

TITLE: Inner-City Teens and Face-Work: Avoiding Violence and Maintaining Honor
Forthcoming in Leila Monaghan and Jane Goodman (Eds.) *A Cultural Approach to Interpersonal Communication: Essential Readings*. Cambridge: Blackwell Press.

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Abstract:

Anderson (1999) and Wilkinson (2001) have argued that the face-work of young men in inner-city areas is characterized by a preoccupation with violence. According to such authors, a child who saves face by engaging in violent behavior “builds a name,” “enjoys esteem and respect,” and learns that “might makes right.” Such findings contrast to Goffman’s (1967) analysis of face-work, suffused with the traditional, standardized and habitual practices by which social actors subtly defend their own face, and protect the face of others, described by such terms as *savoir-faire*, *noblesse oblige*, and “after you, Alphonse.” For Goffman, the sort of “tactless, violent retaliation” described by Anderson and Wilkinson is a *departure* from the “four classic moves involved in face-saving practices:” challenge, offering, acceptance, and thanks. This study will show how young men in the inner-city are finely attuned to such dynamics of face work, and adept at face-saving practices which do not involve violent confrontation.

According to Elijah Anderson, who provides an eloquent and elaborate portrait of the code of the street in his book by the same name, “The code is not new. It is as old as the world, going back to Roman times or the world of the shogun warriors or the early American Old South” (Anderson 1999:84). Anderson states that such a code, also familiar from gangster movies and Westerns, is an organizing principle for violence in the inner-city. Fights are central in Anderson’s analysis, since the “real meaning of the many fights and altercations that ‘hide’ behind the ostensible, as a rule seemingly petty, precipitating causes,” is that a child’s cumulative interactions with face-threatening situations “ultimately determine every child’s life chances” (Anderson 1999:68). In fact, the message, “If you mess with me, there will be a severe physical penalty--coming from me,” “must be delivered loudly and clearly if a youth is to be left alone” which “is essential for a child’s well being--and perhaps even for his physical survival” (Anderson 1999:106). According to Anderson, inner-city residents recognize a clear distinction between “decent” folk who abide by mainstream moral values, and those of the “street” who do not. Yet even the “decent” must be able to “code-switch” when dealing with those of the “street.”

Anderson’s claims can be summarized as five propositions:

- 1) Inner-city young men must fight in order to gain respect.
- 2) If they do not fight, they will not be respected.
- 3) This disrespect will continue indefinitely until one fights.
- 4) Going to authority figures is not seen as a legitimate way to handle a fight, and
- 5) Since fighting leads to respect, and respect leads to safety, the one who fights will be safer than the one who does not.

These propositions dramatically contrast with Goffman’s notions of face-work.

According to Goffman (1967:20), four classic moves are involved in face-saving practices:

- 1) The challenge, offered by those who are offended by another’s face-threatening behavior
- 2) The offering, from the one accused of being offensive

- 3) The challengers accept the offering
- 4) The forgiven person conveys a sign of gratitude

For Goffman, the techniques described by Anderson would be a “departure from the standard corrective cycle,” occurring,

“When a challenged offender patently refuses to heed the warning and continues with his offending behavior, instead of setting the activity to rights. This move shifts the play back to the challengers. If they countenance the refusal to meet their demands, then it will be plain that their challenge was a bluff and that the bluff has been called. This is an untenable position; a face for themselves cannot be derived from it, and they are left to bluster. To avoid this fate, some classic moves are open to them:”

1. Tactless, violent retaliation
2. Withdraw in a visible huff

“Both tacks provide a way of denying the offender his status as an interactant, and hence denying the offensive judgment he has made. Both strategies are ways of salvaging face, but for all concerned the costs are usually high.”

The acceptance of the high costs of tactless, violent retaliation are, according to Anderson, typical of those who adopt a “street” persona in an inner-city context. Those who adopt a “decent” persona may be familiar with the “four classic moves involved in face-saving practices,” but they will nonetheless adopt a “street persona” as a way of preserving their personal safety. I, however, did not find that young people in the inner-city differentiate themselves according to “decent” and “street,” but instead found that while most young men use notions akin to the code of the street as an important accounting device, they could also provide many instances in which they deviate from the dictums of the code. How might one account for these divergences, when according to Anderson, the code has an apparent universal currency in the inner-city?

This analysis will explore negative cases (Cressey 1953; Lindesmith 1968; Katz 1988), to revise--or at least revisit--Anderson’s account of the logic behind inner-city violence. We will explore ways “the code” is operative and the ways it is not, showing that those who violate “the

code” may well be safer than those who follow it. Even if young people who walk away from a fight confront a loss of face, they often rationalize such a loss as more easily survivable than continued violence. Below, I will begin by describing the dataset and definitions, and then explore how young people often account for their actions in ways that positively resonate with the code Anderson describes. I will then turn to negative cases in my sample, and probe the locally understood reasons and methods for making exceptions to the code.

The Dataset and Definitions

The data presented are based participant observation conducted over a four year period in and around Choices Alternative Academy (CAA), a small, inner-city alternative school¹ for young people aged 14 to 21 in the Western United States. Built in the early 1990's by a conglomeration of federal and local officials to serve drop-outs between the ages of 14 and 21, the school is situated in a six census block area with the highest crime and poverty in a large U.S. county. Approximately 300 students are enrolled; 61 are on probation; about 200 show up on any given day. All names of staff, students, and the school are pseudonyms. I chose a school as a setting where I could spend a sustained period of time with young people and be of service to them. I chose this particular school as it is located in an area with the highest crime and poverty in a large, highly populous, diverse county. Students who are sent there often have histories of violence, drug use, truancy, dropping out of school, and teen pregnancy.

Over a period of four years, I interviewed 46 students, six repeatedly, plus eleven teachers, two administrators, one security guard, and a community activist. Interviews were open-ended, lasting from one to three hours, and were taped and transcribed in detail. For some consultants, the total time of interviewing lasted up to 12 hours. I chose my interviewees based on a number of criteria, seeking a racial/ethnic balance of interviewees that would mirror the

neighborhood, and interviewees who represented extremes of the continuum from gang-member to non-gang-member, nonviolent to violent. I also sought to interview students with a variety of interests, including those who excel academically, musically, in sports, or mechanically. The range of talents and abilities of young people who have been marginalized in educational settings of last resort, such as alternative schools and special education programs, is not only remarkable but stunning, as is evident in many of interview excerpts below.

