how as one of 'three international hobo ninjas', he 'prepared to sneak into the underworld' in Paris:

voilà, we crossed the liminal zone of the 'known' city into a realm of illicit encounter, raw experience, playful exuberance and corporal terror. (2011, p.272)

There have been several critiques of the romantic portrayal of urban exploration that can be found in the academic literature. A co-author of Garrett, Kindynis (2017, p.993) argues that urban exploring has always appealed to those attracted by 'thrill-seeking, sensation-gathering, cultivating an edgy "transgressive" persona'. Kindynis is also critical of 'romantic theoretical flights of fancy' (2017, p.989) exhibited among cultural social scientists who are keen to interpret new cultural forms such as urban exploration as exemplars of resistance. Indeed, Mott and Roberts (2014) note that far from being transgressive, urban exploration appears to be a celebration of able-bodied, heteronormative and white masculinity.

Balancing harms and benefits

While the medical ethics prescription 'do no harm' is often mentioned in discussions of research ethics, most research ethics guidelines recognise the prevalence, magnitude and distribution of harm should not be considered in isolation but as part of a consideration that encompasses both harm and benefit: 'It is commonly said that benefits and risks must be "balanced" and shown to be "in a favourable ratio"' ([National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research](#), 1979).

In addition, research undertaken in the social sciences may quite legitimately and deliberately work to the detriment of research participants by revealing and critiquing their role in causing 'fundamental economic, political or cultural disadvantage or exploitation' (Economic and Social Research Council in its now superseded [2010 Framework](#)). Similarly, researchers uncovering corruption, violence or pollution need not work to minimize harm to the corporate or institutional entities responsible for the damage though they might be expected to minimize any personal harm. Finnish guidelines also acknowledge the issue by recognizing that 'research concerning the use of power and the functioning of social institutions must not be restricted on the grounds that results can have negative effects for subjects' (National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009, s2.2).

Not only do risks of harms need to be commensurate with potential benefits, but sometimes researchers need to choose between competing benefits and competing harms, knowing that they only have the resources or skills to achieve some benefits and minimise some harms (Josselson, 2007). These choices do not have random effects – they may both be patterned across space and demographics. In short, the choices that are made about who might benefit and how, and who might be harmed and how are also questions of distributive justice.

There are good reasons to study urban exploration and criminal trespass. Like other academics who have researched the phenomenon, Garrett interpreted trespass as a democratic, albeit not always self-aware, response to the privatisation and social control of space. One geographer, reviewing Garrett's 2013 book, wrote of the importance of documenting 'grassroots responses to a sense of stultifying cultural foreclosure, as we are funnelled through a cynically choreographed urban landscape of spectacle and consumerism'

(Gandy, 2015). The justification of harm in the research ethics literature is generally articulated in relation to a particular organisation or institution rather than late-capitalism and social control in general.

The slow decay of heritage sites has been documented longitudinally by urban explorers when there appears to be little interest among or capacity within other organisations. Indeed, Garrett (2012) noted that one collection in London had caught the interest of the British Museum. As part of his work, Garrett contributed to this visual ethnography with both still photography and video images.



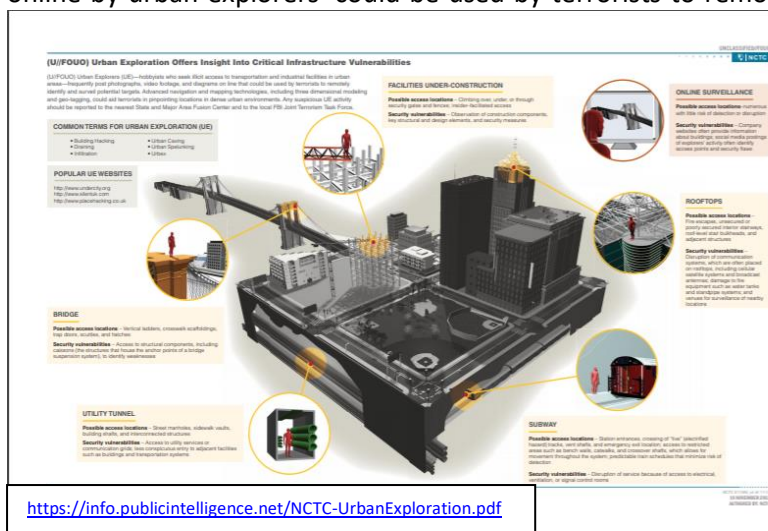
<https://news.nike.com/news/nike-acg-defining-sport-utility-for-the-city>

Criminalisation and commodification have become linked through urban exploration as the coolness associated with transgression has been deployed by companies such as Nike to promote cutting-edge attire. Surprisingly, and perhaps ironically, some other tangible benefits for the capitalist economy may flow from urban exploration. By revealing gaps in security, place-hackers have helped organisations tighten control over entry to and surveillance of sites. As with

computer hackers, this seems an unlikely aim of exponents. Garrett told a journalist (Craddock, 2012) and a Sydney audience that his crew would have probably been happy to advise Transport for London of the potential for security breaches if they had been asked rather than prosecuted.² On the other hand, Kindynis (2017) portrayed a tightening of security as an (again) ironic consequence of attempts to subvert spatial controls.

