Respectability, Roughness and ‘Race’: Neighbourhood Place Images and the Making of Working-Class Social Distinctions in London

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Abstract

Housing has come to play an important role in demarcating the contours of social polarization in inner London, notably via the widening socio-spatial divide between an impoverished working class located in council housing estates and affluent home-owning gentrifiers. In mass media and policy discourses, the former are routinely represented as an unruly urban ‘underclass’, a representation that homogenizes council tenants and marginalizes their voices. This article aims to move beyond a narrow underclass perspective by providing an in-depth analysis of neighbourhood place images and social identity based on interviews with white working-class council tenants in the inner London Borough of Camden. Drawing on debates around social distinction and place, the article illustrates a complex set of neighbourhood images rooted in narratives of urban decline as well as notions of belonging and knowing people. The article examines these place images in relation to the longstanding status distinction between respectability and roughness, as well as ‘race’. In conclusion, the defensive and exclusionary elements of neighbourhood images are related to processes of social deprivation and insecurity that have affected working-class council tenants in Camden.

Introduction

London has experienced social polarization as a consequence of deindustrialization, economic restructuring and neoliberal welfare policies. Widening inequalities of wealth and income are etched onto different neighbourhoods via upmarket property redevelopment and gentrification at one extreme and concentrated deprivation and stigmatization at the other. The broad pattern of polarization in London is well established, even if there remains considerable debate over its precise socio-spatial contours and most salient causal mechanisms. Whilst Sassen (1991) has suggested that social polarization takes an occupational form, Hamnett (2003) has argued that there is a growing division between housing tenures (‘socio-tenurial polarization’) with home-owning gentrifiers counterposed to tenants of social housing landlords, i.e. local councils and housing associations.

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Despite the voluminous urban literature on social polarization, we know relatively little in sociological terms about those who occupy the disadvantaged ‘end’ of the polar distribution of socio-economic resources. This is particularly the case in relation to the poor white working-class residents of council housing estates who, according to Haylett (2001), have effectively been rendered ‘illegitimate subjects’, symbolic of backwardness within a national discourse of progressive British multiculturalism. Such residents, many of whom are tenants, are routinely represented in mass media and policy discourses as members of an unruly ‘underclass’ (Watt and Jacobs, 2000; Lawler, 2002). They are subject to an intense governmental gaze via a plethora of urban regeneration strategies (Haylett, 2003) and punitive ‘anti-social behaviour’ initiatives (Flint, 2002). This article aims to move beyond such a narrow ‘underclass’ perspective by presenting a richer sociological account of the complex life worlds and perspectives of council tenants and the white working class in particular. In so doing, it takes its cue from the kind of sociological representation Bourdieu et al. (1999) have advocated in their account of suffering in the contemporary world, including those French housing projects that are analogous to council estates in Britain:

It should become clear that so-called ‘difficult’ spots (‘housing projects’ or schools today) are, first of all, difficult to describe and think about, and that simplistic and one-sided images (notably those found in the press) must be replaced by a complex and multi-layered representation capable of articulating the same realities but in terms that are different and, sometimes, irreconcilable (Bourdieu et al., 1999: 3; original emphasis).

This article is based on research carried out among council tenants in the inner London Borough of Camden. It addresses the question of what the residential neighbourhood means vis-a-vis images of place and social identities as the tenants attempt to make sense of the manifold changes which have occurred in their locales. Place images have been defined as ‘the various discrete meanings associated with real places or regions regardless of their character in reality’ (Shields, 1991: 60). As Shields notes, such images can result from stereotyping or from prejudices towards places or their inhabitants, and they are formed by the discursive practices of a range of groups and organizations, including the local press, government and employers, as well as residents themselves (Dean and Hastings, 2000; Evans and Cattell, 2000). Place images are therefore related to processes of distinction and the way that people ascribe identities to ‘others’ as well as themselves (Sibley, 1995). I will now turn to examine the working class and questions of social distinction with reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

**The working class, distinction and place**

During the last 10 years, there has been a renewed interest in social class, notably following on from the influential work of Bourdieu, especially *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984; Jenkins, 1992; Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu offers a multi-dimensional approach to capital and class in which class position is based on relationship to economic, cultural and social capital. Whereas Marxism concentrates on economic capital, class for Bourdieu has a powerful symbolic dimension in terms of cultural capital, whilst he also refers to social capital, the power of social connections. It is the combination of economic and cultural capital in particular that is significant in relation to how the various classes are socialized, both by the family and the educational system. The socialization process imbibes a distinctive class ‘habitus’, i.e. the system of durable dispositions of being and acting that represent the internalized embodiment of social norms and established patterns of behaviour. People subjected to similar experiences share the dispositions associated with a particular habitus; that is why people of similar classes, genders and nationalities feel ‘at home’ with people who share their social space.
Bourdieu’s approach has proved a rich source of inspiration, especially for those class analysts concerned with excavating middle-class differentiation (Butler and Robson, 2003). At the same time, there is a considerable hiatus in relation to the working class. As is well known, Bourdieu paid far more attention in *Distinction* to the dominant rather than the dominated classes. His treatment of the working class has been subject to two main criticisms (Jenkins, 1992: 148–9; Rupp, 1997; Swartz, 1997: 170–6). Firstly, his analysis of the working-class habitus as the ‘choice of the necessary’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 372–96) is effectively a deficit model in which the working class is simply treated as an absence, i.e. lacking both cultural and economic capital and therefore incapable of making distinctions, unlike the case of the dominant classes. Secondly, Bourdieu treats the working or ‘lower’ class ‘as an undifferentiated, homogeneous social class’ (Rupp, 1997: 224). Although such criticisms are largely accurate, they also neglect an intriguing reference Bourdieu (1984: 395) makes to the ‘sub-proletariat’ in that the urban working class ‘knows no other hierarchies than the purely negative ones which are measured by distance from the absolute poverty and insecurity of the sub-proletariat’. Given that the making of distinction has an inherently negative aspect generally in Bourdieu’s work, it is difficult to see why working-class attempts to distance themselves from a putative ‘sub-proletariat’ do not thereby also count as ‘distinction’. 1

Writers inspired by Bourdieu have sought to broaden and deepen his somewhat thin account of the working class, albeit in the very different social conditions pertaining to post-industrial economies (see *inter alia* Skeggs, 1997; Charlesworth, 2000; Savage *et al*., 2005). Bourdieu’s analysis of the working-class habitus is rooted within an earlier and now displaced industrial, Fordist political economy. The contemporary urban working class is instead largely defined by service employment, much of it ‘poor work’ in traditionally feminine occupations, coupled with the spectre of unemployment. In other words, the sub-proletarian experience of poverty and insecurity that Bourdieu alludes to in *Distinction* has become an ever-present feature of working-class life in the marginalized quarters of many British towns and cities, including London (Charlesworth, 2000; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Smith, 2005).

