

“Litterers”: How Objects of Physical Disorder Are Used to Construct Subjects of Social Disorder in a Poor Suburb

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How do *people* get constructed as “litterers” through *objects* of litter on the ground? Middle- and working-class white and black homeowners of the suburb under ethnographic study believe that litter is a significant problem in their community. Despite rarely seeing anyone actually litter, they develop folk theories that blame this problem on black, poor renters moving into the suburb. This article documents the structural features that sustain litter accumulation across different spaces. It then examines how longtime residents interpret these patterns and use their own behavior toward litter (picking it up) to claim a moral status for themselves as community insiders while constructing those they perceive as outsiders as disreputable litterers. The author considers the relationship between physical and social disorder as they construe it and the consequences of this process for theories of ecological contamination and the reinforcement of racial and class distinctions.

Keywords: suburban poverty; disorder; ecological contamination; territorial stigmatization; neighborhood change; litter

One hot August evening in the summer of 2010, Demetrius stopped at McDonald’s to pick up dinner at the drive-through.¹ He ordered a quarter pounder with cheese, minus the pickle, large fries, and a Coke. He had been

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NOTE: I am grateful to Mitchell Duneier for his invaluable guidance and feedback. Thanks also to Paul DiMaggio, Danielle Wallace, Forrest Stuart, Andrew Deener, Jooyoung Lee, Daniel Menchik, Len Albright, and Rafael Santana for reading earlier versions of this article and providing useful feedback and suggestions. This work was supported by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (H-21573SG), the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (09-94118-000-HCD), the National Science Foundation (SES-1102540), and the Department of Sociology at Princeton University.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716212438210

working all day at a cellphone store in Pittsburgh and had no chance to take his lunch break. We had just picked up his girlfriend, who lives with her mother on the other side of town, and were making our way back to Demetrius's house. Demetrius, who is 21 years old, lives with his parents and his two sisters in a small house they rent using a Section 8 voucher on Franklin Ave in Penn Hills. From the back seat, I watched as Demetrius finished his fries, unwrapped his burger, devoured it, put the packaging back in the McDonald's bag, rolled down the driver's side window, and tossed his bag out into the brush along the shoulder of Harriet Ave. "What did you do that for?" I asked. "I hate shit junking up my car," he responded. "And the smell—who needs the smell in here?" Demetrius loves his car. He bought the used 2007 Honda a year ago with money he had saved from working. He souped it up with tinted windows, rims, and a new sound system, though the tints were now gone after an encounter with the police. I pushed back: "But why not wait 'till we get back to your house to throw it out? We're right around the corner from there." He replied, "Guess I could. I don't know man, guess I'm just being lazy. Who knows, I might forget and the car be smelling like shit in the morning. I like to keep my car spotless, you know." He shrugged.

When Demetrius threw the remnants of his dinner out the window and onto Harriet Ave that night, it became one piece of litter among many others alongside that road. Litter accumulates in a variety of other places in Penn Hills as well, including Prospect Avenue, Grand Street, and Emerson Boulevard. Longtime residents of Penn Hills regard litter as a significant municipal problem. They define litter as small pieces of refuse (e.g., food wrappers or packaging, paper, plastic bags) situated in public places of the built environment. These objects are problematized when they accumulate in a given spatial area. In a community-wide survey commissioned by the municipality, residents ranked litter as one of the top problems the municipality faces. Litter also consistently ranks among the top five concerns that civic groups such as the Penn Hills Community Development Corporation wish to address. For these residents, litter represents a type of pollution that is out of place and disrupts the orderliness of the community (Douglas 1966).

Those who seem most troubled by the litter are longtime homeowners, both black and white. To explain the problem, they develop folk theories about who is littering and why. They blame the accumulation of litter alongside roads, at bus stops, in parking lots, and on commercial and residential property on poor, black renters like Demetrius, whom they believe are moving from the city into their suburban community. The Section 8 housing program is a particularly popular scapegoat; people who have moved to Penn Hills using a Section 8 voucher are believed to have little respect for themselves and the community. As Trevor, a black homeowner, explained to me, "If someone is renting from a place or whatever, they don't care as much as the person that's actually buying their home. . . . You know? They'll drop trash all over the place, and a lot of times they just don't care." To account for why these new residents litter, these folk theories posit that poor, black renters lack decency, respect, and pride, either because they do not own their homes and thus have no stake in the community, or because they have different values than longtime residents.

Significantly, these theories are developed and vocally expressed by people who rarely, if ever, see anyone actually litter. Melanie, a black woman who manages a local store, explained to me that the litterers are disreputable people from the city who have no pride nor decency. Yet when I asked her whom she has actually witnessed littering, she replied, “I have no idea because we never see them; we just see the litter, see what they left.” Holding this belief despite the absence of direct evidence is common in Penn Hills: I documented six different occasions when people who had never seen anyone litter blamed the problem on poor, black ex-urbanites. How do longtime residents infer information about behavior and values from mundane objects? How do *people* get constructed as “litterers” through *objects* that litter the ground?

