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# COVERT RESEARCH

## THE ART, POLITICS AND ETHICS OF UNDERCOVER FIELDWORK

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# 1

# WHAT IS COVERT RESEARCH?

## 1.1 Popular definitions of covert research

Turning to the initial task, it is important here to briefly survey some populist definitions of covert research from introductory textbooks because students will typically gain a basic understanding of the field from such sources, which then becomes a type of conventional wisdom on the field.

Holloway broadly defines covert research as 'research processes in which researchers do not disclose their presence and identity as researcher and participants have no knowledge of their research identity' (1997: 39). Macionis and Plummer claim: 'In sociology, the dilemma appears where the researcher conceals his or her identity and "cons" his way into a new group' (2005: 64). Giddens adds: 'Indeed, some of the most valuable data that have been collected by sociologists could never have been gathered if the researcher had first explained the project to each person encountered in the research process' (2009: 37).

Turning to the more methodological introductory texts, covert research is understandably given more detailed treatment. Bryman (2008), in *Social Research Methods*, focuses on Humphreys and Milgram as key 'infamous cases'. He then discusses a range of cases and related issues about access, legality, going native and key informants as well as the rise of visual ethnography.

Throughout various keyword books, dictionaries and encyclopaedias, covert research is defined broadly in terms of deception. Michael Bloor and Fiona Ward define covert research as: 'the undertaking of research without the consent of research subjects, by the researcher posing as an ordinary member of the collectivity, or by the experimental manipulation of research subjects without their knowledge' (2006: 43). They usefully provide a range of examples and discuss the typical advantages and disadvantages. The limitation and omission here is that they suggest that the tradition is not currently vibrant, stating: 'Although covert qualitative research projects are still sometimes undertaken, the controversy surrounding covert methods has probably made such studies less common than they were previously' (Bloor and Ward, 2006: 45).

Levine (2014) presents a voluminous multi-disciplinary *Encyclopedia of Deception*, based mainly on psychological studies about lying and deception in different contexts, from the everyday to high-profile political scandals. My work is not trying to build psychological models of deception that can be applied and tested. There is also an established literature on deception from moral philosophy (Bok, 1978, 1982; Martin, 2009) which centres on the examination of the relationship between truth, self-deception and lying, and the ethics of such behaviour in a very specific manner. Neither shall the book cover the literature on spying and espionage, much of which historically and politically analyses the more militaristic roots of espionage (Calder, 1999; Knightley, 1987; Goldman, 2006). Interestingly, some of the immediate assumptions about and mythic images of covert research are tied up with spies and spying. What Knightley (1987) refers to as the 'second oldest profession' and a still highly clandestine occupation and subculture. The more contemporary and popular images of covert research have shifted to investigative journalism, which is more accessible and one that we explore in the book. My lens and gaze on deception is thus primarily sociological although the range of deceptive scenarios that are critically explored and concepts used shall range across the wider family of social science disciplines.

## 1.2 Media scandals, whistleblowing, exposé documentaries and citizen journalism

What we have in broader societal terms is the contradiction between protectionism and voyeurism in society. On the one hand, we have increased our pursuit of the

primacy of the private, yet on the other hand, we are intrigued by voyeuristically 'peering' and 'watching', and all the better if we remain unnoticed. The public tune in, with significant viewing figures, to various televised programmes to watch the degradation ceremonies unfold in different contexts. If the cameras are hidden or at least normalized, this seems to enhance the viewing pleasure.

Deception in public life is not new. Historically, an interesting example of deception and its unintended consequences was when the famous actor and film-maker Orson Welles broadcast *The War of the Worlds* on the radio in 1938 in Columbia, USA. The first two-thirds of the sixty-minute broadcast were presented as a series of simulated news bulletins, which suggested to many listeners that an actual alien invasion was currently in progress. This resulted in mass panics in certain quarters and an outcry by the media. Within one month, newspapers had published thousands of articles about the broadcast and its impact. Adolf Hitler, the infamous Nazi leader, even cited the panic. The hoax broadcast was repeated in Ecuador in February 1949, and resulted in local riots.

