RESISTANCE AND REPRODUCTION: AN ARTS-BASED

INVESTIGATION INTO YOUNG PEOPLE’S EMOTIONAL

RESPONSES TO CRIME

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Thomas Dodsley and Emily Gray

*This paper reports on a qualitative study of young people’s emotional responses to crime, underpinned by cultural criminology and interpretive phenomenology. It uses alternative approaches to explore young people’s ‘fears’ of crime via the use of arts-based methods, specifically performative drama and focus groups. The rationale is rooted in young people’s voices being largely absent from fear of crime research and the increased movement towards a more creative and less prescriptive criminology. The findings point towards the value of such approaches and argue that young people’s emotions about crime become highly gendered and age-relevant in youth and have multiple, overlapping spheres that are culturally constructed, resisted and reproduced.*

**Key Words**: fear of crime, young people, emotions, arts-based methods, visual criminology,

Gender

*Introduction*

Fear of crime has been an area of criminological inquiry for over five decades, yielding a vast body of research (see Ferraro 1995; Hale 1996; Henson and Reyns 2015). The topic has become recognized as one that absorbs and reproduces a myriad of historical, political and personal variables, as well as raising methodological concerns (see Hale 1996; Farrall *et al.* 2009). Despite this, young people’s fears have been largely ignored and minimized (Cops 2010). This paper reports on a qualitative study conducted in the North East of England which explored young people’s emotional responses to crime using focus groups and performative drama methods (Leavy 2015). It starts by outlining the foremost conceptual and methodological issues that surround fear of crime research before reviewing the literature pertaining to young people. Subsequently, we introduce the theoretical framework and detail the artsbased methodology before turning to the findings, which locate the young age at which the participant’s relationship with crime becomes highly gendered. Crime was a lens through which they understood and formed connections with society and the people in it. Additionally, it was a lens through which they themselves were reflected— as a risky problematic population regardless of their personal engagement in crime.

*Fear of Crime: Conceptual and Methodological Matters*

There is no accepted definition of the fear of crime and specifying it has become one of the most prominent debates in the field (Henson and Reyns 2015). Lane *et al.* (2014) summarize three common themes: fear of crime is (1) an emotional response (2) to a danger or threat (3) of an actual or potential occurrence of crime. Early research hypothesized that fear of crime was a product of adulthood, with the elderly being the most fearful (Warr 1984). It was postulated that a ‘fear of crime paradox’ existed where those least likely to experience victimization (women and the elderly compared to young males) often reported the highest concentrations of fear (Ferraro 1995).1 More recent research has somewhat dispelled the paradox concerning age-based fears (see Jackson 2009; Brunton-Smith and Sturgis 2011) but, in terms of gender, it largely remains in place with both historic and contemporary research indicating that females report higher levels of fear (Lane and Fox 2013). The gender-fear paradox has been criticized, however, for implying that women are inherently fearful of crime (Gilchrist *et al.* 1998). Feminist criminology has argued that fear functions as a social control agent as women are constantly exposed to messages concerning victimization (Stanko 1997). Indeed, research has highlighted how cultural representations, situated narratives and varying levels of symbolic meanings contribute towards shaping the dynamics of female fear (Lupton and Tulloch 1999).

A common theoretical approach to addressing the gender-fear paradox is the ‘shadow of sexual assault’ hypothesis, which asserts that women’s fear of being sexually victimized increases their overall fear of crime. Studies in the United States support this theory (Lane and Fox 2013); however, UK-based research remains limited and inconclusive (Hirtenlehner and Farrall 2014). It is worth stressing that the majority of this research has been conducted from adult female perspectives (Lane *et al.* 2014), leaving out young women’s perspectives. However, a recent report (Russell *et al.* 2016) into the state of girls’ rights in the United Kingdom has identified that harassment and sexual violence against young women is increasingly part of their everyday experience.

Turning to the methodological approaches within the field, positivist frameworks have been questioned regarding their validity and reliability (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). The use of questionnaires has been criticized for being too blunt to capture the nuanced perceptions and experiences of crime (Walby *et al.* 2016). As such, scholars have concluded that traditional survey approaches may actually exaggerate and misrepresent the incidence of fear through limitations in theory and methods (Farrall *et al.* 2009). Moreover, the term ‘fear of crime’ has been criticized for not encapsulating the broad range of emotions at play; ‘anger’ or ‘worry’ have been suggested as more sensitive in some instances (Gray *et al.* 2008). ‘Fear’ might involve both ‘experiences’ (everyday worries about personal risk) and ‘expressions’ of general attitudes towards social order (Farrall *et al.* 2009). Fear of crime has become regarded as an ‘umbrella term’ that embraces varying attitudes about crime and society; ‘“fear of crime” exceeds fear and exceeds crime likewise’ (Vanderveen 2008: 40). While it was acknowledged that too much emphasis was placed on quantitative inquiries and that the field would be ‘enriched rather than impoverished by the deeper insights from alternative approaches’ (Hale 1996: 132), studies employing qualitative methods have remained limited. The findings of systematic reviews on the use of qualitative methods in fear of crime research have revealed that qualitative approaches, based on sound epistemological approaches, are essential to provide new knowledge (Paris *et al.* 2011). It is in this spirit the paper proceeds.

