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*Code of the Street 25 Years Later:
Lasting Legacies, Empirical
Status, and Future Directions*

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Abstract

This review, published on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Code of the Street* (1999), considers the legacies of Elijah Anderson’s groundbreaking analysis of the interactional rules for negotiating street violence within the context of racism and structural disadvantage in Philadelphia. Empirical testing has yielded substantial support for *Code of the Street*’s key arguments. In the process of assessing its generalizability, such scholarship has inadvertently flattened and decontextualized the theory by, for example, reducing it to attitudinal scales. We identify a more politically conscious analysis in the original text than it is generally credited with, which we use to argue that “code of the street” has outgrown its reductive categorization as a subcultural theory. We conclude that the pressing issue of urban gun violence makes now an ideal time to refresh the theory by resituating it within the contemporary structural and cultural landscape of urban violence, analyzing the social-ecological features that shape the normative underpinnings of interpersonal violence, and studying the prosocial and adaptive features of the code.

INTRODUCTION

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Elijah Anderson's (1999/2000) *Code of the Street*, a groundbreaking analysis of Black youth in urban Philadelphia and the interactional rules for negotiating street violence. According to an early assessment, "few writings in contemporary criminological theory match the eloquence and, arguably, the insight" of this study (Brezina et al. 2004, p. 303). Two and a half decades later, as gun violence reaches crisis proportions in many areas of the United States,¹ this review considers the lasting legacies of the code of the street (CoS)² as a criminological and sociolegal theory as well as the limitations and contemporary relevance of subcultural theories of crime. We find robust empirical support for CoS in contexts where it has been tested, along with potential applications to settings beyond Anderson's original focus. We highlight a more politically conscious analysis in the original text than the book or the theory is generally credited with and apply a critical lens to argue for continued research on translocal cultures, rather than racialized subcultures, of violence within and beyond the United States.

THE MESSENGER AND THE MESSAGE

Code of the Street's Genealogy

Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street* has a place-specific genealogy. Anderson was mentored by Gerald Suttles and Howard Becker and trained in the Chicago School tradition of social science.³ Subcultural theories were informed by immersive research designs, especially ethnography, and a focus on symbolic interactionist processes in the urban communities of Chicago, Illinois. Although *Code of the Street* was anchored in Philadelphia, Anderson's (1978/2003) earlier work included *A Place on the Corner*, an ethnographic study of the status hierarchies of the "decent" Black men at Jelly's Bar on the South Side of Chicago and their interactions with their relatively disadvantaged peers they called "hoodlums" and "wineheads." Despite their positions as "top dogs," the regulars at Jelly's occasionally "moved to adopt a tough front" (Anderson 1978/2003, p. xii), a theme developed more fully in *Code*.

Supported by years of ethnographic field research in two Philadelphia neighborhoods, *Code* is a subcultural analysis of routine interactions between urban youth, particularly Black boys and men, focusing on how violence and the threat of violence are negotiated in urban spaces. These routine interactions reflect an unwritten set of rules, or code, where respect and other forms of social currency are "hard-won but easily lost" (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 33). To "mean mug" or "act hard" is precisely that: a performance for an audience. Underlying this treatment of value orientations is an astute dramaturgical analysis (Goffman 1959) drawing on the successful performance of "street" culture. In public staging areas such as movie theaters, schools, street corners, and sidewalks, urban youth act street by adopting the aesthetics and communication patterns of

¹"More Americans died of gun-related injuries in 2021 than in any other year on record, according to recently published statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). That included a record number of gun murders, as well as a near-record number of gun suicides" (Gramlich 2023). Between 2012 and 2021, the rate of gun suicide in the United States increased 19%, and the rate of gun homicide increased 73% (Cent. Dis. Control Prev. 2021).

²In this review, we use *Code of the Street* or *Code* to refer to Anderson's book and CoS to refer to the criminological and sociolegal theory.