This article draws on three years of participant observation to elucidate the process by which litter becomes defined as a social problem. First, I trace how litter accumulates unevenly in different physical spaces in the suburb. Specific features of the built environment, such as differences in the usage of public space, institutional negligence, and unequal litter cleanup, contribute to the accumulation of litter in areas where poor, black people live and occupy public space, while leaving other areas relatively free of litter.

I then turn to how longtime residents perceive these patterns. Specifically, I show how longtime residents interpret the unequal distribution of litter across spaces to mean that black poor people feel differently about the community than they do. In part, this is accomplished by projecting racial and class prejudices onto the objects of litter. It is also accomplished by making litter into a public issue, cleaning up their own neighborhoods, and living in neighborhoods that have the organizational capacity to combat litter accumulation. Together, these dynamics allow longtime residents to construct themselves as righteous community insiders who care about physical and social order. Their interpretation of the absence of litter in their own neighborhood is that they care enough about their property to pick it up. On the flip side, they see the accumulation of litter in public spaces occupied by black poor people as a sign that these new residents do not care about the community and are disreputable. Not only do they discard their trash haphazardly, they do not organize themselves to pick it up. In making these interpretations, longtime residents use litter to claim and reinforce their status as community insiders while creating and underlining the outsider status of black poor residents. In making such interpretations, longtime residents use objects of litter to formulate folk theories that implicate behavior and values as the cause of the “litter problem.”

Litter and Disorder

Numerous ethnographic accounts document how longtime residents of various communities interpret physical and social disorder as a sign that their neighborhood is undergoing racial and class changes (Kefalas 2003; Rieder 1985;

Modan 2007; Elias and Scotson 1964; Patillo 2007). A central theme in these accounts is that longtime residents distinguish themselves morally from groups they see invading their community. In doing so, they construct themselves as insiders who are morally decent and define new arrivals as invading outsiders who are disreputable. This article draws upon this ethnographic tradition to examine more closely unresolved questions in the literature on disorder.

In his critique of the “broken windows” theory of urban disorder, Bernard Harcourt (2001) calls on social scientists to move away from fixed definitions of what constitutes norms of order versus disorder. He challenges researchers studying disorder to adopt an alternative approach that is focused on understanding the social meaning of disorder for different groups of people and how, in turn, those meanings may create subjects—the person perceiving the disorder and the person defined as the agent of disorder—and relations between subjects. To that end, he calls for a methodological shift away from statistical correlations towards “in-depth interviews of informants, participatory observation, and other investigatory or experimental techniques that probe the structure of meaning” (p. 120). By employing these techniques, Harcourt argues, we can get at how such meanings serve as “the environment within which subjects engage strategically in their daily activity” (p. 221), which can then be used to inform our theories about disorder.

I heed this call by considering one of the most commonly cited examples of physical disorder, litter (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Skogan 1989; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Stapel and Lindenberg 2011; Keizer, Lindenberg, and Steg 2008; Sharkey, Papachristos, and Sampson 2011), and isolating it for systematic ethnographic study.²

In using this approach to the study of litter, this article makes several theoretical contributions to the study of disorder. The dominant conceptualization of physical disorder is that objects of disorder, such as litter, are things that people perceive and interpret (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Skogan 1989; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999, 2004; Taylor 1996). By looking ethnographically at how processes of meaning-making happens in one suburban community, this article shows that these mundane objects are not simply objects that people perceive and respond to; they are used by people in their projects of self-presentation. Litter pollutes space because it is considered to be “out of place” (Douglas 1966). Furthermore, it is used to construct people as being out of place. As Colin Jerolmack (2008) argues, by problematizing objects as out of place, those who make this claim are able to define and construct themselves and others. In defining litter as a social problem, longtime residents of Penn Hills construe themselves as virtuous community insiders while constructing poor, black residents, who may or may not engage in the act of littering, as litterers who are, by definition, out of place.

The use of objects of disorder to create subjects of disorder raises interesting questions about the relationship between physical and social disorder. According to the literature, physical disorder refers to objects such as abandoned buildings,

graffiti, and overgrown lots, as well as litter (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Skogan 1989; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999). Social disorder, however, involves people engaged in social acts that are deemed out of place because they break the law or some social norm. Under this definition, agents of social disorder include panhandlers, drug sellers, prostitutes, and squeegee men (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Skogan 1989; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999). According to the “broken windows” hypothesis, the presence of physical disorder signals that people in a neighborhood do not care about the place, which can lead to social disorder and, potentially, crime (Wilson and Kelling 1982). Under this proposition, although physical disorder predates and may lead to social disorder, both signal that “no one cares.”

