Gossip, Control and Community: Figurational Explorations in Sociological Criminology

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of gossip in struggles for power and control in two urban communities. The findings from the community studies research on 'Cornerville' and 'Ashmill' (both pseudonyms) confirm Elias and Scotson's (1965) diagnosis of the role of 'praise' and 'blame' gossip in maintaining group charisma for the established and attributing group disgrace to the outsiders. The findings from the Ashmill case-study also develop and adapt Elias and Scotson's model to include the concept of 'grassing', which is proposed as a parallel 'deviant' phenomenon that may assist in bonding some residents of stigmatised places. Finally, the article highlights the implications of these continuities and adaptations of Elias and Scotson's model for advancing sociological criminology's contribution to explaining group ordering and collective stigmatisation in contemporary local communities.

Keywords

sociological criminology; community studies; established–outsider figurational relations; gossip; grassing

Introduction

Drawing on two ethnographic case-studies in South Wales, this paper explores and explains the role of the phenomenon of gossip in struggles for, and maintenance of, group power ratios in these urban communities. The paper is organised as follows. In the first section of the paper, a brief review of the limited research literature on the role of gossip in mechanisms of communitarian social control is presented. Particular attention is paid to Elias and Scotson's (1965) seminal research study, *The Established and the Outsiders*, which our research programme has sought metaphorically to bring back to life for community-based research in contemporary sociological criminology (see also Swann and Hughes 2016; Hughes 2020; and Meredith 2017).

In the second section, the paper focuses on the key findings that have emerged from our participant-observational research on established–outsider relations in the communal figurations of 'Cornerville' and

'Ashmill' (both pseudonyms, as are all interviewee names) in South Wales. It is argued firstly that much of the findings confirms Elias and Scotson's (1965) earlier diagnosis of the role of 'praise' and 'blame' gossip in maintaining group charisma for the 'established' residents and attributing group disgrace to the 'outsider' residents. Secondly, analysis of some key findings from the Ashmill case-study develop and adapt Elias and Scotson's figurational model of established–outsider group dynamics to include the phenomenon of 'grassing,' [1] [#N1] which is closely connected to a code of honour that binds some 'disgraced' outsider members. Grassing is then proposed as a parallel 'deviant' phenomenon (in the eyes of 'respectable' groups) that assists in bonding some residents of stigmatised places and producing a 'self-help' form of social control. Finally, in the third section the paper discusses some of the implications of these continuities and adaptations of Elias and Scotson's oft-neglected community-based figurational research for advancing sociological criminology's contribution to the analysis of group ordering and neighbourhood stigmatisation in particular, and of 'actually existing' forms of lay normativity more generally in contemporary local communities. In exploring why things like community matter to people, to paraphrase Sayer (2011), this paper concludes that the conditions for both human flourishing and suffering – in brief, ethical goods and bads – need to be centred in any *critical* sociological criminology worthy of its name.

Previous research-theorising on gossip and social control

The existing body of 'research-theorising' [2] [#N2] on gossip as a mechanism of social control in everyday life remains surprisingly underdeveloped in both sociology writ large and sociological criminology more specifically. Indeed, we need to go back over half a century to the following passage from the social anthropologist Max Gluckman. To this day, this represents the most incisive sociological explanation of the social role and function of gossip alongside Elias's figurational research-theorising of established–outsider group dynamics that this paper seeks to develop further. According to Gluckman (1963: 313),

> The important things about gossip and scandal are that generally these are enjoyed by people about others with whom they are in a close social relationship. Hence when we try to understand why it is that people in all places and at all times have been so interested in gossip and scandal about each other, we have also to look at those whom they exclude from joining in the gossiping or scandalizing. That is, the right to gossip about certain people is a privilege which is only extended to a person when he or she is accepted as a member of a group or set. It is a hallmark of membership. Hence rights to gossip serve to mark off a particular group from other groups. There is no easier way of putting a stranger in his place than by beginning to gossip: this shows him conclusively that he does not belong. On the other hand, if a man does not join in the gossip and scandal, he shows that he does not accept that he is a party to the relationship; hence we see that gossiping is a duty of membership of the group.

The functions identified by Gluckman – that gossip serves in struggles for, and maintenance of, power and place in social groups – would tend to suggest that gossip can and should be central to sociological research in the criminological field. How, for example, are we to appreciate the lived realities of social life if we disregard the power of gossip as a social glue that binds groups of people into relations of interdependency? Despite gossip arguably being critical to understandings of social relations, to date it has not attracted much attention from sociological criminologists. We return to this issue in the discussion section below.

Despite its general neglect in much sociological literature on social control, the role and function of gossip is crucial to Elias and Scotson's (1965) figurational exploration of neighbourhood-based relations and social ordering in the British Midlands community of 'Winston Parva' (a pseudonym). More than fifty years later, the study continues to provide a cogent explanatory framework for understanding insider–outsider relations and dynamic 'power balances' within and between interdependent social groups (Swann and Hughes 2016). [3] [#N3] Importantly for this paper, Elias and Scotson identify 'blame' and 'praise' gossip as key mechanisms for the attribution and reinforcement of power relations and the ranking of status groups. Both blame and praise gossip are inseparable sociological processes that serve to emphasise the positive we-image of the established group and reinforce the stigmatisation of the outsiders through the generational transmission of name-calling and stories that are shared through community gossip channels. Linked to this, gossip also serves as a powerful social tool in the generalisation of all that the established group consider to be undesirable to the 'minority of the worst' of the outsiders. Within their own group, group members' positive we-image is linked to their generalisation of all that is considered to be 'good' to the 'minority of the best'.

Taken together, Elias and Scotson's (1965) initial conceptualisation and Elias's (2008 [1976]) later conceptual elaboration of established–outsider group dynamics represent (along with Gluckman) an all-too-rare centring of gossip in sociological research on social control and routine social ordering. In particular, this body of Eliasian work explores and explains the key role played by gossip, both praise gossip and blame gossip, and collective fantasies in maintaining the figurational processes of both status honour and status disgrace and in trapping individuals and groups in such interdependencies. In observing the collective power of what is now often termed 'othering' (for the out-group) and the cultivation of a we-image (for the in-group), Elias and Scotson do not shy away from making broader claims as to the more universal tendencies at work in human figurations across time and place. Accordingly,

> attribution of blame or for that matter of praise to individuals who, individually have done nothing to deserve it, because they belong to a group which is said to deserve it, is a universal phenomenon [...]. Everywhere group charisma attributed to oneself and group disgrace attributed to outsiders are complementary phenomena (Elias and Scotson 1965: 102–4).

