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ARTICLES

Non-violence in the Inner City: 'Decent' and 'Street' as Strategic Resources

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Abstract This study explores how young people in the inner-city draw upon "the code of the street," the paradoxical notion that one must resort to violence to find security, as an incorrigible proposition, which members sustain even when providing evidence to the contrary. While "the code" may describe what young people would like to do when confronted with potential violence, both their reasons and methods for avoiding violence are artful and nuanced, expressed with a wit that can be quite liberatory.

Keywords Youth aggression · Violence · Nonviolence · African American identity · Gangs · Code of the street · Inner city · Face-work · Fights

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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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."

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These propositions dramatically contrast with Goffman's notions of face-work. According to Goffman (1967, p. 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, or 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. However, I did not find that young people in the inner city differentiate themselves according to "decent" and "street," but instead found that while most young males use notions akin to the code of the street as a 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 1983), 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.

Violence, Non-violence, and African-American Identity

If the code of the street might be seen as a departure from the "four classic moves" of face-work, it is not the first theory of violence derived from Goffman's

theorizing. For instance, Luckenbill (1977, p. 177) analyzed homicide as a "character contest" (Goffman 1967, pp. 218–219, 238–257) "in which at least one, but usually both, attempt to establish or save face at the other's expense by standing steady in the face of adversity." Prus (1978, p. 56) found that the anger that leads to violence is often a product of moral indignation, based upon "trust violations," "consistent with the material on face-work." While Athens (2005, pp. 636–637) critiques Luckenbill's use of "character contests" on a number of grounds, his focus on violence as fundamentally a means of establishing dominance appears consistent with the concerns of one who has been (literally) "put-down" through insults. One strength of Athens' theory is that he charts out the steps of "tactless, violent retaliation," showing the *work* necessary to bring off a violent encounter, as many challenges to face result in tiffs or skirmishes, in which "physical force is almost but not actually used to settle the issue" (Athens 2005, p. 651).

If such "violent encounters rarely end in actual violent engagements" (Athens 2005, p. 669), then why should such encounters be so common in inner-city areas (Anderson 1999, p. 135)? A number of recent studies question whether, in fact, this is the case. Prudence Carter (2003, p. 139), for instance, explores "blackness" as "non-dominant" cultural capital invoked "to acquire symbolic forms of recognition." In her study, "code-switching" involves not moving between modes of "decent" and "street," but drawing on "different linguistic currencies deemed appropriate in variable social settings" (p. 141). As opposed to living in a climate of fear and violence, her informants seem as comfortable negotiating the realms of school and business as they are at home with friends. Similarly, Gunn (2004, p. 65) draws on a background in acting, which he shares with his friend James, which helped them to "handle" themselves "in a variety of ways when the situation called for it." Although Gunn's older brother, Harold, "taught James and me how to box and defend ourselves" (p. 65), these young males were much more concerned with school, basketball and females to engage in petty squabbles. Even marijuana-using crack sellers born to chronic crack abusers are shown to uphold many decent values, from working three years in construction, to being anxious to act as a good father, to becoming active in the military. According to the authors (Benoit et al. 2003, p. 522), "labeling certain kinds of behavior as 'street' has the potential to unwittingly reinforce stereotypes associated with young, urban, African-American males," and "positing 'street' and 'decent' codes of conduct may unnecessarily dichotomize the norms that guide young inner-city adults." A useful alternative may be to "address the patterns of exclusion cutting across multiple contexts" which "leave youths with few opportunities but to become violent" (Irwin 2004, p. 475). Nonetheless, as we will see below, many such youths have the wit and resilience (Rutter 1987) to avoid such outcomes.

The Dataset and Definitions

The data presented are based on participant observation conducted over a four-year period in and around Choices Alternative Academy (CAA), a small, inner-city

alternative school[1] for young people aged 14 to 21 in the Western United States. Built in the early 1990s by a conglomeration of federal and local officials to serve dropouts between the ages of 14 and 21, the school is situated in a 6-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 4 years, I interviewed 46 students, 6 repeatedly, plus 11 teachers, 2 administrators, 1 security guard, and 1 community activist. Interviews were open-ended, lasting from 1 to 3 hours, and were taped and transcribed. 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.

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 to consultants when possible, checked for accuracy, and used as the basis for further questions.[2]

In each interview with students, I asked my consultant about fights they had experienced throughout their life course. In my first stretch of fieldwork, I recorded

[1] Alternative schools such as CAA are 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 dropouts 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 depiction 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.

[2] 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).

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 of 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 males who were chasing and grappling with each other crashed through a locked gate on a 6-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 drugs or guns, as these instances often overshadow fights, occurring within an ecological framework that deserves attention in its own right (see Fagan and Wilkinson 1998). 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 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 Incorrigible Code of the Street

According to Anderson, African-American young males in the inner city will 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 incorrigible proposition, as it cannot be proved wrong, and is such a part of "common sense" that members continue to believe it 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 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 gangbanger. (...) 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 [chuckles]. 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 every time 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, also an 18-year-old African American, 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, 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.] "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, pp. 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 males 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 males tell such tales. First, they provide good *reasons* for walking away from a fight, and secondly they describe their *methods* of avoiding fights.

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 males 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, pp. 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 (Athens 2005, p. 667). Consider the explanation of Ben, an 18-year-old Belizean-American, for not attacking his abusive, alcoholic stepfather.

> 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.

Other consultants also understand "back-up" as a good reason for potential antagonists to avoid a fight. Terry, an 18-year-old African American, understands a young man's reasons to stop harassing 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 2 males approached him and demanded, "Hey man, gimme your bike." Ernest ducked into a liquor store and, in his words,

> 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, p. 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 weightlifting. In this case, it is not the size of his antagonist that justifies his non-pursuit, but his apparent gang connections.

> 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.

> 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 wichu.' He didn't like me. He's like, 'I'm gonna throw down wichu 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 males 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 (Athens 2005, p. 668). 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.

> 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.[3]

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 moved 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.[4] 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 3 are African-American; Donald is 14, and Brian and Buck are both 16.

[3] 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."

[4] 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 blamed 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 stated, "I don't cherish having anyone on my staff with an attitude about students like that."

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.

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" (Garot 2007). 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 males, 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 males can foresee trouble and know when to back off, and how to de-escalate confrontations, as Chris, an 18-year-old Cherokee/African American 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 have been more difficult, as was apparent in the excerpt from Antoine, above. Below, Terry faces similar pressures, and also gives in, despite his better judgment.

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, p. 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

A young man's ingenious *ways* to avoid a fight are often more interesting than his reasons for avoiding one. 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 males 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 males 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 such tactics as: 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.

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 males do to diffuse Gerald's attack. Johnnie diminishes the tension by raising his open palm towards Gerald, and another vocalizes a cooling complaint by saying, "ahhh" (see Athens 2005, p. 668). Ken then provides an "offering" (Goffman 1967, p. 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, pp. 85–91). This is in contrast to

Anderson's finding that, "the culture of the street doesn't allow backing down" (Ibid., p. 97).

A second short-term way to avoid a fight is through conversational techniques. Many young males 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.

> 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 hangouts 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., pp. 76–79). Below, we see the result of one such incident.

> 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 laughed and walked 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.

> 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.

> 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., p. 34). Yet in this, and in five other instances, young males 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 males 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.

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 males 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 males 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 minor acts 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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