According to Sayer (2002), Bourdieu himself in *The weight of the world* (Bourdieu *et al*., 1999) has moved towards a ‘hermeneutics of sympathy’ in which lay people’s moral judgements are taken more seriously than in his previous work. This hermeneutics of sympathy opens up greater possibilities for investigating how the working class themselves make social distinctions, distinctions that often take the form of moral judgements regarding self-worth and the worth of others. This has been effectively illustrated in several pieces of recent research, one example being Lamont’s (2000) analysis of working men in the US and France, whilst another prominent example is Skeggs’ (1997) study of gender and class formation among white working-class women in northwest England. She argues that the women strove to prove their ‘respectability’ in the light of the culturally hegemonic ‘middle-class gaze’ (*ibid*.: 93) by wearing the ‘right’ clothes, living in the ‘right’ houses, and adopting the ‘right’ standards of heterosexual femininity. Skeggs suggests that the women dis-identified with being working class who they considered uniformly rough and undesirable. At the same time they did not accomplish genuine middle-class status either because they lacked the cultural and economic capital taken for granted by the middle class. In the relative absence of the latter, respectability proved to be an important resource for the working-class women since it offered a positive identity. The attempt to unpack the subjective elements of class identity among the working class themselves can theoretically mean a move in a Weberian direction towards an emphasis on status differences (Weber, 1948; Travers, 1999). Intra-class status distinctions between the ‘rough’ and ‘respectable’ have a long historical pedigree in English working-class neighbourhoods and were prominent

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1 Wacquant (1998: 223) pithily summarizes one of the major arguments of *Distinction*: ‘taste is first and foremost the distaste of the tastes of others’.
in both the pre- and post-war periods (Stacey, 1960; Olechnowicz, 1997; McKibbin, 1998), although their relevance is something that Skeggs herself tends to downplay.

The making of social distinctions is increasingly regarded as having a powerful spatial component, for example in relation to gentrification and processes of middle-class formation in London (May, 1996; Butler and Robson, 2003). Savage et al. (2005: 101) argue that place, in terms of residential area, is if anything more significant as a sorter of social distinction as other traditional signifiers, notably occupation, have lost some of their previous purchase. Social distinctions therefore take an implicit or explicit spatial form as people attempt to sort themselves into a spatial as well as social habitus, i.e. where they feel comfortable with others ‘like themselves’. Images of place are therefore crucial to contemporary processes of distinction, as seen in Sibley’s (1995) work on geographies of exclusion. He emphasizes the affective dimension of place images since feelings (of fear or disgust) about the social ‘other’ underpin exclusionary geographies since that which is feared is spatially distanced, as illustrated by the racialized distinction between the ‘dangerous’ multiethnic city and the ‘safe’ white suburbs and countryside (Sibley, 1998). According to Sandercock (2002), cities are increasingly subject to ‘discourses of fear’ that prioritize the maintenance of social order at the expense of social justice, as highlighted for example in contemporary media and policy accounts of council housing that we now examine.

Council housing: beyond the ‘underclass’

Historically council housing in Britain has been regarded as working-class housing even if the class fractions living in it have fluctuated from better-off skilled workers and their families in the early twentieth century to more impoverished marginalized sections at the end. The social history of council housing demonstrates that communal sociability was often undermined by antagonistic status divisions along lines of roughness and respectability, as seen in the east London Becontree estate during the 1930s (Olechnowicz, 1997). This rough/respectable distinction has proved to be an enduring element within the British working class, albeit one that has proved difficult to precisely pin down (Stacey, 1960: 153; McKibbin, 1998: 198–205). Skill and income could play a part, with skilled manual workers and their families more likely to regard themselves, and to be regarded by others, as respectable compared to the unskilled. Behavioural factors were also significant with the ‘roughs’ described by Roberts (1995: 7) as those ‘who can be characterized by violence, whether to people or to property, frequent drunkenness and petty criminality’. Respectability was signified by sobriety, respect for the law and hard work, while for women it was also associated with ‘keeping up appearances’ via the maintenance of a clean and tidy home. On top of such longstanding status divisions, housing policymakers and practitioners have overlaid new ones, notably between ‘problem tenants’ and the rest. Damer (1989) traces the former term back to a 1930 official report on housing which referred to those tenants who were not only a ‘problem’ for their fellow tenants, for example by drinking, fighting and quarrelling with neighbours, but who were also a ‘problem’ for housing managers because they did not look after their homes ‘properly’ or pay the rent regularly.

During the last 25 years, the council housing sector has shrunk both in absolute and relative terms as a result of restrictions on new building plus sales and transfer policies. The overall consequence has been that council housing has become a residual ‘tenure of last resort’ catering for the economically deprived and socially marginalized (Hamnett and Randolph, 1987; Watt, 2001; Hamnett, 2003). At the same time, public housing has also become increasingly stigmatized, accommodating ‘council estate slags’ according to Marie Claire magazine (cited in Skeggs, 1997: 3). This kind of stigmatizing ‘underclass’ discourse, that conflates council renting with moral decline and criminality, dominates mass media and policy representations of council estates (Watt and Jacobs, 2000; Haylett, 2001; Lawler, 2002). Such representations have come to acquire a
powerful mythic quality in the British social imagination, what Shields (1991: 61) calls a ‘place-myth’, in which negative place images of social housing estates have congealed around immovable stigmatized reputations (Dean and Hastings, 2000).

Research on council estates and similarly deprived urban areas that has attempted to move beyond the ‘underclass’ stereotype has demonstrated that the local neighbourhood matters both for residents’ sense of identity and as an important site for social connections, or social capital in Bourdieu’s terms (Evans and Cattell, 2000; Reay and Lucey, 2000; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). This occurs since many residents spend a large amount of time there, not least because of limited resources, but also because the neighbourhood can act as a fulcrum for survival strategies among the new urban poor as they ‘make do’ by mutually exchanging what resources they have (Smith, 2005). At the same time, as inner-city neighbourhoods become more demographically complex, so the symbolic meanings of such places can no longer take singular gemeinschaft properties, despite the best efforts of urban policymakers (Evans and Cattell, 2000; Blokland, 2003). Instead, questions of identity and the marking of social and spatial boundaries in relation to the ‘symbolic construction of community’ (Cohen, 1985) become more complex and contested, for example vis-à-vis age. Long-term and elderly residents of areas dominated by council housing articulate ‘narratives of urban decline’ in which the easy conviviality and neighbourliness of yesteryear, associated with the traditional working-class community, is said to have fallen away (Back, 1996; Finnegan, 1998). Youthful disorder and the fear of crime often take centre stage in such urban decline narratives. Council estates seem to be particularly prone to these narratives: ‘virtually everywhere older tenants speak of a golden age when their estate “used to be lovely” ’ (Ravetz, 2001: 177). Research on adults in east London has also highlighted the racialized nature of such urban decline narratives that foreground a link between ‘race’ and crime whereby the latter is blamed on the presence of immigrants and minority ethnic groups (Back, 1996; May, 1996). At the same time, children and young people living in inner-city council estates have expressed counter-discourses of belonging and community, a belonging that can take a syncretic ethnic form (Back, 1996; Reay and Lucey, 2000).

The London Borough of Camden

This article is concerned with elucidating questions of identity in relation to place images with reference to qualitative data drawn from a case study of local authority tenants and social class undertaken in the inner London Borough of Camden (Watt, 2001). The case study utilized a range of methods including semi-structured interviews with tenants, local politicians and council officials, a large-scale sample survey, plus observation at a variety of meetings.

From its birth in the mid-1960s, the London Borough of Camden has remained a social and political hybrid formed out of the three very different Metropolitan Boroughs of Hampstead, Holborn and St Pancras (Wistrich, 1972). There is a longstanding middle-class presence in the north of Camden in Hampstead and Highgate, and also prominent gentrification in Camden Town and Kentish Town. The borough plays an important role in London’s tourist and night-time economies, notably in the Camden Town area. Despite its affluent image, Camden was ranked the 17th most deprived borough nationally in 1998 (Hamnett, 2003: 190). It has high levels of poverty, benefit dependency, overcrowding and homelessness. Much of this deprivation is concentrated in council and other social housing prominent in the south and centre of the borough clustered in estates and blocks of flats. Camden shares many of the demographic features associated with inner London boroughs, notably an extremely varied multi-ethnic population. This includes a long-established Irish and Cypriot presence, plus a growing Asian and black population especially in council housing in the south of the borough (Watt, 2001).
The Labour-controlled Camden Council put considerable efforts into tackling its lengthy housing waiting list from the 1960s to the early 1980s, including an extensive programme of new building plus a proactive municipalization policy of purchasing private properties and converting them into local authority dwellings (Wistrich, 1972). Since the early 1980s, this stock has declined as a result of central government controls on council building and also as a result of the sale of local authority properties under the right-to-buy legislation, the 1980 Housing Act. Although this decline was by no means as dramatic as that found in many rural and suburban areas, it was severe by Camden Council’s own standards as a champion of public housing provision and in relation to its reduced capacity to adequately house the borough’s large and expanding homeless population (London Research Centre, 1993). Census data show that by 2001 only 26% of households in Camden rented from the council, down from a post-war peak of 40% in 1981.

