

**Book Review: Scott Jacques and Richard Wright, *Code of the Suburb: Inside the World of Middle-Class Drug Dealers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-226-16411-3 (Paperback). 194 Pages. \$25.**

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In their book, *Code of the Suburb: Inside the World of Middle-Class Drug Dealers*, criminologists Scott Jacques and Richard Wright examine the social milieu of young, suburban drug dealers. Both authors are associated with what has been referred to as the “St. Louis tradition” of studying active offenders (see Lasky, Jacques, & Fisher, 2015). The lead author, Scott Jacques, is a protégé of Richard Wright, an ethnographic researcher, who is well-known for interviewing a variety of characters ranging from gang members to stick-up artists. In this book, the researchers turn their attention from the inner city to the suburbs and demonstrate that underground drug markets have the potential to thrive in affluent communities, even in those that are overwhelmingly White and seldom, if ever, identified with illegal activity.

The methodology employed throughout *Code of the Suburb* is unique in that the first author had a preexisting relationship with many of his research subjects. Jacques was friends with eighteen of the thirty

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interviewees, all of whom were young suburban drug dealers. This aspect of the book is, in and of itself, fairly interesting, especially in light of a recent scholarly examination of “friendship as a method” (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014). Jacques’ friendships with key informants proved to be quite advantageous. For example, aside from giving participants the occasional six-pack of beer, it was not necessary or appropriate for Jacques to provide them with any type of monetary compensation. The respondents also referred Jacques to their friends, a strategy that was successfully employed by the second author in his classic examination of residential burglars (see Wright, Decker, Redfern, & Smith, 1992).

It is evident from reading this book that the research respondents trusted Jacques. The subjects were notably forthcoming as they responded to a series of open-ended questions. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed for themes by both authors. The respondents ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-three years old, and virtually all of these middle-class drug dealers were enrolled in a college or university. Given that members of racial minorities disproportionately make up the bulk of those who are arrested for drug offenses (see Alexander 2012; Goffman 2014), it is also noteworthy that all but one of the participants in this study was White (one subject was Asian).

From the opening pages of *Code of the Street*, the authors candidly examine the motivations of young, middle-class drug dealers. As Jacques and Wright argue, in spite of having privileged lives, most middle-class youth lack a professional career that is sufficient to generate a meaningful amount of income. As a result, these actors are largely dependent upon their parents and know that it will take several years for them to achieve a sense of social status in their own right. The authors contend that high school is an arena where teenagers attempt to campaign for respect from their peers; “in-school assessments affect who hangs out together and who is (dis)respected during and outside of school hours” (7).

According to Jacques and Wright, some middle-class adolescents perceive that they can resolve the dilemma of peer respect by using drugs as a way to demonstrate their attractiveness and likeability.<sup>2</sup> In the chapter titled, “The Pursuit of Coolness,” the authors describe how adolescents living in the suburbs use drugs as a strategy to become

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<sup>2</sup> This is essentially the crux of the book and reminded us a bit of Albert Cohen’s (1955) famous observation where poor adolescents, especially those who are judged unfavorably by the middle-class measuring rod, may form alternate subcultures in order to obtain a sense of belonging and purpose.

popular and achieve short-term success; they argue that young people use drugs to become “cool” and enhance their social status. For example, drug use gives others the impression that an individual likes to have fun and rebel against parental authority. As a result, many suburban youth immerse themselves in the drug subculture in order to gain acceptance and respect from their peers.

Though Jacques and Wright contend that most suburban youths are content to merely use illicit substances (as opposed to selling them), they explain that some actors decide to make the transition from drug user to drug dealer. The authors assert that dealers can be generous with their friends, which helps elevate their status among their peers. Respondents reported that they made concentrated efforts to show their friends that they had the highest quantity and quality of drugs. This was done primarily to impress others (including potential customers), which in turn boosted their coolness factor.

The suburban drug dealers depicted in the book had unique motivations for peddling illicit substances. For example, many of the respondents reported to Jacques that they dealt drugs not to make money per se but rather to “smoke [marijuana] for free” (10). Being a dealer permitted them to buy drugs in bulk and subsidize their own consumption. Unlike drug dealers who work within the inner cities, many of these suburban dealers were not overly concerned with making a profit. Instead, drug dealing was merely a means to obtain extra spending money and buy creature comforts, such as, fashionable clothing, smart phones, and expensive electronic devices. Most of the subjects reported that they did not perceive dealing as a way to make a substantial amount of money. They also sold marijuana, mostly, and to a lesser extent, ecstasy, cocaine, and hallucinogenic mushrooms. None of the respondents sold crack cocaine or heroin.

According to the book, very few young suburban dealers are willing to become involved in the dangerous, albeit more lucrative, business of selling drugs to other dealers. Jacques and Wright explain that this is because there are far fewer legal and extralegal risks associated with being a low-level dealer. In many cases, dealers reported that they were able to cultivate relationships with supplier-colleagues who were a few years older than they were. Often, these suppliers were perceived by respondents as individuals who failed to become successful adults. Dealers reported that they preferred to obtain drugs from suppliers who were coworkers or friends of friends. The dealers did not trust African American suppliers and avoided them at all costs. Of course, this was fairly easy to do, for all of the dealers lived in an affluent suburb

(referred to as “Peachville” in the book) where nine out of ten residents are White (non-Hispanic). It is also apparent from reading *Code of the Suburb* that dealers were getting these drugs locally rather than in the inner city. As the authors write, “It is unlikely that many of the sellers had ever visited a ‘ghetto;’ there certainly were not any such areas anywhere near where they lived” (33).