In turn, the task of the researcher is not to praise or to blame but rather to better understand and explain the interdependencies that can trap groups of people in a figuration not of their own making (Elias and Scotson 1965: 155–6). In a later discussion of the broader significance of the Winston Parva research study for theorising established–outsider relations, Elias (2008 [1976]: 6) observes that, as researchers, we need to avoid the tendency to discuss the problem of social stigmatisation as if it is

> simply a question of people showing individually a pronounced dislike of other people as individuals [...]. Thus one misses the key to the problem usually discussed under headings such as 'social prejudice', if one looks for it solely in the personality structure of individual people. One can find it only if one considers the figuration formed by the two (or more) groups concerned or, in other words, the nature of their interdependence.

In this sense, the 'whole drama' of Winston Parva was 'played out by the two sides as if they were puppets on a string' (Elias and Scotson 1965: 36).

If we accept the proposition that 'in the last resort, the crucial test for the fruitfulness or sterility of a sociological theory is the fruitfulness or sterility of empirical enquiries stimulated by and based on it' (Elias

and Scotson 1965: 171), it is necessary now to present the empirical enquiries. These were stimulated by the research-based theorisation discussed above and undertaken on two communities in South Wales.

Communities, gossip and control: a figurational turn

The findings from the intensive case studies in Cornerville and Ashmill presented in this paper focus on how residents collectively distinguished themselves – as 'better or worse', 'civilised or uncivilised' and such like – from others living in different but proximate neighbourhoods, and on the forms and functions that these intra-community distinctions took. Moreover, the case studies allow claims to be made as to both the continuities with the original established–outsider model, and new empirical contributions and conceptual adaptations that may be made to the model.

The location of the first study, Cornerville, [4][#N4] is an unremarkable city suburb in South Wales with a population of approximately 2000 residents, most of whom are white, working-class and Welsh. Despite officially recorded crime and anti-social behaviour being low, neighbouring, more affluent suburbs view the village as 'hard' and its community as the source of crime and anti-social behaviour problems in their neighbourhood (UPSI confidential report, 2008). [5][#N5] Like Winston Parva, Cornerville has 3 main zones, with the smallest area, Zone 1, consisting of large semi-detached and detached homes. Locally, this is the more desirable area. Zone 2 is not geographically linked to Zone 1 and consists of (largely) ex-council housing built in the 1950s. [6][#N6] Zone 3 is an area of housing association homes [7][#N7] that was built approximately twenty years ago. A row of Victorian terraced housing runs along the main road through the village and these houses are not allied with any of the zones. This is where one of the authors lived for several years as a 'newcomer-outsider'. Focussing on the role of gossip in understanding and maintaining social relations, the significance of the Cornerville study lies in the continuities with the key findings of Elias and Scotson's Winston Parva study. Over fifty years later, their observations on the role of 'praise' and 'blame' gossip in maintaining the unequal distribution and exercising of power are essentially mirrored in this unremarkable contemporary 'urban village'.

The Ashmill study in another South Wales community involved an investigation into the relationships between the locally stigmatised 'rough' 'Blackacre' council estate and the surrounding 'respectable' working-class neighbourhood. Like Winston Parva and Cornerville, its 10,000 population is predominantly Welsh, white and working-class, and the selection of Ashmill was substantially based on its relative social homogeneity. Blackacre is regarded locally as 'rough', plagued by drug dealing, violence and antisocial behaviour. Analysis of neighbourhood-police-reported crime data suggests that a slightly higher number of crimes *per household* were recorded by the police for Blackacre (0.46), compared to the surrounding community of Ashmill (0.19) (Meredith 2017: 111). Blackacre's reputation motivated a Neighbourhood Action Plan to be conducted by the registered social landlord on the Blackacre estate shortly before the study commenced. [8][#N8] This involved a door-to-door survey, during which residents were asked about local issues and concerns. Residents indicated that antisocial behaviour and drug crime were significant issues, but that they were afraid to report incidents for fear of retribution. Like the Winston Parva and Cornerville studies, the Ashmill study focuses on the role of gossip in shaping relationships between residents.

A tale of continuity: the Cornerville study

Just as in Winston Parva, gossip serves an important function in reaffirming the positive shared image of the established group in Cornerville. The shops, pubs and community-based clubs are hubs for the exchange of gossip, together with the bus shelter and local convenience store, both of which are located on the main road in Zone 2. Gossip in the village serves to praise the established group members and can be seen as a means of 'mobilising communal help' (Elias and Scotson 1965: 92). 'Gwen', now in her early seventies, was born in the village, has never married nor had formal employment, having 'devoted her life' to caring for her grandparents, then her parents and finally an uncle who died some years ago. When he died, she was left with no family and no home, and despite not being a member of an established family or having local associations she is nonetheless supported by the community. Indeed, she is afforded near 'saint-like' status by the shop assistants who are the main channel through which gossip on her well-being – which is always described as 'poorly' but 'bearing up' – and her care needs are shared. Despite not being particularly well liked by anyone, members of the established group do her shopping, ensure she has enough money for her utility meters and check on her daily. Gwen is, as observed by Edith (a senior matriarchal figure in the established group), a 'good woman', a view regularly shared amongst the residents. Such praise of Gwen, and – importantly – their caring for her, serves to reinforce the values that members of the Zone 2 group hold dear, particularly the ideal of 'taking care of our own'. Commenting on this, Edith said:

> …it's what we do, we look after our own. It might be old fashioned in this day and age and the ways things are going, but, well, we always have taken care of our own. You won't see anyone round here being left. …There's them that don't but taking care of our own is what we do and I know it's not what some do but we always have and we always will.

This praise gossip of their own group superiority based on an individual is frequently juxtaposed by members of the Zone 2 group against the supposed behaviour of all members of the Zone 3 group, who, as commented by Bill, 'don't care about anyone else'.