Interviews were semi-structured, open-ended conversations, lasting from one to three hours, and were taped and transcribed. Sessions with students were life-history interviews (see Vigil 1988), covering such topics as places the consultant lived, reasons for moving, descriptions of fights, drug use, experiences in school, intimate and familial relationships, hobbies, and experiences with gangs. Transcripts were provided for consultants when possible, checked for accuracy, and used as the basis for further questions.ⁱⁱ

In each interview with students, I asked my consultant about fights they had experienced throughout their lifecourse. In my first stretch of fieldwork, I recorded 39 accounts of fights based on these interviews, and in my second stretch, I recorded an additional 54 cases of “fight tales,” leading to a total of 93 stories of fights. I also asked about fights avoided or “walked away from.” These queries lead to 23 accounts in my first immersion period, and 18 accounts in my second immersion period, for a total 41 accounts. Respondents vary greatly in loquaciousness; some speak for over a half-hour about a single fight episode, while others limit their description to a few lines, despite my efforts to solicit as complete an account as possible. I also directly observed 15 instances of fights, 6 which I categorize as “play-fights,” as the participants were laughing and smiling at the time, even though they could become quite rough (compare Boulton 1991). In one instance, two young men who were chasing and grappling with

each other crashed through a locked gate on a six-foot-high chained link fence, only to arise laughing and somewhat surprised. The lock was badly damaged.

The dataset is limited to fights experienced; I omit all fights witnessed second-hand, unless the protagonist became directly involved. I also omit fights involving gangs, drugs, or guns, as these instances often overshadow fights, occurring within an ecological framework that deserves attention in its own right. Hence, I limit what is to be considered a “fight” to an aggressive physical engagement understood as a fight by my consultant, and which does not involve gangs, drugs or guns. “Walking away” is similarly dependent on the definitions of my consultants, and does not include instances involving gangs, drugs or guns.

The Incurrible Code of the Street

According to Anderson, African-American young men in the inner-city fight for respect. Those who do not fight are thus liable to be disrespected. To be disrespected means to be deeply shamed: verbally stripped of one’s masculinity, and referred to as a “punk,” “pussy” or “bitch.” This theme was reinforced by many of my consultants, even if they provided evidence to the contrary. Such an unquestionable assumption is called an incurrible proposition, as it cannot be proved wrong, and is such a part of “common sense” that members continue to believe even when faced with contradictory evidence. Consider, for instance, the following exchange I had with Oliver, a 14-year-old Latino, who tells me how he and his friends were occasionally harassed in middle school.

Oliver: They would go over to us and like try to punk us. You can’t go let a punk say that, you feel like a little bitch. You know getting punked this and that by another person, then the whole school thinks you’re a little bitch.

RG: They think you’re a little bitch?

Oliver: Yeah. [laughs]

Such “punking” includes both short- and long-term physical and/or verbal harassment.

Oliver then speaks of a powerful motivator to fight: “the whole school thinks you’re a little bitch.” In my sample of fight accounts, 9 fights began as a response to offensive words, and 12 fights began in response to continued, long-term harassment. In the following excerpt, Antoine, an 18-year-old African-American, reiterates these elements of the code in his description of a fight.

Antoine: We all playin’ basketball, right? So I’m just doggin’ ‘im, I’m usin’ him all day. I’m makin’ shots on him, scorin’ on ‘im. So he gettin’ mad. He started trying to bang. I never knew he was a gang banger. (...) He just kept going on it, picking at it.”

RG: What did he do? What did he say?

Antoine: He tried to lie and switch it up and say, ‘Oh I’ve seen you in such and such hood.’ I was like, ‘You ain’t seen me nowhere.’ I tried to walk off. But sometimes you just have to fight, you know! Me, I didn’t know what he had on him, a gun, a knife or nothing. So he just kept on trying to fight me. So I have to stick up for myself. ‘If you wanna fight me, come on man. I ain’t fittin’ to sit up here and let you punk me.’ So he got up in my face and he swung on me. So I just slammed him on a car (xx). I just started chokin’ him out. All his friends were laughin’ at him. And they told me, ‘I see that you ain’t a punk.’ So they just wasn’t gonna mess with me. Period. I had to stick up for myself and I had to fight. But you know, I don’t like fightin’ period.

RG: Right.

Antoine: This was in front of a lot of people, so you can’t just punk out here. If so, they’ll be like, ‘Oh so I know he a punk now, so I can just punk him everytime I see him.’ So sometimes you gotta stick up for yourself. So I stuck up for myself and I told him, ‘Come on then.’

In this excerpt, Antoine describes a scenario common in seven separate fight tales, where a contest (such as a competition over gymnastic flips) or a game (usually basketball) leads to a physical altercation. According to Antoine, his adversary, humiliated by Antoine’s basketball skills, concocts a gang rivalry as a justification to fight (“he started trying to bang”). Although Antoine doesn’t know if his rival has a weapon, he is highly conscious of the crowd watching the interaction, and is determined not to be seen as a “punk.” His story validates the code of the street, as do the onlookers, in whose eyes Antoine earned respect (“they told me, ‘I see that you ain’t a punk.’”). His rival, meanwhile, is humiliated by the audience’s laughter.

Later in this interview, Antoine's good friend, Charlie, joins the interview, and agrees wholeheartedly with Antoine, saying, "If you let somebody disrespect you, you a punk, simple as that."

Antoine: Yeah.

Charlie: You ain't *supposed to* let nobody disrespect you."

Such is the moral authority of the code, prescribing the ways one is "supposed to" act. If one does not, the myth goes, one will be punked over and over again. As one example (of many), Jaime, a 20-year-old Latino, tells below how walking away from fights will lead to greater violence than simply standing up and fighting.

RG: Have you ever walked away from a fight?

Jaime: Well it's hard to walk away from a fight here.

RG: Here at this school?

Jaime: No. Here in this area, period. 'Cause if you turn around, they gonna come right back on you. They might even hate you, to tell you the truth.

RG: They hate you because you walk away?

Jaime: I mean 'cause, you already gonna have a scar there, they already gonna be talking shit about you. When you turn around, they might just get back on you, and that's that," he laughs, and adds, "You know, you might as well know what happens after that.

Anderson also states that if one does not stand up to an antagonist, one will continue to be harassed indefinitely. As Oscar, a 19-year-old Latino consultant, claims, "I never walked away from a fight. Basically what I think, you walk away, they gonna call you a bitch for the rest of your life. You backed off. You scared. They keep bugging you. They still bring stuff up. Really, I never backed off a fight." He offers this based on his first-hand observations of a gentleman who sometimes hangs out with his group: "We got a friend, he kinda old, we still bringing that stuff up, then he be feeling bad, and he sometimes just go home."

Such episodes may also lead to intense, long-term self-recrimination. In his short story, "On Violence," David Nicholson (1995) describes the humiliation he felt when, as a ten-year-old and a recent immigrant to Washington, D.C., from Jamaica, he refused to participate in a staged

fight despite pressure from his peers. As he states, “I’d done nothing to Furman. He’d done nothing to me. And besides, one of us might get hurt.” As he notes, “It is a terrible thing to be condemned by others as a coward, but it is even worse to condemn yourself as one. For that reason, I brood about that time in the alley more often than is probably healthy” (1995:29-30).