*Young People and Fear of Crime*

Although an enormous amount of attention has focussed on fear of crime, relatively little weight has been placed on young people’s perspectives (Cops 2010; 2013).2 This gap is surprising given young people’s vulnerability to crime; Goodey has commented that ‘childhood would seem like an obvious starting point for a comprehensive insight into fear of crime’ (Goodey 1994: 198). The omission is also unexpected when one considers the extensive political and media focus in the United Kingdom on young people’s occupation of public spaces (Burney 2005).3 Indeed, critics have noted that, within the Westernized world, young people often symbolize societal fears rather than hopes, with young adulthood commonly associated with deviancy (Cohen 1972). The limited data there is available on young people has documented that they are more likely to report worry of violent victimization (Green *et al.* 2000) and other personal crimes (Jackson 2009). Research has additionally shown that neighbourhoods with younger populations tend to be more fearful of crime, suggesting that structural features, visual signs of disorder and recorded crime rates have direct and independent effects on young people’s fears (Brunton-Smith and Sturgis 2011). Meanwhile Cops (2013) reported that low fear among young people was related to their more frequent occupation of public space. Further studies have suggested that young females are socialized to be fearful, whilst young males are socialized to be fearless (Goodey 1994; Cops 2010). Specifically, young women are more likely to report fear of sexual victimization, particularly if they perceive their locality to exhibit signs of incivility (May 2001). Cops and Pleysier (2011) have suggested that fear of crime is associated with young female concerns and ‘doing gender’ but stressed that additional research was necessary.

Notably outside criminology, the fields of social and cultural geography have paid more attention to young people’s fears. These studies have revealed that young people’s fears are common and shaped through their localized environment (Pain *et al.* 2010) and that young males do not necessarily face their fears with bravado (Shirlow and Pain 2003). Meanwhile, research on young people’s ‘leisure careers’ have demonstrated that their occupation of public space is often operated within territorial boundaries and familiar neighbourhoods help them construct notions of localized security (Shildrick and MacDonald 2007). These contributions have highlighted how young people’s awareness of their neighbourhood can illuminate a broader understanding of crime (Alexander 2008). Similarly, Taylor, a sociologist, has revealed that public surveillance, such as CCTV, ‘undermined privacy and was regarded to be a manifestation of mistrust’

by young people (Taylor 2010: 391).

Given the intense academic scrutiny within fear of crime research, it is remarkable that such a narrow focus has been placed on young people’s own experiences, particularly when one considers how vulnerable they are as a group to criminal victimization, media and political scrutiny and that youth is a recurring topic of interest within criminology. This study then seeks to address this gap and investigate young people’s emotional responses to crime and consider the meanings and understandings they attribute to it. It was designed to provide a holistic picture of how young people position themselves in relation to crime and how meanings embodied from media representations and narratives from their locale overlap and inform their lives.

*Methodology: Employing a Cultural and Interpretive Approach Through Art*

Cultural criminology’s desire to employ methods that capture the ‘phenomenology of crime’ and challenge the ‘bogus of positivism’ (Young 2004) was central to the alternative approach employed herein. Such a framework is invested in subjectivity, interpretation and meaning. Cultural theorists place a strong emphasis on ‘situational, subcultural, and mediated constructions’ of the topic at hand (Ferrell 2013: 257). The perspective is inherently qualitative, endeavouring to move away from technical regulations and instead move towards an interpretive analysis, focussed on the meanings generated by human actors (Young and Brotherton 2014). Indeed, because this methodology strives to explore the ‘real lives’ of individuals and the ways in which they experience the ‘real world’ (Freistadt 2011), it is well suited to exploring young people’s

subjective relationship with crime.

Similarly, arts-based research (ABR) emerged in the late 1970s in the field of education. It was influenced by the practice of creative arts therapy in psychiatry and psychology, which utilized art as a means of expressing what cannot be conveyed by conventional language (Barone and Eisner 2012). ABR now includes a burgeoning set of methods that are diverse in their application whilst united in their aims to blur the boundaries between science and art (Leavy 2015). Eisner (1998) argued that the link between artists and social scientists was interchangeable as historically both had made significant contributions to our understanding of social life. In this border-crossing dynamic therefore, arts-based work is one that uses the creative process to collect data, conduct analysis and represent social research. It is capable of producing multidimensional and multisensory responses from both the audience and creators. Eisner (1998) insists that ABR methods are uniquely sensitive—as they widen the lens with which the world is investigated and interpreted. However, while criminology is regarded to have witnessed a ‘visual turn’4 around the start of the 21st century (Brown and Carrabine 2019), the explicit use of ABR is currently limited to a small number of studies conducted in North America involving incarcerated women (Frigon and Shantz 2014) and at-risk youth and incarcerated youth (Conrad 2004).

This study uses drama, which has become recognized as a meaningful method of inquiry within qualitative social research (Leavy 2015). Drama-based research involves a form of embodied inquiry and communication; it produces a co-evolving interaction between the participants, their locale and the themes from which learning and knowledge emerge (Bresler 2011). Performative drama is inherently phenomenological; the data it produces is embodied and dialogical and is regarded as particularly effective in representing the narratives of marginalized groups (O’Neill 2017). Culture is ‘put in motion’ via performances that have the inimitable quality of opening up ‘spaces for critical thought, challenging categories and structures by connecting actions and events’ (Frigon and Shantz 2014: 90). Drama-based research facilitates a platform on which new understandings are forged via the blurring of fact and fiction so that ‘fictional narratives might illuminate lived experiences’ (Nicholson 2005: 66). Frigon (2014) has also argued that the merging of drama and criminology has the capacity to turn audiences into participants and challenge our understanding of crime.

