“Watching out for my boo”: Understanding women’s aggression in a night-time economy

Abstract

Female aggression in night-time economies (NTE) is a relatively under-researched area of criminological inquiry. This paper focuses on a group of White, working class local women (Locals) drawing on a mixed-method qualitative study of 78 women (18-58 years) who participated in the NTE of a Welsh city centre. This paper explores the women’s accounts and understandings of engaging in aggressive behaviours in this particular situational context. Foregrounding their voices the research found that stereotypical assumptions surrounding the women’s reputation for *unprovoked* aggression is not supported. Rather, the women themselves understand their aggression as justifiable responses to breaches of shared group norms and values in relation to both reputation and manners. This group of women’s aggressive behaviour often was oriented toward maintaining their relationships and loyalty to each other and their group. This further challenges research in which women’s violence is framed as a response to or modelled on the behaviour of men. This paper reports on a subgroup (‘Locals’) of a larger study that included two additional female groups, Professionals and Students, the perspectives of which are occasionally included to draw out distinctions with the working-class women focussed on here.

Keywords reputation, aggression, night-time economy, manners

Introduction

Research into alcohol related violence and disorder in the night-time economy (NTE) has tended to characterise men as perpetrators and women as victims. Typically, explorations of women’s experiences in and around pubs, bars and clubs has tended to focus on their heightened risk of being victims of sexual violence, and related to their consequent adoption of safety and avoidance strategies (e.g. Brooks, 2014). Together with their being *at* risk, in

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recent years there has been rising evidence of the ways that women can pose *a* risk of alcohol-related violence in the NTE. The Crime Survey for England and Wales 2012/13 and 2013/14 found that of the 16% of all violent crimes recorded as being perpetrated by women, more than 10% was alcohol-related. In 2015, 30% of penalty notices for disorder issued for being drunk and disorderly were given to women (Ministry of Justice, 2016); this marks a 10% rise from a level of 20.3% of such notices given to women in 2011 (Ministry of Justice, 2012). Whilst apparent rises in female violence and disorder are used by the tabloid press to claim the scourge of so-called 'ladette' culture, there is no evidence to support the notion that "girls will overtake boys in the violence stakes" (Batchelor et al. 2001:125). Nonetheless, statistics such as those cited above do support the suggestion that whilst female perpetrators are a minority, they are a growing one.

Whilst media-driven campaigns aim to stoke public anxieties about female aggression, and despite statistical evidence suggesting a more pervasive assocation of women's violence and alcohol in the NTE, the phenomenon remains relatively under-researched in criminology. Foregrounding the voices of women, this article aims to contribute toward a more nuanced criminological understanding of an under-researched area: that of understanding the nature, precursors and situations of women's aggression in a NTE. To do this, the research explores the experiences and understandings of a group of white, working-class, Welsh women in a city centre NTE. The large-scale research conducted by the author from which the following study is drawn found that these women were considerably more likely to be perpetrators of aggression and that this was consistent across their wide age range; a finding that concurs with local police intelligence. As part of this analysis, this study draws on focus groups, interviews and observations in and around a NTE in highlighting the significance of both reputation and manners as precursors for their verbal and physical aggression.

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Background literature

Despite a burgeoning criminological literature that has explored violence in pubs, clubs and bars, there remains a relative paucity of research that has focussed on aggression perpetrated by women in this environment. Rather, there has been a prevailing gendered focus on women at risk and intra-male violence. Fearful women avoiding dangerous, night-time spaces is a familiar trope, and one repeated in Hobbs et al. (2003:255) study in which they noted that 'those who fall outside the target consumer group, particularly older people and women, often regard these leisure zones as threatening and therefore seek to avoid them'. Given the general consensus that the majority of violence is perpetrated by males in the NTE (Finney, 2004) the relative neglect of women's voices in some of the most influential criminological research (see, for example, Hobbs et al., 2003; Winlow and Hall, 2006) is perhaps understandable. However, some research suggests that the number of women who are aggressive could be significantly higher than their relative absence from scholarly accounts might suggest (see, for example, Forsyth and Lennox, 2010; Forsyth et al., 2005; Collins et al., 2007). Interestingly, Graham and Wells' (2001) Canadian research found that women's opponents in violent encounters are often male and the level of violence was less serious than male-on-male aggression (Graham and Homel, 2008). Conversely, some UK research has suggested that women (both individuals and in groups) are involved in serious alcohol-related violence toward other women (Spence et al., 2009; Parker and Williams, 2003).

