

Factual – Measured - Critical

**On the Frontline: ‘Passing by’. Insecure neighbourhoods and people**  
**Lisa McKenzie, University of Nottingham**

The St Anns estate in Nottingham is one of the poorest 10% of neighbourhoods in the UK today (1). It has a long history of engagement with social research, and community studies. In the 1960s, Ken Coates and Bill Silburn first brought to light its poor conditions in their study, ‘Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen’ (Penguin 1970). Their study was a response to a paper published by Peter Townsend raising serious questions about government assurances that poverty had been eliminated in the UK through a combination social policy, full employment for men and the welfare state. Townsend, and Coates and Silburn, argued that instead of poverty being eliminated it was taking on new forms, involving tensions between the new demands of the individual consumer and the need for basic public amenities. Coates and Silburn asked ‘the new society always be typified by private affluence and public squalor’, when they discovered the poverty experienced by many sections of the British working class, and within St Anns in Nottingham. This is a question we must still ask about the services, and the conditions of the poorest communities within the UK.

St Anns, like many neighbourhoods, in the UK has been subject to some harsh social realities: loss of manufacturing jobs in the city leading to unemployment and insecure low paid work, and the lack of social goods such as decent housing (despite slum clearance in the period immediately following Coates and Silburn’s study) and education for a changing workforce. Locally, St Anns has become stigmatised with a reputation as a place to avoid, supposedly full of crime and drugs, single mums, and benefit claimants. The neighbourhood has a long history as the place where the poorest and migrant workers have resided in Nottingham; people from Ireland, the West Indies, Italy, Poland, and South East Asia have been documented as living in St Anns since the early 1950s(2). The neighbourhood has always been in flux, with people moving in and then, as they become more financially secure, often moving out. However the West Indian and especially Jamaican populations who arrived from the 1950s have stayed constant, creating homes, families, and communities, alongside a large population of migrant people from Ireland, and the existing English working class residents. The estate today is mostly made up of families who have been St Anns residents for several generations, with a high percentage of mixing from both white and black families on the estate.

I began my research in this neighbourhood in 2005 and focused upon a group of 35 women who are white and are mothers to mixed-race children living on the estate. My study wanted to find out how this group of women found value for themselves and their families when they and the place where they live were often represented as people and spaces of no or little value. The first four years of the study was spent ethnographically mapping this group of 35 women, and their families, spending time with them on the estate, in the local community centres and cafes. I interviewed the women, in their family and friendship groups but also one to one in their homes. I

Factual – Measured - Critical

took part in local community activities, and public meetings, as a community member.

I have lived on this estate for over twenty years, and I am also a white mother with mixed-race children. Nonetheless, it had taken me many months to gain the trust of the women I was first involved with, even though we usually knew some of the same people, and found connections through friends and family, this type of local knowledge. This situated me as an insider, and allowed them to assess me through their and my local connections. The women in particular know they are ridiculed, and 'looked down on', and 'made to feel small' because of the negative representations about council housing estates, and working class women and because of those representations it was difficult and hard work to win the trust of the women, they needed to be sure that I would not represent them negatively. The women were used to 'the looks', and the 'snide comments' particularly whenever they came into contact with what they knew as 'official services'.

There was commonality between us, and we shared the same interests and fears regarding the neighbourhood, all our children were growing up in St Anns, and I shared their stories about how we had felt 'looked down on' because of our council estate status, and that we were white mothers with mixed-race children. The women all stressed the importance of 'belonging' and what I describe as 'being St Anns'. This term came about through the conversations I had with the residents when I asked them to tell me about themselves, they often started with 'Well I'm typical St Anns', or 'when you're St Anns...'. The neighbourhood was much more to the residents than a place to live, or a location in a City, it was part of who they were, and how they understood themselves, however negatively others saw them.

A Leverhulme Fellowship in 2010 allowed me to focus upon the men in the neighbourhood. The men were absent from my initial research, because they had little involvement in the community activities and daily lives of the women I was engaged with, and appeared to be 'missing'. There were many reasons for their absence, some of which I knew at the time. Mostly the men did not live with the women they had relationships with on a full time basis. It made no economic sense to the family to have a man 'officially' living at the address who was unemployed, or employed in very low paid work. Sometimes the men were involved in the underground criminal economy, which thrives in this neighbourhood as a consequence of lack of legitimate economic opportunities - handling stolen goods, and drug dealing at various levels. Having a man full time in your home often carried too much risk, the women told me they did not want the police 'kicking down the door' looking for whoever, or whatever, with the added risk of losing your tenancy. In addition these men have an occupational hazard of going to jail and were unreliable as full time partners.

