



LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

Citation:

Harrison, K and Raisborough, J and Taylor, LJ (2020) From Streetscapes to Sofas: Representations of Place and Space in Britain's Benefit Blackspots. Sociological Research Online: an electronic journal. ISSN 1360-7804 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780420946781>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/6878/>

Document Version:

Article (Published Version)

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0

© The Author(s) 2020

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

From Streetscapes to Sofas: Representations of Place and Space in Britain's Benefit Blackspots

Sociological Research Online

1–17

© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1360780420946781

journals.sagepub.com/home/sro



Katherine Harrison 

Leeds Beckett University, UK

Jayne Raisborough

Leeds Beckett University, UK

Lisa Taylor

Leeds Beckett University, UK

Abstract

Representations of place and space in Factual Welfare Television (FWT) are under-researched, contributing to neglect of spatial stigma in austerity culture. In this article, we combine agnotology – the study of manufactured ignorance – with visual grammar methods to examine Channel 5's *Britain's Benefit Blackspots* (2017) to address why FWT is spatially significant. We argue that televisual representations of the abject 'welfare claimant' in Britain have a spatial dimension, evident in repeated camera shots of derelict, deindustrialised, litter-strewn outside spaces and large sofas, overflowing ashtrays and dusty corners inside homes. We conclude that FWT's representations serve two functions: first, they obscure the spatial inequalities inherent in austerity policies by reducing social problems to constructed social types and their places and ways of living and, second, they enable sets of socio-spatial assumptions that become unquestioned ways of reading and understanding disadvantaged and disadvantaged spaces of residence.

Keywords

austerity, place, representation, space, stigma, television, visual grammar

Introduction

Representations of place and space in media that document the lives of welfare recipients are crucial to understandings of how ignorance about spatial inequalities contributes to the production of anti-welfare sentiment in Britain. A wealth of recent factual television

Corresponding author:

Lisa Taylor, School of Cultural Studies and Humanities, Leeds Beckett University, A214 Broadcasting Place, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds LS1 3HF, UK.

Email: l.j.taylor@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

programming about welfare has routinely situated people in identifiable geographical regions, localities, and domestic residences. Channel 4's *Benefits Street* (2014) was set explicitly on James Turner Street, Birmingham, England, UK, and places are often named in programme titles, such as Channel 5's *Benefits By The Sea: Jaywick* (2015). In other documentaries, specific areas – Hull, Blackpool or Hartlepool – are introduced as locations with high numbers of welfare recipients. Furthermore, people are filmed inside their homes. *Too Fat to Work* (Channel 5, 2015) is not unusual in filming participants' kitchen, bathroom, and living areas. Yet the role of place and space in the production of anti-welfare sentiment in contemporary Britain remains under-researched (Crossley, 2017). Meanwhile, it has been argued that we need a stronger critical purchase on the 'cultural mechanisms through which mass consent for welfare retrenchment is procured' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015: 485). We respond to this by considering how place and space are represented in 'Factual Welfare Television' (FWT) (De Benedictis et al., 2017). Our starting point is that representations of place and space are more than mere backdrops for the abject figure of the welfare claimant. Instead, following Crossley (2017), we examine how 'imagined geographies' can mobilise anti-welfare sentiment. We argue that representations of the welfare claimant have a spatial dimension evident in repeated camera shots of derelict, deindustrialised places, littered outside spaces, large sofas, overflowing ashtrays, and dusty corners. These representations obscure the spatial inequalities inherent in austerity policies by reducing social problems to constructed social types and their places and ways of living. They also enable sets of socio-spatial assumptions that become unquestioned ways of reading and understanding disadvantaged and disadvantaged spaces of residence.

This article presents findings from a pilot study for a wider research project that uses Visual Grammar Analysis (VGA) to systematically examine representations of place and space in multiple episodes of Channel 5's FWT series *On Benefits* (2015–2019). Here, we focus intensively on a single episode (series 4, episode 10), *Britain's Benefit Blackspots* (2017) (hereafter *BBB*), to demonstrate how the manufacture of ignorance about spatial disadvantage and stigma contributes to anti-welfare 'commonsense' (Jensen, 2014). *On Benefits* is a long-running series on Channel 5. We randomly selected the individual episode for our pilot from a playlist of the entire series; however, with hindsight, *BBB* is thoroughly representative of *On Benefits*: life on benefits for the three main protagonists is presented as disreputable and self-inflicted. Moreover, for our purpose here, the episode is rich in imagery of place and space, which forms the object of our analysis.

Media and anti-welfare sentiment

Much has been written about the emergence of the rhetoric of 'Broken Britain' under the UK's Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government of 2010–2015 and how this has been operationalised to implement a political project of austerity that manifests in cuts to public spending that disproportionately impact the poor (Slater, 2014; Tyler, 2013). Tyler (2013) and Shildrick (2018b) argue that public consent is required for 'cuts' to the welfare state. One means of procuring consent is by generating commonsense understandings of poverty (Jensen, 2014) and generating an

'anti-welfare sentiment' (De Benedictis et al., 2017: 338). There is acute awareness that media play a role in producing and circulating anti-welfare sentiment by sensationalising disadvantaged lives and communities (Mooney, 2011). Important work has detailed how scapegoats are constructed as responsible for 'Broken Britain': the 'welfare claimant', 'immigrant', 'troubled family', 'single parent', 'chav', and 'asylum seeker' serve as repositories for wider anxieties that are actively shaped from questions about who has access to public resources and who wastes tax-payers' money (Crossley, 2018; Jensen, 2018; Tyler, 2013). Tyler (2013) argues that these figures are constructed as 'national objects', which function in wider poverty propaganda as the means to shift 'blame' for poverty away from neoliberal policies of austerity towards those who are impoverished by them (Crossley, 2018; Shildrick, 2018b).