Research on Camden council housing in the 1960s demonstrates considerable social homogeneity in this sector of the housing market, dominated as it was by white working-class families and married couples in employment (Glass, 1970). However, the last 30–40 years have witnessed Camden’s council housing population becoming both poorer and more socially diverse (Hamnett and Randolph, 1987; Watt, 2003). There was a threefold increase in the number of council renting households containing no one in paid employment, from 19% in 1967 to 62% in 1993 (Watt, 2003: 1775). In 1993, over half of all council tenant households had gross incomes, before tax, of less than £100 per week (ibid.). The worsening employment circumstances and growing poverty among Camden’s council tenants are linked to economic restructuring and deindustrialization with the loss of many local manual jobs in manufacturing, construction and transport, including the mainline railway stations which were an important source of employment in the early post-war period. The public housing sector also came to increasingly accommodate many of those groups with significant labour market handicaps, notably minority ethnic groups, female lone parents and young people. As council housing contracted during the 1980s, new tenants were increasingly homeless and jobless with the most disadvantaged tending to gain entry to the tenure (London Research Centre, 1993). The overall result of the social, economic and policy changes is that council housing in Camden accommodated a far more economically impoverished and culturally diverse population by the end of the century than it did in the early post-war period.

The main data source for this article is semi-structured interviews conducted with 29 white working-class council tenants who ranged in age from some in their 20s to some in their 70s, although most were between 30 and 60. They represented a combination of English and Irish, over half of whom were brought up in London, mainly Camden itself, with Ireland as another major place of origin. Whilst a few had relatively stable employment histories, notably some of the male skilled manual workers, the majority had working lives characterized by job insecurity and lengthy periods of unemployment (Watt, 2003). Redundancy and homelessness, as well as ill health and marital breakdown, were common life experiences. Although a few households had collective incomes well above the poverty threshold based upon two or more adult earners, the majority struggled to get by on shifting combinations of low-paid work (formal and informal) and welfare benefits. Housing standards were by no means always adequate, whilst council housing shortages impacted not only upon their own limited capacity to transfer within the borough but also on their grown-up children’s potential to obtain

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2 The interviews were conducted from 1997 to 1999 and most were follow-up contacts from an earlier sample survey. These were supplemented by interviews with housing and political activists since studies of the working class that ignore the role played by such activists are partial, as Roberts (1999) rightly argues. Of the 29 interviewees, three were right-to-buy leaseholders who had previously rented from Camden Council. A further 21 interviews were conducted with council tenants from different class and/or ethnic backgrounds, including middle-class graduates employed in artistic and welfare professionals; the latter are discussed elsewhere (Watt, 2005).
affordable housing locally. As well as possessing minimal economic capital, cultural capital in the form of educational qualifications was also low among the working-class tenants. In the remainder of this article, I present an account of how this albeit small fragment of the inner London working class makes social distinctions and how such distinctions intertwine with place images under economic conditions that are very different from those encountered by its post-war forbears.

Narratives of urban decline

A prominent theme in the interviews with the white working-class tenants who had either been brought up in Camden or had lived there for many years was deteriorating social conditions in the local neighbourhood. A narrative of urban decline was routinely expressed, as mentioned above, and took the form that the intimate social relations of yesteryear (‘the community’) were said to be no more.\(^3\) This narrative differed in two substantial ways from existing accounts, however. Firstly, it was not monopolized by the elderly tenants, as suggested by Ravetz (2001). Secondly, the Camden tenants did not exclusively focus on the interlinked motifs of ‘race’ and crime, unlike the urban decline narratives identified by Back (1996) and May (1996) in east London. Instead, the decline narrative in Camden comprised a number of discursive strands as follows.

Economic restructuring and public welfare services

Economic restructuring and deteriorating public welfare services were important strands in the narrative of decline. The loss of locally available manual work hit the male tenants particularly hard as they struggled to come to terms with their own redundancies and a far more ‘flexible’ labour market built around typically female service occupations (Watt, 2003). For the middle-aged and older men, the decline of community was partly associated with the collapse of relatively well-paid Fordist employment. Patrick, for example, was a retired widower who came to London from Ireland in the 1940s. He worked on the railways, mainly at Euston station in Camden, and had lived on the same estate within walking distance of Euston for 30 years. Patrick lamented the loss of camaraderie associated with the decline of the occupational networks centred on the slimmed-down, privatized railways:

\[\text{They [railway workers] used to come from all over the bloody place, Bletchley, Leighton Buzzard, mostly out that way. Then there’d be lots from Somers Town, you’d get just the ordinary workers from Somers Town. There was a supervisor from Somers Town, Bill Smith, he died poor old Bill. One time when anybody died after I left, somebody would have rung me up and tell me and I would have gone to the funeral. They all came to my missus’ funeral. If there was somebody there when Bill Smith died I would have known and gone to his funeral. He was at my missus’ funeral. It’s all gone, it’s changed completely.}\]

The erosion of public welfare services was routinely regarded as both signifying and causing deteriorating neighbourhood social relations. In addition to the widely criticized paucity of council housing provision, an emphasis was placed upon the communal areas of the estates, including their deteriorating physical appearance, the erosion of support services such as caretakers, as well as the limited facilities for children and young people. Diane was a lone parent living in a large estate and she expressed a typical set of complaints around council provision:

\[\text{Such narratives did not feature in the neighbourhood accounts given by the middle-class professional tenants who instead valorized Camden for its social and ethnic diversity (Watt, 2005: 374-5).}\]
There’s nothing here for kids. Take play areas — there’s nothing for little kids. The estate had a play centre but it was made into old peoples’ places. The council took everything away for the children. It’s going to get worse for children.

Vivien was in her sixties and had lived on the same estate for many years in a flat she and her husband had recently bought under the right-to-buy. She reminisced about what the estate had been like in the late 1960s and in so doing highlighted the previous role played by the council caretaking services in facilitating communal neighbourhood activities:

The estate was wonderful when we first moved in. We put on fetes, dances, it was all a community spirit. All the children were playing in each other’s houses, all the parents were together. It seemed very safe when we first moved in. We put on festivals, the Camden festival. The tenants association played a big part in our lives. They were all young and together and did things for the children. The caretakers used to take the children horse-riding. You could knock them up at any time and they [caretakers] participated because they lived here. There’s not so much now. Things do go on, but it’s hard work getting people to participate. Everybody looked out for each other’s children, because we were all young together. Me and a friend used to go swimming with our children and we took 10 to 15 children with us.

Vivien’s account illustrates the ‘golden age of the estate’ view often articulated by more elderly residents, as Ravetz (2001) highlights.

Shopping, leisure and gentrification

Narratives of urban decline were also associated with changes to local private retail and leisure facilities. Several tenants referred to the way that some of the street markets had deteriorated whilst supermarkets were not regarded as offering the same possibilities for informal social interaction. One woman in her thirties described her area as:

Years ago fantastic. A really nice place to bring children up, everyone was sort of . . . it was very much a community atmosphere. Now it’s very run down. I think it’s totally been forgotten about. I mean the market here . . . was really well known years ago and we used to have people, I mean it was a real big fun day out on a Saturday. Mum used to take us down and we’d really look forward to going down to the market. And mum took you out and you met lots of your friends and everything. And now it’s awful, I mean it’s a disgrace. The shops are real bad, they’re run down. The council hasn’t done anything to it. And again obviously a lot of the supermarkets, they’ve brought a lot away from people actually seeing each other at the local shops and stuff (Linda).

