Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street*

A Book Review

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Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street* is an ethnographic account of street violence in the disadvantaged African American communities of Philadelphia. Combining elements of respect, loyalty, and honor, the “code of the street” is an informal system used to regulate social interactions in impoverished neighborhoods. In these economically deprived and drug and crime ridden communities, the code of the street emerges as a subculture that governs behavior, particularly violence. As a result of epidemic joblessness and enduring racism in mainstream society, inner-city African Americans are pressured to abide by the code of the street as a survival mechanism.

Asserting oneself into this subculture requires an aggressive demeanor. Anderson describes the importance of self presentation when developing one’s social identity in the community. The code of the street stresses that one must gain respect from others by establishing a tough image. Defining one’s image plays an essential role in how one is perceived, as well as respected, in the community. While this code is often recognized and dealt with throughout the community, not all residents embody the street-oriented, or tough, persona.

Anderson distinguishes between “decent families” and “street families” within inner-city communities. He describes the decent families as having a keen sense of hard work and independence. Additionally, the decent families often acknowledge mainstream values more so than street families, and attempt to inculcate these values into their children. In doing so, decent parents are more willing to utilize external institutions such as schools and churches. While decent parents tend to teach their children to be polite and kind to others, they also furnish them with the knowledge needed to endure their social environment, more specifically, the code of the street. When violence occurs, decent parents teach their children how to defend themselves and how to avoid becoming vulnerable victims.
Unlike decent parents, street parents tend to exhibit a lack of concern for others and often have difficulties establishing a sincere sense of family and community. Street parents use the code of the street as an aggressive method of socializing their offspring into the violent subculture of the inner-cities. Anderson notes that the street-oriented family is typically discernible by social disorganization. As a result, some family members resort to self-destructive behaviors including drug use, alcoholism, and partner abuse.

The drug industry appears to be an underlying issue associated with the code of the street. Due to an institutional racism, African American youths become demoralized with their working impression of society. Consequently, they turn to the street subculture of violence and drugs as a means for economic gain. Thus, the drug trade is an outcome of inadequate opportunities in the mainstream economy, as well as the necessities of the street. Anderson describes how the introduction and proliferation of crack has worsened the drug trade, and in return, intensified the use of violence on the streets. Despite its risks, drug dealers enjoy the “high life” associated with the enterprise. Often, dealing drugs is viewed as a legitimate method for obtaining material goods such as clothing, jewelry, and even automobiles. Acquiring these luxuries often strengthen one’s status and respect within street culture.

The violent, drug-ridden nature of the street is not condoned by all individuals in the community. Anderson describes the role of the “old heads,” the adult role models, in the community. Because the code of the street poses threats to traditional norms, the old heads seek to improve the hardships facing young African Americans. Anderson also portrays the “decent daddy,” who encourages responsible and honest qualities in his family as well as the community. In one account, Anderson interviews Don Moses, a taxi driver who is viewed by many residents of the community as a decent daddy. Moses illustrates an encounter that he had with a young
woman his daughter’s age who was soliciting prostitution to support her drug addiction. Instead of complying with her offer to provide sexual services, Moses took her to get some food and gave her a motivating talk on how to distinguish her unfavorable habits. Moses not only served as a decent daddy to his own family, but also as an old head in the community. As more and more youths are emerging from socially disorganized homes, the need for role models and consistent support becomes crucial.

Anderson’s code of the street thesis combines both structural and cultural explanations to account for the high rates of violence among African Americans in inner-city communities. He argues that the code of the street is the result of cultural adaptation in socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and even proposes that abiding by the code may indeed reduce one’s risk of being brutally victimized. Anderson’s research and theoretical framework has greatly impacted criminological research. Concerns about the high rates of violence among young black males have led to the growth of research based on Anderson’s findings. Additional studies have been conducted to test Anderson’s code of the street propositions (see for example Stewart, Schreck, & Simons, 2006; Rich & Grey, 2005; Brezina, Agnew, Cullen, & Wright, 2004).

Despite its detailed account of street life, Anderson’s study, like all ethnographies, has limitations. First, the study was conducted in one geographical area—one inner city. The extent to which its findings can be generalized may yet be unknown. While it is plausible that the findings can be generalized to similar inner-city settings, it remains questionable how widely Anderson’s code of the street framework can apply to other populations. More research is needed to test the framework’s applicability to other settings. Second, the reader may wonder if Anderson’s at times became too attached to his subjects after he immersed himself into the
subculture. This may be illustrated in Chapter Seven which explains how Anderson became personally involved with a young man named John Turner. Anderson took a special interest in Mr. Turner, assisting him on several accounts. This included providing him with legal counsel, helping him find a job, and lending financial assistance on more than one occasion. The reader may wonder that while noble, the care Anderson had for his subjects may incline him toward portraying them, and the social forces acting upon them, in a certain light. However, this is not to say that Anderson’s results were any more biased than that of quantitative research.

*Code of the Street* is a compelling examination of poverty, violence, and morality in the inner-city neighborhoods of Philadelphia. The intricacy of Anderson’s work provides a stimulating exploration of inner-city street subculture. His in-depth interviews with inner-city residents provide for a clear explanation of the code of the street, and participants’ recollections, such as those of Don Moses, provide the reader with important descriptive insights into inner city life. Anderson’s well-written account of the code of the street is an interesting and intriguing read for scholars and students alike.
Works Cited


