

Book Review: Dean Dabney and Richard Tewksbury, *Speaking Truth to Power: Confidential Informants and Police Investigations*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0520290488 (Paperback). 232 Pages. \$29.95.

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Dean A. Dabney and Richard Tewksbury's ethnography, *Speaking Truth to Power: Confidential Informants and Police Investigations*, provides insightful observations in the area of police work involving confidential informants. Recently, this work received the coveted 2018 Best Book Award at the annual Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences conference. The text includes a succinct review of both applied and scholarly literature that describes some historical precedent to the use of civilian informants as a source of information as well as in its current—sometimes critical, implementation in the war on drugs and associated crimes. Utilizing qualitative research, the authors implement analytical induction to ground their data to lived experiences and provide readers

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with a behind the scenes perspective to the institutional and individual background assumptions that serve as rationale and guidelines for engaging informants as investigative tools. Through the categorizing of informants and describing the varied methods of recruitment, the authors' empirical-based descriptions enable academics and students to gain a broader sense and deeper understanding of the institutional, cultural, and individual dynamics involved when police work relies on confidential informants.

Dabney and Tewksbury's work updates the major elements from the established literature discussing the use of confidential informants to provide logic to their research objective and design. Their collaboration provides a 'where-the-rubber-meets-the-road' perspective to the institutional 'pushes' and sub-cultural 'pulls' of police work motivating the strategic dependence on confidential informants during investigations and case-development. By bridging structural forces with micro-level actions, the discussions suggest that in the 21st Century police practices are responsive to modern geo-spatial accountability systems that track crime and measure officer effectiveness thus creating institutionalized formal 'pushes' on officers' to be competitively proactive with investigations. As outsiders to the criminal underworld, C.I.'s represent a historically proven tactical means for police to infiltrate criminal sub-cultures and gather intelligence vital to investigative outcomes, job performance evaluations, and rank promotions. Culturally within law enforcement, careers and reputations are built on investigative and crime-solving successes. Thus, individual ambitions for rank and unit promotions become part of the informal 'pulls' that draw officers toward a reliance on informants as intelligence gathering instruments.

The review of the applied and scholarly literature aptly contrasts differences between empirically-based training materials and the sometimes overly critical legal discussions provided by academic theorizing and analysis. In drawing comparisons, the writers call attention to the perceptual differences that often times interfere with productive discourse and reforms leading to socially conscionable improvements in policing and justice practices. Contributing to the theoretical and perceptual balance throughout the text are the incorporation of critical-legal scholar, Alexandra Natapoff (2004), and criminologist, J.M. Miller's (2011) discussions of confidential informant-based research to conceptually bridge scholarly inspections with the agent-based experiences brought by participants to the study under review. In doing so, the authors' research design and plan move away from the typical atheoretical policy-practices training manuals toward an

embedded perspective providing a deeper understanding of police work and the on-going struggle with drug related crime and criminals.

In and of itself, accessing the different data collection sites, building rapport and gaining inclusive trust into what is most often perceived as a close-knit subculture is commendable, despite the understandably limited pool of participants. Indeed, this is quite an achievement considering the risks to personal safety and bureaucratic obstacles scientific researcher's face when delving into the necessarily guarded arenas of police duty and drug interdiction. Overall, the book is a commendable methodological accomplishment of a scientific field study with one concern for a missed opportunity to extend the reach of its objective literary goal. The book's contribution to the literature addressing the relationship between cops and their informants could have been broadened if a small supplement of informant voices had been included toward gaining some first-hand insight and interpretation to a C.I.'s own background assumptions motivating their cooperation with police investigators in this study.