Attention to media has focused on FWT (De Benedictis et al., 2017). FWT refers to a new genre of factual programming on British television that centres on the everyday lives of people who claim benefits. FWT proliferated after 2014 when *Benefits Street* gained Channel 4 some of its highest viewing figures. De Benedictis et al. (2017) argue that, although ostensibly informative, FWT represents benefits recipients in ways that support public 'anti-welfare sentiment' (p. 338). Significantly, Tyler (2013) has observed the generation of the affective response of disgust in popular representations of the poor. Mechanisms that promote audience disgust in FWT include the 'judgement shot' (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 95) and the construction of a 'middle-class gaze' (Lyle, 2008: 320). According to Jensen (2014), the genre and the media debate generated by it have embedded and naturalised anti-welfare views as 'commonsense', shutting down the possibility of alternative perspectives. We recognise, however, that FWT is a generic label that encompasses variations across time, broadcasters, and programmes. Not all FWT takes an anti-welfare stance; some like *Welfare Britain – The New Reality* (BBC, 2013) portray the unpleasant reality of claiming benefits (Beresford, 2016). Furthermore, as Allen et al. (2014) demonstrate, White Dee in *Benefits Street* cuts a resistant maternal figure who was embraced by the right-wing press for her warmth and commonsense. While FWT programmes prompt varied affective responses, they are still roundly criticised for their reproduction of denigrating stereotypes of the working class and their suggestion that poverty is a chosen lifestyle of the workshy (Crossley, 2018; Jensen, 2014). *BBB* fits into this paradigm and contains few moments of resistance. This research is not suggesting that these judgements of the poor are new (Golding and Middleton, 1982). What is new is the function these representations serve for wider neoliberal agendas working in and through contemporary austerity policies that may erode social cohesion and public support for the welfare state (Shildrick, 2018b).

Stigma of place and space

Issues of space are important in media representations because deprived regions and areas, council estates, and social housing have long been associated with 'Broken Britain' in political rhetoric and tabloid press (Crossley, 2017). Regarded as 'problem areas', these are represented as habitats of troubled families, the 'underserving poor' (Shildrick, 2018a; Stahl and Habib, 2017), and as sites of welfare dependency (Slater, 2018). Hancock and Mooney (2013) argue that a 'specific geography is at work' in

narratives of 'Broken Britain' (p. 48), which mobilise new iterations of the deserving/underserving poor as part of a sustained class antagonism expressed as rational concern over a 'broken' welfare system. The association between place, space, irresponsibility, and worklessness is such that images of Jaywick, Essex, one of England's most deprived towns, were used in a Republican political campaign in the USA as a vision of a dystopian future (Marsh, 2018).

The significance of this 'specific geography' is made by Wacquant (2008) for whom any meaningful account of contemporary urban poverty must address 'the "powerful stigma attached to residence in . . . bounded and segregated spaces"' (p. 169). Spatial relations are key to Wacquant's (2008) notion of 'advanced marginality', defined as 'the novel regime of socio-spatial relegation and exclusionary closure . . . that has crystallised in the post-Fordist city as a result of the uneven development of the capitalist economies and the recoiling of welfare states' (pp. 2–3). Wacquant draws on Goffman's (1963) notion of 'disabilities' that pertain to a range of bodily, moral, or tribal stigma that disqualify the individual from social acceptance by others. He adds that 'place of residence' is an equally powerful mark of dishonour that acts to taint people. A 'blemish of place' confers powerful feelings of shame among those living in such districts and causes them to enact a range of social or symbolic strategies to accept or resist spatial taint (Wacquant et al., 2014: 1276).

The main strengths of Wacquant's thinking rests in his insistence that stigma is a deliberate strategy used to mask the structural causes of advanced marginality. His work stresses that 'urban hell holes' are directly created by state policies that generate precarity and mass unemployment, normalise economic exploitation, and dissolve away low-skilled jobs. These effectively herd marginalised and economically vulnerable individuals into areas that are 'abandoned' as the state replaces welfare with increased surveillance and punitive interventions. Advanced marginality tends to accrete in isolated post-industrial areas where it is believed that the 'lowest' human beings, characterised by violence and infamy, choose to dwell (Wacquant, 2007: 67). Wacquant stresses that we are witnessing systematic acts of 'violence from above' that are stubbornly represented as the problems of the multiple populations of a threatening underclass (the variously labelled 'new poor' or 'jobless'). Consequences include discrimination, targeted punitive policies, and intrusive surveillance. Research evidences high levels of psycho-social distress felt by people associated with disreputable spaces (Contreras, 2017). Spatial stigma has a negative impact on residents' health and life chances, not just because of poor access to strained public services (Dorling, 2010; Garthwaite and Bambra, 2017), but through the effects of the stigma itself (Pearce, 2013).

While we know some of the structural causes and consequences of spatial stigma, we still understand little about how it is produced and circulated. Wacquant draws attention to 'specialists in cultural production such as journalists' (Wacquant, 2016: 1084) and to the 'sulphurous images' of defamed spaces that feature in movies, music videos, and computer games (Wacquant et al., 2014: 1274). However, Wacquant's work does not develop an analysis of spatial taint in factual programming in the television broadcast schedules of neoliberal democracies. We address this by examining how spaces are represented in FWT in Britain. This is an important site given the role of this programming in the production of anti-welfare 'commonsense', as discussed above. We use our

examination to explore what functions specific and combined representations of place and space serve. To enable this, we deploy the concept of ‘agnotology’ (Proctor, 2008).

