

The Codes of the Street in Risky Neighborhoods

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The Codes of the Street in Risky Neighborhoods

A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Youth
Violence in Germany, Pakistan, and South
Africa

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Foreword

According to 1960s African American activist, Stokley Carmichael, violence is as American as apple pie. Indeed, the notion of violence in the United States is not limited to our urban centers and small towns, but violence is experienced in our schools, in our bars and nightclubs, on our sports fields, and featured in all sorts of products of American culture like movies, television series, news and social media, and computer games.

It is no wonder that violence is one of the most studied concepts in the social sciences, with a predominant clustering in the fields of anthropology, criminology/criminal justice, psychology, sociology, and urban studies. Central to the core of the study of violence in the United States is Elijah Anderson's concept of the "code of the street" (1999). Nominally the concept of the street code is used to explain why young men living in impoverished circumstances resort to and justify the use of violence in their day-to-day activities. Anderson, and those who have chosen to use the street code concept, have conducted a considerable amount of research that has demonstrated its existence and utility. In fact, by last count there have been approximately 70 studies, only in journals ranked in the Social Science Citation Index, that have used the street code explanation. Although the concept and practice of the street code has been debated elsewhere, one of the shortcomings is the failure to test its salience beyond that narrow but important purview of the United States.

This anomaly has not gone unnoticed. This book is the outgrowth of work conducted by Wilhelm Heitmeyer, the founder of the Institute of Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) at Bielefeld University, one of the leading European institutes in violence studies. Heitmeyer has always wanted to conduct research on interpersonal violence that occurs in different parts of the world, where violence is a significant problem for the stability of those particular societies. As a consequence of this interest, Heitmeyer and collaborators have analyzed the violence-related norms of male juveniles (aged 16–21 years old) living in high-risk urban neighborhoods.

The project resulted in this book. *The Codes of the Street in Risky Neighborhoods: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Youth Violence in Germany, Pakistan, and South Africa* is the first comprehensive study of the street code

concept attempting to determine if this concept and process exists in milieus beyond the United States, and if so where, and when it does, its extent, and how and why it is manifested. In sum, the purpose of the study is to provide “an international, cross-cultural comparison of the norms which define and make meaningful violence in three countries, namely Germany, South Africa, and Pakistan.”

To begin with, the analysis is ambitious in its scope and aims. Although the researchers may be faulted for only looking at the explanation and practice of the street code in only three countries, cross-national studies of this nature are complicated not only conceptually, but in a managerial sense too. All sorts of barriers must be navigated.

Also, despite the sample size in each of the countries ($n = 30$) being comparatively low, it allows the researchers to deeply interrogate the process of what is really going on in their subjects' lives in risky spatial circumstances. This is possible, because the researchers deconstructed the street code to its core elements, and translated these component parts to interview guidelines for qualitative interviews that they conducted in Germany, South Africa, and Pakistan. By doing this, they were able to find out which street code elements are stable over all contexts, whether there is a general street code, and which component parts of the street code are culturally shaped.

Moreover, although all contributors to the research project are listed on the cover of this book, not all of them were responsible for writing each of the chapters. In addition to Sebastian Kurtenbach who coordinated the project, he is joined by other academics who are field experts in the countries where the street code is analyzed in this book.

Among the collaborators, I know Sebastian Kurtenbach the best and frequently interacted with him for the past few years. We first met in Germany when I was on sabbatical at the Ruhr University Bochum, and since then we have stayed in contact and engaged in some research collaborations. How did this come to be? I gave a presentation on street culture at Belfield University that was coordinated by Steffen Zdun (another contributor to this book). Subsequently Zdun, Kurtenbach, and I met in Bochum and discussed our respective research projects.

Later Kurtenbach and I walked some portions of the inner city of Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Dortmund in order to get a sense of the street, its urban patterning, and their street culture. As evidence of this disposition, he has given me comments on my papers (and I have reciprocated on his) and we are collaborators on a couple of other research projects. Beyond Kurtenbach, all but one of the authors of this book currently work at the IKG, have worked there at one point in time, or have some sort of association with the center. In addition to Kurtenbach, two of the co-authors will be contributing chapters to my forthcoming *Routledge Handbook on Street Culture* (2020). Not only am I familiar with the IKG, but also I have also reviewed for the *International Journal for Conflict and Violence* that it produces.

This book starts with a thorough review of the contribution of research on gangs, violence, community, neighborhoods, and community, including the scholarship produced by the Chicago school, and work by Thrasher, Coleman and Wilson, etc.

It moves on to a discussion of space. The book describes in detail a multitude of human behaviors that exist and the linkages among the numerous variables in (e.g., risk, collective efficacy, legal cynicism, special threat, risky neighborhoods, etc.). These are followed by an intense discussion of the concept of street code and its use.

Three separate chapters follow that analyze the presence and utility of the street code in Germany (Dortmund Nordstadt, Duisburg-Marxloh, and Berlin-Neukoelln, in particular), South Africa (Cape Town and Durban), and Pakistan (in particular Islamabad and Rawalpindi). An integrating chapter that explains where the street code exists, and how it is modified or interpreted by young men follows this. In short, the street code concept and reliance on it to moderate interactions does not manifest itself the same in each of the different cultures.

We learn how living in a risky neighborhood and having to navigate it can negatively affect one's ability to secure a job outside of that physical space. Not only must young males be careful about their social interactions with others, but they must make important decisions about carrying a weapon and whether to use it too. The book also delves into the subjects' sense of belonging in their neighborhoods, and the kind of street etiquette they must engage in.

What this study points to is the necessity for more cross-cultural/national studies of youth violence in general, and the concept of the "the street code" in particular. More specifically, as this study points out, we may have to conclude that the "street code" concept is place specific and relegated primarily to the United States where we have seen it manifested. When we apply the street code concept to contexts outside the US, particularly those that do not conform to Anglo-American contexts, it does not do so well. This is an important finding in and of itself.

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