These definitions and relationships have been challenged, however. For example, Mitchell Duneier (1999) points out that under this definition, unhoused men constitute social disorder and should signal that “no one cares” in the same way a broken window might. As he shows, however, these subjects of social disorder do care; indeed, they contribute to creating order on the streets that is highly valued by people living in the neighborhood. It would be incorrect to assume that their presence on 6th Street in Greenwich Village is understood by residents to be disorderly. Catherine Ross and John Mirowsky (1999) point out that some types of physical disorder are perceived as intertwined with social disorder. Although abandoned buildings and high grass may reflect abandonment and decay, graffiti and litter reflect the presence of individuals. These physical objects, then, are perceived to be social in nature. Here I take a step further and show how physical disorder such as litter is not only perceived to be social, but it is actively used to construct subjects of social disorder—the litterers.

Using ethnographic tools to study how litter becomes problematized has implications for how we think about processes of territorial stigmatization and ecological contamination. Scholars note that poor blacks living in the ghetto can be stigmatized by virtue of the neighborhoods in which they live (Wacquant 2007, 2008; Anderson 2011). Territorial stigmatization is hard to shake off and has profound consequences for people’s ability to integrate into new neighborhoods (Keene and Padilla 2010; Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2002; Rosenbaum, DeLuca, and Tuck 2005) and workplaces (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Kasnitz and Rosenberg 1996; Wacquant 2008). This stigmatization occurs in part through ecological contamination—that is, people occupying spaces of disorder become contaminated by the disorder by which they are surrounded. Under these conditions, residents of a neighborhood are perceived as embodying the negative characteristics of the environment in which they live (Werthman and Piliavin 1967; Wacquant 2007; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004). People are not seen as happening to live in a neighborhood that has a high crime rate but as being criminals themselves. This manufacturing of disrepute vis-à-vis physical space (Hagan 1994) and “discourses of vilification” (Wacquant 2007, 67), it is believed, has significant consequences for the reproduction of racial and class inequality (Sampson 2009).

For the most part, scholars who posit that people can be contaminated by the places they live rely on observations that such stigmas exist (Wacquant 2007, 2008; Keene and Padilla 2010) or surveys to piece together these statistical associations (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004). Few scholars show us how the process of ecological contamination happens or how stigmatization is constructed *in situ*. By using participant observation to examine the processes by which the accumulation of litter occurs and shapes the construction of the litterer, this article illuminates how these processes of racial stigmatization and contamination play out.

Doing Fieldwork in Penn Hills

The fieldwork upon which this article is based was conducted in Penn Hills, Pennsylvania, an inner-ring residential suburb of Pittsburgh. When the town was incorporated in 1958, most residents were white, middle- and working-class families who were employed either by Westinghouse Electric or in steel mills and coal mines in the surrounding area. In the 1980s, Penn Hills attracted an increasing number of black middle-class residents. August Wilson writes in his 1983 play *Jitney* that Penn Hills was *the* place to live for upwardly mobile blacks in Pittsburgh (Wilson 1983/2000). Today, Penn Hills has one of the largest concentrations of middle-class blacks in the region. In the past 10 years, it has also become the residence of a sizeable concentration of low-income black families who have either grown poorer in place (as the elderly have done) or moved from other poor neighborhoods in Pittsburgh and former steel towns (for trends in suburban poverty, see Kneebone and Garr 2010).

There is no doubt that Penn Hills is a community in transition. As of the 2010 U.S. Census, 34.5 percent of the population was black, up from 23.4 percent in 2000 and 11 percent in 1980. Poverty in the municipality increased from 7.5 percent in 2000 to 11.2 percent in 2007–2009, and median income fell from \$52,000 in 2000 to \$45,000 in 2007–2009. The number of renters has increased slightly, from 20 percent in 2000 to 22.8 percent in 2010. At the same time, Penn Hills has suffered significant, continued population loss. As of 2010, the population was 42,000, down from 47,000 in 2000, 51,000 in 1990, and 57,000 in 1980. Notably, the community is racially segregated. In the western section of Penn Hills, which borders the city of Pittsburgh (census tracts 5231–5234 and 5238), 43.4 percent of the population is black, compared to 25.6 percent in the eastern section, which borders outer suburbs like Plum and Monroeville.

For the most part, Penn Hills looks like a typical bedroom suburb. It is almost completely residential; people live in small, single-family homes in neighborhoods with no sidewalks that are distant from bus lines and commercial areas. The majority of commercial businesses in the suburb are located along busy main roads. As the demographic makeup of the municipality has changed, so too has its commercial landscape. The Penn Hills Shopping Center, once home to

department stores, is now filled with vacant spaces and retail stores that cater to low-income and working-class consumers, such as Rent-a-Center, Dollar Tree, and Aldi's. In this one suburb there are a total of five “dollar stores.”

In February 2009, I moved into one of the poor, black neighborhoods in Penn Hills to conduct an ethnographic study of the social organization of suburban poverty. I sought diverse spaces in the suburb to conduct participant observation at multiple levels of the community: the block, the neighborhood, organizations, and the municipality. Across multiple sites, the issue of litter was frequently discussed. The problem was particularly vexing to longtime residents, who brought complaints about litter to city council meetings, organized small-scale neighborhood cleanups through their civic association and complained about it to neighbors. Perhaps I should have been more attuned to the problem since litter washed itself ashore of my own property on a daily basis. And yet it was not something I noticed much until it became a reoccurring topic at civic gatherings that I attended. Because of the prominent role it played for residents, I thought that to understand this community I would have to take the issue of litter seriously and try to understand what longtime residents meant when they said that litter was a significant social problem. So I committed myself to paying systematic attention to the problem of litter as an object of investigation.