Away from the situational context of the NTE and alcohol-related violence and disorder that is the focus of this study, in recent years there has been a welcome increase in research that has explored female aggression (see, for example, Batchelor et al., 2001, 2005; Ness, 2004; Miller, 2008). These studies working from a feminist criminological perspective have made an invaluable contribution to understandings of the specifically gendered nature of

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young women's and adolescents' experiences of violence. Countering criticisms of earlier feminist criminological works that portrayed women who offended as helpless and/or hapless, these and other contemporary contributors characterise female aggression as a "response or resistance to victimisation" (Miller, 2001:199). This finding is supported by a number of studies including Batchelor (2005) who found that women could use violence in resistant ways, albeit often as pre-emptive and protective measures. Such work parallels and reflects a shift toward focussing on the 'doing' of gender as a situational and performative accomplishment and with this, offers some potential for bridging the agency/structure divide that has tended to render women as agency-less passive victims of immutable structures. This acknowledgement of the possibility for agency, albeit shaped by structural inequalities relating to class, gender and ethnicity, does suggest a potential for recognising a myriad of femininities rather than *a* static gender role. Such an approach might understand women's aggression as the doing of 'bad girl' femininity (for example Ness, 2004). Or, in the example of Miller's (2001) study of young female gang members, it might be practiced as the appropriation of a masculine identity in order to gain higher status.

The notion that young women could be motivated by the same factors traditionally attributed to young men – including honour, self-esteem, respect, reputation and excitement – increases the importance and need to improve understanding of female aggression. Research within the NTE that has drawn on similar concepts has tended to portray women as behaving like men. For example, similarly to Miller's (2001) study, Forsyth and Lennox (2010:12) describe 'macho' women telling 'war stories'; boasting of their fighting prowess, challenging others to fight and defending males in their company. Together with the notion of the 'macho' female, motivations for female aggression have largely been considered defensive, a commonality with accounts of women's participation in inter-personal violence more broadly. For example, a Canadian randomised control trial found that female aggression could be linked to unwanted sexual advances from men (Graham et al. 2013).

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Sexual competition or jealousy have also been identified as recurring themes in explorations of female aggression (Forsyth and Lennox, 2010; Collin et al., 2007; Spence et al., 2009).

Method

This paper draws upon a larger qualitative case study which explored women's 'responsibilisation' for their personal safety and in doing so highlighted the webs of mutual dependency within and between three status groups of women (Locals, Professionals and Students[1]) in a city centre NTE. This study focusses on 78 women from one of these groups, the Locals, who were significantly more likely to engage in violence and disorder than either of the other groups, providing an opportunity to explore a specific group of women's violence.[2]

Sample

At the outset of the research local police intelligence ranked a number of venues in the city as having a 'high risk' of violence. During the course of the research the female frequenters of these venues were identified and framed as a subgroup to which I ascribed the label 'Locals', which was also a term they used to describe themselves; they were a group of white, Welsh, predominantly working-class women who lived and worked in the city and its environs. Most self-identified as working-class and worked in domestic and caring roles (both paid and unpaid), retail or in one of the city's service industries. Whilst they did not usually consider themselves as deprived or 'rough', they were frequently characterised as such by the other two groups in the larger research (not reported here). All names are

[1] The professionals are a group of women aged between 21-58 and the majority, but by no means all of them, self-identified as middle class. Occupationally, some do work in 'the' professions (ie doctors, lawyers etc.), but not all. The students are drawn from three universities and they are a mixture of both middle and working class.

[2] Both the Students and Professionals groups rarely engaged in verbal or physical violence and aggression.

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pseudoynms, and ethical review and approval of this research was conducted through the author's university.