*Sampling Framework*

The participants were sampled from a small region in the North East of England. The area ranks among the highest in the country for indices of deprivation (GOV.UK 2015). A purposive sampling approach was employed to focus on this location as it was predicted that the young people within it would have exposure to ‘everyday’ occurrences of crime and disorder—both directly and vicariously (Case and Haines 2009). Young

people whose education included drama or performing arts were selected because it was deemed that those with experience of the medium would be most likely to engage. Convenience sampling was then employed using a local contact (an educator) who arranged access to a group of young people within a school and also a local youth group. Eventually, the sample included 57 young people aged between 14 and 17. The participants were all White British, which reflected the ethnic composition of the area, as it has one of the highest White British populations in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics 2011).

*Data Collection and Analysis*

Fifty-seven young people took part in the research project.5 All drama-based sessions were undertaken in a local school during drama and performing arts classes and lasted approximately an hour. Each session consisted of between 5 and 10 participants, with most young people participating more than once. The activity consisted of three stages6; first, a focus group covering their relationship with, and understanding of

crime took place. These discussions also explored the participant’s engagement with media representations of crime. During these initial talks, careful attention was paid by the researcher not to pre-judge or label either the topics raised or the individuals participating in order to encourage open communication. Indeed, the study was interested in the participants’ lived experiences and recognized the often close connection between youth, offending and victimization.7 A semi-structured design was used in the focus groups to guide the discussion where necessary whilst allowing the group to also lead their own agenda. All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The focus groups were followed by *improvised performances* (these were also conducted in groups—there were no solo pieces). The participants had access to a functional drama studio and were able to use props, sets, music and lighting to enhance their scenes. The performances were produced entirely by the participants, with the only given instruction that they represent their relationship with crime. This improvisational method only affords a short time for preparation and encourages the actors to invent and create fictional content spontaneously. It is in this fictional environment that the ideas and thoughts of the research participants can be filtered and reproduced (Frost and Yarrow 2007). In total, 11 performances were conducted that ranged in length of one to three minutes. The performances were filmed and kept on a secure server.

Finally, directly after each performance, a ‘collaborative analysis’ (Gallagher 2008) took place with the researcher and young people. These discussions focussed on explanations and meanings of the data created—what had influenced the actors and what they had hoped the audience would take from their performances. The inter-subjective position of the researcher in relation to the research participants needs to be acknowledged at this stage—as a co-creator negotiating and interpreting the field research (Hollway and Jefferson 2013).8 These discussions were also recorded, transcribed and anonymized. The two streams of data from the focus groups and performances were approached analogously via the identification and interpretation of recurring themes, concepts and narratives (Altheide and Johnson 1994). The filmed recordings of the performances were juxtaposed with the focus group transcriptions to provide a holistic representation of the data. These techniques allowed the themes to arise followed by a grounded analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Once a series of general themes were identified, it was possible to group them into conceptual categories through a process of axial coding. The next section of the paper reports the results on a thematic basis and specifies where the data originated from.

*Results*

The young people who participated in this research had well-formed opinions on crime, criminal justice and key criminological debates. They displayed knowledge of a variety of historical crimes (i.e. the murder of James Bulger9): local crimes that had been in the national news (Raoul Moat10), as well as local families or groups whom they understood to be involved in criminal networks. Notably, their conversations and performances reproduced common criminological themes, such as labelling; the social construction of crime; the political economy of crime and gender and crime. This Results section will continue with an in-depth examination of how these themes were articulated and what they represented for the sample.

*Crime realities*

Crime was described by the participants as a normal reality of everyday life, something they were familiar with and had adapted to. They spoke about how they might avoid becoming involved in crime as an offender or affected by crime as a victim. Crime was ‘unavoidable’ on a proximate level; however, they felt much of what they had directly witnessed or taken part in was low-level, petty crime. Serious crimes, particularly those events or topics that made the news were considered rare but also sensational:

There’s a lot of like minor crimes, shoplifting, stuff like that but then there can be like big scale crimes. But not many, but you hear about them. (female, aged: 15)

For the young people in this study, their relationship with crime had substantive and disparate roots: it had evolved from within the spaces they physically occupied, but it was also in the local stories they shared and borne out of an international media. From the entertainment arena, crime was an exhilarating means of recreation widely consumed through music, soaps, film and video games.

People are interested in it [crime]. It’s more interesting than reading about money and finance and stuff. (female, aged: 15)

There’s part of you that wants to play detective…. And you sit there and you work out in your mind it’s just like… it intrigues you and you just want to know the motive. (male, aged: 16)

The ‘seduction’ of crime (Katz 1988) was present in their engagement of violent entertainment media (such as video games), which captured the shame and glory of crime, its excitement and desperation (Young 2004). Indeed, the classic game Grand Theft Auto (GTA), which has been subjected to much controversy (Karlsen 2015), was commonly argued as a form of recreational release devoid of consequences:

You can do things that you can’t do in real life, like in GTA you can go and kill as many people as you want and if you die or get game over it’s not the end of the world. It’s not like if I killed somebody in here. (male, aged: 15)