To do this, I documented when and how litter was discussed among residents and officials in community meetings, such as the city council, civic association, and the NAACP; by municipal employees while interning in the planning department and riding with the police; and in everyday conversations I witnessed or participated in while in public and private spaces, such as restaurants, the Laundromat, the YMCA, litter cleanups, and private gatherings in people's homes. I added questions about litter to the interviews I conducted with forty-five local businesses scattered throughout the suburb and to interviews I conducted with ninety-two households on three different poor blocks in Penn Hills. I was interested in seeing whether people living in different areas of the suburb had different perspectives on whether and why litter was a community problem. I also documented the spatial locations where litter accumulated.

I went in search of litterers. Identifying people who litter was not easy, since most often we see litter after it has happened. I started my investigation by hanging out at a location notorious for having a litter problem: a bus stop located near a gas station. I sat at the bus stop one hour a day for a month in April 2010 hoping I would be able to catch someone in the act so that I could talk to them about why they littered. Littering, though, is not something that people in the act talk about much. This posed a challenge for me as a participant observer trying to understand people's definition of the situation. I decided that the best approach would be to naively ask people about their littering if I caught them in the act. I thought that learning what they thought was acceptable for them to say in response to a question about it might teach me something about their conceptual categories. During my time at the bus stop, I managed to observe and talk with only three people whom I witnessed littering. In addition, I took special notes of

moments when I witnessed littering in my daily round of participant observation with six poor families (including that of Demetrius) I have been following closely.

The Unequal Accumulation of Litter across Space

In its discussion of the suburb's litter problem, the Penn Hills Strategic Plan notes that litter can be found throughout the municipality. This seems to mask, however, my observation that litter tends to accumulate repeatedly in certain spaces and that it is these sites of accumulation that are deemed the most problematic to residents. I thought that understanding these patterns of accumulation might help me understand how it is problematized. So, I asked, where does litter accumulate in Penn Hills, and why does it accumulate in some places and not others?

Elmwood Drive is a commercial artery that runs north and south, dividing eastern and western Penn Hills. The majority of black residents and the majority of poor residents, many of whom are renters, live in the western section of the suburb, which borders the black, poor suburb of Wilkinsburg and the black, poor city neighborhoods of Homewood and East Hills. One day in July 2011, I traveled by car on the major roads in Penn Hills to systematically document locations of litter accumulation. I defined litter accumulation liberally: it was a physical space that had five or more pieces of litter in close proximity to one another. On this day, I found that the western section of Penn Hills had eighty-seven spots of accumulated litter; the eastern section had fifty-two. This unequal pattern of litter accumulation was confirmed in my interviews with business owners. Those whose premises were located in the western section overwhelmingly agreed that litter was a significant problem for their business, while fewer of those east of Elmwood did. Cheryl, who owns a day care center in the western section, said, "Really, every morning you have to go around your business with a little plastic bag and pick up all this litter. It's a big problem over here." For many business owners on the west side, picking up litter is a regular part of their morning routine.

Why does litter accumulate in this section of Penn Hills more so than in others? I identified four structural features of the community that contribute to this pattern: differences in the public utilization of space, institutional negligence, municipal constraints, and unequal organizational capacity among neighborhoods.

The public utilization of space

Litter accumulates in those places where space is most frequently utilized publicly. Importantly, places where people are seen in public are rarely publicly owned. A bedroom suburb like Penn Hills has few public spaces, except for parks that are far from residential areas and only accessible by car. The spaces we see people occupy in public are in fact privately owned commercial sites, both active

and abandoned. For the most part, those who occupy space in this visible way are black, poor people who are waiting for a bus, travelling on foot, or gathering for sociability and hustling. For example, Rashan is unemployed and passes the day with his friends in the parking lots of private businesses; Roselynn and Marcus do not have a car and wait for the bus at stops located adjacent to residential or commercial properties; Shawn has to walk to work on roads or people’s lawns when no sidewalks exist; and Lamar sells DVDs from the trunk of his car in a private parking lot. Many more people use private space as public space on the west side of Penn Hills than on the east. This use of space leaves traces in the litter that accumulates there.

