
Litter as a Sign of Public Disorder?

The Meaning(s) of Litter as Part of Adolescents' Presentation of Self in Public

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Introduction

Although litter, such as cigarette butts, chewing gum, and packages of food and drink, might seem an insignificant topic for social scientists, it does deserve our academic attention because it is related to rule-breaking, public (dis-)order and potentially crime. According to one of the most dominant yet increasingly critiqued theories in criminology, the broken windows theory (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Kelling and Coles 1996), litter is a form of disorder which leads to more disorder and eventually crime. This paper explores littering as a mundane example of low-level disorder in order to gain a better understanding of the antecedents that trigger the so-called 'broken windows' effect. This study offers an alternative view on litter as a sign of disorder by presenting qualitative research from the perspectives of youth on littering, and the various meanings they give to this rule-breaking behavior. This article shows that by focusing on an emic-perspective – an insider's view – it becomes clear that rule-breaking – disorderly behaviour – is an expressive act and related to the way youngsters want to be seen by others, their public identity.

Litter also has societal impact and relevance. Litter causes environmental problems because it deteriorates slowly and there are large costs related to the cleaning of litter. For example, in the Netherlands 180 million Euros were spent on litter in 2008 (Senternovem 2009:18). Litter is seen by many as something to complain about: 20% of the Dutch population perceives litter as a major problem in their neighbourhoods (CBS 2009:37). In local Dutch communities, campaigns have started to raise awareness about litter and local governments have become stricter on throwing litter in the streets, which can result into fines as high as 100 Euros (Senternovem 2008; Algemeen Dagblad 2010). The topic of litter is also a structural component of questionnaires which are used to monitor community safety in

neighbourhoods. The Dutch state qualifies litter as a form of disorder which leads to fear among its citizens.

My study focuses on understanding youth perspectives on litter and littering. In four Dutch communities, I ethnographically studied the litter-behaviour of teenagers who hang around in public places, such as streets, parks, and squares. My data illustrates that, for Dutch teenagers, the meaning of rule-breaking is related to the public identities they strive for: the way they want to be seen in public. In my findings I show how littering is related to their presentation of self in public space (Goffman 1959). Before I present these findings, I will first discuss the broken windows theory and how symbolic interactionism can improve our insight into the meaning of low level disorderly behaviour. Secondly I will explain my research methods.

Litter as a Sign of Disorder

The idea that community safety is not only related to ‘real’ crime but also to forms of disorderly behaviour plays an important role in the broken windows theory (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Kelling and Coles 1996). Litter, graffiti, homeless people and street vendors are, according to this theory, signs of disorder. *Disorder* is, as stated by the authors, a public signal that indicates that nobody pays attention to the location and therefore people can commit a crime without a penalty: ‘One unrepaired broken window is a *signal* (italics added) that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing’ (Wilson and Kelling 1982:31). Wilson and Kelling also point out another mechanism: because of disorder in public space, citizens do not feel at ease and therefore will use public space less frequently and will not intervene in a situation of delinquent and criminal behaviour. In a disorderly surrounding, there is a high chance of a ‘criminal invasion’ which transforms a regular neighbourhood into a ‘inhospitable and frightening jungle’ (Ibid.:32-33). A lack of social control is essential in this transformation.

‘A piece of property is abandoned, weeds grow up, a window is smashed. Adults stop scolding rowdy children; the children, emboldened, become more rowdy. Families move out, unattached adults move in. Teenagers gather in front of the corners store. The merchant asks them to move; they refuse. Fights occur. Litter accumulates’ (Ibid.).

The Golden Goose effect of disorderly behaviour – disorder leads to more disorder and crime – has been recently confirmed by psychological experiments (Keizer et al 2008). In a dirty environment, such as an alley with graffiti on the walls, people behave in a more disorderly way than in a clean environment without graffiti. In

the disorderly environment, participants were more likely to throw advertisement leaflets (which were put on their bicycles) on the ground.

