
John Sugden
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a John Sugden (University of Brighton)

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Truth or dare: examining the perils, pains and pitfalls of investigative methodologies in the sociology of sport

John Sugden
(University of Brighton)

Introduction

In a leading article for the BSA’s (British Sociological Association) Newsletter, Ivor Gaber, freelance journalist and Emeritus Professor of Broadcast Journalism at Goldsmiths College, University of London, suggested that sociologists might improve their skills of interpretation and communication by developing closer relations with journalism, particularly investigative journalism. In this chapter I will be reflecting upon Gaber’s position and exemplifying issues that have emerged through my own field work: researching amongst other things trans-national boxing subcultures (Sugden, 1996), the governing body of world football, FIFA (Sugden and Tomlinson 1998; 1999; 2003), and the ‘black economy’ that has grown in the shadows of the same game (Sugden, 2002). Much of this output inhabits a grey area between investigative journalism and investigative sociology. Trying to make sense of the differences and similarities between the two professions raises a series of epistemological and ethical issues. The substance of this chapter explores these and related methodological concerns, beginning with the most problematic question of all: what is truth¹.

(Note: ¹Some of the material in this chapter builds upon work with Alan Tomlinson previously published by us in Power Games: A Critical Sociology of Sport (2002) and a chapter of my own that appeared in Mike McNamee’s edited collection, M. McNamee (2005), Philosophy and the Sciences of Exercise, Health and Sport. Routledge, London).

Searching for the truth

What, then, are investigative journalists and how do they differ from their sociological counterparts? According to Hugo De Burgh (2000), investigative journalists are usually driven people whose mission it is to probe into and uncover corruption, malpractice and abuse of power usually in corporate, government and/or criminal settings:

Investigative journalists attempt to get at the truth where the truth is obscure because it suits others that it be so; they choose there topics from a sense of right and wrong which we can only call a moral sense, but in the manner of their research
they attempt to be dispassionately evidential. They are doing more than disagreeing with how society runs; they are pointing out that it is failing by its own standards. They expose, but they expose in the public interest, which they define. There efforts, if successful, alert us to failures in the system and lead to politicians, lawyers and policemen taking action, even as they fulminate, action that may result in legislation or regulation (2000:23).

In this formulation one is immediately struck by the unproblematic notion of truth that fires the investigative journalist’s imagination. For them the truth is a taken for granted fact that is unquestionably out there: the problem is finding truth and revealing it. Some sociologists, on the other hand, in a post-post modern moment, are so hung up on the philosophical questions of what is truth and who can legitimately seek it, we are sometimes reluctant to take to the field in the first place. Of course there is nothing new in sociological and philosophical debates about the notion of truth and objectivity. Indeed, it could be argued that searching for the answer to this question has been the cornerstone of philosophy, ancient and modern. However, while the philosopher’s muse about truth can be the central to their discipline, an inability to get beyond it is a major impediment to the business of social science, which is an essentially empirical (not empiricist) enterprise.

This has not been helped by the postmodernist turn that impacted upon sociology and cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s. Within a postmodernist cultural studies (Lash, 1999; Lyon, 1999) the empirically based quest to delineate and theorise the lived nature of social relations has been overwhelmed by an obsession with deconstructing ‘texts’ and/or ‘discourses’, at the expense of trying to make sense of the social worlds of those who constructed them. Other critiques of positivism privilege a standpoint epistemology which holds that only those who embody and live through the identities and experiences under scrutiny can have sufficient empathetic understanding to construct adequate interpretations. For instance, ‘that women’s subjugation puts them in a privileged position to produce true knowledge’ of women’s subjugation (Wacquant, 1993:497). To follow this principle effectively means that only women can study women, only black people black people, and, presumably, only football hooligans football hooligans and so on. Surely, however, to adopt such a position takes away the interpretative role of the sociologist. It makes of sociological work a series of generated accounts in which, say, experiential narratives are not necessarily related to the wider picture.

Steven Ward, has argued that realist (positivistic) epistemology has become unfashionable in much of contemporary sociology, some of which views the concept of positive science as itself ideologically constructed:
This attack (on realist epistemology) has been instigated, at least in part, by a loose confederation of deconstructionists, feminist theorists, science studies practitioners and cultural studies theorists. These theorists, who are often grouped under the convenient label of postmodernists, question the possibility of ever grounding scientific knowledge in any firm absolutes ... They reject the notion that scientific truth can ever transcend the local semantic practices, power dynamics, social hierarchies or cultural forms which shape it. Truth, therefore, is not a result of the unearthing and reporting of the already there, but always and forever a product of rhetoric, power and persuasion (Ward, 1997:773).

