



In Testing Times: Conducting an Ethnographic Study of UK Animal Rights Protesters

by Andrew Upton
Liverpool John Moores University

Sociological Research Online, 16 (4) 1
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/4/1.html>>
10.5153/sro.2442

Received: 31 Jan 2011 Accepted: 13 Sep 2011 Published: 30 Nov 2011

Abstract

This article reflects upon the experience of conducting research into a UK-based, though internationally-renowned, animal rights group. The article firstly rationalizes the ethnographic research methodology used to approach Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC). Secondly, it describes the effect of unforeseen factors (from adverse media attention to ongoing criminal investigations) on the Author's ability to forge research relationships with informants within the movement, and how these challenges were overcome. Given the interdisciplinary focus of the project, this manuscript will be of interest to scholars wishing to investigate 'hard-to-reach' social groups, and particularly those who have written on reflexivity and power in research relationships.

Keywords: *Animal Rights and Liberation, Protests, Ethnography, Field Relations, Overt Research*

Introduction

'A small group of people have succeeded where Karl Marx, the Red Brigade and the Baader-Meinhof Gang all failed' - *The Financial Times* on the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign, April 2003 (cited in *Do or Die* 2003).

1.1 Ethical research is typically defined as that which safeguards the rights and feelings of those being researched (Liebling and Stanko 2001). Assuring confidentiality, minimizing the impact of recalling and reporting stressful events, and avoiding deception are said to be three components of any ethical expectation for social science researchers (Denscombe 1998). According to Warwick (1982 cited in McKenzie 2009), research into human subjects should carefully consider four parties – the individual participant, the researcher, the larger society, and the researcher's profession (Warwick 1982). The increased focus on the rights of the subject has been the core rationale behind the growing trend in research legislation, codes of conduct and ethics committees.

1.2 Ethnographic methodology brings participant observation, a major strand of this approach, in question. For some researchers, 'going native' via complete infiltration of the subject may, for example, jeopardize the researcher's professional status (Hart 1998). For others, complete participation becomes the key to insider status. Bolton (1995; 1996) used unorthodox methods to immerse himself in a gay community, by means of addressing the adaptation processes towards issues such as AIDS (see Wengle 1988). Alternatively, covert participation may be decided as the preferred access approach, particularly where a project may be at risk of uncovering – or indeed seek to uncover – possible criminal activity (Hobbs 1995).

1.3 This article reflects upon my own experiences of conducting an eleven month-long ethnographic study into an animal rights protest group.^[1] My primary purpose is to document the pragmatic issues (including ethical, moral, legal and personal difficulties) I encountered during my fieldwork. Through references to my own work and that of others, I seek to highlight the inevitability of these problems, and suggest that pre-empting / dealing with such challenges is by its nature intrinsic to sociological research.

1.4 This paper is divided into four parts. The first section discusses the controversial perceptions of ethnography within the social sciences, by drawing upon methodological examples and literature. Part two uses a brief description of my core subject Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC), and offers some context to build my research objectives. In the third section, I detail the pragmatic challenges I faced in my attempts to 'access' the animal rights movement, including how I conceptualized a parallel process of accessing informants from SHAC's opponents (senior trade representatives, scientists, MPs, Huntingdon Life Sciences staff, and a high profile lawyer) to complement my data. The fourth and final section

concludes the case in relation to access issues, gatekeeper relationships, political climate and research ethics. I hope to offer a candid reflection on the moral dilemmas, issues of trust, and discretion needed to ensure a fair and justified portrayal. I have given pseudonyms for several animal rights activists (these are indicated in the endnotes). Those informants that did not request anonymity and were happy to be quoted 'on record' have been publicly named.

Research Ethics

2.1 Covert research methods enhance the likelihood of access and mitigate the risks involved with the researcher's presence affecting the behavior of those being observed (Humphreys 1970; Wallis 1976; Winlow et al 2001). In a covert role, the status of the researcher remains unrevealed: 'the researcher spends an extended period of time in a particular setting, concealing the fact that s/he is a researcher and pretending to play some other role. In such a situation the identity of the researcher and knowledge of his or her work is kept from those who are being studied, who have no knowledge that they are being studied' (Bulmer 1982).

2.2 Ethnographic research (specifically covert) has long held a controversial position in social sciences. According to Purkis (2001), ethnographic work is significantly more emotive than quantitative methods of sociological enquiry, 'mainly because they raise uncomfortable practical and theoretical questions about the legitimacy of sociological investigation: Why do it? Who is it for? And what do the people being studied think about it?' As a result, covert observation has been discredited in some quarters (Erikson 1967; Fielding 1993) and is 'analogous to infiltration by agent provocateurs or spies' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 264). Criticism centers on the betrayal of trust, deception, invasion, damage of field relations, and the reputation of social research as a whole (Homan and Bulman 1982).

