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# The Unity Gym Project *Podumentary*: Joint Enterprise, Anti-Racism and Community Partnership

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## Abstract

This text introduces the Unity Gym Project (UGP) *Podumentary* (a portmanteau of ‘documentary’ and ‘podcast’). The UGP *Podumentary* is a youth-led output, generated as part of an ongoing university-community partnership in the North of England. The episode presented here profiles the work of JENGBA (Joint Enterprise Not Guilty by Association), a grassroots campaign established to challenge the legal doctrine of Joint Enterprise. This work is part of an ongoing anti-racist project, which seeks platform ‘counter-stories’ of resistance, vulnerability, and success, associated with community activism. Our accompanying text briefly situates the project, before offering an account of our collaborative process, which repurposed a model of small project supervision, beyond the university. Through this creative output, and our accompanying text, we provide an example of counter-storytelling that extends contemporary discussions of university-community partnership and anti-racist civic action.

## Keywords

anti-racist, filmmaking, participatory, podcast, *Podumentary*, youth leadership

## Background: situating the project

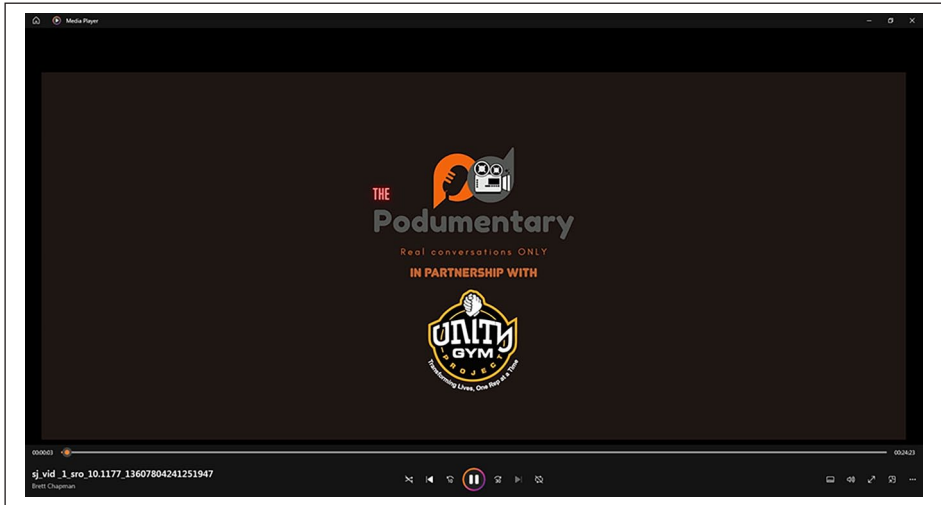
The Unity Gym Project (UGP) *Podumentary* (a portmanteau of ‘documentary’ and ‘podcast’) is a collaborative output, generated as part of a larger multi-agency project called CiviAct (Mason and Williams, 2022). CiviAct partners six grassroots anti-racist

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organisations and two universities in the North of England. It aims to support youth and community-led civic action by (1) financially resourcing the work of its partner organisations; (2) connecting those organisations with each other; and (3) exploring new models of community-led university partnership.

UGP is a youth charity, committed to the promotion of health and wellbeing. It was established in 2010 as a response to UK government's disinvestment in youth services (Youdell and McGimpsey, 2015). The gym is based near the centre of Sheffield (a Northern English city), and its core activities include provision of a gymnasium, a weekly open access youth club, football and basketball sessions, work placements, and mentoring opportunities.

The *Podumentary* episode presented here is one of several outputs generated from an ongoing university-community partnership involving the lead author (Mason), the second author (Haybe), and UGP (Mason with Unity Gym Project, 2020, 2021). Haybe is a long-standing member of the gym. His role, at the time of writing, included sessional youth-leadership work, mentoring, and project development. Since 2022, Haybe has also served the ward surrounding UGP as a local councillor. Mason is a senior lecturer at the University of Sheffield. He has been a volunteer youth worker in the neighbourhood since 2009 (Mason, 2023).

## Joint Enterprise, anti-racism, and the UGP *Podumentary*

The vision for the *Podumentary* – which sought to integrate discursive ‘podcast’-style content with the look and feel of a documentary – belongs to Haybe. A link to the full mini-series is provided at the end of this article. Our episodes were developed according to the anti-racist praxis of counter-storytelling and the will to platform stories of community activism and resistance (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002).

Anti-racist scholarship seeks to dismantle racism by exposing structurally racist systems and practices (Clark Goings et al., 2023). Taking influence from Critical Race Theory (CRT), counter-storytelling attests that racialised people are the holders of knowledge that can disrupt dominant racial ideology (Aldana and Richards-Schuster, 2021). Racial ideology – as Bonilla-Silva (2003) puts it – characterises ‘white logic’ and the common-sense frames of reference that can work to reify race (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi, 2008). Counter-storytelling speaks back to these logics, presenting alternative narratives of hope and resistance. Racism, as such, is ‘beyond prejudice’, and the sociological task for understanding racism is ‘uncovering the mechanisms and practices . . . at the social, economic, ideological, and political levels responsible for the reproduction of racial domination’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2015: 75). The episode presented here seeks to contribute to that work, by platforming Joint Enterprise not Guilty by Association (JENGbA).