Ward refers to the relativist position in the theory of method as 'standpoint epistemology' whereby, ‘all knowledge is localised perspective and all interpretations are mediated by and can be reduced to the linguistic or social characteristics of the groups which produce them’ (1997:774). He goes on to reveal the ontological weaknesses in the standpoint position, and concludes his attack on postmodernist and culturally relativistic thinking by staking out a middle ground between standpoint epistemology and scientific realism. He calls for an 'associational epistemology': a theory of method based on the moral commitment of a community of scholars to objectively, rigorously and systematically find out how societies work (Ward, 1997:83-85).

It has been argued elsewhere that Ward's case is overstated and oversimplified (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002). By grouping together under the heading of 'standpoint epistemology' a wide and diverse body of scholarship, particularly in feminist and postcolonial theory, he fails to notice that it is not so much the standpoint of the researcher that is important, but what she or he says about this in relation to the observations and interpretations made and theories constructed. It is possible to research and theorise about power relations in ways that are honest about the perspective that frames the gaze of the researcher, while at the same time, through self-reflection and dialogue with existing theory and research, contributing to the accumulation of 'associational' sociological knowledge.

There are in fact versions of realist epistemology, in which social science-based knowledge aspiring to objective can be distinguished from ideological accounts. Gouldner has a radically different use for the notion of standpoint-based social research. In his hands one meaning of sociological objectivity is the ability of the sociologist to ‘take the standpoint of someone outside of those most immediately engaged in a specific conflict, or outside of the group being investigated … It is only when we have a standpoint somewhat different from the participants’ that it becomes possible to do justice to their standpoints’ (1973:56-57). For Gouldner such a position is absolutely essential for any empirical work that aims to avoid the pitfalls of cultural relativism.
By singling out a narrowly defined positive-realism as the only standpoint from which to embark on research Ward could also leave himself open to the charge of academic elitism. Yes, sociologists should talk to one another in a shared language that is also accessible to a wider audience, but the development of this code of communication is a democratic project. In other words it cannot be white; middle class, western and male dominated, but must be inclusive across all social categories (race, class, gender, region and so forth). However, Ward is right to suggest that neither can it be a melting pot or battlefield of ideologies and local perspectives. On the contrary, the code of communication becomes the meta-language, a kind of exchange rate system, through which interpretations of and debates about distinctive spheres of social life are conducted on common ground. Without such a language relativism prevails and the ‘disenchantment of the world’ cannot be achieved. Sociologists should not be against the empowerment of the marginalised and oppressed through the authentic reporting of local perspectives. However, if local voices are to make a contribution to shared understanding such perspectives must themselves be re-evaluated through the meta-language of social science. The task is always to relate different accounts to each other, and to construct the bigger picture.

There will always be problems with any relativist position that privileges the assumed authenticity of any single voice. Detached critique and evidence-informed scepticism are necessary for the defence of an associational realism upon which the meta-language of the critical social science community must be based. Willis, for instance in his seminal ethnographic work, 'Learning to Labour' (1977), never left the voices of his subjects to speak merely for themselves. His ethnography of the lads is mediated by his interpretative conceptualising intervention, and then – separately – densely theorised in the meta-language of social science, and so avoids falling into any reductionist relativism or romantic celebration of the voices of the less powerful. I hesitate to introduce the term ‘objectivity’ into this debate as it has been out of sociological fashion for a number of years. While agreeing with the idea that it is impossible to be fully objective – that is to arrest and lock away our own ideological baggage and fully blinker the ensuing gaze - that when doing sociological research, particularly when it involves intimate social contact with segments of social life that we do not naturally inhabit, I continue to believe that attempting to be as objective as one can possibly be in the circumstances one finds oneself, should be a guiding aspiration when in the field. Yes, come clean to yourself about your position as researcher, but do not allow this to dominate your capacity for honest and dispassionate interpretation.

Sociological impressionism
Investigative sociologists should have a commitment to the objective, rigorous and systematic quest for truth. This, however, can never be the philosophical or absolute
truth that Ward seems to be talking about or the uncritical notion of truth which works for journalists. Rather it is a sociological truth. Clegg (2000:141) argues that whereas the former asks what is truth (a question that Foucault believed unanswerable), sociological truth is 'what passes for truth', in other words, what people believe to be true in the context of the social worlds within which they abide. Given this formulation, and given that there are multiple vantage points, there are multiple truths. In the context of particular social hierarchies and networks of power, it is the task of the researcher to identify, gain access to, and share as many of these vantage points as possible. On this basis it is possible to construct an overall interpretation that may not be true to any single vantage point, but which, by taking account of them all, including that of the researcher, is the most honest representation of a given milieu's shared truth about itself at a given point in history. This approach can be explained through an artistic metaphor:

To clarify this, think of the difference between a photograph and an impressionist painter's canvas. The photograph captures a moment of reality (or truth) that is immediately transient, dependent on prevailing and instantly passing conditions of light, shade, expression and so forth. And remember, just like respondents in interviews, the camera can lie. The impressionist painting, on the other hand, is constructed over time and incorporates the various dimensions of the artist's gaze and what is known about the places and people that are painted. It also leaves room for interpretation by those who view the work in the gallery. Thus, what is produced is not reality per se, but an informed impression of that reality. The artist then offers the painting for public appraisal, acclaim or ridicule, implicitly challenging other artists to depict the chosen scene differently. In this way we regard ourselves as rigorous social scientists and as social impressionists (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002: 18).

