

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Boy Racer Culture

Youth, masculinity and deviance

Karen Lumsden



ROUTLEDGE

Boy Racer Culture

On the public roads boy racers are a foreboding presence, viewed with suspicion and derision by the 'respectable' motorist. The problem of the young (male) driver is one which has plagued authorities and governments due to youths' supposed propensity for engaging in deviant and dangerous driving behaviours.

Boy Racer Culture sheds light on the boy racer phenomenon through ethnographic research with the notorious 'Bouley Basher' culture in the city of Aberdeen, Scotland, and the moral panic on the part of outside groups, including the local community, police, politicians and media. This book examines the creation of masculine and feminine identities in a traditionally male-dominated subculture through car-related rituals, such as 'modding', subcultural media and events, and the quest for celebrity status via public performances.

Boy Racer Culture challenges common misconceptions surrounding the boy racer, the 'problematic' young (male) motorist and the car modifier. It will be essential reading for an international audience including sociologists and criminologists, particularly those with an interest in youth culture, subcultures, moral panics, car culture, anti-social behaviour, and the governance and policing of the roads.

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Acronyms

AA	Automobile Association
ABD	Association of British Drivers
AECC	Aberdeen Exhibition and Conference Centre
ASBO	anti-social behaviour order
AYJSG	Aberdeen Youth Justice Strategy Group
CCCS	Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies
ICE	in-car entertainment
ILP	intelligence-led policing
LOL	laugh/laughing out loud
MAD	Motorists Against Detection
MK	marque
MP	Member of Parliament
MSP	Member of the Scottish Parliament
NASCAR	National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing
NESCAMP	North East Safety Camera Partnership
POP	problem-oriented policing
RAC	Royal Automobile Club Foundation
TDA	taking and driving away a vehicle
TWOC	taking without owner's consent
SACRO	Safeguarding Communities, Reducing Offending
SNP	Scottish National Party

Introduction: rebels of the road

Since the late 1960s, young drivers have collectively gathered at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard in order to socialize with like-minded car enthusiasts, display their (modified) cars and engage in daring driving manoeuvres (such as speeding and illegal street racing) with the aim of receiving public acclamation from fellow drivers and spectators. Generations of Aberdeen's youths have participated in the subculture. Hence, these boy racers, or as they are locally known, 'Bouley Bashers', are firmly cemented in the history and lore of this particular area of the city of Aberdeen in Scotland. The Beach Boulevard, a quarter-mile stretch of road, is the main thoroughfare from the seafront to the centre of Aberdeen and forms part of the drivers' 'cruising' circuit. At night, the road comes alive to the sound of revving engines, roaring car exhausts and the blare of music from car stereo systems.

For the youths who frequented the Beach Boulevard and feature in this book, this urban space was historically meaningful and symbolic. The vast majority travelled into the city from towns and villages in rural areas. The Beach Boulevard provided them with a 'space of their own' (White 1990) away from the watchful eyes of their own communities and moral guardians. Crucially, the subculture has at its centre the prop or totem of the car: a ritualistic symbol which helps to frame the behaviours, dialogue and practices of its members. The modified car is an object of value, reflected in the rituals and public performances of the group. The subculture functions as a space for the creation of a collective group identity, which is intertwined with the quest for individual identity and celebrity via car-related practices. For participants, the subculture was a positive influence in their lives, particularly for those who faced uncertainty in terms of stagnated employment, education or family prospects. In a sense, the subculture was their family. Moreover, although it is a largely male-dominated subculture, a growing number of females participate and adopt complex strategies in relation to their gender, in order to carve out a niche for themselves in the subculture.