JENGbA is a grassroots campaign, established to oppose injustices associated with Joint Enterprise (JE). JE is a legal doctrine that permits two or more defendants to be convicted of the same criminal offence, even if the levels and nature of involvement are different (Mills et al., 2022). Recent evidence has demonstrated significant disproportionality in JE convictions and the criminalisation of young Black men, mobilised through the image of the ‘gang’ (Mills et al., 2022; Williams and Clarke, 2016). Figures published by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS, 2023), for example, have shown that Black people in England are 16 times more likely to be prosecuted under JE than white people (Liberty, 2023). These data compound what are already damaging patterns of racial disproportionality in the UK criminal legal system, where ethnic minority groups are overrepresented in both youth justice and prison populations (Mwale and Williams, 2023; Shankley and Williams, 2020).

JENGbA has campaigned against the use of JE with notable success. In 2016, their work influenced the abolition of Parasitic Accessorial Liability (a legal doctrine associated with JE) as a basis for criminal liability (CPS, 2019). More recently in 2023 – following a legal challenge from JENGbA – the CPS agreed to pilot the monitoring of data on JE prosecutions; work that has generated clear evidence of racial disproportionality in its use (CPS, 2023). In November 2023, JENGbA was awarded the Longford Trust Prize for their ‘impactful, tireless, and strategic’ case for reform (The Longford Trust, 2023). The motivation to profile JENGbA’s work, as such, was not only to raise awareness of JE but also to demonstrate that anti-racist activism *can* have impacts at the very highest levels. Working with JENGbA, as part of the CiviAct project, has allowed us to (1) raise awareness of JE among disproportionately impacted communities, (2) provide information to minoritized young people about the criminal legal system, and (3) demonstrate the possibility and impact of an anti-racist civic action. To this extent, we see CiviAct as an example of anti-racist sociology in action because it makes pragmatic efforts to ‘connect the dots’ between private troubles and public issues through understanding, supporting, and resourcing communities of resistance (Joseph-Saibury and Connelly, 2021; Mills, 1959).

## Making the *Podumentary*: community leadership and small project supervision

For the *Podumentary*, we worked in partnership by repurposing a model of small project supervision. Project supervision felt appropriate in this instance because it aligned with our commitment to Haybe's ownership of the *Podumentary* and Mason's experience of supporting and delivering a range of small projects. The *Podumentary* belongs to the UGP and its featured guests. It does not belong to the university. This is commensurate with the CiviAct's broader commitment to anti-racist scholarship and the repurposing of university resources, beyond the academy (Joseph-Saibury and Connelly, 2021). It is also aligned with some key principles of good project supervision.

For Roberts and Seaman (2018), 'good supervision is characterised by trusting relationships where students and supervisors share research interests [but] supervisors provide advice without undermining students' ownership of projects' (p. 33). Good supervision also requires a broad range of competencies, mobilised to fulfil supervisory roles including supporting, challenging, consulting, evaluating, and mentoring (Hodoza, 2007). Practically, in this context, Mason advised on the ethics of small project work, including the basics of informed consent. He also helped Haybe to manage the size and scale of the project by breaking it down into distinct, manageable tasks, negotiating timelines and checking in on progress. Haybe recruited and directed a professional filmmaker (Brett Chapman) to record the *Podumentary* episodes. He selected and recruited guests, drafted conversational prompts for each episode, and hosted the conversations. Haybe also took responsibility for uploading the episodes onto YouTube and promoting them with support from Mason and UGP.

## Ethics

The *Podumentary* itself is the intellectual property of the UGP. This reflects UGP's ownership of the project as a youth-led output. As a university partner, Mason advised on ethics in practice and ensured that robust ethical protocols were in place (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). For example, all guests were older than 18 years, with (sometimes extensive) prior experience of podcasting/media involvement. On their invitation to participate (at least 2 weeks before filming was scheduled), all guests were offered a full explanation of the *Podumentary* and informed that their participation in the project was optional and unpaid. All guests were briefed on the nature of the conversations that would take place, and conversational topics were collaboratively negotiated during an initial informal discussion 'off camera'. These discussions included Haybe, each guest, and the filmmaker. Guests were also consulted to check that they were happy with their episodes before they were publicly released. All participants consented orally and in writing to their involvement in the documentary and the publication of this article, respectively.

## Closing thoughts

The *Podumentary* mini-series worked successfully as a pilot-sized 'proof of concept'. We hope that the episodes are received in a way that meets our intentions; to generate

counter-stories that platform and celebrate community activism. This work is also aligned with our revisioning of university-community partnership and our commitment to supporting anti-racist community-led projects without taking ‘ownership’ of community-based knowledge, processes, or outputs (Smith, 2012). We would like to thank The Big Lottery Community Fund for supporting this work, alongside Brett Chapman (the filmmaker) whose technical input and direction was invaluable. Finally, we would like to thank our guest speakers for sharing their personal stories so openly and generously. We hope these outputs do them justice as they continue to create, disrupt, and inspire.

### Authors’ note

The full Podumentary mini-series can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/@thepodumentary4546>

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## Author biographies

**Will Mason** is a sociologist and a volunteer youth worker. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in Applied Social Science at The University of Sheffield.

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Unity Gym Project is a charitable organisation focused on the promotion of health and wellbeing.

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