The established group's shared sense of their superiority compared to Zone 3 outsiders extends to its own young members. Interestingly, and drawing from ethnographic immersion in the community, there is little readily identifiable difference between the children of Zones 2 and 3 (the children of Zone 1 are rarely seen unaccompanied in the village) in terms of their behaviour. Yet the young people in Zone 3 are blamed for a litany of offences, from verbal abuse to shop lifting, vandalism and damage. On one occasion, the shop assistants and a few customers in the local convenience store were talking about two boys who had been caught stealing chocolate bars just a few minutes before. One of them was from a long-established family in the village and after being verbally chastised by the shop assistant, who knew both his name and his address, he was sent home where 'his nan will sort him out' (Tina). He was not held responsible for what had happened as he had been 'led astray by that little bastard' (Tina) from Zone 3. Unlike the child from Zone 2, there would be 'no point' in talking to his family, even if they knew them, because 'they won't sort him out! They wouldn't know how' (Margo).

The shame inferred on all of Zone 3 residents because of the actions of 'a few' can be felt keenly by those who are in the majority and not 'the worst'. In conversations with Sue, Karen and Louise, they shared their experiences of being mothers and living on the estate. A key part of this was the knowledge of the low regard in which they are all held and, interestingly, some acceptance of this because of the behaviour of a minority of their own group. For example, the actions of the notorious 'Staynes' family are a source of some embarrassment and they understood that they were a key cause of the contempt heaped on the rest of the residents of Zone 3. Assisted by one of his friends from the estate, a teenage male Staynes forced tablets he said were ecstasy into the mouth of a young girl from the established group one morning whilst they were

waiting for the school bus. News of the incident, including her trip by ambulance to hospital, spread quickly. There was widespread contempt at the police's handling of the assault, which was considered inadequate and inappropriate – primarily because of their advocacy of a 'restorative justice' approach. According to her mother, this was 'taking the piss' in trivialising the seriousness of what had happened. It was also seen as abrogating responsibility for dealing with the offence to the victim and the community. Whilst the incident was seen as 'typical of them lot' (Ken, Zone 2) and added to the litany of their wrong-doing, Sue, Karen and Louise shared in their horror of what had occurred and agreed with the criticism of the police's handling of the incident. Moreover, they were equally, if not more, damning of the Staynes family, who are a 'horrible lot' (Sue) and they described the teenage boy who committed the assault as 'mental', 'evil' and 'twisted'. For them, it is this family, and two others, that 'make us all look like shit' (Karen).

For the majority of people in Zone 3 who are shunned and despised because of a minority there is little they can do. Illustrative of the sense of powerlessness that accompanies their shame, Sue asked 'what can we do?' They lack the tightly bound cohesion that could support a more concerted response. In another more mundane example of the 'talk' of Zone 2, three mothers from the established group discussed the spread of headlice ('nits') in the primary school. In their opinion, the blame for their children's infestation lay with 'them lot' and 'them up Collins Way' who 'don't care' and 'don't treat 'em'. These and similar comments were often heard being shared by parents and carers waiting outside the school. In conversations with the researcher three weeks into the school term, Karen and Louise from Zone 3 discussed the spread of 'nits' and their frustration with the school and the futility of endlessly treating them only for the children to become 'riddled with them again' (Karen). Both said they had treated them quickly but at 'fifteen quid a go' (Karen) they were struggling with the costs of fortnightly treatments, although both said they would buy more once they had some more money. Whilst ostensibly the medications are available from the local doctor free of charge, in reality the surgery refuses to provide prescriptions. Karen is raising three children as a single mother and whilst she works part time in a supermarket, her income is meagre. Louise, whose youngest child is two years old, does not work and after splitting from her partner before his birth, she has been reliant on state benefits. Both women were distressed but unable to refute the allegations nor explain their positions.

An additional source of tension, and one that mirrors again the story of Winston Parva's community life, centred on the local pubs. The 'Old Canal Inn' was the busiest of the three and had a largely young clientele drawn from Zone 2. The young people would often drink to excess and occasionally their anti-social behaviour (including groups shouting in the streets, urinating on windows, emptying rubbish bins and damaging street furniture) would escalate to more serious incidents. Most low-level anti-social behaviour was tolerated by the older residents in Zone 2 who viewed it from across the road as natural youthful excess (for example, Margo commented 'they're just kids'). [9],[#N9] According to participants, the police would intervene if anyone was 'out-numbered' or 'hurt', but their involvement was very rarely called upon. For example, Mark who is in his thirties said:

> Let's face it, and we all know this is how it is, well those of us that do anyways. They just make it worse. I've got nothing against 'em, got a lot of respect, it's a tough job. And if things were out of hand then sure, give 'em a bell. But most of the time, I'd say 99 percent, near as 100 percent as you can get, well why would you? Just use your head, there's no point man.

The 'Glamorgan Arms' [10] [#N10] was the preferred pub for the older residents of Zone 2 and, when they socialised in the village, the middle-class of Zone 1. The latter were, and still are, welcomed into the pub because they do not 'cause problems' (Mark). However, residents of Zone 3 were met with a significantly frostier reception. According to the regulars, the newcomers 'didn't know when they've had enough' (Carol)

and were too noisy, disturbing the 'peace of the regulars' (Sid, barman), and because of this were not welcome. Rather than relocating themselves, as had happened in Winston Parva, the established drinkers in the 'Glamorgan Arms' shunned the newcomers, who moved to the 'Old Canal Inn'. Whilst their own behaviour could be deemed as being profoundly anti-social, the responsibility for their being ostracised was attributed solely to the unacceptable behaviour of the newcomers. For example, Carol a member of Zone 2 in her forties said:

> they roughed it up didn't they? … we couldn't be bothered with them … if they can't make an effort then, well that's them. Some of 'em, they're alright, but not many – I mean most of them – they're not alright.

The Glamorgan Arms' reputation for rowdy and noisy excessive alcohol consumption was now attributed to the behaviour of the outsiders. This is evidence, we suggest, of the 'collective fantasy' (Elias and Scotson 1965) of the established group yet it was viewed by residents of Zone 2 as further evidence that the outsiders of Zone 3 were a disruptive and unwelcome intrusion on (their) village life. The newcomers had failed to understand or adhere to the rules of the established group that included, importantly, some expected due deference to the social standing of Zone 2 members. From a stable, long-term position of power, the established group were able to apply the stigma of 'group disgrace' on the outsiders. Had the balance of power between the two status groups been less uneven, the outsider group of Zone 3 may have been more resilient to the social slurs applied to them (see the contrast with 'Ashmill' below).

