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**THE VIEWING GLASS OF DISORDER:  
DO ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
'YOUTH' AFFECT THEIR  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE 'DISORDER' IN  
THEIR LOCALITY?**

***Grant Kennett***

**Abstract**

This dissertation explores the extent to which adults' perceptions of youth affect their perceptions of disorder in their local area. Utilising qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and a focus group alongside secondary data from the Safer Cornwall Partnership Strategic Assessment (Sorensen 2012), the aim of this study was to not only establish if adults' perceptions of young people have a direct impact upon their perceptions of disorder in the Cornish town of St. Austell, but to also analyse how such perceptions are established, informed and influenced. Grounded by a wholly interpretive epistemology and through a 'thematic' analytical approach, it was found that 'social' disorder 'cues' are far more likely to 'signal' disorder to an adult onlooker than 'physical' cues. Subsequent 'youth' perceptions are then seen to impact upon these disorder perceptions by the finding that as people age, the ages they attribute to 'youth' also increase, thus subsuming the behaviours of 'older' youths within their own perceptions of youth. Therefore, once these perceptions have been propagated through vehicles such as the media, it could be argued that behaviours and acts that have become synonymous with youth are actually, in the main, not being carried out by young people. It was also found that the 'fear of crime' had a profound impact upon how young people and their behaviours were perceived and interpreted by the adults with whom they share a locality.

**Keywords:** youth, disorder, anti-social behaviour, fear of crime

**Introduction**

Disorder as a concept is framed by a myriad of complex inferences and interpretations. Whilst it may appear superficially as a mere descriptor of the 'low-level breaches of community standards' (Farrall *et al.* 2007: 8) that amount to 'nuisance', often non-criminal deeds, upon closer inspection, the term is a contextual viewing glass; the focus of which is altered by each individual whose own perceptions inform their view of what is disorderly. Such perceptions are equally as intricate in their construction, with a number of influences seemingly contributing to the overall representation of disorder in the 'eyes of the beholder' (Skogan 2008:

403). These influences can be borne from personal, 'lived experiences', whereby an individual encounters 'disorderly cues' that 'signal' to them a potential risk based on a previous 'situation' in their life (Innes 2004; Brunton-Smith 2011). Alternatively, perceptions can seemingly be swayed by persistent and robust third-party influences (such as the media) through which stereotypes and 'folk devils' are established; further informing the perceptions individuals have of the behaviours and actions displayed by certain social groups (Cohen 1972; Brown 2003). From all of this, one social group in particular has come to be the epitome of disorderly behaviour, with the consensus amongst British adults being that 'youths' and young people are the predominant perpetrators (Burney 2005; Squires 2008; Sorensen 2012). Yet with the concept of 'youth' being equally as complex and variant as 'disorder', the differing perceptions of the former notion could, theoretically, have their own influence upon how adults calibrate their 'viewing glass' of disorder.

Utilising qualitative data gathered from four semi-structured interviews and a focus group, this study aims to explore how adults' perceptions of youth affect their perceptions of the disorder in their locality and how such perceptions manifest themselves and are influenced by external factors such as the media. The focus of the research is on adults living in or around the Cornish town of St. Austell; the largest urban area in the county. The sample for the study was drawn from parents and carers of Explorer Scouts whom the researcher is the leader of at a St. Austell youth group. From those who expressed an interest in being a part of the study, 'quota sampling' techniques were employed to ensure the best possible cross-section of the St. Austell community was represented (Babbie 2010).

The decision to use qualitative, primary research techniques was made following the literature review by the researcher as a gap in the previous literature was discovered where both the concepts of 'youth perceptions' and 'disorder perceptions' could be directly applied to each other. From this, it was decided that a wholly qualitative approach would be utilised as not only does this facilitate the application of a 'social meaning' to the data captured (which is vital when exploring perceptions) (Davies *et al.* 2010), it also sat well with the epistemological positioning of what was a wholly interpretative research project; the aims of which were to gauge perceptions rather than collate factual, opined answers. To this end, whilst the semi-structured interviews offered a combination of the flexibility of the 'open-ended' interview and the 'directionality' of the 'structured survey instrument (Schensul *et al.* 1999), the focus group supplemented their use by not only offering an ethnographic basis to

gauge a group dynamic, but also increased the volume of data that could be utilised (Morgan 1997). To complement the primary qualitative data gathered, findings from a secondary source; a local crime audit titled Safer Cornwall Partnership Strategic Assessment (SCSA) (Sorensen 2012), were used to frame the discussions with the sample, provide a wider lens through which the qualitative data can be interpreted and also to act as a 'triangulation' measure to both validate and strengthen the primary findings. Finally, throughout this project, the researcher carefully considered and maintained conformity to the published 'Research Ethics Policy' (University of Plymouth n.d) and the British Society of Criminology 'Code of Ethics' (BSC 2006).