McDonald makes a further and useful distinction between radical and moralistic epistemological positions stating, 'moralistic social research collapses the boundaries between research and activism' (McDonald, 2002:114). People working in this way not only privilege the voices of the oppressed but manipulate those voices to serve their own activist agendas. 'Little attention is paid to the conventions of sound scholarly habits, which are dismissed anyway as elitist and bogus, as the aim of research is to support the attainment of immediate political goals' (McDonald, 2002:114). The radical approach, on the other hand, while likewise having an explicit political agenda, incorporates this as one perspective amongst many and accounts for it as part of multi-layered process of getting at the sociological truth. 'Underpinning this approach is a view that there is no special virtue in those that lack power and authority, and more than in those who possess them. In particular, there is no reason to believe that the perspective of those placed the bottom of society is more likely to be true than those at the top' (McDonald, 2002:109). Adopting a leftrealist position McDonald argues, by all means let politics set the sociological
agenda and encourage others (and ourselves as activists if necessary) to use the yield of sociological enquiry to promote equitable social change. Do not, however, allow this to influence the methods through which we gather and present the evidence and argument.

**The Fourth Estate and the investigative imperative in sociological research**

This brings us to another key question: how do you get at sociological truth if those who inhabit it do not want to give it up? To begin with the term ‘investigative sociology’ is somewhat tautological inasmuch as sociology is (or should be) by its very nature investigative in its mission to discover, uncover and make sense of the mysteries and complexities of social life. Be that as it may, this is not a view remembered or widely shared among many contemporaries calling themselves sociologists. Thus, investigative sociology is an important methodological tradition in need of revival because passive forms of ethnography - that is fieldwork in which the researcher's role is dictated and constrained by the flow of events presented to him or her as 'natural' - rarely allows for the full impressionist canvas to be filled. Investigative sociological research is an important dimension of the critical gaze. It is not a new category (although, it has for some years lain dormant within the social scientist's methodological repertoire).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Jack Douglas, a sociologist at the University of California retrieved this tradition, arguing that any valid critique of what is really going on must go beyond passive observation and embrace the investigative. His investigative mission combines a quest for truth with the recognition that observation is essential: 'Direct observation of things in their natural state (uncontrolled) is the primary basis of all truth ... this bedrock facticity of concrete experience and observation pervades our everyday lives' (Douglas, 1976:12). To get at the truth, direct observation, for Douglas, necessarily goes beyond gazing at the surface. His research strategy is based upon the assumption that everyday social life has a tendency to be duplicitous: that individuals and groups construct and present images of who they are and what they do that can mask underpinning social realities:

The investigative paradigm is based upon the assumption that profound conflicts of interest, values, feelings and actions pervade social life. It is taken for granted that many of the people one deals with, perhaps all people to some extent, have good reason to hide from others what they are doing and even lie to them. Instead of trusting people and expecting trust in return, one suspects others and expects others to suspect him. Conflict is the reality of life; suspicion is the guiding principle. (Douglas, 1976:55).

Douglas's view of the nature of social life is framed by his experience of researching relatively microscopic, albeit 'deviant' subcultures. However, his basic principles can
be taken to apply to all walks of life. He does not believe that all people are fraudulent all of the time, but he does maintain that even the most trivial areas of social interaction can be distorted through combinations of misinformation; evasions; outright lies; and stage management or 'front'. He argues that social research must account for this and advocates mixed methodologies that are simultaneously 'cooperative and investigative' (Douglas, 1976:56) - that is, methodologies that take note of self-generated and freely given legends, but that also subject such 'official histories' to scrutiny from a multitude of vantage points.

Classic subcultural studies by former newspaper man, Robert Park, and his contemporaries in the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s were in part dependent upon the methods of investigative and muck raking, journalism a tradition that can be traced back to Charles Dickens and beyond (de Burgh, 2000). This style of reformist political and corporate whistle-blowing made an important contribution to public accountability and the protection of democratic process in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries on both sides of the Atlantic (Kaplan, 1975).

Investigative journalists schooled in this tradition tend to view themselves then as keepers of the public conscience. Mathew Kieran (2000:156) has argued that,

> Journalism can usefully be characterised, in part, as an official Fourth Estate which has the function of pursuing and covering stories that concern the political legal or social interests of the public as citizens…The basic Lockean thought is that citizens must be made aware of the nature, workings, and character of those in government so they are in a position to exercise their will as citizens and judge those to whom power is entrusted on their behalf.

