

“I Showed You What I Thought Was Appropriate”

Reflections on Longitudinal Ethnographic Research and the Performativity of Dutch Gang Life

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article highlights some aspects of doing longitudinal ethnography in criminology. By zooming in and reflecting on some of the key moments and methodological choices made over the course of more than 15 years of fieldwork among members of a Dutch gang, this article illustrates that relations with informants have the potential to strengthen over time, but that building rapport and trust with (active) offenders is not necessarily a linear process. In addition to voicing the emotional and evocative aspects of these methodological deliberations, this “true confession” is meant to spark some more debate on how longitudinal fieldwork in criminology impacts field relations by critically examining not only the performativity of informants, but also of researchers.

■ **KEYWORDS:** gangs, longitudinal ethnography, performativity, research ethics, true confession, violence

On a rainy day in February 2020, I enter a small room in the visiting area of a high-security prison in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. As I take my place on a banged-up chair, my eyes shift from a one-way mirror on my left, a big red emergency button on my right, and back-to-back desks across the width of the room that seem to serve as a barrier between visitors and prisoners. Magnetic clicks from opening and closing doors in the hallway, coupled with a dim, but audible buzzing from the intercom amplify my nervousness. It has been four years since I spoke to Raymond, and my anxiety stems from our last interactions. On WhatsApp, we had a falling out about the publication of my research on the Dutch gang that Raymond founded in the late 1980s. Specifically, Raymond felt that I sided too much with former gang members by voicing their feelings of discontent with Dutch gang life (Roks 2018). Moreover, he stated that “I also know that you never meant anything bad, but I think you underestimate it a bit. I showed you what I thought was appropriate.” Although things between us settled down over the next couple of days, these digital exchanges were our last interactions. Since then, a lot happened in Raymond’s life, as indicated by our scheduled rendezvous in prison instead of on the streets of The Hague, where we had previously met. Currently, Raymond is a main suspect in a high-profile murder case and linked to multiple assassinations and several murder attempts in recent years. As I await his arrival in the visitation room, I cannot help but think: was Raymond right? Did I underestimate gang life in the Netherlands? Did he only show and tell me what he wanted me to see and know?



In this article, I will address these questions by recounting my personal relationship with Raymond. As the founder and leader of the Dutch Crips, Raymond acted as my gatekeeper and key informant during two different ethnographic studies (Roks 2018, 2019; Roks and Densley 2020). The literature on ethnographic fieldwork has documented the importance of building relationships during fieldwork, both short-lived and long-term. Regardless of the time spent with informants, establishing rapport is crucial for researchers to obtain any amount of intimate and detailed knowledge (Coffey 1999: 38–58, 2018: 60–77). In criminology, conducting fieldwork among and with (active) offenders produces additional ethical and practical dilemmas that impact one's relations in the field and the way researchers navigate these relations (for an overview, see Ferrell and Hamm 1998; Rice and Maltz 2018). To date, scholars have paid little attention to the issue of long-term field relations among (active) offenders. Moreover, as Dennis Rodgers (2019: 124) notes, although longitudinal ethnography is not uncommon among anthropologists, its “methodological ramifications are rarely explicitly considered.” Therefore, my central goal in this article is to illustrate the ambiguities and complexities of building and maintaining longitudinal field relationships with (active) offenders by reflecting on my contact with Raymond over the course of more than fifteen years.

In addition to discussing how our relationship developed over time, I will also touch upon an additional challenge for scholars studying street and gang cultures. The extant research on street culture documents how people seek out status, reputation, and identity on the streets (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995) and as part of street gangs (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Thrasher [1927] 1964). Furthermore, studies have noted how the activities and interactions of gang members are permeated with performativity and mythmaking practices (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs 2004; Van Hellemonst and Densley 2018). This not only impacts the tension between informants “words and deeds” (Deutscher 1966) but also raises the question of how scholars can critically examine the performativity of informants in these research contexts, recognizing that many informants owe much of their status, reputations, and sometimes even safety and livelihood to these street cultural acts of impression management. To spark some debate on this matter, I will shed light on how publications about my research influenced my relationship with Raymond over time.

For seasoned fieldworkers, but particularly for the benefit novice researchers treading the path of ethnography in criminology, I will document my fieldwork experiences as a “true confession” (Ferrell and Hamm 1998). Specifically, I will dwell on methodological issues and considerations that are usually left out of academic publications or “relegated to footnotes or methodological appendices” (Wakeman 2014: 719). Although these issues constitute “essential components in any full accounting of field research knowledge” (Ferrell and Hamm 1998: 12), they are quite rare in criminology (for an overview, see Ferrell and Hamm 1998; Rice and Maltz 2018).¹ In part, this is understandable in the current day and age that sees a lot of research is guided and sometimes even limited by Research Ethic Boards (see, for instance, Urbanik 2018). Moreover, scholars do not want to be labeled “going native” or worse because they fear public scolding for their (possible) unethical behavior: all examples of “compromising data quality to avoid getting burned” (Katz 2019: 27–29). By reflecting on the development of my longitudinal relationship with Raymond, this article is meant to serve as an example of a criminological “seldom told tale from the field” (O'Brien 2010).

This article is structured as follows. To contextualize my fieldwork, I will start with a brief introduction of the case of the Dutch Crips. The remainder of the article will follow my relationship with Raymond over the course of fifteen years by highlighting several methodological and ethical aspects that arose as our relationship unfolded. In the conclusion, I will reflect on

the takeaways of my findings for both current and future criminologists doing longitudinal ethnography.