## **1 Literature Review**

### **1.1 Disorder: What is it and how is it perceived?**

Farrall *et al.* (2007: 8) define disorder as 'any aspect of the social and physical environment that indicates to the observer (a) a lack of control and concern and (b) the values and intentions of others that share the space'. Farrell *et al.* (2007: 8) continue on to describe 'incivilities' as 'low-level breaches of community standards that signal an erosion of conventionally accepted norms and values', inferring that such 'incivilities' 'can serve as indicators of "disorder"' (Herbert 1993: 45). In modern Britain, the term 'incivilities' has been replaced within political discourse by the more emotive 'anti-social behaviour' (Burney 2005). What is evident here is the avoidance of the term 'crime'. Whilst some argue that disorder is a major causal factor of crime and if left untended will undoubtedly lead to this end (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Braga *et al.* 1999), it is also argued that disorder may not have a directly criminogenic effect. Some argue disorder is a social construct brought about through issues of 'implicit biases' based on racial stereotyping and stigma (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004). It is also argued that certain typical behaviours (namely youth behaviours) have been labelled as disorderly (Muncie 2009; Squires 2008), thus highlighting the implications of citizens themselves 'imput[ing] the character of disreputability' (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004: 321). From this, the question can be asked of the potentially socially-constructed nature of disorder and its actual implications. As Skogan (2008: 403) suggests, 'is [disorder] somehow "real", or "just in the eyes of the beholder?"'. Such diverse interpretations of what disorder actually comprises and consists of highlight the complexity of the notion, which is a central theme of this study.

Upon first examining the literature concerning perceptions of disorder, it is evident that the majority of studies conclude that it is the 'fear of crime' that has the greatest

impact upon disorder perceptions (Hale 1996; Brunton-Smith 2011; Farrall *et al.* 2009). Such fears are influenced by a perceived breakdown of the physical state of the neighbourhood and the erosion of formal and informal social controls (Garland 2001; Ferraro 1995) which lead individuals to perceive that they are at risk of becoming a victim of crime (Ferraro 1995; Farrall *et al.* 2007). In this regard, if an individual perceives that those around them are lacking in regulation, be it through formal controls (such as a prolonged lack of police presence) or informal controls (through a deficiency in morality, for example), they are likely to reach assumptions that such people pose a threat to them due to a perceived lack of 'internal control' within them (Nye 1958; Garland 2001; Farrell *et al.* 2007). Whilst the deficiency in morality discussed here is identified as an 'internal control' factor, it is argued that such controls not only manifest from the self, but are often 'internalised' following a period of learning during prolonged exposure to controls through both social and environmental contexts (Reckless 1973). This element of 'control theory' highlights a common argument that a perceived weakness in the external controls subsumed within these contexts is likely to result in deviant behaviour (Reckless 1973; Graham and Bowling 1995; Koffman 2008).

It is also suggested that the fear of crime *must* be accompanied by a 'cognitive facet'; for an individual to feel fear they must be in a situation that they perceive as fearful, 'regardless of how vague this perception may be' (Gabriel and Greve 2003: 602). The cultural and social significance of such 'situations' (be they a manifestation from an individual's previous experiences or an actual, present-moment occurrence) seemingly frame the attitudes towards crime and disorder that individuals within communities have, thus directly affecting how they view the moral make-up and physical state of their locality (Jackson 2004; Gabriel and Greve 2003). Further research suggests that it is perceptions of low-level disorder in particular that lead to the greatest prevalence of a 'fear of victimisation'; fears that are (in the majority of cases) vastly disproportionate to the reported crime levels in the locality (Brunton-Smith 2011; Markowitz *et al.* 2001; Wyant 2008). From this, the fear of crime can also 'stimulate further delinquency and disorder' due to citizens withdrawing themselves and 'undermining the capacity of the community to deal with its problems' (Skogan 1986: 204; Markowitz *et al.* 2001).

This particular belief is a key underpinning of the 'broken windows' thesis put forward by Wilson and Kelling (1982). According to this theory, minor, visible forms of 'physical' disorder act as 'visual cues' for subsequent, more serious disorder to occur in that area after citizens withdraw further and loosen their subconscious, informal

controls (Kelling and Coles 1996; Gau and Pratt 2008). Therefore, disorder not only leads to an increase in the *fear* of crime, but also crime itself (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Gau and Pratt 2008). Further consequences of this are seen to be the eroding of community bonds and the establishment of the belief between local residents that the community is ill-equipped to deal with deviance, disorder and crime, which subsequently pours more fuel onto an inherent 'fear of crime' (Brunton-Smith 2011). What these arguments illustrate is that whilst the feelings of security within individuals will be reinforced by obvious signs of the exertion of both formal and informal social controls, visual, 'disorderly cues' will symbolically erode such feelings of security and *indirectly* indicate a 'real risk' of crime even if there is little or no, *direct*, 'real risk' of victimisation (Farrell *et al.* 2007; Warr 1990). Therefore, the key feature at the heart of the relationship between the environment that surrounds us and our fear of crime is 'social control', or more precisely, the perceived erosion of it (Garland 2001; Warr 1990; Farrell *et al.* 2007).

