'Introduction: Critical Issues in Researching 'Hidden Communities''

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Hidden Communities

Critical Issues in Researching 'Hidden Communities'

Stephen Ashe, Alistair Fraser & Teresa Piacentini

> **hide** *vb* **hiding, hid, hidden or hid 1** to conceal (oneself or an object) from view or discovery. **2** to keep (information or one's feelings) secret. **3** to obscure or cover (something) from view.
>
> **community** *n, pl* **–ties 1** all people living in one district. **2** a group of people with shared origins or interests. **3** a group of countries with certain interests in common.
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> (*Collins Concise Dictionary & Thesaurus* 1995, p. 174 & 442).

This Special Issue of eSharp represents the culmination of a two-year postgraduate initiative revolving around research with 'hidden communities'.[1]   The focal point of this initiative was a two-day postgraduate conference, entitled *Critical Issues in Researching 'Hidden Communities'*, at the University of Glasgow in October 2008. The event was interdisciplinary in nature, bringing together both postgraduate students and experienced academics from anthropology, criminology, sociology and political science. The articles in this Special Issue represent a sample of papers presented at the conference. In doing so, this created a space for postgraduate students to operate at the cutting-edge of ethical debates within social research.

The Hidden Communities project evolved from a series of conversations between the three of us in relation to our respective doctoral research projects with right-wing extreme groups, youth gangs, and refugees and asylum seekers. We found ourselves

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[1] The conference was organised, led and chaired by postgraduate students, for postgraduate students. Our decision to publish these papers via *eSharp*, itself run by postgraduate students, was a direct result of this principle. The Hidden Communities organising team would like to thank *eSharp*, particularly Laura Tansley, for their support and expertise in helping to make these papers available to the postgraduate community at the University of Glasgow and beyond.

confronting an increasingly similar set of methodological dilemmas and problems in and around issues of research design and access; emotions and personal challenges; power, politics and the role of the researcher. Notable exceptions aside, we felt that published accounts in our respective areas often glossed over these fundamental problems, skating around the messy realities of conducting research in difficult situations.[2]   With the sheer bewilderment and inexperience felt by many postgraduate researchers (us included), these issues are hidden from those who perhaps need it most. Therefore, we utilised the concept of 'hidden communities' as a means of capturing our diverse interests, as well as creating a focal point for much needed dialogue and debate within the wider postgraduate research community.

For the purposes of the conference, the phrase 'hidden communities' was used (loosely) to refer to social groups that are difficult to access for the purposes of social research; where issues regarding access, emotions, power, and the politics of representation were particularly sharply posed. For example, right-wing extreme groups may have a constructed public persona which is very different from the back-stage reality, and this can create particular problems which go beyond most standard methodological textbooks. While this definition served as a useful starting point, the concept prompted postgraduate engagement which went well beyond our initial ideas – extending to research on political elites, football hooliganism, child prostitution, drug addiction and homelessness to name but a few. We invited doctoral students and established academics from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to give personal accounts of their research

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[2] For further discussion of these issues see Coffey 1999; Hobbs & Wright 2006; *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 2007 36(2); Lee-Treweek & Linkogle 2000; Nordstrom & Robben 2007; Temple & Moran 2006.

journeys, using the concept of 'hidden communities' as a point of intersection between their disparate interests.

While there were significant commonalities of experiences between researchers at different stages, in different fields, and from different backgrounds, the concept of 'hidden communities' also found wider resonance with key sociological and anthropological debates surrounding power, politics, and ethics which went beyond the research site. Just as methodological challenges were posed in ways which went beyond standard accounts, so the theoretical bases of these dilemmas were also brought into sharper focus. It is in this spirit — sharing practical guidance which goes beyond most textbook accounts, and showcasing the talent and energy which will hopefully inform the future of research with 'hidden communities'— that we present the following set of papers.

The first paper by Kathleen Blee, on access and methods, offers a masterclass in practical guidance for postgraduate researchers interested in researching right-wing extreme groups. Drawing on her extensive experience of research with racist groups in the United States, the paper offers a valuable introduction to anyone interested in researching hidden groups, outlining a range of techniques on securing access, avoiding 'disingenuous and evasive talk', and overcoming front-stage performance. In addition, Kathleen offers valuable insights into the nature of 'hiddenness', questioning *who* and *what* is hidden in so-called 'hidden communities', and the right of a researcher to penetrate this 'hiddenness'.

