



**Critical Social Research as a 'Site of Resistance':  
Reflections on Relationships, Power and Positionality**

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## **Critical Social Research as a 'Site of Resistance': Reflections on Relationships, Power and Positionality**

Becky Clarke, Kathryn Chadwick and Patrick Williams<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*This paper creates an opportunity for the authors to reflect on our collective efforts to create a space within the academy through which we can actively support communities and groups who are challenging injustice. Herein we consider the potential role of the academic in supporting sites of political or legal struggle, how we work to, with and within groups or communities attempting to resist State power. What is evident is the importance of reflexivity, considering and articulating our position, as a guiding principle. The issues we examine here are connected to our wider network beyond our collective work or institution. In attesting to the virtues of critical social research, we draw upon our experiences particular our ongoing work with, and contributions to, the Hillsborough and JENGBA justice campaigns. When considered together this activity reveals a number of emergent themes which give shape to our approach in contributing to 'sites of resistance'. We understand these spaces to be the intersections where State power and its impact on the lives of those who experience injustice is revealed. The site is then both a physical space of meeting, but could also be conceptualised as a conscious space where, by coming together, individuals, families, supporters, critical lawyers and academics, and*

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*other stakeholders make sense of the injustice together. Through this collective awakening the group can draw strength and generate strategies to challenge State power. It is in these spaces that resistance can be developed, nurtured and discussed.*

*The principles for discussion within this paper include: 'being there', 'bearing witness' and acknowledging injustice, of our relationships to marginalised communities and powerful institutions, and the significance of positionality (Scraton, 2007). Our aim then, is to work within collective organisations in order to expose and counter the hegemonic narratives and silencing processes through research informed interjection as opposition (Hall 1986; Mathiesen, 2004). By actively disrupting these discourses we can contribute to a process of re-humanising the 'Other', where the complex and historically situated relationships between communities, institutions and the State can be exposed (Scott, 2013).*

## **Introduction**

We fight the same battles over and over again. They are never won for eternity, but in the process of struggling together, in community, we learn how to glimpse new possibilities that otherwise would never have become apparent to us, and in the process we expand and enlarge our very notion of freedom  
(Angela Davis, 2009, cited in Davis, 2012: 198).

As academics, working out of the Sociology department at Manchester Metropolitan University, we are committed to exposing, analysing and campaigning around social and criminal injustice and inequality. Through teaching, research and wider work with communities we endeavour to examine and intervene in the marginalisation and criminalisation of groups characterised by difference, reflected in the continued 'othering' of individuals in society generally, and criminal justice contexts specifically. This paper draws upon reflections of a number of significant moments, from our ongoing relationships with groups who are resisting injustice. These reflections not only starkly expose the failures of the criminal justice system to deliver justice for all, here they also enable us to examine and illustrate features of the process and experiences of critical social research.

As with others previously (Cohen, 1988; Hillyard, Sim, Tombs and Whyte, 2004), we find it difficult to affiliate ourselves to a discipline where much (mainstream) output attests to research that is fixated with and perpetuates the

criminological 'Other', that is 'the threatening outcast, the fearsome stranger, the excluded and the embittered' (Garland, 1996: 461). Where administrative and realist criminological approaches serve not only to delineate the criminalised other, they dangerously act to (re)produce the Other (Spalek, 2008).

Over a number of decades now, the field of critical criminology has sought to work against this tide, to expose processes of pain infliction and punishment through criminalisation, which are disproportionately deployed against marginalised and powerless members of society (Anthony and Cunneen, 2008, Coleman, Sim, Tombs and Whyte, 2007). The challenge for critical theory and methods is to promote engagement in research that contributes to an alternative discourse, questioning the connection between relations of power and processes of legitimacy (Scraton and Chadwick, 1991). In doing this, there is a shared commitment to exposing the significance of personal troubles as public issues; voicing the view from below; challenging the basis of legitimate or 'expert' knowledge; questioning the dominant knowledge base that underpins policy and practice (Scraton, 2007; 2009).

Our collective research activity takes as a starting point that constructs of 'crime' and the process of criminalisation should be subject to academic and political challenge. In recognising that responses to 'crime' are disproportionately experienced, the strategies underpinning our research specifically acknowledge the interplay of structural relations such as race, gender, class, age and sexuality. Our concern is that research informed responses to challenge these issues are too often met with silence, the suppression of dissenting voices and the continuity of destructive policies and practices which further marginalise particular groups. Our approach is therefore one in which we "recast research as a form of resistance" (Scraton, 2007: 17).