The relationship between where litter accumulates and where people occupy space publicly is evident when we compare variation in litter accumulation in two different neighborhoods, both of which are located on the west side of Penn Hills and house low-income black renters. Rolling Hills contains a mix of pre-World War II houses and newer, smaller homes. Census data for 2005 for the block group in which this neighborhood is located shows that 78.4 percent of residents are black and 23.7 percent of households live below the poverty line. Renters, who occupy 30.9 percent of homes, are sprinkled among longtime homeowners. Rolling Hills sits adjacent to a busy intersection zoned for commercial use. One corner has a grocery store; another a gas station; another a small strip mall that contains a dollar store, a liquor store, a hair salon, a Chinese takeout restaurant, a laundromat, and a pet supply store; and the last, a vacant commercial property. The neighborhood is also on a bus route. A number of people who live in Rolling Hills, especially young people, walk from their homes to these shops and to the bus. Litter is a prominent feature of the roads and sidewalks here.

Edgebrook, a neighborhood with a comparable demographic composition, nonetheless has much less litter. According to 2005 census data, 96.7 percent of households are black and 24.4 percent live below the poverty line; 21.6 percent of occupied houses are rentals. The neighborhood is roughly 1.5 miles from any commercial properties and has little bus service. Though young people occasionally walk to and from the school bus stop or the local community center, few people can be observed in public. In this neighborhood, dumping (i.e., throwing out a significant mass of trash, often including large items like tires, wood, and furniture) on abandoned properties and empty lots is more of a problem than litter. In Edgebrook, with few places where people might travel to or congregate, few people occupy public space and have an opportunity to throw trash on the ground.

Institutional negligence

Litter accumulates not simply because people use public space, but because these spaces rarely accommodate them. I realized that this mattered in conversation with Rashan, one of the three people I witnessed littering while sitting at the bus stop by the gas station. Rashan is 18 and lives three blocks down the street.

He graduated from high school last spring but has had no luck finding work. Most days he walks up and down Prospect Avenue visiting a friend who lives on the block or going to the gas station to buy cigarettes. I had seen Rashan walk by the bus stop many times. On April 17, he stopped to take the bus. While waiting, he finished off a bottle of soda. Without hesitation, he tossed the bottle onto the grass at his feet. "Excuse me," I asked. "Can I ask you a question?" Rashan looked at me skeptically. "Why did you just litter that bottle?" "Huh?" he replied. He seemed confused by the question. "Why did you just throw that bottle on the ground—littering?" I repeated. "I don't care that you did," I quickly added, trying to save myself from looking like I was making a moral judgment. "I was just wondering why you littered. I'm curious to know why people litter versus why they don't." Rashan replied, "I dunno, I guess 'cause I was done with it and there ain't nowhere else to throw it."

Rashan identified an important structural feature of the space that facilitates littering: the lack of a place to put trash. Except for the few bus shelters that are maintained by an advertising company and a few trash cans put out by McDonald's, public trash cans are noticeably absent in Penn Hills. How are people in public supposed to throw away their trash if no trash cans are available? Melissa Brown, a black business owner, exclaimed, "So if you walking down the street and the kids are eating from McDonald's or from Rita's with a cup, where you going to throw it at? You think they're going to be nice enough to stick it in their pocket all the way home? They're going to throw it on the street and that's exactly what they do."

In a suburb that was not built for pedestrians, there are few public or private accommodations for how people are currently using public space. Few businesses provide trash cans. The importance of simply providing a place for people to dispose of their trash became clear when, in the summer of 2010, Penn Hills code enforcement cited the gas station for litter. The municipality fined the owners and demanded that they either have the litter picked up daily or provide a garbage can by the bus stop. They opted for the garbage can. During a three-month period after this, I witnessed on four occasions individuals sitting at the bus stop throwing their trash into this garbage can. Also during this time, litter was relatively absent from the ground in the area. By providing a place for people to throw away their garbage, it seemed the gas station had taken care of its litter problem.

Litter accumulation, though, cannot be reduced to the lack of publicly available places to throw away trash. This became evident shortly after the gas station provided the trash can for people at the bus stop. Though people waiting for the bus or loitering at the station made use of the trash can, managers of the station routinely failed to empty it. Every two weeks the can would fill to its brim. Despite being full, pedestrians and bus riders would still try to throw away their garbage in the trash can, mostly by stuffing their trash on top of that already in the can. Because the can was full, this trash would pop back out of the can or roll off the top of the trash and fall to the ground, becoming litter.

This natural intervention into the litter problem at the gas station is instructive in highlighting the role that negligent institutions, primarily property owners, play in facilitating and allowing litter to accumulate.

Municipal constraints

The municipality of Penn Hills is financially strapped. Like many suburbs where poverty rates are rising, it faces the challenge of having to do more with less as cuts to federal funding, high costs for fixing aging infrastructure, and the decline in property tax revenues because of foreclosure and abandonment squeeze the budget. Municipal employees have been laid off, and hiring has been frozen. Though recognized as important, no funds have been allocated for municipal-wide litter cleanup; nor does the municipality contract with private agencies to attend to the litter problem.