In terms of popular culture and media constructions, various comedic characters trade on dupery and fakery and conduct various breaching and transgression experiments. What I call 'popular passing'. Banksy, the famous English graffiti artist is even more exotic. Without revealing his true identity, he has worked in clandestine ways over a sustained period of time in the art world.

Deceptive tactics, or what have been classically called 'muckraking', have been normalized for a lengthy period of time in the press. The Leveson public inquiry was set up by the government in the wake of the phone hacking scandal at the *News of the World*, a British newspaper, and amid wider issues of the work culture and professional ethics of the British Press. Employees of the newspaper were accused of engaging in a culture of phone hacking and police bribery (Mawby, 2014) in the pursuit of stories. The inquiry involved *News Corporation* owner Rupert Murdoch and his son being called before a parliamentary committee, and resulted in several high-profile resignations and convictions. Advertiser boycotts led to the closure of the *News of the World* in July 2011, after 168 years of publication. The Leveson Report was published in November 2012. Efforts are being made to replace the Press Complaints Commission by a new regulatory body (Cohen-Almagor, 2014).

It is clear that secrecy forms part of our popular culture and public imagination. Whistleblowing at work is an established and successful way of exposing corruption, injustice, scandal and forms of wrongdoing. Indeed, whistleblowing has been promoted by a government national inquiry, with an anonymous telephone reporting system established, for reporting poor medical care and unacceptable professional standards in various NHS (National Health Service) hospital Trusts in the UK. This was partly a response to the '*culture of fear*' in

openly reporting medical malpractice in what was commonly titled 'freedom to speak up'. Such whistleblowing is subject to the Public Interest Disclosure Act of 1998, with whistle blowers protected from potential harassment or discrimination. Whistleblowing is also linked to resistance in the workplace (Miethe, 1999; Near, 1995; Near and Miceli, 1996; Perry, 1998; Rothschild and Miethe, 1994; Tuda and Pathak, 2014). What Perry (1998), in his examination of these activities, elegantly refers to as '*indecent exposures*'. De Maria (2008) links whistleblowing and protest together and views them as important sources of ethical resistance to corruption and forms of wrongdoing. For him, the field is still largely unexplored and will likely expand.

Edward Snowden, the CIA whistleblower has caused an international storm around his claims of surveillance of the Web in 2013 by the American government. In a similarly politicized context, Julian Assange, who founded *Wikileaks* in 2006, has caused controversy by putting sensitive information, often military-based, into the public domain. It made particular global headlines in April 2010 by publishing confidential footage showing US soldiers firing at civilians from a helicopter in Iraq. In this way, *Wikileaks* represents a sort of public whistleblowing. Lindgren and Lundström (2011) view such activities as part of wider movements in 'hacktivist mobilization' and a technological 'pirate culture' which is broadly anti-authority.

Some undercover investigations have controversially hit the headlines. In September 2006, the BBC's *Panorama* programme broadcast a special investigation into corruption in English football, entitled '*Undercover: Football's Dirty Secrets*', which included meetings between agents, managers and high-ranking football club officials, filmed undercover by reporter Knut auf dem Berge, a former freelance scout, posing as a prospective football agent based in America who was looking to set up a new football agency called Dynamic Soccer. The footage purported to show agents and managers accepting backhanders and illegally contacting players under contract to other clubs, and included some high-profile clubs and managers. The strong reaction to the programme resulted in the Football Association establishing an inquiry, headed by Lord Stevens, a former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, to investigate the claims as well as further police investigations of bribery in 2008. More recently, in September 2016, Sam Allardyce, was forced to resign his high-profile post as national England football manager due to an undercover sting by journalists from *The Daily Telegraph* posing as overseas businessmen. Allardyce, on hidden camera, offered advice on getting around banned third party ownership in the game and was very open to taking paid offers for overseas speaking engagements.