Part of the explanation of how the established group succeeded in maintaining their superior group image can be found in their monopolisation of resources of power in the community, again paralleling the processes unearthed in Elias and Scotson's (1965) study. Almost all official and administrative positions in the community were carried out by members of Zone 2. To a large extent, then, organising 'community' events is an exclusive and excluding performance. From hall bookings to lay members of the parish church, community council members, and youth activity/play scheme leaders, to putting out green cones to prevent parking outside the local primary school: the established dominate. Excluded from key positions in the community and lacking the advantages of an established network, the Zone 3 group lacks the organisation and channels through which gossip is transmitted to be able to effectively retaliate.

In the next section, the Ashmill study focuses on the impact of blame gossip directed at three generations of the 'minority of the worst' families on Blackacre, which may have significantly shaped the ways in which these families have 'hit back' and closed-ranks to protect and empower themselves.

A tale of continuity and change: the Ashmill study

Elias and Scotson (1965: 73) observe that residents of the 'outsider' estate tended to 'keep themselves to themselves' as part of 'an attitude of self-protection' against others with different standards of behaviour. This acted as a barrier to channels of gossip and the recognition of common standards of behaviour. Figurational bonds, status-building opportunities and informal social control between residents of the estate were relatively weak in contrast to the 'established' village, where gossiping channels were comparatively well developed. Observations in Ashmill suggest that the situation may have inverted to some extent, as relatively tight-knit family-based friendship networks have emerged among some residents who have lived in Blackacre for several generations based on relatively short chains of interdependence, in contrast to the relatively long chains of interdependence and loosely configured relationships observed among the residents of the

surrounding 'respectable' neighbourhood (see Elias 1984; Fletcher 1997; and Wacquant 2004 on the structure of chains of interdependency in civilising and decivilising processes). [11] [#N11]

Gossiping among residents on Blackacre is relatively common when contrasted with the surrounding neighbourhood, where gossiping may breach a 'respectable' social boundary: a respect for privacy in which self-restraint maintains a neighbourhood level scale of 'civil inattention' (Goffman 1966: 83–88). Peter (60) commented that it was:

> a little bit more reserved up here. … People … keep themselves-to-themselves more … not too much gossiping going on …

However, the close-knit 'gossipy' bond between (at least some) residents of Blackacre was not exclusively the kind of 'neighbourliness' foregrounded in some accounts of estate life in the UK (e.g. Boyce 2006; Hanley 2012; McKenzie 2015), in which residents unite against stigma from the outside, developing collective support and cooperative feelings of 'community pride', although some participants did describe this.

Some residents of Blackacre described limited bonding with their neighbours. Duncan (44), who has lived on Blackacre for almost two decades, described a relatively detached respect for privacy, an example of 'subsistence sociability' and limited public intercourse (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira 2014: 1277) prevalent in the surrounding neighbourhood:

> We'll say hello to most of the neighbours, because a few of them have lived here a long time, but it will tend to be just in passing – we don't chat much, we're not in each other's houses having cups of tea, just a friendly 'hello'.

'Local indifference' (Hogenstijn, van Middelkoop, D. and Terlouw 2008) seemed to be a common attitude across all neighbourhoods in Ashmill, as many residents encountered during the study tended not to be involved in local matters and neighbourhood power struggles.

Crucially, however, some residents of Blackacre described associations with a relatively powerful family-based friendship network on the estate that had developed intimidatory power within a context of long-term stigmatisation. Members of the network capitalised on blame gossip positioning them as the 'minority of the worst', reproducing intimidating, albeit exaggerated or untrue, reputations. This network requires adherence to a code of honour from members, who in return experience a sense of collective belonging and protection, and intra-group 'respect'. In contrast, neighbours who keep themselves to themselves or refuse to bond with the family-based network may be perceived as a threat to the dominant 'survival group' (Elias 1987 [1983]: xi). This was the 'Smith' family's experience of fifteen years living alongside two relatively powerful families: the 'Joneses' and the 'Williamses'.

The Smiths refused to subjugate their 'respectable' moral code – a 'pacified honourable code' in which being honourable correlates with 'morality and honesty' (Elias 1996 [1989]; 96). In contrast, the Jones-Williams network accepted a type of 'warrior code of honour', requiring 'violence with courage' (Elias 1996 [1989], 96), which underpinned their intimidating local reputations developed over generations of living together on Blackacre. The Smiths were forced to either accept the code of this relatively powerful and 'established' network, requiring adherence to the 'no-grassing' rule, or be branded as 'outsiders' within the figuration on Blackacre, risking reputational, emotional, and physical harm. Their place as immediate neighbours of the Jones-Williams families constrained their 'choices'. This highlights the social space occupied by relatively

powerless, socially isolated residents situated between the established and the outsiders, or between what Wacquant, Slater and Pereira (2014) have termed residents associated with submission and recalcitrance (and rebellion). Wacquant, Slater and Pereira (2014) develop the concept of 'territorial stigmatization' to grasp the dynamic processes by which residents of denigrated places can be stigmatised through collective representations. Stigmatised residents may, depending on their social position in that place, adopt strategies of 'submission' or 'recalcitrance to resistance' to negotiate stigmatisation. The following is developed from Wacquant, Slater and Pereira (2014: 1276), who construct two ideal types of situation to illustrate these strategies:

- Submission: The long-time elderly home owner with a strong local network of family and friends retreats into this network and emphasises what distinguishes them from other stigmatised residents.

- Recalcitrance: A young man of an immigrant family embraces the reputed badness and aligns with his peers to collectively invert the stigma. His parents may cultivate 'a front of indifference' or leave the area.

Our analysis also considers how life is negotiated by those residents who have relatively weak neighbourhood networks with which to collectively negotiate stigmatisation, and who may be either unwilling to submit to the dominant network or are excluded by its members.