2.3 The covert study of homosexual activities in public toilets in the 1960s by Laud Humphreys was memorably criticized on ethical grounds to the extent that Humphreys' PhD was later withdrawn (McKenzie 2009). He had failed to achieve informed consent for his research, and had committed a clear invasion of his unwitting subjects' rights to privacy. The British Sociological Association's code of ethical conduct emphasizes this as a significant problem:

As far as possible participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used^[2] http://www.britisoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm#_cov

2.4 The absence of explicit informed consent jeopardizes the welfare of participants and is judged as a significant drawback (Robson 2002). Additionally, potential harm maybe introduced in the manner chosen to report research results, and the consequences of publication to a wider public (Sieber 1993). The threat of harm affects researchers, too. Jacobs (1998), for example, was subjected to harassment and was eventually robbed at gunpoint by a crack dealer (one of his research informants). Yet it is only relatively recently that researchers have begun to admit to such occupational hazards (Scott 1998). Context has been hugely beneficial in shaping my approach. At every stage, I have been acutely aware of the risks in taking a 'wrong move'. An overt research approach, encompassing a thorough pre-investigation of my subject and its very reason for being, has helped to guide and inform my enquiries, as the next section explains.

SHAC Attack: Overview of Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty's (SHAC) Protesting History

3.1 Established in August 1999 by three veteran British animal rights protesters Greg Avery, his wife Natasha, and Heather Nicholson, SHAC's principle goal was to force the closure of Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS), a leading contract research organization for the international pharmaceutical and biochemical industries, which has been a protest target since the late-1970s. SHAC's strategy centers on 'direct action' or, harassment and intimidation of HLS affiliates.^[3] Through such, SHAC hoped to cut the life source from HLS, engendering their financial ruin (*Business FT Magazine* 2000).

3.2 SHAC's emergence brought a greater focus and professionalized approach to the UK animal rights movement, even setting an ambitious three-year deadline to force HLS' closure (Author's interview with John Curtin). In 2001, SHAC moved to a new dimension when it started to publish the names of their targets via their website SHAC.Net (Upton 2011a). Since January 2008, SHAC has orchestrated targeted protests in more than twenty countries (SHAC eNewsletter 2009). Its strategy, modeled on earlier campaigns that had successfully forced the closure of two established animal breeders - Consort Kennels, based in North-East England; and Hillgrove Cat Farm, Oxfordshire, UK (Boggan 2006), is claimed to have resulted in more than 270 companies ending business ties with HLS (Yeoman 2009).^[4]

3.3 SHAC's 'legal' campaign has been bolstered further by the underground Animal Liberation Front (ALF) movement, the moniker used by activists that implement economic sabotage against companies that allegedly profit from animal exploitation (Jonas 2004). The synchronization of SHAC and ALF has long been speculated on by UK media and law enforcement agencies (Upton 2001b). Up until 2002, SHAC's communication contained 'action reports' received from the ALF, admitting direct-action attacks on HLS' stakeholders.^[5] In 2003, HLS successfully persuaded the UK High Court to grant an injunction against SHAC publishing such reports in any form (Robins 2004; Author's interview with Timothy Lawson-Crutenden HLS Solicitor-Advocate).

3.4 In late 2002, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI), the trade body representing the interests of major pharmaceutical drug firms, started to compile cases of harassment and intimidation reported by animal experimentation employees (given the prior absence of UK police and UK Home Office department attempts to do so). These figures were collated from reports given to the ABPI from affected companies as well as data gathered from the Association's security advisors and experts. They provided a more complete picture of the state of play. This diagnosis was escalated to the UK government as an

emerging concern. In the first three months of 2004, the Association claimed that thirty-two company directors received threatening home visits, compared with ten in 2003, and that property damage had doubled (Figures supplied by ABPI to the Author 2008). The ABPI felt that their warnings were ignored, particularly as many protest actions were only executed at a local, not national, level. Their fragmented strategy enabled the protest groups to remain under radar, as they were not seen as part of a sustained effort of illegal/legal campaigning.

My Own Research

4.1 I was eager to speak to SHAC's three co-founders, by way of better understanding SHAC's *modus operandi*, to profile their individual involvement in it, and to probe them on the complex overlapping membership between SHAC and the ALF.^[6] I wanted to understand their motivations and attitudes towards SHAC's protest forms, and hear what they thought of the reactions from targets. Specifically I wanted to examine the role of SHAC.Net within the group's overall operational capabilities. Finally, I wanted to speak to those active users of the site and a portion of the 10,000^[7] activists who opted in to regular email communication.

4.2 Downing (2003) alerts us to the multiples roles that online and print media can play in social movement activity. It therefore seemed to be an essential way to gain insight to activists' behavior, particularly considering the complex ways in which online media content is intertwined in 'everyday practices' (Morley and Silverstone 1991). Like audience research, I aimed to capture and understand experiences which were private not public (viewing or listening in the private home) and those imbued with meaning (beliefs and attitudes). Media usage is at times highly personal, even transgressive. It is the domain within which people feel comfortable demonstrating intimacy and private emotions. The challenges lie in the infiltration of these spaces (Renzetti and Lee 1993). This is intensified if the researcher does not personally know the people they wish to study (Ruddock 2001).

4.3 My investigation was problematic from the start, rendered 'sensitive' by the political and/or moral climate in which it was conducted. Within their new Framework for Research Ethics (*FRE*), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the main funding body for social scientific research in the UK, defined sensitive as: 'Participants' sexual behavior, their illegal or political behavior, experiences of violence, their abuse or exploitation, their mental health or gender or ethnic status' (ESRC 2010). Clearly my target of research fell into this category and there was no easy guarantee of securing trust, interest and co-operation from my informants.