In a different context, Margaret Haywood was a working nurse who was involved in secret filming for a BBC *Panorama* programme exposing poor care in the Royal Sussex Hospital in 2005. She was subsequently struck off the professional register

for misconduct. Her case caused widespread media coverage and more academic discussion in healthcare (Belshaw, 2010; Wainright, 2009). In 2011 the BBC's *Panorama* team of covert investigative journalists discovered the systemic abuse of patients with severe learning disabilities at Winterbourne View, a residential care home near Bristol. Six out of eleven care workers who admitted a total of thirty-eight charges of neglect or abuse have been jailed. The Care Quality Commission has also launched an official government inquiry. Three former care home workers who mistreated an elderly female resident with Alzheimer's disease at the Granary Dementia Care Centre, near Bristol, were prosecuted. One received a jail sentence and two others have suspended sentences in 2013. The abuse footage was captured using hidden cameras, this time planted by the concerned and suspicious family of the resident rather than a professional journalist.

Still using '*sting*' tactics, undercover journalist Mazher Mahmood, known as the 'fake Sheik' due to his faked persona, snared former professional champion boxer Herbie Hide by getting him to supply cocaine at a hotel in Norwich, England. Despite reservations about the 'entrapment tactics' adopted by Mahmood, Hide was sentenced and imprisoned to twenty-two months in November 2013. The same journalist attempted a similar sting on a celebrity music judge Tulisa Contostavios in August 2014, but this failed. Ironically, Mahmood himself was then investigated by the police and found guilty, with his driver, of conspiring to pervert the course of justice in this case and has been sentenced to fifteen months in jail in October 2016. His various undercover investigations over the years are covered in his rather glamorized and self-styled confessions of 'the king of the sting' (Mahmood, 2008). In the political arena, two former foreign secretaries were also exposed in 2015 by undercover journalists in the '*cash for access*' scandal.

Controversial undercover investigations by female journalists faking pregnancy have been done into Crisis Pregnancy Centres (CPC) in the UK in 2014, both by *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper and independently by Education For Choice, a sexual health charity. The CPCs are not endorsed by the National Health Service and are currently unregulated by the government. There are over a hundred in the UK and are proving increasingly popular with young, particularly vulnerable and desperate, women. Such critical undercover journalistic work, although sensitive, can clearly be seen to be in the public interest.

Undercover investigations of North Korea, which many view as a rather repressive regime, were undertaken by journalist David McNeill. Posing as an ordinary tourist attending an International Film Festival, he exposed widespread poverty and illegal food markets before being caught out by the authorities in 2010. Journalist John Sweeney, who posed as a fake professor on a student exchange trip in 2013 to North Korea, also gained media attention. Sweeney's reasoning was that such covert methods are justified to explore closed and secretive societies with strong

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state censorship and dubious human rights records. Undercover work into the Mafia in Naples, Italy was carried out by celebrated Italian journalist Roberto Saviano, who wrote a bestselling book called *Gomorrah* (2007) that was then made into an award-winning film and television series of the same title. *Gomorrah* made global media headlines and brought attention to the use of covert methods to expose transnational corruption and crime. Undercover officers in the National Public Intelligence Unit, based in London, have recently come under formal investigation and possible prosecution for unethical practices and reckless behaviour in a number of cases. This included one officer marrying and having children with someone under investigation and another, Kennedy, who was investigating environmental activism for eight years, living as the partner of one woman in the movement under false pretences.

Citizen journalism is also known as public, participatory, democratic, guerrilla and street journalism (Allan et al., 2007; Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Domingo et al., 2008; Thurman, 2008). It is on the rise, particularly because of the widespread use of mobile technology and in situ amateur reporting of a range of different events. There are clear concerns with sensationalism, selectivity and bias but it has obvious aspects of covertness as it is an expedient form of documentation, which has either assumed consent or is purely bypassed in crowd contexts. It is usefully seen by some as a form of 'bearing witness' (Allan et al., 2007).

*60 days in Jail* is a remarkable documentary, similar to the Rosenhan experiment, one of the covert exemplars, except that it involves members of the public rather than trained academics, criminal justice professionals or journalists. The series was screened in March 2016 in the UK on Channel 4 and has aired in several countries around the world, with a second series already made. The series, produced by the American Arts and Entertainment Network group, followed seven people as they volunteer to go undercover for sixty days in Clark County Jail in Jeffersonville, Indiana in the USA. Their goal was to gather evidence about any wrongdoing and illegalities. There is some senior gate-keeping but the vast majority of inmates and guards are not aware of their role. They are trained beforehand and given fake but credible cover stories and criminal charges. The production team needed extensive legal advice to be able to conduct such an inquiry with the amount of concealed recording devices that were required. Despite reservations about glamorizing prison life by this intrusive media game, it puts the use of covert methodology firmly in the public eye and imagination.