Such 'disorderly cues' were examined by Innes (2004) as part of his 'signal crimes' perspective, which further details the 'symbolic function' of disorderly cues that come to be instilled and evaluated by local residents, 'signalling' to them potential future risks (Innes 2004; Brunton-Smith 2011). These cues include aspects of vandalism, litter, general dilapidation and discarded syringe needles as broad examples. Many stress, however, that the contingent, socially-constructed nature of such disorder perceptions means that the same 'visual cues' and 'signals' may lead to differing perceptions from individuals, due to differing individual experiences or 'ideological positions' (Girling *et al.* 2000; Carvalho and Lewis 2003; Jackson 2004; Spelman 2004; Brunton-Smith 2011). It has also been suggested that disorderly cues fall into two categories: 'physical' cues and 'social' cues (LaGrange *et al.* 1992). Whilst the physical cues are the sort discussed previously such as the disrepair of buildings, dog mess and graffiti, social cues encompass certain 'disruptive' behaviours such as noise, loitering and drunkenness as well as simple perceptions of people and groups within the neighbourhood (LaGrange 1992; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Farrell *et al.* 2007).

## **1.2 Youth: What is it and how is it perceived?**

Garratt (1997: 144) illustrates a modern-day evaluation of 'youth' by describing the term as '...go[ing] some way towards bridging the gap between the "dependency" of childhood and the independent "freedom" of adulthood'. Such a description connotes what is further implied by the term 'adolescence'; a sense of an 'uncontrolled freedom', 'irresponsibility', 'vulgarity' and 'rebellion' (Muncie 2009). Yet although such

perceptions are borne from modern-day thinking, the 'dangers' of youth have seemingly been in existence for centuries. Stainton Rogers (1997), talks at length of how, even in the times of Shakespeare, gangs of violent young people were not uncommon. The profound difference, he argues, was that the youth of the sixteenth century inhabited a world devoid of the 'profound need to understand them' (Stainton Rogers 1997: 177). It is therefore argued that 'youth' was yet to be constructed into the 'social issue' that it is today as there was seemingly no desire to 'take informed action about them' (Stainton Rogers 1997: 177). Perceptions of youth and young people were yet to be influenced by the modern-day 'tools of construction' that have moulded and stereotyped the 'problem of youth' (Stainton Rogers 1997; Roche and Tucker 1997; Muncie 2009).

When investigating 'perceptions' of youth, one recurrent theme is the concept of 'youth culture' (Parsons 1942), with arguments often detailing how working-class struggles in Britain have permeated into youth subcultures, leading to actions of 'resistance' against dominant cultures caused by the desire to express their identity (Cohen 1972; Hall and Jefferson 1976). Such anxieties about working-class youth seem to have been present throughout the history of industrialised society, with Muncie (2009: 64) arguing they stem from 'Victorian assumptions of a causal relationship between working-class culture and delinquency'. Many waves of youth subculture have swept across Britain, with the 'teenage culture[s]' of the 'teddy boys' (Melly 1972), 'mods' (Hebdige 1976), 'skinheads' (Mungham and Pearson 1976) and 'punks' (Hebdige 1979). Previous to these arguments, however, subculture theory was already well established in the USA by scholars within the Chicago School. Albert Cohen (1955), for example, argued how working-class youth subcultures were emerging that were straining against the dominant values of a middle class society which discriminated against them. Their delinquent and disorderly behaviours were therefore 'working-class adaptations' borne of their 'status frustration' and their lack of retention of middle-class norms (Cohen 1955; Muncie 2009). It is further argued that youth subcultures of this type would then not only generate their own norms and see it right to conform to these, thus becoming 'deviant' to the majority (Cohen 1955), but they would also create 'parallel opportunity structures' which replaced the 'legitimate' means of attainment adhered to by the wider-society, with 'illegitimate', criminal means (Cloward and Ohlin 1960).

The widely-perceived prevalence of often-violent youth cultures is mirrored in modern times with an arguably 'overwhelming focus' upon youth and crime due to long standing perceptions of them being 'troublesome' (Brown 1998). This view is echoed

by Roche and Tucker (1997: 1) who argue that 'young people are beset by predominantly negative images [and] are seen as either a source of trouble or in trouble'. In a broader context, media fuelled 'moral panics' pitched alongside high-profile cases of 'child demons' (the murder of James Bulger, for example), are seen to have exacerbated negative perceptions of a 'feral youth' amongst British adults (Brown 2003; Fionda 2005; Scraton 2007). This is said to stem from the argument that once a new, 'highly visible' youth group emerges, media-fuelled stereotypes will whip up an endemic 'panic' in society, 'labelling' the members of this new grouping a modern 'folk devil', thus identifying them as a threat to society (Cohen 1972).