Attempting to Become a Research Fieldworker

5.1 Upon receiving formal ethics clearance from my university, I wrote to SHAC in January 2007 (via a postal address listed on its website) and emailed via an address published online (info@SHAC.Net). I was upfront about my research. I asked to meet Greg and Natasha Avery, and requested permission to attend SHAC's national meetings. In parallel to my national approach, I identified (via SHAC's website) a broad cross-section of regional meetings in Swansea, Southern regions, Slough, London, York, Northern regions and Nottingham (via SHAC's website), and asked whether they would like to help with my research. Unfortunately, I never received any replies.

5.2 In early 2007, my original research plans had run into major difficulties, as a consequence of two unrelated developments occurring simultaneously. Not long after my first approach, I received the devastating news that my father had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer. I made the decision to freeze my research and focus my attentions on my family. It was to be a further fifteen months (March 2008) before I reacquainted myself with my work.

5.3 Interestingly, in mid-2007, a much publicized police operation brought about the arrests of Greg and Natasha Avery, Gavin Medd-Hall, Gerrah Selby, Daniel Wadham, Dan Amos and Heather Nicholson (Laville 2007). A two-year long undercover investigation (code-named Achilles and headed by UK's Kent and Hampshire police forces) was brought to conclusion by a high-profile, six-month long trial.^[8] All were jailed on charges of conspiracy to blackmail (Verkaik 2008). These convictions of senior SHAC activists, including its three co-founders, were the latest blow by the UK police and law enforcement agencies against the British animal rights and liberation movement. The rise in police attention and hostile media coverage on 'extremism' (to coin a popular UK media phrase), became a frequent unwelcome interruption to my progress.^[9]

5.4 The political demonization of activists perhaps explains the overall dearth of research into movement's more militant wings. Tester and Walls (1996) sketch the philosophy of radical groups such as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), Animal Rights Militia (ARM), and The Justice Department (JD), but both acknowledge that insight on these groups is both rare and struggles to breach the shroud of mystery concealing their *modus operandi* (Tester and Walls 1996). This is aggravated by the movement's deep-seated mistrust of outsiders or those perceived as threats to the movement (Munro 2005). New faces that ask 'uncomfortable' questions, or conversely, those who appear to be eager new 'recruits' to the cause^[10], are often suspected as possible police informants or undercover journalists (Newkirk 2000).^[11]

5.5 Adrian Radford, a former British soldier turned security consultant, is a good example of this. After SHAC's co-founders were convicted of blackmail, Radford gave interviews to *The Sunday Times*, a UK broadsheet newspaper, and ITV News, the pre-eminent UK commercial television network, in which he claimed to have operated close to the Averages as an undercover police agent. In these interviews, he also professed to have provided police with 'vital information and intelligence to disrupt attacks and forewarn potential victims of animal rights extremism' (Grimstone 2009).^[12] Although Radford's true involvement was debatable, he and many similar figures were seen as threats to the cause. In this context, eliciting trust and co-operation became a tough task for researchers like myself.

The Challenge of Cultivating Relationships with Gatekeepers

6.1 Dr Max Gastone, SHAC's legal representative and adviser, explained his reluctance to co-operate with the many requests for help that he'd received from other academics, believing them to be a waste of efforts better invested in protests.

I do get asked to participate in academic research projects but often it is a one-way system and which raises the question: where is the end result? What do I get out of this arrangement? Where is the feedback? Doing media work and interviews with journalists always has tangible outcomes and results - in the form of appearing on the news or seeing your comments appearing in print - whereas helping with academics never resulted in that kind of benefit for those who cooperated with it. Put crudely, "What do we get out of this?" (Author's interview with Dr Max Gastone).

6.2 In justifying their use of covert techniques to observe night club bouncers, Winlow et al (2001) supposed that deviant cultures had little to gain from allowing researchers to access their daily lives (and much to lose by risk of incrimination). Consequently, outsiders seeking to infiltrate the subject's territory will always be regarded with apprehension. As Winlow et al (2001) put it: 'If your name's not down, you're not getting in' (Winlow et al 2001: 358).

6.3 Never one to take defeat easily, I contacted the Averys a second time in early summer 2008 (during their period on remand). I thought that by opening a dialogue at this particular time, I would be enabling a welcome 'right to reply' – allowing them to share their insights, or to spread the word via introductions to other activists who could help me on the 'outside world'. My first correspondence was with Natasha Avery. Her reply to me came just a week after my first letter to her husband, Greg, in June 2008. She appeared to sound me out on his behalf, requesting a sample of my work 'before taking it from there' (Author's personal communication 23 June 2008). I chose to share two papers that I'd delivered at recent academic conferences to underline the legitimacy of my research. After a month of no contact, I wrote to Natasha again. She replied within a week, but the news wasn't encouraging. 'Unfortunately', she told me, 'the issues you want to discuss go to the heart of the case, and we have been advised by our lawyers not to do any interviews etc. until the trials are over' (Personal written correspondence 14 August 2008).^[13]

6.4 Without this essential co-operation, I felt the need to shift my focus from an examination into user consumption of SHAC.Net, to an analysis of the wider social and political ramifications of the campaign as a whole. In short, I wanted to learn the impact of the campaign on those targeted. Re-evaluating my objectives (a practice common within sociological research) also gave me a broader scope to consider State and industrial responses to animal rights campaigning, such as the effects of specific court injunctions upon the form and content of SHAC's media output. I was partly inspired towards this approach by Purkis (2001) who had preceded me in turning his focus from Animal Liberation Front to Earth First! activists, by way of avoiding the police surveillance red tape surrounding the former.

