A Disgraced Whiteness: Tactics Used to Deny Racism, Reduce Stigma, and Elicit Sympathy

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Abstract

The stigma of being white in post-apartheid South Africa is a complex challenge. In 2008 the town of Swartruggens was discredited in the media following a shooting of black shack dwellers by a white Afrikaans boy, igniting racial tensions and creating a media narrative of 'victimised blacks' and 'violent whites'. This paper discusses part of a broader study investigating social relations in the town almost a year after the shooting. This paper focuses on qualitative, open-ended interviews with white residents of the town, arguing that managing a stigmatised white identity involves producing a positive construction of one's place of residence, since identity and place are interwoven. The discursive production of place-identity in dialogue and interaction tries to accomplish the tasks of reducing stigma, denying racism, and even eliciting sympathy. This paper also calls for a foregrounding of geographical location in work on identity construction.

Keywords: discursive psychology, discourse analysis, place-identity, post-apartheid, racism, race-relations, sympathy, Swartruggens, Skierlik, stigma, white identity

Introduction

Despite growing up in "the rainbow nation" of Nelson Mandela's post-apartheid state, 18 year old Johan Nel's actions reflected a prejudicial and anti-integrationist view of social relations based on black inferiority and white supremacy. The result was tragic: a shooting spree that left four people dead, eight injured, and dozens traumatised (Mail and Guardian 2008).

In January 2008, Nel drove to Skierlik, a nearby informal settlement (a 'slum' or 'squatter camp' that is a widespread phenomenon across South Africa due to the historically inequitable distribution of land and proper housing) and began randomly shooting the black residents, allegedly while shouting "kaffir, kaffir, kaffir", a derogatory reference to black South Africans (Mail Online 2008). He was arrested and sentenced a year later to four life sentences by the Mmabatho High Court. Psychological assessments of Nel suggested long-standing beliefs that white people were under attack from black people, and the judge commented that racism cannot be tolerated (BBC 2008). However, the social repercussions of Nel's actions dominated headlines for months. Fuel was thrown into an already tense national dialogue on 'race'-relations and post-1994 social transformation. The media dialogue was shaped by a discourse of pity and blame. Pity was directed at the black residents of Skierlik, whom the media portrayed as innocent victims of a racist killing. Blame was directed at the white residents of nearby Swartruggens, who were portrayed as violently resisting reconciliation and nation-building. Nel was made the exemplar of violent white racism; Swartruggens was made the exemplar of an untransformed, racially divided small town (The Times 2008).

Individual acts of extreme, unprovoked violence are not uncommon in contemporary societies. Casella and Potterton (2006) note that violence is part of the fabric of South African society, and examine accidental shootings that occur in otherwise peaceful schools, when learners get access to guns and show them to friends. This paper wants to avoid the notion that the Skierlik incident automatically fits into the repertoire of 'racist incidents'. In the same way that the 2011 Norway shooting by Anders Breivik is not an uncomplicated expression of right-wing conservatism, these ideological concerns exist alongside other factors, such as psychopathology and contextual enablers, which can result in the acting out of prejudices in extreme forms. However, despite these alternate explanations, the ensuing public discourse after the Skierlik shootings assumed that it was a clear expression of racism. Therefore, this paper is not about the shooting per se, but about the secondary identity work following the shooting.

The research question that this paper attempts to address revolves around the relationship between identity, race, location, and social relations. The small town of Swartruggens, in the North West province, was chosen as the site of research because these events catapulted it into national media and a flurry of journalistic analyses. Social commentators inferred that Swartruggens was typical of untransformed places still thriving in South Africa (see Figure 1 for the map of Swartruggens Town). Media discourse extended the implicit assumption that all small towns were racist enclaves of mainly white Afrikaans-speaking people who were resistant to post-1994 change (SAPA 2008; Sunday Times 2008; The Witness 2008).

