REVIEWS

NARRATIVES OF NEGLECT: COMMUNITY, REGENERATION AND THE GOVERNANCE OF SECURITY.
By Jacqui Karn (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2007, 251pp. £40.00 hb)

In this book, Jacqui Karn examines in detail both local tenants’ and local professional practitioners’ ‘narratives’ and ‘stories’ about the locality in which they variously live and work. Karn’s ethnographic research on which this book is based was undertaken over a period of 18 months and as part of her doctoral research. The locality studied was one of the poorest estates in central Manchester, characterized by social housing tenure and with a reputation as a high-crime and, I would add, disorder area. At the time of the research, ‘Millton’ (as this estate is referred to throughout the study) was also an area undergoing regeneration. Karn explores the complex and contradictory consequences of such regeneration policies and practices for the local people, in particular the damaging exclusionary consequences of much top-down regeneration and gentrification processes.

There is much to celebrate in this well crafted and pains-taking ethnographic research study. Karn’s book is one of the first in a potentially exciting new series of research monographs on ‘crime ethnography’ and Willan Publishing is to be applauded for its investment in research monographs not least by relatively new scholars in social scientific criminology.

The book is organized as follows. Part 1 introduces the reader both to the estate (‘Millton’) as the case study and to the wider body of literature on governing urban communities and on local sensitivities around fear, danger and crime. In this first part, Karn presents a coherent if fairly standard account of these connections with which most British criminologists will be well acquainted. It is, however, in Parts 2 and 3 of the book that the originality of Karn’s research shines through. Part 2, entitled ‘Living Here’, provides a rich ethnography of the life stories and weltanschaungen (Mannheim’s world-views) of a sample of local residents which is clearly structured in terms of their narratives of decline and change in their locality, how they ‘relate’ to other (and ‘othered’) residents in the community, and finally their views of ‘authorities’. The power and significance of lay normativity—not least that of some of the poorest working-class people—are foregrounded in a manner still rare in contemporary academic research (Sayer 2005). Part 3, entitled ‘Working There’, is based on interviews with a sample of various local professionals and managers. Again, much rich and subtly textured material is provided, focused primarily on their narratives of ‘imagining and managing change’ and their views on the nature of ‘Millton’ as a local community. Both these substantive parts of the book merit close reading—less for their specific criminological relevance and more for the insights presented about the varying ways in which actors actively constitute communities as places to survive in, perhaps prosper in, and also as site, effect and object of governance in these predominantly neo-liberal times. This book is a good example of what can be produced by theoretically informed ethnography. In Part 4 and
in conclusion, Karn provides some tentative insights as to questions of ‘what is to be done’ in political, normative and policy terms. In particular, she highlights the limitations of authentic and effective ‘bottom-up’ participation: according to her case study, regeneration continues to be a top-down process which is done ‘to’ local residents in the poorest and least flourishing localities of our society. As a finale to this absorbing book, Karn offers some telling, if insufficiently developed, insights with regard to more ‘just and sustainable’ responses both to community safety broadly and crime and disorder more narrowly.

Methodologically, the book is driven along by in-depth, semi-structured conversational interviews with both ‘lay’ and ‘professional’ actors. As Karn notes at the beginning of the book (p. 3), the ‘emphasis on relationships between residents and authorities, and their respective understandings of local problems, structures the book’. Her focus is self-consciously around the ‘life-stories’ and ‘narratives’ deployed by these people and, of course, the main title of the book speaks to this focus. Her account depicts variations on the theme of ‘narratives of neglect (and decline)’ in this hard-pressed neighbourhood. Importantly, Karn does not view ‘Milton’ residents as passive objects, but rather as subjects who make their own history (though, of course, not in conditions of their own choosing). Their narratives, adaptations, etc. help to make up the communities to which they belong. Whilst such members may misperceive the source of the problems in their locality (especially via the stigmatizing of ‘new’ or ‘different’ residents), Karn’s account emphasizes the importance of taking these narratives seriously, however uncomfortable for academics, policy makers and politicians in the new urban regimes. Her work raises once again the wicked issue of the potential capacity for local communities to influence regeneration and the local governance of public safety through participation and engagement processes. On the question of local empowerment, her conclusions remain typically pessimistic and, in this way, her conclusions reflect the burgeoning body of critical research in urban studies on regeneration and the fate of those communities left behind in the neo-liberal project to ‘free’ and ‘responsibilise’ citizen-consumers.

