
Jacques SCOTT and Richard WRIGHT, *Code of the Suburb. Inside the World of Young Middle-Class Drug Dealers* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2015)

Ethnographic works about crime seem to have the wind in their sails in America. We are all familiar with the success (and the controversies!¹) that Alice Goffman's *On the Run* encountered. Once again, *The University of Chicago Press* has decided to publish an ethnographic work. This time, Scott Jacques and Richard Wright take us behind the scenes of drug trafficking in a middle-class Atlanta suburb, in the South-West of the US. Both Professors in Georgia State University's Criminal Justice and Criminology Department, Scott Jacques and Richard Wright built their book on the basis of Jacques' observatory work, who "was a member of their peer group" [2]. This Beckerian method² was completed with many interviews conducted with dealers.

The setting is not what we are used to when we read crime studies. In this Atlanta suburb, 90% of the population is white and had at least a high-school degree at the time of the study. The "median yearly household income was almost \$70,000" [1]. If we leave aside the barking dogs and the youths who drive a little too fast, the neighborhood is quiet and clean. From the first sentences of the introduction, the authors make their intents clear. Their book "explores the world of young, middle-class, suburban drug dealers as seen through the eyes of a group of dealers themselves" [1]. The questions raised are also very clear: "what leads these adolescents to start selling? How do they conduct business? What problems do they face? How do they handle those problems? Why do they quit?" [1].

Answering these questions one after another, Scott Jacques and Richard Wright begin by analyzing what would make a young person from the American middle-class sell drugs (chapter 1). Along with fashionable clothes, electronic devices, music, and cars, it appears that drugs are one of the elements needed in the "pursuit of coolness" [5]. Having drugs, and *a fortiori* selling and distributing of drugs, is a good

¹ See http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2015/06/alice_goffman_s_on_the_run_is_the_sociologist_to_blame_for_the_inconsistencies.html

² We refer to the now classical work, *Outsiders*.

way to significantly improve your social network. Pete, one of the interviewed dealers, is clear on this point: “everybody wants to hang out with a drug dealer” [23]. Adopting an opposing view to the traditional stance that ties deviant behavior to antisocial personality, this analysis shows how deviance is actually the best way to be at the heart of a social group. In this upper-class group, perfecting one’s image is as important as the lucrative aspect. The latter is at first a way to get “drugs for free” [10], but rarely becomes a dealer’s primary source of income [13-17].

The contacts between suppliers, dealers, and clients already existed before the trafficking took place (chapters 2 and 3). Most of those involved already knew each other, either through school or sport clubs. This easily explains the demographic and social homogeneity that characterizes those involved in trafficking, from the suppliers to the consumers. In other words, drug trafficking and consumption do not extend their social network spectrum. These young people from the American middle-class do not mix with other social classes and other ethnicities as part of their drug activities. Consuming and selling drugs fosters contacts with other social groups as much as any other conventional activity (i.e. school, work, hobbies) would do: that is, not that much. The dealers’ commercial strategies clearly demonstrate that profit is not more important than relationships. Thus, dealers’ friends were generally undercharged [54-55] and even sometimes received drugs for free, while people the dealers did not know or would probably not see again were cheated in terms of price, quantity, and/or quality. This enables the dealers to become more cool and even nicer than they already are.

As we are used to linking crime and criminal justice, it seems quite confusing that Scott Jacques and Richard Wright scarcely mention police, courts, and prison cells. But the reason is simple: the suburban inhabitants “seldom went to prison” [66]. It is therefore interesting to note that the chapter on social control is called “Police and Parents” (chapter 4), suggesting that the latter are at least as important as the law enforcement officers (actually they are probably even more important!). Since police from the neighborhood are not really interested in drug trafficking, the dealers know that the risks they face are rather limited, especially if they take precautions. Among the 30 dealers studied, only two encountered difficulties with the criminal justice system due to their drug activities [150]. In fact, the principal threat was routine traffic stops that could end “badly.” There was no issue of a proactive police force. Being discovered by one’s parents

would seem to be a greater risk than the police. Hence, the discovery of a scale to weigh drugs or of a wad of cash could lead worried parents to ask questions about their child's activities. "Parental punishment varies from one family to another: taking away some sort of material item (i.e. cell phone, car, etc.), a mere discussion, or even a protection afforded to the dealer." For example, one mother finds out that her son sell drugs but hides it from his father to avoid any familial dispute.

Another more present risk other than the police is victimization (chapter 5). Since they have large amounts of money and drugs, the dealers are easy targets for dishonest consumers or even "predators" [82]. Once they are conscious of this risk, the dealers further limit their contacts to the social groups that are closest to them. Many of the dealers rely on their clients' race to evaluate their "sketchiness" [86]. The first rule being "you don't deal with black guys. You do not fucking deal with niggers—sorry, excuse the fucking racist term—"cause they're looking to fuck over the little white kid" [87]. The intra-racial victimizations, which were by far the most common, could be violent but only to a limited degree. There were no cases of them leading to hospitalization. It was more a case of cheating and fraud, for example, clients running away with a dose that they did not pay for, or suppliers lying about the quality of the drugs. Even though they were more victimized than non-dealers, the drug dealers still encountered few risks.

Nevertheless, since they were unable to get help from police or parents, the young people had to manage the conflicts themselves (chapter 6). Adopting a culturalist approach, Scott Jacques and Richard Wright interpret the conflict resolution modes of these dealers as a sign that they "subscribed to what might be called the 'code of the suburb,' which maintains that when it comes to conflict management, less is more. In such a cultural context, toleration is an especially popular response to victimization because it consigns the event to the past and keeps it from escalating, thereby allowing victims to get on with their lives" [100]. Thus, dealers do not retaliate because they subscribe to a culture of tolerance and oblivion. In the worst-case scenario, the dealer avoids the person who victimized him or her in order to avoid any further damage. Some of them will also negotiate and obtain compensation for the prejudice suffered. But it sometimes happens that the dealers retaliate, sneakily or even violently.