While the Washington Post’s Watergate investigations that brought about the downfall of U.S. President Nixon in the 1970s is the most outstanding example of this kind of work (Woodward and Bernstein, 1981), the investigative imperative it is not and should not be restricted to the confines of formal political parties and related organisations: rather it should pervade all aspects of social life where it is the public’s interest to know exactly what is going on.

The aim to penetrate, interpret and, where relevant, make transparent the inner-workings of public and private corporate organisations is too important a task to be left to journalists alone. Today global media is dominated by fewer and fewer self-interested and self-censoring conglomerates (Said, 1993). According to John Pilger (1998) investigative journalists and are a threatened species. They are being crowded out, to be replaced by automata masquerading as news reporters. With notable exceptions, such as the works of Andrew Jennings in the UK and Dave Zirin in the USA, likewise investigative journalism has been pushed further to the margins.
of mainstream sports reporting. One of the chief reasons for this is the power of sport organisations and their PR minders to freeze out journalists who ask too many hard and probing questions, the sub-text being, be nice to us or it’s ‘access denied’. Jennings himself is a well known victim of such exclusionary tactics. While the advent of rebellious forms of multi-platform e-journalism – and both Jennings and Zirin are pioneers in this field – promises to open new fronts in the battle for transparency and accountability in corporate sport, for the time being it is more important than ever that we give space in our journals to the critical voices of sport academics to be heard alongside those of a dwindling and endangered band of investigative journalists. The freedom of the press is likewise under threat as ideology and spin replace factual news and critical analysis. The more that the independence of the Fourth Estate it is threatened, the more important it is that sociologists, at least occasionally, leave the relative sanctuary of the academy and reinvigorate the investigative tradition. Sociology has indeed made a significant contribution to this Fourth Estate. Some of my own work, particularly that with Alan Tomlinson, on power, politics and corruption within the governing body of world football, FIFA, for instance, is justified and driven by such Lockean Principles.

(Note: For examples of their brands of web-based investigative sport journalism see Andrew Jennings’ and Dave Zirin’s websites, [online]. Available at: http://www.transparencyinsport.org/ and http://www.edgeofsports.com/ Accessed 9th December 2011).

This book is not an epitaph for the people’s game. We have written it because we believe that information is power. Pointing out who is doing what to your game, we believe that we can make a valuable contribution to the growing resistance and reaction against the total commodification of football (Sugden and Tomlinson, 1999:8).

**Prose not pose**

Unlike sociologists, investigative journalists do not usually target the ordinary in everyday life. Sociologists' interest may include high-level corporate malpractice but it also may embrace much less spectacular, but nonetheless interesting spheres of social life, following social anthropologist Alan Klein’s Advice and making the exotic appear ordinary and the ordinary exotic. For instance, the social construction of status, identity and meaning among groups of volunteer charity workers may hold some fascination for certain sociologists and may lend itself to an investigative approach, but it is unlikely to fire the imagination of an investigative reporter. Neither are investigative journalists so much concerned with the broader concerns of social structure and social process that frame and help to account for the kind of corruption and injustice that they choose to expose. In other words their
commentaries lack any theoretical gravity. It would be a brave (and soon to be unemployed) newspaper reporter of even the most respected and highbrow broad sheet that attempted to invoke Bourdieu and Focault in his feature on power and corruption in local government! In this context, in some of my own work I have felt the wrath of sceptical editors and publishers. Once I submitted a book proposal to a publisher in the popular market. The idea for a book on football and the underground economy was warmly embraced apart from the last chapter in which I proposed to flesh out first level narratives, characterisations and interpretations with broader theoretical issues and social-structural connections. The publisher in question agreed to publish the book (Sugden, 2002), and even offered me a modest advance, so long, that is, I omitted the final chapter! Of course this has as much to do with target audiences as it does with the substance of enquiry and mode of analysis.

This raises another obvious and, in my view, regrettable, distinction between journalists and sociologists. The former are usually much better communicators. Journalists write for the general public, whereas sociologists usually write for more specialist and sociologically sensitised audiences. The latter, however, can be no excuse for the amount of impenetrable jargon that characterises much contemporary sociology. If sociologists are to make a contribution to the preservation and development of democracy they need to find voices that can be heard and understood. For some, sociology has developed into a kind of Glass Bead Game whereby primacy is given to the demonstration of general theoretical sophistication over the empirical analysis of social phenomena. The Glass Bead Game is the fictional creation of German novelist and philosopher, Herman Hesse who describes it thus: 'The only way to learn the rules of this Games of games is to take the usual prescribed course, which requires many years, and none of the initiates could ever possibly have any interest in making those rules easier to learn. These rules, the sign language and grammar of the Game, constitute a kind of highly developed secret language' (Hesse, 1970:18) As Orwell argued vigorously, assumed technical sophistication is no excuse for bad English (1994). Orwell’s tirade was directed toward political commentaries of his day. Surely, however, of all the academic disciplines, with the possible exception of English itself, sociology – the study of society – should be the most accessible of subjects. That it is not is nothing short of shameful. A view endorsed by C. Wright Mills (1970:240) whom, in a searing critique of some of his contemporaries, said:

To overcome academic prose, you must first overcome academic pose . . . To be called a ‘mere journalist’ makes him feel undignified and shallow. It is this situation, I think, that is often at the bottom of the elaborate vocabulary and involved manner of speaking and writing…It may be that it is the result of an academic closing of ranks on the part of the mediocre, who understandably wish to exclude those who win the attention of intelligent people, intelligent or otherwise.
Wright-Mills was a very widely read scholar who had a supreme command of the classic tradition in nineteenth and twentieth century sociology. But as he demonstrates amply through his own research and writing, there is no good reason why the possession of a highly tuned ‘sociological imagination’ and the capacity to write clearly and succinctly should be mutually exclusive talents. Instead he used his encyclopaedic knowledge of social theory as a kind of intellectual scaffolding within which to frame and craft his own interpretations and theories: once finished, like a house builder putting a new home on the market, he removed the scaffolding to reveal his distinctive contribution to the body of knowledge.

**Ethnography and ethics**

Journalism is by no means all virtue. On the contrary, driven by circulation statistics and headline hungry editors, journalists, unlike sociologists, can become over-dependent upon sensationalist expose and juicy stories. The danger here is that too often the journalist is tempted to use sources that are either too narrowly focussed and/or required degrees of anonymity that make verification impossible. It may also encourage a resort to tactics that are not normally associated with the sociologists' method. This would include such things as 'check book journalism', 'faction' (dramatic reconstruction of events that are alleged to have taken place), 'stings' (entrapment operations) and a wide ranging of techniques based on deception. At worst it can lead journalists to fabrication - never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

If ever there were any doubts about this, the phone hacking scandals that engulfed the British press in 2011 which in its wake brought down Rupert Murdoch’s The News of the World, one of Britain’s oldest and best selling Sunday newspapers, wiped such doubts away. Central to the ensuing investigations and cross-party Parliamentary hearings was the need to clarify the distinction between stories that were deemed to be in the public interest and those that were merely interesting to the public. While the former gives a far greater moral conviction for reporters to use any number of devious means to go after their stories, the latter does not. The problems associated with the evocation of a public interest clause in doing certain forms of investigative sociological research will be discussed later in this chapter.

Verification and reliability are much more important principles for sociologists who are required to present in full the context that lies behind the headlines. We must demonstrate in detail how we gather our data and who our sources were in order for those that come after us can replicate our studies and test our findings and interpretations. Necessarily, however, this must go beyond a reliance on official sources and self-generated biographies/hagiographies and glossy institutional histories: sources that are notoriously unreliable. In order to cover all of the angles -
access all of the vantage points that comprise a sociological truth - some times it is necessary to resort to or at least take advantage of forms of deception. I must confess that more than once while in the field I have pretended to be other than I am in order to get inside organisations and gangs and to get deep access to insider information that would have otherwise been withheld.

This raises another important set of issues that require some thought and discussion. What, if anything, are or should be the differences in the ethical principles that underpin the regulation of investigative journalists' method compared to those of sociology? This is a very grey area. Sociologists, in the UK at least, are advised rather than regulated through the BSA's (British Sociological Association) ‘Statement of Ethical Practice’ (BSA, 2002). This is, to say the least, an ambiguous document that has not been written with the investigative sociologist in mind. The overriding emphasis is towards the protection of those studied and their empowerment in terms of the way data collected from and about them is interpreted, communicated and disseminated. Take clause 24 which states, ‘Clarification should also be given to research participants regarding the degree to which they will be consulted prior to publication. Where possible, participants should be offered feedback on findings…’ (BSA, 2002:6). The spirit of this clause is hard to square with some of the underlying assumptions of investigative sociology outlined herein. If even in relatively mundane spheres of social activity, individuals and groups hold views of themselves that are underpinned by self-interest, it is difficult to imagine how those same individuals and groups could be allowed to influence the researcher’s interpretation of findings without undermining the search for sociological truth. This problem is magnified one hundred-fold when researching large official groups and organisations (like FIFA or Manchester United) that have PR departments with communications directors (spin doctors) the sole purpose of which is to promote squeaky clean official histories that deflect attention from corruption and malpractice. Likewise, the veracity of our investigations into so-called deviant and/or criminal subcultures are unlikely to be enhanced by ongoing consultations with subjects with regard to the images of their worlds that we are constructing.