Exceptions to The Code of the Street

In the above instances, as in Anderson’s analysis, invocations of “the code” are unproblematic: one’s masculinity is forever compromised if one walks away from a fight. Yet many young men have their masculinity well intact despite telling of numerous instances of “walking away.” In each case, the unquestionable authority of the code is preserved through justifications for not following it. Still, such “exceptions” accumulate into a substantial number of tales (41), both with and without bystanders. Below, we will examine two ways young men provide such tales. First, they provide good *reasons* for walking away from a fight, and secondly they describe the *process* of walking away from a fight.

Good Reasons to Avoid a Fight

In the course of my interviews, I could count on every young man to tell me that anyone who walked away from a fight would be punked for life. I could also count on most young man to tell me a of a time when he walked away from a fight. He was able to walk away without losing respectability due to “good reasons.” Many in this context would consider that fighting despite such good reasons would be stupid or shameful. For instance, sometimes the odds are not equal, as when the protagonist has back-up (friends who will assist him), is much bigger and stronger, or is seen as a member of a gang. At other times, the consequences of fighting are not worth the risk, as when one might lose a job, be expelled from school, or risk harm to family members. Another good reason is that the matter is not significant enough to fight over, such as

a perceived foul during a basketball game. Finally, one would be seen as a punk for engaging in violence, by “hitting a girl.”

Unequal Odds

One vital aspect of inner-city teens’ accounts of fights is “back-up” (see Anderson 1999:88-90ff). Often seen as a motivation to join a gang (Jankowski 1991; Monti 1994), “back-up” entails having friends who will provide assistance in case of a fight. Having such friends or seeing that others have them is a “good reason” not to fight. Consider Ben’s explanation for not attacking his abusive, alcoholic step-father.

Ben: I feel like hitting him myself.

RG: Mm hm.

Ben: I’m always the one being able to control myself.

RG: How are you able to control yourself?

Ben: You just have to think of the consequences, of what happens after this, after you do this or do that. He has sons himself. What if he gets his sons. His sons are old and big. If I hit this guy, who knows what he’s gonna bring after me. I just think of all that.

In this case, Ben avoids striking his stepfather for fear of repercussions from the stepfather’s other sons.

Other consultants also understand “back-up” as a good reason for potential antagonists to avoid a fight. Terry understands a young man’s reasons to stop harrassing him in these terms: “I started hangin’ with my cousins. When he saw that I had people that go to this school, he started leavin’ me alone.”

Young people may also explain avoiding a fight without humiliation if the antagonist is especially large and intimidating. Below, Ernest, a 16-year-old Latino, has told me how he was riding his bike after school when two men approached him and demanded, “Hey man, gimme your bike.” Ernest ducked into a liquor store and, in his words,

Ernest: I was acting stupid like if I was looking at the candies and shit like that, and they came up and just took it from right there. The man that works in the store said, 'Hey, they stole your bike!' I came outside and I saw 'em, they had my bike. I was like, 'Man, fuck it.' I wasn't gonna fuck with them 'cause they were big! [he laughs] They were kinda buff. They didn't have no shirts man, and you could see they were buff, like they barely came out of camp [prison] or something. I thought, 'Man, I ain't fucking with them. Fuck them. Take the fucking bike man. Fuck the bike.'

Having a personal item stolen is a clear way to be "punked," and leads to fights in five accounts. While my consultants provide no instances of stickup, such episodes of "jacking," typically signaled with the mundane request, "Give me _____," are intended to "construct a power asymmetry" and "make a fool of the victim" (Katz 1988:174). Yet in this case, his "face" is preserved, since it makes sense locally for him to not confront multiple "buff" assailants, as his account makes apparent.

A third way that a reference to unequal odds provides a good reason to avoid a fight is when a young person is intimidated by the other's gang connections. For Ernest, his bike wasn't his only loss to local predators; he also tells of losing the weights he placed outside the door of his house, for weight-lifting. In this case, it is not the size of his antagonist that justifies his non-pursuit, but his apparent gang connections.

Ernest: One time I had some weights. I had 'em outside the door of my apartment, and some fool got 'em. It was some gangster, so I said 'fuck it.' I saw him go get 'em. He got 'em and he put 'em in his car, and I was gonna go tell 'im something, but I left there. I didn't wanna get into no problems. Fuck it man, he got it already. [If] I'm gonna go up there, talk shit to him, then he's gonna come back and try to do something.

Carlos, an 18-year-old Latino who "kicks it" with members of 18th Street, draws on each of the above justifications for not fighting. First, he mentions the large size of his opponent, but despite this, Carlos is undaunted. Then, when the opponent realizes Carlos has "back-up," the opponent leaves the scene.

Carlos: I was in Jackman [High School]. I was with a lot of girls in the [lunch] line. I thought it was a lady's folder, of one of my friends. I was gonna start writing 18th Street

and all that, when that fool was from 38th. That fool was from 38th, and that fool told me, 'Whachu wanna do,' and all that. He said he was gonna throw down with me. I told him, 'What's up?' And then we went out. That fool was big and tall. He was like two years older.

RG: You were writing 18th Street on his folder?

Carlos: Nah, I didn't write. I was gonna start writing. And then I saw where that fool was sitting, and he told me, 'That's my folder. I'm gonna throw down wachu.' He didn't like me. He's like, 'I'm gonna throw down wachu when you go out,' and all that. I'm like, 'Oh well.' And then when one of my homeboys saw that he was gonna throw down with me, he was like, 'Let's go down, let's go down, me and you.' He [the antagonist] like started running.

Avoiding the Consequences of Fighting

Young men also speak of not wanting to fight to avoid negative repercussions, such as losing a job, being kicked out of school, or bringing harm to family members. Consider the following excerpt, in which Jaime, a 20-year-old Latino, tells of being accosted by a drunken gangster while he is taking out the trash at the printing company where he works.

Jaime: I was out in the alley putting trash in the bin, and this gangster walks up to me. I didn't even know him or nothing. He's like, 'You got any money?' I'm like, 'Nah I ain't got no money.' 'Lemme check yo pockets,' he says. I'm like, [high pitched:] 'What?' 'Lemme check yo pocket.' I go, 'Man, I ain't got shit,' and I just talked to him. I coulda straight out beat him up. I'm like, 'Nah I ain't got shit man, it's cool.' You know? Try to avoid him and shit. 'Lemme check your pocket.' I had money in one pocket and my pager, so I'm like, 'Look man, I ain't got shit.' Put my hand in my pocket, took it out of my pocket, ain't have shit. In my other pocket I had my pager and my money. He was like, 'Lemme see your other pocket.' I'm like, 'Nah man, get away.' He had a bottle. He was actually drunk. He had a beer bottle. I'm like, 'Maan, I was like, come on man, it's cool.' That's the way I was telling him. I was actually acting like a punk, but it was for the best for me, 'cause at my job I don't wanna lose--I don't wanna burn myself around there.