Manufactured ignorance

Agnotology explores the construction and function of ignorance (agnosis). Part of this is the study of ‘manufactured ignorance’, famously demonstrated by Proctor’s (2008) analysis of the tobacco industry, which actively crafted ignorance about the health effects of smoking by marketing its products as healthy, feigning its own ignorance and repeatedly casting doubt on medical evidence. More recently, Barton et al. (2018) have deployed agnotology to analyse how acquiescence in mass harms is manufactured. They argue that constructed agnosis can help corporations escape criminal prosecution and, significantly for our purposes, distract from state-generated harms. It is in this vein that Slater develops an agnotological approach to what he calls an ‘ideological assault’ (Slater, 2014: 951) on ‘welfare, urban poverty and social housing’ (Slater, 2018: 878). Ignorance serves as a ‘strategic and pernicious ploy, an active construct’ (Slater, 2014: 951) that forecloses alternative ways of apprehending urban poverty while obscuring the multiple harms of state-generated policies. What agnotology means for us is a concern with what is not said in FWT or what is only rendered intelligible through critical analyses of unarticulated representations of space: we explore here how constructed agnosis plays a role in obscuring ‘violence from above’.

Method

This article draws from a pilot study for a wider research project, which applies a VGA (visual grammar analysis) to multiple episodes of Channel 5’s FWT series *On Benefits* (2015–2019). Visual grammar is based on the principles of social semiotics to analyse how meaning is made and understood through visual imagery (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). More specifically, VGA generates data related to the ‘arrangement, location, colour saturation’ of visual elements (Friedman and Ron, 2017: 100) and the production of a narrative through the composition of presence, location, and flow of visual elements (Juvancic and Verovsek, 2017). VGA is appropriate here because locales and objects on streets and in homes that appear in FWT may appear incidental in the dominant narrative and may not be spoken about either in dialogue or off-screen narration yet perform a significant function in producing meaning.

We piloted Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) compositional trilogy of salience (sizing and foreground), information value (position on screen such as left/right) and framing (continuity and discontinuity) to analyse one randomly selected episode of the series (*BBB*, 2017). We followed Dash et al. (2016) in using freeze-frames (screen-shots) to focus on salience and information value in each scene and the movement (framing) between shots. Our attention to one 60-minute episode is justified by the detailed and data-rich nature of VGA, which necessitates singular or small samples (see Dash et al., 2016).

For this article, we reviewed our data through an agnotological reading. Whereas VGA focuses primarily on presence, recent adaptations of the method emphasise the

importance of omissions in narrative production (Juvancic and Verovsek, 2017). Agnotology gives weight to the function of omissions by viewing them in light of the production of specifically shaped knowledges (Slater, 2014). We offer a commentary based on our data to highlight representations of place and space and use these to consider what we were being distracted from knowing, or understanding, about welfare claimants in *BBB*. Our position as researchers was, as always, significant: we share working-class backgrounds, and each has experience of spatially blemished places. We have/had, then, some lived appreciation of the impact of reputational taint: we do not offer our agnotological reading as a neutral one, but instead one produced through affective and political reading that stresses contextual socio-economic relations and the material realities of the people represented on screen. We offer this reading under two themes: ‘streetscapes’ and ‘homescapes’.

Streetscapes: it's grim up North

The documentary follows 34-year-old Shaun from Stockton-on-Tees who has been on and off benefits – and in and out of trouble with the police – since leaving school, and is finally trying to turn his life around. Leon from Ashton-under-Lyme [sic] is fed up of only finding jobs with zero-hours contracts but cannot afford the transport to look further afield, while Knowsley-based cab driver Mark has not worked since having his licence revoked following an angina attack two years ago. Now he struggles to manage the stairs to his flat and needs moving to a new home. (<http://www.radiotimes.com/tv-programme/e/fqqzm8/on-benefits—s4-e10-britains-benefits-blackspots/>)

As this synopsis demonstrates, *BBB* is set in the North of England and plays to the stereotype of the ‘broad sobriquet of the North-South divide’ (Coe and Jones, 2010: 7). Yet, while the White, working-class subjects of the programme – Shaun, Leon, and Mark – negotiate unemployment and poverty, our contention is that *BBB* constructs ignorance of the historical, structural inequalities that produce the contemporary North while systematically implying that personal fecklessness and workshy practices are the reasons why these men ‘fail’ to make the North a better place. *BBB* draws on the place-image of the ‘grim’ North while occluding the powerful structural inequalities that have deepened Britain’s divide, leaving the North as casualty.

Cultural historians posit a long history of the North as a denigrated place. Russell (2004) argues there is a genealogy of ideas reaching back to the 12th century, which represents the North as inferior and marginal. Russell’s analysis of written travel guides of the late-1800s shows that northern English counties are secondary. The literary tours of H. V. Morton in the late 1920s represent the North as a ‘morally fallen’ England – a place where the landscape is un-English (Kohl, 2007). J. B. Priestly (1987) in *English Journey* describes the north as ‘sad, ugly and depressing’. Sure enough, *BBB* feeds the idea of an ugly, mundane north veiled by drizzle. Aerial shots that serve as the opening to *BBB* home in on Teesside, Tameside, and Merseyside to show how remaining industry works blight the land with prefabricated buildings and chimneys that spew chemical fumes. Shots of grimy streets use an insipid colour palette in persistently dreary weather. Shots of high streets are invariably damp, grimy, and half-lit, showcasing run-down bargain basement shops, punctuated by the Job Centre. If the visual grammar of these

images of place give the impression of economically under-nourished outlying regions, their implications are not far from the truth. Economic historian Martin (2015) argues that Britain's 'spatial economic imbalance is a long-standing one', exacerbated by the 1980s neoliberal growth model which was built on privatisation, cheap credit, and deregulation. Northern cities and their surrounding environs, regions that the camerawork relies on to establish place in *BBB*, 'felt the full force of deindustrialisation' in the late 1970s and the division was compounded by the economic downturn of 2008 (Dorling, 2010: 13).