In GTA you’re controlling someone, and you can do any crime you want, but it’s like if you get killed you re-spawn but in real life you don’t. (male, aged: 14)

Indeed, the participants widely engaged with the ‘culture of spite’ (Presdee 2000) where violent crime was viewed as lurid and attractive, even if they acknowledged that the ‘real-life’ consequences were ultimately harmful. Comments expressed during the focus groups demonstrate this:

They [serious crimes] are more entertaining than lesser crimes. Like say if you saw someone doing credit card fraud, a two hour long movie on credit card fraud everyone is going to be thinking – this is boring. (female, aged: 16)

Experience of crime was not limited to being an observer as participants also spoke about the thrill of being chased by the police earlier in their youth—hanging out in mass groups on the streets and experimenting with substances:

Where I live, like when I was 13 …I like smoked, drinked behind the back of like shops and that. But like now that doesn’t happen. I kind of like grew out [of it].….It was the police, that’s why we did it.. we wanted to do it to get a chase. (male, aged: 17)

..on a Friday night, there used to be what, 100 odd people at the back of [the line of shops] and that, you know what I mean? There used to be about 100 odd people, they used to set fires, used to create fights. (male, aged: 16)

*Proximate crime*

Crime was carefully mapped onto the local spaces young people navigated and governed their occupation of particular areas. Key locations were mentioned by multiple participants (i.e. certain parks, roads and estates) that reportedly made them feel physically vulnerable. Such spaces were often avoided or it might be necessary to modify one’s behaviour while in these areas:

Anywhere where there’s a street and someone’s in their car, you just don’t go there. (female, aged: 15)

However, against this backdrop of familiar ‘risky spaces’, it was noted that areas had developed ‘bad reputations’, which might have laden them with an unfair burden. Notably, the concept of ‘labelling’ was a common theme across the discussions and performances and will be expanded on further.

Nevertheless, a shared local understanding of crime influenced the discussions and also the performances. One performance was laced with references to a local Irish traveller community in terms of the names given to characters and the lifestyles depicted. One neighbourhood was consistently marked out in the data as both fear provoking and populated by immoral families; stories were recounted of ‘bad mothers’ who let their children drink, smoke and take drugs. It was also revealed in the discussions to be ‘common knowledge’ that some older women (referred to in their capacity as mothers) from this area had had sexual relationships with secondary school-age boys. While controversial, these stories of inappropriate sexual relationships11 between older women and young men passed by dispassionately and were not drawn out for further consideration. Such a detachment contrasts sharply with the performances/discussions of the female participants, for whom sexual boundaries were a preoccupation (see section ‘crime through gendered eyes’):

Yeah, my mates have slept with a couple of their [friend’s] mams and that type of thing. (male, aged: 16)

If my mam slept with someone my age I’d be mortified. (female, aged: 16)

*Risk and reputation*

A disconcerting feature for every group of participants was what they perceived to be the damaging representation of young people in modern culture and the inextricable link made between young people, crime and risk. They understood themselves to be the focus of adult anxieties and that youth crime was a central concern for individuals, communities and governments. This rigid reputation that accompanied young

people was strongly resisted as inflammatory and inaccurate. Comments from the focus groups illustrate this:

in the media like, a lot of people our age are just - they’re all bad and they’re all doing this, that and the other but they’re not. (male, aged: 16)

people have instinctively got this thing that all teenagers wear hoodies, all teenagers carry knifes. (male, aged: 15)

The improvisations afforded the participants an opportunity to demonstrate a different perspective; in one example, an elderly woman was depicted driving under the influence of alcohol, putting the lives of others at risk, while, elsewhere in the scene younger people enjoyed themselves at a bar responsibly. Speaking about the performance, the actors explained that their intention was to challenge the stereotypes around young people and reemphasize crimes committed by less obvious characters:

like, drink driving you would associate with younger people wouldn’t ya? (female, aged: 15)

You never hear about it with them [older people]. (female, aged: 15)

The young people in this research expressed frustration that, as a group, the youth population were pursued by lurid headlines and marginalized in the popular imagination as ‘dangerous’ and ‘unpredictable’. Meanwhile, adults and adult offenders were perceived to evade the wider attack on their reputations.

Yeah, like if a young person has done something then they [media] are more likely to show it whereas if an adult has done something they might not be as serious about it... or if a young person’s done it they blow it out of proportion. (male, aged: 16)

This irritation—that particular adult offenders were able to hide—either long term or permanently from legal scrutiny—was articulated in both the discussions and visually demonstrated in the improvisations. They provided examples, such as criminal networks and ‘rich people’ who made money illegally; renowned historical ‘paedophiles and perverts’ and domestic abusers who committed offences ‘behind closed doors’. Indeed, one improvisation focussing on a story of domestic violence took place entirely ‘off stage’ leaving the audience restricted to the audible exchange between the two protagonists. While adult offenders were frequently able to obfuscate their public relationship with crime, the ‘good character’ of young people was said to be persistently under question.