Group processes in South Africa are frequently racially tinted. However, "location" is often quietly reduced to a mere backdrop to action. The interplay of race and place rarely features in socio-political or psychological analyses of intergroup relations and identity. Despite
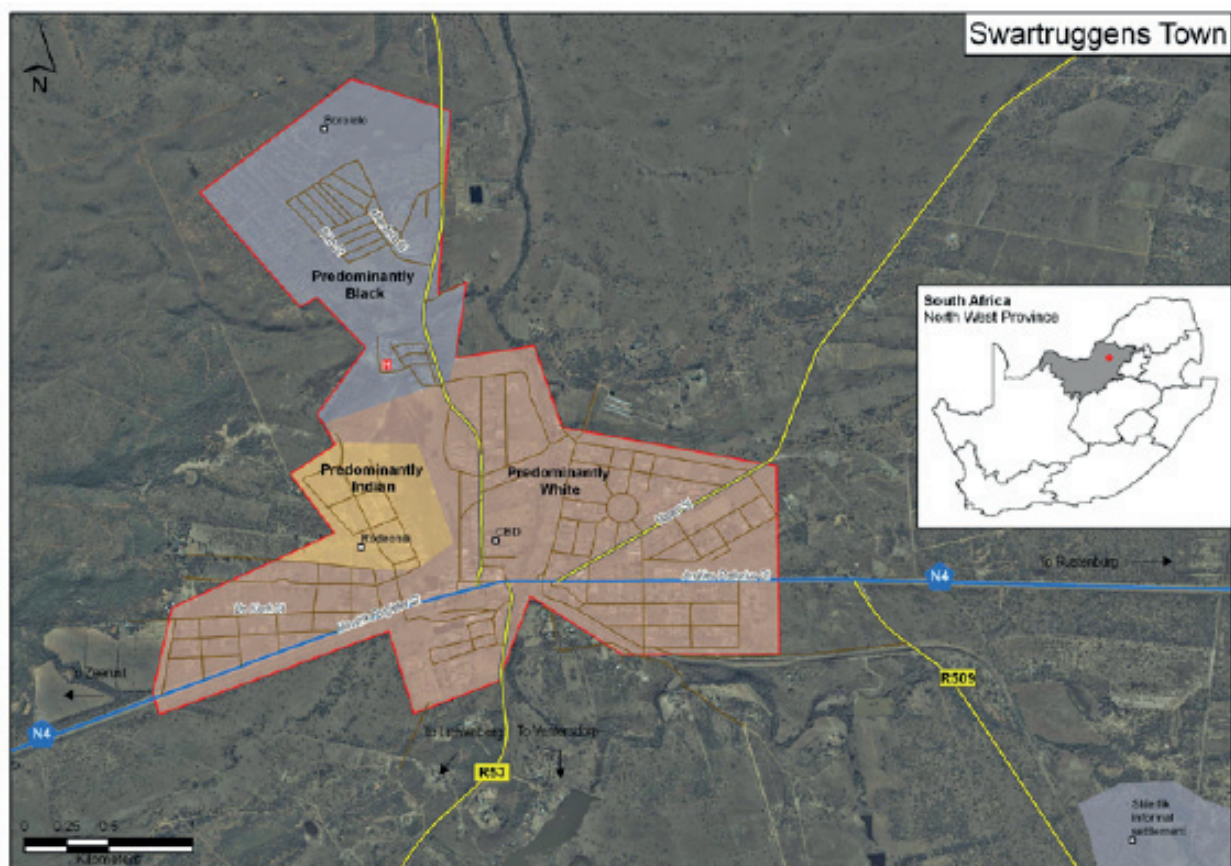

Figure 1:   Aerial view of Swartuggens and nearby Skierlik

Source: Maps created by Michela du Sart, EduAction.

this, our historical points of reference, such as the Sharpeville massacres of 1960, the Soweto uprising of 1976, Mandela's release from Robben Island in 1990, the xenophobic attacks of 2008, and even the Skierlik murders, cry out for a proper foregrounding of geography in social processes.

This study, part of a larger research collaboration called the Rural Transformation Project, attempted to bridge the gap by looking at how questions of identity are wrapped around questions of location. 'Place-identity' will be explored as 'a collective construction, produced and modified through human dialogue that allows people to make sense of their locatedness', acting also as a resource for 'rhetorical and ideological action' (Dixon and Durrheim 2000: 40). This conceptualisation challenges mainstream notions of place-identity as a cognitive-affective construct that is mentally and individualistically located (e.g. Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff 1983). Instead, shared collective constructions are seen as imbued with the person/place knot, revealing the mutual nature of identity and location, and providing an interesting construct with which to think about stigma management. Other aspects of this study focusing on how black and Indian residents racialise place-identity construction can be found elsewhere (Pillay 2010; Pillay and Durrheim 2012).

Managing white identity

The media discourse around Swartruggens (e.g. SAPA 2008) rearticulated the idea that small towns are mini-citadels of apartheid (Centre for Development and Enterprise 1996). This stereotype sits uncomfortably with the grand discourse of a reconciling, nation-building, politically stable South Africa.