Jaime, a tough young man who had been kicked out of six high schools for fighting before entering CAA, tells me elsewhere in his interview that he has very little respect for punks. Yet in this excerpt, he admits to being one, because "it was for the best for me." As this excerpt continues, he tells how his quick movements allow him to skirt past his drunken assailant and inform the boss of trouble. From that point on, they made sure not to go to the trash bin

unaccompanied, and Jaime always carried a long metal rod that his manager told him he could “throw through the heart” of the assailant if he bothered him again.ⁱⁱⁱ

Anderson offers such accounts as instances of what a “decent” person must be prepared to face. According to Anderson’s analysis, Jaime “code-switched” in this instance, using street smarts by showing the assailant only one of his pockets, and then moving quickly to get back into the shop. Yet Jaime was also kicked out of numerous high schools for fighting, had taken drugs, and “kicks it” with gang members, which would certainly fall on the “street” side of the decent/street dichotomy. Above, Jaime waxes “decent,” in order to not lose his job; later, with his boss’s permission to arm himself in the alley, he relishes the potential opportunity to do great harm to the assailant. Thus Jaime shows not only how the “the code” is a resource, but also how notions of decent or street may be a resource.^{iv} Jaime may speak of himself as “punked” in this instance, but like Ernest, he has a good reason, as well as a vow not to let it happen again.

Another potential consequence of fighting is to be kicked out of school. Although the deterrent effect of disciplinary expulsions has been extensively criticized (Fine 1991), some students, such as Donald, Brian and Buck, below, cite this factor as a good reason to avoid a fight. All three are African-American; Donald is 14, and Brian and Buck are both 16.

Donald: I try to avoid it. You hear people talk. People like be watchin’, they be tryin’ to have you fight. (...) I didn’t wanna get suspended or nothin’, or kicked out, miss school and everything else.

Brian: In Jr. High, people talking mess, trying to bag, I just walk away, because I know they gonna wanna fight. People call names like, “Scared, chicken.” I don’t even care. I never cared. They don’t punk me. They know I ain’t scared. I don’t need to be kicked out of school.

Buck: I was in Jr. High, and I had straight A’s, and everything I wanted. This boy tried to pick on me. I was like, ‘Man, I don’t gotta fight you.’ He had bad grades; he didn’t have nothin’ goin’ for him. I was like, ‘I ain’t about to fight you.’ I had everything. I had all of it. I had good grades, science fairs.

In these excerpts, both Donald and Brian refer to the pervasiveness of the code, represented through taunts of others at school; as Donald states, “you hear people talk,” and according to Brian, “people call names.” While Donald simply does not want to be suspended, Brian claims that “I never cared,” taking a rare moral stance that the code does not interest him. For Buck, a student labeled as “gifted,” school was too precious of a resource for him to miss, and the actions of another young man who wants to fight are understandable by virtue of his bad grades. If more inner-city students could be inspired with such an outlook towards school, zero-tolerance policies for fighting might have some teeth. At CAA, however, Buck had lost this perspective; in fact, he once outraged a teacher at the school by stealing a teaching manual.

A third good reason to avoid the consequences of a fight is if one is with family members. For Everett, an 18-year-old African-American, this constitutes his only possible reason.

RG: Do you ever remember a time when you walked away from a fight?

Everett: Once. The only reason I walked away from that fight was I had my little niece with me. It wasn't that the guy was older or anything like that, it was that I had my little niece with me, and she was kinda young. I didn't wanna like put her in that kinda environment.

Below, Angel, an 18-year-old Latino, offers a similar justification, in light of threats of a fight wrought by a gang [Bisa crew] rivalry.

Angel: Me, my lady and her two sisters are at the movies in Huntington Park. Me and an enemy bumped heads with each other. He was like, ‘What’s up?’ ‘Shh, homie.’ He was like, ‘Fuck BMN.’ ‘Wha?’ ‘Fuck BMN’ [clicks tongue] Whatever, esse. I don’t care. I ain’t from there no more.’ ‘What? You straight punk ass bastard.’ [I respond] ‘You know what esse, you wanna get down with me? Because of the crew, I’m not getting down. But if you have a little personal problem with me, just let know.’ He wanted to get down because of the crew. I used to be from BMN. I used to put a lot of work into it. He was like, ‘Fuck BMN. Fuck this. Fuck that.’ I said to my lady, ‘You know what? Let’s go. Fuck that. Let’s go to another movie theater.’ I just let him talk his shit. He got mad, because he was talking shit, I wasn’t paying attention to his ass. Like my lady said, ‘They know you ain’t no punk. They know if you want to, you can whoop his ass.’ I got down with him once at Eldridge. He’s taller than me. ‘Let’s go.’ We went to

another theater. I wasn't gonna let this fool ruin our little night out. Even though I had paid already, I said, 'Let's go.'

After Angel distances himself from his affiliation with BMN, his antagonist calls him a "straight punk ass bastard," a likely response to "ranking out." Angel then reports changing the topic of the encounter, from "gangs" to "a personal problem." As the antagonist continues, Angel then turns to his lady to propose leaving, and she affirms that this does not entail a loss of face, since he had "already whooped his ass" previously. Although Angel's evening out is compromised, his honor remains intact.

"Nothin' but a Game"

Many young men, in the inner-city or not, become quite passionate when playing basketball. The excitement of the sport, the physical labor required to play it, the fouls that may be committed intentionally or inadvertently, combined with the fact that one's reputation is often on the line as one plays this very public game, often lead to fights. Since the game is known to be so combustible, many young men can foresee trouble and know when to back off, and how to de-escalate confrontations, as Chris explains below.

Chris: My homeboy T-Faith, we was playin' basketball and he jump up, went to grab my shirt. I grab his shirt, I said, 'Look, you can raise up off me homie I'm tellin' ya 'cause I didn't hit you.' He was like, 'Well cuz, who hit me?' The guy don't know. 'I didn't hit you.' I'm like, 'Man, it wadn't nothin' but a game. It's a contact sport, you gonna hit regardless.' So then he went to push me an' I pushed him back I was like, 'You know what cuz? Ain't worth me gettin' kicked out of school no more and goin' to jail for you.' I jus' turned around and walked away. Later on that day cuz come up he was like, 'Man you know what? You got some big ass balls to do dat.' And Ms. Reynolds was like, 'Boy you cool, I like that.'

In this case, Chris is playing basketball with a friend who suddenly grabs his shirt, thinking Chris had hit him. Chris invokes the ambience of basketball as a reason T-Faith was hit, saying, "You gonna hit regardless." T-Faith doesn't accept Chris's reasoning however, and pushes him. Chris, not one to be punked, pushes back, but continues his explanation, this time

invoking the prospect of being kicked out of school or going to jail. Through extensive reasoning, and tolerating some physical abuse, Chris leaves the scene of the threat with his honor intact. He even tells me that the principal of the school complimented him for his behavior. Here is another instance of a “street” person becoming “decent” to avoid a fight.