A recent undercover investigation for the BBC's *Panorama*, broadcast in February 2017, reveals the harsh reality of life behind bars in the UK. The reporter spent two months in a Category C prison in Northumberland, which houses up to 1,348 male inmates. Footage shows how inmates are effectively running the prison, with many of them addicted to Spice, the popular synthetic form of cannabis. It also reveals how prison officers don't feel able to maintain

control and are under enormous pressure and stress. The programme also finds little evidence of rehabilitation. It is a timely investigation as it comes at a point when the government faces repeated warnings about the crisis inside Britain's prisons as regards congestion and violence.

A range of both emotive and familiar issues have been investigated by undercover means by *Dispatches*, the Channel 4 flagship programme for televised British investigative journalism, including pensioner home care, a young offenders' institute, travel centre cheap flights and bargain priced supermarkets, to name but a few. Activist group Mercy for Animals (MRA) have also used undercover methods to investigate animal cruelty in factory farms and slaughterhouses across the world, using exposé-style websites to disseminate their findings. What is interesting to note here is that our popular conceptions of, and conventional wisdom about, undercover reporting is typically drawn from journalistic sources and not from academia.

## 1.3 Mock interviews and comedic pranks

In a very different comedic context, the success of comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's controversial characters Ali G, Borat and Bruno are clearly saturated in moral and ethical transgression centred on deliberate anti-political correctness. Atluri, in his useful analysis of humour and race, argues 'the charm of Cohen's characters lies in their ability to mock authority figures through playing dumb' (2009: 200).

Hamo et al. (2010) view the Ali G and Borat characters, along with other comedic characters such as Dame Edna, Mrs Merton and Dennis Pennis, as part of the 'mock interview' televised genre, which emerged in the 1980s and has been gaining in popularity since then. Hamo et al. reflect: 'This status allows the comic character to function as a court jester who is permitted to brashly break accepted norms' (2010: 250).

Similarly, we cringe at the clumsy situations and degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel, 1963) for the general public when they interact with certain comedy constructions. The range of characters constructed by Dom Jolly in *Trigger Happy TV*, Novan Cavak in *Phonejaker* and *Facejacker* and Marc Wootton in *LaLa Land* play similar games of fakery, dupery and transgression as they fool the public with their characters. Such caricatures are constructed to deliberately dupe you. Their comedic exaggeration trades on recognizability and familiarity. The line between reality and fantasy is a fine one. Deceptive breaching is clearly part of their highly appealing comedic modus operandi.

Linked to this was the prank call by two Australian radio presenters, Mel Greig and Mike Christian, in December 2012. They pretended to be the Queen and Charles, the Prince of Wales, making inquiries about the pregnancy of Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge, which tragically resulted in the suicide of nurse Jacintha Saldanha, who mistakenly disclosed information to the bogus callers at a private

hospital in London. The ethical standards of radio broadcasting were then called into question and put under the global spotlight. Police investigations were made but no charges followed. This so-called 'prank call' was in an established 'shock jock' tradition and part of what Turbide et al. (2010) refer to as 'trash radio'.

## 1.4 Television hoaxing

The public have eagerly tuned in *en masse* to watch ordinary people being hoaxed in popular television programmes over the decades. A British version of *Candid Camera* began in 1960 and ran for seven years and then reappeared in the 1970s and 1986, with adaptations running in both Australia and Canada. With a similar sentiment, *Beadle's About* was screened to large viewing figures in the 1980s and 1990s in the UK.

Staying within the entertainment context, James Randi, the American award-winning and well-known magician, escapologist and illusionist, used deception sceptically to expose, debunk and reveal what he felt was the truth behind the trickery of various paranormal and religious organizations and leaders. He was centrally involved in Project Alpha, an elaborate hoax of a government investigation (1979–1981) of paranormal activity where two fake psychics were used. He also exposed the popular televangelist and faith healer, Peter Popoff, as fake in 1986 as well as causing a media storm in Australia for his hoax of a fake spirit medium in 1988. A documentary film about Randi's life entitled *An Honest Liar* (2014) sums up his modus operandi.