The broken windows theory has had public support in the media and was introduced as zero tolerance policing in cities all over the world. But since the late 1990s this theory has been criticized for a variety of reasons. One fundamental point of critique is that there is hardly any relationship between disorder and crime and that other social and economic circumstances have a greater influence on crime rates (Harcourt 2001; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999): 'the active ingredients in crime seem to be structural disadvantage and attenuated collective efficacy more so than disorder' (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999:638).

However, many of the critics of the broken window theory do agree that disorder can lead to more disorder and can have several negative effects on the social climate of neighbourhoods, such as high turnover in residents and a reduction in private investments. This can lead to social disorganization, with its well known effects on crime (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999).

Another basic form of critique focuses on the zero tolerance policing style, which stems from the broken windows theory. This policing style affects the life of the urban poor in a drastic way. In many American cities, their mere presence in public spaces is reason enough for the police to intervene and on many occasions this results in arrests for loitering. Because of this kind of policing, the public realm of many cities has been eroded and a significant part of the urban population feels alienated from the police and the community government (Collins 2007; Duneier 1999; Fagan and Davies 2000; Garnett 2004; Goffman 2009).

A third elementary point of critique is that which is labelled as disorder might differ from person to person and depends on one's perspective. The approach in broken windows theory can be described as essentialist. Objects, behaviour and situations have an unambiguous, singular meaning in broken windows theory. With this approach, scholars deny the fact that in an urban environment there are, by definition, a variety of people and perspectives (Ferrell, Hayward and Young 2008:104-5; Harcourt 2001:16-7; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004). But in the conceptualizations of broken windows theorists there is only a singular, categorical and universal difference between people, behaviour and objects: those that are disorderly and those that are not. This way of reasoning implies that there is a strong division between the 'impure' category of those that behave disorderly and the 'pure' category of those that behave properly. As a result categories of persons are by definition defined as different, inferior, impure and disorderly, such as youth hanging around and the urban poor and seen as criminal because of their sheer presence. Hence a process of "othering" takes place: a "process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between "us" and "them" – between

the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained” (Lister 2004:101). Othering is problematic not only because the social-psychological effect of stigmatization, but also because it perpetuates inequality in society (Link & Phelan 2001).

An example of this kind of critique comes from Sampson and Raudenbush (2004). Their findings show that in neighbourhoods where many African Americans live and where the level of disorder is similar to other neighbourhoods, persons (of any racial/ethnic background) perceive more disorder. The interpretation of objects and behaviour as signs of disorder has more to do with how African Americans are labelled than with the visible disorder that has been recorded by Sampson and Raudenbush.

One overlooked aspect of the broken windows theory that has received hardly any criticism to date, is its perspective on the actors who are responsible for low level forms of disorderly behaviour, such as graffiti, littering, panhandling, and unlicensed vending. In the broken windows theory it is assumed a priori, with little empirical evidence, that perpetrators are calculating persons who automatically will act in a criminal way in any disorderly environment because in this situation the chance of being caught will be minimal. Figure 1 shows the way of reasoning in the broken window theory (1) Disorderly conduct as such is not problematized: it is seen as an ‘objective’ fact. The interpretation (2) of this ‘fact’ by those who perceive it, is that nobody pays attention and therefore one reacts (3) to this in a disorderly/criminal way because there are no costs involved.

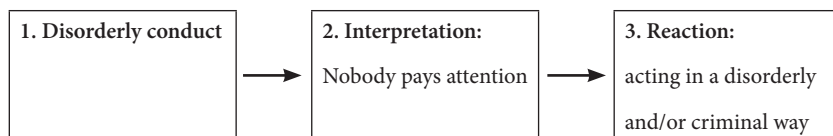


Fig. 1 Schematic model ‘broken windows theory’.