Evidently, as Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994: 211) have observed, young people’s interpretation of the media can involve both ‘resistance’ and ‘reproduction’. While the young people lamented the media and societal attack on their reputations, elsewhere in the discussions, they shared similarly intolerant attitudes about young people involved in crime. During one discussion, a debate arose on the location of a young offender’s institution and the management of young offenders. A number of participants spoke about their

fears of these young people and the risks they might pose to their older family members:

…I think it’s like shocking and they’re [young offenders] allowed to go out in the streets like, but like, that fears my nan and granddad who live like opposite so I think they should take them young offenders far away to live. (female, aged: 16)

But then they shouldn’t be put onto people living in the local area who have done nothing, it shouldn’t have to affect them. Like I think putting them back into society slowly that’s a good idea but then I think it shouldn’t have to affect these other people. (male, aged: 15)

Clearly, the complexity of public discourses surrounding the ‘youth problem’ is such that, while the young people acknowledged and experienced the negative influence of dominant cultural discourses, they commonly contributed to their reproduction through largely unavoidable and unintentional ways.

*Policing reputations*

Many of the young men in the study expressed a lack of trust and respect for the police, often resulting from adverse encounters and perceived that they were not trusted or respected in return. A significant number of the young men felt that they were the ‘usual suspects’ (McAra and McVie 2005) and were routinely stopped and searched because of their appearance, locality or family history:

They’ll stop and search, search through your bags, aiming at us because they think we’re teenagers so we’ll have something on us we shouldn’t have. (male, aged: 16)

It’s stereotypical because my brother’s been locked up, like, 5 times now. They think I’m going to go down the same road as him. It just makes you get pissed off ...and then I don’t want to speak to them. (male, aged: 16)

Conversely, it was also recognized that policing interactions were often fair and

necessary:

I know a few coppers and basically some of them are right arseholes but some of them are really canny. The coppers [here] as soon as they drive past my cousin they bring her home, right there’s a reason for that …[laughs] but sometimes they do have to judge because they’re not doing their job properly if they’re not. (male, aged: 15).

Negative views expressed by the participant’s peers were considered to influence socialization processes and be instrumental in shaping policing perceptions. Certainly, it was argued that young people were often ‘expected’ to find the police obnoxious, but experience had also demonstrated that ‘…if you respect them, they’ll respect you’(male, aged: 15).

*Making sense of crime*

Much like the distortion of fact and fiction that shaped the precarious reputations of young people, crime and criminal justice were described by the young people as confusing, complex or ambiguous. In the improvisations, the roles played by the actors often merged both victim and offender such that the audience were left wondering where to apportion judgment. There were cases of a mistaken identity; sexual consent was typically ‘contested’; mental ill-health might mitigate the nature of an offence—or it might be used as an excuse to avoid justice, while people in authority (in one example, a paramedic) might exploit their position to take sexual advantage of others. Reflecting on their performance that overlapped two voices describing two different crime events, the actors explained that their motivation was to mirror the chaos involved

in understanding crime:

like, the confusion of all the crimes that go on in today’s society, and people just get confused. People are accused of different things, so it’s like, you don’t really… it’s as if no one really knows what goes on behind closed doors. (female, aged: 15)

In another improvisation, the actors turned out the lights (which renders a windowless drama studio completely dark) and positioned the chairs of the audience far apart from each other. As the performance started, the actors slowly walked between the audience, deliberately unnerving them by touching their shoulders unexpectedly. Commenting on their intentions, they said:

it was hard to set up, but, I was the victim and he was the offender, but we wanted you to feel like the victim too. That’s why you’re all separated. (male, aged: 16)

The struggle to ‘make sense’ of crime was not limited to the arena of their performances. Rather, the ‘confusion’ was alive and at work in their everyday lives. Trust in authority figures was a key part of this uncertainty; historical examples of police corruption and the ‘covering up’ of police failures were raised (i.e. the South Yorkshire Police’s management of the Hillsborough collision12); stories were cited of responsible figures exploiting their access to vulnerable children; paedophilia was ‘everywhere’ and young women in particular expressed concern that they would prefer to speak to a teacher before speaking to the police if they became a victim of crime:

who can you trust now like, massive icons [have] been done for paedophilia… like I don’t know who you can trust anymore. ..if it’s celebrities that are doing it how do we know people next door to you aren’t doing it? I just think it makes it feel like you can’t trust anyone. (female, aged: 16)

I’d rather go to like someone within sixth form or school rather than the police. (female, aged: 15)

The relationship the participants had developed with the crime and the criminal justice system appeared to be fused with ambiguity and doubt. Many were not confident of what constitutes a crime and few had confidence that the criminal justice system would deliver justice or protection. Compounding this, attitudes towards adults more generally were characterized by feelings of scepticism and fear. Many felt that, as young

people, they would be treated more harshly than adults and met with suspicion.

*The responsibilization of young women*

Significant and conspicuous gender distinctions were present throughout the discussions and performances. Three performances, all led by young women, focussed on sexual violence as its central theme; each improvisation highlighted the array of potential consequences associated with being a victim, including the physical, emotional and social harms caused. These performances embodied elements regarding the hidden

characteristics of sexual violence through using lighting, location and dialogue. In one performance, the ‘sullied self’ (Stanko 1997) was particularly present within the dialogue:

I feel, I feel so violated. Like, I feel disgusting, horrible. (female, aged: 16).