6.5 In April 2008, I contacted SHAC.Net to firstly ask for information on the campaign, and secondly, to arrange attendance at their demonstrations. I received a reply from Clare.^[14] Her email introduced North West Animal Rights^[15], an 'active' group that met regularly in Liverpool. Clare proved to be a great source for local information. She provided me with a PO Box address (one that I had actually previously written to in January 2007), and an email contact at the group for further information on local demonstrations. Not only this, but she recommended that I sign up to SHAC's eNewsletter for regular national and local updates on the movement.

6.6 Clare forwarded our conversation on by way of facilitating an introduction to the group. A few days later, I received an email from Sarah at North West Animal Rights,^[16] inviting me to an upcoming monthly meeting. Looking for a potential gatekeeper to the movement – and excited by the prospect of finally meeting activists face-to-face – I seized upon the opportunity to build this relationship. I attended these meetings for a further eleven months, meeting Sarah, Jean, William and Mike^[17] in the process, and finding myself privy to plans for local activity from weekly food fairs, to protests against Liverpool's famous fur trade, to fundraising attempts to finance the group. The meetings often lasted between an hour to over two hours in total, depending on agenda and attendees.

6.7 At my first meeting I met Emma^[18], who I believed could become a valued gatekeeper to gaining 'conditional access' to the movement's inside operations (Lee 1993 cited in Gronning 1997). I decided from the outset that in order to gain Emma's trust, I'd need to be fully honest with her. She knew who I was and what I was trying to achieve with my work. I asked if she knew any leading figures in SHAC and whether she would be able to help me to contact them. Although initially concerned about the nature of my research and the questions I sought answers to, she asked me to outline my questions on email and reluctantly agreed to 'ask around'.

Turning Challenges into Opportunities: Working Against Negative Media Coverage

7.1 In hindsight, perhaps a more cautious first approach would have yielded better results. A few days after sending over indicative questions, I received the following reply from Emma:

I am really dubious about the questions. There is a lot of stuff in there I would not feel comfortable about answering, even anonymously. It is just a bit too probing for a group under so much state repression at the moment. Sorry. I am happy to explain this to [Gastone – the Senior Activist that I was hoping to contact at the time], but I could not recommend that anyone answers this - some of this stuff has been points of debate and sensitive in some of the injunction hearings. Sorry not to be more helpful (Personal Email Correspondence 7 July 2008).

7.2 Apart from the risk of me uncovering material that could be incriminating to the legal authorities, Emma confessed to me that her nervousness was borne from having her fingers burnt by the media in the past. She had been involved with David Modell's *Mad About Animals* (2006), a Channel 4 documentary that had

examined the British animal rights movement with a particular focus on key activists Keith Mann (a veteran ALF bomber) and Emma's friend, Johnny Ablewhite, a senior activist with Save Newchurch Guinea Pigs.^[19] She was chosen for interview following her arrest for attempting (with Ablewhite) to disrupt a badger cull in Wales, but was upset at how her views had been grossly misrepresented.

[David Modell] did betray us, particularly Johnny.^[20] He broadcast the programme following the conviction of Johnny for the grave robbery of Gladys Hammond. [Johnny] has never admitted taking the body.^[21] Yet David said he had. After Johnny and David Modell had been arrested and put in the cells overnight [during the cull], I was seen saying: "Johnny now knows how it feels like for those poor animals who are caged". My comments were trying to make a serious point, but [I was] being portrayed as flippant (Author's interview 15 September 2008).

It became apparent to me that previous mainstream media representations of activists were deeply embedded in the collective memory of protesters, and I was consciously aware of how these representations made activists wary of outsiders or people new to the movement.

7.3 Nonetheless, I cultivated my research relationship with Emma by joining North West Animal Rights activists on two demonstrations during spring and summer 2008. In July 2008, I joined them at SHAC's national demonstration through Peterborough city centre and outside Huntingdon Life Sciences itself. As well as using these events to develop a better rapport with Emma^[22], they gave me a platform to witness protests first-hand, to take photographs (see below), and to establish contact with other potential research contributors. This was how I was able to meet veteran protester Joan Court and the former ALF activist John Curtin.



Figure 1. SHAC National Demonstration outside HLS' Alconbury premises, Cambridgeshire (18/07/2008)

7.4 Without Emma's support, it would have been much more difficult to navigate my research setting. In short, Emma helped me to 'get on' (Hornsby-Smith 1993), and ingratiate myself socially with the community. On the periphery of these two worlds, gatekeepers such as Emma occupy a position which enables them to be observers to, and potential influencers or controllers of, such research.