Crips in the Netherlands

Gangs are not indigenous to the Netherlands and for the longest time the word "gang" was avoided in official accounts and scientific publications in the Netherlands or used "only with reluctance" (Van Gemert et al. 2008: 8). However, since the early 1990s, there were growing reports raising concerns about youngsters from the city of The Hague who would refer to themselves as "gangsta" or as part of either Crip or Blood gangs. Although the Dutch gang patterns and crime problems might not have met US standards, the gang styles and symbols showed remarkable resemblances to the Los Angeles-based street gangs (Van Gemert 2001). Scott Decker, Frank Van Gemert, and David Pyrooz (2009) therefore argue that the chief explanation as to why Crip gangs are found in Europe is popular culture. In fact, Decker, Gemert, and Pyrooz (2009) conclude that any comparison between Crips in the United States and Europe rests primarily on style and identity and that the Dutch Crips "are far less organized, are not organized around drug sales, are not territorial, and engage in much lower levels of violence" (Decker et al. 2009: 401).

One of these Dutch Crip gangs has been in the spotlight of both local and national media: they featured in articles in popular magazines (Van Stapele 1998; Viering 1994), they made an appearance on various shows on Dutch national television, and were the focus of a book written by journalist Saul van Stapele (2003). Some years later, the media attention culminated in the documentary *Strapped 'N Strong* (Van der Valk 2009). A central figure in these media accounts is Raymond, the gang founder and leader. Over the years, Raymond's portrayal of Dutch gang life has been met with skepticism by journalists reporting on the case of the Dutch Crips. During an interview with the Dutch glossy magazine *Panorama* in 1994, a reporter asked Raymond to what extent the Dutch Crips were imitating the Los Angeles Crips. Raymond responded: "Don't mistake our lives for a game or romance, the life of a Crip is hard. If we would live in America, in LA, several of us would have been arrested or killed a long time ago" (Viering 1994: 41). In the book *Crips.nl*, this recurring comparison with US street gangs is also addressed by Raymond: "I have shown some Americans around in the hood. Showed them some weapons, introduce them to some niggers. They went completely crazy. 'This is just like back home, cuz, you guys are fucking crazy'" (Van Stapele 2003: 45).

How I Met Raymond

These journalistic interpretations and scientific accounts of gangs and gang violence in the Netherlands formed the backdrop of my introduction to the Dutch Crips. In 2004, I was introduced to the case of the Dutch Crips when I came across the book *Crips.nl* (Van Stapele 2003). After first reading the book, I was fascinated by the detailed documentation of the gang's criminal history. In addition to being intrigued by the presence of a Crip gang in the Netherlands, I was drawn to the content of a CD with Dutch "gangsta rap" that accompanied the book. As the year 2004 drew to a close, I decided to send an email to an address in the back of the book, stating my interest in the book and the CD, both as a criminology student and rap music enthusiast. A day later, somewhat to my surprise, I got a response from one of the main characters in the book: Raymond.

Raymond was born in the early 1970s in the Republic of Suriname, a former colony of the Netherlands. At the age of three, he migrated with his parents to the Netherlands. After living in the nation's capital of Amsterdam for a year, Raymond's family moved to a small neighborhood in the city of The Hague. Together with his three brothers, Raymond—the second eldest son of six children—laid the foundation for the Dutch Crips. First as a breakdance collective in the early 1980s and then, some years later, as a youth group. As they grew older, Raymond, his brothers, and their friends started getting involved in delinquent activities like petty theft, vandalism, and the possession of weapons. In 1988, the group adopted the identity of the Crips after seeing the movie *Colors*.² A lethal stabbing by one of Raymond's younger brothers in 1989 marked a defining moment in the development of the Dutch Crips as a gang. Until then, the group could be seen as “an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously,” beginning as a playgroup of youngsters. However, their involvement in this violent event meant an “integration through conflict” (Thrasher [1927] 1964: 46). In the aftermath of the stabbing, the group was stripped down to a core of a dozen members and shortly after the incident Raymond broke off his intermediate vocational education. In 1994, he was arrested and sentenced to four years in prison for masterminding the breakout of a prison with a hijacked helicopter. Reinvigorated by his prison experiences, Raymond resumed his criminal career in 1997. Since then, he has acted as the leader and spokesperson of the Dutch Crips.³

After the first email from Raymond in 2004, we kept in touch for over two years, exchanging emails on a variety of topics related to Dutch street culture, US gang life, and rap music. In general, Raymond always took time to answer my questions, usually resulting in lengthy, detailed messages in his distinctive style and vernacular. In the winter of 2006, we met in person for the first time; a result of an assignment for a course on Organized Crime that involved interviewing someone (actively) involved in organized crime. As someone from a middle-class family in the Netherlands, growing up in a sheltered, rather peaceful village that borders the city of Rotterdam, I could think of no one in my social surroundings who was involved in organized crime nor did I know anyone who had such contacts. Therefore, I decided to ask Raymond if he could assist, either directly or by introducing me to someone. I forwarded him the list with potential topics and Raymond responded: “You know whats up cuz. You know you're at the right place, that's what we do cuz. All day everyday! I had to laugh, because 2/3 of the shit on your list is on at every moment 4real. But that's the easy part. Now for the hard part. . . how do you want to handle this?” (Email conversation with Raymond, 1 November 2006)

At first, Raymond raised the issue of receiving financial compensation for his work. However, in the same email he stated that because it was “a school project” he agreed to an interview later that month in his “h200d”: a square behind a community center in a small neighborhood in the Laak district of The Hague (Roks 2019).