Furthermore, code enforcement in Penn Hills is weak. Although the six code enforcers would prefer to be proactive, as Robert Johnson, who works for the municipality, tells me, they are overwhelmed responding to reports of aging buildings and overgrown lots. The litter problem, for code enforcement, has taken a back seat in the face of what are considered to be more serious issues, like public health violations and unsound structures. What this means is that property owners are rarely fined for allowing litter to accumulate on their premises. A municipal employee reported that it took years of complaints for code enforcement to take action against the gas station. Moreover, code enforcement lacks the resources required to pursue negligent property owners who do not respond to their violation letters. This leaves vacant and abandoned properties especially prone to litter accumulation.

Unequal organizational capacity across neighborhoods

Though usage of public space, institutional negligence, and municipal constraints help explain why litter accumulates in some places where there is heavy usage of space, it does not help to explain how litter accumulates alongside state roads that run through Penn Hills, that get very little foot traffic. The litter on these roads mostly comes from people, like Demetrius, who throw their trash out of the car window while driving. How does litter accumulate along some of these roads more so than on others?

In part, differences in litter accumulation can be explained by how litter cleanup does happen in Penn Hills. In the absence of municipal action, residents of one neighborhood organize cleanups through the Wentworth Civic Association (WCA). Wentworth is one of the only neighborhoods in Penn Hills that has a local organization, which dates back to its development as one of the first planned neighborhoods in Penn Hills in the 1920s. At that time, six hundred homes were built for white-collar employees at the nearby Westinghouse Electric Company plant or for those working in medicine. The Wentworth Ladies Club was formed

in 1935. Initially the club conducted social activities for women, but it slowly morphed into a civic association that aimed to welcome newcomers and maintain the standards and beauty of the neighborhood. Today the WCA still sponsors social events, including a plant sale. Most important, it ensures dialogue between public officials and residents by having board members attend city council and school board meetings to gather information and speak up on issues relevant to the neighborhood.

Over the past 20 years, the WCA has increasingly turned its attention to the upkeep of its neighborhood, especially as its racial and class composition have begun to change. Many of the issues the WCA takes on are related to beautification. It is under the guise of this organization that the only systematic cleanup of litter in Penn Hills happens. Litter cleanup occurs on three different occasions, all organized by Marilyn, dubbed the “litter queen” of Penn Hills. The first occasion is when Wentworth residents pick up litter along the three state roads bordering their neighborhood that they have adopted. The second occasion is when, once a year, the WCA partners with the University of Pittsburgh to bring students to Penn Hills to clean up litter on roads throughout the municipality. Roads selected for pickup are decided by the parks department, which determines where the problem of litter accumulation is worst. Finally, Marilyn also organizes occasional cleanups when she hears that a road has accumulated a great deal of litter, soliciting help from members of the Penn Hills Community Development Corporation (CDC). Usually these events attract ten to fifteen committed members. In Penn Hills, litter cleanup is synonymous with the WCA. Even when Marilyn tries to partner with communitywide organizations like the CDC, she finds it difficult to attract volunteers who live outside Wentworth, partly because such efforts are seen as exclusive to the WCA and their neighborhood.

The result of these efforts is that litter is consistently picked up in the Wentworth neighborhood and left relatively untouched in other neighborhoods. During the past year, I recorded that Harriet Road has been cleaned up only once. In contrast, Taylor Road, which was adopted by the WCA, has been cleaned up at least four times. Few neighborhoods in Penn Hills have the history of the Wentworth neighborhood or the local organization it does. Only two other neighborhoods of the twenty-six in Penn Hills have organizations, and they are relatively weak.

Scholars find that responses to physical disorder are largely contingent on the efficacy of neighborhood-based organizations (Skogan 1989; Hunter 1985). Voluntary associations are common in middle-class neighborhoods, like Wentworth, where disorder may be lowest (Skogan 1989). This situation creates what Arthur Stinchcombe (1968) calls an unequal “opportunity structure” for collective action across neighborhoods (also see Skogan 1989). This is certainly the case in Penn Hills. The result is that such inequality in neighborhoods’ organizational capacity across the suburb contributes to the fact that litter is cleaned up in some neighborhoods, like Wentworth, and left relatively untouched in others, like Rolling Hills. When the geography of litter accumulation maps

onto spaces where low-income and black people live and visibly utilize space, this pattern contributes to the representation of places and people surrounded by litter as stigmatized.

Making Meaning of Litter Accumulation

For structural reasons, litter tends to accumulate more in public and commercial spaces located in or near neighborhoods occupied by poor, black people. This spatial association helps inform longtime residents’ theory that the litter problem is caused by poor, black renters. Debra explained, “I don’t think it is just a Penn Hills problem. I think that some of the people who have moved into Penn Hills litter more than it was before they moved in. So I see more litter, since the city people have moved further into Penn Hills.” It is especially important in informing such folk theories in the absence of actually witnessing people litter. For as Debra confessed to me shortly after explaining that litter comes from “city people”: “The thing is you rarely see it, you don’t actually see [littering], that’s the problem. . . . You don’t see it actually happening.”