Writers on the economic geography of Europe argue that austerity policies have enhanced regional disparities, but the UK has the worst case in Europe (Coe and Jones, 2010; Martin, 2015). By 2011, London and the South East had outstripped growth in the rest of the country, opening a gap of almost 40% in gross value added (GVA). By 2015, London and the South East made up 37% of the national economy (gross domestic product) compared to 26% in 1911, leading Martin (2015) to assert that economic imbalance across the UK was not only persistent, it was 'now greater than at any time in the country's recorded history' (p. 241). Driven by concern that the imbalance would affect the national economy, Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne launched the idea of the 'Northern Powerhouse' in 2014 to collectivise northern cities and announced a suite of interventions to energise its rhetoric. Data from the Northern Powerhouse Factsheet (2015) testify to the relative weakness of the ironically named 'Powerhouse': the combined cities of the North accounted for just 13.3% of the UK's GVA, compared to London's 62.2%. These data, conspicuously missing from *BBB*, masks the regional vulnerability Shaun, Leon, and Mark face given their difficulties finding employment: the 'Powerhouse' accounted for only 16% of Britain's jobs and those were in the Manchester city region (27%) or West Yorkshire (22%). For outlying regions such as Ashton-Under-Lyne and Stockton-on-Tees, where Leon and Shaun reside, work was especially scarce.

Historically, northern regions are economically under-nourished, yet *BBB* uses visual strategies to promulgate the idea of the North as dull and decaying to manufacture a powerful place-image of northern outlying towns. This is achieved with the use of camerawork in the opening sequence. After the lead up to the main title sequence, the programme offers a series of shots which 'locate' each of the men. Recognisable long- and mid-shots of respectable architectural and cultural landmarks are shown: Gateshead's Millennium Bridge and Gormley's *Angel of the North* sculpture are used to navigate the audience to Shaun's locale. Then, using the shock tactics of montage and operating at the level of sensation, the 'stain of place' undercuts the outsider image of the North East: *BBB* uses the textual strategy of lingering for several seconds on shots of fly-tipping.

Northern decay is shown to worsen as a result of the behaviours and flaws of the Northern people who move through its towns. In the next shot, the camera frames a backyard containing a damp mattress, a crumpled piece of carpet and two refuse bins; in another, an abandoned car without wheels amid dumped rubbish – a stray cat sniffs at litter. Using an agnotological approach, we argue that these provocative scenes are a 'gaze trained on' place to imply that the neighbourhood *is* the problem, 'rather than the expression of the problem to be addressed' (Slater, 2017: 121). *BBB* produces ignorance about the structural causes of poverty and occludes any alternative means of tackling it.

Martin (2015) argues that places 'shape' people, but the implication in *BBB* is that the White working-class men contribute negatively to their environment through their lack of deportment and brash street behaviour. Shaun, for example, lives in a poorly maintained upstairs flat. Its windows are grimy and dilapidated, and, in an external shot, Shaun hangs out his upper body and shouts onto the street, adding to the regime of existing images of 'low quality white' people in the roiling lower class north (Haylett, 2001; Rhodes, 2012). Elsewhere, Shaun is filmed leaving his flat: 'It's benefits pay-day and Shaun's heading straight to the bank', proclaims the voiceover. In what might arguably be viewed as a redemptive moment, we cut to Shaun standing in a grimy street with defiled white walls next to a refuse bin. 'Landlord's office is here so I'm going to go in and pay my rent', he says to camera. But just as we might view Shaun as an upstanding citizen paying his bills, he turns to walk down the street, makes a guttural noise, and spits on to the pavement. The voiceover returns: 'after he's paid his rent, he'll have just £100 to live off and he's not planning to save it'. Shaun's shopping trip to buy console games leaves us in no doubt that he is personally responsible for his financial difficulties. While it is Stockton-on-Tees with its lack of employment opportunities and poverty that produces desperate people like Shaun, *BBB* manufactures the idea that it is these disgust-inducing behaviours that produce 'territorial stigmatization' (Wacquant, 2008).

Empirical studies of the coping strategies of people managing 'spatial disgrace' (Slater, 2017: 119) include choosing to stay in areas among street gangs, local criminals, and extreme social exclusion. MacDonald et al.'s (2005) work on young people's transitions to adulthood in deindustrialised Teesside, where the previous 'economic scaffolding' which enabled transition to stable working-class life was missing, shows that living within supportive, social networks was indispensable to them. Similarly, McKenzie (2015) argues that the residents of St. Ann's council estate, Nottingham, recognised it carried place stigma, but tight social bonds within the community enabled them to cope. *BBB* identifies the coping strategies working-class men use to live alongside territorial stigma. But such strategies are portrayed unsympathetically; what belies them is dubious presumed over-dependency, co-dependent timewasting and weak will. For example, Leon is always filmed with his friend Daniel. The two young men walk the streets together, shop together, and worked for the same employer. In one scene, they are shown looking for stray coins in the street, boasting that they once managed to find £25. Talking to camera from his flat, Daniel describes their friendship: 'It's like we're brothers, not friends, at end of the day'. While elsewhere, the viewer is incited to feel disgust at dumped rubbish in the street, in a similar vein this scene is difficult to watch: the viewer is invited to judge Leon and Daniel as pathetic. One of Leon's hobbies is beat-box rapping. The camera dwells uncomfortably on Leon and Daniel performing in the flat; Leon makes rap hand gestures and performs lyrics, while Daniel provides the 'surround sound':

I have debts, but I can't get out/My mind goes black, I have a blackout/It's like I'm escaping,
but I can't get away/ I need to think straight, think in the right way/ Because if I don't, I'm
gonna go to the bottom of the ground/ No help from anyone around.

'Leon vents his frustration on lyrics which he turns into raps', remarks *BBB*'s commentator. One might feel sympathetic to Leon's and Daniel's friendship, but the implication is

that if the pair un-coupled and desisted from pathetic pastimes they might produce the neoliberal individualistic self-drive, or the ‘fight’ (as Leon asserts in his first scene), to find employment rather than hunting the streets for coppers. After all, as the voiceover informs the viewer, Leon and Daniel were both sacked from their zero hours contract jobs because they both called in sick on the same day. *BBB*’s agnosis encourages the viewer to feel revulsion for the behavioural conditions which cause poverty and worklessness – practices that contribute to the ‘blemish of place’, which characterises outlying northern towns in the UK. In the next section, we consider the camera’s function inside the homes of *BBB*’s participants.