If a crowd is present at a basketball game, such a resolution of conflict may be more difficult to arrive at, as was apparent in the excerpt from Antoine, above. Below, Terry faces similar pressures, and also gives in, despite his better judgment.

Terry: We was playin’ basketball and then he elbowed me in the lip, so I bled. And then I just walked off, and then everybody was like, ‘Why you let him do that?’ I was like, ‘We just playin’,’ so that’s why. I was like, ‘Forget it, fool was jus’ playin’.’ Then everybody was like pressurin’ me and I was like, ‘Forget it.’ so I just—

RG: So everyone else was pressuring you?

Terry: Yeah, so I just told him to go outside; we started fighting.

In this case, Terry is unsuccessful in using the same justification for not abiding by the code that Chris was able to use: “we just playin’.” Also, while Chris practically boasts of reducing the tensions that could lead to a fight, Terry resorts to a fight as an acknowledged surrender to pressures from the crowd. Here we see that for Terry, “The issue... was not one of being seen positively, but one of folding oneself into the cultural fabric of the group so as not to be subject to its devastating gaze” (Katz 1999:152).

“Everybody was saying, ‘He’s a punk if he hits her back.’

One final reason for avoiding fights is when a young man is afraid of being perceived as a punk if he does engage in violence -- an explanation possible only if his antagonist is female. Below, Buck, an 18-year-old African-American young man, speaks of being hit by his girlfriend at school.

Buck: When I was at high school one time, my homegirl was mad at me for some reason. She slapped me in front of everybody. I wanted to just hit her back, but I was like, ‘cool

down.’ Everybody was saying, ‘He’s a punk if he hits her back.’ I was like, ‘I know.’ Then she hit me again, so I was like—

RG: In front of everybody?

Buck: In front of everybody! So I just sat there. I just walked away. I was like, ‘All right.’ I go to my class.’ And then the next period came, I couldn’t take it, so I told my counselor, ‘Could you send me home? I’ll come back tomorrow. I just need to cool down.’ She sent me home.

In this case, as in the above case, a crowd is present, and the narrator speaks of being attacked by the assailant. Yet while Chris is concerned that he could be kicked out of school, Buck speaks only of the gender of his assailant. Although one may face increased pressure not to punk out in front of a crowd (Felson 1982; Anderson 1999), in this case, the crowd exerts a moral force in the opposing direction. While such an instance is not mentioned by Anderson, it clearly belongs as a case in which one is upholding the code of the street, but without violence.

Good Ways to Avoid a Fight

Often more interesting than a young man’s good reasons for avoiding a fight are his ingenious *ways* of doing so. In the face of an antagonist, perhaps with a hungry crowd eager for action, how might one back away, and what are the consequences? While this is the topic of innumerable conflict resolution programs, young men in the inner-city have their own techniques, which are not based on special training. As we move from rationalizations to descriptions of methods, the relevance of the code diminishes. In fact, many of the young men speak unapologetically and even proudly of practices that directly contradict edicts of “the code,” such as “don’t back down,” and “don’t snitch” (also see Rosenfeld et al. 2003).

In this section, I will examine both immediate, short-term solutions as well as longer term ways of avoiding a violent confrontation. Immediate ways of avoiding a fight include: backing down; conversational techniques, such as complimenting (“sweet talking”) the antagonist, or switching the topic; making the fight into a contest; telling an authority figure (“snitching”), and

avoiding the antagonist. Longer-term solutions include: moving, or “to kick it by myself” in a practice I call “becoming invisible.”

Short-term Solutions

I observed at least one situation in which a student explicitly backed down. Ken and Gerald are both African-American; Ken is 16 and Gerald is 18. Ken is a member of one of the school’s tagging crews, and Gerald has established a solid reputation on the basketball court.

The following scene occurs under the basketball net.

When Ken makes fun of a young man on the court, Gerald says, “What are you saying this to him for? It’s like you think you can play basketball just because you made a shot yesterday. You can’t rap or play ball so you best shut up.” Ken shakes his head--Johnnie puts a hand up as if asking Gerald to back off, and another says “ahh,” as if asking Gerald to go easier. There is silence, as we know Ken could take a swing at Gerald, but instead he laughs slightly and says, “I know I can’t play ball, I never said I could. Come on.”

Such incidents happen on a daily basis, but they seem to pass without notice and are never mentioned in interviews. The excerpt begins with Gerald coming to the defense of another young man by ridiculing Ken’s basketball and rapping skills, and telling him, “you best shut up.” What’s fascinating in this excerpt is the collaborative work that other young men do to diffuse Gerald’s attack. Johnnie diminishes the tension by raising his open palm towards Gerald, and another vocalizes a colling complaint by saying, “ahhh.” Ken then provides an “offering” (Goffman 1967:20), acknowledging the truth of Gerald’s attack, cooling down a potentially violent confrontation.

One week later, Ken brings a small gift for Gerald, and Gerald is appreciative:

On the yard, Ken pulls out a silver scorpion, shows it to Gerald and asks, “Is this your scorpion? I found it last week. I think it came off when you were playing basketball.” “Yeah, it did. Thanks,” Gerald says, and Ken hands to him. Gerald looks it over and puts it in his pocket.

In this case, Gerald shows a way a young man can “get cool” with another that does not involve fighting. Initially on the basketball court, it is clear that honor is significant in this interaction.

First, Gerald comes to defend the honor of the young man whom Ken had been chiding. While Ken had been “only kidding,” Gerald’s tone is quite serious, as is quickly acknowledged by others who signal for him to back off and calm down. Ken, rather than rush to defend his honor and fight the taller, older, young man, admits to Gerald’s accusations. Yet Ken does not lose face in this instance. The whole scene is quickly forgotten and never remarked upon. Nonetheless, Ken’s thoughtfulness shows he has not forgotten, and harbors no ill will towards Gerald (compare Anderson 1999:85-91). This is in contrast to Anderson’s finding that, “the culture of the street doesn’t allow backing down” (*Ibid.*:97).

A second short-term way to avoid a fight is through conversational techniques. Many young men enjoy telling of their quick use of wit to avoid trouble. Below, Gerome, an 18-year-old, discusses how he avoided a scrap, in the days when he was younger and smaller, by complimenting the fine taste of his larger antagonist.

Gerome: There was one time when I was a freshman, there was a guy whose girlfriend was in class. I knew they were going together. One of his friends said that I was flirting with her. I was like, ‘OK, I flirt with his girl, whatever.’ He [the boyfriend] comes up to me, he’s this big football player, a big senior. He’s like, ‘You lookin’ at my girl?’ I was like, ‘You know what, you have a very cute girl. You have a FINE girl. Let me tell you that. I’m not flirting with her, I’m not trying to disrespect you in any way at all. I’m just complimenting you. Your girlfriend’s hot. He was like, ‘Oh, thanks man.’ And it was fine. I woulda gotten my ass beaten then [he laughs]. This dude was big.