The state of the shops and pubs that catered for ‘locals’ was contrasted negatively with the facilities available to the urban tourists and young people who flocked into Camden Town at weekends. Brian lived there and complained that the area was inundated with shops selling stripped pine furniture and leather jackets with the result that he was hard pressed to buy a pint of milk. Such changes, associated with gentrification and the rise of a post-industrial tourist economy, effectively meant that not only was the industrial base of the manual working class eroded, but that the public leisure spaces centred around working-class pubs, shops and markets were being eradicated, forcing the tenants either outside Camden or into privatized spaces. Kevin, an out-of-work security guard, used to drink in the Camden Town pubs near his flat, but increasingly he either went further afield or sat drinking at home alone. He described Camden Town in the following terms:

A bit of a mess. Camden Town has changed dramatically over the last few years. It used to be all working-class cafes and pubs, they’re now yuppyfied, late yuppies — yuppies came in the eighties — but now it’s all sports bars . . . with people with trays on their shoulders walking around like something out of Treasure Island or something like that, waiters you know, the uniform . . . I don’t like it. I live in it but I don’t like it. I did when I came here first, but I don’t like it now.
Kevin’s account of neighbourhood change relates to gentrification and the impact of the arrival of middle-class ‘outsiders’ in the form of gentrifiers, urban tourists and students. However, by and large ‘anti-yuppy’ sentiments were not prominent, a finding compatible with the relatively muted criticisms made by the London working classes about gentrifiers elsewhere in the city (Foster, 1999). Those who were the most vociferous in their association of the middle classes with urban decline in Camden tended to be those working-class radicals, such as Kevin, with backgrounds in political, trade union and tenant activism.

Low-status others

Rather than gentrification and well-healed tourists, the mooted decline of community in Camden was more routinely and vociferously linked to the presence of low-status ‘others’. These were rough ‘newcomers’ or ‘outsiders’ who were seen to threaten the way of life of decent ‘locals’. ‘Problem’ tenants and families were common themes as interviewees related their disputes with neighbours, often revolving around noise:

> There is one problem family that has arrived here now, they come from Somers Town. But this last week they’ve been very quiet because they’ve been warned [by Camden Council] (Patrick).

By no means all of the low-status others were identifiable as council tenants, since they also included those who were visible in the public spaces on the estates or the streets near the tenants’ homes, notably young people ‘hanging around’ the streets and estates in ‘gangs’. The street homeless, alcoholics and drug users around Camden were also prominent low-status others. Pam felt less safe in her local neighbourhood because of the public visibility of the homeless:

> Lots of things have changed here, they’ve got Big Issue people selling Big Issue, and that sort of thing five or seven years, and you’ve got them on all the corners, but there are more homeless than ever. Probably not their fault . . . Some of these young kids are put out of hostels and that and they can’t help it, but a lot of them have got psychological problems and probably drug problems.

To conclude, we have seen how complaints were common about deteriorating neighbourhood conditions prompting a decline of community narrative. The latter contained several strands, prominent amongst which was the presence of low-status others, those ‘outsiders’ defined by their roughness and ‘problem’ tenant status. For some interviewees, these low-status others also took a racialized form in the guise of immigrants and minority ethnic groups. These issues will be discussed in detail below, but before that I will consider aspects of neighbourhood belonging via ‘knowing people’.

‘Knowing people’ in Camden

The Camden residents’ views of their neighbourhoods were not as one-sided as the narratives of decline might imply. Survey data indicate that 73% of council tenants described themselves as either satisfied or very satisfied with their neighbourhoods, while only a minority, 20%, regarded their neighbourhoods as either unsafe or fairly unsafe (London Research Centre, 1993: 12–13). In the interviews, many tenants

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4 The Camden respondents tended to use terms such as ‘problem tenant’ and ‘problem families’ which have their distant origins in housing management discourse (Damer, 1989), rather than the more recent policy discourse of ‘anti-social behaviour’ championed by New Labour (Flint, 2002).

5 The Big Issue is a magazine sold by the homeless themselves.
tempered their accounts of decline with more positive views about living in Camden, notably praising its centrality as well as the ready availability of public transport. A discourse of ‘belonging’ often coexisted with the more negative views described above, as Reay and Lucey (2000: 423) highlighted in relation to children’s ambivalent images of place living in inner-city council estates.

In Camden this belonging was rooted in ‘knowing people’, i.e. having social connections, or ‘social capital’ in Bourdieu’s terms, in their immediate neighbourhoods and even across Camden. Extended family relations continued to play an important role for those tenants who had been brought up in the borough itself, especially the women. For example, Jenny’s mother lived in the flat downstairs from her and she saw her on a daily basis. When I arrived at the flat for the interview her mother was there, and Jenny’s complaint, after her mother had left, was not that she lacked family contact but instead that if anything her mother lived too close. Jenny’s son also lived in Camden and he and his family often ‘popped in’ to see her. Two other women also lived near their mothers on the same estate that they had grown up on, a longevity that contributed towards a sense of belonging as well as feelings of safety:

I feel safe on this estate. I was born around here, born on this estate . . . I see my Mum a lot, three times a week. We’re a close family (Diane).

Such extended family contacts demonstrate the resilience of localized kinship links in what is often regarded as an anonymous quarter of north London and helped to facilitate a sense of belonging among those tenants brought up in Camden. Extended family members often provided various forms of support in relation to employment and housing, as well as care-giving when people were ill, child care and even straightforward financial support. This kind of support could extend beyond the boundaries of the immediate neighbourhoods. Even among those tenants whose adult children had moved out of Camden, extended family relations could continue to play an important role despite the increased geographical distance. For example, although one of Vivien’s sons had moved out to Kent, he stayed at his parents’ flat three nights a week because he worked in Camden. Much of this familial sociability revolved around the activities of women. The single and divorced men were less successful in maintaining family links, as indicated by this poignant lament from Pete, a divorced unemployed gardener: ‘I passed my daughter in the street the other day and she walked straight past me’.

If extended kin could provide one basis for belonging, friendly neighbourly relations, in which people passed the time of day but weren’t necessarily ‘in each others houses’, were common. They would chat with their neighbours if they saw them and also exchange small favours for one another such as going shopping. Pete described his estate in terms that capture the ambivalence many tenants felt about living in diverse multi-ethnic neighbourhoods:

The estate isn’t bad. Some people say there are certain places they don’t go because there are a lot of youngsters hanging around, gangs of 20 or 30. There’s been a lot of race attacks. I feel safe, especially in this block. The people in this block are very nice. There’s a Bengali lady and she was struggling with a bag which I helped to carry for her. It’s nice to be nice sometimes. The people here are very polite. The old man who used to live next door, he’s died now, I used to bring him here on Christmas day and feed him his lunch. They all know me, the whole lot of them say ‘hello’ to me because I used to be in the tenants association. It’s more or less disbanded now . . . There is a sense of community when you get to know people. I used to go in the local pub . . . My neighbours are Bengali and they knocked on the door once to offer me a curry. Next door to them is a Japanese bloke with an Irish girlfriend.

Although some people expressed anxieties about urban others in the shape of gangs of youths, Pete himself felt safe. Many people knew him and he also interacted with his
multiethnic neighbours in a friendly fashion. As this quote also illustrates, the tenants associations could help people to get to know their neighbours. There was an extensive network of tenant and resident associations in Camden made up of council tenants and leaseholders that was organized at borough level by the Camden Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations. Survey data indicates that around one-fifth of Camden council tenants had attended a tenants association meeting during a 12-month period (cited in Watt, 2001: 191).