In the same Sydney speech in 2014, Garrett also suggested that media coverage of urban explorers had encouraged others to reclaim forgotten and unused spaces for public or entrepreneurial activity by stimulating tourism and other activities involving these heritage sites. Garrett said that his group had also unsuccessfully sought to encourage homeless people to access unused space for squatting.

Risk assessment is not as exciting as risk-taking and so, to compete in the media, there is a danger that more sober assessments of the risks posed to others by recreational trespass are 'sexed up'. Both Garrett and Kindynis have pointed to a one-page unclassified document purportedly published by the National Counterterrorism Center (2012) in the United States. This document claims that images and videos posted online by urban explorers 'could be used by terrorists to remotely identify and surveil potential targets.



<https://info.publicintelligence.net/NCTC-UrbanExploration.pdf>

Advanced navigation and mapping technologies, including three dimensional modelling and geo-tagging, could aid terrorists in pinpointing locations in dense urban environments'. The document was subjected to considerable derision on the internet. However, there is no reference to the document (or to urban explorers) on the website of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence where the NCTC is housed.

² Festival of Dangerous Ideas, Sydney, Australia, August 2014 <https://www.bradleygarrett.com/festival-of-dangerous-ideas/>

Unfortunately, the risks of harm to non-trespassers are not clearly addressed by Garrett in his publications – though they may well have been in any application for research ethics review – other than to point out the ridiculousness of some of the wilder claims.

However, there are more sober claims of harm caused by these activities, including those with which Garrett's group may have been involved. For example, the Vice Chairman of Friends of West Norwood Cemetery wrote that infiltration of privatised space extended to desecration of a tomb that represented a threat to public health:

The gang also broke into the catacombs at West Norwood Cemetery, and opened up a sealed coffin. I am the person that monitors the structure of the crypt, thus they potentially exposed me to smallpox, TB and anthrax, diseases which could have still been viable in the corpse they desecrated. (Fenn, 2015)

Fenn noted that the cemetery had suffered subsequently from copycat incursions.

Other agencies have maintained that by highlighting vulnerability, urban explorers have put key infrastructure at risk. John [Strutton](#) (2013), Community Safety and Crime Prevention Manager at Transport for London, argued urban explorers were causing problems for London's transport system. The organisation owed a duty of care to anyone on its properties, and even if urban explorers were unhurt there was a possibility that staff might be injured or children put at risk if access points were left open by explorers. At one point, a counter-terrorism alert had been issued when a member of the London Consolidation Crew emerged from a drain along the Olympic torch-bearing route. More troubling, train schedules would be disrupted if the organisation suspected that people were or had been inside the network overnight. In short, the risk of delaying people's travel to work distributed a multi-million-pound cost across the London economy. Strutton also criticised the sharing of information on closed internet discussion groups of how to evade security measures, as this might help other groups with more overtly disruptive agendas.

Conclusions

Part of the difficulty in critiquing Garrett's work is that it is not always clear on what basis it might be judged. As an academic study, what methodology does it adopt – is it an ethnography or an autoethnography? It may make methodological sense to blend the two, but there are ethical consequences and, as Tolich has suggested, autoethnography is still developing responses to the ethical challenges it faces. Ground-breaking, innovative work is necessarily transgressive and contests boundaries, but code-switching between different communities of practice can be both a challenge to conventional wisdom and a way of evading accountability.

In addition, Garrett adopts various professional and personal roles – sometimes he is an ethnographer, sometimes an urban explorer, sometimes a political activist, film-maker or gonzo journalist. Analysts working in the field of research ethics are interested in his activities as an ethnographer but would not wish to use the bureaucratic processes of research ethics review to curtail his rights as a citizen to engage in political activism.

Of course, we all maintain multiple roles; no-one is 'just a researcher'. Ethnographers and autoethnographers draw on knowledge or skills gained during another role to inform their research activity. A problem for research ethicists occurs when access to data gained in one role is then used in another, particularly when access to that data would not otherwise have been afforded to a researcher. Biomedical ethics has long been concerned to separate the doctor as physician from the doctor as research role. In the social sciences, too, there is a danger that deliberately blurring the delineation between researcher and

non-researcher roles might be considered deceptive and possibly harmful to participants as well as threatening the work of other researchers whose access may be curtailed or safety compromised (Iphofen, 2013).

QUESTIONS

1. How proactive can ethnographers be as actors in a research setting?
2. When might covert research be justifiable? What positions have been taken by professional associations, research councils, universities or research institutions in your jurisdiction?
3. When might it be ethically justifiable for a researcher to break the law? What support should be provided to researchers by their home institution or ethics guidelines in these situations?
4. Should the ethical considerations that govern ethnography and autoethnography be different? If so, how do you distinguish between the two activities?
5. What are the ethical consequences of romanticising the activities of research participants and researcher-participants?
6. Sometimes researchers have to balance not just potential benefits and harms, but competing benefits or competing harms. What might an ethical urban explorer prioritise?
7. How can research ethics committees assess the harms and benefits of research independently from the claims of a researcher?
8. How can social researchers ethically navigate their multiple identities and roles?

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