³The Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago was home to Edwin Sutherland, Herbert Blumer, Erving Goffman, Howard Becker, Clifford Shaw, and Henry McKay, among others, and is associated with the development of ecological, neighborhood-level, and subcultural theories of crime, deviance, and socialization (Newburn 2009, p. 188).

role models or admired figures, including rappers, athletes, and local drug dealers. These figures share an unequivocal emphasis on confidence and bravado. The underlying premise of looking and acting tough is to be perceived as someone who should not be messed with, i.e., victimized, disrespected, or otherwise taken advantage of. “Facial expression, gait, and direct talk” are “geared mainly toward deterring aggression” (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 73). This normative pressure to adopt what some might interpret as toxic and hypermasculine personas limits other opportunities for self-expression, social affiliation, and sense of identity. Dress codes, ways of speaking, and cosmetic or aesthetic adjustments (e.g., slits on eyebrows, teardrop tattoos, hairstyles) condition others’ perceptions, expectations, and assumptions about race, place, and belonging.

Anderson reminds readers that subcultures do not appear at random. In the context of the original research, the CoS is about adaptations that Black men and boys make when restricted or otherwise blocked from conventional avenues for upward mobility and self-actualization. Legacies of racism and institutional neglect prompt some urban youth to engage in hypermasculine campaigns for relative dignity and respect by developing a reputation for willingness to deliver on varied forms of interpersonal aggression (see also Bourgois 1995, Fagan & Wilkinson 1998, Horowitz 1983, Wilkinson 2001). It is not merely about being a fighter but being ready to fight. The best defense is a decisive offense. “A person’s public bearing must send the unmistakable, if sometimes subtle, message that one is capable of violence, and possibly mayhem, when the situation requires it, that one can take care of oneself” (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 72). One interpretation is that respect is distilled to a relational, arguably zero-sum asset that must be negotiated as a form of interactional currency of dominance and submission. Another is simply that the code is an iterative culture of honor (see Cohen et al. 1996, Henry 2009, Rodriguez Mosquera et al. 2008) that gives predictability and direction to how disputes might emerge and how they should be settled. Under both interpretations, the symbolic and cultural practices associated with the code must be understood alongside structural exclusion from (a) conventional forms of protection, such as calling the police, and (b) conventional forms of interpersonal competition and upward social mobility. With ample reasons to distrust police and state law enforcement institutions, public safety becomes the responsibility of each individual, providing incentives to harden one’s presentation of self to be perceived as “unfuckwithable.” Once gained through the “credible threat of vengeance” (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 10) and demonstrating “juice,” this configuration of respect serves a protective function.

Code is grounded in the criminological tradition of subcultural theories of crime and delinquency, which were at the height of popularity in the 1950s and inspired by anomie and differential association theories (Merton 1957, Sutherland 1947). Although Anderson does not invoke Mertonian anomie directly, CoS is a salient example of how race, class, and gender are embedded in contexts where individuals are excluded from institutionally recognized means for attaining culturally prescribed goals. Although anti-Black racism features prominently in the structural conditions that make the code necessary, earlier ethnographic studies with working-class youth found parallel adaptation to exclusion and ostracism from mainstream society. Cohen (1955), for instance, found that White⁴ youth from economically disadvantaged households experience status frustration when judged by teachers and other adults using a middle-class measuring rod. Unable to meet those expectations, youth reject and subvert the middle-class value structure to attain status through deviance. Miller (1958) identified five concerns (which underwrite focal concerns

⁴For a primer on the arguments in favor and in opposition to capitalizing the “w” in white, see Coleman (2020) and Laws (2020). We capitalize the “W” to communicate that Whiteness is not “a common noun or adjective” but a socially configured and contingent thing that shapes social and political life and institutions (see also León 2021, p. 12).

theory) that were distinctively grounded in socioeconomically disadvantaged culture and visible among its youth: trouble, smartness, toughness, fate, and autonomy. Anderson's *Code* is complementary to these earlier works while charting an original course by emphasizing how Black youth negotiate exclusion in the context of 1990s Philadelphia.

Grounding his theory in Wilson's (1987) empirical portrait of deindustrialization and the concentrated disadvantage left in its wake, Anderson argues that the disappearance of "old heads," or senior mentors, led to the rise of the street as a powerful site of socialization. Widespread mistrust of the police and mainstream institutions, grounded in direct and vicarious experiences of racial exclusion and police violence, led to a breakdown in norms and procedures for resolving conflict. In its place, street (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 35) orientations vied with "decent" value systems as a way of negotiating the acquisition and maintenance of social status, along with the norms and standards for conflict resolution.