The second and third papers, by Jennifer Fleetwood and Christopher Kidd, speak to the practical and lived realities involved in the 'lonely furrow' of doctoral research. Offering frank and candid accounts of their emotional journeys, the authors share valuable personal experiences which will resonate with many. Drawing on

her experience of researching men and women in the international drugs trade in Ecuador, Jennifer outlines the impact of emotionally engaging with the prison as a hidden institution, and with prisoners as a 'stigmatised' community. Making explicit reference to her status as a PhD student, Jennifer draws on fieldnotes to offer an 'anatomy' of emotions in the field; giving an invaluable insight into her own personal struggles and emotions during her prolonged engagement in solo fieldwork, which necessitated a degree of 'emotional distance'.

From an 'engaged anthropological' perspective, the third paper by Christopher Kidd addresses similar issues of emotional engagement and detachment. Drawing on his doctoral fieldwork with the Batwa community in South West Uganda, whose marginalisation and discrimination are hidden from public view, Christopher gives a personal account of his political and professional role within the research site. In describing his fractured engagements with Western conservation workers alongside his relationships with the Batwa, Christopher develops existing debates within sociology and anthropology relating to objectivity and subjectivity, arguing from personal experience that these are in fact false dichotomies. For Christopher, debate should move beyond these divisions, to recognise the social relations which research with 'hidden communities' demands of the researcher.

Building on the emotional journeys which form the foundation of these doctoral accounts, the fourth paper, by Laura Piacentini, reflects on over a decade of research within Russian prisons. Drawing on experiences from her own doctoral research and beyond, this paper focuses on the often contradictory sets of power-relations involved with simultaneously studying 'up' (with prison officials) and studying 'down' (with prisoners). Connecting these personal and political struggles with a discursive approach to the issue

of 'hiddenness', Laura moves the focus to wider debates in sociology and criminology, questioning the conventions of Western scholarship, and their applicability to non–Western settings. Laura's rich engagement with history and culture in Russia lay the foundations for a more insightful and reflexive understanding of research with 'hidden communities'.

From a perspective rooted in political science, but drawing on ideas from anthropology, psychology and sociology, the final paper, by Jeffrey Murer, broadens the methodological focus beyond the qualitative and ethnographic accounts which predominate in research with 'hidden communities'. Jeffrey draws on his experience of applying mixed-methodological approaches with political activists in Hungary, and youth activists across Europe, to outline some of the strengths and limitations of mixed-methods approaches. While these approaches allow for a greater level of representativeness, and cross-cultural comparison, there are also difficulties of translation, cultural comparability, and depth of focus. By examining these issues, Jeffrey also broadens the theoretical engagement with 'hiddenness' to consider the subjective interpretation of the researcher – questioning the definition of membership within a 'hidden community'.

This collection of papers unearths many common challenges, issues and dilemmas encountered by postgraduate students and experienced academics researching 'hidden communities'. As well as considering *how* a community comes to be hidden, the authors expose the multifaceted nature of 'hiddenness' by questioning whether it is communities, individuals, institutions or practices that are hidden. By analysing their personal experiences across time and space, the authors offer suggestions as to how to negotiate our own biases, identities, preconceptions and emotional responses in what are often unexpected and testing situations. By drawing on both

ethnographic and mixed method approaches, the contributions demonstrate how doing research with 'hidden communities' connects us with the phenomena that we have chosen to study and how this connection permeates across different disciplines and areas of social inquiry.

As a whole, the papers make a significant contribution to the literature on research with 'hidden communities'; offering honest and pragmatic guidance on the myriad unique and sensitive issues involved with such research. This advice is most apposite for postgraduate researchers, who may feel isolated and alone in confronting these dilemmas. Over and above this postgraduate audience, however, we feel that the papers make a contribution to more esoteric debates relating to research on sensitive subjects, opening up the concept of 'hidden communities' in ways which went well beyond our initial thoughts and ideas. The papers connect first-hand research experiences with social science debates on the interplay between engagement and detachment; objectivity and subjectivity; reflexivity and transparency; and the increasingly complex relationship between the global, the national and the local. While each author treads their own path, what unites them as researchers is their engagement with the community they have chosen to research, and their efforts to render the lives of those within it in a way that is at once personal, sensitive and authentic.

Finally, while there are numerous issues relevant to the study of 'hidden communities' not covered in this issue – historical, documentary/archival, or internet-based methodologies, or the practical and ethical challenges of analysis and dissemination – the papers are intended not as the last word on any of the substantive areas covered, but rather as an invitation for further debate, dialogue, and reflection. We offer these papers to postgraduate students, as a

resource to draw on in their own research journeys, and to scholars of 'hidden communities' more generally, as a starting point for progressive methodological and theoretical agendas. Our hope is that the papers presented will contribute to ongoing debates whilst prompting new avenues for further discussion, both within the postgraduate community and beyond.

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