Homescapes: dirty corners of England

Just as *BBB* obscures the lack of government spending and the disproportionate impact of austerity politics in the North, it also obfuscates the parlous state of housing for people claiming housing benefit or the housing payment portion of Universal Credit: over 4 million households according to the latest government statistics (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 2018). In *BBB*, Mark and Leon live in relatively modern one-bedroom flats in high-rise blocks, rented from Housing Associations. This is typical of the social housing sector in the UK, which is largely provided by non-profit making organisations rather than by Local Authorities. Shaun, however, lives in a privately rented top-floor flat in a dilapidated terraced house, which the voiceover explains is ‘paid for by benefits’. The UK homelessness charity Crisis describes ‘a shrinking and risk-averse social housing sector’, which excludes people on the basis of rent arrears, anti-social behaviour and criminal convictions and forces the most vulnerable housing benefit claimants into the precarious for-profit Private Rented Sector (PRS): approximately 889,000 households in 2017–2018 (Bimpson, 2018; Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, 2019). As an ex-offender who has never held a long-term job, Shaun fits this exclusory profile. The PRS is known to be the source of some of the lowest quality homes in the country. PRS tenants in the worst housing live in insecure, overcrowded conditions, cannot keep their homes warm or access hot water. Homes in the PRS have a higher than average likelihood of potentially lethal hazards such as unsafe electrics and other dangers. The housing charity Shelter (2019) asserts that the UK’s housing provision is ‘one of the most deregulated and marketized rental systems in the developed world’ and, in the worst of the PRS, the ‘slum conditions’ that first led to the building of social housing in Britain have returned. Even for people living in the social rented sector, like Leon and Mark, hardship is common. Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that low-income renters pay a higher proportion of their income on rent than higher income renters, even after housing benefit is considered (Joyce et al., 2017). Since 2011, housing benefit has been cut and for around 68% of social renters, housing benefit does not cover rent (Joyce et al., 2017: 3), leading to arrears and pressures on expenditure for food and utilities. Leon and Mark describe their difficulties affording heating and food. Despite this, *BBB* represents participants’ homes in a way that simultaneously undermines their hardship and sustains a discourse of moral turpitude that associates household disorder with personal character failings. This approach manufactures ignorance about the structural, policy-related causes of the dire living conditions of thousands of people in the UK.

Most scenes in *BBB* are set inside participants' homes. TV makers' access to residences of working-class people is a rare opportunity. Miller (2001a) states that 'apart from kin, entry into the private [working-class] home has been highly restricted' (p. 3). This has produced obstacles for ethnographic research. Mah (2009) observes that while research on domestic culture has often focused on middle-class concerns, such as interior design and the display of material possessions, little research has been conducted into the experience of home for people living in areas of industrial decline, like the three locations in *BBB*. The privileged access of TV makers constitutes an unusual opening and the representations they generate play a privileged role in producing knowledge – or manufacturing ignorance – about the private home lives of the poor. Through particular camerawork and a standardised mise-en-scène for each participant, *BBB* establishes a visual topography of the working-class home that emphasises disorder and squalor as explanations for, rather than consequences of, poverty. These representational techniques construct the home as a moralised reflection of the inhabitants' fecklessness and undercut participants' verbal testimonies of hardship, notwithstanding the responsibilities of social and private landlords and utility companies for the poor living conditions. Precisely through their situation within their homes, Mark, Leon, and Shaun are made to function as Tyler's (2013) 'national abjects' (p. 9) in the political landscape of austerity Britain.

Sofas are particularly prominent in *BBB*. The three men are repeatedly filmed sitting or lounging on sofas in their living rooms. Sofa-based interviews with documentary subjects are a convention of reality and factual TV formats. However, sofa settings in FWT serve an ideological function. As Crossley (2017) observes, while unemployment or under-employment necessitates time spent within the home, the repeated televisual image of benefits claimants inactive on their sofas is loaded with extra significance regarding laziness and decadence. The styles of the sofas featured in FWT are important. Usually over-sized in relation to a small room, made from flabby faux leather, crumpled and laden with squashed cushions, these are not the tastefully upright mid-century modern sofas of middle-class lifestyle media. Rather, the furniture is well-worn, its style is outmoded, and its shape indicative of excessive comfort. This is not only a matter of exposing working-class tastes in home décor to middle-class judgements. Particularly in episodes of *On Benefits* that focus on participants with large bodies, the camera roves in close-up over the human subjects and furniture, drawing visual continuities between flesh and squishy leather upholstery, as if the indolent unemployed have melded into their déclassé furniture. In the case of Shaun in *BBB*, he explains that his sofa doubles as a bed due to cold in his bedroom, yet camera shots of a crumpled duvet on the sofa are included in a scene where Shaun discusses how he has failed to get up for a training course, implying self-defeating laziness rather than a dwelling unfit for human habitation.

Throughout *BBB*, sofas are surrounded by or stacked up with remote controls, mobile phones, mugs, cigarette lighters, and ashtrays. While such objects are commonplace in many living rooms, they are not usually apparent in staged middle-class lifestyle media that focus on aspirational home interiors, such as the property television show *Location, Location, Location* (Channel 4, 2000–present). The candid real-life conceit of *BBB* explains the quotidian clutter yet simultaneously incites viewers to judge the untidiness by the standards of a lifestyle media audience taught to survey domiciles for

their tastefulness, orderliness, and value. As such, everyday private disorder is made into public shame as the viewer questions the judgement and housekeeping standards of the idle subjects who have not tidied up to receive the inspecting gaze of the camera.