Access

A number of techniques were used by the author to establish multiple discrete 'chains' to recruit participants, including A5 adverts and social media, particularly Facebook. The A5 adverts were distributed via pre-existing contacts, and in and around pubs, bars and clubs. Most commonly, initial contact was made with women in the venues and telephone numbers and/or social media information shared via mobile phone and followed up within a few days.

Data collection

Focus groups aimed to generate collaborative accounts of the experiences of women who socialised with each other in the city centre's bars, pubs and clubs. Following initial recruitment as described above, snowball sampling was used as a means of constituting focus groups of those connected through their shared participation in the local NTE. Forty five women (aged 18-58 years) took part in 8 focus groups, with an average of 6 participants in each. The participants preferred the location to be away from the university campus and most chose for me to go to their homes. The other venues were the beer garden of a local pub and a small room in a community centre.

Six semi-structured interviews were undertaken with local women and of these, four also participated in focus groups. The interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes, the longer sessions being with those that had previously participated in a focus group. Four took place in a meeting room on the university campus and two in the participant's homes. Initially semi-structured interviews were intended to be means of adding depth to complement group

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discussions. However, the focus groups did generate rich, insightful and occasionally contradictory and complex accounts. Five individual interviews were undertaken though most of the local women preferred not to participate because they had negative connotations, particularly due to previous experiences with government agencies and job interviews. In a reference to interviews with social security officials, Sam (37) remarked "Christ Rach I'm not being funny but it's like being at the sosh[3]". This wariness of face to face interviews prompted the use of social media and e-mail to follow up points raised in focus groups and enabled the women to reflect on and respond to the group discussion at a later point.

An additional 24 women also took part in web-based, synchronous and asynchronous interviews via e-mail and social media. Of the 49 Locals who participated in face-to-face conversations, 39 also communicated using social media, most commonly 'Facebook'. Of the 24 women whose participation was solely web-based, 17 contributed to a Facebook page for the research, a link to which was included on the A5 flyers that were distributed. Seven were invited by women who had participated in both a terrestrial method and web-based communication.

Over a 16-month period observations were carried out in and around five pubs, bars and clubs frequented by the local working class women participating in the research. Adopting the role of participant-as-observer (Gold, 1958) in order to gain an in-depth contextual insight into their social world, I visited each venue between four and eight times, typically for between three and six hours. This combination of qualitative methods was used in acknowledgement of an accepted potential shortcoming in relying exclusively on accounts generated at a distance from the social context, principally that what the women say they do may well differ from what they actually do (Seale, 1999).

[3] 'Sosh' is a slang term used to refer to social security and more specifically government income assistance.

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Approach to Analysis

A thematic and iterative analytical approach was adopted to the qualitative data generated. Data from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews was fully transcribed and together with the field notes recorded using a mobile phone in situ and web-based communications were coded according to the three-step process coding of pre, provisional and core/satellite advocated by Layder (1998). The aim of the study was to explore women's responsibilisation for their personal safety and this informed the decision to use 'responsibility' as the core code. The satellite were codes linked to commonalities and divergence both across and within the groups on the nature and extent to which this could be said to accurately characterise the group's participation in their NTE.

Findings

This section provides a brief overview of the nature and extent of aggression associated with the group. Importantly, not all of the women engage in physical aggression and none of them relished having a reputation for *unprovoked* violence. Verbal aggression was so common as to be un-noteworthy to any of the women, and throughout the 16 month period of observations in the NTE some form of physical aggression by participants was observed on each occasion. Similarly, the re-telling of incidents of verbal and/or physical aggression were always features of the focus groups, interviews and web-based communication. Similar to Batchelor (2005, though focused on young women), I found that aggression was essentially normalised, although mostly this was verbal rather than physical. Interestingly participants did not view their physical aggression as violence. Rather, violence was considered to be a specific phenomenon referring specifically to unprovoked, unjustifiable acts that were outside of the women's rules of acceptable behaviour. The term violence was frequently understood in terms of the perpetrator being 'psycho' (e.g. Moesha, 19); a label they were keen to