In fact, the first effect of these violent and negative episodes is to encourage the dealers to stop trafficking. The dealers, willing to protect their life prospects, encounter problems that make them

realize trafficking is not worth it (chapter 7). Belonging to the American middle-class and planning on going to college, the conventional lifestyle takes over from the deviant one. This leads the authors to suggest that some events that are *a priori* negative (i.e. victimization, contacts with police, or parents' suspicion) "often marked a positive turning point in their lives" [122]. In other words, "these suburban middle-class dealers viewed their involvement in drug sales as nothing more than a phase, something to fulfill their short-term desires, which revolved around a pressing need to be cool, until they assumed professional careers and achieved financial independence from their parents. Once they started to perceive dealing as a potential threat to their future prospects for conventional success, therefore, they had little inclination to continue. For them, drug dealing was never intended to be a career—better to get out before it was too late" [136].

Contrary to American stereotypes of the drug dealer, these young people are white, quite wealthy, and live far from the inner-city neighborhoods. What differences and similarities do they share with black violent inner-city dealers? Scott Jacques and Richard Wright go above and beyond their ethnographic data and look into their past research and into the crime literature to answer these questions (Conclusion). In fact, they compare the "code of the suburb" with the "code of the street"³. According to the authors, "both groups venture into dealing as a way to satisfy their pressing need for coolness" [140]. Rather than conventionality, urban and suburban dealers choose to subscribe to a subculture that allows them to obtain a short-term higher social status before obtaining conventional success. The first difference between white suburban and black urban dealers is family. In the white Atlanta suburb, we have families that are well educated, have high incomes, and who look out for their reputations. In the black ghetto, "many of these parents resort to the use of corporal punishment, thereby perpetuating a culture of violence that teaches their children that might makes right" [147]. Another explicit difference lies in the importance of the criminal justice system. Almost completely absent from the wealthy American suburbs, the criminal justice system and its ramifications are very different for young urban people than for the white suburban dealers. This differential impact cannot be explained by differential crime, as

³ This is a widely used expression in American scientific research, since Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street*; hence, Scott Jacques and Richard Wright's choice of title is very interesting.

scientific research tends to show that whites are as likely to sell drugs—maybe even more so—as African-Americans [150]. Hence, the chances of African-Americans' conventional success are often affected by the criminal justice system, making it necessary to continue trafficking drugs. The victimization risks are also much more significant for urban dealers than for suburban dealers: gunshots for the first, punches for the latter. This is reflected in the dealers' behavior: peacefulness in the suburbs, combativeness in the inner city. In short, "unlike their suburban counterparts, urban dealers learn and live by a 'code of the street'" [155].

Where crime statistics are not representative of reality, this research reveals what is actually occurring in this wealthy American suburb. Yet, the book's conclusion can be brought into question. The pertinence of a comparison between white middle-class suburban dealers and black urban dealers is not that obvious (in fact, when reading this last part, it is less fluid). While the suburban drug activities are parallel to drug use (the aim being to get "free drugs"), on the other hand, drug dealing in poor urban areas seems to have the characteristics of a professional activity. For example, one of the interviewed suburban dealers explained that, "school and work came first" [49], thus, suburban clients had to be patient. The authors explain that, "the most important reason that these young middle-class suburbanites turned to drug dealing was not to make money *per se*" [10]. Thus, we are far from the dangerous street corners where the urban dealers stand. This also explains why the middle-class dealers mainly sell marijuana, since it is the drug they themselves use, and why their consumers are mainly friends and acquaintances. In short, Scott Jacques and Richard Wright compare a peripheral social activity with, what we might call, a principal activity.

In my opinion, this fundamental difference casts some doubt on the assertion that white suburban dealers and black urban dealers "venture into dealing as a way to satisfy their pressing need for coolness" [140]. The authors' ethnographic material does not allow an analysis of urban dealers and it is therefore necessary to rely on the literature. The literature is strongly polarized and Scott Jacques and Richard Wright principally rely on few works to support their comparison: the differential treatment between white and black crime can be explained by the fact that the first are peaceful, while the latter subscribe to a culture of violence. However the authors rely on a false consensus: if the relationship between race and crime has been deeply studied in the US since the 1960s, the causes of African-Americans'

overrepresentation in prisons still divide the literature. Academics are mainly polarized between causes that encourage welfare policies, and other causes, principally endogenous ones, that encourage the use of penal policies (such as incapacitation). Thus, it seems to me that it is not yet time to compare white suburban dealers with black urban dealers.

Leaving the conclusion, which almost seems like an after-thought, aside this book is still of great value both for its scientific interest and for the data collected and analyzed. The reader who is interested in criminology will probably be struck by the almost total absence of contact between dealers and police. Shedding light on an unknown delinquency, this work is an essential complement to those focusing on poor neighborhoods.⁴ Like Alice Goffman, Scott Jacques spoke about what he saw in his social circle. Yet, while Alice Goffman speaks about death, prison, paranoia, and about the omnipresence of the criminal justice system Scott Jacques talks about parental punishment, little tricks, and the dealers' quest for coolness. Reading these two books side by side makes us aware of the abyss existing between two realities that criminal law eventually calls "drug offenses."

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⁴ For example that of Alice Goffman, *op. cit.*