It could be argued that there is a logic to inferring that black, poor people litter based on this spatial association. But how do longtime residents move from drawing such inferences to making assertions about newcomers’ values and decency? In the next section, I show how the same structural features that contribute to unequal litter accumulation and cleanup play a role in how longtime residents construct others as litterers. Longtime residents use their own involvement in community cleanup as a means of positing themselves as moral insiders.

Constructing the self as a community insider

Litter is an important part of how longtime residents construct themselves as moral not just because they report that they do not litter, but also because they pick up litter discarded by others. Abby works with the WCA’s informal code enforcement program and frequently participates in litter cleanup. When I asked why she got involved in these efforts, she explained: “I’m not a club person, . . . but one morning I woke up and I looked out my window and there was this huge blue plastic swimming pool in the front yard, with dining room chairs all around it and a barbeque sitting beside it. . . . The people one house down from them... their gutters were hanging down, they had litter all over their yard. Ugh, I know this is terrible, but they’re black families. . . . But then that’s what made me, I decided, what can I do? The only thing I can do is, I have to get involved.”

In thirty-two instances, I heard longtime residents explain that they got involved because they cared about Penn Hills and wanted to “preserve this great community.”³ These residents are also those who most frequently complain about the litter problem to one another, the CDC, and the city council. Their behavioral response to the litter problem has been to work together to pick it up. In

attributing their involvement to the fact that they “care” about their home, neighborhood, and community, litter becomes a prop in their project of self-presentation. They use it to reinforce their status as insiders who share moral values rooted in their desire to keep order in the community. From their behavior, then, they derive certain moralistic attributes about themselves. They become righteous citizens who care about their own property and that of others; they go out of their way to serve as stewards of community order.

In constructing their moral selves as community insiders, through a similar process of linking behaviors towards litter with values about disorder and the community, they also construct the “disreputable other”—the litterers.

Constructing the other as the litterer

Longtime residents take the spatial correlation they observe between where poor, black residents live and utilize public space and where litter accumulates as authorizing them to make inferences not only about what poor black people do but also who they are. As a group, litterers are imagined as disreputable and as holding moral values antithetical to their own. When longtime residents see litter accumulation in places where poor, black people are also visible, they assume that this group thinks differently about litter than they themselves do. One evening at a social gathering of five Wentworth residents, Gary began to deplore the state of the lawn and the litter on the driveway of the black woman who had moved from the city into a home across from Debra. Debra defended her neighbor by explaining that she had moved from an apartment building and had never been taught to take care of her property. Quickly Gary retorted, “Nah, that’s not it—they don’t even see it!” This comment drew laughs, with one resident raising his glass to second that sentiment. In the minds of these longtime residents, poor black people moving from the city are incapable of seeing the disorder they create; they have no problem with the litter that surrounds them, so they do not pick it up.

If picking up litter means that some residents are good, responsible, orderly, caring citizens, then not picking it up means that others are disreputable, apathetic, irresponsible, and disorderly.⁴ Longtime residents attribute these characteristics to black poor residents who may never engage in the act of littering but occupy spaces where litter accumulates. Melissa offered her folk explanation:

I mean when you get people, young people, people who don’t care, there is no pride in ownership, okay, and remember, I said you have lower-income people that comes in and they don’t own anything, they don’t care about anything. They just couldn’t afford it over there so they moved over here and this is the community to move to at this point in time. . . . We used to have nice homes and now they are running down. I don’t care if they are Chinese, African American, gray, black, or plaid—pride of ownership means you keep the place clean.

I have focused on how longtime residents come to define litter as a social problem because of their own, publicly expressed, preoccupation with it. This is

not to say, however, that poor black people living in Penn Hills are not bothered by the presence of litter in their community. Indeed, when I asked low-income black residents if litter was a problem in their neighborhood, thirty-five out of seventy-four said yes. Twelve mentioned litter on their own when telling me what they would change in their neighborhood. In discussing litter, some of these individuals employed similar folk theories of who was littering and why (see also St. Jean 2007). As Ron told me, “All these kids running around here not caring. Eating chips and drinking pops and stuff and just dropping their stuff on the street and people’s yards. . . . Their parents don’t care and neither do they.”

I documented eleven cases in which poor residents, like longtime residents, defined themselves as moral in contrast to their neighbors who were also black and poor by the action they took around the object of litter, either by picking it up or by forcing kids to pick it up when they observed them littering. Indeed, in nine of these cases, when I asked residents if they thought litter was a problem in their neighborhood, they did not respond yes or no; they responded by telling me what they did about it. As Lauren told me in describing what she did not like about her neighborhood, “The cleanliness, the upkeep of it, you know? Like, you know, me and mom are the only ones that like, you know, go out and pick up the trash, and you know what I mean. The rest of these people don’t do nothing around here.” Litter, then, serves as an object of disorder through which all residents can claim their stake as insiders as distinguished from the disreputable litterers.