Two performances incorporated elements of doubt and disbelief concerning victims of sexual violence. Trust issues incorporated the mistrust of perpetrators motives (who claimed the episode was ‘consensual’) and the mistrust of victim’s personal accounts by wider society. The use of the dialogue: ‘you know what you’re going to get’, ‘is it what she wore?’ and ‘is it the way she acted?’ (female, aged: 16) within an intentionally ambiguous performance highlighted the embedded acknowledgement of expected codes of femininity. Consent was portrayed as an antagonistic power struggle between the protagonists; in one example of a violent sexual assault, the young female told the audience ‘I hated it’, while the male countered that ‘it was just a bit of fun’. Noticeably, the location of many young women’s fears was focussed on sexual and domestic violence and specifically, these scenarios took place within the home, which contrasted with the

enactments of drug use, violence and robbery that were presented in a variety of public spaces. In one improvisation, a rape was set completely ‘off stage’. Speaking about their scene choice, the actors said:

it’s hidden and we wanted you to hear it instead of see it. (male, aged: 16)

The concerns about sexual and physical violence demonstrated in the improvisations were a direct continuation of the themes in the discussions with young women. Many of them spoke about their own experiences and the need to take personal responsibility for their physical safety.

certain times of night I won’t go out because I’m scared in case, cus’ I know, I’ve had a few incidents where I live and I’m just a bit like right after a certain time don’t go out by myself. (female, aged: 16)

I can’t walk to the end of the street without thinking something going to happen. I’m like really bad like, if there’s like a group of people in a shop I won’t go in, I proper panic about it. (female, aged: 15)

In contrast to the young women’s heightened sense of safekeeping, the young men’s apparent lack of safekeeping was evident. A generalized detachment was projected by the young men—potentially an act of masking or minimizing of concerns in line with dominant conceptions of gender socialization (Connell 1995). Dialogues from the focus groups demonstrate a much cooler attitude to crime fears:

I don’t really think about it [crime]. (male, aged: 14)

I just tend to think if I keep out the way I’ll be safe and that. (male, aged: 15)

The young women in this research (aged 14–17) had already employed ‘technologies of the soul’ (Stanko 1997) in order to keep themselves safe. Moreover, they actively *demonstrated* their self-keeping activities and emotional concerns amongst their peers. The ubiquitous ‘responsibilization’ agenda was coincidently highlighted during the study when the female students were addressed by a teacher in a pastoral session about a recent incident of a female student being ‘followed and grabbed’. Since the perpetrator had not been apprehended, the young women were advised to ‘go around in twos’ and ‘just always keep that in the back of your head’. This example underlined how the young women were exposed to—and receptive of—the instruction to restrict their everyday behaviour, express concern about their safety and ‘be aware’ of crime from a young age.

*The violent male protagonist?*

It was unacknowledged in the post-performance discussions, but all of the deliberate physical violence in the improvisations was committed by men (including young women playing the roles of men). Indeed, violence was portrayed as a uniquely male activity. Nevertheless, the discussions did reveal something beyond the two-dimensional ‘fearless, violent’ male portrayed in the performances. Within the discussions, it was acknowledged by the young people that males are also the victims of rape, sexual exploitation and are often at risk of being exploited by influential older people in gangs, particularly if they incur drug debts.

it’s not just women [who are raped], it’s men as well… obviously people look at women like, I know this sounds sexist or whatever, people mainly do look at women more. (male, aged: 17)

like drug dealers get themselves in debt and …then if you don’t pay your money like they get you back. (male, aged: 16).

While the gendered stereotypes of ‘fearless male/fearful female’ conspicuously emerge from the data, the subtleties of it revealed that gender identities are multifaceted and it is essential to unpack the often delicate processes by which gendered meanings of fear and fearlessness become ‘fixed’ for both young males and females.

*The drama of drugs*

The hazards associated with substance misuse and drug dealing were clearly acknowledged by the young people in the focus groups—although there were elements of glamorization in the performances (music, stylized movements, etc.). It is notable that there was more emphasis placed on drug use in the dramas than in the discussions; this may reflect the potential for sensationalism around illicit substance use, but perhaps it

also underlines that the participants own exposure to drug use was vicarious or peripheral at this stage13. However, one young person astutely pointed out that drug use had evolved and new drugs, less known to older populations, were now popular.14

there wasn’t really the type of drugs that we have now, so everybody is trying different drugs and things. (male, aged: 17)

*Discussion: Resistance and Reproduction*

Crime was a source of considerable emotional stimulus for the young people in this study. It was at once exciting, sensational, mundane, frustrating, disgusting, confusing and fear inducing. It was a junction at which significant gender and age divisions fractured; it straddled the lived experiences of the participant’s locale and the fantastic world of virtual reality and an international media. Crime provided an inimitable lens

through which the young people understood and built relationships with society and the people in it. Moreover, it was a lens through which they themselves were reflected— as a risky problematic population, regardless of their own engagement in crime. This dual-observation chamber underlined the complexity of examining young people’s emotional responses to crime—as a process of active resistance to social norms, enmeshed with an inevitable (albeit uneven) reproduction of these models.

The participants were fluent in their emotions about the topic of crime. Indeed the states of their emotional arousal were intimately implicated in and vital to an understanding of numerous fields of criminological enquiry, whether they be offender motivation, the dynamics of domestic violence, ‘fear’ of crime, victimization and its effects, the appeal of mass-mediated crime dramas or the demands for order. Certainly the value of attending to the emotional landscapes of young people and crime has been emphasized in this endeavour.