Whether or not they grant entry to the setting, gatekeepers will generally, and understandably, be concerned as to the picture of the organization or community that the ethnographer will paint, and they will have practical interests in seeing themselves and their colleagues presented in a favorable light. At least, they will wish to safeguard what they perceive as their legitimate interests. Gatekeepers may therefore attempt to exercise some degree of surveillance and control, either by blocking off certain lines of inquiry, or by shepherding the field worker in one direction or another (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 cited in Gronning 1997).

7.5 I had no evidence that Emma had attempted to 'shepherd' me away from certain lines of investigation and felt that she was upfront with me about the sensitivities of my work. Equally however, I was careful not to make reassurances that I could not keep, something Wells (1994) identifies as a common mistake with social researchers. I was never asked by Emma (or another informant) to change the direction or shape of my research. Another commonly discussed ethnographic problem is the risk of the researcher 'going native' (Geertz 1974), in other words, identifying oneself with the object of research to the extent that one loses all capacity for critical objectivity (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Finlay (1999) and Sim (2003) acknowledge instances of deliberate attempts made by informants to compromise researchers' objectivity. As Liebling and Stanko (2001) note, inherent uncertainties occur in the way in which we choose our allegiances. Where do our allegiances lie, for instance, when a police officer hits a suspect? Whose confidentiality should be protected? Whose rights take priority? Who is right and who is wrong?

7.6 My biggest moral dilemma came with the attempt made by one of my research contributors to use me as a conduit to forge contact with national newspaper journalists. In her email, Bridget^[23], who I had interviewed more than five months previously, asked me:

Do you have any contacts with any journalists from the Nationals [newspapers] who would be interested in a rather nice story??? Well, there are actually two stories that they could report on. But, there is an especially juicy one that exposes an AR (animal rights) organization for the frauds that they are. This has been well researched and is water-tight. Please get back to me. In any case, as I said above, it would be good to know how you are progressing with your thesis (Personal Email Correspondence 14 November 2008).

7.7 It troubled me enormously that Bridget, a secret informer to the Research Defense Society after becoming disillusioned with the animal rights movement, was attempting to use me to network my media contacts with view to harming the cause. After careful consideration, I told Bridget that I could be of no help to her. I never heard from her again. This particular incident underlined the potential for identities and relationship boundaries to shift. Bridget's approach was a blatant attempt to encourage me to 'play' in the information and political 'wars' surrounding the issue. In this respect, the whole matter of collaboration types (be it working with / empowering the research subjects) appears to be through my experience, quite asymmetrical – co-operation from the pro-animal experimentation lobby might yield more benefits for them than it would for SHAC or other animal rights groups.

7.8 Despite this unfortunate incident, my relationships with potential informants were more constructive than not. I enjoyed various bouts of fortuitous luck with 'behind the scenes' gatekeepers who were able to facilitate access to hard-to-reach individuals on my behalf. After becoming aware of his testimony to the Averys' trial in 2008, I contacted Bill Denison, the chief executive of a company targeted by SHAC and UK animal rights activists. Unbeknown to me, Denison had vetted me through Paul Evans, a senior university administrator at my part-time place of employment (JMU), who Denison knew well (Evans was married to Denison's former wife). In effect, this was a form of snowball sampling, something that actually worked well for the project.

7.9 My main objective was to cultivate an image of a dispassionate, learned and curious observer who wanted to hear what activists wanted to say. Fielding (1993: 158) defined this as a crucial form of image management adopted by the researcher. I built Emma's trust by disclosing small amounts of my own personal biography to her. As Hammersley and Atkinson have noted, 'It is hard to expect 'honesty' and 'frankness' while never being frank and honest about oneself' (1995: 91). Deciding how much self-disclosure would be appropriate or fruitful to the cause was a fine balance. Commitment to reflexivity suggests that the researchers disclose what are often immensely personal experiences or private emotions (Burman et al 2001: 448-9). It was during this SHAC event an incident occurred which encapsulated the transcendence of multiple social realities I was situated within, whereby the very people I was supposed to be observing turned to 'observe' me.

7.10 During the journey from Peterborough to HLS, spirits were kept high with the light relief of childish toilet humour. Amidst laughter from the group, Emma remarked: 'I bet you won't put that in your PhD'. At that moment, another activist (Jean) commented: 'Andrew, I know you are doing your PhD and you have to be transparent and see things objectively, but do you have a particular view on animal rights or do you have opinions on animal testing?'. I had to say something, and, after taking me in, I didn't feel that this group of people deserved a flippant answer. I ended up sharing one of my own very personal experiences with them by way of communicating my views on the subject:

Well, I can see both positions. I can see all of you are passionate about what you do. But I would be a hypocrite if I said to you I don't believe in medical experiments involving animals. My Dad died from gallbladder cancer. The chemotherapy that prolonged his life by ten extra months was a drug that would have tested on animals at an early stage.