While longer chains of interdependence require less dependence on local bonds for identity formation, for 'the minority of the worst' residents of 'places of last resort' (Watt 2006) like Blackacre, coping with collective stigma may require closing ranks, with shorter chains of interdependence and an intensification of local bonds. A feature of these relationships may be the informal control of information through the 'no-grassing rule'. A claim made in this paper is that the no-grassing rule observed within a shared code of honour may be a mechanism of informal social control, comparable to gossip. The investigation of the code in this and subsequent studies may help in understanding figurational processes through which 'the minority of the worst' may transform stigma into pride and power.

The no-grassing rule is a relatively underexplored phenomenon in the UK compared to the USA (Rosenfeld, Jacobs and Wright 2003), although it has been studied as part of a council-estate code that rejects the legitimacy of the police and other state authorities (Evans, Fraser and Walklate 1996; Yates 2006; Trickett 2011). Following Elias's (2000 [1939]) original research-theorising of civilising processes in Europe, the emergence of a legitimate state monopoly on violence exercised mainly through the police has corresponded with a historical decline in rates of public interpersonal violence. Where state legitimacy weakens, reliance on moral codes that involve self-help policing using violence may escalate (Black 1983; Cooney 2003; Rosenfeld, Jacobs and Wright 2003; Wacquant 2004). Such decivilising processes are not rooted only in problems of deindustrialisation, or the emergence of a welfare-dependent 'underclass', but also by the retrenchment of a variety of state-controlled public services allowing violence and fear to proliferate in the vacuum left by the reduction of state control.

The 'no-grassing' rule may be understood as part of a sociologically inherited code of honour, a processual mechanism through which the legitimacy of the police and other state agencies is rejected and collective intimidatory power developed over generations. This is not to claim that all or even most residents were fully integrated into or accepted the code. However, it was evident that Blackacre's reputation could be used even by people who ostensibly rejected it but grasped the intimidatory power that being a resident might imply. Tomos (22) has lived on Blackacre all his life. He is not integrated into the Jones-Williams network but is accepted by its members as 'safe'. He explained that, although he is cognisant of the stigma of 'being from Blackacre', he can use this aspect of his identity to overcome personal and occupational challenges outside the estate: he takes his community with him when he leaves the estate (see also Dunning, Murphy Williams 1988: 205).

Similar to the transmission of 'respectability' among the established group in Winston Parva, Cornerville and residents of the surrounding neighbourhood in Ashmill, there is an intensely emotional dimension to the process of transmission. Walkerdine (2016) explains how a Welsh community she studied was collectively generationally residualised after the ending of two-hundred years of steel production. Walkerdine develops the concept of 'affective histories', which grasps the importance of the generational transmission of collective responses to historical inequality and social injustice. Likewise, the generational evolution of a code of honour involves a rejection of collective stigmatisation from the 'outside world', and the development of a contrasting affective bond. As Moran (2015) observes, a sense of *bonhomie* or 'we-ness' may also operate to convert shame into pride among members of street gangs.

The no-grassing rule was explored in Blackacre concerning its meanings and informal social control functions. It builds on the previous work of Evans, Fraser and Walklate (1996), Walklate (1998), Yates (2006), Trickett (2011), who observed distrust between many council-estate residents (particularly young men) and the police, and that being branded as a 'grass' risks physical injury and public shaming. Evans, Fraser and Walklate (1996) identify three key elements in the phenomenon of grassing: intimidation, through local 'reputation' building; politicisation, through the observance of a moral code of honour; and socialisation, whereby well-known family groups inculcate feelings of trust, security, and community cohesion. Evans, Fraser and Walklate (1996: 370–375) attribute grassing with the status of a kind of 'neighbourhood dogma', highlighting its significance as a discourse and being careful not to overstate its empirical reality. However, the no-grassing rule may have profoundly real consequences, like those Elias (1996 [1989] 96) highlights in relation to the 'warrior code of honour' in which members 'fear of losing honour in the eyes of one's we-group' and of being thrown out of the fraternity.

The Neighbourhood Action Plan conducted on Blackacre highlighted that antisocial behaviour and drug crime were significant issues, but that residents were afraid to report incidents for fear of retribution. This was corroborated by us during the study in conversations with residents who identified a relatively powerful family-based friendship network on Blackacre that had developed an intimidating reputation over two or three generations: the Jones-Williams network. The code of honour and its no-grassing rule operated mainly to control the behaviour of network 'insiders'. However, it also operated to control residents on the margins – those who lived in close proximity, those perceived as 'weak', and those who challenged the dominance of the network.

In the following sections we provide some concrete empirical examples of the operation of the code of silence and no-grassing. Doreen, a widow in her late seventies who lives in the same square as the Jones-Williams families, [12] [#N12] found a 'Kinder surprise' [13] [#N13] container in her front yard that she put in her kitchen bin, assuming it to be litter. Minutes later, a neighbour in his early teens knocked on her door and asked her for the container, which Doreen retrieved. Before handing it over she opened it and found that it contained a small plastic bag of brown powder. She suspected that this may be 'drugs' but was too frightened to report the incident for fear of being branded a grass and suffering retribution. This is one example of many that Doreen described that leave her in perpetual fear.

Michelle Smith, a working-mother in her forties, and her neighbour who lived in the same square, were prepared to challenge the behaviour (and power) of the Jones-Williams network. After discreetly gauging the support of some other neighbours, Michelle approached the social landlord, which installed CCTV to collect evidence of anti-social and intimidating behaviour. However, monitoring and recording of the CCTV only occurred when residents alerted the community safety team, who required the caller's name to proceed. Michelle and her neighbours were not prepared to risk being identified as 'grasses'. Here the no-grassing rule worked to keep potential threats to the power of the family-based network in abeyance.

Residents living close to the Jones-Williams network who refused to submit to their power were relatively socially weak and isolated, and thus available for bullying. It is by bullying these relatively weak residents that the Jones-Williams network maintain their intimidating reputations without risking retaliation or serious criminal prosecution. For some stigmatised young men on the estate, becoming 'involved' seemed like a 'rational choice': they typify the recalcitrant type of adaptation of the territorially stigmatised that Wacquant, Slater and Pereira (2014, 1276) identify. They were inculcated into the relatively powerful Jones-Williams network from an early age. Becoming part of the network entrenched an individual's identity, their I- and we-identities becoming bound-up in the trap of the estate, as Jordan (19), one of the Jones boys, commented:

> It's like a black hole, Blackacre is. You get sucked in there and you're not getting out!