Conclusion

Litter is like a Rorschach test in Penn Hills.⁵ When residents come upon this object, they engage in acts of interpretation. Their interest in the object is not in interpreting what it is, but who did it and why. Rarely do residents ever see people actually littering, however. And so, they use ecological cues as well as their own behavior towards litter to answer this question. Perceiving that the most significant problem of litter accumulation is spatially located in neighborhoods where blacks live, some of whom are poor and renters, or in public places where they can be easily observed walking, socializing, or waiting for the bus, longtime residents, black and white, conclude that black, poor renters litter. In using their own behavior towards litter (picking it up) as a prop by which they stake a claim in defining themselves as moral, community insiders, they then construct subjects as litterers who put their trash on the ground and do not pick it up because they are disreputable people with a lack of respect for the community value of order. In this way, longtime residents do not just perceive litter and react to it; they use this mundane object of physical disorder to construct people they accuse of littering as subjects of social disorder. Litter is thus read as a signal of physical and social disorder.

An important part of how disorder is problematized and how objects of disorder are constructed as subjects of social disorder in Penn Hills has to do with an aspect often missing from the disorder literature—the question of how disorder

is sustained. While studies of disorder are increasingly interested in how individuals perceive disorder differently (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; St. Jean 2007; Ross and Mirowsky 1999; Wallace forthcoming; Hipp 2010; Latkin et al. 2009) or how they perceive the origins of disorder (St. Jean 2007), they frequently overlook the processes that sustain disorder. Taking a step back from the perception of disorder to understand the historical and structural ways in which litter is sustained in some places and not others in Penn Hills sheds light on how litter becomes problematized and, in turn, how perceptions are developed and litterers are constructed.

Litter is seen to accumulate in some neighborhoods in Penn Hills in part because it is not allowed to accumulate in others. This happens because neighborhoods like Wentworth were developed with neighborhood organizations that had nothing to do with neighborhood preservation or class and race. Once in place, this organization evolved as needs of the community changed. Few other neighborhoods in Penn Hills were developed as such. This does not mean that they cannot develop their own neighborhood organization or that they will not. It does mean, however, that as all neighborhoods in Penn Hills face demographic changes, different neighborhoods are equipped with different abilities to confront such changes. This significantly shapes how disorder gets sustained and then perceived in ways we miss when we use survey instruments to ask people if they see disorder in photographs or try and make statistical correlations between individual characteristics and perceptions of disorder.

While it would be easy to make claims that simply blame racial and class prejudices for how black poor people come to be constructed as litterers, we would be wise to resist such assumptions. In her study of the ways in which white working-class residents in Chicago become vigilant about the physical order of their community as black poor people begin to move, Maria Kefalas (2003) notes that these white residents are not necessarily overtly racist. Instead, they are working to protect their own status and the values of order that they feel are threatened by their new neighbors. What I find in Penn Hills is something similar. Longtime residents are not constructing black poor people as litterers who are disreputable simply because they put trash on the ground. They construct them as disreputable in part because they are thought to not pick up the litter by which they are surrounded, a behavior that contrasts their own actions towards litter. Longtime residents like Marilyn and Robert in part define community insiders by the actions people take to keep the community orderly and things "in place." We might wonder whether, if residents of Rolling Hills were able to organize their own civic association and pick up litter in their community, they might come to be constructed as respectable community insiders as well. While we may never know the answer to this question, it is worth pointing out that even if the work that longtime residents engage in while constructing definitions of community insiders and outsiders results in the stigmatization of a group of people based on their race and their class, it is likely that how this happens is more complex than simply labeling people as overt racists.

Even so, the nuanced ways in which a mundane object like litter can be used to construct impoverished black people as litterers with disreputable values is powerful in reinforcing racial, class, and place-based (city versus suburb) distinctions that existed before many poor, black families moved into Penn Hills (see Keene and Padilla 2010). Though physical disorder is often conceived of as important for the role it is thought to play in sending cues productive of social disorder and, potentially, crime, when we isolate it for systematic investigation, we see that physical disorder like litter plays an important role distinct from its relationship to crime and/or fear of victimization. Litter is not important to longtime residents of Penn Hills because it induces fear of the social disorder that might follow. Instead, it helps longtime residents understand their place in a community where demographic changes calls into question definitions of the social order and where distinctions between insiders and outsiders are being redrawn. The unfortunate consequence of their own project of self-presentation, then, is that through their preoccupation with litter, already stigmatized others become contaminated subjects of disorder.

Notes

1. Names of people, streets, and neighborhoods have been changed to ensure confidentiality.
2. For another example of this approach, see St. Jean (2007).
3. I also documented eight times where I heard longtime residents explain that they got involved in their neighborhood because they observed signs of physical disorder, such as litter, and wanted to preserve the value of their home. Although I more often heard people explain their involvement in terms of how much they cared about the community, the prevalence of explanations about fearing the decline of housing value suggests there are other motivations as well.
4. By using behavior around litter to define who are litterers, this move conveniently helps longtime residents reconcile the fact that though they recognize the role that the municipality and negligent commercial property owners have in the litter problem, they can still blame the problem on the litterers.
5. I thank Jack Katz for pointing out this apt analogy.

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