The narratives of decline therefore coexisted with more positive views about living in inner-city council housing, as Reay and Lucey (2000) found. Such ambivalence can be seen in the fact that the narratives of urban decline could be highlighted at the beginning of the lengthy interviews only to be qualified later on by more nuanced reflections on the neighbourhood. Near the beginning of her interview, Betty, in her seventies, recalled her early married life on the estate in typical ‘urban decline’ fashion:

It’s just everywhere has changed, everybody is out for themselves. They don’t want to be like they used to be . . . look how you listen to old people dying in flats, lay there weeks and weeks. You never heard of that years ago. If your neighbour wasn’t showing for a couple of days you’d think ‘what’s going on like?’ They’re all just living for themselves aren’t they, it’s just a rat race really isn’t it? . . . They [neighbours] all used to go to the local [pub], that’s just across the road, the mums and dads and that was good, yes, very friendly. And we used to have, like, run tenants associations and things like that. Everybody was . . . we all looked after each other and looked after the kids, take the kids on days outings or things like that. But you get nothing like that now, nothing. Well it’s hard for one thing because let’s face it . . . you’ve got so many races in here haven’t we and it’s really hard to explain to them.

Contrast Betty’s nostalgic lament for a ‘lost community’ in the past with her detailed description of her present day local social contacts which meant that she would not leave her flat:

My daughter said to me ‘Mum, why don’t you move, move up near us?’, they’ve all got their own houses, they’re not silly like their Mum. But then I thought ‘no I’m quite happy here’. I mean I go round the shops round there, I’ve been here — everybody calls me Betty, they all know me. And years ago when I used to run the tenants association all the kids would call me Betty when I went through the flats. I know too many people, I couldn’t get lonely here, you know what I mean. I could go round the corner and I’m sure to see somebody that I know, that I can have a talk to, I talk to the shopkeepers or people like that. But, no, I’d sooner be in this flat, you know, I like it.

Such inconsistencies reveal a tension between the more generalized narratives of urban decline, tinged as they are with nostalgia for a ‘lost community’ in the past (Finnegan, 1998; Blokland, 2003), and more specific descriptions of social interaction in their neighbourhoods which include elements of ‘belonging’. Despite the fact that Vivien lamented a lost community, as we saw above, she also had ‘wonderful neighbours’. She was well connected in her neighbourhood, not least as a result of having worked for many years as a volunteer in the local youth club, which meant that she felt perfectly safe walking her dog at one o’clock in the morning because she knew ‘all the boys’ on the estate. Knowing people and being known were important in facilitating a sense of safety and belonging, even in estates which to outsiders could well be regarded as ‘rough’ or dangerous places (Reay and Lucey, 2000).

Respectability and roughness

‘Respectability’ proved to be an important lens through which many tenants assessed themselves, their neighbours and their neighbourhoods. They made strenuous efforts to distanciate themselves from the ‘rough’ elements around them and in so doing maintain
their own respectability in straitened circumstances. They emphasized the distinction between those ordinary, decent council house dwellers like themselves, and those low-status others who in one way or another were ‘rough’ and caused ‘problems’. Lisa, an accounts assistant, felt very strongly that her estate had declined in the last few years because of a lack of repairs, the presence of gangs of youths with ‘nothing to do’, plus the arrival of newcomers who did not adhere to respectable feminine norms of domestic cleanliness:

There’s no neighbourliness in any of the blocks any more . . . These people come in and they stick a bit of old rag up the window and it does affect other people. People say ‘oh, you know what’s up their windows shouldn’t worry you’. But when someone’s coming to visit you and all they can see, I mean out of the whole block, is that one window that stands out like a sore thumb. I mean there’s nets, there’s curtains and people should be made to keep their flats on the outside, the view looking out as well as looking in, for the sake of everybody. I mean you go along [X street] and have a look at [Y block]. It makes it look . . . I mean if I’d never lived there and I was just driving there I’d say ‘that’s got to be one of the shittiest estates on this earth’, just looking at that one block . . . Some of the windows are beautiful, people have obviously bought the flats and they’ve had new windows put in their selves. But even you can tell that the tenants that hadn’t had new windows put in, they make an effort, they put a bit of decent net up or a curtain up or whatever, and there’s people there they put paper bags stuck to the windows . . . These odd few people are lowering the tone of the whole place . . . just take the stuff down, make ‘em take it down, make ‘em live in a place and keep it nice for everybody.

As Skeggs (1997) has argued, working-class respectability can be bound up with the judgements of powerful others. Lisa was incensed at the way that a minority (‘newcomers’) were ‘letting the estate down’ by giving it a bad image in the eyes of those high-class passers by with the power to label a place as respectable or not. Those respondents who expressed strong social aspirations were the most critical of their neighbours and neighbourhoods. One example was Pam, a single parent and unemployed cleaner who described herself in the following terms:

I’m a snob. I’m like your Mrs Procket, or whatever her name is, that wants to mix with educated people. Not necessarily educated but someone who uses what they have educated themselves with. So I’m a bit fussy, even with my own class.

Although she was a second-generation council tenant herself and one of her grown-up daughters also rented from the council, Pam commented that ‘council tenants breed lots of infestation’ since their children ‘roam the streets’.

The low-status others and problem tenants constituted an amorphous group who were condemned both for their sheer presence as well as for their behaviour. The latter included a widespread array of activities ranging from violence, drinking and drug taking, to noise, vandalism, graffiti and playing football, as well as failing to maintain the appearance of the dwellings. The latter was particularly important for the female respondents, since ‘home and bodies are where respectability is displayed’, as Skeggs (1997: 90) notes for working-class women. Yvette, an out-of-work secretary, described disputes she had had with her neighbour:

The guy next door when he first came here he was homeless. We all helped, I mean even made his curtains for him. Then he started getting abusive and I suddenly realized he had a drink problem . . . You can go in there and you can see, I mean his curtains are terrible, they need washing.

Similar complaints were made about students who rented right-to-buy properties on certain estates: ‘their curtains can be dirty and unkempt, you can tell if students are

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6 Pam is referring to Hyacinth Bucket from the BBC sitcom ‘Keeping Up Appearances’ which gains its comedic value from the main character’s social pretensions.
renting’ (Vivien). Several women, but far fewer men, expressed a concern with domestic visual aesthetics, a concern that expressed itself via the condemnation of the tastes of low-status others along Bourdieuvian lines of distinction.⁷

Geographies of exclusion

Those who wanted to stress their own respectability felt that their sense of identity was threatened and even betrayed by the visible signs of inner-city poverty around them, i.e. the presence of the homeless and alcoholics on the streets, and gangs and graffiti on the estates. Their efforts to maintain respectability, and the manifest problems in doing so consistently, revealed the daily strain they faced in struggling to get by on limited resources amid people doing likewise who were so obviously failing. The result was a permanent underlying urban anxiety about being too close, socially and spatially, to concentrated poverty. Such anxiety received its spatial expression via ‘geographies of exclusion’ (Sibley, 1995). The particular form such geographies took depended upon the tenants’ assessment of the balance of rough/respectable forces in their neighbourhoods. Despite the presence of unwanted ‘newcomers’, most compared their immediate areas relatively favourably to other neighbourhoods in Camden or the rest of London. In other words, they drew upon what can be called a ‘geography of roughness’ involving place images from various parts of the city. While there was little obvious pride expressed about living in north London, the tenants were nevertheless grateful that they weren’t in either east or south London, zones of supposed uniform roughness: ‘whenever I’ve been to Brixton for instance, I’ve never felt comfortable’ (Ken). Despite articulating a distinctive narrative of community decline, Nancy a lone parent working as a part-time teaching assistant, said that she did not dislike living in her large estate:

Nancy: No, I couldn’t really say that there was anything major about the area, because I’ve seen a lot worse. I’ve seen better obviously, but I’ve seen a lot worse.
PW: What do you mean you’ve seen a lot worse?
Nancy: Oh really like rough estates where just . . . you feel grotty. You know in yourself, you walk down a really grotty place where you just feel dirty and insecure. So I don’t here, so as I say, it’s not . . . it’s not that much of a deprived area.