A range of both hoax and exposé undercover television programmes have increased in recent years. Successful hidden-camera prank shows include *Totally Hidden Video*, *Punk'd* and *Oblivious*, *Girls Behaving Badly*, *Just for Laughs*, *Gags*, *The Jamie Kennedy Experiment*, *Boiling Points*, *Howie Do It* and *The Joe Schmo Show*. More recent exposé-type undercover programmes include *Cheaters*, *The Real Con*, *Faking It*, *The Undercover Millionaire*, *The Undercover Boss*, *The Undercover Princess*, *Restaurant Stakeout*, *Tricked* and *Mystery Diners*, to name but a few.

Clearly much more could be said about this area, particularly for those within media studies, which is beyond the scope of the current book. Although very different from the academic focus of this book, such a popular cultural context of deception is worth noting. Such programmes seem to be on the increase, such is our appetite for deception, and, generally speaking, have been ramped up in terms of shock and degradation value.

## 1.5 Social media

Social media, which we are now rather normalized too, is also saturated in forms of voyeurism, eavesdropping (Locke, 2010) and deception. For Locke (2010) the

nature of privacy has radically changed for the 'facebook generation' to being a more shared and collective version of it. We are typically invited, indeed expected, to 'peep' into the lives of others without their permission. The recent cases of internet trolls, on which there is growing research (Gershon, 2014; Hughey and Daniels, 2013; Jane, 2014; Shachaf and Hara, 2010), are clearly based on deception in terms of the trolls hiding behind fake or anonymous cyber-identities. What Jane (2014) elegantly refers to as 'textual hate'. Witness the rise in fake 'selfies', often taken with mobile phone cameras, by members of the public, with some depicting extreme and graphic scenes designed to shock.

Also witness the rise in incidences of fake or hoax news on social media, where misinformation and disinformation is deliberately manipulated and falsehoods are promoted for political propaganda purposes. Facebook now employ staff to monitor and censor such claims as the real consequences of such actions can be influential and harmful.

Facebook has been a topic of more recent research as regards identity formation, friendship networks and imagery (Farquhar, 2013; Sauter, 2014; Wilson et al., 2012). What Goggin (2014) describes accurately as mobile media. The recent Facebook emotional manipulation study, conducted by Kramer et al. (2014), manipulated the newsfeeds and homepages of 689,003 users for a week in 2012, without their consent, to explore mood shifts. The secrecy of the study, conducted jointly by Facebook and Cornell University, on 'massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks' caused widespread outrage and public concern, not least on the question of internet research ethics (Flick, 2016). Schroeder (2014) argues that such big data research using diverse social media will become much more commonplace in the future.

Surveillance, in various modes, is now fully embedded into the fabric of modern society but there are still sensitivities around and emotive debates about the role and extent of legitimate snooping in society. Calvert (2000) accurately refers to modern culture as a 'voyeur nation', where spectatorship and peering is an expected part of our everyday lives. The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 gives covert police units special dispensation in their work on suspect criminal populations. The investigatory Powers Act of 2016, popularised as the highly contentious 'Snooper's charter', has significantly increased the range and intensity of covert surveillance, particularly the lawful interception of internet and social media communications. This is in the context of increasing terrorist activities on a global scale and the rise of various forms of transnational organized crime and cyber-crime. Critics feel that this is a worrying intensification of hyper mass surveillance. There is a dedicated literature on surveillance in society, which is not the focus of this book.

## 1.6 Practitioner undercover investigations

Corporate companies have routinely and extensively used secret shoppers and mystery customers across different sectors, including financial services, leisure services, retailing, motor dealerships, hotels and catering, passenger transportation, public utilities, and government departments, for commercial imperatives for a number of years (Miller, 1998; Morrall, 1994; Wilson, 1998). Indeed, the public can sign up easily as a mystery shopper as the large supermarket groups continually recruit mystery shoppers to gain different types of data on their employees and organizations. Store detectives are also used. They blend into their environments as normal customers, but are vigilantly watching for criminality.