### **Interventionist Critical Social Research**

In discussing the reshaping of the Institute for Race Relations (IRR)<sup>2</sup> in the 1960s, Sivanandan reflected that "the Institute became far more than a professional organisation; it was rather a servicer of movements" (1990: 13). This perhaps gets closest to expressing how our work has engaged with groups and

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<sup>2</sup> The Institute of Race Relations (IRR) is at the cutting edge of the research and analysis that inform the struggle for racial justice in Britain, Europe and internationally. <http://www.irr.org.uk/>

communities challenging injustice explored below. In recognition that as academics, we have a responsibility and a duty to promote, expose, resist and alleviate injustice, which manifests in gross social, economic and political inequalities resulting in mass criminalisation and imprisonment, Hillyard, et al., (2004: 384) call for research that is “decidedly interventionist”. They suggest critical researchers often share a “Milibandian ‘coincidence of interests’ with community-based organisations with respect to documenting the deleterious harms generated by the activities of powerful individuals, organisations and institutions...”. In 1974 in the context of penal abolition, Thomas Mathiesen advocates ‘action research’ committed to the disclosure of information and the foregrounding of political values in the research process. While in 1987, Sim, Scraton and Gordon discuss the significance of interjecting into public debates that may impact on legislation and policy, with interventionist research which is united in a “commitment to demystifying and exposing the workings of State power in its institutional forms...” (Sim, et al., 1987: 10).

Here we take the opportunity to outline and reflect upon our commitment to developing critical analyses which prioritises structural contexts and their relation to personal experience. In doing this research alongside campaigners, activists and victims, we attempt to counter the ‘ceaseless chatter’ (Foucault, cited in Hillyard, et al., 2004: 371) within British criminology and the preoccupation with research that simply advocates the extension of the criminal justice apparatus, by taking on those issues labelled the ‘sustained silences’. David Scott (2015) in creating a dialogue “against criminal injustice” highlights the importance of “making the invisible visible” advocating a position where we “must prioritise highlighting the human costs, harms, injury and damage of neo-liberalism and penalisation”.

Our work has clearly been influenced and guided by critical scholars through their research and publications over a number of decades (Mathiesen, 1974, 2004; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, 1978; Gilroy, 1982; Sim et al., 1987; Sivanandan, 1990; Carlen, 1998; Scraton, 2007, 2016a; Spalek, 2008; Scott, 2015). We recognise the significance of ‘cases’ and the need to closely monitor how they are processed, enabling a critical scrutiny of operational policies and practices of State institutions. Equally and intimately linked is the requirement to develop research prioritising the “experiences and struggles of individuals, neighbourhoods and identifiable communities”, where the emphasis is on establishing “the view from below” (Scraton, 1987: ix). In this context, Scott (2015) refers to the voices of the “concrete others” recognising and acknowledging individual human context and that “each voice comes from

a specifically situated position, standpoint or worldview rather than a generalised and abstract universalism" (Scott, 2015).

Drawing on these broader principles, here we explore the complexities and challenges of engaging in an interventionist research agenda of 'being there' and 'bearing witness', of building relationships with groups and campaigns engaged in resistance, whilst continually attending to our relationship to power. This necessitates a brief contextualisation of cases central to our research activities. Following long-standing and intermittent work examining the legal processes and the subsequent impact on survivors and families of the deceased, associated with the Hillsborough football disaster, working alongside fellow researchers and family campaign groups, one researcher reflects on two years of attending and monitoring the new Hillsborough Inquests between March 2014 and April 2016.<sup>3</sup> Two further researchers consider their on-going work, which attempts to disrupt the official narrative and impact of the racialized concept of the 'gang', using this as a lens to understand the re-emergence of collective punishment in the form of Joint Enterprise<sup>4</sup> laws (Williams and Clarke,

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<sup>3</sup> For nearly three decades, families, survivors, supporters and academic activists have been fighting for justice in the name of the survivors and the 96 who died at the Hillsborough football stadium in 1989. The original Inquest verdict of accidental death was quashed in the High Court in December 2012. The new Inquests commenced in March 2014 in an attempt to address the many simple and unanswered questions into how and why 96 people died while attending a football match. The verdicts delivered in April 2016 exonerated the fans, survivors and deceased of any blame by ruling that the dead were 'unlawfully killed'. The Inquest jury in returning a narrative verdict made 25 criticisms against those in positions of power and 16 of policing before, during and after the tragedy. Truth and justice finally prevailed but accountability has yet to be realised.