Although assignment of a 'white' 'racial category' certainly does not imply membership to a homogenous group, post-1994, various research efforts have investigated white identity management, given that being white means grappling with the complex adaptive challenges of a stigmatising history (Brown 2008; Gqola 2001; MacDonald 2006, Steyn 2001, 2004; Verwey 2008). Modiri (2011), Mangcu (2008) and Ndebele (2000) all suggest that political change has occasioned a radical shift in identity construction among whites whose comfortable social supremacy has been discredited as racism. Goffman (1963) describe the ensuing stigma as 'the plight of the discredited' (p.14). Steyn (2004) has investigated the discursive strategies used by white people to signify resistance to transformation in the country, labelling it "white talk". She argues that ethnic anxieties are pervasive, and explores the dual purpose of white talk: 'to restore the Afrikaner mythology that secured a special place for the Afrikaner in the political, economic, and social life of the country, so that the ground gained through the apartheid era of systematic Afrikaner advancement is not lost in the new social order, while presenting Afrikanerdom as compatible with the New South Africa' (p.143). Similarly, Steyn and Foster (2007) assert that the central challenge for white people today is the question of how to maintain privilege despite black political rule. Jansen (2008, 2009) also grapples with these questions, commenting on the collective trauma of losing historical privileges, and the process of remembering and enacting the past.

One way that whites have attempted to resist transformation is through strategic place construction. For example, Ballard (2010) shows how resistance to cattle slaughter in suburban areas is a way for some white residents to preserve the identity and character of historically white neighbourhoods. Constructions of place have also been used by white South Africans to argue against the presence of black residents in historically white urban areas (Dixon et al. 1994) and beaches (Durrheim and Dixon 2005), and to defend new practices of segregation such as retreating to exclusive gated communities (Ballard and Jones 2011).

This article aims to bring these two literatures together to show how place constructions can be used, not only to resist change, but also to manage a stigmatized identity. Contested dialogues were anticipated to emerge during interviews with white residents in Swartruggens. After public humiliation, how would white residents construct identity and deal with stigma?

Words as social reality

Although events such as the shooting appear to epitomize poor intergroup relations, the lived reality of these relations occur within the seemingly banal, everyday conversations. In the supermarket; in the bank queue; around the *braai* [barbeque]; in living rooms; while chopping wood for the fire; or while chatting to a researcher who is offering an opportunity to participate in a study. Discursive psychology suggests that words, as they are used in daily conversation or highly technical arguments, are the stuff from which social reality is made (Edwards 1991). An analysis of these words can expose the taken-for-granted choices that individuals make when constructing a sentence, or a joke, or a defensive social manoeuvre. Critical discourse analysis suggests that discourse is a worthy site of investigation for it provides empirical access to the construction of social reality (Edwards and Potter 1992; Billig 1987).

This analysis is a discursive one, taking the premise that living in this town requires participants – residents of the town – to discursively construct a particular version of the town and their collective identity which is inextricably linked. Descriptions of one self and life in the town are treated as a temporary version that serves a function for that specific interaction, to deal with the dilemma of having their town (and by extension, themselves) stigmatized. This analytic view holds that all discursive actions are part of 'activity sequences' involving such things as blame and responsibility (Edwards and Potter 1992: 155). A conversation is an activity in which intergroup issues are linguistically (re)produced as individual versions of reality. Such discursive tasks are the 'primary stuff of lived human life' (Ibid: 156). The following extracts draw attention to the 'dilemma of… interest' (Ibid: 158) that white participants find themselves in while constructing versions of themselves. No conversation is treated as a disinterested 'factual' account – they are all *constructed as* factual using certain discursive techniques that this analysis exposes.

What strategies do people use to maintain a satisfying sense of self, if the place they live in has been publicly stigmatised? Specifically, what types of discourse do white residents of Swartruggens draw on to construct their place-identity in the face of the Skierlik shootings, which has arguably threatened the post-apartheid credibility of both the town and its white citizens? The following analysis attempts to address these questions.

Post-apartheid dilemmas

This section analyses the discursive construction of place-identity that is primarily concerned with stigma management. White residents attempt to reconstruct themselves as victims of stigmatization and not villains. A mix of convenient- and snowball sampling was used as myself and two interviewers walked around the central business district and asked residents for a few minutes of their time and for names of people they thought might be keen to be interviewed. Efforts were made to sample for diversity and ensure representativeness in the overall sample. The following five extracts show how different speakers are all trying to achieve the similar objective of denying any racial tension in the town. An extract from an interview with an Indian businessman contextualises the kinds of narratives that the white participants are arguing against.