Initially I was unsure as to where I might find the 'missing men' I knew they were not in the same places on the estate as the women, the community centres, and at

Factual – Measured - Critical

community projects such as youth clubs, community cafes, and at the local schools. The men were rarely present in the spaces on the estate the women occupied, but they often 'passed by'. To 'pass by' is a term which is used by men to describe their plans for the day and has its origins within the Jamaican community, 'pass-by' meaning to visit. However 'passing by' described a lifestyle and a transient identity on the estate for men.

Searching for the missing men was not as difficult as it might seem. They were never far away and always on and around the estate, but in specific spaces rarely frequented by women and children; I joined a local boxing gym and started to train alongside the men, I also spent many hours sitting in a barbers shop opposite the gym. This is where I made contact with the 'missing' St Anns men, and where they spent most of their time during the day. To 'pass by' meant that there were never any firm plans, or full responsibility for actions - the men's 'pass by' lives involved no real commitment anywhere.

During the year prior to August 2011 - a significant period within the research, but also within the UK because of the civil unrest and rioting during this month in many English Cities including Nottingham - I was engaged with a group of men all living on the estate. It is hard to say how many because of the transient and fragmented nature of their relationships to the neighbourhood, and to the women they are involved with and with whom they have family relationships. There was a core group of 15 men and conversations and informal meetings with many more as they 'passed by'. All of the men are black African-Caribbean, born in the UK or in Jamaica, and mixed-race born in the UK. Many were the sons, partners, and brothers of the white women I had previously been involved with, which means I have been able to map the neighbourhood, and the relationships within it.

The men at the gym and the barbers were far less suspicious of me than the women had been, and appeared to be less aware of others opinions of them, they talked openly about how they made money, their time spent in jail, the problems they had with the police in the neighbourhood and their relationships with their girlfriends, and 'baby-mothers'. This frankness was surprising in contrast to the guardedness of the women, particularly when the men talked about drug dealing, and receiving and selling stolen goods.

The women were constantly involved in local schools, Sure Start centres, community projects, housing officers, and benefit agencies they knew they were scrutinised, and 'looked down on'. In contrast the men had very little engagement with anyone from outside of the neighbourhood, and particularly with statutory services or projects unless it was through the police and judicial system. They had minimum interaction with benefit agencies, and housing departments, which amounted to signing on every two weeks in order to claim job seekers allowance, and some of the men did not do this, simply because they did not want to be connected to any address. They told me about the cat and mouse games they played with the police, they knew 'how

Factual – Measured - Critical

to get around things': if you have no address the police can't find you, and they need substantial evidence to search an address you do not live at.

The men spent most of their time with each other and had strong friendship, and family bonds often introducing new friends to me as their 'cus' or their 'fam'. Sometimes they were blood relatives, but mostly the family relationships were more complicated and interwoven within the estate. It was one of those things that if you had to ask how people were related you are definitely an outsider. The networks, family ties, and relationship to the estate were very important for both men and women. While 'being St Anns' was the way women would describe themselves and their families, the men subscribed to the idea that 'Stanz' was territory and belonged to them. I met very few people who imagined themselves 'being' or living anywhere else. Moving out was not an ambition in or a means of social mobility and 'getting on in life', as Coates and Silburn discussed in the original study.

During the mid-2000's it became clear that most families did not consider that things would get better. 'Just managing' was ok as long as the neighbourhood provided friends, family, and local value. However since the end of 2010 this has been replaced by fear that things are getting worse, that no one cares, and that it is public policy to purposefully subdue council estates, and their residents, through death, prison or both. The women attempt to work together for safety and support.

However, the men are disconnected and further disconnect themselves through their belief that they are 'on their own', and that making as much money as possible and by any means is their only route away from their situation. I say away and not out, because there is no appetite to 'get out' of the neighbourhood. The goal is to stay within the neighbourhood and be successful according to the rules of the local value system, the logic being that being somebody on the estate is always preferable to being nobody on the outside.

(1) Office for National Statistics (2010) *The English Indices of Deprivation 2010*, London: HMSO Communities and Local Government Publication

(2) As well as Coates and Silburn, see Solomos J. (2003) *Race and Racism in Britain* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Hampshire: Palgrave and Johns, R. (2002) *St Anns: Inner City Voices*, Warwick: Plowright Press.

**Dr Lisa McKenzie** is a research fellow in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. She previously held an Early Career Leverhulme Research Fellowship conducting a re-study of the 1970 St Anns 'Poverty' study, focusing upon the changing shapes of community, family, and belonging in contemporary Britain. She is writing a book on this research to be published by Policy Press in early 2014.