<sup>4</sup> Joint Enterprise (JE) has emerged as a prosecution tool for the collective punishment of groups where it can be proved that the suspects were 'in it together'. Controversially, it applies even where the suspects may have played different roles in many cases, or where a suspect was not in the proximity of the offence committed. Intrinsic to the application of the doctrine is the principle of 'common purpose' where it is alleged individuals have conspired to commit a crime together. Moreover, where such a 'common purpose' is shown to exist in committing one crime, all the participants may be held liable for other crimes committed by one member of the group, even though they may not have participated in or intended that the further crime should have been committed. Instead, JE has been contingent upon police and prosecution teams demonstrating possible 'foresight', that is, establishing some association between those involved to demonstrate a shared 'belief and contemplation' that the principal 'offender' might commit the offence.

2016). They reflect on their campaigning work with JENGBA<sup>5</sup> and most recent involvement with families from racialized communities whose children are currently in prison or on remand awaiting trial under joint enterprise legislation.

### **Being There**

For over two decades critical researchers have sought to disrupt existing and persistent regimes of truth concerning those who died or survived the Hillsborough disaster, and the powerful official narrative of how and why the disaster occurred (Coleman, Jemphrey, Scraton and Skidmore, 1990; Scraton, Jemphrey and Coleman, 1995; Scraton, 2013). This has been done by working alongside those affected groups whose stories and testimonies have been silenced, discredited and ignored during the many institutional and legal processes attempting to investigate the disaster. By speaking ‘truth to power’ this research has examined, sought to understand and critically expose the powerful institutions involved in the disaster in an attempt to re-humanise and centralise the victims and demand truth and accountability from those dominant institutions (Scraton, 2012).

One of the authors of this paper has been part of a team of researchers attending the new inquests; engaging in this process was significant for a number of reasons. Critical social researchers have emphasised the importance of ‘being there’ and ‘bearing witness’ as fundamental to any research process seeking to challenge State power and discourse. Citing Lucy Maher’s work and her use of the concept ‘being there’, Joe Sim “captures the dilemmas of critical research in process” (in Scraton, 2007: 5) and of bearing witness to an act, a moment and to distress. As Scraton (2007: 240) himself says: “critical work is about bearing witness, gathering testimonies, sharing experiences, garnering the view from below...”. Being there and bearing witness were essential elements in researching the new inquests. As a scrutineer, attending the two year inquest, the objective was to observe and subject the issues, events and formal processes to a critical examination. The primary tasks were to document, to monitor, to observe, to hear, to record, to contextualise key themes and issues, “taking as our point of departure the interests of those out of power rather than those in power” (Mathiesen, 2004: 78). Yet being there and bearing witness cannot be reduced to these tasks as it is also undoubtedly about being

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<sup>5</sup> Joint Enterprise Not Guilty by Association (JENGBA) is a grass roots campaign launched in 2010 by families, supporters and ex-prisoners wanting to highlight the abuse of the Joint Enterprise doctrine. <http://www.jointenterprise.co/>

present, being consistent, being approachable, being engaged and being a support.

The qualitative documenting of official processes is crucial, involving gathering and understanding information but also watching and subjecting to analysis the interactions, the language, the rituals and the organisational mechanisms of the court room and beyond. Central to this was hearing the testimonies of others – the survivors, bereaved relatives, local residents, those who worked at the stadium, those who planned and prepared for the football match, the police, the ambulance and hospital staff and many others in official roles. Significant in this process was recognising the different interpretations of 'truth' presented, recognising the varied vested interests at play in the court room, whether that be self-interest, professional interest, or political interest. The role involved making sense of these representations and committing to challenge officially constructed narratives and discourse that continue to demonise and blame football fans rather than acknowledge the deep and multiple institutional systemic failures.

From early in the proceedings it became clear that there was more to documentary research than keeping records and chronicling official court room proceedings. In order to humanise and contextualise the experience of attending the inquests it was necessary to capture, record and understand the everyday experience of the different spaces from the moment of arrival to the moment of departure. What happened alongside the formal sessions of the inquest, before and after court, in recess, in family rooms, inside the court room, outside the court room all become significant. The unofficial activities and interactions between court room participants: the barristers, the solicitors, the families, the survivors, their supporters, the public, the press and media representatives, the court ushers and the researchers were equally worthy of documentation as they also added understanding and a context to issues, events and processes. The researcher would often sit and watch, listen to different voices in different spaces, and document what was happening at these times in order to understand wider personal, social and political power relations in the context of the court room.