Extract 1: Indian businessman, 40s[1]

1 P: In all the /the (1) these little (1) what u call (1) little *dorpies*[2] you know (1) uh:: (2)

2 There's still very conservative whites here you know (1) You take Swartruggens (.) you take

3 Koster (.) I mean Ventersdorp (.) you must have heard of Ventersdorp? (R: Ja) That's where

4 Eugene Terre'Blanche comes from[3] (1) Ja so (.) the Boere he still (2) I suppose they grew up

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[1] These transcription conventions are loosely based on the Jefferson method, used frequently in studies employing discourse analysis, e.g. Dixon and Durrheim (2001).

[2] Afrikaans word for *small towns*, generally used in an affectionate sense.

[3] Interestingly, Eugene Terre'Blanche, leader of the Afrikaner *Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB) (the Afrikaner Resistance Movement) was later killed in early 2010.

5 that way and– (R: Ja) I suppose maybe not this (.) but the next generation (.) will come out

6 with them ja (1) you find they still using the K-word you know (R: Ok) I / maybe / not that

7 we won't use it (.) we use it for fun you know (R:Ok) We won't go around using it on people

The discourse of small town racism is introduced as a known feature of such places, but one that exists because of racist whites (lines 1-2). Blaming 'conservative whites' from 'little dorpies' absolves this Indian resident from any role in maintaining this known culture of racism, which he is well aware of but implies non-participation. This distance is constructed in three ways. Firstly, there is an 'othering' process that takes place by referring to 'conservative whites' (line 2), 'the Boere' (line 4), 'they' (lines 4 and 6), 'them' (line 6), and making Eugene Terre'Blanche the exemplar of white (racist) conservatism. Secondly, there is the construction of innocent (Indian) bystanders who observe these racist whites "using the K-word". Despite a frank admission that he also uses the K-word, the intentions are constructed as different, 'we use it for fun you know' (line 7) and 'won't go around using it on people' (line 7). There is the creation of two separate categories of people who use 'the K-word', i.e. racist conservative whites like Eugene Terre'Blanche, and Indians ("we") who merely use it in jest and never direct it at a black person. His dissociation from the first category (whites), and his non-alignment with the "people" whom the K-word is used to describe (blacks), creates an identity that is distinctly separate from both groups in the town. A unique place-identity is delicately discursively constructed: one that is not the object of victimisation by white racism, nor a perpetrator of racism directed at blacks.

The white supremacist leader was murdered by two black men on his farm in Ventersdorp, reigniting racial tensions in the North West area and reopening up major debate in the public sphere on race-relations in post-apartheid South Africa (Mail and Guardian Online, 9 April 2010).

The third space of critical detachment that has no part in the black/white racial tensions of the town bolsters place-identity that is manageable to live with, because white residents are made to be the real villains.

The next speaker makes no explicit reference to the media or to the Skierlik event. Instead, it is an unspoken premise upon which her entire constructions of the 'tight-knit small town' are built. Although the media's grand narrative of a racist town is never articulated by either the researcher or participant, it remains ever-present – the discursive elephant in the conversation.

Extract 2[4]: White female, 50s (interviewed jointly by Indian and black male researchers)

1 R: So tell me about the people in Swartruggens?

2 P: I say (.) you know what (.) when they come through my door they always

3 laughing always smiling (1) 'hello Ma!' (.) always (.) they haven't one

4 woman in the truck and they never drink because I don't drink (.) so I smell

5 the alcohol first (1) Never (R: mmh)

6 P: Never never:: (2) so you know what (1) I haven't got even (.) uh uh:: um

7 safety things around my shop

8 R: Ok

9 P: Nothing

10 R: Ja ja

11 P: The people (.) I handle everyone who comes to me with respect

12 R: And they respect you back? (P: Ja) Ja

13 P: So sir if you want me to say negative things I haven't got anything to say

There is an attempt to build a positive image of the town, which by the end of this extract is seen to be based on the premise that I, the interviewer, am expecting something negative to emerge. The question "So tell me about the

4 R refers to the researcher; P refers to the participant.

people in Swartruggens" is heard and interpreted as a subtle accusation against the (white) residents of Swartruggens. "So sir if you want me to say negative things I haven't got anything to say" suggests that a competing discourse exists, is being argued against, but will not be explicitly acknowledged. That she hears the initial question as an opportunity to argue against negative constructions of the town alludes to a stigmatised place. She works hard, throughout the interview, to construct a version of Swartruggens and herself – as both this place and her identity are mutually implicated – in a positive light. As a white woman in a town publicly branded as the home of white racists, her race constructs her as an individual 'who is disqualified from full social acceptance' (Goffman 1963: 19). She is aware of prevailing attitudes expressed in extract 1.