Crime occupied both private and public spaces and virtual and lived locations. Serious crime often took place in a detached virtual world of news stories, video games, film and television. The image of crime was found to be commoditized through these mediums, packaged and marketed to young people as sensational, empowering and romantic (Katz 1988). As crime was an organizing theme in contemporary entertainment, young people were acutely involved in its consumption and reproduction, which they found to be distorted from reality but, nevertheless, irresistible. Meanwhile, the proliferation of criminal tropes concerning young people in the news media was identified as harmful and relentless; all of the groups stressed their frustration at what they considered to be an inextricable link between crime and youth. They felt that this was not limited to distinct subcultures of young people (as has been linked in the literature to mods, punks, ravers etc.; Cohen 1972) but that young people as a population were perceived as a problematic.15 This contributed to strained relations with older generations and mistrust of authority figures in the criminal justice system such that many stated the police would not be their instinctive ‘first choice’ if they were victimized. The participants described how they felt excluded from the public discourses about them and were unable to shape the attitudes that determined their public reputations. Being a young person, according to the data herein, remains politically and culturally risky and the responsibilities for negotiating those risks have become highly individualized (Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

Closer to home incidences of crime took on a more mundane, everyday occurrence. Driving offences, petty theft and the sale of drugs was thought to be common and unremarkable. However, the superficial tameness of local crime belied a more complex underbelly—regardless of personal victimization, the everyday lived experience of crime was found to be damaging to young people’s sense of security and limiting of their use of physical spaces. It was also in the domain of the ‘everyday’ that gender divisions became pronounced and a site at which divisive gender norms were embodied and reproduced. Young women were well-versed in the risks associated with sexual and domestic violence. Those risks were not restricted to victimization but imbibed with the risks of being held responsible for sexual violence and of being doubted and the generalized risks located in interpersonal relationships. High-profile child sex abuse scandals were frequently mentioned by the young women and appeared to be embedded in their collective consciousness, contributing to a generalized anxiety concerning personal safety. Indeed, child sex abuse scandals have been argued to possess

the potential to ‘redefine reality, transforming public perceptions of individuals and organizations and reshaping cultural attitudes towards “official” power’ (Greer and McLaughlin 2013: 260). Moreover, the female participants exercised a form of ideological resistance through rejecting mediated representations of victim blaming whilst simultaneously reproducing aspects of appropriate femininity though their methods of

safekeeping. During the course of the study, these young women were directed by the host school to ‘take responsibility’ and ‘walk in pairs’ following a recent incident near the premises. The overt responsibilization of young women to protect themselves from interpersonal violence clearly forms part of their early socialization and many of the participants were already at pains to actively demonstrate, *perform* or ‘prove’ their safety measures to others.

Conversely, the young males performed from the reverse end of this emotional spectrum; they did not proclaim any elaborate safety behaviours or interpersonal concerns Asked if they worried about crime, the characteristic response was ‘no’. Still, the data revealed some concealed vulnerabilities; while male rape was acknowledged, local stories of young men (perhaps underage) being sexually involved with much older women passed by without debate. All of the premeditated violence and threatening behaviour in the performances was portrayed by male characters, so reproducing a dominant and aggressive masculinity. There was very little recognition of the problematic role that crime played in shaping the perception or emotional lives of young men and, thus, the monolithic ‘emotionless’, ‘dangerous’ male (Connell 1995) remained largely unchallenged.

Patently, the role of gender in this analysis is complex and delicate. We cannot simply state that young men are not affected by crime and insecurity. It is also clear that the young women are alert *and are alerted to* personally manage the risks of victimization and associated moral judgements concerning their responsibilization. These tasks, facilitated by the role of crime are gender divergent and harmful for both young men and women. Understanding the murky interplay of gender, youth and crime requires careful examination of the context of social roles. The variation evidenced in the data offers clues about a changing world and gender role expectations, where participants are struggling to challenge restrictive notions and pursue new choices.

The slippery nature of crime complicates the ontological challenges it poses for young people. Crime can be difficult to make sense of; there was a lack of understanding of what constitutes a crime, who could be trusted with details of a victimization and confusion about how guilt or culpability might be established. The ambiguity of crime was palpable in the performances; crime was portrayed in situations that ranged from the

routine to the rare and fact and fiction merged imperceptibly. Indeed, the normalization and mundane reality of certain crime types was depicted in contrast to more abstract and anomalous depictions. This amorphousness highlighted the ‘phenomenology of crime’ in its anger, desperation and humiliation juxtaposed against its attraction, excitement and pleasure (Young 2004). As Campbell has observed, this type of data, that incorporates performative properties, highlights ‘the affective, sensibilizing force of “crime”’ (2013: 34); crime has a multidimensional reach that can articulate a variety of social values, sensations and moral boundaries. It has the power to reinforce social norms, entrap the reputations of young people, and illuminate gender hierarchies while also rendering invisible some of the vulnerabilities our young citizens face. Through ‘entertainment’ media, the virtual and everyday worlds collide to create discordant ‘interactional spaces’ (Hayward 2012: 457), which rearrange the landscape and connections young people make with crime and society. Moreover, crime is a channel through which young people are also understood by others, underlining Ferrell’s statement that mediated reflections become a vast ‘hall of mirrors’ where images of crime ‘bounce endlessly one off the other’ (Ferrell 1999: 307).