Further to this, existing arguments also suggest that actions widely recognised as 'youth behaviours' are becoming rapidly criminalised and socially unacceptable, meaning that what may have previously been labelled as 'mischievous' is now labelled as 'anti-social' (Presdee 2000; Squires 2008; Muncie 2009). 'Anti-social behaviour' in itself has become embedded within the everyday lexicon of modern-day society and political discourse, with some arguing it has now become the British public's greatest concern (Sorensen 2012; Squires 2013). For example, Tonry (2004) argues that such widespread concern is a result of New Labour proliferating an issue that is of concern to a relatively small minority into a broader social issue, 'thereby making people more aware of it and less satisfied with their lives and their government' (Tonry 2004: 57). From this, 'anti-social behaviour' is argued to have become a key visible indicator of disorder within a community (Sorensen 2012). Burney (2005: 2) argues, however, that the two concepts are distinctly different. Whilst 'disorder' is 'a term applied directly to communities' and 'focusses on a standard list of recognisable elements', 'Anti-social behaviour' is 'something done by individuals who are thereby singled out and blamed'. On top of this, this new umbrella concept has 'politicised an almost limitless range of behaviour [which is subsequently] drawn into the net of new controls' (Burney 2005: 2). As evidence suggests that anti-social behaviour is widely perceived to be an activity synonymous with youth (Burney 2005; Squires 2008; Muncie 2009; Sorensen 2012), considerations should be made in this study regarding how such perceptions inform perceptions of disorder.

### **1.3 *Bridging the Gap***

Through conducting this review, it has become apparent that the opportunity to apply both concepts of 'perceptions of disorder' and 'perceptions of youth' to each other has seemingly been overlooked. This is particularly surprising as there are many instances where it seems a negative perception of youth can directly inform a

negative perception of disorder. For example, evidence suggests that the very presence of a grouping of 'teenagers' can be interpreted as a 'social disorder cue' (LaGrange *et al.* 1992) which, in turn, could be interpreted as an example of 'anti-social behaviour' (Brunton-Smith 2011). However, whilst residents throughout Cornwall described their perceptions of what consisted of anti-social behaviour as predominantly involving young people, only 11% of all reported incidents were 'specifically recorded as youth related' (Sorensen 2012: 66). Compounding this, the town relevant to the research in this study (St. Austell) is highlighted as the area with the highest number of reported incidents of anti-social behaviour in Cornwall, with a number close to double that of area with the second highest (Newquay) (Sorensen 2012). With all of these factors in mind, it is the purpose of this study to establish an understanding of how such perceptions of youth and disorder are established regardless of their opposition to the statistical evidence.

#### **1.4 Summary**

Whilst the concept of 'disorder' is debated in its definitions, its power to inform perceptions of risk of victimisation and fear of crime is widely accepted. From this, perceptions of the formal and informal social controls exerted on youths have a considerable influence upon feelings of security amongst adults, whilst the specific make-up of the disorder that young people are believed to cause can be interpreted by communities as 'cues' to further, more criminal acts being imminent. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that the concept of 'youth' harbours a deep-rooted anxiety amongst adults, with the majority attributing young people with the disorder in their localities. Such anxieties are argued to have been proliferated by the highly politicised nature of youth crime and disorder and the unrelenting thirst for the exploitation of youth culture by the free media. Whilst this may be the case, there is a distinct lack of research apparent which examines the extent to which a negative perception of youth affects how disorder itself is perceived.

## **2 Analysis and Discussion**

### **2.1 Defining and Identifying Disorder**

Before exploring how the respondents' perceptions of disorder were informed and maintained, it was vital to first gain an understanding of how they defined and

identified it. This belief is drawn upon the idea that, as one respondent highlighted, “disorder can be anything, in that what is disorder to someone is not disorder to someone else” (I4, Comment 7) and, as Skogan (2008) explained, disorder is interpreted through the ‘eyes of the beholder’ (Skogan 2008). Upon questioning, it can be seen that the direction of the responses is seemingly that disorder is predominantly the behaviours displayed by people who deviate from the norm, rather than any physical signs they may create:

[W]hen I think of disorder...I think of people maybe, acting in a way that’s not deemed acceptable... (I1, Comment 4)

I would say...any sort of behaviour that upsets the natural balance of society (I4, Comment 4)