However, in the eyes of the media, local community, politicians and authorities, the Bouley Bashers are the villains of this narrative. Their occupation of urban space and use of the car are deemed problematic by 'outside' groups. Boy racers are thus 'folk devils' (Cohen 2002[1972]) and the symbol of the boy racer

denotes danger, risk, youthful deviance and anti-social behaviour. The urban space in Aberdeen, as with many other seafront towns across the United Kingdom, has been presented as an arena in which adults and youths contest rights to public space (Aitken 2001). Aberdeen's boy racers became an object of political concern and scrutiny from the mid-1990s onwards. From 1990 to 2000 this area of Aberdeen underwent vast urban regeneration in the form of residential and retail complexes. From 2000 onwards, concern over illegal street racing and anti-social behaviour resulted in a proliferation of media articles centred on the detrimental effects of the boy racers on the urban environment and the lives of local residents and businesses. Thus, *Boy Racer Culture* provides a sociological analysis of both the societal reaction to Aberdeen's Bouley Bashers and the subculture itself.

The boy racer label

In this book, the term 'boy racer' is understood as a label, albeit a powerful one. It is a means of categorizing young motorists who are seen to contest the normative practices of car culture via their engagement in the ritual of car modification and acclaimed participation in deviant driving behaviours, such as speeding and illegal street racing. The label itself denotes a combination of themes including youth, masculinity and deviance which are intertwined with the car (and car cultures), often resulting in moral panics over youths' appropriations of this highly valued consumer good. More generally, youths' physical occupation of urban space (generally perceived as 'inappropriate' use of the public highways), and the related risks and dangers associated with their driving behaviours, are also of concern to citizens, the authorities, government and road safety organizations. Essentially, the young motorist is 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966) in the ordered, daily flow of city traffic. The aesthetics of boy racers' cars makes it difficult to miss them amidst the mass of standardized vehicles. The appearance of the modified car, coupled with the low rumble of car exhausts, the revving of car engines while stationary at traffic lights and the music emitting from car stereo systems, signifies to other motorists the presence of what is popularly known as a boy racer – an irrational speed-demon who disregards the rules of the road and will quash any motorist who crosses their path. The symbol of the modified car can itself be enough to ensure the young driver's position as an outsider or rebel of the roads. Hence, on the public roads, boy racers are a foreboding presence, viewed with suspicion and derision. As Dick Hebdige (1979: 2) notes in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 'mundane objects' such as the motor car, can in contexts such as this, 'take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile'.

Media images convey inaccurate representations of the boy racer. Hence, in the public mind there is confusion and misunderstanding regarding what exactly constitutes a boy racer. In the United Kingdom, the term is typically used to describe *young male* drivers who partake in activities such as speeding and illegal street

racing, as was claimed to be the case with Aberdeen's boy racers. However, reality television *exposés* of disadvantaged youths engaged in joyriding or 'TWOC-ing'.¹ commonly apply the boy racer label to these individuals also. Thus, boy racer becomes an enveloping 'catch-all' term to describe youths who steal cars (thereby engaging in TWOC-ing or joyriding) and also those licensed young motorists who modify the technical, mechanical and/or aesthetic aspects of their vehicles and may or may not engage in deviant driving behaviours such as speeding and street racing. O'Connell (2006) argues that the distinctions between these two groups are becoming blurred as the activities of boy racers become increasingly dangerous in the wake of movies such as the *Fast and the Furious* franchise. Parallels are drawn between joyriders and boy racers since both involve a celebration of car culture expressed in terms of risky driving and are outlets through which to 'do' traditional masculinity (O'Connell 2006: 466).

Although this may be the case, it only tells part of the story. It conceals the social world of car enthusiasts and the differences which may exist between licensed motorists (who are labelled boy racers) and those who engage in the theft of vehicles. Since the mid-1990s, media attention has largely shifted to concern over boy racer culture and the risky young male motorist more generally. These misconceptions result in the stigmatization and marginalization of serious car enthusiasts who are tarred with the boy racer brush. In addition, the ideological construction of the boy racer label becomes real in its consequences and particularly so where the government, police, community and media response to young drivers is concerned. For instance, in the UK, authorities have tackled boy racers using the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004 which includes powers such as anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) seizure of vehicles and dispersal orders.