Before meeting Raymond, I was nervous. An email from Raymond sent just a few days before the interview did not help. He attached a picture of himself holding two large guns and included the following message: “If the interview goes well, you can use this picture for the cover of your project.” The contrast with our first meeting could not have been bigger. Instantaneously, I was drawn to Raymond's friendly expression, which cut through his impressive, muscular build and the presence of six of his homies. Moreover, he immediately made me feel at ease by saying: “Really nice to finally meet you.” Over the next three hours, he took his time to answer all of my questions on Dutch gang life and organized crime. Although we differed in a number of respects—including, but not limited to, age, ethnicity, and criminal involvement—I felt a connection. Our first interview grew into a period of more intensified contact in 2007 as part of my master's thesis. Once Raymond provided his informed consent on the project, I combined

in-depth interviews, informal conversations, observations, and questions via email to reconstruct his life, criminal career, and the formation of the Dutch Crips (Roks and Densley 2020).

"Sorry for the Mess, but as You Can See, We're Busy"

Ethnographic research in criminology is rife with ethical conundrums, most of which seem logical and valid in theory, but prove to be more arduous and intricate during fieldwork. One of the first ethical concerns I came across was the issue of "guilty knowledge" (Adler 1990: 106; Polsky 1967: 139–140). In *Ethnography at the Edge* (Ferrell and Hamm 1998), various authors discuss doing fieldwork in the vicinity of crime and deviance and disclose their experiences with shifting ethical and moral boundaries over the course of their research. Stephen Lyng (1998: 242–243), for example, makes note of a "hierarchy of consequences" in terms of the moral ramifications of the researcher's participation. Illegal acts that ambiguously lead to harming of others, either physically or psychologically, are at the top of the hierarchy and constitute unethical behavior. The bottom of the hierarchy is less clearly defined and comprises participating in or observing illegal acts that do not harm others. According to Lyng (1998: 243), the difficulty lies in filling the spaces in between these two extremes. Others, like Ned Polsky (1967: 133), therefore emphasize that researchers should make clear decisions about their personal, moral boundaries. In this consideration, the safety of the ethnographer should be taken into account, but also the matter of already established relations with informants (Zaitch 2002: 16).

In the summer of 2007, more than six months after our first meeting, I had an appointment with Raymond. Until that day, we usually met and talked outside in the neighborhood, most of the time accompanied by several other gang members. When I entered the "h200d" in The Hague, the streets were empty, and I decided to give Raymond a call. He answered and said that they were busy, but that I could meet them in a spot that was located nearby. As I got close to the three-story apartment building, a mixture of tension and excitement came over me, a feeling that intensified as I climbed the stairs of the walk-up. Mostly, because I thought that the relocation of our meeting from outside to inside might be symbolic of an increased amount of trust.

When I entered the apartment, Raymond was sitting on a black leather couch, in an otherwise scarcely furnished room. He looked at me and said: "Sorry for the mess, but as you can see, we're busy." As I gazed around the almost empty room, I noticed several objects that were laying on and next to a glass coffee table that in the middle of the room: I could make out the jack of a car and a welded square block. At first, I had no idea what Raymond or the other members of the Crips were doing. On the floor next to the couch was a black shopping bag with the brand of a Dutch furniture store in bright red letters on each side. As I stood in the doorway, Raymond kept looking at me with a big smile on his face as he grabbed the bag and pulled out a translucent bag of thick plastic filled with white powder. Raymond put the bag down on a scale on the coffee table. The digital numbers on the scale stopped at 512 grams.

Although this moment took place more than ten years ago, it is engraved in my memory. Time seemed to move in slow motion and a number of questions flashed through my mind. Should I stay or should I get out? Is getting out even an option? Can I leave? If I leave now, how would Raymond react? Would it be really suspicious if I walk out right now? Then and there, I decided not to leave but took a seat next to Raymond on the couch; a split-second decision that could have had far-reaching consequences. If the police had raided the apartment at that time, I would have been an accessory to a criminal offense. A visit by a rival group could have had an even more dreadful ending. Fortunately, neither of these scenarios happened.

Back then, I had no idea whether staying in this particular circumstance was the right thing to do. Textbooks on ethnography among active offenders of gang members provided no specific advice for these circumstances, except noting the importance of an exit plan or keeping a safe distance from criminal offenses (Van de Bunt 2015: 61). Because I stayed in the room, I felt somewhat ashamed, like I crossed some moral ethnographical boundary, even though I also felt that leaving in that particular instance was not a viable option. Unsure about how others—like my thesis supervisor—would react, I decided not to share this information and not to write about this moment in my master's thesis. Only after a few years did I slowly start disclosing my experience to others. First during informal conversations and paper presentations and also in my dissertation, specifically in light of the issue of building rapport.

Looking back on my contact with Raymond, the confrontation with 512 grams of cocaine was a defining moment. Although it came much sooner than I had anticipated, it led to an extensive talk with Raymond about my personal boundaries. It gave me a chance to explain that I wanted to discuss his criminal career, but that I also wanted to stay as far away as possible from knowledge about past criminal activities for which an arrest had yet to be made or information about offenses that would take place in the (near) future. He acknowledged that exposing me to the scenery in the apartment room was a test to see how I would respond and whether I could be trusted. In the years that followed, I regularly caught glimpses of the Crips' criminal activities: different quantities of illegal narcotics, an operating cannabis plantation in a house, large sums of money and counterfeit money, and several knives and firearms. Nothing, however, that exceeded my personal moral boundaries. In fact, I took into account that some of these activities might be visible during the course of my fieldwork, particularly since the Rollin 200 Crips have shown these items in earlier media presentations. Therefore, I thought it would be inevitable that, at some point during my research, I would be confronted with some aspects of their criminal lives. In addition, I took these observations as a way to check whether the activities of my informants aligned with their stories about their criminal activities.