7.11 The reaction was reassuringly positive. Emma chipped in, remarking that I was 'not a hypocrite for wanting to find better treatments for people like [my] Dad, but it's about what works and if there are better ways of finding that knowledge out'. What Emma said was the essence of the debate and something to which I had no answer. I think upon reflection Emma and the others on the bus respected me for being able to speak candidly. Within this key moment, I not only understood but *felt* the need to reach a new level of understanding with my research subjects, and we continued with our journey to SHAC's demonstration at HLS.

Concluding remarks

8.1 This article has illustrated the contextual and moral difficulties involved in the research of socially peripheral groups and movements. I had set out with the intention to interview the co-founders of SHAC, as well as the editors and subscribers of SHAC's website. But this objective became unfeasible due to circumstances beyond my control, primarily the arrest of SHAC's co-founders in mid-2007, and the general suspicious mentality of the community I attempted to enter. The reasons behind and within the lack of co-operation were many and varied: incapacitation on legal grounds (as with the Averys); paranoia and fear of

infiltration (as with the Adrian Radford example); previous trauma (as with the case of Emma), or purely in the lack of outcome or personal gain (as with Dr Max Gastone).

8.2 It is without doubt that there are research avenues that I would have relished the opportunity to pursue – namely the opportunity to get right to the heart of SHAC itself. Would the Averys have been able to unlock the hidden secrets of the movement? Would their voice have lifted the awkward silences of others? Given the opportunity to speak, how would they have answered the criticisms from the media and the State? And, perhaps most importantly, what signals did their guilty plea send to those in and outside of the movement?

8.3 But, cut from the source of my most obvious questions and their answers, I found myself piecing together an altogether different story – and one which I found had more layers and complications than the media and the State portrays. I found myself refining and refocusing what I sought to gain. I learnt that in these situations, there are more involved parties than 'predator' and 'prey'; and there are more shades to the argument than 'black' and 'white'. I was immensely gratified by the increasing network that I was able to forge despite the difficult circumstances that I faced. I was similarly pleased by the rewards that my honest policy reaped in building my relationship with Emma. The transparent manner in which I tried and did win her trust should hopefully serve as an example to ethnographers faced with the similar dilemma of accessing sensitive and hard to reach social groups. The dynamics of these relationships are hardly dissimilar to the ones we forge with colleagues, friends and family; and more often than not, honesty and mutual respect is often the best policy, even when divided by a core difference of opinion. What this article underlines is that every fieldwork situation brings its own set of ethical issues and we can learn best not only by those lessons learnt by others (Laine 2000), but by our own mistakes and successes.

Acknowledgements

This research could not have been accomplished without the participation and insight provided by Andrew Gay, Dr Max Gastone, Dr Philip Wright, Timothy Lawson-Cruttenden, the Research Defence Society's Dr Simon Festing and Barbara Davies, Bridget, Emma and the North West Animal Rights group. I would also like to thank my PhD supervisors Dr Jonathan Purkis, Nickianne Moody, and Professor Steve Tombs, for their wisdom and support over the years, and to Kimberley Coventry.

Notes

¹To give some contextual background, I spent a total of 120 hours 'in the field' with campaigners and protesters between April 2008 and March 2009. This participant-observation fieldwork involved travelling to protest marches and several key events across the UK, and attendance at regular monthly meetings with a Northern English protest group.

²<http://www.britisoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm#_cov>, date accessed 13 July 2011.

³Author's interview with Dr Philip Wright, Head of Science and Technology at the Association of British Pharmaceutical Industry (4 July 2008).

⁴These figures are disputed by HLS itself (Author's Interview with Andrew Gay, HLS Marketing and PR Director 22 April 2008).

⁵Author's interview with Andrew Gay, Huntingdon Life Sciences' Marketing Director (22 April 2008).

⁶I had a general idea of who I needed to approach within the UK animal rights community to commence field-work and initiate interviews. This awareness and knowledge was partly generated from media appearances of leading activists, but also from activist literature and materials such as SHAC's website, newsletters and pamphlets.

⁷Figure taken from Yeoman (2008).

⁸The police investigation cost in the region of £3.5 million pounds was undertaken by officers drawn from a number of constabularies, led by Detective Chief Inspector Andy Robbins, of the Kent Police. Those constabularies included Kent, Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex, Thames Valley and City of London. Other constabularies contributed evidence including National Extremist Tactical Co-ordination Unit (NETCU), the City of London Economic Crime Unit, and the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA), who had gathered evidence from witnesses (Author's personal communication with Crown Prosecution Service, 13 January 2009). It was understood the American Federal Bureau Investigations (FBI) also contributed material used in the trial.

⁹For example, see Evans et al (2004).

¹⁰Author's interview with Emma (21 September 2008).

¹¹Matthew Taylor (2004) was one reporter who had secretly attended a national protest camp in September 2004 for The Guardian, reporting how protesters were 'warned' to be on the lookout for undercover police and journalists' (Taylor 2004).

¹²I asked Max Gastone about the veracity of this story and he stated Radford's claims did not stand up (Personal Email Correspondence 3 March 2009).

¹³At no stage did the Averys suggest to me they would be willing to allow me to visit them in prison. I did

write to Greg, Natasha and Heather Nicholson in January 2009 following their convictions, but received no reply.

¹⁴This is a pseudonym.