Specific examples of disorder voiced included ‘noise’, ‘drunk people in the streets’, ‘rowdiness’ and ‘groups of people hanging around’. Whilst this (at least in part) concurs with the previously highlighted definition of disorder given by Farrall *et al.* (2007: 8); that disorder can involve ‘any aspect of the social and physical environment’, it only corresponds to aspects of the ‘social’ environment. This could have a number of explanations. The first is that St. Austell town centre has recently undergone a £75m regeneration process which has seen the demolition of large sections of derelict and time-worn structures and the building of new, more aesthetically-pleasing shopping precincts. With this, large areas which would have harboured examples of what both Farrall *et al.* (2007) and Innes (2004) would describe as ‘physical signs’ or ‘signals’ of disorder have been removed, thus rendering the ‘social’ cues more obvious and the only ‘signs’ through which the sample can base their definitions and perceptions upon. Secondly however, as some areas of disrepair still exist (especially within the suburbs and surrounding areas), it is highly likely that most of the sample would have encountered these ‘physical cues’ in and around St. Austell as (at the time of the study) all of the respondents resided either within the town or its outskirts. Therefore, the evidence in this study suggests that ‘social disorderly cues’ are far more likely to ‘signal’ disorder to observers than ‘physical cues’. Furthermore, by suggesting that the previously discussed ‘social cues’ highlighted by LaGrange *et al.* (1992) are arguably more powerful disorder indicators than any physical mark, this pours more doubt upon the ‘broken windows’ thesis (Wilson and Kelling 1982), in that the maintenance of urban areas and the tackling of ‘physical’ disorder does little to alleviate the ‘signalling’ potential of ‘social’ disorder and the possibility of it developing into a more serious issue (Shelden 2004).

On top of this, there was an apparent preoccupation amongst some respondents with associating disorder with 'drunkenness':

Late at night, round the pubs, there are signs there, that's the usual breeding grounds of it (I2, Comment 8)

You have the night life. Kicking out of pubs and what not, I suppose that is disorder (I3, Comment 13)

Not only does this again highlight a predominant focus upon a 'social' disorder cue, it also corroborates with evidence from the SCSA, which states that the 'majority of anti-social behaviour reports to the police [in Cornwall] relate to rowdy/nuisance behaviour' (Sorensen 2012: 18). However, respondents subsequently admitted to instances where they attributed themselves to disorderly behaviour when inebriated.

The following examples illustrate this:

It's just like a nuisance...most people have probably all, done these things, this is the thing, when you get to a certain age it's like, oh that's a nuisance, but when I did it, it was fine (FG:R3, Comment 13)

I am not innocent of that myself and I'm sure there are other people in this room who are not innocent of that either (FG:R2, Comment 14)

Such utterances highlight an issue which betrays the transient nature of disorder as it is understood by these respondents. Whilst they admit to acting in a disorderly manner whilst in a state of drunkenness, they do not ultimately 'label' themselves as a troublesome individual; their fleeting disorder is legitimated by their overall ability to conform. This, therefore, could mean that certain individuals are 'labelled' as disorderly if their behaviour when drunk is supported by pre-conceptions of their overall conformity within the wider society, thus meaning that certain social groups or communities are more likely to be viewed as disorderly than others. Not only does such a 'label' legitimise the wider society's condemnation of the behaviour being displayed by the 'labelled', it also has the effect of allowing the 'deviant actor' to legitimise their behaviour (Becker 1963).

A further aspect which betrayed how the sample defined and identified disorder is how each individual had different interpretations of the 'related' concept of anti-social behaviour. Whilst some could find little or no difference between the two notions ("*it runs in tandem with each other, it's just another way of saying it*" (I2, Comment 12) and "*similar sort of things I suppose, or part of disorder would be anti-social behaviour*" (I4, Comment 10)); others highlighted profound differences between them. For example, whilst one respondent defined disorder as "*a group of people*

*acting in a manner that causes distress to other people*" (I3: Comment 4), they go on to describe anti-social behaviour as:

People who don't want to, or can't conform to what is the expected values, the expected behaviour...not to have respect for other people's feelings...so anybody who tries to impose their will on everybody else (I3: Comment 10)

Another argued that whilst disorder could be carried out by '...drunk people [who] don't do it on purpose', 'anti-social behaviour [is] someone who [is] doing it...on purpose...with intent' (FG:R1, Comment 33). This all suggests that the respondents regard anti-social behaviour as more serious and more 'directed' than disorderly behaviour. Such a conclusion can be drawn from the use of the term 'intent', which suggests anti-social behaviour is a step-up from behaviour that is widely termed as disorderly. What is particularly interesting about this is that originally, anti-social behaviour as a concept was borne from what Farrall et al. (2007: 8) and Herbert (1993) term as 'incivilities'; 'low-level breaches of community standards that signal an erosion of conventionally accepted norms and values' which serve as 'indicators' for disorder (Herbert 1993). In this study, however, the perceived, more 'directed' nature of anti-social behaviour has led respondents to believe that the behaviour has now escalated to the point where it goes beyond just 'upset[ting] the natural balance of society' (I4, Comment 4) and now impacts upon individuals to the point where their quality of life is considerably infringed. Whilst these findings are striking, such feelings could be explained by the evidence previously discussed in the literature review; in that the proliferated and sensationalised nature of 'anti-social behaviour' has led to a relatively small issue being brought to the attention of the masses and thus disproportionately increasing anxieties (Tonry 2004).

In summary, it appears that disorder as a concept brings about a range of definitions and interpretations based on a number of aggravating factors (such as drunkenness) or wider influences (the proliferated discourse surrounding anti-social behaviour, for example). Not only does this highlight the potentially 'socially-constructed' nature of disorder (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Skogan 2008), but it also underlines the importance of how differing perceptions of what actually constitutes disorder can affect the wider responses and understandings of the concept as a whole.