The Department of Work and Pensions in the UK has expanded the amount of surveillance staff to investigate the increasing amount of fraudulent claims. Various councils use undercover agents to review the health and safety, hygiene and fair trading standards of the restaurant and hospitality industry. In the culinary world, coveted Michelin stars are awarded by covert methods, as are the routine visits of some hotel inspectors. An investigator drops in unannounced and unknown and then writes a report. There has been a rise in specialized surveillance companies across numerous countries offering private detectives to investigate workplace theft and fraud by placing trained personnel undercover in commercial settings. Some of these companies also offer male and female undercover relationship investigators exploring matrimonial infidelity and internet scams, popularly known as 'Honey Traps'. There are various national and international professional bodies in this industry, which attempt to regulate their conduct.

The medical world has also routinely used placebo experiments since their first use by physician John Haygarth in 1799. Placebo experiments, where a controlled group of patients in a clinical trial are given fake drugs with no side effects for comparative purposes, are part and parcel of the sanctioned and necessary deception in modern medical science (Beecher, 1955; Kienle and Kiene, 1997; Miller et al., 2005; Petkovic et al., 2015).

When we reflect on the secret service security organizations that most people could name, such as MI5 and MI6 in the UK and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the USA, we know very little about them in detail apart from filmic myths. The Official Secrets Act, the latest revision being in 1989 from the original Act of 1911, is still currently used in the UK, Ireland, Hong Kong, India and Malaysia for legislation that provides for the protection of state secrets and information related to national security. The Free Mason Society, a secret society, still exists today and operates around the world. Freemasonry, in various forms, has a global membership estimated at six million by the United Grand Lodge of England in 2013. What Clawson (1989) elegantly

describes as a process of fraternally 'constructing brotherhood' through the ages. Clearly there is a more dedicated literature on such topics, which is not the remit of this book.

## 1.7 Deception in police culture

Deception has played a significant role in police culture in different ways. There are clear concerns with entrapment (Panzarella and Funk, 1987; Sagarin and MacNamara, 1970), stings (Dodge et al., 2005; Marx, 1980, 1982; Panzarella and Funk, 1987), lying (Alpert and Noble, 2009; Klockars, 1980; Manning, 1974) and covert policing strategies (Fijnaut, 1995; Kruisbergen et al., 2011; McKay, 2015). As expected, the police routinely use undercover tactics for intelligence gathering and surveillance on a range of sensitive topics, such as paedophilia, drug abuse, football hooliganism, people trafficking and counterfeit goods, to name just a few. A recent case exploring the criminal underworld in Salford, Greater Manchester, which was reported in the press in November 2016, was extraordinary in terms of the undercover police officer being embedded in the local community as a café and shop-keeper for three years. He successfully infiltrated and was trusted by five crime families. Operation Damson led to 78 convictions and a number of long-term jail sentences for drugs and firearms offences, as well as a bravery award for the officer. What Loftus and Goold (2012) in their fieldwork on covert policing in the UK refer to as the '*invisibilities of policing*'. Such covert policing requires specialist training and must be sensitive to issues of entrapment.

Landmark covert insider accounts or autoethnographies of the British police force (Holdaway, 1982; Young, 1991) are discussed in Chapter 5. It is important to note here that much more active covert investigation techniques are now widely used by the police in protecting children from online grooming and sexual abuse, including cyber-stings (Gillespie, 2008; Martellozzo, 2012; Simpson, 2006; Tetzlaff-Bemiller, 2011; Urbas, 2010). What Tetzlaff-Bemiller elegantly describes as 'undercover online: an extension of traditional policing' (2011: 813).

In his pioneering work on exploring undercover police work in the USA, Gary T. Marx (1980, 1982, 1988) cogently argues that 'secret police behaviour and surveillance go to the heart of the kind of society we are or might become. By studying the changes in covert tactics, a window on something much broader can be gained' (1982: xxv). Mac Giollabhui et al. (2016) add, in their recent overt ethnographic study of UK covert policing: 'the growing importance of covert police investigation has profound implications for the relationship between citizen and the state in a democratic society but it is relatively unexplored by police researchers' (2016: 630). Clearly, academic access to this occupation is very sensitive and highly restricted.