She quickly attends to several negative issues in this small town: promiscuity of truck drivers who pass through (line 3); alcohol abuse (line 5); crime and safety (lines 6-7); and disrespect (line 11). Each of these issues is potentially stigmatising, especially crime and disrespect. It is crime, after all, that catapulted Swartruggens into the media; and underlying this construction crime is attention to the notion of respect. Lines 11-12 argue that respect involves a mutual give-and-take, attending to the nature of interpersonal relations in the town, and the foundations upon which they ought to be built. It suggests that there is a common understanding amongst people and amongst groups, that mutual respect is a given. The lack of safety fences around her shop is provided as further proof that crime is not a norm, because people respect each other enough not to commit crime. Lines 2-4 create the image of happy people who are more than just passing truckers or customers of her shop; "hello Ma!" suggests familiarity and care. She constructs herself as a mother-figure – they greet her as 'Ma' and she maternally ensures that they neither drive drunk nor pick up women to have sex with. An image of family is drawn on here to build this rhetoric of care, support and – most importantly if not subtly – intergroup stability. If she is the mother, then the others are like her children. And mothers care for their children,

and children respect their mother. The family image works as a metaphor for the town, a town that cares and respects its family-members/residents. The use of 'never' three times emphasises the point that any sort of disrespect is both not expected and will not be tolerated. Her response hinges on a 'scripted story of what *generally* happens' (Edwards 2003: 38). As a discursive tactic, the formulation of this script works by constructing a regularity in the way events happen in the community, making them 'factually robust and also somewhat knowable in advance without having to wait and see for any specific instance' (Ibid: 38).

The Skierlik shooting, consequently, emerges as a breakdown in this resident's construction of Swartruggens as a mutually respectful and safe small town. If the town had a disposition to be respectful, descriptions of the town as racist or violent do not fit with this disposition and must therefore be untrue or a rare exception. This reduces stigma and blame. The shootings are not mentioned at all during the entire interview; yet, her construction of the town actively counters media portrayals, which although unspoken in the interview, are present via their counter-constructions. She expects me, after all, to be waiting for 'negative things' to be said (line 13). The mark of stigma in this town is being a white resident. She also constructs an alternative version of whiteness to the one she assumes I have read about in the papers. She is what Goffman (1963) calls a 'discredited' person, whose potentially stigmatising quality (in this case skin-colour) is publicly visible and mutually known.

The following extract is less subtle, but tries to achieve similar goals with the talk.

Extract 3[5]: White female, 50s (interviewed by white female)

1 R: Would you say the community is close?

2 P: We are very small, therefore everybody
       cares for each other. *We don't have the*

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5 The extracts that were translated from Afrikaans do not contain the usual transcription conventions.

3   *stories here that you have seen and*

       heard on the news. We don't know that

       things

4   the news is talking about. It doesn't

       matter if the people are black or white or

       any

5   colour, people support each other.

Like the previous extract, the researcher does not offer the participant a direct invitation to speak about racism, opting instead to ask about the closeness of the community. Race relations, however, becomes the salient point around which 'closeness' is constructed, and an alternative version to media reports of racism becomes the key point of reference around which a stigmatised place-identity is developed.

She assumes I am well aware of what the media have said about the town – "we don't have the stories here *that you have seen and heard on the news*" – and pleads ignorance and denial as her defences – "we don't know that things the news is talking about". This denial, however, does not permit space for at least acknowledging the objective fact that a shooting spree did happen, in a black settlement, by a white shooter. One tenuous possibility is that a *potentially* racist incident (such as a shooting) is less stigmatising than the long-standing effects of *generalised racism* in the town. Generalising that a town is racist, which the media has done, requires proof of many other episodes of strained race-relations, which upsets the peaceful historical grand narrative that she (as a white resident) is constructing. She is being strategically vague (Edwards and Potter 1992) in her reference to "stories" in the news, attempting to reduce the validity of "stories" that the media has created. Place-specific racism and racist white residents are constructed as foreign and unknown, something which is anomalous in a town where "everybody cares for each other". Intergroup friendliness is normalised. Like extract 2, a certain 'character of the town' is being constructed. By assigning a certain disposition to place, this disposition is

also assigned to the identities of residents that occupy this place. A caring place, then, must consist of caring people. A discourse of care (and respect in extract 2) is pitted up against a discourse of violent disrespect in an interactional effort to reduce a stigmatised place-identity and save face. This defence of place is a defence of whiteness too.