A centripetal force trapping young men on Blackacre is the risk of a diminished status and loss of 'respect' if they leave their place and we-group: their power is bounded by and intertwined with Blackacre. The no-grassing rule functions as a mechanism of social control within an honour-based habitus providing both a sense of, and actual, protection, respect, and empowerment.

Lee (35) has been convicted and imprisoned for drugs offences and burglaries, and has been involved in the family-based network on Blackacre for most of his life. To clarify, being involved does not imply a static position. Members may be involved to different degrees at different times and may be simultaneously involved in other networks. Lee explained:

> If you're associating with a group that break the law ... you grass on them and you're dead. ... You got grief for a long, long time. You'd have to move out of the area to stop people remembering that you're a grass. ... It's the circle of friends, basically it's the criminal circle ... they're the ones who can't grass ... whether it's just to ring up the council 'Next door are causing trouble. Next door are blasting music'. Just that alone is classed as grassing. ... And that person would beat you up over something like that. And all the others watching, as far as they're concerned, you're a grass then, this is what happens to a grass ... that's the difference with people say, up Blackacre, to where people on Town Road. It's only ... a short distance.

Lee's evidence highlights the relationship between grassing, criminality, fear and violence on Blackacre. His statement emphasises a greater potential for escalation into violence to resolve even relatively mundane problems, compared to people living on Town Road: an area abutting Blackacre that is close in terms of spatial proximity, but remote in terms of social distance. Lee's statement also highlights how being branded as a grass has intra-group reputational implications. In this sense, the no-grassing rule can be seen, like gossip, to have both integrating and rejecting functions. It is integrating in the way it binds adherents to a common moral code that ostensibly rejects the legitimacy of the state's power to resolve problems and its monopoly on violence.

Jordan Jones explained that the no-grassing rule was:

> the number one rule up here. Never go to the police, you take it into your own hands ... if I was to hear someone be like 'Oh the Joneses have rung the police', it wouldn't be that they rung the police, it would be 'They are grasses ...'. You would never live it down from that word.

Jordan's statement explains that if a family member was to inform the police about an incident in circumstances that could be perceived as breaching the code of honour, the individual, and potentially the whole family, would be branded as grasses: a stigma that may endure for generations. Similarly, in Winston Parva an unpunished contravention of the 'respectable' moral code may have risked the reputation of the established group. In practice, intra-group gossiping about grasses, perhaps including even past 'dead' members (Gluckman 1963, 309), is an effective mechanism of informal social control in both rejecting grasses and integrating or bonding the group within a code of honour by reinforcing the no-grassing rule. As dominant members of the family-based network on Blackacre, adherence to the rule, and the responsibility for the punishment of transgressors, offers opportunities for the Jones-Williams families to foster their intimidating reputations, and maintain, or even bolster, their local power.

> Jordan saw grassing as a 'cardinal sin', explaining that

> if you were found out … Your windows would go through for the next ten years. Until you went off the estate.

Victims of intimidation tend to be physically, socially or morally 'weaker' residents. Jordan described how a paedophile (a morally weaker resident) had been hounded off Blackacre:

> It was either that or he was going to end up dead.

He compared the moral position of a grass to that of the paedophile, stating that

> a grass is as bad as a paedophile … so if there was a grass amongst you, they had to go.

Jordan's evidence describes a 'righteous justice' in the informal social control exercised through humiliation and threats of violence, transcending what he perceived as the (in this instance) legitimate but inadequate power thresholds of the police. The point here is that both 'the paedophile' and 'the grass' present empirical reputational threats to the power of the family-based network on the estate. If they deal with them effectively, by threatening and humiliating moral outsiders until they leave the estate, they may maintain or even bolster their power. If they do nothing, they risk losing power. Blame gossip is used to disgrace 'the paedophile' and 'the grass', and thereby maintain their own 'deviant charisma'.

The power to protect the estate, within the broader context of social stigmatisation and rejection, seems to be a mechanism that may bond some residents. Jordan described an affective bonding among residents of Blackacre who are 'all in the same boat; nobody can really look down on each other', protecting themselves from the stigmatising outside world and implying a 'defended community' (Walklate 1998). This is a view from someone who is situated inside the established network. For 'weaker' residents, effectively outsider-outsiders, the estate may be perceived as a frightening and isolating place where a double exclusion and stigmatisation may be experienced, both from the 'respectable' surrounding neighbourhood and the dominant 'unrespectable' network on Blackacre. Uncomfortably, this exposes a darker reality that undermines the notion of a predominantly positive sense of collective belonging and neighbourliness prevailing on council estates in many UK-based sociological accounts. Figurational mechanisms such as gossip, and the exaggerated and totalising reputations that gossip can entrench, may have a more nefarious bonding effect. This may be especially so for some 'minority of the worst' families on Blackacre and their friendship networks, members of which may, over generations, respond to the stigma from the outside world by converting group

stigma into pride and power by capitalising on their intimidating reputations. This may explain how generations of Blackacre boys, cognisant of their deviant outsider status, may be socialised into the dominant family-based network. Jordan described how a generationally transmitted honour-based code may work:

> I could walk up there now and say 'Boys, that car over there, set in on fire for me'. No offer of money, no offer of anything, they'd just say 'yeah'. ... If they have trouble down the line, they'll come and ask you. And you'll think that'll be alright, because they done something for me. It's a protection for them I suppose. They're young, they want you to look after them now; you want them to look after you when you're older.

Kieran (24) respected the older boys growing up on Blackacre, and by doing 'favours' for them (involving assaults, damage, and holding and couriering drugs) he became respected as part of the group, climbing in the competitive hierarchy. When he was asked why he did these things, Kieran explained that the motivation was:

> so you didn't look weak ... at that time when you're young, and you look up to older lads who are doing that, you want to be with them, don't you? You don't want to be the pussy.

Criminality and caution in talking about it, issues of trust and group self-reliance, and a rejection of 'authorities', particularly the police, are inculcated from a young age. Observance of the no-grassing rule and group honour earned individuals in-group 'respect' in contrast to their rejection and social stigmatising by the wider community, and had the effect of dispersing criminal culpability.