¹⁵This is a pseudonym.

¹⁶These are both pseudonyms.

¹⁷All names are pseudonyms.

¹⁸This is a pseudonym.

¹⁹This campaign group, established in August 1999, had successfully campaigned to stop Newchurch farm's owners – the Hall family - breeding animals for animal experimentation. Although the Hall family was subject to several years of threats and intimidation, Save Newchurch Guinea Pigs said the group was in no way connected to acts of intimidation or harassment.

²⁰Emma's friend, Johnny Ablewhite, was jailed for twelve years along with fellow activists John Smith and Kerry Whitburn in 2006 for conspiring to blackmail the Hall family, owners of Darley Oaks guinea pig farm in Newchurch, Staffordshire, UK. As part of the conspiracy the prosecution alleged the three men had stolen the human remains of Gladys Hammond, the mother-in-law of one of the owners of the farm, in an attempt to blackmail the owners to close the farm before they would return the body of Mrs Hammond to her family.

²¹For further background on this episode please also see Morris, Ward and Butt (2006).

²²During one of our numerous conversations we both realized Emma knew a teaching colleague of mine from university.

²³This is a pseudonym

References

BUSINESS FT WEEKEND MAGAZINE (2000) 'They Know Where You Live: Animal Activists Have Brought Protest to the Stock Market as Scared Investors Ditch Their Shares in Science Labs', The 6 May 2000

SHAC (2009) SHAC E-newsletter, 17 January 2009.

Tonight With Trevor McDonald, (2004) ITV 1, 22 November 2004.

BOGGAN, S (2006) 'Money Talks', *The Guardian*, 1 June.

BOLTON, R. (1995) Tricks, Friends, and Lovers, in D. Nulick and M. Willson (eds) *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*. London: Routledge.

BOLTON, R. (1996) Coming Home: The Journey of a Gay Ethnographer in the Years of the Plague, in E. Lewin and W.C. Leap (eds) *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

BULMER, M. (1982) *Social Research Ethics: An Examination of the Merits of Covert Participant Observation*, (ed.) London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press, pp4-12.

BURMAN, M, S. Batchelor, and J. Brown, (2001) 'Researching Girls and Violence: Facing the Dilemma of Fieldwork', *British Journal of Criminology*, 41 (3), pp. 443-459. [doi://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjc/41.3.443]

CHANNEL 4 (2006) *Mad About Animals*, David Modell Productions for Channel 4, Executive Producer: Chris Bryer, Associate Producer: Alison Ramsey, Director: David Modell, Broadcast 15 May, 60 minutes, UK.

DENSCOMBE, M (1998) *The Good Research Guide*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

DO OR DIE (2003) 'SHAC Attack! Targeting Companies Animal Rights Style', Issue 10, Online Available HTTP: <<http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no10/shac.htm>> (Consulted 16 August 2010).

DOWNING, J (2003) 'Audiences and Readers of Alternative Media: The Absent Lure of the Virtually Unknown', *Media Culture and Society*, 25 (5): 625-645. [doi://dx.doi.org/10.1177/01634437030255004]

ERIKSON, K (1967) 'A Comment on Disguised Observation in Sociology', *Social Problems*, 12: pp.366-373.

ESRC (2010). *Framework for Research Ethics*. Swindon, ESRC
<http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/Framework%20for%20Research%20Ethics%202010_tcm6-35811.pdf>

EVANS, M., S. Tendler and P. Hosking (2004) 'MI5 Agents Plan to Infiltrate Animal Rights Terror Groups', *The Times*, 10 September.