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distance themselves from. The women understood their own use of physical aggression as a regrettably necessary corrective to the behaviour of others, rather than as unjustifiable actions to be celebrated. Verbal aggression usually included shouting or screaming profanities and threats of physical violence, and the intensity and duration of verbal altercations could vary from just a few words to a tirade of verbal abuse. Physical aggression was usually preceded and accompanied by verbal abuse, a finding that concurs with Batchelor et al. 2001 and included slapping, biting, punching, kicking, hair pulling and spitting. Sometimes weapons would be used and these included high heeled shoes and occasionally bottles and glassware. Whilst the women tended to be embarrassed and ashamed of participating in serious violence if it could not be justified according to their own group norms and values, the other two, more powerful, groups in the wider research project (Students and Professionals) perceived this group of women (the Locals) through the lens of the 'minority of the worst' (Elias and Scotson, 1994:7). Counter intuitively, the use of verbal and physical aggression was not solely associated with younger women but was consistent across the broad age range of the group.

Borrowing a phrase from Sayer (2011), the following exposition aims to foreground 'why things matter to people' in developing an appreciative and authentic account of their behaviours. In doing so, the following sections focus on two key themes critical for understanding how aggression is justified: reputation and manners.

Reputation

Resonating with Elias & Scotson's (1965) insider/outsider analysis of neighbourhood relations, in the context of this research reputation is linked to socially acceptable behaviours and compliance with group norms and serves as a powerful signifier of inclusion and exclusion. The Locals were primarily concerned with having as much fun and excitement as possible and the consumption of significant quantities of alcohol before and during a night

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out was linked to their group norms about being 'out for a good time' (Paula, 44) and 'to have a laugh' (Brooke, 28), not because they want to start fights. They do invest considerable time, care and attention in their appearance in order to look 'sexy' (Siân, 23) and 'sassy' (Ang', 38), not promiscuous. Contrasting the in-group values and norms of the Locals, both Professional and Student groups were fearful of the Locals who have a reputation for 'dressing like hookers' (Alex, 28, Professional) and being 'easy' (Kitty, 20, Student). They are also widely derided as 'cheap" (Sara, 18, Student); 'volatile' (Rosie, 24, Professional) and 'drunken chavs' (Louisa, 20, Student) with a propensity for 'fighting' (Laura, 22, Professional) and behaving 'like nutters' (Pip, 19, Student). Contrasting with Elias and Scotson's finding that generationally stigmatised and powerless outsiders acquiesce to powerful, established groups, the Locals group in this study did more than remain in a state of "paralysing apathy" (Elias and Scotson, 1994: xxviii). Whilst localised and limited to the NTE, the shame and stigma inflicted on them by others was transformed into pride in their reputation of being Locals and they were able to hit back; both physically and figuratively.

Whilst the 'locals' label has overwhelmingly negative connotations amongst the other groups, the Locals themselves attached positive attributes to the label and considerable pride in being part of a group of white, heterosexual, working-class, Welsh women from the city centre and its environs. For them being a local means sharing a weekly escape from the boredom of their home lives and having as much fun and excitement from a night out as possible. High levels of alcohol consumption and a sexualised presentation of self is very much part of this and again are shared group norms. Upholding these norms and values of the group is critically important and the Locals understand that breaching those rules, for example by not investing sufficiently in their appearance and refusing to drink, could be responded to with aggression, albeit more commonly verbal rather than physical. Contrary to some research that has explored status and reputation amongst female groups outside of the NTE (e.g. Miller 2001; 2008), the women in this research do not consider their

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aggression as masculine and neither can they be considered to be the 'macho female' of Forsyth and Lennox's (2010) NTE research. Nor did the Locals actively pursue opportunities to demonstrate their fighting proficiency. They did not engage in aggression in order to earn a reputation of being 'hard' but, similar to what Batchelor et al. discussed (2001:130), some of the women enjoyed the discomfort and unease their presence caused amongst other groups (namely, the research subgroups of Students and Professionals). Aggression perpetrated by the Locals was not instrumental in the sense of being an opportunity for *elevating* their individual status and respect amongst their peers (Batchelor, 2005) but rather deployed for maintaining their group membership and relations. An example of this was that failing to defend attacks on their own and other group members' reputation (from other groups of local women) was frowned upon and could lead to them being ostracised.