A code of silence may have strengthened the affective bond between inter-generational members of the Jones-Williams network, but it could also be enforced on weaker individuals who may become less likely to rely on 'external rival powers' (Blok 1974: 212) like the police or social landlord, for fear of the consequences of breaching the no-grassing rule. Over time, the rule can become entrenched even for 'honest people, because the law is unable to offer protection. Those who seek redress by law can be sure to be affected by serious injury sooner or later' (Blok 1974: 51).

Supporting the analysis by Evans, Fraser and Walklate (1996), the key elements in the phenomenon of grassing – intimidation, politicisation, and socialisation – were observed on Blackacre and these conceptual insights were developed further using the resources of established–outsider relations theory and research in process sociology. Although the grassing narrative should not be overstated as Evans, Fraser and Walklate (1996) caution, we argue that its quotidian reality must be acknowledged. Comparisons have been drawn between the phenomena of gossip in established–outsider relations and grassing in neighbourhoods undergoing territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira 2014), highlighting the way in which both are used as mechanisms of social control that may entrench moral and social boundaries between generations of residents of different neighbourhoods. Moreover, a link has been proposed between the use of blame gossip in stigmatising a 'minority of the worst' through a collective fantasy, and the reproduction of a code of honour underpinned by the no-grassing rule that potentially allows some young men living on Blackacre to capitalise on exaggerated reputations to transform stigma into pride and power.

Discussion

1. Resuscitating community studies in sociological research.

In this research programme on 'insider–outsider' figurational dynamics in residential communities, we sought to steer a route past both the 'Charybdis' of nostalgic communitarian romanticism regarding community and the 'Scylla' of cosmopolitan critique of community as moral oppression. The programme was also driven both by a dissatisfaction with the dominance of discursive accounts of 'community governance' and by a sociologically realist ambition of foregrounding the study of concrete, 'actually existing' communal relations, taking us nearer to the living, throbbing, and at times dark heart of the beast that is communing in often tightly bounded localities. In particular, we returned to the 'older' tradition of community case-studies in sociology in order to explore how communities live and breathe and how they bond and bind people in simultaneously creative and coercive ways. As Sayer (2000: 176) notes, this requires the study, 'gloves off' so to speak, of the 'conventions, routines, containers for the fair and just', which, whilst displaying considerable social variation over time and space and being highly situated, are nonetheless 'essential to all action'. Arising out of the collaborative research-theorising, it was discovered – unsurprisingly – that everyday, taken-for-granted communing is usually neither all bleak, nor all bright, but is markedly more complex.

2. Replicating and testing of past research studies.

The clear status distinctions between 'established' and 'outsiders' as well the as entangled interdependencies between them that were discovered in the communal figuration in Winston Parva in England in the mid-1960s by Scotson and Elias (1965) were in large measure confirmed in Cornerville in Wales some fifty years later. The established group's story in Cornerville is one of successful (for them) communal problem-solving. Their community is protected by capable, informal guardians and provides the insiders with metaphorically solid walls of security. It looks very like Putnam's (2000; 22–24) 'bonding social capital', with its own dark side represented by the 'disgraced/disgraceful' outsiders of a different 'zone' in the neighbourhood who were subject to collective processes of stigmatisation by the 'established' and (in the latter's own eyes) more 'civilised' status group. There is also some evidence, again in line with Scotson and Elias's original study, of members of the outsider group submissively accepting and feeling embarrassment and even shame at their shared low regard due to the behaviour and manners of the 'minority of the worst' among the collectively stigmatised. What is markedly not in evidence in contemporary Cornerville is the death of community – unlike Sennett's (1998: 147) overblown claim of loss of community due to 'no shared narrative of difficulty, and so no shared fate'. But what we find is a very restricted sense of 'us' (often requiring very close-by stigmatised 'others'), which is a long way away from both the ideal of post-war social democratic solidarity and the contemporary utopian aspirations of cosmopolitan pluralism and hybridity. Both Elias and Scotson's (1965) and our research-theorising reproduced here have explained how the use of collective 'praise gossip' and 'blame gossip' can function as a mechanism through which respectable reputations and social boundaries were maintained between the relatively powerful 'established' and the relatively powerless and stigmatised 'outsiders' in the residential communities of Winston Parva and Cornerville. We thus have empirical evidence of continuities over half a century in the nature of social ordering in this form of residential community.

3. Adapting the Scotson-Elias thesis: 'recalcitrant' established–outsiders in 'places of last resort'.

In our second community case-study of a white working-class housing estate area, the Ashmill study, evidence was found of the communal institutionalisation of a 'no-grassing' rule, as part of the outsiders' code of honour, which may be understood as a counter-mechanism to the stigmatising blame gossip identified by

Scotson and Elias and confirmed in the Cornerville study. As part of the local code of honour, the no-grassing rule acted as a social mechanism through which the 'minority of the worst' of an already externally stigmatised outsider group based around reputations of 'notorious' families, acquired some control and power over their reputations by transforming stigma into intimidatory pride and power.

This finding suggests that, over generations, some stigmatised residents in 'tough' housing settlements become socialised into the normative code, developing an affective bond and habitus that largely rejects the power of the state to resolve disputes, and normalises criminality and use (or threat) of violence, thus no 'grassing' or informing the public authorities of disputes and crimes. Criminological research-theorising that gets close to the often hard stuff of everyday life in marginalised communities in the UK necessarily examines the collective cultivation of vices such as bullying and the deployment of threats of physical and emotional violence and how such social mechanisms remain obstacles to the cultivation of virtues and human flourishing. We contend that, in adapting Wacquant, Slater and Pereira's (2014) idea of residents adopting strategies of recalcitrance, this may be extended – with further research – to generations of groups and families. A strategy of collective recalcitrance, such as seems to be the case in the Jones-Williams and the Staynes networks/families, may constitute part of the generational sociological inheritance of a code of honour.