Navigating between a Stranger and a Friend: Building Rapport

For almost ten years, Raymond acted as my “Doc” (Whyte 1943: 298). Back in 2007, I set out to do a street ethnography on the Dutch Crips. However, most of the gang members would pay me little to no mind, regardless of Raymond introducing me as a “researcher” and stating that I was “cool.” For instance, when Raymond was not present in the neighborhood, most of the Crips would routinely ignore me until Raymond would arrive. On several occasions, I tried to start informal conversations, but their stoic expressions made me feel that most gang members were not interested in chit-chat. Therefore, after two months of little progress, I decided to focus solely on the life history of Raymond.

After graduating in 2007, I kept in touch with Raymond and visited the neighborhood in The Hague several times a year. A research grant I received in 2010 made it possible to conduct an ethnographic study on the embeddedness of crime and identity in the small neighborhood in The Hague where Raymond grew up and that has been the home base of the Dutch Crips since the 1980s. When my fieldwork started in January 2011, Raymond was in prison on drug charges. Due to this recent attention from law enforcement agencies, few gang members were present in the neighborhood. This major setback at the start of my research felt like I had to start from scratch. With the help of a youth worker, I was introduced to a group of 50 young people aged between 12 and 20 who frequented the local Youth Center. Despite my efforts to build rapport, joining them in various sport and musical activities, most of them kept their distance.

On good days, I was seen as one of the youth workers or blatantly ignored. On bad days, people yelled "snitch" or "po-po" whenever I entered or exited the building or, worse, called me "cop" to my face. Eventually, some youth warmed up to me, but because most did not, I was limited to an entirely observational field role.

Things started to pick up when Raymond came back from prison in June 2011. Talking to Raymond on the street, sharing laughs, and being seen in his midst seemed to help. Increasingly, I also noticed how Raymond took it upon himself to introduce me to others, often without me asking. On several occasions during group conversations on the streets, he would say: "This is Roks, he is a criminologist who is writing a book about us, he is cool." As a 30-year old white male, I stood out between the gang members and local youngsters from Surinamese, Antillean, and African descent. Because Raymond explained my presence, other members of the Crips and youngsters from the neighborhood would come up to me to ask who I was and what I was doing in the neighborhood, offering me the opportunity to clarify my role and research. Most helpful, however, were the times Raymond directly introduced me to others as a "homie," "cuzz," "cuzzo," or a "brother."

Raymond, therefore, played a vital role during my fieldwork. His introduction, however, was only the first step in building rapport with other informants. Mark Fleisher (2000: 234) notes that doing (street) ethnography is like dating: "The longer you hang around, the more you talk and the better the relationship." In general, I also experienced how "being there" for a sustained period of time was beneficial for relationships with informants. As I came to the neighborhood more often and extended the duration of my visits from hours to better parts of the day, most of the members of the Crips became talkative, interested in my research and my personal background. With most of my informants, I developed a good relationship, also because most of them would comment on my presence in the neighborhood during rain, sleet, and even in the snow. What also really helped was working out together. In 2012, I joined the Crips in their weekly Sunday training in a nearby park, which consisted of jogging, doing pull-ups and push-ups, followed by some boxing or grappling exercises. Informants who still had their doubts about my presence or intentions would often show this during the sparring sessions: on several occasions some informants kept hitting or kicking me, even though I was on the ground or my guard was down. Even though my upper body was covered in bruises after a training a couple of times, this physical contact seemed to have a positive impact on my field relations, with a few informants opening up to me after these training days.

Looking back, I argue that building relationships during fieldwork was not necessarily a linear process that increased with time. Fleisher's (2000: 234) dating metaphor seemed to apply, but only—just like dating—when there was a connection between two motivated individuals. With some I developed an amicable bond, bordering on friendship, but not all informants seemed that interested in building a relationship. During my fieldwork, I experienced that my thoughts—in my fieldnotes but also in my dreams—navigated toward evaluating my relationships with specific informants. In this context, the literature on doing (street) ethnography often discusses the issue of trust (see, for instance, Maier and Monahan 2009: 11–16). Although few scholars clearly define what is meant by trust in this respect, I always felt that trust carried too much weight to be applicable to my relationships with informants, also with Raymond. First, because I felt that although the core of my informants—whom I spoke to on a daily or weekly basis—would share certain specifics about their lives and criminal activities, they would also shield other specific parts of their lives, like the shame and disapproval experienced by family members and friends because of their criminal involvement. Second, I felt like the issue of trust was fragile, something that required continuous work to maintain. For instance, despite an introduction or green light from Raymond, I had to show informants that I could be trusted. To that end, I made sure I

was always transparent about who I spoke to, in and outside the neighborhood, and also why I interviewed (local) law enforcement representatives. As my fieldwork progressed, I therefore settled for being tolerated or accepted by informants rather than being trusted.

Breaking “Silent Codes”?