Sexual Reputation

The Locals placed considerable emphasis on maintaining and defending their own and their friends' sexual reputation, a finding that resonates with other research (see, for example, Cowie and Lees 1987; Kitzinger 1995; McRobbie and Garber 1982). Avoiding a reputation as sexually promiscuous was important to the Locals yet the labels most frequently associated with this were also used by them affectionately with each other as terms of endearment. Greeting a friend whether in person, on the telephone, texting or on Facebook, as 'Hey Slag' or 'Hello Slut' was commonplace, particularly amongst the younger (under 35) group members who often greeted each other in focus group discussions in this way. By adopting these as terms of endearment rather than abuse they could be considered to be neutralising or eliminating the offensive meaning of the labels. There was an acceptance that men, particularly drunk male strangers, could use the labels but their impact was considerably lessened because they would do so unprovoked:

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Adelle (29) …….the other night there was this group of blokes right and I swear one of 'em had pissed himself but they think they're all 'ard and giving it all that….you know calling us slags and whatever…..for no reason……..we were like whatever (others join in laughing).

Their power to subvert the label came in part from a belief that the males were not "good judges" (Sayer, 2011:162); they did not know anything about the women's sexual proclivities and the men's opinion was of no importance to them, a finding that contrasts with Lee's 1993 research in which women had some pride as a "triumphant slut" (Lee, 1993: 287). There was then a tacit acceptance of the sexual insults of male strangers as normal (Kitzinger, 1995). However, as value judgements, their impact was considerably lessened by their judges being male, in contrast again with a number of studies (Griffin 1985; Cowie and Lees 1987; McRobbie and Garber 1982).

The same labels could however be hugely offensive, particularly when used by or toward *female* strangers. The following example is drawn from field notes made during a Saturday night in a club. Catching sight of a couple by the bar in a (very) passionate embrace, several women I had just begun talking with turned their attention to them. Loudly and pointedly focussing their gazes on the woman, whom by their own admission none of them knew, their comments included;

Tonya (27): Slag! (chanting) EASY, EASY, EASY

(The others join in, laughing loudly)

Pauli (32): What a 'ho! Proper nasty bitch

Lyn (24): I hope you're getting paid for that love

Interestingly, and indicative of the Locals' notions of sexual reputation, their verbal abuse (which went on for several minutes) were solely aimed at the woman in the couple whose arresting display had attracted their attention. The women did not object to *all* public displays

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of affection but the enthusiastic and highly sexual nature of this display was not acceptable. Casting aspersions on others' sexual morality was based on situational guesswork linked to indicators like these, with little evidence needed for judgements to be pronounced. There was no expectation of absolute sexual restraint but indulging in more than kissing with strangers *was* generally frowned upon. Evidently highly intoxicated, the target of their commentary did not respond on this occasion. However, this was not always the case and similar remarks made against the women, particularly by Students, could serve as precursors to physical aggression, including scratching, biting and kicking. Unlike the Locals, Students were unlikely to respond with physical aggression and because of this the severity of altercations with the Locals would not usually escalate beyond relatively minor incidents although there were incidents of more serious physical aggression. Local aggression towards other Locals was much more likely to be met with physical aggression and one or two slaps and/or punches and/or kicks were normal features of such responses. Intensification of these incidents in their severity and seriousness were usually prevented by the intervention of security staff and once outside the venue the parties would usually, though not always, disperse.

The following extract from a focus group is part of a longer discussion between seven women who are sharing a story involving four of them in an altercation with a group of five students in the city centre two days prior to the focus group. The incident was considered to be an unprovoked attack on them as one of the students was overheard mocking their appearance and another had used the word 'slag'.

Crystal (34): mouthy little bitches start making snidey comments like they think they're all that about us…..

Martine (33): the one with the dark hair and the ballet shoes….like where are you going love? What do you look like? But you're startin'? I don't think so

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Crystal (34): she won't be doing that again, or her pathetic little friends

Stacey (24): so what 'appened? Get on with it….(laughing)

Martine (33): Well Crys just walks over to 'em and we went with her like and they start walking off and she's like "gotta problem"? and then she grabs hold of the ballet dancer by her 'air….