Nancy and other interviewees singled out certain areas within Camden as being ‘rough places’ to live. The mass media, in the form of local press or TV news programmes, fuelled negative place images of these areas:

I wouldn’t like to live around [area A] because that’s got a very bad name, it still has. There’s a lot of drugs around there and there’s a lot of . . . it’s always in the Camden Journal there’s something going on around there (Patrick).

Those tenants who thought the low-status others were in a minority wanted to preserve the spatial status quo by keeping the problem tenants and urban others out and in so doing maintain enclaves of respectability. At various meetings I came across examples of tenants associations trying to prevent the council allocating housing in their areas to ‘problem tenants’, whilst the interviewees referred to getting such tenants evicted. Although Patrick thought his own block was the ‘best’ on the estate, he was also bothered about ‘gangs’ that he wanted the council to take action against:

We have been having gangs around with the football, so we want to cut that out. I think they’re going to block off this end here altogether, because at night times sometimes you get them

⁷ Appearing respectable could also be a reflected phenomenon in the sense that married men could take pride in the outward appearance of ‘their’ women and children.
coming back, all these young yobs, drunk and they’re kicking cans. I’ve seen them urinate out there.

Other interviewees thought they constituted a respectable minority within an area ‘taken over’ by problem tenants. Linda felt ashamed to invite people back to her flat, both because of the estate’s poor physical state and because her neighbours (‘problem families’) were ‘shouting, banging the doors, ripping the rubbish when it’s left outside the doors’. She felt that they got more from the council than respectable tenants like her did. Linda thought that the area as a whole had got worse, partly because of ‘lots and lots of single parents with lots of children’, and that her block was particularly badly affected since ‘the mothers are not looking after their children properly, they don’t want to work’. Although Linda felt sorry for the residents of the block because they were obviously poor and had even asked her for money in the past, she was also concerned to demonstrate her social distance:

I have a real big thing about being seen as sort of like, like everybody else. It’s like if I said that if you look at this block people assume that we’ve come out of it, you’re just like everybody else in the block that they know.

Linda’s immediate response was the classic female respectable self-exclusionary strategy of withdrawal from the immediate neighbourhood: ‘I keep very much to myself’. She also kept her son indoors for fear of his coming into contact with the ‘undesirable’ children in the estate. In the long term, Linda was concerned to enact another geography of exclusion, i.e. leave the estate and Camden altogether in order to give her children a better life in the suburbs, indicative of her own social aspirations:

I love Finchley, I went up that way quite a few times. Gary’s school is nearby. Hertfordshire way, some place like that. It just sounds so nice from living in the inner city. I mean I know it’s not sort of miles, it’s just green . . . I don’t know. It’s just that this is so sort of depressing and it’s so awful, it’s so, it makes you feel so sort of down trodden when you come home of a night time.

However, moving out was unrealistic for Linda, as it was for most working-class Camden tenants, given her family’s limited economic capital. The desperation Linda expressed was exacerbated by the way that she was trying to put a spatial distance between herself and a social phenomenon that was close to her own experience. At the time she had obtained her flat, Linda was herself an unemployed single parent. Although she had subsequently managed to attain a degree of social mobility via entry into administrative work, as well as respectability by living with a long-term partner, neither mobility nor respectability felt secure given the worries she expressed about both her own and her partner’s job. The possibility of slipping back down again into the sub-proletarian poverty that surrounded her was all too real.

If Linda’s exclusionary spatial strategy involved immediate withdrawal and long-term hopeful escape, living in an area taken over by ‘yobs’ and ‘problem families’ could entail a far more confrontational approach by those adult males who felt their masculine sense of respect was challenged. Ken, an ex-bus inspector, went to great lengths to explain the problems he had living at a previous flat on an estate that had a poor reputation locally, including getting into a violent dispute with youths over vandalism. For Ken, the only long-term solution to the travails of living in inner London, which was ‘going down the tubes’, was escape to the home-owning suburbs:

In my experience of housing, my fiancée has just bought a house out of London near West Thurrock and I can honestly say that if I had the chance I would do the same thing because I’ve now seen the other side of the coin. There’s no noise, there’s no pollution, there’s very little crime and vandalism, and basically you go in your street door and shut it and that is your own peace and quiet, your own space. But by the pure nature of council housing you are compressed into a small space. If you’re lucky to get like-minded people around you, then
you don’t have a problem. But if you get one idiot with a stereo blaring all hours of the day or night, one yobbo in a car that forever toots every time he pulls up, or has friends shouting up to the windows and so on then it takes the whole area down, just one person.

This illustrates a utopian suburban place image characterized by a ‘concern with order, conformity and social homogeneity’ (Sibley, 1995: 38–9). Several tenants felt increasingly out of place living in inner London and expressed strong desires to leave for the suburbs, the countryside or the south coast in order to avoid the low-status others around them. As we discuss below, such urban and suburban place images could also have racialized connotations.

The view from the ‘problem tenants’

Since ‘problem tenant’ is a negative label that has been applied to council tenants by powerful groups, such as housing officials, it was not an identity that any respondents adhered to. Nevertheless, it was clear during the lengthy interviews that several single men routinely engaged in behaviour that their fellow tenants would find problematic, notably heavy drinking and drug taking.8 When asked what he liked about being a council tenant, John contrasted the safety and freedom that living in his block of flats offered him compared with the dangers and restrictions of the homeless hostel where he lived previously:

Great, great, fantastic, got the keys to my door. I ain’t got to worry about going through doors, being attacked going up the stairways or things like that, or being thrown out because I was too drunk. I can come in here when I’m drunk, go out when I’m drunk. So there’s a lot of difference between your feelings, this is your castle, this is me only home. It’s the only home I’ve got, got no other home.

John’s freedom to get drunk when he felt like it came after a lifetime of poverty, chronic illness and homelessness. It was also bought, in a sense, at the expense of threatening the respectability and peace of those around him. These men, such as John, had employment histories involving lengthy periods of unemployment and housing histories characterized by time spent sleeping both in squats and on the streets. They also suffered from ill health exacerbated and even brought on by the material harshness of their lives; hence ‘vulnerable tenant’ was as much a viable label as ‘problem tenant’. Such men were closest to the stereotype of ‘underclass’ council tenants, and their numbers had increased over the years as the public rental sector came to increasingly accommodate the homeless.

Those ‘problem/vulnerable’ tenants who had been brought up in Camden demonstrated a considerable sense of belonging based on extensive local networks of family, friends and acquaintances. They were sanguine about the presence of low-status others since they had a personal affinity with such groups and identified with them. Tony, for example, was in his twenties and had spent several months sleeping on the streets, begging and drinking heavily, as well as lengthy periods of time squatting. His employment history was characterized by alternating between working in casual jobs and living on welfare benefits. Living in a cramped bedsit flat in one of the large estates, Tony described the difficult material conditions many tenants faced, whilst also demonstrating considerable empathy towards fellow ex-squatters who he personally knew:

When you’ve got this many people trying to live in such close quarters it’s hard enough. I don’t think that putting in a few extra flower beds and cameras has helped. Even the big flats

8 The contrast between these single men and the female interviewees anxious to prove their respectability in the interviews could not have been stronger since the former were unconcerned about smoking cannabis and/or drinking when being interviewed.
are small. It’s hard work trying to deal with the mental side of the estate. If your life is together — you’ve got a job and you go to work — it’s not that much of a problem. But if you’re on social security and you’re all trying to live in such a small space, there’s a lot of problems for a lot of people. There’s a lot of squatters rehoused on this estate and they’re put into really shitty flats. I know a lot of people on this estate.