The fragility of field relationships first became apparent to me in the aftermath of conflicts between members of the Crips. In 2011, when I started my PhD research, there were about 50 active members of the Crips. However, as the year 2012 progressed, I noticed fewer gang members in the neighborhood. In fact, in a period of 18 months, 20 members left the gang: either because they were kicked out by Raymond or other older gang members or because they left the gang of their own volition (Roks 2018). The departure of some of the gang members I hung out with on a daily basis constituted an important moment in my study, especially since the conflicts between my informants made me feel pressured to choose a side. In addition to wanting to keep in touch with the Crips that left, I was also interested in knowing more about their motives for leaving. However, I expected that Raymond and the remaining Crip members could interpret this as a sign of “disrespect” and a lack of loyalty on my part. Because I had known Raymond for almost a decade, I decided to share my thoughts on keeping in touch with some of the Crips that had left. Somewhat to my surprise, he had no objections and even recognized the importance of their perspectives for my research. But he also stated that “they won’t talk to you about that, that’s one of the silent codes of the set. But you can try.” Eventually, I managed to get in touch with some of the Crips that left via direct messages (DMs) on different social media platforms.

In March 2013, Raymond asked me about my progress in speaking to what he called “the drop-outs.” At first, most of the Crips that left were quite hesitant to talk to me, just as Raymond predicted. However, in the following months, as we met up more often, the “silent codes” seemed to have unmuted and most started to speak up. In fact, some were remarkably open and elaborated on their perspectives and experiences of the inner workings of Dutch gang life (Roks 2018). This frankness, and in particular the details that some of them put forth, presented me with a new dilemma: how can I give voice to the stories of these informants, without harming them? After all, as Herbert Gans (1965: 345–346) and others have noted, it is the responsibility of the ethnographer to minimize any adverse consequences of research participation. With this in mind, I tried to frame the conflicts and the process of gang disengagement from different perspectives, respecting the multiple sides to each story. Furthermore, I left out particulars that I felt could be taken out of context or that might result in new conflicts, and presented the information in aggregate form, without quotations or other details that could be linked to specific informants.

Building on these deliberations was the question of whether I should let informants read (parts of) chapters of my research. Marianne Boelen (1992), in her well-known revisit of the field site of *Street Corner Society* (Whyte 1943), is quite definitive on this matter: yes, ethnographers should take their manuscript back to their informants. In fact, she rather harshly considers it to be an “ethical cardinal sin” (Boelen 1992: 33–34) that William F. Whyte did not discuss his findings with the residents of Cornerville before publication. In his rebuttal, Whyte (1992: 58) states that such an ethical principle is invented by Boelen and that he is unaware of any other examples of this kind of “community feedback” in anthropological or sociological studies. During my fieldwork, I had provided different informants with earlier publications, yet, apart from a few comments on the design on the text, I received no real input on the content of my work. Therefore, during the final stages of my fieldwork, I decided to discuss my preliminary

findings with my informants, either during a couple of in-depth interviews with key informants, or during informal group conversations. My main goal with these meetings was to see if my interpretations were consistent with the definitions of the situation of my informants. In general, the feedback was positive, and I used their input to provide a clearer and more complete picture of my results.

Regardless of whether they would actually read the entire manuscript, I also had additional reservations to share my work with informants. After having spent almost a decade in the vicinity of Raymond and the other gang members, I felt like the media documentation on the Dutch Crips painted a somewhat distorted picture of their criminal activities and Dutch gang life in general. *Strapped 'N Strong*, a 90-minute documentary film on the Dutch Crips of which the title in itself is symbolic of their violent and powerful presentation of self, serves as a prime example. In the first scene of this epitome of their media attention, Raymond enters a house. Looking at the blood stains that are spread out over the living room floor, he says: "Look, I think it is clear what happened here, right? This is a deal that went bad, you know? And this type of shit happens every day, but this is the kind of shit people don't see." Furthermore, during the opening minutes of the documentary, individual gang members are introduced alongside their gang name and rap sheet. Scenes throughout the film show the movement of large quantities of cannabis, the preparation of cocaine for an upcoming transaction, bullets that are being wiped for fingerprints, large sums of cash money, and several firearms.

Although my research at times mirrored the ways the Crips had presented themselves in the media, my fieldwork also gave insight into the mundane, even boring aspects of Dutch gang life. Or, to invoke Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lexicon, in addition to being shown the frontstage performance in the media and on the streets, I was also exposed to the backstage of Dutch gang life. Sometimes this shed light on informants in "discrepant roles" (E. Goffman 1959: 141–145), something that was captured by informants as the difference between "real" and "fake" gangstas. During the last phase of my fieldwork in 2013, one specific concern stood out, something that was the result of a conversation I had with the maker of the documentary. He told me that in the process of finalizing the movie, Raymond urged him to make specific edits like, among other things, to cut a specific storyline of an estranged member. For me, this prompted the question of how I could write critically about the orchestrated criminal performance of the Dutch Crips, something that haunted me in the process of analyzing and writing.

"Something about an Informant"

After the summer of 2013, I gradually decreased my visits to the neighborhood in The Hague. Every now and then, in the process of finishing my manuscript, I kept in touch with Raymond and other informants, mostly via WhatsApp and social media platforms (Urbanik and Roks 2020). In the week before defending my dissertation, I invited Raymond to attend the public ceremony at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, but also to inform him about what I said in media interviews about my forthcoming book. He appreciated the gesture, but also told me that I did not owe him any explanation and that he trusted me. In addition, he reassured me that I did not have to worry that any statements in the media would be misinterpreted by him or any other members of the Crips. Or, in Raymond's own words: "I know how the media works."