Boy Racer Culture explores the ways in which society and groups within it construct, adapt, apply and give meaning to certain labels. The repercussions this can have for how society responds to a certain group are diverse and wide-reaching, particularly when the label is a symbol of deviance or anti-social or even criminal behaviour. We are concerned with the processes through which the body of 'knowledge' concerning boy racers in Aberdeen came to be established as 'reality' (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 15). Also of interest is how the labelled reacted to, utilized or attempted to reject the label. Ironically, the youths in this narrative helped to reinforce the boy racer label through their application of the term to other motorists who they believed gave them a bad name. In doing so they further reinforced these common misconceptions. Hence, the book highlights the power that labels possess and the way in which they go beyond the authorship of their creators (Berger and Luckmann 1967). It is concerned with both the objective aspects of the social phenomenon and the subjective definitions of the social problem by various interested parties, including the 'outside groups' and the 'folk devils' (boy racers) themselves. Its analysis demonstrates that the boy racer label is a myth that generates seemingly commonsensical misunderstandings and misconceptions with regard to both the practice of car

modification and deviant driving behaviours. It provides essential insight into the culture of young drivers, in order that policy and practice can be informed by these academic insights rather than by assumptions based on popular myths which are propagated and reinforced by the mass media.

Studies of (deviant) car cultures

The emotional investment that individuals have in cars (or motorbikes) is reflected in classic sociological studies such as Paul Willis's (1978) *Profane Culture*, Howard Parker's (1982[1974]) 'The Joys of Joyriding', Beatrix Campbell's (1993) *Goliath* and the work of cultural criminologist Mike Presdee (1994, 2000). These merit separate discussion and will be covered in more detail in Chapter 1. For instance, Willis (1978) notes the symbolic centrality of the motorbike for the biker boy subculture. The aggressively masculine style of the culture signified a kind of 'bravado' and a 'rough masculinity', communicated via the ensemble of the bike, rider, noise and clothes (Willis 1978: 53). Parker's (1982[1974]: 101) study of joyriding in Liverpool highlights the importance of 'action' in the form of 'excitement, competition, status and adrenaline-pumping stimulation'. For the joyriders, the material success symbolized by the car was further transformed into envy, resentment and aggression towards those who owned them. Parker notes that, although joyriding is a deviant activity, it is motivated by 'respectable and conventional desires' (1982[1974]: 106). Thus, as noted, authors draw parallels between boy racers and joyriders, where the lines between deviance and respectability are blurred (see Groombridge 1998). Both activities offer avenues for the performance of masculinity via the celebration of car culture, albeit in different forms (Campbell 1993, Presdee 2000, O'Connell 2006).

Moreover, in line with the 'mobility turn' in the social sciences, which will also be discussed in detail in Chapter 1, there has been a proliferation of studies centred on car cultures and automobility (see, for instance, Featherstone 2004). For Daniel Miller (2001: 2) the term 'car cultures' evokes 'the diverse, unexpected, sometimes tragic, contradictory humanity of cars; the taken-for-granted mundane that hides the extraordinary found in this material expression of cultural life'. Car cultures which have been the focus of social scientific investigation include the *kortelliralli* street racers of Helsinki (Vaaranen and Wieloch 2002, Vaaranen 2004), the *raggare* (greasers) in Sweden (O'Dell 2001) and Chicano Lowriders in the United States (Allard-Holtz 1975, Beck 1980, Vigil 1991, Bright 1998). Amy Best (2006) also provides a comprehensive analysis of the adolescent 'car cruising' scene in California. Boy racers have been an area of scrutiny in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia with scholars highlighting the link between working-class masculinity and participation in the scene (see Dawes 2002, Hatton 2007, Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007, Falconer and Kingham 2007, Lumsden 2009a). Car modification, which is a central ritual in many of these car cultures, also allowed the first motorists to redesign the car

and renegotiate their cultural identities and relationships to public space in terms of gender and technical expertise (Franz 2005). For example, in the United States, car modification has its roots in the early days of automobility and has continued among several subcultures since the Second World War, such as hot rodders, drag racers and stock car racers (Franz 2005). Moorhouse (1983, 1991) provides a comprehensive analysis of the American hot rod and drag racing traditions, claiming that illegal street racing will have a continuous effect on the organized and official world of hot rodding, thus highlighting the relationship between subcultures and the mainstream motoring industries. O'Dell's (2001) study of the *raggare* in Sweden also shows how certain cultural groups can (re)appropriate consumer goods such as the car. For these youths, it was the vulgarity of the 1950s American car (from a middle-class perspective), which gave it a new life in the hands of working-class males. The car becomes an object of debate, with the debate centring on concerns about morality, mobility, violence and sexuality (O'Dell 2001: 125).