Crystal (34): (laughing) she shouldn't have walked off should she? Then the others starts……..

Lacey (37): so she smacks her, properly like. Not bad really like as she still had hold of the other one's 'air

Crystal (34): 'Tine did help out too mind

Martine (33): got to be watching out for my boo[4]

(all agree)

Martine: …….out on the floor she was, they weren't 'appy.

The Locals significantly invested in their femininity, which was often mocked by other groups as excessive, tasteless (Skeggs, 1997) and loaded with pejorative assumptions about their morality (Sayer 2005), and their assumed sexual promiscuity (Swann 2013). It has been suggested that working class women's 'hyper-femininity' can be linked with attempting to 'pass' as middle class (Skeggs, 1997, 2004). However, the findings of this study did not support the idea that they were 'failing' to achieve middle class standards of femininity whose appearance they considered to be dowdy and lacking in sufficient care:

Harley (43): We was walking past (name of bar frequented by the Professionals) and I was checking out my lippy in this cars wing mirror and I turned around and I thought look at 'em all. They just look like they've never had a good time!.....wouldn't hurt to make an effort would it? You know I think they wear the same shit they wear to work? (all laugh)

[4] 'Boo' is an American slang term and is a corruption of the French 'beau'. It is used affectionately, usually for a boyfriend or girlfriend. It was not a common term amongst the Locals and appeared to have been temporarily popularised by a US TV show. More recently, the word 'boo' has been replaced by 'bae', a term thought to mean 'before anyone else'.

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Rather than Skeggs' 'hyper-femininity' and failing at aping the middle classes, the Locals were concerned with achieving their own culturally mediated norms, of what constitutes an ideal femininity *for them*. Within the particular situational context of this city centre NTE, their femininity is most closely aligned with what Griffin et al. (2012) described as 'hyper-sexual femininity'. Their presentation of self is the enactment of 'excessive sexuality' (Griffin et al., 2012: 186) which often included short dresses with plunging necklines, very high heels, fake tanning, elaborately coiffed hair and heavy make-up. As already mentioned, this investment in their femininity could be linked to the desire to attract and keep a mate but this was not the only reason, or even the main reason, for their investment. The Locals' shared group norms that required them to look sexually attractive but not (necessarily) available. Contra to Connell (1987), neither were they expected to be sexually passive. Rather than concerned mainly with the 'interests and desires of men' (Connell, 1987: 183), the Locals' adherence to their shared norms and values in relation to their 'doing' of femininity was linked to their fear of being socially ostracised from their own social group, a punishment they were keen to avoid.

Finding that the women were as likely to respond aggressively to attacks on their own, and others', femininity without a link to competition over men has received little attention. For example, six participants in a focus group discussed a recent incident in a bar in which a female acquaintance had laughed at Tania's outfit, mockingly asking if she had 'got dressed in the dark love' (Tania, 27). A heated verbal exchange ensued and, following their expulsion from the bar by security staff, culminated with a physical fight between the two women outside the bar. The women exchanged kicks, punches, biting and scratching and although neither had been badly hurt Vicky, a friend of Tania's, proclaimed with some relish that she had 'pulled out a handful of the bitch's hair'. Discussing the provocation for the incident, Tania said 'I looked good and she knew it…….no-one talks to me like that. No-one'. As illustrated by the earlier focus group extract with Martine, Crystal and Lacey, there was a

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shared expectation that the women would defend their own and others' reputation, and threats to this (whether real or perceived) were rarely left unchallenged. Undermining accounts in which women are at risk from men or organise violence against other groups of women who are strangers to them, the women here showed examples of aggression against each other, and other women (such as the Students).