Based on interview and observational data of undercover American and Canadian police officers, Sara Schneider (2008) explores artefacts of identity, muddied identities and identity breakdowns. For Schneider, undercover operators are ones who 'construct their trick identities through the scripting and safeguarding of their cover stories' (2008: 8) in what she calls 'craft and artifice'. Schneider, coming from a performance art academic background, talks about the interaction between self and scene. Under the heading of 'elementary collusion', Schneider argues that 'Western culture has long dallied with the identity players' (2008: 4).

Related to this are various first-hand insider accounts of undercover work, which are often glamorized and gritty, by former police and security industry professionals and experts, some of which have been popularized in films. Included in this autobiographical genre are Paul Doyle's (2004) investigation of the Boston criminal underworld as an undercover agent, William Queen's (2005) two-year investigation of a violent American motorcycle gang as a special agent, Valarie Wilson's (2007) twenty years as a covert CIA agent and Bon Hamer's (2008) twenty-six years as an FBI agent.

In a British context, Duncan Maclaughlin (2002) recounts his memories of his undercover work for Scotland Yard, David Corbett (2003) reflects on his experience with the Glasgow undercover police unit, Christian Plowman (2013) recalls his sixteen years' service as an undercover specialist with the London Metropolitan Police, as does Pete Ashton (2013) after his ten-year service with them.

In a filmic context, some of which have been big screen Hollywood hits, the award-winning film *Donnie Brasco: My Undercover Life in the Mafia* (1988) was based on the autobiography of Jospeh D. Pistone, an FBI agent for twenty-seven years who investigated the New York Mafia. Another film was the story of Frank Serpico, the undercover policeman who was a celebrated whistleblower on corruption in the New York Police Department in the 1960s and 1970s. The film *Serpico* was adapted from the best-selling biography *Serpico: The Cop Who Defied the System* (1973) by Peter Maas. Similarly, *Prince of the City* (1981) was a crime film based on the biography of New York Police undercover detective Robert Leuci. In the UK context, James Bannon (2013) explored his covert investigations of hooliganism at Millwall Football Club, on which the British film *ID*, released in 1995, was based. More recently, the film *Imperium* was released in 2016 which is based on the real life undercover investigations of white supremacist and neo-Nazi organizations in the USA by former FBI agent Michael German. His investigations spanned fourteen years and were published in his book *Thinking Like a Terrorist: Insights of a Former Undercover Agent* (2007).

The undercover operations of Robert Mazur, who worked for the United States Customs Service and the Drug Enforcement Agency, has also been recently turned into a film, *The Infiltrator*, released in 2016. Mazur infiltrated Pablo

Escobar's Colombian based international drug cartel over a five year period in the mid-1980s. Eighty-five arrests of drug lords and corrupt bankers were made as well as the collapse of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International, which was a legitimate institution involved in money laundering. Mazur changed his identity for some years after a large bounty was placed on him. The film is based on Mazur's book *The Infiltrator: Undercover in the World of Drug Barons and Dirty Banks Behind Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel* (2009).

The filmic context, although clearly driven by different goals, logic and imperatives, has been another way to embed covert work into the popular imagination and public consciousness.

## 1.8 Conclusions

The insider, police, media and journalistic contexts of deception are, in different ways, more practically motivated and have different imperatives and approaches on legal issues of entrapment and public justification than academic ones. Clearly, such contexts and scenarios present a different order of problems from academic ones, but deception plays an important and intriguing role in all these contexts.

It is reasonable to claim, then, from a brief review of these different settings, that deception is profoundly interwoven into the fabric of everyday life and has a familiar place in popular culture and the public imagination. If we stop and think about the covert aspects of eavesdropping (Locke, 2010), which has been routinely used by social scientists over the years, it is something we take for granted in ordinary language. Many of the assumptions about and images of covert research are somewhat evocative ones drawn from such populist contexts rather than from academic sources. Our focus here is more with the academic context, although understanding the reactions and responses to it relates to wider movements in society.

## 1.9 Learning exercise

1. Define covert research.

2. What image of covert research immediately springs to mind and what sources do they come from?

3. What is the importance of understanding the different contexts within which covert research has been used?

4. What is your initial 'gut reaction' response to doing covert research?