There is also the related issue of how a researcher is supposed to go about gathering insider information. Wherever possible we are advised to be candid with our research hosts about the nature of our research and our role as researchers. Usually access to a research setting is gained via a ‘gatekeeper’. In these situations the BSA (2002) reminds us,

Members should adhere to the principle of gaining informed consent directly from the research participants to whom access is required, while at the same time taking account of the gatekeepers’ interest.
This consent, we are told, should be,

Regarded, not as a once and for all prior event, but as a process subject to renegotiation over time. In addition, particular care may need to be taken during periods prolonged fieldwork where it is easy for research participants to forget that they are being studied.

Much of my own research experience has led me to take the opposite view. Wherever possible I have avoided fully covert work. Not only, as the BSA makes clear (2002: 9), is this very problematic ethically, but it is also very risky, especially when working in potentially dangerous settings involving people who are suspicious of those who would study them. I have reached the conclusion that the most productive and certainly the most secure modus operandi for investigative sociology is to let a few key informants know up-front, without going into too much detail, that you are a researcher. Then as the fieldwork progresses make it easy for them to forget by fading into the background and becoming part of the furniture. This allows for a greater sense of sociological naturalism to pervade the fieldwork. There is also a personal risk/safety issue here that will be raised later.

Also, I have occasionally found it useful to be less than fully honest about what my research interests are and where the product of my research will be disseminated. When embarking on our FIFA work, for instance, Alan Tomlinson and I told potential gatekeepers that we were social historians, not sociologists, the latter being regarded with some suspicion in the corporate world. The idea of academics producing a social history of some or other institution is far less threatening than the prospect of a potentially revealing and acerbic sociological analysis and critique, which our various FIFA publications tended to be. In addition, in circumstances such as this it proved to be useful to encourage a belief that the yield of our studies was targeted for a strictly academic clientele. Similarly, for my football-black economy research my key gatekeeper assumed that the product of my fieldwork would end up gathering dust on a University library shelf. I did little to discourage that view as it helped me with ongoing insider access. That it ended up in paperback and sold thousands of copies on the high street was, as we shall discover, a very unpleasant surprise for my hosts.

**Flattery and betrayal**

One thing that investigative sociologists and journalists have in common is the resort to interpersonal treachery. In my experience, in order to gain full empathetic access to the world of the other it is useful to develop a positive rapport with them. To achieve this it is important to find and focus upon an aspect of their character that you can at least pretend to like. Some of the subjects of my research have been, in my view, pretty reprehensible, but I have almost always discovered in them
something that I can relate to. By cutting out the bad and the ugly and homing in on the good the researcher can develop a line of communication through which the required information can flow more freely. This is the stock-in-trade of most 'fly-on-the-wall' television documentary makers, but it can also be a useful strategy for investigative sociologists. For both the researcher and the researched, however, this is an uncomfortable manipulation of the natural human desire for facilitation and friendship. In the end, because the subjects of investigative sociology can be exposed to public scrutiny in ways that either make them look foolish, bad, or both, such intimate research relationships can end with a deep sense of betrayal. I am absolutely certain that key gatekeepers in FIFA and in the football-black market felt betrayed once they read what had been written about them and the networks of which they were guardians. According to Tomlinson (1997:262), this is something that comes with the turf:

However much the researcher subscribes to the ethical principles of a research discipline, in the messy world of social research at least, the integrity of the project should be at the forefront of the researcher’s consideration. The social researcher, despite and argot of methodological reflexivity behind which moral issues might be veiled, faces the same moral issues as the investigative reporter...to sense that the subject or respondent as been flattered and betrayed is to sensitively recognise the strengths of oral sources and use them critically. Merely to produce and oral account or to over-anonymise it, would be a greater betrayal of the very task of interpretation.

The public interest
Using deceit in the service of sociology, however, requires ethical justification that goes beyond ‘for the integrity of the project’. Once more the BSA’s guidelines are ambiguous. On the one hand, we are told, ‘research relationships should be characterised by trust and integrity …although sociologists, like other researchers are committed to the advancement of knowledge, that goal does not, of itself, provide and entitlement to override the rights of others’ (2002: 16). In the same code of practice we are offered the following get-out clause, ‘in some cases, where the public interest dictates otherwise and particularly where power is being abused, obligations of trust and protection may weigh less heavily. Nevertheless, these obligations should be discarded lightly' (2002:4): hardly a ringing endorsement of the methods of investigative sociology.

As mentioned earlier Journalists, who are regulated through a variety of codes of conduct/practice, are subject to similar ethical considerations. However, there is less ambiguity when it comes to the question of matters deemed to be in the public interest. The public interest as defined by the PCC (1997:1) (Press Complaints Commission) includes:
Detecting or exposing crime or serious misdemeanour; protecting public health and safety; preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of an individual or organisation.