Bad Manners

From the perspective of the other groups in the wider research project, the Professionals and the Students, the behaviour of the Locals was 'scary' (Meg, Professional, 26); 'rude' (Kay, Professional, 37); 'nasty' (Faith, Student, 19) and 'mental' (Milly, Student, 18); in short profoundly 'anti-social' (Pip, Student, 19). Inherent within this latter term is the idea that those who commit anti-social behaviour are not being social; yet the Locals' understood their actions as just that, profoundly pro-social, displaying (when targeted at outsiders) and enforcing (when directed amongst themselves) norms of loyalty and respect. The other groups (Professionals and Students) policed the boundaries while out on the town in order to demonstrate their own 'superior' norms and values against those of a different class and position. The Locals were more concerned with policing their own members and ensuring that they adhere to their own understandings of what constitutes appropriate behaviour, and punishing both their own and other group's members if they transgress their social rules.

The Locals almost invariably arrived in the city centre drunk and then become *more* drunk and aggressive incidents increased in frequency and severity as the night wore on. Flashpoints linked to manners and etiquette included bumping into someone (with or without their drink being spilled); queue jumping at the bar or toilets and prolonged eye contact (combined with a 'hard' facial expression). Unsurprisingly, given that almost everyone in and

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around the bars was in varying stages of advanced intoxication, small, minor incivilities were common but tolerance of such transgressions was not.

As observed in venues but also discussed in individual interviews and focus groups, a lack of adherence to group etiquette in relation to the Locals' relationship status could be significant. Similarly to Spence et al. (2009), other women flirting - prolonged eye contact, smiling, touching (drunks can be very tactile) or dancing with or too close to their partner was not generally tolerated. The following incident shared in a focus group by Kaz who had been in a relationship with Mark for seven months illustrates typical responses to such infractions:

Kaz (43): Me and Mark were sat at the bar with Lacey and her fella and we was just having some drinks and a laugh and all that and this skank[5] starts leaning over him to try and attract the bloke behind the bar for a drink like……. She didn't say excuse me or anything and honest to god her tits were right in his face. And I'm like you wanna move love? And she's like all arsey like (mimics voice) "ooooh she just wants her drink" and everything and all that shit and I'm like yeah right whatever like……then she touches his arm right cos she's wobblin' and that was it. I flew off the chair and I had hold of her, her head like, and I smacked her head down like bang on the bar…….straightened her nose out for her (laughing)

Stories like this one in which the 'offender' was left with a bloody nose were often told with a great deal of humour and relish, a finding that resonates with Forsyth and Lennox's (2010) research. Understood within the context of their bounded rationalities, they were revelling in the pride they shared in successfully policing group values. Few of the women held their partners responsible for their own fidelity and constant vigilance was required to repel encroachments by other women. Men were frequently judged to lack the requisite thought processes to enable them to assess the 'difference between havin' a laugh and havin' a go' (Becky, 22). The task of defending their relationship and the ill-mannered behaviour of

[5] 'Skank' is a derogatory slang term usually aimed at young women to infer that they are dirty and/or promiscuous.

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others around their partner was essentially deemed to be 'women's work' by both the women and men, and males were not usually expected to be involved in any ensuing altercations. Usually flirtatious behaviour was initially dealt with by verbal chastisement and the typical retorts included (Hel, 27): 'fuck off love, he's not interested'; (Corina, 39): 'run along' and 'back off' (Moesha, 24). Providing the flirting was considered relatively minor, for example another woman looking at their partner or making very brief eye contact, women who rapidly absented themselves when warned were not usually pursued. However, those that did not and/or committed a second offence were less likely to escape with a verbal warning and physical aggression could rapidly escalate from slapping and pushing to punching, thumping and kicking.

'Manners' were clearly important and throughout the period of observation in and around the pubs, bars and clubs it appeared that if said quickly enough an apology would usually be sufficient to curtail any escalation from the incidents, the overwhelming majority of which were not deliberate and thoughtless but drunken and accidental. Underlining the importance of not being overly reliant on de-contextualised accounts, in their re-telling of events such incivilities were invariably presented as malicious and intentional. In the following excerpt Ceris is explaining a recent incident in a pub in which she slammed a door into the face of another woman:

Ceris (19): …….she was like bang and the door smacked me…..I gotta say how hard is it to check? She must have known I was there…..you do…..I was mad as hell, I mean that could have hurt! I said to her excuse me bitch but you can't see can you? She's all "oh fuck off" and if she'd said sorry it would be different but I thought oh no…… so I had to give it her back didn't I?.....Can't be havin' any of that now can we girls?