Similar to Yiftachel and Tzfadia's (2004) findings amongst Mizrahi residents (Jewish immigrants from Arab countries) who lived marginally in Israel's development towns, there is a concerted effort here to portray solidarity and positive community sentiment, due to years of reproduced discourses of 'local pride'. The speaker in this extract makes clear her resistance to this 'new' label of racism, which has been thrust upon residents by the media. Her preferred identity is one congruent with a version of Swartruggens before its public discrediting in 2008. She tries to undermine this discourse of racism by creating a discourse of unfair stigmatisation. Using the popular notion of tight-knit small towns, she argues that "We are very small, *therefore* everybody cares for each other". The use of 'therefore' implies that everybody cares for each other *because of* the geophysical fact that this is town is small. The construction of place and identity and their mutual link is made clear in the statement: people are caring because they come from a small place, or put the other way, small places create caring people. There is no space for racism or socio-political instability in her construction of this small town. The forceful construction of an alternative (and by implication more legitimate) version of the town is needed to dismiss the master narrative that predominates in the media. In just four sentences, she works hard to undermine this narrative and reduce the associated stigma.

The next extract neither omits mention of Skierlik (as in extract 2), nor forcefully argues against strained relations in the town (as in extract 3). Instead, the case for a rational conservatism is being made that subtly helps reduce the stigma of irrational and violent small-town white people.

Extract 4[6]: White male, 50s (interviewed by white female)

1 R: Are you feeling in certain places less comfortable or more comfortable?

2 P: ummm… the fact is there is a mutual underlying fear and incidents like the

3 Skierlik incident and a few months/about a year ago where there was a farmer

4 murdered and two weeks ago there was a farm attack just outside the town

5 R: Ja ok

6 P: (….) ummm this church complex has an electric fence, alarm systems and safety

7 gates, for good reasons (R: ok) ummm there was years ago burglary in our hall

8 and during church services car theft. It was simply a necessity to do this, even if

9 you don't want to. This situation you will see everywhere. We just- to protect

10 ourselves because/ because here/ because crime is a reality in the town. I think at

11 the end I will feel safe to go to places during the day, but during the nights you

12 are a bit more careful to go to certain places. You would maybe pass there, but

13 you would not get out of your car there. We recently had a conversation with

14 people who are staying in Borolelo where/ where they/ where they have

15 especially middle aged women who doesn't go out at night because they are

16 scared. There are elements in the street.

This speaker constructs place-identity differently, but again, it is serving the same rhetorical ends: to make a case for unfair stigmatisation. The "Skierlik incident" is mentioned in light of other incidents of violent crime. All the farms are owned by white people in Swartruggens and its surrounds. The use of farm attacks in the context

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[6] Translated from Afrikaans to English. Indian and black male researchers were present during interview.

of crime attends to the fact that white people are also victims of violence, by black people, because just as blacks are afraid of whites after "the Skierlik incident", "there is a mutual underlying fear", hinting that whites are also afraid of blacks. The use of "mutual" does the job of lessening the burden of stigma that only white people are violent and therefore only black people have reason to live in fear. The idea of Skierlik being a special case of racial violence is dismissed by putting it in the category of other criminal events like farm attacks. The use of "underlying" suggests that this fear may not be evident on the surface – we see this clearly in the preceding extracts, where fear of any sort is outright denied. This fear is "underlying", not visible to an outside visitor; perhaps not even visible to each other.

The discourse of friendly tight-knit small town, where one does not even need fences around their shop (as in extract 2), is acknowledged but carefully managed: "It was simply a necessity to do this, *even if you don't want to*" hints at a resistance to put up safety features, drawing on known discourses of a safe small town. Despite this, his three-part list of "an electric fence, alarm systems and safety gates" is put up "for good reasons". But it is ultimately in the phrase "This situation you will see everywhere" that the work of stigma reduction is done most forcefully, because this normalises crime and the precautions one must take against crime. By seeing this situation "everywhere" the issues of crime (as introduced by the "Skierlik incident") is made into a pervasive feature of life, regardless of the place one comes from, even a church. White criminals, then, like Johan Nel, should not be made exemplars of any sort of special violence. Farred (2002) makes this point by drawing on themes from J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, to explore the ways in which the post-apartheid nation, the 'disgraced' state of Coetzee's novel, 'makes violence a mundanacity: an ordinary, everyday, ubiquitous, and commonplace occurrence…' (p. 352). Despite the historical and moral cost, South Africans accommodate violence and its divisive effect on racial reconciliation (Farred 2002).