The study

The discussion draws on ethnographic research conducted within the boy racer subculture in Aberdeen and qualitative interviews with members of the outside groups, including police officers, local residents, politicians, journalists and council officials. Ethnographic methods allowed an in-depth look at the everyday lives of boy racers and the reasons for their actions and participation in the culture. In terms of the research with boy racers, it was useful to keep in mind Mike Presdee's (2004: 245) approach to studying so-called deviant groups:

We do not have, and cannot have, a handy template that describes this or that behaviour as criminal, anti-social, transgressive. These labels incorporate meanings defined and imposed by those with power and authority; meanings where social life is made to fit certain pre-existing ideological and theoretical propositions that describe certain groups and individuals as anti-social, or criminal, or evil. In qualitative excavation we reject that approach and privilege our 'subjects' as creative social beings living life within pre-ordained social structures as best they can – at times with great desperation and at times with a love of life.

Therefore, the study was concerned with 'giving voice' to the drivers, thus unpacking the social reality of the boy racer. A reflexive approach was adopted, whereby the researcher acknowledged their role in the research process and the way in which their social position shaped their experiences in the field. In this sense, 'the researcher's feelings, values, belief and social position are central to the creation of the ethnographic narrative' (Lumsden 2009b: 498). Data was collected via overt participant observation with the subculture in Aberdeen from September 2006 to August 2007.² Semi-structured interviews were also

conducted with members of the culture in addition to ethnographic interviews (or informal chats), which took place during the fieldwork. Access to the culture was aided by Grampian Police who regularly met with a group of drivers from the beach area of the city. These ‘Drivers’ Group’ meetings took place every few months and it was here that I met the two main gatekeepers: Debbie and Robert.³ The main location for the research was Aberdeen’s Beach Boulevard. In total, around 150 hours were spent in the field. I also accompanied the drivers to various car shows and events across Scotland (referred to by the subculture as ‘meets’ or ‘cruises’) and to local garages, scrapyards and car accessory stores. Websites which were created and utilized by participants were also a source of data collection. A glossary of subcultural terminology is provided for readers at the end of the book.

With regard to the societal reaction, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the outside groups. This included five police officers, a local councillor, a Member of Parliament (MP), a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), three journalists, two council officials, two residents and one group interview with four residents present. Content analysis was also employed regarding media reports (both local and national) which focused on Aberdeen’s boy racer culture. Over 200 articles were collected between August 2003 and September 2008 from daily local newspapers (*The Press and Journal* and *Evening Express*) and two free newspapers distributed weekly across Aberdeen (*The Independent* and *The Citizen*). Relevant articles from national media outlets such as *BBC News Online*, *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Scotsman* were also analysed.⁴ Finally, official documentation from Aberdeen City Council and the Scottish Government,⁵ and data provided by Grampian Police in relation to road traffic offences and anti-social behaviour legislation also help to frame the discussion.

The book

Chapter 1 provides the context with an overview of the literature on car cultures and automobility and driver deviance and car crime in the UK. It begins with a discussion of the history of the car and the recent ‘mobility turn’ in the social sciences. The role of the car in shaping landscapes, social relations, gender roles, everyday routines and urban life is discussed. The focus then shifts to sociological and criminological studies of car crime and driver deviance in the UK. This includes the work of Presdee (1994, 2000), Campbell (1993), Parker (1982[1974] and O’Connell (2006) on joyriders and ‘TWOC-ers’. These studies point out that car thieves and joyriders share the same desires as the legal/legitimate motorist. As a result of their lower class position, car thieves and joyriders can only participate in car culture through deviant or illegal means. Similarly, for boy racers, also viewed as ‘deviant’ drivers, participation in the subculture and the related rituals of car modification and public performances, allowed them to experience the kicks and pleasures which car culture promises.