But the role of documenting and 'being there' is not simply about observation, or taking, it is also about giving. The research role then not only involved supporting established campaign organisations in this case the Hillsborough Family Support Group but also individuals in some of the other family groups. 'Being there' and 'bearing witness' then involved daily interaction and dialogue with family members, some with whom a long-term relationship



already existed and with others establishing new connections. These interactions involved multiple roles: being a friend, a support, a listener, a shoulder to cry on, talking through issues. Bearing witness daily to emotion in the court room was difficult. From seeing the deep hurt, the sadness, the raw emotion, the anger, and the lows, to the highs and laughter, was deeply moving. Bearing witness to the pain of others alongside viewing and hearing often disturbing and deeply upsetting evidence presented in court through photographic imagery, video footage, written and verbal witness accounts was often painful and at times unbearable. Managing this range of emotions personally, while attempting to appear strong and supportive was a constant challenge and one that was not always possible to achieve, on many occasions the tears flowed in court as they do now reflecting on the experience. The support of one's own community, family, friends and colleagues was essential throughout in processing these emotions that flow from this experience of doing critical social research.

The challenge and significance of reflecting on the management of emotions has been both neglected and underestimated in critical social research. In one attempt to address this a number of researchers (Drake, 2012; Drake and Earle, 2013; Earle and Phillips, 2015; Sloan and Drake, 2013; Jewkes, 2012) reflecting on their work in prisons suggest that knowledge and understanding is "deepened and enriched when researchers identify and systematically process their emotions as a form of data" (Sloan and Drake, 2013: 24). Moreover, as researchers we often occupy a privileged position, in bearing witness to the experiences of others and to State institutional processes and practices. Subsequently we have a duty to share and communicate this knowledge.

### **Building Relationships, Building Resistance**

Critical social research has the potential then to build strong alliances (Scraton, 2016a), with researchers being part of support or campaign groups, contributing to sites of resistance who collectively seek to reflect, discuss, plan and act on events, cases or issues which expose injustice. Yet such groups are not easily defined, or necessarily self-identified, as being sites of campaign or struggle. In this section we will consider how as researchers we become part of an existing collective, often in response to an invitation to join or contribute.

Following the tragic murder of an 18-year-old young man in a community racialized as black, the local police force has charged thirteen young people with murder. Twelve of the thirteen are of black or mixed-race heritage and the

youngest defendant is fourteen years old. All thirteen have entered a 'not guilty' plea at Crown Court and will now face trial. We understand, from the police and defence solicitors, that these individuals will be prosecuted under joint enterprise laws. We have become part of a group established by some of the young people's families and local youth workers, sharing a collective concern that the use of joint enterprise will lead to the conviction of those who are not guilty of the murder. These concerns reflect the precedent we know exists for miscarriages of justice with the application of collective punishment strategies such as joint enterprise. We are driven to be involved in this case as we argue that the collective punishment of thirteen young people, including a fourteen year old child, will represent a serious injustice.

The weekly meeting of this group in a local youth centre reveals the ambiguity of an emerging space, which might be reflective of a site of resistance. Two of the authors were invited into this group on the basis of their research backgrounds and their existing relationships with those working in the local communities. Their recent research had involved analysis of a similar set of JE cases, and wider official datasets, which examined the relationship between joint enterprise convictions, the 'gang' narrative and processes of racialization. Whilst the community workers who had existing relationships with many of the young people and their families also had long standing connections to the researchers, the families did not know each other or the two academics.

Being invited into this newly established group we were unfamiliar with each other, coming together at an early stage in the legal process ahead of the Crown Court trial. There is a need for care. Whilst we cannot predict the outcome of the court process, our experiences as researchers and the evidence we have previously gathered suggests a likely injustice will occur. Our previous research exposes the strategies and mechanisms which the various institutions in the process, the police and the prosecution, will deploy in court to secure the collective punishment of the young people. Whilst offering a powerful insight into the workings of this process, and potential strategies for opposition to it, we must take care. Understandably the families are already devastated by events thus far, with feelings of fear, pain and disbelief on their part exposed in each meeting. At this stage the group of families are meeting for mutual support and may not see themselves as part of a wider struggle against injustice, and why would they? We cannot speak for what the collective means to those families, or the handful of local community workers who turn up each week to listen, reassure or offer support. We can only represent it as we see it, what we

are each doing or bringing to the group, how it feels for us to be present or why we feel driven to be involved in this particular case.

It can be viewed as a duty, or obligation, of the academic to engage in critical social research which seeks to challenge State power and voice the interests and understanding 'from below' (Scraton, 2007; Mathiesen, 2004). Yet connected to this duty lies a deep-rooted moral and political motivation to intervene in reaction to our recognition that their injustice necessitates resistance. Face to face with the raw pain and emotion, such as that experienced at the Hillsborough Inquests or in the local JE family support group, it becomes impossible not to be moved and motivated to interject. The commitment here is to the collective of families and the wider community experiences they represent, to a shared grief, concern or anger, which swells from the disbelief and desperation that something must be done. What our role should be or can be in relation to this particular legal case is a process of negotiation with the families.