Below, Ken shows how he avoided a possible fight after a young man bumped into him at an amusement park. Anderson speaks of such a setting as the third type of “staging area,” after local hang-outs and business strips, where young people wage their campaigns for respect. It is also one of the most volatile of such places since “large crowds gather [there] from throughout the city.” As he states, “people can become touchy, and a fight can start over seemingly minor incidents, but what happens is anything but minor, because an injury or death may result” (*Ibid.*:76-79). Below, we see the result of one such incident.

Ken: We were by WaterWorld, right next to that. It was so crowded around there. Trying to get by everybody, so when we walked by each other we bump, and we just turn around. I was just like, I had that little voice, saying, 'Sock him.' So I turned around looked, and said, 'Excuse me,' and we both said, 'Excuse me,' and then we just laugh and walk off. We said 'excuse me' at the exact same time, which made me feel better.

A third immediate way to respond to a potential threat is by turning the fight into a contest. While seven consultants told tales in which an athletic game becomes the scene of a fight, Chris tells of an instance in which he and his friends manage to create a game out of a threat. Below, Chris tells how this occurred during a football game.

Chris: We was playing, and there was about like five or six big ole heavy set Mexican dudes, walk up, they was like, 'That's my ball, that's my ball.' We was like, 'Nah, man, that ain't your ball.' My friend was like, 'We can play football for the ball. Whoever win, game is 21, and if we win, it's our ball, if we lose, it's your ball.' I was like, 'OK, cool.'

A fourth way of pacifying a threatening situation is through "snitching." In the excerpt below, Bix, a 16-year-old Latino, tells of how he resolved a menacing situation by simply telling school administrators about bullies who had stolen his money in a high school locker room.

Bix: I thought I was gonna get punked, because I saw all kind of big kids. They stand at the end of the hallway when you walk out of the locker room. You gotta go through that to get outside of the locker room. They'll pocket check you right there. Take your money or take whatever they want. I thought they'd beat me up. I just got punked in the locker room. I got jacked for my money. Oh man, I felt like a little punk. Some other kids got jacked too. That was only one day. I snitched on 'em and they got caught, so they went to jail. Two out of the four of 'em went, and they didn't do that anymore.

According to Anderson, "The code of the street is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system--and in others who would champion one's personal security" (*Ibid.*:34). Yet in this, and in five other instances, young men speak of resorting to persons of authority in school, whether they be security guards, teachers, or administrators, and receiving a definite respite from their worries, with no ill effects on their reputation. In interviews, young men also speak of many times when their families called the police to report violence that had been done to them. Based on this scant evidence, I suggest that

people in the inner-city will go to police and other champions of personal security when they believe they will be able to address a situation effectively, just as people do anywhere else.

Long-term Strategies

As opposed to the immediate, situationally grounded ways of enacting “exceptions” to the code of the street, consultants also share long-term solutions. The first of these, avoidance, is quite common in literature on disputes in communities (Merry 1979). The second, moving, is often the last resort for those faced with intractable antagonisms (Emerson 1981). The third, “being invisible,” is a means of adopting a stance of civil inattention in public (Goffman 1959). By not overtly paying attention to one’s surroundings, those surroundings rarely reciprocate, leaving one, in effect, as unnoticed as one is unnoticed. I will explore accounts from two young men who speak of adopting such an approach towards the presentation of a public self. Such presentations, which are “delivered loudly and clearly” enough for them to be left alone, do not involve antagonizing others through the intimation, “If you mess with me, there will be a severe physical penalty--coming from me” (Anderson 1999:106; also see Wilkinson 2001:243).

One consultant in my sample is an expert on avoidance strategies. Steve, a Latino, has lived his whole life just blocks from CAA, and claims that he has been involved with the 18th Street Gang for nearly that entire time, since he was six. The issue that was eating at Steve during our interview is that his girlfriend of two years aborted her baby without his knowledge because some of his long-time male friends told her that their sister liked Steve. One of his hopes was to be a father and raise a family, and he is deeply hurt by this news. In an extended interview that came to resemble a therapy session, I asked:

RG: So you still feel like you could use a gun to solve a problem?

Steve: That’s what, that’s what I’m tryin’ not to do. [he laughs]

RG: Tryin’ not to do. [I laugh]

Steve: That’s what I’m really trying not to do. I even, I even took ‘em outta my house.

RG: Took the guns outta your house?

Steve: I give 'em to my neighbor(x). 'Keep my guns for me.'

RG: Uh huh. [...] So it's not like that feeling just goes away.

Steve: Uh uh. It got, that gots me. It gots me real good.

While the code of street shows how inner-city residents must fight for respect, in his dilemma, we see Steve trapped by lines of honor wherever he turns (Horowitz 1983). For his girlfriend to have a child is a great honor, but she has aborted it, which is not only a dishonor, but a disappointment. To add to this, he is dishonored by his friends, whom he feels led his girlfriend to abort the fetus. Moreover, he is unsure why they are giggling when he passes, but if they are giggling at him, it is a further dishonor. To avenge this loss of face he is tempted to somehow use his guns against them, but he guards against his rage (Hochschild 1983) by placing his own guns out of reach and avoiding looking at the friends who have brought about his grief. Four years later, when I ask him about this prior dilemma, he says he developed the practice of keeping his friends and his girlfriend separate. "You notice how you don't see me around with her a lot, I don't talk about her," he says. I nod. He tells me he likes to keep it separate, just to keep things straight.

Erick, a 19-year-old Latino, is well versed in a more drastic long-term strategy for avoiding violence: moving. At the time of our interview, he faces a number of profound difficulties in managing the problems posed by his sister. According to Erick, at age 12 she had joined a local gang, and she became uncontrollable and rebellious to the point of becoming violent against himself and their mother. After his sister physically abuses their mother and steals her money, the mother evicts her from the household. The sister subsequently throws a molotov cocktail through her family's living room window, which breaks against the security bars, setting fire to the couch and draperies. Erick's family then moves, but he is horrified to find that his sister followed, moving into an apartment behind theirs. As he states,

Erick: One time, I was outside, fixing the car and I saw my little nephews playing around. I'm like, that's my sister's kids. What are they doing there? And then I found out that they were living there, 'cause I would see 'em everyday. I thought they were probably visiting a friend. But I see 'em again and again. I was like, I told my mom about it.

When she and her friends attempt to destroy Erick's prized van, she forces Erick and his mother to move again, only to again track them down. Faced with this stalker, he and his mom decide to move out of state (Emerson et al. 1998).

Erick: We're gonna move outta here, and I guess I'm gonna have to check outta school 'cause I'm not gonna be able to come over here. My mom was talkin' about moving [out of state] so we could stay away from my sister.

RG: Jeesh. (..) That's terrible how one person can--

Erick: Can do all of that, that's what I would think too, you know--what she's making my mom do.