## **2.2 Defining and Identifying Youth**

Possibly the most evident observation that was made from the responses to the question "*What first comes to your mind when you think of the term 'youth'?*" was the

disparities in the age ranges with which it was associated. Whilst some respondents gave brackets such as 'teenagers' (FG:R6, Comment 153), and 'anyone under 18' (I1, Comment 40), another suggested youth encompassed the 'mid-teens, up to about, early 20s' (I2, Comment 18). This highlights the troublesome nature of 'youth' as a term, as there is no universal definition or collective, societal understanding of what 'youth' actually is. A key explanation for this conundrum was highlighted by one particular respondent:

I'm an older man so the young to me ...depends on their behaviour really, it's first impressions with them...it's not so much their age. You could have a young male of 16 acting really mature...he should be a youth but...you wouldn't automatically look at him as a youth, you would perceive him differently... (I2, Comment 20)

This suggests that as people age and the gap between their own age and the 'younger element' widens, the age ranges by which they identify youth get progressively older as well. The difficulty in pinning a definitive age grouping on youth can be further understood by many attributing 'youth' to 'behaviours', rather than a set age range:

I think that as people are living longer... [they] try to hold on to their youth a lot longer and then I think it's them that cause the problems (I4, Comment 32)

I find it very difficult to define youth...where's the cut-off point? Because I feel that I have grown up quicker than others perhaps...would my cut-off point be lower than others? (FG:R5, Comment 171)

The particular focus here is how such 'behaviour' is viewed as 'troublesome' (Brown 1998) and how it has led to youth as a whole being 'seen as either a source of trouble or in trouble' (Roche and Tucker 1997: 1). What these respondents are suggesting is that youth is not necessarily a mere attribute of the young; it is a concept which can encompass the actions of any individual acting in a manner which is seen to be attributable to the young. This conclusion allies with Muncie's (2009) definition of 'adolescence' as comprising of the notions of 'uncontrolled freedom', 'irresponsibility', 'vulgarity' and 'rebellion'; all of which could theoretically be attributed to a person of any age. This, therefore, raises the question of whether characteristic 'youth behaviours' that, in recent times, have shifted in their perception from the 'mischievous' to the 'anti-social' (Squires 2008; Muncie 2009), are actually carried out, in the main, by young people at all.

To illustrate this claim, the association between disorder and drunkenness should be revisited. As is shown, the respondent in Interview 2 (I2) suggested that the “usual breeding grounds” of disorder are “outside the pubs and clubs”; a perception also shared by others. When asked later: “to what extent do you feel that the disorder you identified earlier, at the start of this interview, is committed by young people?” they replied:

[F]rom what I was talking about at the start, it's mainly...the young people ...it's just what you've seen personally, what you hear on the news all the time...you're looking at kids...right up to about 30, and they are absolutely out of their tree and they're totally, out of order, and that's where you get these perceptions from (I2, Comment 46)

This clearly illustrates how a differing perception of youth and ‘youth behaviours’ can impact upon perceptions of disorder. Whilst this particular respondent may attribute these ‘disorderly’ behaviours to youth, others with lower age thresholds for what they identify as youth, may view them as behaviours of adults. However, once views similar to the ones displayed by this respondent proliferate throughout public discourse, negative perceptions of youth can influence other individuals’ personal perspectives; illustrating further how the ‘problem of youth’ (Roche and Tucker 1997; Muncie 2009) has proliferated within and impacted upon the social conscience. A final issue which arose concerning the identification of youth as a concept was how it was predominantly interpreted as a negative term:

I do tend to think of them causing trouble... just loitering and not really up to much... (I1, Comment 46)

It kind of depends how I say it, I could use the term youth just to identify, a youth, but if I were to actually call someone a youth I mean it, in more of a derogatory sense. (I4, Comment 155)

Not only does this further evidence the previous discussion concerning the proliferation of perceptions surrounding ‘troublesome youth behaviours’, it also corroborates with the widely accepted notion that ‘youth’ predominantly connotes negativity and anxiety amongst adults (Fionda 2005).

It should be stressed, however, that not all respondents interpreted the term negatively, although some displayed an understanding that wider society may well do:

It does depend on how it is said because...youth to me just means anyone under the age of 20, I don't have a stigma with it (FG:R6, Comment 158)

I think it's a term that's used a lot...at people that cause problems but they are not, necessarily...it's not always youth I don't think...it's used in a

negative way...I wouldn't necessarily, think it's always a problem. I think it's one of those terms that used to just, stereotype a group of people. (I4, Comment 20)

This suggests that whilst the negative connotations of the term 'youth' may have been subsumed by a large proportion of society, it has not permeated the consciences of everyone due the establishment of their own, unique and differing perceptions. It is interesting to note, however, that when the respondent in Interview 4 (I4) was asked following the quote above, "so to you personally then, what does youth actually mean?", they replied:

[I]t does make me think of that actually, it makes me think of the stereotype that people use...only because you get battered with this term all the time... (I4, Comment 22)

This further illustrates the claim that wider perceptions have the power to overwhelm and influence personal perceptions; even, in this instance, an individual who believed they held their own personal view.