Once, it seems, journalists have established that the focus of their inquiries are ‘in the public interest’ then, to a large extent, the end – i.e. publication and exposure – justifies the means. As Kiernan (2000:158) puts it,

One might think at various points investigative journalists, to be effective as such, will have to be immoral…very often successfully investigating hidden scandals or corruption requires journalists to misrepresent themselves, deceive, lie, intrude into privacy and in extreme cases even break the law, all actions we normally presume are wrong. If investigative journalism were required to be morally good they would be unable to penetrate the murky world they need to investigate and thus would be unable to do there job. It is something like this that thought that underlies the presumption of may journalists that at a certain point ethical considerations are excluded from the sphere of investigative journalism.

Kiernan (2000:159) goes onto argue, however, that immoral actions used in the service of investigative journalism are only justifiable if the moral purpose for doing so is incontrovertible. When conducting in-depth sociological investigations into the affairs of individuals, groups and organisations that are clearly in the publics’ interest to know about, it is my contention that the same flexible approach should be taken. I have argued elsewhere, ‘getting one’s hands dirty’ does not mean that the investigator has become morally corrupt (Sugden and Tominson, 1999). As is the case with journalism, however, such strategies should only be deployed as a last resort when they are the only way through which to establish proof of neglect, corruption and/or criminal practise that has resulted or may result in significant harm to others or undermine the commonwealth. Without such license the sociologists’ capacity to make meaningful contributions to social policy and social change may be undermined.

The ethical context for investigative research is a very grey area that, in my experience, is a question of principle and balance that can only be worked out in practice. I have in the past, for instance, turned down the opportunity to misappropriate important documents, even though they might have shed important light on the subject of my inquiry, largely because of the consequences that might befall the person who left them unguarded. In other situations I have participated in black market activities (for no personal gain) when I judged that this would get me deeper inside the subcultural world that I was investigating without resulting in any substantial harm to others. In this case I believed that the story was worth, in public interest terms, the marginal immorality and, the issue for the next section: the risk to others and to me.
**Risks assessment**

There are two dimensions to this issue: risk to the researched; and risk to the researcher. In several places the BSA warns us that we have a duty of care to those who we study, not just while we are in the field, but also after we have left it. ‘Members have a responsibility both to safeguard the proper interests of those involved in or affected by their work…they need to consider the effects of their involvements and the consequences of their work or its misuse for those they study’ (BSA, 2000:2).

No matter how much we would choose to avoid it, almost by definition investigative sociology can run the risk of damaging the quality of life of some of those that we have studied. Gatekeepers can be especially vulnerable because it is they who let us in and often bear the brunt of the blame once we have left and told the company secrets. For the work on FIFA, for instance, Alan Tomlinson and I - remember posturing as historians - benefited considerably from the co-operation of the organisation’s director of communications who was not just a key informant but also a very important gatekeeper. Not long after our second book on the subject (1999) and while we were writing the third (2003) without explanation he was dismissed from this very prestigious and highly rewarding job. Likewise another highly placed FIFA official – its director of Marketing - who we duped into telling us more than he should have, was fired by FIFA President, Sepp Blatter, as after his re-election in 2002 he removed from his inner circle those he considered as enemies or at least those whose loyalty to the organisation (FIFA) was prioritised over their personal loyalty to him. While I have no proof that letting us in, facilitating our research and feeding us with insider knowledge was the sole reasons for their dismissals, I am nonetheless convinced that they were important contributory factors.

That FIFA and President Blatter wanted to take retribution on my co-author and I for the ensuing exposé, I have absolutely no doubt as I still have a large bundle of legal papers served by them in a court in Switzerland in May 2003 in an attempt both to stop the publication of the third book in the trilogy, Badfellas, and suing us for liable. In the end this attempt at legalistic bullying came to nothing, but at the time it was quite daunting to be facing the prospect of having to take on a hugely wealthy multi-national organisation. While space does not permit fuller consideration of the legal dimensions to investigative research, it is an area that should never be overlooked when planning and carrying out such work.

Corporate retribution can be hard and expensive, but the justice of the underworld can be even rougher. After the publication of Scum Airways (2002) my main gatekeeper received death threats from small-time mobsters and hardened football hooligans who were infuriated because he let me into and chaperoned me through
their world. He had been given a pseudonym in the book, but the cognoscenti - the so-called Salford Mafia - recognised him through the detailed character description that I had given him. As alluded to earlier, the risk to him was compounded by the fact that the book had been written for a popular market and not as a relatively inaccessible academic thesis. At one stage it seemed like half of Manchester were out to get ‘Big Tommy’. Not long after the book was published enraged he telephoned me with the chilling message that because of me there was ‘a bullet in Manchester’ with his name on it. The situation only calmed down when his main tormentor was imprisoned for four years for football related violence. While both of these cases are regrettable, in my judgement each project was justifiable, both sociologically and most importantly in terms of the public interest.