Faced with hostilities from his sister, and after repeated efforts to avoid and dissuade her, his family decides to move out of state as a last resort (Emerson 1981). Emily, an 18-year-old Latina, also speaks of moving in response to antagonisms from local, rival gang members.

Emily: We had problems with gang bangers that lived around us. They were always chasing me and my sister so we had to move.

RG: Did your whole family move because of the gang banging?

Emily: Yeah. My dad and my sister. Me and my twin sister, like we were from a different gang that didn't get along with the gang where we lived. So they would see us and they would start chasing us every day.

RG: Every day?

Emily: They'd chase us from school. We couldn't go outside. They'd be waiting for us outside, waiting for us to come out.

RG: Mm hm.

Emily: So we moved.

Many families have moved out of the area around CAA to suburban regions, where they often find problems with "gangs" and violence to be even more pernicious.

The final long-term means of avoiding violence involves the adoption of a mode of bodily comportment that in effect signals to others that this person will have nothing to do with "the code of the street." Such students at CAA are typically quiet, long-suffering and hard

working. Although they had exemplary records in previous years, they were often lost in the shuffle at traditional high schools, simply disappearing from the overwhelming and stressful crowds, and dropping out. In my fieldwork, I had the pleasure of getting to know two such young men rather well. The first is Terry, a 17-year-old African-American, and the second is Ben, an 18-year-old Belizean. In a classroom they are easily overlooked, in the shadows of those more boisterous souls busily engaged in posturing, rapping and insulting each other, as in the following note.

I am sitting near the back of Mr. Ross's class as it fills with students. While Mr. Ross sits at his desk in the back of the room, his head bent over as he concentrates on a piece of paper, Tim, a large young man, and ostensibly a student in the class, exercises his dominance of the room, often getting up to physically demonstrate the way someone walks around the hood, or make some other point. Meanwhile, Terry and Richard both work quietly at the back. As some of the young men begin dissing each other, Terry focuses on his work with his back to them, shaking his head disapprovingly.

Terry is a remarkable young man not only for his ability to concentrate in the midst of disorder and distractions, but for the way he routinely walks away from fights, finding tears an effective release for his anger. Consider the excerpt below, continued from the discussion above regarding avoiding a fight out of considerations of unequal odds.

RG: Have you ever had someone who wanted to be in a fight with you and you didn't wanna fight?

Terry: Yeah. In middle school I did.

RG: What happened?

Terry: A boy named Dawkins, he just wanted to come up and fight me, 'cause I don't know. I guess 'cause I used to beat him at a lot of stuff, like basketball and stuff, so he just wanted to fight me one day. He'd push me, hit me, and I wouldn't do nothin', 'cause I didn't wanna fight. 'Cause like now, I ain't never been suspended or kicked out of a school.

RG: Did he call you names?

Terry: Like bitch and ho and everything else. It made me angry.

RG: He was trying to make you angry.

Terry: That's what he wanted to do, so I just--. Like I know a lotta people just wanna make you angry, so I just walk away. I just like started avoidin' him. He only had one of my classes, my homeroom. And I was like avoiding him, and started hangin' with my cousins. When he saw that I had people that go to that school, he started leavin' me alone.

RG: That seems like it takes a lot of strength to walk away when someone's trying to make you angry.

Terry: Sometime I walk away and I be so angry I just like, I start crying, walkin' away.

RG: Mm hm. Yeah. (..) What do you do when you start crying?

Terry: I just go, sit down, talk, talk to the teacher or somebody.

RG: Uh huh.

Terry: Then, soon after that I feel a little better.

Such an account seems quite rational and ordinary, especially for a young person: Terry is picked on and feels bothered, so he finds a teacher to talk to and sheds a few tears. Yet it is the most extraordinary thing in light of the code of the street. For a young man not only to walk away, but to go to a teacher? To cry? Isn't he concerned about his masculinity? Isn't he concerned about the code? Actually, no. For Terry, this was also the most ordinary of events.

Ben, an 18-year-old Belizean, speaks of many ways in which he avoids violence. First, contrary to Anderson's argument, he states that looking like a gang member leads to more problems than not looking like one.^v In fact, on this day, he is wearing the vest of the local auto parts dealer where he proudly works. He then tells how he avoids eye contact on the street--to the point of not even noticing a friend who is waving.

RG: So you don't feel like not being in a gang constricts your lifestyle at all or limits you in any way?

Ben: Nope. (...) If you look like you from one, then they're gonna mess with you. Like me. [he chuckles] "The way I look, nah. Nobody's ever asked me 'where you from' or asked me 'what you lookin' at?' 'Why you starin at me like that?' or somethin'.

RG: Yeah.

Ben: I'm just, you know, I just walk down the street and mind my own business. I don't look at anybody (x). I don't pay *attention* to anything. I just concentrate on walkin', that's it.

RG: You don't pay attention to anything?

Ben: Nu uh. Mr. Martin [the school plant manager] said he was honkin' at me once when I was down the street. I never heard him.

Remarkably, Ben has been able to avoid becoming involved in a fight throughout his entire life in the area around CAA, which he accounts for as follows.

Ben: I never talk to anybody. I don't like interacting with anybody. I just leave everybody alone. I just don't, you know. I try to get people to not look at me as a bad person, somebody against them. When that happens, something's going to happen to you, watch.

Such an account runs contrary to "the code." As Anderson states, "Young people who project decency are generally not given much respect on the streets. Decency or a 'nice' attitude is often taken as a sign of weakness, at times inviting others to 'roll on' or 'try' the person" (Anderson 1999:100). Here is Ben, decent by anyone's standards, beloved by his mother and the teachers at CAA, who walks the streets at will, and has never been jumped. Despite working at an auto parts retailer, Ben often experiences car problems, and will walk miles through some of the most notorious neighborhoods without incident. I have seen how Ben walks, and while he does not exude an air of toughness, he does not seem especially "nice" either. Rather, he appears as a serious young man going about his business, and staying out of the business of others.

Steve, a 20-year-old Latino member of the 18th Street gang, refers to young men such as Ben as living in a prison.

Steve: Oh but see, Ben lives that life. We call it the prison life, prison at home. You can't live in your home if you scared to come out. I mean I'd rather go to jail, stay in your cell all day. It's like most fools here, everybody's stubborn, 'fuck this.' Everybody's stubborn and most of 'em ambitious. You gonna wanna go out. You see people, you gonna go out and talk to 'em. That's nature, that's logic. That's why most everybody is in it [gangs].

Despite Steve's comment, the contrary actually seemed to be the case: often those in gangs, or those who fight, become prisoners in their own homes. Consider the following statement from Emily, whose large tattoos on her arms and reputation testify to her bygone status as a hard core gang banger.