The remainder of the book is divided into two interrelated parts: the societal reaction and the subculture. The first part provides an analysis of the moral panic concerning boy racers and its institutionalization in terms of anti-social behaviour legislation. Chapter 2 sets the scene for this ethnography by providing a detailed overview of the history of Aberdeen's Bouley Bashers and the response of outside groups. It opens with an overview of the demographics of Aberdeen and its transport infrastructure. It then outlines the history of the subculture at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard, including the reputation of the road which is conveyed via local press coverage of court cases involving boy racers and road accidents and fatalities in the area. The discussion then turns to urban regeneration of the area and its impact on the subculture. The influx of middle-class residents to the area prompted increased police and government intervention in response to boy racers. The new residents fell into the category of 'moral crusaders' (Becker 1963) who were primarily concerned with the successful persuasion of others. The discussion then turns to the authorities' attempts to displace the drivers by the provision of an alternative space away from the Beach Boulevard and by police operations and community engagement. The chapter ends with a consideration of the use of anti-social behaviour powers in response to deviant driving and anti-social behaviour, and the proposed closure of the Beach Boulevard road in the evenings.

The level of coverage which the boy racers received in the local (and at times national) press is the focus of Chapter 3. Media reports and images of the drivers resulted in a localized moral panic which fed into the myth of the boy racer and the labelling of individual drivers. The reaction is analysed using Cohen's (2002[1972]) seminal study *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* and Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2009[1994]) moral panic framework. This includes the five elements required for a moral panic: *concern, hostility, consensus, disproportion* and *volatility*. The collective efforts of groups such as the local residents, politicians, police and council, sustained the media's attention to the culture. The local media helped to fuel the panic by communicating the social consensus that the boy racers were deviant and problematic. This was particularly evident in the labelling of car enthusiasts as deviant through association with the boy racer label.

The problem of boy racers was taken up by local politicians and police and became the focus of new powers under the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004. Hence, the myth of the boy racer became real in its consequences as young drivers (particularly those who drove modified cars) found themselves increasingly under the radar of the authorities. This is the subject of Chapter 4, which focuses on the policing of Aberdeen's boy racers and the institutionalization of the moral panic. The chapter begins by discussing the shift in the nature of problematic behaviours encountered at the Beach Boulevard. For police and local residents, this included a shift in concern over traffic offences to a focus on behaviours defined as 'anti-social'. Police officers' views of this and related definitional decisions with regard to enforcement and discretion are discussed.

The discussion then focuses on enforcement practices at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard and the authorities' attempts to interact with, and educate, young drivers. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of the tendency for social groups to conflate the boy racer myth (or car enthusiast) with the problem of the inexperienced young (male) motorist. This has repercussions for the design and implementation of legislation, policing practices and education on road safety.

The second part of the book sheds light on the internal world of the subculture. Chapter 5 analyses the 'folk devils' (boy racers') reactions to, and involvement in, the moral panic. It also sheds light on the drivers' involvement in deviant driving practices and their relationship to the outside groups. The categories 'respectable racer' and 'rough racer' are used in order to understand conflict within the group. Respondents who were part of the 'Drivers' Group' viewed themselves as respectable members of the culture and took part in 'defensive othering', a form of 'identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group' (Schwalbe *et al.* 2000: 425). The first part of the chapter focuses on the youths' views of their portrayal in the media and the response from residents and police. This is followed by a discussion of the ways in which the drivers attempted to manage their respectability in response to the threat posed by individuals who were identified as rough racers. On the one hand, this involved adherence to the rules and enforcement strategies of the authorities, which included self-policing, informal policing and absorbing the roughs' deviance. However, on the other hand the drivers also defended and justified their own involvement in deviant behaviour and placed loyalty to the culture above external responsibilities. Hence, the binary opposites of deviance and respectability are challenged by this particular subculture. Who is 'deviant' and who is 'respectable' is a contested matter and highlights instances where power and its social distribution come into play.