As has been captured above, one offer of service to the group can be to 'bear witness' to the experiences they face as the case of their loved ones progresses through the legal system. Beyond this, an understanding of what, if any, intervention can be made emerges through dialogue. The potential interjections may range from: engaging in private written correspondence with key senior officials in the local area; the opening up of our networks and inviting key campaign, legal or political figures to attend and speak with the group; the writing of an open letter or other public statement to expose the hidden and problematic features of this case,<sup>6</sup> connecting the local case to a wider campaign group involved in public protest and activist strategies. The merits of these are considered collectively with decisions led by the families. It is a slow and tentative process. Our experiences thus far reveal how cautious the group is to act openly, to challenge the system or publicise the case. In part this exposes the stigma the families experience, the power of the pathologising narrative of the 'suspect' parents and the 'violent black gang' residing within the 'problematic neighbourhood'. Reflecting on shared local histories and our research we anticipate these narratives which are likely to surround discussion of their children in court and the media. Initially the group of individuals, or individual families, feel powerless to counter the State apparatus of the criminal justice institutions and the media, they are silenced. Yet as the collective space grows and feelings become shared, the possibility of having a voice strengthens.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/feb/27/unfair-criminalisation-of-moss-side-residents>

At the time of writing, and in response to damning media reports of the initial days of the trial of their children, the families support one another to be part of a local radio show to alert the community to their struggle and to develop a collective statement should the media seek their views on the trial.<sup>7</sup> This is significant because as Scraton (2016a: 10) rightly states: “For most prisoners, unsupported by political movements and rejected by their communities, there is no collective resilience”.

Our relationship with the JENGbA campaign group reveals how, with support, such groups can grow in their collective resistance. Over a number of years we had been regularly inviting local families, mothers with sons in prison serving JE sentences, into the university to speak with our students and be part of events raising these injustices with wider audiences. Our relationship with some of the women and families then pre-dates the formation of the JENGbA campaign, and since its inception we have been involved in their organising conferences (in Oxford in 2013 and 2016). In 2015, with JENGbA and other partners including the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies,<sup>8</sup> we were funded to undertake a research project exploring the experiences of their inside campaigners – the prisoners serving JE sentences. JENGbA were integral to the research process as the hidden nature of this issue meant their established links to a network of JE prisoners was essential.<sup>9</sup>

Over the last five years JENGbA have not only established the network of inside prisoners and their families on the outside but also built a broad base of other support. As is acknowledged by Mathiesen (2004) the process of organising in political opposition to institutional silences requires a broad range of approaches and contributions. He advocates for groups which extend to become inter-professional, drawing on the expertise and networks of a range of professions in order to share experiences of comparable challenges. The work of Mathiesen and the penal abolitionist network KROM in Norway also demonstrates the importance of ‘engaging the client group’ or ‘users’ (ibid: 59). In the case of JENGbA, however, they have *led* the process of building an influential coalition, engaging professionals including lawyers, politicians, media

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<sup>7</sup> A *Soundcloud* recording of Legacy FM ‘Search Engine’ programme can be accessed via Northern Police Monitoring Project.

<https://twitter.com/npolicemonitor/status/857940713245466624>

<sup>8</sup> The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies are a London based charity which aims to inform and educate about all aspects of *crime* and the *criminal justice* system.

<sup>9</sup> There currently exists no available data on the use of joint enterprise at charge or sentencing in England and Wales.

journalists, film-makers, musicians and academics from a range of disciplinary backgrounds. Is this reflective of other campaigns? It arguably is of Hillsborough too. What potential strengths can be created by linking sites of struggle? These questions are central to our collective work, reflected in events and writing, under the 'sites of resistance' banner.

Hall (1986), in his appraisal of Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony, reminds us that our collective resistance will not be composed of a single homogenous class, but will have a 'complex social composition' made up of a 'system of alliance'. Strategic alliance therefore must develop in recognition of sustained hegemonic ideas located within civic society. Resistance then to anti-hegemonic ideas, must be developed and fought within 'voluntary associations, relations and institutions of civil society – schooling, the family, churches, religious life, cultural organisations, so-called private relations, gender, sexual and ethnic identities' (ibid: 18). For Hall, such spaces become in effect the 'trenches' in the war against such ideas.