### **2.3 The Formation of Perceptions**

The discussion will now move on to establish how the perceptions of the respondents have been formed, informed and influenced in the context of two themes which appeared the most pertinent.

### **2.4 Media**

Throughout this study, respondents highlighted how what "*you hear in the news all the time*" (I2, Comment 46) and "*read in the newspapers*" (I1, Comment 100) has either impacted upon their own perceptions, or of those around them. Some specific examples given of the influential power of the media are as follows:

[W]hat you read in the newspaper and things like that...makes you think, actually yeah they are a pain in the arse (I1, Comment 100)

I don't think you can have an opinion without it being, influenced by outside...I think especially these days media is just, in everything...I don't think it's possible for that to not have some sort of bearing on, opinion (I4, Comment 46)

These examples suggest that the media has the power to alter or influence the personal perceptions of youth and disorder held by individuals. Furthermore, one respondent in the focus group seemingly referenced the notion of a 'moral panic' following a discussion around the proliferation of negative views of young people in local newspapers:

Especially if they are on a particular crusade as well, like some of the newspapers do these crusades don't they (FG:R4, Comment 108)

This suggests that this respondent is not only aware of the influential power of the media, but is also conscious of certain sections of the media carrying out prolonged, sensationalised campaigns focussed upon one particular issue, which, in this case, has propagated the belief that a 'feral youth' is present in British society (Brown 2003; Fionda 2005; Scraton 2007). Other respondents within this study further betrayed examples of how these factors have impacted upon their perceptions in highlighting that they perceive that the majority of the disorder in St. Austell is carried out by young people:

Yeah I would definitely say that the majority of things that I said I class [as disorder], that the young people do it, yeah... (I1, Comment 98)

[T]here's definitely an anti-social, problem within St. Austell, of youngsters, I would say yeah... (I2, Comment 36)

Strikingly however, findings from the SCSA detail that whilst 'St. Austell Town' was found to be the area with the highest number of reported incidents of anti-social behaviour in the whole of Cornwall, only 11% of all reported anti-social behaviour incidents in the county were 'specifically recorded as youth-related' (Sorensen 2012: 66). As each of these respondents had either previously or then proceeded to mention some sort of media influence "*putting a slant*" on their perspectives (I2, Comment 48), it becomes clear that this outside influence has encouraged a particular inclination of their perceptions of youth, which has subsequently impacted upon their perceptions of disorder. Ultimately then, it can be argued that 'youths' and young people as a whole have become the new 'folk devil' (Cohen 1972), whereby the problems apparent in the locality of these respondents can be blamed upon this group, solely based on widespread perception rather than any empirical evidence.

## **2.5 Fear and Intimidation**

Another theme that became distinctly apparent during this study was the impact that fear and intimidation had upon the respondent's perceptions, with the following examples:

Personally as a woman, yeah I find it quite intimidating if there's a big group of people in the town and you have to walk past them because you don't know what they are going to do (I1, Comment 22)

You think that if you are out walking the dog you think, oh I might get attacked by a young kid... (I3, Comment 70)

The key feature of these responses is that they both came from women. Whilst it cannot be denied that their fear of victimisation has impacted upon their perceptions

of potential 'attackers', it can be said this is a disproportionate fear, as research suggests that whilst young women may be more fearful of crime than their male counterparts, they are less likely to be victimised (Fetchenhauer and Buunk 2005). However, the findings in this study suggest that this reduced likelihood of victimisation could be explained by women withdrawing or avoiding certain situations or areas where they could potentially be victimised. Furthermore, the perceived unpredictability of those that instil the fear in these respondents ("*you don't know what they are going to do*") is seen as a proportionate fear to them as the apparent erosion of the informal social controls exerted upon their potential 'assailants' (Garland 2001; Ferraro 1995) has led to them to conclude that they are at risk. Additionally, being in a 'situation' even just once where an element of risk is perceived provides the 'cognitive facet' required to be fearful; which then develops into a broader perspective of crime and disorder that directly affects how individuals view the moral make-up and physical state of their locality (Jackson 2004; Gabriel and Greve 2003).

How such fears and levels of intimidation have manifested in these individuals could be partly explained by the notion of 'social connectedness'. The belief here is that the 'extent to which an individual is familiar with others who share the same public spaces' directly affects their ability to 'evaluate whether or not that behaviour presents a risk or a threat' (Sorensen 2012: 66).