Jacques and Wright describe the process by which suburban drug dealers sell illicit substances to their customers. According to the authors, once a drug dealer gains access to a connection, he or she (Jacques interviewed two female dealers) must then establish the acquisition of a customer base. This is mainly done through a network of friends, and most of the respondents do not seek out buyers beyond their close social circle. The authors suggest that social networks are established through school, extracurricular activities, or through their jobs. Friends who are deemed to be especially cool will often be given better deals because this will help to increase the dealer’s status and reputation.

The authors found that it was typical for young suburban dealers to use the technology provided by their parents as a means to arrange drug deals. Most transactions occurred in public and were often fairly busy places. These locations afforded the dealers with an ideal spot to complete an exchange inconspicuously; if the locations were often frequented by young people, this helped dealers blend in even more. According to the authors, dealers seldom conducted business in one place; instead, they had several alternate spots where they could set up transactions with their customers. Also, Jacques and Wright found that speed was crucial to a successful transaction in a public place. The transaction had to be carried out quickly in order to minimize the chance of being seen and caught.

Though Jacques and Wright contend that both police and parents can play roles in stopping adolescent drug dealers from making illegal transactions, they note that respondents were more afraid of being caught by the police. When adolescent drug dealers reported being caught by their parents, the consequences varied from the parents doing nothing, talking about the problem with an expression of concern, withholding privileges, and, in some instances, taking the drugs and cash. None of the parents called the police on their wayward children. Nevertheless, many dealers stated that they were still afraid of being caught by their parents, for this would create feelings of embarrassment and disappointment.

Throughout, Jacques and Wright provide an interesting discussion of victimization. Suburban drug dealers who are involved in an illegal activity cannot approach the police for assistance whenever they are

assaulted or ripped off, so, like dealers in the inner city, they implement strategies to reduce the possibility of being victimized. These protective measures included locking the door during a deal, stashing away possessions in a safe place, and only dealing (or not dealing) with certain individuals. In this situation, when it came to customers, dealers reported that there were certain types of individuals to avoid—unknown, sketchy, as well as shady individuals. One racial prejudice that was consistent among the dealers was based around the stereotype that Black customers were dangerous and should be avoided at all costs. In spite of the fact that dealers refused to do business with African Americans, many respondents still indicated that racism was wrong.

The authors provide an in-depth discussion of the conflict management strategies employed by suburban drug dealers. These measures ranged from tolerating, avoiding, negotiating, *sneaky payback* [imposing secret punishments, such as, fraud, vandalism, or unseen theft], and last but not least, *hitting back*. *Hitting back* was the strategy that was least used, even in the face of real victimization. When the suburban drug dealers did decide to retaliate (or hit back), there was not an overbearing use of violence, as there often is in the inner city (see Anderson, 2000; Jacobs, 1998). With that in mind, dealers preferred to use toleration, avoidance, negotiation, or any strategy that was non-confrontational.

Jacques and Wright also discuss why suburban drug dealers tend to stop peddling illicit substances. According to the authors, the reasoning behind their decision to stop selling drugs was closely tied to a preference to mitigate risks. Like inner city drug dealers, one of the perceived risks included the possibility of being violently victimized. However, suburban dealers were also afraid of being arrested and getting a criminal record which could limit their future opportunities. The respondents interviewed in this book were affluent and White and preferred to solve their conflicts through negotiation rather than violence. The fact that the overwhelming majority of the respondents were able to deal drugs and quit doing this without the stigma of even an arrest should give academics pause that within the United States there are still two systems of justice within this country: one for the rich and one for the poor.

Drug dealers in the inner city often come from disorganized communities with low levels of collective efficacy (Fagan, Wright, & Pinchevsky, 2014). They are less committed to the status quo, and it is much harder for these actors to quit “slinging dope,” as they are limited in legitimate job opportunities with a low likelihood of achieving conventional success as adults (Decker, 1995; Goffman, 2014). This is,

of course, why some minority males, particularly those in urban settings, may view drug dealing as their primary occupation (Venkatesh, 2008). Despite the fact that it carries numerous risks and limited rewards, many urban drug dealers nevertheless see this as a viable strategy to attain monetary success. This is likely to continue, so long as individuals living within the inner city continue to have limited education, low literacy, and reside in communities where jobs are scarce (Clear, 2009).

*Code of the Suburb* is an important work for two reasons. First, it provides readers with a glimpse into the lives of young drug dealers who come from affluent communities, a topic which up until now has received very little attention. More importantly, however, this book illustrates that individuals who are White and middle-class wield considerable power and are simply not subject to the same laws as those who are racial minorities. Today, in the United States, African Americans are overrepresented in prisons and jails by a ratio of 5:1 and often receive significantly longer sentences than Whites or even Hispanics (National Research Council, 2014). There is also a 60% likelihood that Black males who do not graduate from high school will spend at least some time in prison. Anyone who reads *Code of the Streets* is likely to see that there is systemic racism and inequality within the American criminal justice system.

Overall, Jacques and Wright do an excellent job of demonstrating through real-life examples how drug dealing in suburban communities is often a form of recreation with few, if any, repercussions or interference from law enforcement. Nevertheless, the book would have been even stronger if the authors had provided more of a critique of the criminal justice system and specifically discussed how drug enforcement is racialized and discriminates against poor minorities. While *Code of the Streets*, at times, delved into this area, it simply did not go far enough. It seemed evident from reading this book that Jacques and Wright were primarily concerned with examining the subculture of middle-class drug dealers. They did not seem overly interested in using their work to ameliorate the plight of the young, urban Black male who for the last four decades has been a casualty of the mass incarceration movement. In spite of this caveat, *Code of the Streets* is well-written and well-researched and explores exciting new areas that have been largely neglected by drug and crime researchers. For this reason, we recommend this book.

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