In contrast, qualitative studies with a focus on discovering an emic understanding of the social world of ‘disorderly’ citizens, such as unlicensed street vendors, graffiti-artists and scroungers, show that these ‘disorderly’ people in fact create their own public order and attach different meanings to their so-called disorderly behaviour (Duneier 1999; Ferrell 1993, 2006). While informative, these studies focus primarily on people who have a deviant lifestyle and are marginalized in a social-economic and cultural sense. But when we focus on the low level disorderly behaviour of

non-marginalized persons, we know almost nothing about their perspectives on disorderly behaviour. Therefore in this article I focus on non-marginalized youngsters in public place and how they give meaning to disorderly objects, situations and behaviour in relation to littering. Before I will describe my findings in detail, I discuss the conceptual framework I use in this article and the methods of my study.

Impression-Management and Rule-breaking

A symbolic interactionist approach to litter shows the relevance of understanding the social construction of meaning in studies on disorder, such as litter and graffiti. According to this approach, objects in themselves have no intrinsic meaning. Objects become defined by people in a certain way which is decisive for how people act towards them. The interpretation of an object depends on the perspective of a person. Therefore, it is relevant to study the perspective(s) of youngsters on litter in order to get insights into their rule breaking behaviour (Blumer 1969; Meltzer et al 1975).

The sociological concepts developed by Goffman in relation to public behaviour (1959, 1963, 1971) are used to analyze the empirical data on litter as rule-breaking behaviour. Goffman uses the dramaturgic perspective in his work, which is closely related to symbolic interactionism. Goffman's focus is on how people try to communicate a socially accepted image of themselves by impression management. *Frontstage*, in public, they will behave differently than *backstage*, where there is no or less scrutiny from others (Goffman 1959).

Here I mainly use concepts from one of Goffman's studies on public places, *Relations in Public Places* (1971). Goffman puts great emphasis on how people deal with the norms of conduct in public place: 'A social norm is that kind of guide which is supported by social sanctions, negative ones providing penalties for infraction, positive ones providing rewards for exemplary compliance' (Goffman 1971:95). For Goffman, the public order has a moral character. Users of public space will act in order to not lower their moral status by behaving in a disorderly way in front of others. They will put an effort in maintaining the impression that they stick to the dominant norms of public order (*frontstage*), while they actually might break these rules (*backstage*). Goffman's work on public behaviour has hardly been used by criminologists in their studies on public disorder and crime. This is an omission because criminologists can make use of the descriptive and analytical potentiality of a Goffmanian approach in order to gain a better understanding of rule breaking behaviour in public settings.

This study builds upon Goffman's work and considers whether the presentation of self in public (including engagement or non-engagement in disorderly behaviour) is of major importance to adolescents for their public moral status. In the description of my findings I will describe this in detail.

Research

The study was conducted by observing and interviewing Dutch teenagers in different locations in the summer and autumn of 2008 in a variety of communities in the Netherlands. My research was guided by two questions: 1) What meaning(s) do teenagers give to litter (in the streets) and littering, and 2) What is their behaviour towards litter?

To get a rich and varied view on the litter-behaviour of teenagers and their perspectives on litter, I chose a variety of locations. When selecting the research site, I paid attention to the following dimensions: 1) the characteristics of teenagers, 2) the population size of the communities, 3) the location within the community, and 4) the type of public place. To be able to make a definitive selection, much time was invested in initial observations and phone calls with professionals, such as youth workers and employees of waste-management organization. This preliminary, explorative research phase was necessary because of the dynamism inherent in the gathering of teenagers in public space. These groups are mobile and their size changes constantly.

After the preliminary assessment of potential locations, I then conducted field studies in four places in the Netherlands: a village (Castricum: 30,000), a small city (Schiedam: 75,000) and two bigger cities (Tilburg: 180,000) and (Rotterdam: 580,000). In these communities, a variety of public places were visited, such as 'official youth meeting places', school squares, sport squares and shopping squares¹. Diversity of perspectives was achieved by targeting teenagers with a variety of characteristics in relation to education, age, ethnicity and gender. In total, interviews with, and observations of, one hundred and five teenagers was undertaken.