Mechanisms of cultural transmission include parents, caregivers, and peers, providing clear connections to observational, learning, and differential association theories of crime and deviance (Akers 1973, Cohen 1955, Sutherland 1947). Anderson's *Code* centers the family as the primary mechanism for how values and behaviors are transmitted. So-called street families are composed of adults who, according to Anderson, provide comparatively less supervision of children and where substance use and extramarital or otherwise nontraditional romantic relationships are more likely. According to Anderson, caregivers in street families rely on relatively harsh discipline in the home and encourage children to fight with others to protect or increase self-esteem and social standing in the absence of achievement measured by objective or institutional standards.

"Decent" families (which Anderson equated to heteronormative two-parent households), by contrast, teach their children to value mainstream markers of achievement, such as education and employment, but they must also prepare them to navigate the broader social order: "Even the most decent child in the neighborhood must at some point display a degree of commitment to the street" (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 99). In essence, "decent" families instruct youth in code-switching (see also Rios 2017), adapting language and comportment to different interpersonal and situational contexts. In this way, a person from a "decent" family can still be street smart, so long as they possess a working knowledge of the code and social antennae for assessing relational hierarchies, practices, and codes of conduct that vary across class locations and racial-ethnic terrain. Most relevant for criminologists, this kind of sociocultural capital informs how threats and instances of violence take shape and also how they can be prevented. The fluidity of code-switching and attention to structural and interactional context sets CoS apart from earlier subcultural theories, including the subculture of violence thesis (Wolfgang & Ferracuti 1967), which viewed criminal values as stable and assumed that most individuals in criminogenic neighborhoods embraced them (Brezina et al. 2004). The code and Anderson's differentiation between two types of families, then, is not a mutually exclusive dichotomy (see Wacquant 2002), but a package of norms and expectations that inform place- and person-specific interactions.

Code as Structural Analysis

Cultural criminology emphasizes how "much of what we label criminal behavior is at the same time subcultural behavior, collectively organized around networks of symbol, ritual, and shared meaning... and how subculture can serve as a basic unit of criminological analysis" (Ferrell 2009, p. 204). Anderson's work could surely qualify as an extension (or novel expansion) of this approach. Yet the way criminologists reference CoS invites reflection on where subcultural theories fit between (a) psycho-social accounts of crime and deviance and (b) structural analyses of race, power, and public policy. The code is not merely a matter of "corrupt values or deviant socialization"

(Brezina et al. 2004, p. 304) but a form of self-preservation and status protection among individuals who exist in a milieu marked by insecurity and violence. Anderson's approach to subculture extends far beyond an analysis of what kinds of people hold what kinds of values; rather, it is a story of how individuals, families, and subgroups adapt—however imperfectly—to given institutional and structural configurations.

Anderson's *Code* included what some might interpret as a radical critique of mainstream institutions. Anderson did not interpret youth violence and interpersonal victimization within Black communities as solely a matter of subcultural attitudes, values, or norms. "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" (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 34). Subcultures of violence might be best understood by dropping the sub prefix and identifying the tree that produces branches, leaves, and poisonous fruit. Today, this might be best described as White supremacy, institutional racism, or acute and structural forms of state-sanctioned violence. Anderson (1999/2000, p. 34) made clear that his findings "can be traced to the profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and its institutions felt by many poor inner-city Black people, particularly the young." By focusing on Anderson's clear description of cultural adaptation, we can see that CoS might have been categorized as a sociolegal theory and not a behavioral-cultural one, because Anderson was always clear about what, why, and how adaptation was necessary in the first place.

Code of the street as an alternative conflict resolution system. CoS is as much a sociolegal theory as a criminological one, insofar as it helps us understand law-like norms, mores, and conventions that give structure and rationality to social interactions. The "moral life of the inner city" has an intuitive—albeit problematic—logic in which violence is understood as a form of self-help or "people's law," described by Anderson (1999/2000, p. 66) as "a perversion of the Golden Rule" (see also Kubrin 2005). When police and other agents of the state are part of the problem rather than a solution to physical insecurity, alternative systems of conflict resolution take hold. In impoverished Black urban communities, residents have learned that they cannot rely on the police to mediate disputes and are responsible for their own safety (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 27). "The youth knows. . . that he exists in a legally precarious state. Hence, he is motivated to avoid the police and his public life becomes severely circumscribed" (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 196). In this context, invoking formal social control by calling 911 is at best ineffective and at worst positively dangerous. Acts of violence, vengeance, and retribution become more likely in the absence of formalized mechanisms for pursuing accountability (Brezina et al. 2004, Jacobs & Wright 2006). Defending one's physical self and sense of honor can be realized by possessing a ruthless offense, creating a dynamic where violence serves both a retributive and deterrent function (see Brunson & Stewart 2006). Adherence to the code thus creates a social environment in which violence is normative and to some degree predictable or, at the very least, explainable in terms of the rules of the game (Kubrin 2005).