*Conclusion*

Criminological research ought to reflect the messiness of the social world and complexities and contradictions contained within it (Law 2004). We believe that it can be argued that arts-based methods are pertinent to the messy conditions of the topic herein; they can condense the essence of the indefinite and incoherent and capture the conscious and the subconscious relations young people have with crime. Specifically, performance-based art is able to provide a platform for the sensibilities of cultural practice through which we become embodied and dynamic subjects (Goffman 1974). ABR has the potential to further develop the creative and imaginative aspects of criminology, which have gained increased salience within the discipline (Brown and Carrabine 2019). ABR methods are broad in their application and scope, e.g. film, illustration, painting, photography, poetry and the spoken word, and thus, may provide original insights in a variety of criminological contexts. Although this framework requires careful consideration, often regarding ethics and data analysis, ABR methods possess the ability to shape new ways of seeing and interpreting a fast-changing social world.

The data yielded in this project certainly proved to be rich and meaningful due not only to the creative approach employed but also to the focus on young people’s emotional responses to crime. Indeed, it is hard to see how an analysis of crime, fear and society can adequately proceed—in this and other domains of criminology—without more serious attention being paid to the experiences of young citizens. Overlooking their understanding and responses to crime is to render silent the harm caused by it. For example, the participants in this study rejected the dominant discourse of a risky youth and did not consider themselves or young people in general to represent significant risks or problems to each other or to wider society. Conversely, the participants viewed adults as embodying a myriad of risks. Anxiety about crime for young people was linked to a fear and frustration of age-related discrimination; young people described a form of ephebiphobia—a widespread fear towards young people based on false stereotypes propagated in the media and society. This was found to culminate in a lack of trust in their relationships with adults and authority figures and a mounting frustration that they were powerless to confront their tarnished reputations.

The results also pointed to the entrenched gender roles for both the young women and men. For the young women, a fear of sexual or domestic victimization attached with a secondary concern of not being taken seriously as a victim by the criminal justice system or others meant that they paraded an unambiguous set of safety behaviours, broadly supporting the shadow of sexual assault hypothesis. The findings revealed that the young women possessed the agency to self-regulate through safekeeping methods, but such behaviours were influenced by wider structural processes of gender socialization, narratives of responsibilization and a mediated socio-political patriarchy. Conversely, the young men’s psychic and physical vulnerabilities were mostly considered inconsequential by the participants and rendered invisible. The findings suggest that young people’s lived experience of crime is highly gendered and embodies elements of both resistance and reproduction, which is frequently ideologically significant.

These findings are important given that recent research has demonstrated that political socialization can influence perceptions of crime from childhood through to middle age (Gray *et al.* 2019). It may be then that the young people in this study will carry their concerns and emotional connections to crime into adulthood—they might not ‘grow out of it’. Although the participants frequently resisted dominant cultural discourses, they commonly contributed to their reproduction through largely unavoidable and unintentional ways. Ultimately, this research makes a new contribution to the fear of crime literature through demonstrating that crime concerns develop in young adulthood and absorb existing stereotypes. We argue that to understand the complex and changing nature of our society, research must pay special attention to how non-elites struggle against simple reproduction of traditional power systems and role expectations. The decisions by researchers to focus primarily on adult’s ‘fear of crime’ may overlook the need to bring about change to the socio-political practices and structures that maintain unhelpful stereotypes and the subjugated positions of women, men and young people.

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**Endnotes:**

1 Walby *et al.* (2016) warn that our understanding of the fear of crime paradox emanates from victimization surveys, which may minimize violence against women, particularly high-frequency domestic violence through methodological shortcomings.

2 Since 2009, the Crime Survey for England and Wales has been extended to include 10–15-year olds in its sample.

3 Since 1982, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (previously The British Crime Survey) has asked participants to rank ‘how common a problem young people hanging around in their local area’ is.

4 Conceptualized as ‘the assemblage of imagistic sensory elements that give meanings to the pillars of critical criminology: crime and control and their relations to power, resistance, spectacle and transgression’ (Brown and Carrabine 2019: 192), visual criminology is closely associated with the emergent perspectives of ‘sensory’ (McClanahan and South 2020) and ‘aesthetic’ criminology.

5 Full details of the research process are detailed in Dodsley (2017).

6 Due to school examinations and associated time constraints, not all participants took part in all three stages of a session.

7 This approach is relatively uncommon in criminological studies involving young people. A notable exception is the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (see McAra and McVie 2005).

8 Hollway and Jefferson (2013: 43) stress that data collection is a ‘co-production’ between the researcher and subject and unconscious inter-subjective dynamics may influence the process.

9 James Bulger was a 2-year-old boy from Merseyside, England, who was abducted and killed by two 10-year-old boys in 1993.

10 In 2010, Raoul Moat from the North East of England killed one person and took his own life following a six-hour stand-off with armed police officers.

11 The specific ages of those involved was not elaborated on, so it is impossible to verify the legal status of the sexual relationships described. For this reason, we have referred to them as ‘inappropriate’ as a more accurate description is not possible.

12 In 1989, 96 people were killed in a collision at the Hillsborough Football Stadium, Sheffield. An inquest in 2016 found that the local Police Force had failed in their planning, policing and management of the match.

13 There has been a decline in drug use among 11- to 15-year olds in England since 2000 (European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addition 2019).

14 New psychoactive substances, such as Mephedrone, have become more available (European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addition 2019). Since 2010, the Crime Survey for England and Wales has asked questions about this substance.

15 The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended the UK Government take ‘urgent measures to address the intolerance and inappropriate characterization of children, especially adolescents, within the society, including in the media’ (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 2008: 6).