(Note: This character was released from prison on license in 2004 during which time he got into a fracas in a Salford public house and was shot and seriously injured. Incidentally he had also threatened violence against me during a fieldwork episode in Bangkok, Thailand in 2002).

The risk to research subjects has to be set against the chances that researchers themselves take when undertaking investigative fieldwork. The BSA warns us that, 'social researchers face a range of potential risks to their safety. Safety issues need to be considered in the design and conduct of social research projects and procedures should be adopted to reduce the risk to researchers' (2002:3). Compared to the kinds of endeavours discussed in this chapter, the methods and mode of much contemporary sociology - sending out surveys, penning great thoughts, or recycling the great thoughts of others from the sanctity of a university library, reinterpreting existing texts and related media analyses - are relatively risk-free occupations. Alone, such hands-off approaches cannot give us full access to and understanding of the complex worlds in which we live. If we are to follow Gidden's (1976) wisdom (albeit metered out from his armchair), researchers must 'immerse' themselves and live the experience where structure and agency collide. By definition this is far more risky than sitting in the library and, as I have argued elsewhere, ethnography is inherently perilous (Sugden, 1996). The risks multiply when the (under) worlds that you set out to access and share are at the margins of society and those that you research have something to hide. For instance, while doing boxing-related fieldwork in Northern Ireland during the ‘troubles’ I have been threatened by IRA gunmen and on several occasions during my time working with ‘Big Tommy’ and his gang during the ‘Scum Airways’ project I have been threatened with extreme violence: not to mention the legalistic posturing of FIFA.

However, the level of risk can be minimised. The most important thing is for the researcher to be acutely aware that once in the field he or she is always at risk. In order to maximise understanding fieldworkers should be ever alert to what is going
on around them. To achieve this they need to develop a highly tuned ‘sociological antenna’: using and extending our natural facility to be acutely aware of what is going on at the centre, periphery and every corner of the social milieu that we find ourselves in. This is required for the generation of data, but it is also essential for self-preservation. For the purpose of generating open and fluid lines of communication, work hard to engender trust, but trust nobody. In the field you are required to make decisions about who to be up-front with about your role and who not to tell, what is safe to do and who it is safe to be with. You need to make judgements on when it is safe to stay and when it is the time to leave and for this you also need an escape route.

One of the main reasons why I do not favour fully covert research – that is entering the field and posing as somebody else for all subjects, including gatekeepers - is that it offers no protection. There may come a time when the researcher may need to invoke the protection of his or her researchers’ identity through a well-placed insider. Once you have let key gatekeepers know that you are doing research this can act as an amnesty - a kind of ‘get out of jail free’ card - later in the investigation should you find yourself compromised. For instance, while studying football's black economy, on different occasions, I was accused of being under cover police, invited to take part in a variety of illegal scams, and threatened with arrest as ‘one of them’. At such times it was valuable for me to reaffirm my researcher’s role with my gatekeeper and make for the exit.

Conclusion

Getting under the surface-soil of social life, digging deeply into and making coherent sense of the social experience of others, and translating those findings and interpretations into a universal language for widespread consumption, are hugely challenging tasks. Taking account of the checks and balances outlined herein, to help us meet these challenges I believe we do have much to learn from the traditions and techniques of investigative journalism. Kiernan's (2000:158) view of investigative journalism, that 'getting one’s hands dirty is something that comes with the territory' should not discourage sociologists from using similar approaches. Yes, it may mean occasionally getting our hands dirty, but so long as the grime is only skin deep, the product is clean and, above all, the story is in the public interest in the first place, it is usually worth the dig. What we need to do now is to debate and develop an ethical framework that guides us through rather than inhibits this important style of fieldwork. I offer this paper to provoke such a debate.
References


Reviewer’s comments:

Such an honest and candid view of the challenges inherent of social field work is refreshing for its forthrightness, practical sense and accessibility. For the novice researcher the author tackles some of the key concerns for the sociologist, particularly those considering investigative or (degrees) of covert field engagement as part of their research. Similarly for those researchers with more experience, the author echoes many of the thoughts and concerns which some sociologists and ethnographers may have in private and not confront so blatantly in their reporting; ethical issues are not shied away from and the “greyness” of ethical guidance is usefully acknowledged. So, yes, let’s get the ethical debate going which, most usefully, is offered here in the context of sports related field research. Establishing links from ‘stand alone’ philosophical theory to practical field research experience in a given project are often very hard to make but are made explicit in this article where we can at least appreciate the depth of consequence for the research and the researcher. I found this to be a motivating read which may help researchers, novice and experienced alike, to be more aware of what they may be getting themselves into, but also, importantly, not to shy away from actually getting stuck into some meaningful field work, and thereafter, reporting it in an appropriate way – whatever form that may take.