JENGBA then have garnered some unusual allies and support, from across the political or media spectrums. This arguably reflects their understanding that opportunities to engage in work to support the collective goals of the campaign lie in a range of places, including within those very same State institutions who have the power to shape and deliver the 'justice' process. Such dynamics to their community of resistance suggest that JENGBA recognise that 'contingent spaces exist within and between organisations and institutions and those who work within them' (Hillyard et al., 2004: 385). The events convened in early 2016 to launch the *Dangerous Associations* report, from local community events in Manchester and London, to a large session in the House of Commons, which included political representatives from all parties and cross-house, are testament to this. Similarly, a key breakthrough for the Hillsborough campaigns was the revelations of new evidence related to the review and alteration of police statements, which came from within the State – an ex-police officer turned whistle-blower. Yet it is the pressure of the campaign that precipitated the whistle being blown.

These reflections demonstrate the potential for building a broad alliance and drawing on a wide range of voices and positions in such campaign groups. Yet we must also remember that we continue to work with only some of those impacted by the issues we explore. For example, JENGBA are in touch with 800 cases (JE prisoners and or families), but it has estimated that there are at 'least 1800 and up to 4590' people have been prosecuted for JE homicide over the period 2005/2006 and 2012/2013 (McClenaghan, et al, 2014). Similarly, in

relation to the local JE case less than half of the families of the young people who have been charged with murder are part of the family support group. As critical social researchers we must be mindful of those who are not 'there' in the collective spaces, being alert then not only to those whose pain and experiences we are listening to but also those whose voices are not heard, who remain silent.

Whose voices or experiences are foregrounded in the campaigns, the research and the collective work? Where individuals, families and groups are not present, what might this represent? Could it be that for some embracing invisibility is a source of resistance whilst others are unable to be actively involved due to a range of personal circumstances, for example due to health issues, financial constraints or other commitments.

### **Relationship to Power – Institutional Support and Resistance**

Finally, we consider our positionality and the relationship to power of our research as it manifests in three specific ways. Firstly, reflecting on our own power in the research process, to classify 'evidence', (re)shape narratives and (re)construct representations through our work. Secondly, by considering our role as critical researchers in challenging State power and injustice, how we are at once in multiple relations to power as we speak with and to those who are *powerless* and *powerful* to address injustice. Thirdly by acknowledging the wider context and location of our work as it sits within powerful institutions, such as the academy and those who may fund or commission our research.

We inevitably exercise our own power as academics when we shape the research projects we are engaged in and use this process to construct narratives about issues or communities. To recognise and reflect on this power is a fundamental step in critical social research. Carlen (2012) identifies dilemmas which confront researchers who are variously positioned.

Critique and politics are played to different rules and the critical campaigning criminologist or the critical criminologist engaging in the development of crime and justice policies is just as likely to be compromised by political strategies for securing particular objectives as is the administrative criminologist employed by the official agencies (Carlen, 2012: 24).

Similarly, inherent in research are the risks of 'othering', of affording agency beyond what really exists or, conversely, of denying agency through deterministic representations of individuals or communities (Krumer-Nevo and

Benjamin, 2010). It is our contention that all criminological research, including that which regards itself as critical or realist, risks further (re)presenting of the ‘offender’ as decontextualized, dishistoricised and disconnected from those structural relations, which govern and mediate our political realities (Krumo-Nevo and Sidi, 2012). The power of representations and their role in constructing regimes of ‘truth’ are central to critical social research.

The discussion of analysis and our relation to data further reveals this relationship to power, the power to classify, to construct frameworks through which cases or issues are analysed, understood and conveyed. Our experiences of gathering and analysing official data from multiple sources demonstrates that whilst there are undoubtedly benefits of using the criminal justice system’s own data to expose contradictions which require explanation, there are also risks. In our case through the construction of comparable data sets on ‘gang’ flagged individuals or events and incidents of serious youth violence we were able to disrupt the problematic yet enduring racialized conceptualisation of youth violence in the UK. However, by examining these issues through the lens of the State, we ultimately risk engaging in and legitimising official definitions and constructs of violent crime, albeit at the same time problematizing the ‘gang’.