On 16 March 2016, I successfully defended my PhD dissertation. Raymond, somewhat to my disappointment, was not present during the public ceremony nor did he show up at the party I threw later that evening. A number of former members of the Crips did attend. They asked for copies of the manuscript and requested my signature on the first page. One of them placed

a picture on which we pose together with my dissertation on Instagram, including #proud in the caption. That same week, I received more positive reactions to my book from informants via social media who, independently of each other, seemed really happy that I (also) told their side of the story. A few days after the public defense of my dissertation, I went back to the h200d in The Hague to bring five copies of my book. Several gang members were present that night, including Raymond. Flipping through the pages, they were hyped and eager to start reading the book. A couple of days later Raymond send me a message on WhatsApp to let me know that the book was “hood,” a positive qualification presented in what I had come to learn as Raymond and the Crips’ distinctive gang vernacular. Overall, Raymond seemed impressed by my work and was full of praise, especially since he felt that parts of my book were “more real” than previous media publications about the Dutch Crips.

Because I had worried about Raymond’s reaction to my work, I felt relieved that he liked the final result. However, this feeling quickly disappeared when I received the following message from Raymond later that same week:

Raymond: I gave you what you asked for
 Raymond: Now I want something in return
 Raymond: Give me their names
 Raymond: Before I go to the wrong people
 Raymond: Because this will be handled
 Raymond: I didn’t let you come this close to let you disrespect me
 (Conversation via WhatsApp with Raymond, 22 April 2016)

Despite the digital nature of our WhatsApp communication, I could make out more aggression in between the words and sentences than usual. Raymond’s discontent seemed aimed at a section in the manuscript that included “something about an informant.” More specifically, he wanted to know who was responsible for calling him an informant. Nowhere in my manuscript do I state that Raymond is an informant nor that specific informants have said so. However, I do describe that almost everyone I have ever spoken to on the street has experienced being snitched on—in accordance with findings by Richard Rosenfeld, Bruce A. Jacobs, and Richard Wright (2003)—and that the term snitch was easily thrown around during my fieldwork. For instance, members of the Crips would suspect local residents of “snitching” whenever they got a visit at home from a local police officer. Furthermore, when a former member of the Crips was released from jail, much sooner than most people on the street suspected due to the gravity of the violent offense, it was automatically assumed that he “snitched.”

Conversely, and this was the passage in the book that stirred up the most controversy, I illustrated a similar practice among the younger members of the Crips that left the gang after conflicts. In expressing their disillusionment with the inner workings of the gang and their displeasure with Raymond’s leadership, they proclaimed that Raymond might be an informer. In part, this was rooted in the ways Raymond dealt with the police in the neighborhood. Although the police were considered to be the street cultural “enemy number one,” as Raymond and other informants would utter on a regular basis, most interactions in the neighborhood were friendly and relaxed. Even while this happened, most active gang members were amazed and even astonished by Raymond actions. However, questioning whether Raymond was an informant was a heat-of-the-moment emotional response by the informants who had left the gang. More importantly, as I describe in my dissertation, these allegations should not be read and taken literally. Rather, these claims should be interpreted as a “weapon of the weak” (Scott 1985): a symbolic way to fight back in asymmetrical power relations on the street by discrediting someone’s reputation.

Somewhat overwhelmed by the nature of Raymond's reaction, I promised to consult my fieldnotes to see who called him an informant. A knot in my stomach was formed by Raymond's aggressive digital communication, but mostly by the assumed reciprocity captured in the statement "I gave you what you asked for, now I want something in return." At first, I felt like there was no one I could discuss this with: not with my family, or friends, or my wife, because I did not want to worry them. Moreover, I also felt hesitant about being open about this matter with my supervisors and colleagues because on a certain level I felt ashamed about the way I handled the situation with Raymond.

"Why Were the Dropouts So Important All of a Sudden?"

Revisiting the section in my manuscript in the process of writing this article, I might have been able to add some more nuance to parts of the text. In fact, perhaps I should have provided a more detailed, contextualized account about the practice of "snitching" altogether. However, a peculiar thing happened during the process of writing my dissertation and engaging with my empirical data. Real life stories of informants with whom I spent time with on a daily basis for almost three years seemed to transform from people of flesh and bones into more abstract narratives, anecdotes, and examples. This distance from my informants was further exacerbated by the fact that during this stage of my research I started to use pseudonyms. As the names of my informants changed, combined with the abstract nature of their stories and experiences, the characters in my manuscript felt increasingly distant.

However, in the process of writing I always tried to take conflicts between informants into account and repeatedly checked for quotes that could have possible negative outcomes, something my supervisors also assisted in with their useful feedback. Overall, I think I offered a balanced and honest account of the conflicts between my informants. Raymond, however, had a different take on the matter and wrote: "Why were the dropouts so important all of a sudden?" a variation on Howard Becker's (1967) famous phrase "Whose side are you on?" In responding to this matter, I explained that I valued every contribution of each informant, and I did not validate one perspective over the other. Moreover, I emphasized my transparency about speaking with former members of the Crips. "I'll overlook the rest when you give me their names," Raymond responded, adding that "many people thought it was a negative book."