Chapter 6 focuses on the rituals of the subculture. Three forms of ritual are discussed. First is the ritual of car modification or 'modding'. For participants, the modified car functioned as a 'prop' for the self and was a form of 'sign-equipment' which was used to 'embellish and illumine one's daily performances with a favourable social style' (Goffman 1959: 45–46). Cars united members of the subculture but segregated them from mainstream car culture. Second are rituals concerning the public displays of boy racers, such as subcultural media and events. It will be argued that the racers' private interests in cars and car modification entered into public space in highly ritualized ways to mark the space at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard as appropriate for the performance of their culture. The third form of ritual concerns legitimate and appropriate public behaviour by the drivers. This includes rituals by which status was accorded by others, masculinity performed publicly and celebrity status achieved.

Chapter 7 discusses gendered interactions in the subculture. Although touched upon in previous chapters, the gendered interactions observed between girls and boys in this largely male-dominated subculture merit a chapter of their own as

they provide insight into the various ways in which girls viewed and appropriated the car, and the lengths they had to go to in order to be accepted as legitimate members of the subculture. The chapter begins by outlining the construction of masculine identities within the boy racer culture. This includes the creation and maintenance of a form of 'hegemonic masculinity' and hence the subordination of other masculinities and femininities (Connell 1987). The second half of the chapter is concerned with female participation. An indigenous typology is introduced which includes the categories of girl racer, babe or bikini girl, and girlfriend or passenger. For the girl racers, 'doing gender' (Butler 1990) involved negotiating a complex set of norms while reconciling the competing discourses of the masculine racer scene and femininity.

It is hoped that, by shedding light on the internal world of Aberdeen's boy racers, the book will go some way towards challenging common-sense and stereotypical notions of boy racers and what the car enthusiast/modification hobby entails. Definitions of deviance and normality in terms of the subculture and mainstream car culture are not as clear cut as they first appear or as they are presented in the media and popular discourses. Before exploring the case of Aberdeen's Bouley Bashers, it is necessary to provide a context in terms of sociological and criminological explorations of automobility and car culture. Therefore, Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the recent 'mobility turn' in the social sciences, which has helped to place automobility firmly back on the agenda of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, geography and criminology. John Urry (2007: 131) believes that it is only through recognizing how deeply embedded automobility or car culture is in the contemporary psyche, that we can bear witness to the ways in which it has impacted upon and transformed the social organization of time, space and everyday life.

Car cultures and deviance

Until recently, sociology and criminology tended not to view the car as a topic worthy of serious investigation and debate. The car's position in contemporary society has largely been taken for granted and it has been regarded as a neutral technology, permitting social patterns of life which would have occurred anyway (Urry 2000a: 59). Moreover, criminologists have largely shied away from an exploration of car crime – a phenomenon which is hardly treated as 'real' crime (Corbett 2003: 3). This chapter sketches out social scientific analyses of car culture and automobility. It begins with an overview of the history of the car and its dominant role in society. It then discusses the recent 'mobility turn' in the social sciences. The role of the automobile in shaping landscapes, social relations, gender roles, everyday routines and urban life will be discussed. The second half of the chapter focuses on sociological and criminological studies of car crime and driver deviance in the UK. This includes Beatrix Campbell (1993), Howard Parker (1982[1974]) and Mike Presdee's (1994, 2000) notable studies of joyriders in England and Sean O'Connell's (2006) recent work in this area.

CAR CULTURE AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The 'mobility turn'

Ownership of private cars has been the defining feature of consumer society since Henry Ford invented his Model T which sold 15 million units and was designed to bring the technology of the horseless carriage to the masses (Northcott 2008). There are currently over 500 million cars across the world, a figure that is expected to double by 2015 (Sheller and Urry 2000: 737). Country after country is developing a car culture, with the most significant being China as it turns its back on the bicycle (Urry 2003). No longer is car ownership merely a sign of status or special interest: 'Like television, telephones, central heating and inside toilets, cars are just part of the equipment of modern living that is more noticeable when absent than when present' (Dant and Martin 1999: 1). As Urry (2007: 130) suggests, automobility is now so all-encompassing a system that civil society in most countries should be reconceptualized as a civil society of