- FIELDING, N. (1993) Ethnography in N. Gilbert's (ed.) *Researching Social Life*, London: Sage, pp154-171.
- FINLAY, A (1999) 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: An Ethnographic Encounter in Northern Ireland and its Sequel', *Sociological Research Online*, 4 (3). <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/4/3/finlay.html>>.
- GEERTZ, C (1974) 'From the Native's Point of View: On Nature of Anthropological Understanding', *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 28 (1) pp26-45.
- GRIMSTONE, J (2009) 'Animal Terrorist Group Foiled By Informant Dressed as a Beagle', *The Sunday Times*, 1 March.
- GRONNING, T (1997) 'Accessing Large Corporations: Research Ethics and Gatekeeper-Relations in the Case of Researching a Japanese-Invested Factory', *Sociological Research Online*, 2 (4), <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/4/9.html>>
- HAMMERSLEY, M. and P. Atkinson (1995) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice (Second Edition)* London, Routledge.
- HART, A. (1998) *Buying and Selling Power: Anthropological Reflections on Prostitution in Spain*. Oxford: Westview Press.
- HOBBS, D (1995) *Bad Business*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- HOMAN, R. and Bulmer, M. (1982) On the Merits of Covert Methods: a dialogue in M. Bulmer (editor) *Social Research Ethics: An Examination of the Merits of Covert Participant Observation*, London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press, pp105-121.
- HORNSBY-SMITH, M. (1993) Gaining Access in N. Gilbert's (ed.) *Researching Social Life*, London: Sage, pp52-67.
- HUMPHREYS, L. (1970) *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, Chicago: Aldine Publications.
- JACOBS, R (1998) Researching Crack Dealers: Dilemmas and Contradictions in J. Ferrell and M. Hamm (eds.) *Ethnography at the Edge*. Boston, Northeastern University, pp.160-177.
- JONAS, K (2004) Bricks and Bullhorns, in Best, Steven and Nocella, Anthony (eds.) *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters: Reflections on the Liberation of Animals*, New York: Lantern Books, pp.263-271.
- LAINE, M. de (2000) *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research*, London, Sage.
- LAVILLE, Sandra (2007) 'Animal rights activists involved in bid to shut lab among 30 people arrested in raids', *The Guardian*, 2 May.
- LIEBLING, A & B. Stanko (2001) 'Allegiance & Ambivalence: Some Dilemmas in Researching Disorder and Violence', *British Journal of Criminology*, 41 (3); pp421-430. [doi://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjc/41.3.421]
- MCKENZIE, J (2009) 'You Don't Know How Lucky You Are to Be Here!': Reflections on Covert Practices in an Overt Participant Observation Study, *Sociological Research Online* 14(2)8 <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk.ezproxy.liv.ac.uk/14/2/8.html>>
- MORRIS, S, D. Ward and R. Butt (2006) 'Jail for Animal Rights Extremists Who Stole Body of Elderly Woman From Her Grave', *The Guardian*, 12 May.
- MORLEY, D. and R. Silverstone (1991) Communication and Context: Ethnographic Perspectives on the Media Audience, in K.B Jensen, Klaus and N.W. Jankowski (eds.) *A Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research*, London and New York: Routledge, pp.149-162.
- MUNRO, Lyle (2005) 'Strategies, Action Repertoires and DIY Activism in the Animal Rights Movement', *Social Movement Studies*, 4 (1), pp.75-94. [doi://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742830500051994]
- NEWKIRK, Ingrid (2000) *Free the Animals: The Story of the Animal Liberation Front*, New York: Lantern Books.
- PURKIS, Jonathan (2001) *A Sociology of Environmental Protest: Earth First! and the Theory and Practice of Anarchism*, PhD thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University.
- RENZETTI, C. and Lee, R. (1993) *Researching Sensitive Subject Topics*, London: Sage.
- ROBINS, J (2004) 'Red in Tooth and Law', *The Lawyer*, 16 August.
- ROBSON, C (2002) *Real World Research (Second Edition)* Oxford, Blackwell.
- RUDDOCK, A (2001) *Understanding Audiences: Theories and Methods*, London: Sage.
- SCOTT, S. (1998). 'Here be dragons: researching the unbelievable, hearing the unthinkable: a feminist sociologist in unchartered territory'. *Sociological Research Online*, 3, (3) <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/3/3/1.html>> [doi:10.5153/sro.189]
- SIEBER, J. (1993) The Ethics and Politics of Social Research'. In C. Renzetti and R. Lee (eds.) *Researching Sensitive Topics*, London, Pluto.

SIM, J (2003) Whose Side Are We Not On?, In S.Tombs and D. Whyte (eds.) *Unmasking the Crimes of the Powerful: Scrutinising States and Corporations*. New York: Peter Lang. pp. 239-260.

TAYLOR, M (2004) 'Animal Rights Activists Hit Training Camp to Sharpen Up Battle Plans', *The Guardian*, 6 September.

TESTER, K and J. Walls (1996) 'The Ideology and Current Activities of the Animal Liberation Front', *Contemporary Politics*, 2, pp.79-91. [doi://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569779608454729]

UPTON, Andrew (2011a) 'Contingent communication in a hybrid multi-media world: Analysing the campaigning strategies of SHAC', *New Media and Society*, Vol. 13 (1): 96-113. [doi://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365304]

UPTON, Andrew (2011b) 'Go on, get out there, and make it happen': Reflections on the first ten years of Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC), *Parliamentary Affairs*, (Forthcoming, in press).

VERKAIK, R (2008) 'Animal Rights Four Guilty of Terror Spree', *The Independent*, 24 December.

WALLIS, R. (1976) *The Road To Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology*, London: Heinemann Educational.

WARWICK, D.P. (1982) *Tearoom Trade: Means and Ends in Social Research* in M. Bulmer (editor) *Social Research Ethics: An Examination of the Merits of Covert Participant Observation*, London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press, pp 38-58.

WELLS, P (1994) Ethics in Business and Management Research, in V.J. Wass and P.E. Wells (ed.) *Principles and Practice in Business and Management Research*, Aldershot: Dartmouth, pp.277-297.

WENGLER, J.L. (1988) *Ethnographers in the Field: The Psychology of Research*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama.

WINLOW, S., D. Hobbs, S. Lister, and P. Hadfield (2001) '**Get Ready to Duck: Bouncers and the Realities of Ethnographic Research on Violent Groups**'. *British Journal of Criminology*, 41 (3), pp.536-548. [doi://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjc/41.3.536]

YEOMAN, F. (2008) The £1m Hate Campaign Paid For By High Street Collections', *The Times*, 24 December.

YEOMAN, F. (2009) 'Animal Activists Jailed For Campaign of Hate and Fear', *The Times*, 22 January.