Teenagers were approached in two ways: on my own and with the help of youth workers. Most research sites were visited three or more times during the afternoon and the evening. Each visit lasted between 1 and 2 hours depending on the presence of teenagers and my interviews with them. Approaching teenagers in public spaces

1 The research sites are part of a village, an inner-city, a suburban district and social housing area built after the second war.

made it possible for me to confront them with the litter in the actual space where they gather, and to observe their behaviour in relation to litter. First I asked how the teenagers valued the place where they were gathering and what they thought of litter lying on the ground. Second I would focus on their litter-behaviour. Most of the time, this topic arose spontaneously during the interactions. Sometimes teenagers were on their guard and wanted to know why I wanted to talk with them. I answered that I wanted to understand how teenagers deal with litter and that I wanted to hear this from them. The conversations and observations were written down in a notebook and later on described in more detail in my field notes. I also took pictures of the research sites and the teenagers.

I anticipated that an age-difference of thirty years (between myself and the teenagers) would be problematic, but in most interactions it did not matter. I was surprised by the openness of the teenagers and their willingness to participate. In one instance my position as an adult who was willing to listen to teenagers was pointed out as a unique characteristic, which was seen as a positive feature.

During my data-analysis I used the 'constant comparative method', which refers to a constant reflection on the findings in relation to previously gathered data and the development of categories and concepts in order to refine the analysis of one's findings (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006:187). A central aspect of my qualitative analysis consisted of coding observations and interviews in order to categorize littering-behaviour and the way teenagers give meaning to litter and littering. This is a constant process of checking and double checking up to the point of saturation within the analytical process, where no new insights are found (Ibid.).

Findings

The research findings show that all informants were confronted with litter in the streets on a daily bases. Based on the interviews and observations, three reactions to litter can be categorized. The first reaction consists of conforming to the rules of a clean and tidy environment. Ten of the informants reacted in this way. The second reaction, bending of the rules, is more common and in fact the dominant approach used by eighty teenagers. The third reaction consists of breaking the rules and was found with fifteen informants. In nearly all cases, the reactions of the teenagers towards disorderly behaviour were shaped by the way they wanted to present themselves in public. In the following pages, I will describe in detail how littering receives a variety of meanings which are related to the desired public identity of youngsters.

‘We have manners’

The first reaction to litter in the streets consists of conforming to the norms of a clean and tidy environment. Those who react in this way will under any circumstance throw their litter in a bin. They respect this social norm and with their behaviour they claim the moral status of someone with manners. By not throwing litter in the streets, they distance themselves from others who do that. A girl of 14 years:

‘Where we live, there is always a lot of mess in the streets. People do not really care that much, I think, but I’m not like that.’²

This quotation is an example of how ‘othering’ takes place in relation to litter. The girl emphasizes that she differs from people who do not really care that much. ‘Othering’ takes place to define herself as a better person, a person who cares. This is also present in a conversation I had with a girl and a boy (17).

They tell me that they do see people throw litter in streets, but they don’t do it themselves. When I ask them why they don’t do it, they answer: ‘we have manners’.

These youngsters realise that they are different from other users of public space, but they are not affected by pressure to confirm to rule-breaking. This is shown in a conversation I had with a group of young woman in their early twenties.

When I ask them whether they keep everything clean themselves, they have to laugh. It seems that one of the six women is very keen on throwing litter away in a proper way, as is stated by one of her friends: ‘we do not always throw our litter in a bin, and when we do so she will comment on that’. The friend says that litter irritates her and she will walk at least 100 metres to throw something in a bin. The other women laugh at her in friendly way: ‘but I will go on and say something when they throw litter in the streets, even though I know that they will not listen to me’.