Throughout observations it appeared that providing the incident was understood as minor then muttered, murmured or slurred small words like 'sorry', 'excuse-me', 'please' and 'thank-you' or even a raised, placatory hand gesture were important and acceptable ways of

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acknowledging infringements on personal space and other slights. If suitably respectful, even barely intelligible utterances could be accepted and their faulty delivery reduce their offending to a symptom of their intoxication, therefore deserving of some good humour and/or sympathy rather than severe reprimand. However, failing to be sufficiently or suitably apologetic in words or gesture could be understood as lacking due deference to the 'victim' and be linked to an escalation from minor reprimand to verbal abuse and physically aggressive altercations.

Concluding remarks

The findings of this research develop understandings of the constitution of, and relations within and between, female social groups in the NTE through aggression. It offers a contrasting and significant account of women's aggression, one which is not reliant on understanding this in terms of men's behaviour or masculinist accounts of violence. As such, it offers promise in showing how exploring NTE figurations of women's behaviour can develop novel insights and contribute to feminist criminological work in this area. Moreover, the foregrounding of both reputation and manners in understanding the Locals' dispensing of justifiable, necessary and even righteous punishments for breaches and infringements of their shared group norms and values is a significant finding. Whilst researchers have identified reputation and allied concepts amongst younger age groups and in other social contexts (e.g. Batchelor et al., 2001, 2005; Miller 2001, 2008), the role of reputation in understanding a group of women's aggression in the NTE is under-explored. Understanding the role of manners in exploring precursors for female aggression has also been largely neglected in criminological research and utilising the sociological concept in other studies could also prove fruitful.

Analysis of the study's findings explored here found that defending their reputation was considered to be important to all of the women, as was countering breaches of their group

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specific notions of ‘good’ manners. Their reputation as locals was linked to shared, if not very clear, notions of what this means to them: specifically a white, working-class, heterosexual Welsh woman from the city centre and its environs. As part of this, their sexual reputation and defending against perceived or actual slights was of critical importance. In countering breaches of shared norms and values in relation to reputation and manners the use of verbal aggression was essentially normalised (Batchelor, 2005) and physical punishment was less common. Eschewing violent labels, those that used physical aggression did not engage in boasting about their fighting prowess (Forsyth and Lennox, 2010) and neither did they use violence to advance their status or reputation (Miller, 2001). For the women participants, across all ages, their use of aggression was seen as having a purpose, a regrettably necessary corrective to the actions of others rather than being defensive or pre-emptive (Batchelor, 2005).

The nature and extent of the punishment meted out varied, but most common was verbal abuse. Physical aggression was relatively minor and included biting, hair pulling, slapping, punching and kicking. Most altercations ended very quickly and did not lead to injuries. In developing an understanding of their aggression it is necessary to appreciate what matters to them and the importance to them of defending these norms and values. The Locals reputation is linked to their considerable investment in having as much fun as possible in their weekly escape into the city centre’s alcohol related night-time leisure zone. An essential part of this investment is their hyper-femininity and whilst they were largely unconcerned with the ill-informed opinions of males, they would not tolerate attacks on their own or other group members’ presentation of self or their sexual reputation.

Within the wider figuration of established-outsider dynamics their use of verbal and physical aggression to correct breaches of etiquette and bad manners was a source of considerable unease and vilification amongst both the Students and the Professionals who believe the

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Locals to be dangerous and uncivilised. Rather than being manner-less, the Locals had their own rules about what constitutes appropriate behaviour and suitable punishments to enforce these. Though unabashedly unrestrained in terms of their alcohol consumption and pursuit of a good time, much to the horror of the other groups, they were very much restrained by their belonging to their status group. Their aggression is not however explainable as working-class rebellion or an ill-fated desire to escape their bonds but rather a means to maintain those bonds, the relations with others in their group. Understood in terms of their bounded rationalities, their aggression makes sense to them because they are concerned with maintaining what matters to the group; at the foreground of which is their reputation and their group specific etiquette and manners.

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