The resistance of dominant narratives or classifications, which are used to construct stories about those communities, issues or events experiencing injustice, can be understood as a process of challenging silencing techniques. For example the ongoing contributions of critical research offered in service to the Hillsborough campaign groups to challenge the State sponsored ‘truth’ of the Hillsborough tragedy. Or the ongoing commitment to unearthing data, official statistics and voices from below, in order to challenge a narrative which uncritically seeks to explain a range of violent behaviours in society by blaming individual or cultural deficits of racialized communities. In both these cases it is important to recognise that the evidence to counter such narratives may already exist, it may even be available to the public through official documents or statistics. For example, where a Home Office research study identifies that “the most serious forms of street robbery are perpetrated by white and not black people yet continues to reinforce the view that African-Caribbean males were disproportionately associated with mugging” (Barker et al., 1993; cited in Walters, 2009: 201). Or how, over twenty years later, data published by the London Assembly Police and Crime Committee (2016) demonstrates that less than 5 percent of serious youth violence is flagged as ‘gang related’, yet the policy and practice response to youth violence in England’s capital city remains that of an ‘anti-gang strategy’ focussed disproportionately on racialized

communities (LAPCC, 2016; cited in Williams and Clarke, 2017). These knowledges remain silenced. The established hegemony of the regimes of 'truth', the legitimacy which they are granted and their echo across a range of media and academic spaces make them impervious to the counter evidence.

The alternative discourse requires constant work to interject in the noise and 'leave a stain on the silence' (Hillyard, et al., 2004). Whether this be by the chronicling of injustice through factual film making or fictional story telling,<sup>10</sup> interjecting into media debates across a range of platforms, or within academic spaces and discourses, the creation of sites of resistance must be plural, diverse and consistently attended to. As explored previously, campaigns such as JENGBA have worked hard over time to establish a diverse 'community of resistance'. Working within these collectives can be mutually beneficial to many of those involved, including critical social researchers seeking to engage in challenging hegemonic narratives, where powerful interests may seek to shape or influence our work. As Scraton (2007) observes, critical social researchers can be subject to challenge in efforts to silence, in the worst cases such work can bring "suspicion, marginalisation and hostility, as powerful interests defend their corner" (Scraton, 2007: 17). During the long course of our collective work we have experienced a number of moments in the research process which attest to such efforts to silence.

Whilst the academy can be a valuable support in our endeavours, as we have experienced from the faculty we work in, there can also be wider interests or relations in universities, which make the promotion of critical social research findings less attractive to an institution. In our experience, at different times the same findings may be viewed otherwise by the university. For example, the institution chose not to actively promote critical research findings related to the policing of 'gangs' in Greater Manchester, when the academy was simultaneously seeking to develop lucrative financial partnerships with these powerful institutions in other contexts.<sup>11</sup> However, at other times or in a

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<sup>10</sup> English screenwriter and producer Jimmy McGovern who has written and produced critically acclaimed fictional dramas about both Hillsborough ('Hillsborough', first televised in 1996) and Joint Enterprise ('Common', first televised in 2014). There have also been numerous documentary and non-fictional programme about both justice campaigns, most notably Director Daniel Gordon's 'Hillsborough', first televised in the United Kingdom in 2016, and 'Killing the Law' Directed by Anton Califano which is currently in production.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/alison-white/policing-academia-exporting-expertise-importing-marketisation>  
<http://www.mmu.ac.uk/news/news-items/5319/>



different context the exchange and promotion of the same critical social research findings may be seen as valuable ‘impact work’.<sup>12</sup> Such examples reveal the contradictory nature of the relationship between the State and the academy in a contemporary context of neoliberal agendas. The space to challenge dominant narratives and critique practices of the State can be opened up, but often require the navigating of the powerful, shared interests of the State and universities.

In her work researching the police, Gilmore (2017) recognises the stark differences for those researching with the police on policing, versus researching with the *policed* on policing. She notes the significance of lucrative contract arrangements, such as the N8 Policing Research Partnership, which tie academic institutions to research underpinned by restrictive policies, ultimately enabling the State to set and oversee research agendas.<sup>13</sup>

Negotiating such interests can similarly occur outside of the academy. We have on a number of occasions experienced those who commission or fund critical social research seeking to influence the tone or emphasis of our work according to their values or interests. Other critical scholars have reflected on the experience of being managed by sponsors, especially State institutions, when producing knowledge under their control (Walters, 2009). As Mathiesen (2004: 72) reminds us, “state-initiated research has a tendency to produce silence as far as criticism of the State is concerned”. Yet in our experience this can also extend to those funders who may appear outside of the State, the large ‘independent’ charitable trusts or philanthropists who strive to appear politically neutral. It would seem that once the research findings step into the realm of implicating powerful institutions, commissioners of all kinds are apprehensive of dissent.