Any idiographic, anthropological and single-handed community case study based on doctoral research necessarily will have its limitations. I was left with several questions which remained unanswered by this study. The study does not have much empirical evidence on the material and demographic facts underpinning the lives of the inhabitants with whom she interacts. A fuller picture of the local political economy would have been hugely helpful. For example, I would like to have known more about the nature of the interplay between the wider material forces of the local labour and housing markets, funding regimes for and institutional constraints on public services and their agents, the role of political and economic elites in urban renewal in Manchester, etc. and their impact on this particular geo-historical context.

Methodologically, there is an appendix on how the researcher went about conducting the interviews with local residents and sample interview schedules are provided. This proved a valuable section and it will be helpful for budding ethnographic researchers to read this. However, this appendix left me wanting to know more about the actual experiences of both the researcher and her participants. For example, what were the ethical dilemmas she faced with regard to individuals whom she encountered who had been either (or both) victims or perpetrators of crime and violence? What were the risks associated with interviewing people in their own houses or on the streets? (In passing,
I’m not convinced that this research would now be approved by many research ethics committees in UK universities!) In turn, how were the officials and professional agents selected? Despite spending much fieldwork time with young people on the estate, there was also a lack of detailed discussion and evidence about experiences and narratives of young people and, relatedly, the detached youth workers employed in the estate (when compared to other agents of control and change, such as the police, housing officers and private sector professionals). Fuller discussion of this doubtless rich empirical data would have improved this study further and arguably should have merited a substantive chapter rather than a brief appendix.

Another absence emerged when reviewing this book for a criminology journal: namely where and what is the criminology here? The study certainly addressed the powerful labelling of communities like ‘Millton’ as a ‘bad place’ with ‘bad people’. In turn, such processes of othering appeared to be evident both from within the divided neighbourhood itself and from the accounts of the so-called ‘authorities’. We have a clear picture of communities like ‘Millton’ as tough places but little is said about the actual careers in criminality and detailed processes of criminalization in this locality. What, for example, did the researcher think about the accuracy of the reputation which the estate had for crime and street drug dealing (p. 7)? Crimes and disorders and their control and the attendant narratives associated with these phenomena remain in the background rather than centre stage in the carefully crafted story-line developed by Karn. For a putative ‘crime ethnography’ text, there are quite surprising silences on these issues.

The last point leads me to re-emphasize that this study is perhaps most productively read as primarily an anthropological and sociological study of how poor, suffering, yet surviving people try to order their lives and cope with change and struggle. It reminded me of the classic community research by the sociologists Elias and Scotson (1965) and their diagnosis of the processes—status group politics in Weberian terms—of forging insider and outsider groups in particular localities with their specific blend of geo-histories. As Rock (2007: 36) has noted, and in part as an answer to my own question as to what makes this text a ‘crime ethnography’, ‘a criminology without a vision of social process would be deformed. A sociology without a conception of rule-breaking and control would be an odd discipline’. Karn’s success in addressing these two provocations does mean that her work will be read well beyond the narrow confines of traditional criminology and, in this sense, she makes a contribution to the further enrichment of the contemporary criminological imagination.

I was left wondering what has happened to this ‘community of fate’, as just one particular example of the ‘immobilised’ survivors, outcasts and victims of neo-liberal times. The local people, lay and professional, whom we encounter are far removed from those ‘lightly engaged strangers’ of cosmopolitan sociological and post-modern lore. Indeed, the final and telling lesson to draw from this study is perhaps an obvious one: namely that the brutal realities and insecurities associated with being at the bottom of the class structure are alive and kicking in the United Kingdom. Perhaps it is time for criminology to rediscover the ‘moral significance of class’ (Sayer 2005).

In conclusion, Karn’s book should be of particular interest to researchers and teachers across criminology, anthropology, urban studies and social policy, but also policy makers and local practitioners. In particular, her tentative argument with regard to ‘just sustainability’ deserves a wider audience and further elaboration. For researchers and
practitioners alike, her work shows the value of detailed, context-sensitive analysis of local areas, and the attendant need for *verstehen* and sensitivity to the experiences and views of local residents in shaping long-term responses to problems of deprivation and ordering in the most insecure and poor neighbourhoods of our increasingly unequal society.

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doi:10.1093/bjc/azm061
Advance Access publication 19 November 2007

**References**