Another effect of sofa-shots is to juxtapose the confessional narratives of participants with visual information about home décor and possessions that mobilises judgements about taste and responsible home economics. Sofas are filmed using medium shots that centralise the human subject but also establish domestic context in the fore and background. As Mark sits on his sofa discussing the prohibitive cost of his flat's metered heating system, the background takes in his collection of model aeroplanes, while the foreground includes his mobile phone on a coffee table. The same scene uses a longer reverse shot through Mark's living room doorway to emphasise stacks of personal possessions, including a large flat-screen television and computer equipment. It is worth restating here that all three participants in *BBB* live in small one-bedroom residences where storage is limited. Yet, camera shots composed conspicuously to take in Mark's belongings are not used to emphasise cramped living conditions but to undercut his verbal narrative about his inability to pay heating bills. The audience is provoked to question the prudence of Mark's consumption choices or even the truthfulness of his claims to poverty. For a benefits claimant in *BBB*, non-essential belongings are coded as suspect.

The sofa as a site of social disorder and moralising judgements is central to FWT. As Jensen (2014) observes, the image of 'the sofa abandoned in the street' is a key icon within 'underclass media mythologizing'. If the sofa-in-the-street is a sign of the unruly underclass' private space overflowing distastefully into the public domain and taps into discourses of domestic excess and irresponsibility, the recurring centrality of interior sofa-shots in *BBB* suggests an idleness and slovenliness that goes on behind closed doors. Sofa-shots – or 'sofas of despair' (Crossley, 2017: 87) – therefore sustain anti-welfare commonsense that blames poverty on laziness and manufacture's ignorance about the hardships of life on benefits.

BBB routinely employs an editing technique using cut-away camera shots. These are incongruous close-ups of objects or spaces, which punctuate scenes in which participants, or the narrator, speak about hardships. Objects and spaces highlighted by such editing are accorded exaggerated meaning in the visual topography of the household and perform a moralising function. While Leon discusses his budgetary difficulties, the camera cuts away to a close-up of a folded £10 note and packet of tobacco, with a PlayStation in the near background. In another scene, Shaun explains toothache kept him awake all night, threatening to make him late for a training course. To accompany Shaun's words, there is a fast-cut sequence of close-up shots constitutive of powerful visual grammar: (1) an open can of caffeinated energy drink and an ashtray containing cigarette butts; (2) an empty bottle of vaping liquid, another ashtray containing cigarette papers and a tube of ointment; (3) the same cigarette papers and ointment from another angle. Here, the dialogue provided by Shaun is contrapuntal to the visual images, which destabilises his verbal explanation of toothache and suggests an irresponsible lifestyle based around the consumption of stimulants. Other interior close-up cut-away shots in *BBB* focus on shelves of DVDs, stacks of electrical equipment, laundry, bags of sugar, cluttered surfaces, dusty skirting boards, and cracked paintwork. This recurring editing technique emphasises the subjects' dubious expenditures and household disorder.

Cut-away shots engender disgust in *BBB*. Particularly in the case of Shaun, who is the most isolated and vulnerable of the three participants, the camerawork emphasises squalor. In an early sequence inside Shaun's flat, the camera enters the bathroom and immediately zooms in on a grimy, detritus-strewn floor and down a soiled toilet bowl. The action cuts to his bedroom and zooms in on piles of bin-bags, clothing, and crumpled bedding. At other points, the camera intrusively picks out an empty aftershave bottle, a broken window blind on top of a dusty radiator, an antiquated mop and broom lying on the floor, an unmade bed, peeling paint, and condensation in the niche of a window frame. All these visual vignettes, which literally get into the corners of Shaun's home, imply dereliction so that Shaun is tainted by the squalor of his domestic surroundings. To emphasise this point, he is repeatedly filmed attempting to clean, but rather than this imagery supporting an impression of a responsible resident, his futile attempts are used to underline the seediness of his accommodation and person. Shaun's decaying flat is constructed as a moral reflection of his character, notwithstanding his status as a precarious tenant in the PRS with little choice as to his residence and limited economic power to shape his domestic environment. The use of cut-away close-up shots emphasising arbitrary material possessions, decay, and clutter has two interrelated effects: it undermines the sense of genuine hardship (if the men can afford luxuries like games consoles, cigarettes, and DVDs, their hardship is due to lifestyle rather than insufficient welfare) and it sustains a discourse of moral turpitude, which associates household dereliction and disorder with personal character failings.

BBB's representation of domestic space as a signifier of character is particularly unfair since none of the men featured in the programme has any discernible long-term attachment to or investment in their residence. Shaun's flat is unfit for human habitation, he dislikes it, and, according to the voiceover, he is at risk of eviction. Subtitles at the end of the programme inform the audience that Leon moved out of his flat shortly after filming ended. Mark strives throughout the episode to find alternative housing due to accessibility issues and the high cost of utilities. The flats bear palimpsests of previous temporary residents – bright pink floral wallpaper in Shaun's living room is an unlikely choice for a man who aspires to work on the railways. Leon's bedroom, too, is decorated with feminine wallpaper. As Burrell (2014) observes of insecure rented accommodation, 'The choices and lifestyles of previous tenants linger, co-habiting with the new tenants and challenging. . . the association between private and domestic space' (p. 159). While the homes featured in *BBB* may be represented as private, indicative of their inhabitants' tastes and lifestyles, they are, in fact, starkly impermanent, open, and vulnerable to the public sphere. Such dwellings, 'under threat of demolition, deterioration, dislocation, and/or contamination', perform a different function than the stable homes of the affluent and have little influence 'in the construction of personal identities' (Mah, 2009: 291). Burrell's (2014) study finds that 'understandings of how people make homes' must 'recognize the overwhelming power which larger structural forces wield within the domestic realm' (p. 157). She observes that 'Renting places residents in a potentially very vulnerable – even if not extreme – position; it is important to understand this vulnerability and how it is materialised in people's lives' (Burrell, 2014: 160). *BBB* takes no account of this or the differences in the function of living accommodation for affluent, stable groups and poor people with little or no choice about where and how they live. As Miller (2001b)

argues, ‘lack of choice or power to determine our material conditions’ (p. 120) because of poverty prevents people from feeling that their homes are an expression of their own agency. Yet, *BBB* holds Mark, Leon, and Shaun to account for their homes and asks the audience to judge them. As such, the programme’s agnosis deliberately overlooks the precarity, uninhabitability, and impermanence of the dwelling places of benefits claimants in 21st century Britain.