In our experience, what can ensue is a strategic battle of wills, where the commissioning group (whether from within or outside of the State) requests changes, for example the removal or adjustment of language which is perceived as unnecessary or “inflammatory”. On one occasion we were told that we must replace the term ‘racism’ with ‘race’, and on another to remove the term “institutional racism” from the discussion, even though the research participants quotes are undoubtedly speaking to such processes. These challenges are not only highly offensive, they are also revealing about the failure, even from those who perceive themselves to be independent of politics,

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/news/joint-enterprise-research-wins-award>

<sup>13</sup> <https://n8prp.org.uk/>

to engage in critical explanatory discourses which question the hegemonically sanctioned core beliefs of the State. By necessity then, critical resistance emerges in the periphery, in defiance of the dominant core beliefs of society. For Hammersley (1995), evidence that runs counter to those core beliefs cannot be taken seriously, it becomes ignored. Furthermore, "defensive cognitive strategies may be developed specifically to protect the core from criticism" (Hammersley, 1995: 73). In these situations, where managers, commissioners or funders exercise privilege and power over the knowledge being produced, drawing the strength and support from the wider collective is invaluable. For example when the access or ownership of knowledge, or the networks and opportunities to influence or disseminate, lie outside of the institutions, such pressure can be managed and pushed back, but it is not easy.

### **Conclusions**

Working to the principles of critical social research provides opportunities for academics to interject, to work in support of, or in service to, campaigning groups resisting injustice. There are significant challenges presented by working in this way, and we have attempted to reveal these through the examples discussed. Such research is often undertaken in the periphery, with the priorities being driven by the campaign groups and the wider communities impacted by criminalisation and injustice. Here then "the significance of critical research is marked by close association with people's movements and community campaigns" (Scraton, 2007: 239). Given such knowledge and collective work is shaped in these marginal spaces the act of being there, or of bearing witness, then becomes fundamental to this approach. Being responsive, offering our time and energy to react in support of such groups who are out of power, in the moment where an opportunity may open up to challenge a strategic silence, expose contradictions or disrupt accepted truths.

Whilst the outputs from this type of work, such as the Dangerous Associations report (Williams and Clarke, 2016) or the various publications produced by the researchers documenting the Hillsborough campaign (Coleman, et al., 1990; Scraton, et al., 1995; Scraton, 2016b), may imply a linear project. In fact the critical social research process is messy and complex, involving emotion and intuition. The contribution is inevitably ongoing in its nature and is therefore driven by a longer term commitment to a case or issue and is underpinned by our positionality – a recognition of injustice, a rejection of the processes and discourses driven by the State; and a desire to intervene.

Yet such approaches inevitably present dilemmas and contradictions. We have reflected on the various relationships to power. The tensions which arise when we seek to counter institutional narratives and intervention, yet when our research may also necessitate using power and privilege to support access, funding or influence.

Writing this paper presented us with an important opportunity to reflect on what we are doing in our shared work. As we have been writing, in March 2017, we have also hosted a series of 'Sites of Resistance' events in Manchester. The three public events have brought together the broad alliances involved in justice campaigns - families, activists, film-makers, academics, and young people leading change in their communities. These spaces have been convened to continue to build alliances in which issues of truth and voice, power and knowledge, can be explored in order to resist pervasive hegemonic ideas (Hall, 1986).

These themes and commitments reveal the principles underpinning our work. That in order to support collective sites of resistance we must: re-humanise the 'Other', those individuals, groups and communities who have been marginalised; acknowledge that 'crime' is a construct, driving inequalities and injustice in its disproportionate application to particular groups and communities; refuse to accept State or institutional narratives, whilst also not uncritically reproducing the assumed 'reality' of the communities reflected in our research; recognise the value of building broad alliances for collective thought and action.

The contribution of research to collective efforts underpinned by interventionist principles is demonstrated by the significant achievements of the justice campaigns discussed in this paper. For example, the UK Supreme Court ruling on joint enterprise in February 2016, and the Hillsborough New Inquest verdicts in April 2016. Yet such victories must be placed in the context of broader structural issues and State power. Innocent sons, daughters, mothers, fathers and loved ones remain in prison and their release is not guaranteed. As such this must remain the goal of a shared longer-term visionary strategy. Hall reminds us that it is precisely at the point where the power of the State is in crisis, in the case of joint enterprise the acknowledgement of the legal 'wrong turn' which may affect hundreds of life sentenced prisoners, when hegemony is reinforced and sustained (Hall, 1986).

As demonstrated here, critical social research can facilitate the demands of campaigns and groups for an oppositional agenda and exploit the contradictions which inevitably exist within powerful institutions and systems. These become

the sites for the disruption of the narrative or accepted truths. Working collectively, the challenge is to build a critical voice to support and empower sites of resistance. Such spaces demand that we remain attuned to injustice's 'touch' (Tate, 2016) and sensitive to the pains of structural harms, discriminations and inequalities which lie at the heart of institutional processes of criminalisation and injustice.

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