Therefore, any evidence given by these respondents that betrays a detachment between themselves and youth could be seen to identify a low level of social connectedness between themselves and young people, thus arguably explaining their fear and uncertainty of them:

[T]he youth today have their own kind of culture don't they which they live by... (I1, Comment 72)

I think part of it is due to my age as well because as you get older you do get more nervous of younger people, you do get scared, so I think that probably plays on your mind more... (I3, Comment 70)

Here then, each respondent that previously intimated a level of fear and intimidation surrounding their perceptions have subsequently given an instance where they, in their mind, separate themselves from what they perceive as youth. This could result in them misconceiving any behaviours or actions which 'present a risk or threat to them' (Sorensen 2012: 66), thus explaining why 'fears of victimisation' are often seen to be disproportionate to any real, concrete risk (Brunton-Smith 2011; Markowitz *et*

*al.* 2001; Wyant 2008). From this, it can be further understood how 'labels' become attached to 'troublesome populations' (Becker 1963) and also how 'folk devils' (Cohen 1972) become subsumed and 'othered' in contemporary societies.

## **Conclusion**

When investigating how adults' perceptions of youth impact upon their disorder perceptions, the literature review exposed the highly complex natures of both 'disorder' and 'youth' as concepts. With disorder, for example, it can be seen that a two-fold consensus is apparent; with one side of the argument suggesting disorder is a physical, wholly 'visible' phenomenon which is interpreted into the wider perceptions that individuals build. Alternatively, it is viewed as a socially constructed notion, whereby influences such as fear and the public media have distorted the 'lens' through which people view the world around them which, in turn, encourages a disproportionate and often prejudicial response. With regard to 'youth', the research points to the concept encouraging a deep-rooted anxiety amongst adults, with the majority attributing young people with the disorder in their localities. What was most striking, however, was the lack of research which examines how this negative perception of youth directly affects how disorder is perceived by adults, which therefore justified the direction of this research project.

Whilst the methodological approach utilised in this study was seen to best fit such a direction, it should be recognised that its application was not without its limitations; with the predominant restrictions surrounding the sample involved in the research. For example, although a 'quota sampling' technique was applied in order to gain the best possible cross-sectional representation of adults in St. Austell from those who were selected through the 'convenience sampling' technique, this may not have provided a comparably accurate representation as an ideal, random sample would have created. When this is considered alongside another limitation of this study, the small sample size, it becomes clear that the ability to 'generalise' these results to the wider population is limited.

Regardless of this limitation, conclusions can be drawn from a number of common themes which emerged from the data. Firstly, it can be seen that 'social' disorder cues are more powerful indicators of disorder than 'physical' cues, with most respondents particularly preoccupied with attributing 'drunkenness' to disorder. With this in mind, many respondents were able to recount instances where they themselves acted in such a manner, but were able to excuse it by such behaviour not

being consistent with their overall demeanour; thus, they did not 'label' themselves as disorderly. It was also interesting to note that many respondents interpreted 'anti-social behaviour' as being more serious than disorderly behaviour; a response which could be explained by the proliferation of the term throughout the free media and into public discourse. With regards to youth perceptions, the most striking finding involved the disparities in age ranges which were perceived to encompass youth that were highlighted by the older respondents. The observation made suggested that as people age; the ages they attribute to 'youth' also increase, thus subsuming the behaviours of 'older' youths within their overall perceptions of youth. Therefore, once these perceptions have been propagated through vehicles such as the media, it could be argued that behaviours and acts that have become synonymous with youth are actually, in the main, not being carried out by young people. 'Youth' as a concept, it seems, is seemingly more attributable to troublesome behaviours, rather than a set age range or social group.

Further investigation illustrated how the media has had a profound influence upon perceptions of youth and disorder. With a reference to 'crusades' by local newspapers and many respondents perceiving that young people were the main perpetrators of anti-social behaviour in St. Austell despite empirical evidence to the contrary, the suggestion was that young people have become the modern-day 'folk devil'. When this is considered alongside the findings that 'fear' can also influence perceptions of youth, particularly through the issue of 'social connectedness', it becomes clear that negative perceptions of youth, no matter how they are informed or how they manifest, can have a profound effect on how individuals view the moral and social make-up of their locality.

Without the constraints of time and space, there are a number of areas where elements of this study could be developed and researched further. Firstly, some respondents suggested disorder perceptions can depend on levels of 'tolerance' and 'acceptance' of it. If an individual were to live in an area where disorder was commonplace or to be expected (the example of Newquay was frequently given), then this individual's perception of disorder would be very different to someone who had a lower level of tolerance. Secondly, it became clear that the respondents who made it known that they have prolonged personal contact with young people were least likely to be influenced by the widely circulated negative perceptions of 'youth'. Finally, members of the sample frequently made reference to issues, such as 'poverty', 'lack of education' and 'bad parenting' which they all viewed as contributory factors to the perceived offending behaviour of young people. Each of these

examples could be explored further to develop the arguments raised and conclusions made by this study, whilst they also betray the need for further research to be carried out in the area in order to further understand how adults' perceptions of youth affect their perceptions of the disorder in their locality.

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