A brilliant aspect of Anderson's *Code* is the holistic analysis of how these codes are raced, classed, and gendered and how these hegemonic vectors of power and privilege are negotiated and subverted by everyday people. Anderson trusts that readers will understand that Black Americans have ample reason to distrust institutions associated with the most coercive arms of the state: police, courts, and corrections. To say that Black communities, among others, are formally and practically excluded from state protection is to name an enduring truth about the United States. Moreover, evidence points to their active and perpetual targeting and victimization by the state, not only through discriminatory policies across all domains of civic life (e.g., housing, education, health-care, employment) but also in militarized and repressive crime control policies like the Violent

Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (Hinton & Cook 2021, Muhammad 2010). This is a critical and contentious detail because it helps us problematize two things: (a) the prefix sub in subcultural theories of violence, insofar as we might credit violence within a subgroup as being driven by top-down violence from a more powerful group, and (b) accounts of why Black youth in urban contexts adapt to this reality by engaging in different forms of conflict avoidance and dispute resolution and the role of violence in shaping community-specific social control (Kubrin 2005).

Although typically treated as antisocial from the outside, the street code has little explanatory value for truly antisocial behavior, such as random acts of violence or mass shootings unmotivated by hatred of marginalized groups. The code explains how standards, norms, and procedures are configured in settings where social hierarchies are arranged differently but nonetheless with structure, predictability, and logical coherence (see Matsueda et al. 2006). In distressed areas where violence is common, some residents' mistrust of and lack of faith in the criminal legal system leads them to take personal responsibility for their safety (Black 1983, Sampson & Bartusch 1998, Stewart et al. 2006). The role of the state is critical for thinking about the code as a social and political practice. The code is grounded in an ethos of self-reliance and the regulatory functions of violence that are shared among those who cannot rely on formally designated violence workers: the police.⁵ This ethos of being unable to trust or rely on the state might be so salient that it becomes stigmatizing merely to cooperate with the state on matters of conflict resolution. Criminological research has examined perceptions and practices related to snitching, or providing information to law enforcement in exchange for reduced sanctions for the informer's own misdeeds (Brunson & Wade 2019, Pfuhl 1992, Slocum et al. 2010). The widespread denunciation of snitching, many criminologists assert, underscores the code's contemporary salience, even if, in some settings, adherence is performative. For example, Rosenfeld et al.'s (2003) interviews with 20 narrators who were actively engaged in crime showed that, despite widespread disapprobation of snitching, it was common, especially when a close family member was in imminent danger or the crime was considered profoundly serious (see also Clampet-Lundquist et al. 2015). Despite the regularity of snitching, particularly in plea negotiations and investigative informant scenarios, it is still condemned by adherents of the code.

Having fully unpacked the CoS thesis, including some of its lesser-appreciated nuances, we turn to how the theory has been operationalized, subjected to verification, and explored for its applicability in other settings.

EMPIRICAL VALIDITY

Numerous scholars have tested the core propositions of the CoS thesis and have generally found support for its elements. We first examine studies using violent or aggressive behavior as the dependent variable and the limitations of these approaches. We then turn to the challenging question of the CoS's relationship to victimization. In one of the first evaluations of the CoS, Brezina et al. (2004) reviewed extant literature to examine the relationships between structural factors [race, socio-economic status (SES), residence in high-crime neighborhoods], social process indicators (poor parenting, prior violence or victimization, affiliation with peers who are steeped in the code, and a belief that status cannot be achieved through legitimate means), adherence to the code's

⁵We use the term violence worker not as an evaluative or pejorative claim but a descriptive one. Police are formalized violence workers in that they have the legal authority to use escalatory forms of violence as a core part of their occupational and governmental functions. For more on this term, see Donnella (2020) and Seigel (2018).

belief system, and youth violence. They conclude that the conceptual model generally operates as described in *Code*. Moreover, in their analysis using National Youth Survey data, they found that adherence to the code both predicts future violent behavior and mediates some of the structural effects. In this study, the differential effects of race—being Black versus non-Black—disappeared when controlling for SES (see also Heimer 1997, Markowitz & Felson 1998). This is a critical point, to which we return later.