Conclusion

Our conjoining of agnotology, spatial stigma scholarship, and VGA has allowed us to highlight and engage with representations of place and space in FWT. It may be tempting for our agnotological reading to be regarded as a ‘reality check’, a method of providing facts where they are missing. However, an essential aspect of agnotology is the recognition that ignorance is not always an absence of knowledge (Barton et al., 2018), but rather a constructed apprehension of that which is *absented*. In this article, we have demonstrated that a particular production of ignorance around poverty and state welfare in relation to place and space is manufactured through distraction (often in the form of cut-away camera shots) and through an affective turn towards personalities and character traits of groups as explanations for their marginality. We suggest that this perpetuates and remobilises myths around social mobility, which help stabilise commonsense understandings of the deserving and undeserving poor.

What makes this article distinctive is our focus on place and space. We suggest that images of space as ill-fit for purpose, uncared for, littered, or disreputable, help fold in wider registers of disgust to FWT. In *BBB*, streetscapes and homescapes are presented as identifiable and recognisable sites for the exercise and expression of responsibility – notably, personal responsibility to keep spaces clean and tidy, but also to be *ordered* to enable particular functions expected of neoliberal citizens: spaces to entertain, to exercise, to recuperate after work, to invest one’s finances into regeneration and property values. Spaces in *BBB* lack the ability to fulfil these functions. Significantly, however, this lack is presented as a matter of individual failure of will: cut-away shots of spitting, casually tossed litter, dust, clutter, and functionless areas amass to suggest these stigmatised spaces are an outward expression of the social types who reside in them.

We suggest that FWT is helping to shape a specific spatial literacy. In cognitive and pedagogical terms, spatial literacy speaks to the skills and ability to visualise and develop a sense of location (Witham Bednarz and Kemp, 2011), yet, in another context, Murray (2008) speaks of literacy as an assemblage of tacit knowns that create robust cultural knowledges about social problems and social types. Drawing on both, there are grounds here to consider literacy to be a useful term to draw attention to the ways we may be encouraged to *read* spaces in particular ways that distract us from any structural explanations for poverty and unemployment, even as these may be offered in the commentary of the narrator. Instead, we read that spaces reflect the ‘types’ of people who reside in them. We suggest that spatial representations do this work with great efficiency: they utilise existing commonsense knowledge and affective responses to space that are tied up in home ownership and aspirational aesthetics.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grant award SRG18R1\180914. ‘What function do representations of space and place perform in factual welfare programmes? Towards a visual grammar of benefits stigma.

ORCID iD

Katherine Harrison  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2866-4189>

References

- Allen K, Tyler I and De Benedictis S (2014) Thinking with ‘White Dee’: The gender politics of ‘austerity porn’. *Sociological Research Online* 19(3): 2.
- Barton A, Davis H and White H (2018) Agnotology and the criminological imagination. In: Barton A and Davis H (eds) *Ignorance, Power and Harm. Critical Criminological Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 13–35.
- Beresford P (2016) Presenting welfare reform: Poverty porn, telling sad stories or achieving change. *Disability and Society* 31(3): 421–425.
- Bimpson E (2018) Recognising the social responsibilities of the Private Rented Sector within local welfare systems. *Crisis*. Available at: www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/housing-resource-centre/crisis-help-to-rent-forum/housing-forum-topics/recognising-the-social-responsibilities-of-the-private-rented-sector-within-local-welfare-systems/ (accessed 22 July 2019)
- Burrell K (2014) Spilling over from the street. *Home Cultures* 11(2): 145–166.
- Coe N and Jones A (2010) Introduction: The shifting geographies of the UK economy? In: Coe N and Jones A (eds) *The Economic Geography of the UK*. London: SAGE, pp. 3–11.
- Contreras R (2017) There’s no sunshine: Spatial anguish, deflections, and intersectionality in Compton and South Central. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35(4): 656–673.
- Crossley S (2017) *In Their Place: The Imagined Geographies of Poverty*. London: Pluto Press.
- Crossley S (2018) *Troublemakers: The Construction of ‘Troubled Families’ as a Social Problem*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Dash AK, Patnaik P and Suar D (2016) A multimodal discourse analysis of glocalization and cultural identity in three Indian TV commercials. *Discourse and Communication* 10(3): 209–234.
- De Benedictis S, Allen K and Jensen T (2017) Portraying poverty: The economics and ethics of Factual Welfare Television. *Cultural Sociology* 11(3): 337–358.
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (2018) Housing benefit caseload statistics: Data to May 2018. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/housing-benefit-caseload-statistics#history (accessed 22 July 2019).
- Dorling D (2010) Persistent North-South divides. In: Coe N and Jones A (eds) *The Economic Geography of the UK*. London: SAGE, pp. 12–28.
- Friedman A and Ron S (2017) Unlocking the power of visual grammar theory: Analysing social media political advertising messages in the 2016 US election. *Journal of Visual Literacy* 36(2): 90–103.
- Garthwaite K and Bambra C (2017) ‘How the other half live’: Lay perspectives on health and inequalities in an age of austerity. *Social Science and Medicine* 187: 268–275.
- Goffman E (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.