‘Race’ and the white working class
Racism and respectability

Although crime was a cause of concern for the tenants in Camden, it was only occasionally associated with the presence of ethnic minorities per se, unlike in east London (Back, 1996; May, 1996). Instead, two issues with racialized connotations tended to dominate the white tenants’ neighbourhood images. The first related to young people’s presence and behaviour, as seen above. ‘Racial conflict’ between ‘gangs’ of youths was a distinctive leitmotif among the white tenants living in the south of the borough where the Bangladeshi population tended to be located: ‘this estate is not known for muggings, but you get fights with Asians’ (Diane). During the mid-1990s, there had been highly publicized conflict in the Somers Town area between ethnically diverse groups of young people culminating in the death of a white teenager (Harris, 1998). The second issue was competition over the provision of scarce welfare services, notably social housing, a longstanding factor in generating white racism in inner London (Phizacklea and Miles, 1980; Foster, 1999; Watt, 2004). Asian and black minority ethnic groups, as well as refugees, were sometimes blamed for shortages of public housing and other neighbourhood facilities:

I can’t handle the fact that every time . . . I’m not being racist, but every time a white family move off, the house is filled up by a Nigerian or Asian family. It’s becoming like little India. There are white families out there who are homeless and getting the option last (Tony).

And we’ve had this new [youth] centre opened up for the . . . I don’t know, Bangladeshis or whatever they are . . . They’ve got their area but our kids have got nothing, so our kids have . . . you see it all the time they just hate them. And it’s all down to the Council, because if they were going to open a place for them, they should have opened a place for ours (Lisa).

A few interviewees expressed an overwhelming sense of loss that ‘the other’, the stranger, is thought to be taking over, or as having already taken over’ (Sandercock, 2002: 208), as in the case of Nancy for whom the mere presence of ‘Bengalis’ signified ‘problem tenant’ and thereby neighbourhood decline:

If they [Camden Council] think more about their allocation of flats I think you could wipe out a hell of a lot of problem estates. This is where you’ve got the clash because you’ve got one, two, three, four, five flats bolt on top of one another, and at that particular time they was putting Bengalis, Bengalis, Bengalis and Bengalis. And then people actually go ‘oh my God’, you know, ‘they’re everywhere’, you know like there’s only one white. I think if the council thinks about ‘well hang on a minute, look we’ve got two problem families in this, this family is a problem, do we really need to add not only to their problems but to the problems of other tenants by putting in another problem (Nancy).

At the same time, there was also evidence that a distinction could be made between ‘rough’ and ‘respectable’ ethnic minorities. We saw above how Betty related the breakdown of community at least partly to the presence of other ‘races’ who had come onto the estate but could not speak English. Later on during the interview, however, Betty emphasized that she did not necessarily associate ‘problem’ behaviour with these racialized others:

I had coloured people next to me, Indians and better than some of the English. I mean I liked to keep all my balconies scrubbed down and all that, and they would scrub down with you,
but I had an Irish family next to me when these Indians went... filth, utter filth! [They] kept two dogs in the thing — I had to report them once because you could smell the dogs, keep coming through my passage wall. Filth, utter filth. As I say, there’s good and bad of every kind isn’t there, I mean. Takes all kinds to make the old world up (Betty).

Betty’s blaming of the decline of community on other ‘races’ moving into the area co-existed with her emphasis upon maintaining ‘standards’ which the newcomers could also do. Longevity of residence plus acting in a normal ‘decent’ manner meant that black and Asian minorities could effectively prove their respectability over time. The rough/respectable distinction therefore did not neatly map onto different racialized groups. This ambivalence is illustrated by Jenny’s comments on her neighbourhood:

I don’t mind the area, but it’s getting rougher. We seem to be in the minority, the whites that is. There’s a lot of influx of gypsies or whatever in [B street]. If you closed your eyes you’d think you were in Marrakesh there’s so many Arabs... I like the area I do. I like living here with the house, the garden and neighbours. Our neighbours are great, both black and white. The black family have been here for ages. It’s just the newcomers. I like the area but there’s been so many changes. If you go down to [B street] on a late evening you can see the children and they’re just allowed to run riot and that gives me an uneasy feeling. What are they being brought up like?

Despite the presence of her ‘great’ neighbours, Jenny wanted to eventually leave London, as did several other respondents. Their reasons for wanting to move were manifold, but escaping declining neighbourhoods, and especially the presence of low-status others, was often a major factor. Those interviewees who openly espoused racist place images of urban disorder tended to proffer racialized notions of suburban and rural tranquillity (Sibley, 1998). As well as representing an escape from rough neighbourhood elements, part of the appeal of suburbia and the countryside was a search for a lost way of life in a predominantly white southern England outside the multiethnic metropolis (Watt, 2004). Pam felt that she was a ‘minority’ living in Camden and ideally wanted to live in the countryside: ‘I would like to live somewhere where it used to be the old values — I’m English and I prefer to live that way’. However, with the possible exception of the dual-income households, very few tenants expected that they would actually be moving out of London since council housing transfers were difficult to obtain while the cost of suburban or rural homeownership was prohibitive.

**Cosmopolitanism and anti-racism**

It is important to recognize that while racist place images and attitudes were expressed, liberal and anti-racist views were also in evidence among the white working-class tenants (cf. Lamont, 2000; Tyler, 2004). A discourse of multicultural difference is typically associated with the new middle class as they sample the delights of the ‘exotic’ cosmopolitan city from a privileged social position (May, 1996). This discourse was certainly prominent among the atypical graduate professional tenants living in Camden council property (Watt, 2005), but it was also a subaltern theme among the white working class, as seen in this comment by Mary:

We try out all the different restaurants, we know all the people in the Greek restaurant across the road, the Turkish restaurant in [laughs]. We go to the Greek one across the road and then we go down to the Turkish one down Kentish Town Road, we can’t pass without them saying ‘come in, come in’, we just know them all. We get on well with... we don’t have any problem getting on with people from different races or nationalities, we don’t have any problems like that at all.

Mary, a receptionist, and her husband Jimmy, a self-employed construction worker, were the most affulent of all the working-class households and such a relatively high level of economic capital undoubtedly assisted their enjoyment of Camden’s multiethnic leisure...
facilities. However, not all of the tenants who espoused liberal and anti-racist views had such levels of economic capital. Some were living in or on the margins of poverty, but demonstrated an adherence to a radical set of political and social values. Kevin had been a committed trade union activist throughout his working life prior to taking retirement on medical grounds. He stopped drinking in the neighbourhood pub because he publicly defended the right of the Bangladeshis to live on the estate and was subsequently labelled a ‘Paki lover’ by the ‘locals’. Joe, an out-of-work rigger with an idiosyncratic radical worldview, more anarchist than socialist, was similarly critical of his white neighbours’ comments about young people:

I’d rather live in a community where doors were left open and I’d love it, you know, and it’s not a problem to me to . . . But here it’s going the opposite way, people putting bars across their doors and stuff. People are really closing away. And no-one talks to kids and the kids are left out there. When they [young people] make a noise, two or three people complain and the next thing there’s a letter from the Council talking about this ‘problem’. We don’t actually have a problem on this estate, you know, they blame ‘those Asians, those Asian kids who come in here and play football, they’re the problem’.

