



In Brief: A little bit extra

November's Spark – Gang Culture: the inside story – played to a full house and attracted this write up from Geoff Bayley. We tried, and failed, to squeeze it into this issue of *In Brief* so here's the next best thing: an insert. Enjoy the review on one side and resolutions from AQR's Committee on the back.

A core skill of qualitative research is the ability to suspend our own prejudices in order to view the world from the eyes of another. Mostly this projection is not too challenging but few of us would feel we have the resource to understand the views of a gang member growing up on a North London estate. Charlie Alcock came along to the last Spark of 2011, at Viewpoint Studios in Blackfrairs, to tell us how she succeeded in stepping into the estate world of the young gang member and the outcomes that they constructed together. Her narrative demonstrates a mix of sensitivity and tenacity and here we try to capture some of the flavour of the evening

Charlie's Story

They did not like her hanging around in their spaces, turning up on her own. Nobody knew who she was or what she was doing there. She kept coming. They thought she was a plant from the authorities, threw stones at her, spat at her, shouted obscenities, and made it clear that they wanted her to go away.

But still she kept coming, this small girl-like woman, her presence intruding into their lives and unsettling them. Nothing seemed to happen and so, over time, they grew used to her and less anxious. She made no attempt to explain herself and they lacked the courage to ask her what she wanted from them, people from the outside always wanted them to do something.

She smiled and they sensed she came without a mandate, that she was open, a person they could do business with. Later they said of Charlie Alcock that, from the start, they could tell she was authentic, perhaps a replacement for the Mum they had grown away from or never known. Someone desperate to show them a better future.

Her mandate was to help them discover their own mandate, like a mirror to let them see their lives and find their talents. Too often in the past the glass had shattered, she knew the secret was to always be there so that when they chose to look the reflection was constant, the image always returned.

Once she made an appointment in a cafe, Wednesday morning 10.00am. "Trust me, I will be there," she said. She waited and he did not show, ten more Wednesdays at the same table and then, on the eleventh, he came up to her and said: "Now I can trust you.... I have walked past the window each week." She learned that when nothing seems to be happening everything can be happening, that respect is not a present easily obtained.

In this way she succeeded in taking psychology into their lives and gave them a way of looking at their tiredness, their suspicions, their anger, and their fears. They began to reflect that violence, for many until now the purest means of expression, was not the only way to soothe their rage. She helped them to find something to do and a place to do it so that the week, the day, the next 24 hours began to promise meaning.

The authorities, with their indicators of stabbings and shootings, had put on their 'something different must be done' demeanour. Uncomprehending of teenage gangs and fearful of chaos and riots they were advised that to punish was not the same as to resolve. Charlie, a clinical psychologist, reframed the problem for them, focusing on the cause behind the symptom. Understand, she said, how the pressures of their lives affect their mental stability, how clinical depression is unrecognised, how constant exposure to violence leads to the point where it soothes away problems. Also witness how secrecy and suspicion become a reflex response, see young people who walk constantly looking over their shoulder.

She also showed once again the truth of the saying that 'change has to come from within'. It is not possible to work on people, they are too sussed, too sceptical and have too much self respect to be your raw material; you have to create the opportunity for them to work with themselves. But give them a chance and lives are transformed.

Geoff Bayley

Dr Charlie Alcock's charity, Music and Change (MAC) UK, is based in Camden. Visit www.musicandchange.com