Speaking Truth to Power provides theoretical descriptions of the contexts from which information-exchange dynamics emerge and the considerations that define a C.I.'s status, exchange expectations, and role scripts to both police and informants. As generally discussed, the information-exchanges are shaped by each actor's motivations to participate; how each is categorized becomes significant to expected outcomes. Rationalizing the information-exchange dynamic, the authors construct a categorical continuum describing: "hardcore offenders" pressed into service, "underworld" players motivated by self-interests, to "regular folks" attempting to better their communities, to contextualize the general depth of criminal involvement and self-serving motivations common to information-exchanges. Investigators similarly approach the transactions as consumers and are thus motivated by the perceived value of outcomes (e.g., solving a case, interrupting organized crime, productivity and promotion, etc....) to their investments of time and energy. Concomitantly, whether an officer represents local jurisdiction, or higher-up the chain of legal-authority and prosecutorial capacity, also shapes how a potential C.I. responds to their inquiries and efforts at recruitment as it can imaginably become part of how informants rationally calculate what the officer can deliver in terms of exchange returns. The status and role that each actor ascribes to the other determines how each will be defined and ultimately treated and responded to during interactions and exchanges.

Read carefully as a whole, the text develops theorized and grounded descriptions from which to generalize what officers look out for when

vetting informants according to the estimated value and reliability of the information they propose to provide. At base to the process is the objectively cynical, but necessary, evaluation of the information and the individual's potential to assist with investigations. Equally central to assessment is the informers' circumstance of recruitment and motivation as they determine the nature of the police-C.I. relation and the techniques for managing informants by anticipating the risks and challenges that might emerge during the course of a mutually dependent relation. Thus, the materials and the background assumptions described by the authors provide detailed explication of the dynamics of recruiting and vetting confidential informants critical to successful in-the-field practices, crime solving, and career trajectories.

Ethnographies can be capricious in discovery as data and findings may not always reflect positively on the conduct of the subjects under study. In-depth description to police techniques for categorizing, vetting, recruiting, building rapport and manipulating reluctant indentured informants into service raises questions of ethical conduct at all levels of the legal system. For authorities what makes a good informant is often rationalized as dependent on the outcome of the information and not any particular quality regarding individual circumstance nor the consequence of police-enabled criminal activity to the social health of the community. In addition, officers and prosecutors wield the threat of persecution and are able to bend legal statutes or discretionary rules to manipulate informants possibly creating injustices suffered by already troubled lives. This type of ethically and professionally questionable extrajudicial manipulation is usually not a part of dealing with non-criminal, non-indentured informant types who are generally motivated by self-serving rewards or altruistic community centered objectives. Lacking the coercive threat of prosecution, greedy, jealous, and/or civic minded informants are negotiated with considerate intent and a modicum of deceptive respect to gain the benefits of their assistance. Considering the potential abusive outcomes of power that status differentials between exchange-participants can provoke, it is unsurprising that questions regarding ethical conduct and criminal facilitation inevitably arise but were not discussed to significant length in the text.

Relative to the points addressed above, the cited research of A. Natapoff (2011) calls attention to the social and personal consequences that reliance on informants can potentially produce as the lack of standardized procedural guidelines and regulatory oversight makes for unregulated rules of engagement and abuses of power. From a critical perspective what is not glossed over by dialogue and rhetoric is that a

C.I.'s private troubles—whether addiction or lack of self-control, manifest themselves as public issues. Cautiously, readers must keep in mind the suspect ascriptions and harsh commentaries' potentially inferred from police characterizations of informants should not jade their own perspective toward C.I.'s as persons struggling with their own private life-struggles. Lamentably, what can be interpreted is that informants are some of the least powerful citizens whose bad decisions situate them into an exploitable position where the law can potentially take advantage of their vulnerability to extra-legal coercion. In addition, the disparaging roles and stigma ascribed to informants by police culture, policy procedures, and individual officer judgements raise professionally ethical and socially moral dilemmas by permitting crimes directly affecting communities and families in an attempt to address what some would argue are a result of structural strains and misguided individual coping skills.

In general, the collected data and insight into this area of police work lends itself to informing readers of the complex, sometimes contradictory, inner workings of blue culture and the role it has in perpetuating crime and enabling criminals. To the authors' credit and clarity, qualitative approaches are herein proven better suited as a means of safely informing novice learners, as well as a means of leading in-depth students towards developing new theories and policy reforms, as well as professionals seeking to sharpen their investigative skills through a truly informative book as this.

REFERENCES

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