This last remark is meaningful and important to grasp Raymond's reaction: people around Raymond who read (parts of the book) found the overall tone to be too negative and, in addition, might have had different expectations about the end result. Over the years, I put a lot of effort into managing ideas and expectations about my research, among other things by showing them earlier publications in scientific journals, but also by explicitly stating, explaining, and reiterating that my dissertation would be substantially different from earlier journalistic accounts about the Dutch Crips. After a few years, I felt like most informants seemed to understand what could be expected of the book. In addition to managing these expectations, I also explained that I used a different method than the other "outsiders" who documented the lives of the Dutch Crips. For three years, I was almost always in, or around, the h200d and participated as much as possible in different daily activities: hanging out on street corners and other parts of the urban environment, working out, playing football on the street, eating, and drinking; an approach that was appreciated by many, but something that also provided me with the opportunity to see beyond the performance of gang-ness in the earlier media accounts.

Both the tone and content of Raymond's messages were responsible for several sleepless nights, but also feelings of anxiety as I became increasingly worried that a gang member might

visit me at home or at work. Therefore, I decided to write Raymond a message via WhatsApp. Clarifying my intention would be the best way to go, I thought. In an long message to Raymond I was open about the emotional toll—a cocktail of regret, anger, sadness, fear, and shame—this situation had on my physical and mental well-being. In addition, I explained my intentions with the section about “the informant” and stressed that I did not verify these allegations with the police, simply because, on the one hand, I assumed them not to be true and, on the other hand—and more importantly, as I argued in my message and in my dissertation—because the text should not be taken literally. In other words, it should be interpreted as something that people say to discredit each other and not as factual accounts that informants believe to be true. A man of his street stature, I continued, should be familiar with these street cultural practices and should even be able to laugh at these insinuations. Repeatedly, I thanked Raymond for sharing his knowledge, for his mediating role during my fieldwork, and for being a mentor and street father. For the time being, however, I wrote that I needed some distance to process what happened.

As a person who tends to avoid conflicts in every aspect of his life, I send the message to Raymond but I did not await his response. Since I was scared about his reaction, wary of his violent history, and also ashamed because I felt like I let him down, I chose to temporarily block his number on WhatsApp so I could no longer receive his messages or calls.

“I’ve Read It Myself and I Think It’s Not that Bad”

Immediately after sending the message and blocking Raymond’s number, a feeling of relief came over me. Slowly the tension seemed to leave my body and for the first time in a couple of days I got a good night sleep. A few days later, the feeling of stress reappeared when I got several calls from blocked and unknown numbers. Not much later, I received a message from one of my informants: he casually asked if I was doing well and if I wanted to contact him. Because I was at work at the university, I did not respond immediately, but I intended to send him a message later that day.

However, I did not get that chance. A few hours later, just before lunch time, Jeff—the informant who send the message earlier that day—knocked on the door of my office at the university. In shock, I stood up to shake his extended hand. Jeff asks: “Roks, can we talk for a moment, maybe grab a cup of coffee or something?” Hesitantly, I responded: “That really depends what we are going to talk about, man.” As we walked toward the coffee counter, Jeff told me he has been sent by Raymond to collect some things: a couple of old magazines and some other documentation on the Dutch Crips Raymond gave me back in 2007 and never even mentioned or asked for again. Jeff seemed to be fully apprised of what Raymond and I talked about last week, because he also started talking about “the names.” With our coffees, we walked toward a hallway near my office to talk, greeting several of my colleagues as they pass us.

During our conversation Jeff kept looking straight at me, almost never breaking eye contact. He smiled a lot and his tone was calm and friendly. In fact, he had an air of tranquility that made me very nervous. If I could not give the names, Jeff started, because of some journalistic principle, I could have just told Raymond. Now, especially since according to Raymond I took (too much) time to answer his question about who said what, I have made myself suspicious. Repeatedly, I could hear myself saying that this was exactly what I tried to prevent. Jeff told me Raymond was not angry, but he was very disappointed about how I handled myself in this situation, especially in light of the special relationship we had developed over the years. Moreover, Jeff stressed that my reaction was “not really manly.” Out of reflex, I could hear myself muttering

that I “acted like a bitch.” If Jeff would have been in a similar situation, he continued, he would have called Raymond right away to set up a meeting in person. Moreover, if I had done something like this with another group, he continues, I would have ended up in the trunk of a car.

In our 15-minute talk, this was the only moment the theme of violence was made explicit by Jeff. However, it was the everydayness of this encounter at my work and the anything but aggressive nature of the conversation that gave it an intimidating vibe. This feeling was strengthened when Jeff said: “Like I told Ray, I didn’t get it man. I mean: he knows we know where he works, right? He knows we know where he works, right?” Toward the end of our conversation, Jeff indicated that his visit might have been intimidating. At that point, I could only utter some sounds that were meant to agree with his statement. Jeff told me I should contact Raymond right away. Just before the elevator doors closed, we gave each other a short hug. As the doors of the elevator closed, Jeff said: “Just reach out to him,” and I could hear myself thanking Jeff for mediating. Still in shock, I strolled back to my office.