The racialised description of crime is managed carefully at the end of this extract in lines 12-15:

"You would maybe pass there, but you would not get out of your car there. We recently had a conversation with people who are staying in Borolelo where/ where they/ where they have especially middle aged women who doesn't go out at night because they are scared". He says that "during the nights you are a bit more careful to go to certain places" but does not mention these places immediately. When he finally cites Borolelo, it is only because *others* have provided evidence that Borolelo is unsafe. He is able to give an account of 'black criminals' without explicitly mentioning black people. His "conversation with people" that are from Borolelo serve as 'insider evidence' and corroborates his argument that certain places are unsafe. That these places happen to be black townships is a fact offered to him by others, not his own concoction. A sense of imminent danger that lurks at night is concretised in his statement "There are elements in the street". That these elements prey on "middle-aged women" who come from Borolelo simply reproduces (implicitly) a discourse of 'dangerous black men'. This latter discourse is prevalent in the media as well, and drawing on this discourse as an alternative discourse to the post-Skierlik one of 'dangerous whites', situates his construction in the broader narrative of the *swart gevaar* (Black Danger) that has been historically dominant in South Africa. While media sensationalism may have unfairly stereotyped white people as racist and violent in Swartruggens, he manages to undermine this by reminding the researcher of other dominant discourses in the media that serve as alternative foci of attention.

Verwey (2008) found similar rhetorical strategies being used by white Afrikaners in his study of post-apartheid identity. There was an attempt by participants to separate the Afrikaner identity from a broader African identity, essentially 'othering' black Africans and perpetuating a racist ideology that evaluates black people negatively. As one of Verwey's (2008) participants remarks: "um they kill each other and murder and drink and fight, you know. Drinking and fighting with each other and... I know there are many white people who also do that, but I feel that with them it's a lot more" (p.57). The 'us' and 'them'

motif is clear. Similarly, in extract 4, despite attempts to remain politically correct, the process of othering is seen in his racialised constructions of dangerous "elements in the street". The situated action that his talk performs is the job of stigma-reduction, which removes whites as the sole members of the category 'violent criminals' which laced media discourses following the Nel incident.

We further contend that, thematically, these discursive tactics revolve around the elicitation of sympathy. Extract 5, below, represents a more explicit call for sympathy. The speaker argues forcefully that unfair stigmatisation is upsetting.

Extract 5[7]: White female, 40s (interviewed by white female)

1   R: How would you describe the people with each other? Is there any racism?
2   P: No! You have probably recently seen the news about the shooting that happened
3   here and the news going around that we are racists, that is not true! Well... I want
4   to say it very clearly that it is big lies, all lies! The people here are very caring
5   towards one another, we are united in Swartruggens.
6   R: Okay I see.
7   P: It upsets us when people are telling such lies. I want to say again, it is all lies!

Extract 5 explicitly blames the media ("the news going around") as being unfair ("big lies, all lies!"). The use of location in line 4, "The people *here*" helps tie together place and identity. By describing "the people here" as "caring" and "united" a sense of community is constructed to emphasise that an insult to the town is an insult to all its people, because the "lies" in the media "upsets *us*" (line 7). The use of "us" supports the analytic point that stigma is experienced as a group (of white residents). Sympathy is elicited by forcefully discrediting media reports, thus conveying

7   This extract was translated from Afrikaans to English and does not contain the usual conventions.

the emotional distress of being stigmatised, and explicitly stating that "it upsets us". Since sympathy must be elicited in an interactional context, the interview context creates a space for this kind of discursive work.

Any methodology is implicated in its findings; in this case, it is probably a threatening experience to tell one's story to a researcher who is perceived to come from a big city and who is aware of stereotypes in the news. In fact, my own viewpoints were rarely made explicit; participants never asked me what prior knowledge I had about the town, or what my impression of the town was thus far. All participants' *assumed* I thought the residents were racist.

The elicitation of sympathy as part of the argumentative work they were doing with their talk, gave their discursive constructions of place-identity credibility. Mangcu (2008) argues that this is a frequent quality of white discourse in South Africa, naming it a 'racialised mobilisation of sympathy' (p.103). He says this rallying cry of solidarity, to forgive or to understand, can be seen in other events of white transgression such as former South African cricket captain Hansie Cronje being caught for match-fixing. Cronje was initially vilified in the media, but later rehabilitated as a repentant hero of national sport, especially after his unexpected death. However, Mangcu argues that the same media leniency is rarely offered by white citizens when the 'perpetrator' is black, but that this is consistent with the punitive, long held stereotypes of black incompetence and the need to punish black people. He comments:

> Too often executioners are able to mobilize public sympathy by hogging media conferences, and calling an amazing array of sophisticated diversions and metaphors… before we know it, a reversal of roles has taken place… the original perpetrator has become the victim (Ibid: 104).