4. Why quotidian communing and thus gossiping matters to people (but not to most sociological criminologists!)

It is evident from the above that there remains much conceptual retrieval and recovery work to be done in re-examining community studies carried out in the past and the social-scientific tradition built around them, not least the sociological tradition of community studies' 'determination to respect the everyday and the mundane' (Savage 2010: 249). In particular, the discussion of the key role of gossip in communal control and local power struggles revisited Carol Smart's (2007: 58–59) concern that the 'seriousness of sociology as a discipline seems to become compromised if it gets too close to the taken-for-granted stuff of everyday life' and argue that this mundane 'communing' stuff is serious sociological business. There thus remains a pressing need for more community case-studies across different types of household-based communal figurations in contemporary society, not least to test the controversial claims made by commentators like Banton (2013) regarding the complex and under-researched nature of 'majority sentiment', the supposed 'left behind' and, especially, the everyday practices of communing and 'the things which matter to people' in making everyday sense of the social world (including 'the dark side of social capital'). We contend that the findings discussed in this paper do not sit easily with the socially liberal, urbane, cosmopolitan habitus of most of 'us' social scientists. Such concrete research is necessary for getting into 'the thick of thinking about the ethical dimensions of life' (Sayer 2011: 21–22), not least by having no 'no-go areas' nor pre-given theoretical guarantees as to what might be unearthed empirically and normatively.

5. Urban marginality and 'the underclass thesis'.

Readers may think that our work represents an attempt to reintroduce and revalidate by another name the 'underclass thesis' as proposed by Murray (1990). Our work attempts to figurationally examine the relationships between groups of people trapped in situations of relative deprivation, and who are ensnared in long-term resentful double-bind relationships. The 'minority of the worst', often families who have lived on council estates for generations, are simultaneously struggling to find meaningful status positions whilst combatting appalling stigma reproduced both locally 'here-and-now' and fantasy-images of 'their type'

entrenched in the national consciousness over long swathes of time. The uncomfortable reality is that an 'under-class' of the type observed by Pearson (1983) exists: it is a real type. Moreover, it is critical that we acknowledge this reality if it is ever to be changed. We explicitly reject Murray's (1990) framing of the 'underclass thesis', [14] [#N14] which relies on the myth of equal opportunities for all individuals to live decent, healthy, productive lives if they simply work hard enough. For Murray, the 'underclass' consists of immoral welfare-dependent individuals who reject hard work and reproduce generations of offspring with inherited personality weaknesses. In contrast, Pearson (1983) recognised a historically observable 'under-class': a group of the poorest people in the UK who have persistently borne the brunt of national stigma and been the object of the 'respectable fears' of those in society who are able to claim 'respectability'. The myth is that this group simply choose to reject opportunities. The reality is that this group suffer generational social and economic exclusion, some developing intra- and inter-group 'respect' by transforming stigmatisation into group pride and intimidatory power.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the role of gossip and its relationship to mechanisms and processes of group control and power within two Welsh communities. In particular, the paper argues for the continued relevance of established–outsider relations research-theorising with regard to neighbourhood level interdependencies and clear status distinctions between groups, but also seeks to develop and adapt it in exploring the 'no-grassing' phenomenon as a mechanism through which the 'minority of the worst' can acquire, maintain, and transmit intergenerational power and control within the geographically bounded figuration. More broadly, the discussion above has aimed to make an innovative empirical contribution to debates on both established–outsider relations in process sociology and also on neighbourhood relations and governance in marginalised neighbourhoods more broadly in sociological criminology.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. The verb 'to grass' is derived from the slang terms 'grass' and 'grasser', in use in Britain since as early as the 1920s to refer to police informers (see Evans, Fraser and Walklate 1996: 365). [#N1-ptr1]
2. We deploy this somewhat inelegant term, following Dunning and Hughes (2013: 49, 116), to emphasise the unity of empirical research and theory building that all too often in contemporary sociological practice are viewed as separate activities (see also Hughes 2020). [#N2-ptr1]

3. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth overview of established–outsider research-theorising in process sociology and the following brief description of key concepts discussed in this paper is necessarily brief. For a fuller elaboration, see, *inter alia*, Mennell (1992: 115–139), Dunning and Hughes (2013), and Hughes (2020). [#N3-ptr1]

4. The background to the Cornerville study is explored in an earlier paper (Swann and Hughes 2016). [#N4-ptr1]

5. This source is not publicly available due to it being a confidential report for South Wales Police compiled by the University Police Science Institute (UPSI). The report was written in 2008 and in it the participants from a neighbouring village frequently identified residents of Cornerville as responsible for the anti-social behaviour and crime in their locale. [#N5-ptr1]

6. Council housing refers to homes built by local authorities and funded by central government. [#N6-ptr1]

7. In the UK, housing associations are private, non-profit organisations that provide affordable homes for people in need. While they have existed for many years, there has been a considerable rise in their number since the Housing Act 1988 (UK Government 1988) gave local authority tenants the right to buy their homes at a considerable discount. Cuts in funding for councils has meant that social housing is increasingly built and managed by housing-association entities. For a full discussion of the marginalisation and residualisation of social housing see Pitts and Hope (1997). [#N7-ptr1]

8. The source of this document has been withheld to protect the anonymity and privacy of the participants and the setting. [#N8-ptr1]

9. This was not shared by the police and local council, and the (then) owner lost his license and a new manager was installed within two years; it has since been closed permanently and redeveloped as housing. [#N9-ptr1]

10. This pub was named after the powerful aristocratic family who had once been landowners in the village. [#N10-ptr1]

11. A key theme in Elias's research-theorising of civilising processes is that individuals become involved in increasingly complex relations with lengthening chains of mutual interdependencies between one another (see Elias 1984: 14–16 and 64–68). Drawing on Elias (1997), Fletcher (1997: 83) neatly captures the features we could expect to see in decivilising spurts, which include (among other features) 'a shortening of chains of commercial, emotional and cognitive interdependence'. Wacquant's ethnographic work on the contemporary US urban ghetto (2004: 104) supports Fletcher's argument in contending that 'to complete this summary portrait of the decivilizing process in the ghetto, one would need to evoke the shortening of networks of interdependency'. [#N11-ptr1]

12. Blackacre is built on the Radburn design. It has a series of neighbourhood 'squares' in which properties face inwards over communal green areas and footpaths, with access roads situated around the perimeter. [#N12-ptr1]

13. Kinder eggs are small chocolate eggs that contain toys inside an egg-shaped plastic container. The containers are sometimes used to discretely carry controlled drugs. [#N13-ptr1]

14. Pearson's and Murray's terms of 'under-class' and 'underclass' are written here as they are in their texts. Whilst the words used are the same, Pearson's definition is closer to sub-proletariat/lumpen than Murray's notions of a feckless and wilful immorality. [#N14-ptr1]