What some white tenants therefore took as a sign of urban decay and community decline (Asian children playing football) was regarded as a normal part of city life by others such as Joe. It was also among those working-class cosmopolitans and radicals that the most positive views were expressed about living in Camden generally, whilst they were the most critical of the suburbs deriding them for their social sterility.

Conclusion

The Camden tenants displayed complex and even contradictory attitudes towards their neighbourhoods. Narratives of urban decline were commonplace in which the threads of contemporary neighbourliness were felt to be thinly woven in comparison with the denser community spirit that was said to have existed in the past. Tenants alluded to a range of factors in bringing this decline about, ranging from the demise of manual employment to limited public welfare services, as well as the arrival of unwelcome ‘newcomers’. At the same time, belonging and neighbourhood sociability remained based upon ‘knowing people’ via extended kinship relations, patterns of everyday mutual support and the extensive network of tenants associations in Camden. Ambivalent place images were commonplace in the sense that the white working-class tenants vociferously complained about aspects of their local areas, be it lack of facilities or the invasion of low-status ‘others’, however defined, but they could also point to positive aspects of living in Camden. Some tenants, especially those with heightened social aspirations, were more critical about their neighbourhoods and were also keen to leave areas where they felt increasingly out of place. Knowing people in the neighbourhood, and thereby having social capital, certainly helped the tenants to have a positive sense of place, but it didn’t necessarily eradicate their sense of urban anxiety. They wanted to draw clear-cut defensive lines that could either symbolically or physically seal ‘their’ communities off from both external and internal threats (Cohen, 1985).

Neighbourhood place images depended upon the dialectic between people’s own social identity and their assessment of the local neighbourhood, notably in terms of the presence of low-status others. This interrelationship, which affected whether they fitted in or felt out of place, revolved around two main factors pertinent to social distinction, i.e. firstly moral behaviour linked to respectability and roughness, and secondly ‘race’. The main threat to the respectable white working class in Camden was not so much ‘other races’, but instead the presence of roughs and problem tenants. The rough/respectable status distinction has long bifurcated the working class and was certainly pertinent to how tenants perceived themselves, their neighbours and neighbourhoods.
Most took comfort from the fact they did not live in truly rough places elsewhere either in Camden or the rest of London. Some felt themselves to be a majority living in neighbourhoods with only a few problem tenants and their concern was to maintain their enclaves of respectability. Others felt far more anxiety since they lived in neighbourhoods taken over by ‘others’ and their solutions were withdrawal and a long-term escape to the orderly suburbs (Sibley, 1995; Watt, 2004).

Maintaining a sense of respectability allowed the tenants to symbolically distance themselves from those low-status others who also happened to share the same physical space as themselves. Although maintaining respectability was becoming increasingly important for the white working-class tenants, simultaneously it was also more difficult to achieve, as indicated by the fears and anxieties many tenants expressed. There are two main reasons for this ambivalent state of affairs. The first is the way that the tenants were themselves affected by periods of poverty, unemployment and homelessness, whilst their employment was increasingly insecure and casual. Such factors routinely impinged on the lives of their family, friends and neighbours living in the same neighbourhoods as themselves. In other words, the ‘sub-proletarian’ experience characterized by poverty and insecurity, which Bourdieu (1984) alludes to, has become commonplace among the inner-city working class. As it has done so, it has transformed the working-class habitus, the choice of the necessary, and sense of place. For the post-war Fordist working class in Camden, this necessary ‘choice’ occurred in relation to a plentiful supply of relatively well-paid manual jobs and accessible public rental housing. Neither of these was any longer readily available to council tenants or their children. The paradoxical result is that expressing a social distinction between themselves and the low-status others around them, via emphasizing their own respectability, has become increasingly ‘necessary’ within the contemporary working-class habitus at the same time that the material basis for such a distinction has markedly narrowed. The inherent fragility of this distinction, lacking as it does any grounding in the possession of dominant forms of cultural capital such as educational qualifications, meant that it was unsurprising that several tenants wished to leave inner London and thereby provide a spatial legitimation for their self-avowed respectability.

The second reason for ambivalence surrounding respectability is linked to the sheer social diversity of Camden as a whole, as well as in its council housing. Neat intra-class status hierarchies of white male manual workers and their families based upon skill levels and the cleanliness of doorsteps no longer exist in inner-city neighbourhoods such as those in Camden. Instead, these neighbourhoods comprise spaces within which knowing exactly who is respectable, or rough, is increasingly problematic. The complex nature of the borough’s population and its council estates, plus Camden’s prominent role in London’s tourist and night-time economies, has meant that ‘outsiders’ of one form or another were a constant presence throughout the public space of the streets and estates in and around where the tenants lived. Within such a mobile diverse place, differentiating the ‘respectables’ from the ‘roughs’ was by no means straightforward. For example, although students failed to maintain feminine working-class standards of cleanliness, they were nevertheless in a higher class position. More significantly, increased ethnic variation in council housing brought added complexities to the demarcation of the rough/respectable boundary for the white working-class tenants. Racist discourses existed among the latter in Camden, as they do throughout many parts of London (Back, 1996; Foster, 1999). The low-status others could take a racialized form in Camden and there was evidence of racial tension around competition for scarce welfare resources, not least council housing itself. Nevertheless, black and Asian minorities could also effectively ‘prove’ their respectability over time and thereby legitimate their presence in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, counter-discourses of liberal cosmopolitanism and radical anti-racism were also in evidence. These latter are

9 Extreme right-wing parties have fared relatively poorly in Camden in comparison with east London; see Watt (2001; 2004) for a detailed discussion of racism and ethnicity in Camden.
often overlooked in accounts of the white working class, as both Lamont (2000) and Tyler (2004) have highlighted.

In conclusion, it is the combination of increased socio-economic deprivation and insecurity with socio-cultural heterogeneity in dense areas of council housing that has produced heightened fears and anxieties for many white working-class tenants, as well as defence mechanisms of stigmatization and exclusion. Such anxieties are further exacerbated by wider urban ‘discourses of fear’ (Sandercock 2002) and ‘underclass’ stereotypes (Watt and Jacobs; Lawler, 2002) that dominate mass media and policy representations of inner-city areas, especially council estates. It is important, however, that social scientists do not fall into the trap of simply reiterating such stereotypes, but instead offer a more ‘multi-layered representation’, as Bourdieu et al. (1999: 3) advocate.

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References


Résumé

Le logement joue désormais un rôle important dans la délimitation de la polarisation sociale dans le centre de Londres, notamment par le fossé socio-spatial grandissant entre une classe ouvrière appauvrie vivant dans des logements sociaux municipaux et les propriétaires aisés habitant leur logement rénové. Les discours des politiques et des médias dépeignent systématiquement les premiers comme un ‘quart-monde’ urbain agité, ce qui homogénéise les locataires des habitats sociaux en marginalisant leur voix. L’article dépasse cette conception étroite de quart-monde en offrant une analyse approfondie des images de lieu et de l’identité sociale propres au quartier, reposant sur des entretiens avec des ouvriers locataires de logements sociaux dans l’arrondissement londonien de Camden. S’inspirant des débats sur le lieu et la distinction sociale, il illustre un ensemble complexe fait d’images du quartier tirées de récits de dégradation urbaine, mais aussi de notions d’appartenance et de connaissance des gens. Il examine ces images de lieu en fonction de la différenciation de statut déjà ancienne entre respectabilité et brutalité, sans oublier la ‘race’. Pour conclure, les aspects de défense et d’exclusion dans les images du quartier sont liés aux processus d’insécurité et de destitution sociale auxquels ont été soumis les ouvriers locataires de logements sociaux à Camden.