Stewart & Simons (2006) developed a seven-item scale of code-related beliefs commonly used in later studies validating CoS theory (Moule & Fox 2021). Because their data, the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS), exclusively sampled African American adolescents, they measured racial discrimination rather than race and found it, along with neighborhood disadvantage, community violence, and street-oriented families, to be a significant predictor of code adoption. In turn, code-related beliefs mediated some of the effects of exogenous factors, especially neighborhood disadvantage, on self-reported violent delinquency. Interestingly, membership in a “decent” family, as determined by assessing parent–child interactions in the home, was not predictive of a refusal to adopt the code. This analysis found neither gender nor geographical differences in these relationships, suggesting that the CoS may be applicable to girls as well as boys and to nonurban areas (see also Keith & Griffiths 2014).

Moule & Fox (2021, p. 227) conducted a meta-analysis of 38 quantitative studies (1999–2009) testing the relationship between the adoption of code-oriented beliefs and violence and concluded that “the street code is a more general theory than Anderson originally predicted.” Most studies (79%) found that individuals’ adoption of the code was a statistically significant predictor of offending, with effect sizes strongest for adolescents and violence. Two conclusions are worth emphasizing. First, the effect sizes in the CoS studies were modest compared to those found in meta-analyses of other theories, including self-control, learning, gang membership, and deterrence. Second, the predictive value of code-related attitudes was not limited to Black inner-city adolescents as Anderson specified but extended to other samples, including community and school-based adolescents (Brezina et al. 2004, Carson & Esbensen 2014, Drummond et al. 2011, Matsuda et al. 2013, McNeeley & Hoebe 2017, Simons et al. 2012), college students (Henson et al. 2017, Intravia et al. 2017), criminal gangs or groups (Mitchell et al. 2017, Moule et al. 2017, Pyrooz et al. 2014), incarcerated or formally supervised persons (Allen & Lo 2012, Mears et al. 2013), and European samples (Brookman et al. 2011, Holligan 2015, Kurtenbach & Rauf 2019). CoS has been used to explain a wide range of criminological phenomena, including cybercrime (Henson et al. 2017), tax fraud and drunk driving (Piquero et al. 2012), and academic cheating (Intravia et al. 2017; see also Moule & Fox 2021). Recent tests have also found that adherence to the street code is positively associated with self-control (Intravia et al. 2018, McNeeley et al. 2018, Piquero et al. 2012)⁶ and consistent with developmental frameworks positing that commitment to the code diminishes with age (Erickson et al. 2022, Moule et al. 2015, Piquero et al. 2012). One exception to this pattern is recent research on suburban drug dealers, whose code led them to tolerate or avoid violent confrontations when they were threatened with predatory activity (Jacques & Wright 2015).

An important challenge of quantitative assessment is the protective factor as it relates to victimization. In short, do the most rabid adherents of the CoS experience an increased or decreased likelihood of victimization? Anderson’s own conception of the code is nuanced, articulating that it sets the rules for regulating violence, prescribing the conditions in which violence is necessary—i.e., in retaliation for perceived acts of disrespect—or by which it may be avoided—i.e., by

⁶Intravia et al. (2018) found that adherence to the street code completely mediates the effect of self-control on violence.

appearing threatening enough to deter others from testing one's mettle. According to Anderson, those who are naive to the code are those most likely to be targeted for victimization. However, it is difficult to measure the counterfactual, i.e., instances when violence is prevented or deterred. A further complication is that prior victimization or vicarious exposure to violence may precede adoption of the code, which is consistent with the original theory (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 70), or operate as an outcome of definitions favorable to violence. Although cross-sectional studies have found a negative relationship between the two (Baron 2011), longitudinal research, which is better suited to temporal ordering, has found a direct, positive relationship between prior victimization and later engagement in aggression, unmediated by beliefs (Brezina et al. 2004). This finding is consistent with other criminological research showing a strong overlap, or cycle, between victimization and offending (Lauritsen et al. 1991, Pyrooz et al. 2014).