Emily: We went to check into another school. You know, we had to go to school. We checked in, and the first day we checked in, you know how they test you first, to see what classes to give you. Me and my sister were barely walking in to get tested, and here comes all these fools from Florence. And they're like, 'You fuckin' bitches, get out of our school.' They started chasin' us. So they chased us all the way home, and we lost

'em. Since that day, like they would be downstairs, and we lived upstairs. They would be downstairs, sitting there, like waiting for us to come out.

RG: Mm hm. Wow.

Emily: [Sighs] We couldn't. We couldn't do nothing. We were like prisoners in our own home. Until finally, my dad said, 'Oh well, go stay with your aunt in Hawthorn until we move,' until him and my little sister move.

Steve's logic dictates that he must avoid certain neighborhoods, and Emily and her family must move because of rival gangs; both Steve and Emily are terrified of the police. Ben has no such fears. In the divergent ways in which Steve and Ben understand Ben's behavior, we can see how "the code" can bias member's interpretations. "Are there places you don't go when you walk to school?" I ask Ben.

Ben: I don't go?

RG: Or you avoid? Places that are scary?

Ben: No. [he laughs]

RG: No?

Ben: Nah, I just walk straight, that's it. I just walk straight down the block.

RG: Uh huh.

Ben: I walk everywhere, man.

When I interviewed Ben four years later, little had changed. He still worked at the Auto Parts dealer, and he still visited CAA on occasion to talk with some of his favorite teachers.

While he still walked wherever he wished, he was loath to take the bus, since, as he states, "Too many things happen on the bus!" Recently, Ben has been held up twice at the same bus stop, by the same man. According to Ben,

Ben: He just walked up to me, sat next to me, says, 'What would you say if I told you I had a gun, and told you to put your stuff out on the bench there.' I took my wallet out, stuck it on the bench. He opened it, took out the \$6 and just left. Second time, he just walked up. I just couldn't believe it. The bus just passed right by, and he came out right from behind the bus. I'm like "Jees, is this guy following me or what?" Like 8 or 9 o'clock at night. As soon as I saw him I just pulled it out. I don't [pause] like [pause] to hassle stuff. I just pulled it out. 'There's nothing in there so.' 'Well, I'll take your bus pass.' He took my bus pass.

RG: But he left you with the rest of your wallet.

Ben: He left me with my wallet, of course, yeah. And I had some bus tokens in there which he didn't find. The bus pass was up in a week anyway so I didn't care. As long as nothing happened to me.

Such events are certainly not unique to the inner-city. One could only imagine what might have happened if Ben had tried to appear “tough” (see Hartless, et al. 1995).

Conclusion

In the inner-city, being “punked” is a matter of definition. If one has good reasons to avoid a fight, in terms of local expectations, then one can walk away from a threatening situation without losing face. Rather than being punked, to be able to use such good reasons is simply smart. Such smarts are not only displayed in good reasons for avoiding a fight, but in the ingenious ways of doing so. These tactics are much more common than many depictions of inner-city life may lead us to believe, and many young men take pride in their ability to draw on such tactics as a resource in their everyday lives. Hence, despite claims that the face-work of inner-city young men is routinely and manifestly violent (Anderson 1999; Wilkinson 2001), this analysis shows that they readily and proudly draw upon the classic moves of face-work as described by Goffman (1967).

“The code of the street” has been a vital foil for this analysis. Inasmuch as I was personally riveted by young people’s tactics of nonviolence, I did not have a useful way of presenting the materials until reading Elijah Anderson’s thoughtful book. The many points of contrast are not grounds that one account of inner-city violence is right and the other is wrong, or even that young people on the East Coast and the West Coast have different ways of understanding violence. Rather, a social phenomenon like inner-city violence might best be seen in many different ways. No analysis is complete in itself, but is part of a collaborative effort in the academic community. Such a community is often better served by new questions than fresh answers, and Anderson’s book provides both for this analysis.

One key question that arises from Anderson's work concerns the viability of nonviolent paths to respect in the inner city. Must one be violent to be respected? Of my consultants, clearly many work hard and earn the sort of respect that doesn't come from fighting: Steve holds down two jobs and takes care of his grandmother and his friends who overindulge; Ernest works hard at a Latino grocery store and gives most of his salary to his mother; Ben takes care of his mentally unstable mother, works full time, and takes classes; and Ken works to build friendships through small gestures of kindness. Such small gestures and sustained commitments may not make the news, but they are vital for forging the trust that sustains a community. Future studies would do well to focus on such practices, which are much more prevalent than the sensationalistic images of violence that have increasingly come to color common perceptions.

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ⁱAlternative schools such as CAA have been conceptualized as an increasingly common response to school safety concerns. In a national survey of school boards (National School Boards Association 1993), 66% of responding boards claimed to have an alternative program or school in place as a setting for placing violent students who have been expelled from a traditional school setting. 85% of urban districts report having such a program in place, 66% of suburban districts, and 57% of rural districts. Many policy makers advocate such settings as an alternative to

expelling students, thereby balancing the rights of violent students to receive a free education, with the rights of all students to a safe environment. Leo Klagholz (1995), the New Jersey Commissioner of Education, states, “The removal of violent students through long-term suspension or expulsion is neither immediate nor guaranteed. The severity of these measures and their denial of educational opportunity render them ineffective as means of helping students who are violent or disruptive, or protecting all students,” leaving alternative schools as a viable remedy. Many students at CAA have been transferred there for frequent episodes of fighting and violence, although others were transferred for dealing drugs, and others are simply drop-outs from traditional high schools, who have sought out CAA as a means to achieve a high school diploma. Michelle Fine’s (1991) thorough examination of the ways inner-city schools produce drop-outs, and Deidre Kelly’s (1993) detailed examination of the history and contradictions of continuation schools provide an apt backdrop of the milieu of social and political issues in which alternative schools are located.

ⁱⁱ For a detailed entrée tale, focusing especially on how I came to know and befriend those in the field, as well as a number of chapters on teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives on gangs, see Garot (2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Curtis Jackson-Jacobs (2002) cites such an “imaginative solution to conflict” as “a way of saving face in terms of the code,” at least prospectively. As he states, “Saving-face is always imaginatively and prospectively possible.”

^{iv} Such terms were not common ways of understanding young people in this analysis’s setting. One teacher at CAA came close to making such a distinction when she stated, “You’ve got 40% of these young people out in the world that are not gonna make it. They’re gonna end up dead, in the penitentiary, prostituting, on drugs, got a house full of babies, can’t take care of ‘em, poor, hungry, suicidal, all of the above. And that’s pretty sad.” Even though this teacher blames such conditions on structural factors, stating, “Society has now kind of turned their backs on them,” such a view of the students is actively discouraged by CAA administrators. As Ms. Reynolds, the school principal states, “I don’t cherish having anyone on my staff with an attitude about students like that.”

^v This is a highly common perception, which justifies the use of dress codes in schools, and contrasts to the notion that dressing and appearing “hard” leads to personal security (contrast Anderson 1999 to Garot and Katz, 2003).