This was perhaps best seen in the early post-apartheid years during publicly broadcasted Truth and Reconciliation Commission. White 'perpetrators' of apartheid atrocities became victims of their time, or victims of a cruel system where good people had to do bad things. How-

ever, though their confessional narratives concretised the 'black victim' in the national psyche, public discourse could certainly not ignore the 'white victim' that had also emerged from the TRC. These discourses continue to be reproduced in contexts such as Skierlik. For example, white interests and identity is preserved by claiming victimhood. Given an awful historical baggage, for whites, the maintenance of victim status absolves them from any collective blame for the actions of Johan Nel (who is a stark, albeit extreme, reminder of the political ideology which afforded them the privileges they still enjoy, such as secure jobs, land, economic resources, and higher education). They, too, can claim to be victims of the Skierlik incident, by being unjustly targeted by the media and stereotyped as racists. Taking any other position other than victim would not be in their interests. Mangcu (2008) argues that the conservative nationalism of white opposition politics worked by invoking the shared fears of white South Africans who were struggling to form a new post-apartheid identity. The 'discursive hardening' was done through election campaigns that failed to help his 'mainly white constituency transcend the fears of an unresolved past' (Ibid: 109). Nation-building took a backseat in the political struggle for parliamentary seats. As Barber (1998: 14, in Mangcu 2008: 107) quips: 'Liberals, ever wary, still preach: "Defend yourselves! The enemy is everywhere!" These kinds of ideologies translate into the common sense of everyday racism.

Conclusion

Goffman (1963: 14) asks: 'Does the stigmatised individual assume his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them?' The above extracts have been used to show that 'whiteness' in Swartruggens had become a publicly knowable mark of stigma, because it was extensively attended to in the talk of participants. White participants assumed their "differentness" was evident on the spot, i.e. they were *those* white people from *that* place that had been publicly labelled as racist. The extracts

lend support to those fears. These conversational interactions, then, were examples of 'the plight of the discredited' (Goffman 1963: 14), who were trying to reconstruct their publicly shamed identities to fit historical narratives of what it used to mean to be white and live in this town.

The relevance to present day South Africa is seen in events that have captured further media attention, reverberating through the political discourses that dominate public debates on race, reconciliation and nation-building. The town of Ventersdorp, in the vicinity of Swartruggens, made headlines following the allegedly racist murder of Eugene Terre'Blanche. The gruesome murder of this infamous white supremacist in early 2010 led Afrikaner political party the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) and Afrikaner civil rights group AfriForum to claim that then ANC Youth League president Julius Malema inflamed racial tension by singing an apartheid defiance song with the words *dubul'ibhunu* (shoot the Boer) prior to this killing. In an ironic twist, the ANC planned to take AfriForum and the FF+ to the Equality Court for making such claims, accusing them of running "a campaign of hatred" that racially polarises South Africa (Mail and Guardian Online, 9 April, 2010). ANC lawyer Siyabonga Mahlangu remarked: "Their (i.e. white Afrikaners) campaign is polarising our society. They're saying Malema's songs are causing the death of Afrikaner farmers, when the facts speak to the contrary. They're claiming sole victimhood from the struggle that our country experienced" (Mail and Guardian Online, 9 April, 2010). Similar efforts to deny racism and reduce stigma are seen. And while the battle for victim status

underlies many of the extracts shown, including the interviews with black and Indian residents (Pillay 2010; Pillay and Durrheim 2012), the subtext of Mahlangu's statement implies a need for public sympathy to be shared, like a post-apartheid prize that no one race group must lay claim to. The benefits of such a prize may be the preservation of a sense of place, a sense of self, and sense of history.

Racism and reconciliation continue to be competing discourses. It is little wonder that white residents, when accused of the former, would begin a frantic endeavour to (re)construct identities in a way that provides stability amidst a changing environment. By reinforcing narratives that remind themselves of a town that is safe, friendly, hospitable, and respectable; or by normalising problems as part of life anywhere, the special attention to geography helps in the work of identity (re)construction. Place-identity remains discursively intact and accusations of racism can be downplayed, argued against, or used to elicit sympathy.

Johnstone (2000) remarks that discourse analysis is always partial, provisional, and incomplete. How far outward from the text one needs to go depends entirely on the goals of the analysis. This study has drawn sufficient instances of talk-in-interaction from the interview material to illustrate its main analytic points around the racialised constructions of place-identity and the discursive repertoires used to deny racism, reduce stigma and elicit sympathy. Many discursive stones have been left unturned, such as the impact of class or gender in racialised identity constructions, and these can become the topic of future studies and analyses.

S.R. Pillay, K. Durrheim

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