Litter gets meaning as part of the way in which adolescents present themselves. When throwing litter in a bin they do not only present themselves as persons who

2 These quotes are from the interviews I had with the teenagers, which were recorded in a notebook.

care for a clean environment, but also as persons who act in an orderly way in general. Even a small faux-pas can endanger their desired moral status. But vice versa: by throwing all their litter in a bin, they make the impression that they are also civilized in relation to other parts of their identities. Or in the words of Goffman:

‘Any deviation, then, on any one occasion when the rule is supposed to apply can give the impression that the actor may be delinquent with respect to the whole class of events. And any compliance can carry assurance regarding the actor’s handling of all other events that come under rule’ (1971:97).

Youngsters with this reaction do not feel that they have to fight for their position. For them it is an uncontested and taken for granted perspective. It seems they have fully integrated the ‘civil’ rules of keeping the environment clean.

At the end of my visit to a school-square I meet a group of five teenagers. They are quite and relaxed. A girl (14) says that she always cleans up litter. ‘Why shouldn’t I do that?’, she says. She says that she doesn’t know anything different.

These teenagers will put a lot of effort in throwing trash into a bin. They will walk to a bin even though it might be far away or they will bring their litter with them to their home.

At the stoplight I see a young woman of about 17 years drinking from a bottle of sports drink which is almost finished. I see that she puts the empty bottle in her bag while she is biking. I ask her if she does that more often. She says that she does that all the time when she cannot find a garbage bin immediately. When necessary, she takes the garbage home.

These teenagers embrace the dominant ‘civil’ rules concerning a clean environment. They state that they have learned this from childhood from their parents and see this as normal behavior. They do not experience any pressure or tension in relation to others, such as peers or adults. These youngsters have integrated these norms so completely that they see it as their ‘own choice’, as they state themselves. They show no insecurities about their litter-behaviour. They take it for granted. At the same time they are proud of it. Sticking to the social norm gives them a certain moral status.

The behaviour of these informants shows that litter does not directly lead to disorderly behaviour. This is influenced by the meaning they give to litter and littering as part of their presentation of self.

‘I don’t notice it, actually’

The second reaction consists of bending the rules of a clean and tidy environment. The youngsters who show this reaction do not attach much importance to litter in the streets. It has hardly any significance for these teenagers, but they do care about the impression their littering makes upon other users of public space. They do not want to be seen as persons who always stick to the rules of orderly conduct; on the other hand they do not want to be seen as persons who are deviant and make the environment dirty.

These teenagers accept the presence of litter in the streets and take it for granted. This became apparent during the answers to one of the first questions I asked: do you think it is clean here? At all locations where I asked this question there was litter on the ground. The amount of litter varied, but this did not show in the answers. The teenagers hardly took any notice of the litter in the streets. In some cases, it appeared as if they did not notice the dirt, as I observed during an interview with three girls (14-15):

When asked whether they think it is a mess, while I point out the trash next to them, the three girls look at me as if they have no clue what I talk about. It seems as if they say in a non-verbal way: why do you bother? When I refer for a second time to the bottles of drink and some paper next to them, one of them says: ‘I don’t notice it, actually’.

The interviews show that litter has hardly any relevance for these teenagers. Litter does not occur on their mental agenda. Or as phrased by a young man of 16: ‘it does not really interest me’. This indifference is a reaction to what they encounter on a daily basis in their habitat: lots of litter. They get used to it and become insensitive to it, which is exemplified by an interview with three girls of 14 years.

I ask them whether they think it is clean. ‘Sure’ says one of them. When I point at the trash, one of them says: ‘we are used to it and it actually is not that bad now. In the beginning it was so dirty that I asked myself, ‘what am I doing here’.

Having this indifferent attitude does not mean that these teenagers are not aware of the dominant civil perspective on litter. However, they do not always apply these norms in their daily life. One example of this stance comes from a conversation with a group of boys of 15-16 years old.

Kleine Geheimnisse

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