- Golding P and Middleton S (1982) *Images of Welfare: Press and Public Attitudes to Poverty*. Oxford: Robertson.
- Hancock L and Mooney G (2013) 'Welfare ghettos' and the 'broken society': Territorial stigmatization in the contemporary UK. *Housing, Theory and Society* 30(1): 46–64.
- Haylett C (2001) Illegitimate subjects? Abject whites, neoliberal modernisation, and middle-class multiculturalism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19: 351–370.
- Jensen T (2014) Welfare commonsense, poverty porn and doxosophy. *Sociological Research Online* 19: 277–283.
- Jensen T (2018) *Parenting the Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Parent-Blame*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Jensen T and Tyler I (2015) 'Benefits broods': The cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare commonsense. *Critical Social Policy* 35(4): 470–491.
- Joyce R, Mitchell M and Norris Keiller A (2017) *The Cost of Housing for Low-income Renters*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/comms/R132.pdf (accessed 22 July 2019)
- Juvancic M and Verovsek S (2017) Narrating and explaining urban stories through inherited visual urban vocabulary. *Visual Communication* 17(1): 47–69.
- Kohl S (2007) The 'North' of 'England': A paradox? In: Ehland C (ed.) *Thinking Northern: Textures of Identity in the North of England*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 93–115.
- Kress G and Van Leeuwen T (2006) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Lyle SA (2008) (Mis)recognition and the middle-class/bourgeois gaze: A case study of Wife Swap. *Critical Discourse Studies* 5(4): 319–330.
- MacDonald R, Shildrick T, Webster C, et al. (2005) Growing up in poor neighbourhoods: The significance of class and place in the extended transitions of 'socially excluded' young adults. *Sociology* 39(5): 873–891.
- McKenzie L (2015) *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Mah A (2009) Devastation but also home: Place attachment in areas of industrial decline. *Home Cultures* 6(3): 287–310.
- Marsh S (2018) Outrage after English village used in pro-Trump election ad. *The Guardian*, 31 October. Available at: www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/31/essex-street-appears-in-republican-candidate-pro-trump-advert (accessed 6 January 2019).
- Martin R (2015) Rebalancing the spatial economy: The challenge for regional theory. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 3(3): 235–272.
- Miller D (2001a) Behind closed doors. In: Miller D (ed.) *Home Possessions*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 1–19.
- Miller D (2001b) Possessions. In: Miller D (ed.) *Home Possessions*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 107–121.
- Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) (2019) English housing survey 2017 to 2018. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-housing-survey-2017-to-2018-headline-report (accessed 22 July 2019).
- Mooney G (2011) Stigmatising poverty? The 'Broken Society' and reflections on anti-welfarism in the UK today. A Whose Economy Seminar Paper, June 2011. Oxfam. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10546/146557>
- Murray S (2008) *The Fat Female Body*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Northern Powerhouse Factsheet (2015) Available at: www.centreforcities.org (accessed 22 July 2019).
- Pearce J (2013) 'The blemish of place': Stigma, geography and health inequalities: A commentary on Tabuchi, Fukuhara & Iso. *Social Science and Medicine* 75(11): 1921–1924.

- Priestly JB (1987) *English Journey*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Proctor R (2008) Agnotology: A missing term to describe the cultural production of ignorance (and its study). In: Proctor R and Schiebinger L (eds) *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 1–33.
- Rhodes J (2012) Stigmatization, space and boundaries in de-industrial Burnley. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35(4): 684–703.
- Russell D (2004) *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Shelter (2019) Strategy 2019–2022. Available at: england.shelter.org.uk/what_we_do/our_strategy/strategy (accessed 22 July 2019).
- Shildrick T (2018a) Lessons from Grenfell: Poverty propaganda, stigma and class power. *The Sociological Review Monographs* 66(4): 783–798.
- Shildrick T (2018b) *Poverty Propaganda: Exploring the Myths*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Skeggs B and Wood H (2012) *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Slater T (2014) The myth of ‘Broken Britain’: Welfare reform and the production of ignorance. *Antipode* 46(4): 948–969.
- Slater T (2017) Territorial stigmatization: Symbolic defamation and the contemporary metropolis. In: Hannigan J and Richards G (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of New Urban Studies*. London: SAGE, pp. 111–125.
- Slater T (2018) The invention of the ‘sink estate’: Consequential categorization and the UK housing crisis. *The Sociological Review Monographs* 66(4): 877–897.
- Stahl G and Habib S (2017) Moving beyond the confines of the local: Working-class students’ conceptualizations of belonging and respectability. *Young* 25(3): 268–285.
- Tyler I (2013) *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed.
- Wacquant L (2007) Territorial stigmatization in the age of advanced marginality. *Thesis Eleven* 91: 66–77.
- Wacquant L (2008) *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Wacquant L (2016) Revisiting territories of relegation: Class, ethnicity and state in the making of advanced marginality. *Urban Studies* 53(6): 1077–1088.
- Wacquant L, Slater T and Pereira VB (2014) Territorial stigmatization in action. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 46: 1270–1280.
- Witham Bednarz S and Kemp K (2011) Understanding and nurturing spatial literacy. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences* 21: 18–23.

Author biographies

Katherine Harrison is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Leeds Beckett University. Her research focuses on visual media and visual culture, particularly as these pertain to space and place, as well as women’s negotiations of domesticity, specifically in relation to craft practices such as knitting.

Jayne Raisborough is a Professor of Media at Leeds Beckett University. Her research interests gravitate around stigma and the production of selfhood and citizenship in the context of neoliberalism with specific focus on class, weight, ageing, and spatiality. Her latest book is *Fat Bodies, Health and the Media* (2016).

Lisa Taylor is a Head of Media at Leeds Beckett University. Her research explores how identities are entwined in media/art representations, spaces such as the ‘ordinary’ garden and ex-industrial locales where demolition and spatial change impact on local communities.

Date submitted 26 July 2019

Date accepted 25 June 2020