Immediately, I send Raymond the following message:

ROKS: Waddup cig homie, Jeff was just here at my work. Sorry I have dealt with everything like this, it was never my intention to permanently break off our contact. I just wanted to sort some things out for myself. But that was not a good way to go, as Jeff also pointed out

ROKS: I feel bad about it, because you have always been good to me

ROKS: I just didn’t know what to do anymore, Ray, for real

ROKS: Sorry

Raymond: Hk cuzz

Raymond: You are a real nigga cuzz

Raymond: I understand

Raymond: You have nothing to fear from me. And I also respect you very much. It’s all hood. You are still my homie

Raymond: I’ve read it myself now and think it’s not that bad

Raymond: Everyone reads it differently

Raymond: It will be hood

Raymond: Don’t worry

(Conversation via WhatsApp with Raymond, 28 April 2016)

Although I felt reassured by Raymond’s reaction, it also left me feeling somewhat surprised. The issue that had evolved into a massive problem in my head, dominating my life for the last week, turned out to be not that big of a deal according to Raymond. In fact, Raymond told me that I have “kept it pretty clean in his house.” He did, however, give a number of examples of situations and incidents that, from his perspective, could have benefited from some more background information. But, he stated that he believes I did not have bad intentions in doing so and that everybody in the hood still has “str8 love” for me. And by the way: he did not need the magazine and documents back Jeff requested earlier today.

For almost two years, I did not hear from Raymond. During our last conversations via WhatsApp in 2016, he told me about his involvement in a new group, a hybrid between a street gang and an outlaw motorcycle gang. In November 2018, Raymond was arrested because of his alleged involvement in several high-profile murder cases (Roks and Densley 2020). Over the course of 2019, he was charged with leading a “murder squad” working for the upper echelons of organized crime groups in the Netherlands. Raymond is discussed in several newspaper and internet articles and on television shows, often by way of recounting his previous media coverage as leader of the Dutch Crips. Because of my published research on the Crips, journalists also approach me. At first, I was hesitant to talk to reporters. Not only because of the severity of the

alleged charges, but mostly because I felt that we did not leave things on the greatest terms, and I feared another visit of one of my informants. Eventually, I decided to respond to a few media requests by relying on somewhat superficial and publicly available knowledge on Raymond and the Dutch Crips.

To this day talking about Raymond or the Dutch Crips in the media makes me feel uncomfortable, although this has changed after meeting with Raymond in prison in February 2020. As I waited for Raymond in the prison's visitors room, I could hear him cracking jokes with two guards in the hallway. After walking into the visitor's room with a big, confident smile on his face, he was uncuffed by the guards and said: "Roks, long time homie!" We exchanged a short hug over the back-to-back desks and started talking like we would usually do, like nothing had changed. Almost immediately, I decided to bring up our falling out and added that I could have handled things differently. Raymond was quick to tell me that I did not have to worry about that, stating that the only thing he feared was that former members of the Crips would stain his reputation. Sitting across from Raymond, I could not help but thinking that reputation could also be interpreted as legacy in this case. As we discussed his pending trial, I told him about the different media requests by journalists. Raymond responded with: "I know, I saw you on the news, you're turning grey cuzz!" After reassuring me several times that he trusts I will only say the right things in media, he said: "You can also tell them we spoke, I think that will shock them."

Concluding Remarks

In this article, I reflected on my relationship with Raymond by highlighting some pivotal aspects of doing longitudinal ethnography in criminology. My "confessional tale" first illustrates that gaining access to a hard-to-reach or hidden population and building rapport and trust is not a straightforward and linear process. Rather, it is a trajectory filled with potential setbacks at every phase of the fieldwork. Moreover, although relationships with informants have the potential to strengthen over time, conducting longitudinal fieldwork also presents some additional dilemmas. As my relationship with Raymond developed, we grew closer, but I felt our personal history also grew increasingly complicated voicing critical perspectives on Dutch gang life, during my fieldwork but mostly in the process of publishing the results of my research. In general, the issue of long-term field relationships is currently underdeveloped in literature on tales from the field, but this is something that should be further scrutinized for the benefit of researchers engaged in longitudinal ethnographical fieldwork. Additionally, I hope my reflection on my relationship with Raymond sparks some debate on how to critically examine and publish on informants' criminal and violent posturing while maintaining personal field relationships. Nowadays, where we see street-oriented individuals on both "the digital street" and physical street (Lane 2019), this issue of dealing with informants' performativity and how this impacts field relations is especially relevant for ethnographers to explore in more detail (Stuart 2020: 209–217; Urbanik and Roks 2020).

Lastly, although it is a touchy subject, I hope this article also leads to more attention for the performativity of researchers. Gary Fine and David Shulman (2009: 188) observe that "ethnographers differ little from Erving Goffman's social actors; they rely upon impression management." Overall, notwithstanding some insightful experiences (for an overview, see Ferrell and Hamm 1998; Rice and Maltz 2018), many classic and contemporary criminological ethnographies give off the impression that researchers made very little "rookie" mistakes or engaged in behavior that might have skated along ethical edges, or in some cases might have crossed some moral or legal boundaries. Perhaps most scholars refrain from these "true confessions" (Ferrell

and Hamm 1998) because explicitly describing ethical choices and considerations leaves ethnographers vulnerable and open to a heap of criticism—with the controversy surrounding Alice Goffman’s *On the Run* (2014) serving as a horrendous worst-case scenario. However, instead of stirring up much-needed discussions on research ethics by sharing experiences, this runs the risk that ethnographers—or researchers in general—refraining from divulging their methodological deliberations and real-life fieldwork experiences. Paradoxically, then, the optics of the ethics might actually preclude more informed knowledge about the ethics of actually doing ethnography in criminology.

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■ NOTES

1. In anthropology, however, these methodological and ethical debates are much more common.
2. The movie *Colors* (1988) centers on two white police officers, played by Sean Penn and Robert Duvall, who try to combat the ongoing violence between Crips and Bloods in Los Angeles.
3. See Roks and Densley (2020) for more information on Raymond’s history and the evolution of the Dutch Crips.

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