Stewart et al. (2006) use FACHS to examine the relationship between adoption of the street code and self-reported violent victimization. Contrary to Anderson's assertion that the code reduces the likelihood of victimization through the presentation of "juice," or willingness to engage in aggression, their analysis found that respondents who adopted the code were significantly more likely to be victims of street violence (see also Rich & Grey 2005). It takes two or more parties for an interpersonal conflict to occur, and adherents of the code who can effectively code-switch often do so based on their perception of the opposing party. It would follow that attitudinal preferences for violence to solve disputes are a logical precursor to violent activity and thereby a higher risk of victimization. However, a limitation of extant tests of CoS is the inability to measure the performative adoption of street behavior that Anderson observed directly. In other words, with nonimmersive methods, it is difficult to measure fights deterred by preemptive posturing or intimidation, which may be used by all street-smart individuals regardless of whether a survey instrument would register their internalization of code-related belief systems. Indeed, as Anderson's (1978/2003) study of Jelly's Bar established, altercations were often prevented by men he calls "handlers," who allowed other men to achieve masculine status from their willingness to fight while simultaneously recognizing that it was unlikely to go anywhere. Consistent with this finding, Sharkey (2006) advanced the concept of "street efficacy," or the perceived ability to avoid victimization and maintain one's own safety, finding that this set of beliefs was indeed predictive of less reported victimization.

Analyses that rely on composite variables (e.g., additive indices, factor analyses, item-response theories) to test the relationship between group-level values and violence-related outcomes are fundamentally distinct from the kind of research design and analytic approach that Anderson originally executed. We fear that some important nuances have been lost in translation. *Code* never sought to argue that the type of subculture predicts the type of violence but rather to bring to life, warts and all, the varieties of coping mechanisms that arise in the face of alienation, concentrated poverty, joblessness, and institutional racism (Anderson 1999/2000, p. 318). In the conclusion, we argue that further testing of the code as a set of beliefs likely offers diminishing returns and that the current gun violence crisis makes a regrounding of the theory through ethnographic methods necessary. Next, we examine some of the ways that *Code*'s ideas have been extended to other areas of focus.

EXTENSION OF ANDERSON'S IDEAS

Gender

The experiences of women and girls are infrequently mentioned in *Code of the Street*, and the lion's share of tests have found that boys and young men are most likely to adopt code-related beliefs. Nevertheless, a handful of studies have examined the street code among girls and women. Brunson

& Stewart (2006) interviewed 24 girls on Chicago's South Side and found widespread participation in serious violence and a concern with establishing street reputations to prevent future challenges. Like the boys in other studies, girls were able to generate status, security, and respect through their willingness to "knuckle up" when challenged (see also Erickson & Burgason 2022). Jones (2009), who did graduate work with Anderson, spent three years studying Black girls in Philadelphia and concluded that they navigated a tightrope of competing gender-racial expectations, including typical demands to conform to feminine ideals as well as "Black respectability politics" to distance themselves from racist stereotypes. These girls also drew on the CoS as they engaged in aggression against others while simultaneously working to avoid gender-based victimization. Lessons imparted by mothers and grandmothers formed the code that helped them to manage the risk of both forms of violence.

Masculinities theory has advanced since *Code's* treatment of masculinity performance and analysis of the sex codes governing sexual and familial relations between girls and boys. Feminist theory has elaborated on the ways in which masculinities (plural) can be flexible and adaptive to changing structural and cultural circumstances but also fragile, requiring constant effort to maintain (Bridges & Pascoe 2014, Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Moreover, manhood acts often rely on the "valorization of aggression and violence," and criminal activity signals "capacities to control one's own life, to be invulnerable and needless of help, and to be fearless and hence not easily intimidated by others" (Schrock & Schwalbe 2009, pp. 282, 289).

Criminologists have demonstrated how adult manhood is shaped by a set of age-normed expectations that are expressed while building durable social ties with romantic partners and children. To earn the esteem of these important stakeholders, men must put their juvenile involvement in crime and violence behind them, cut ties to problematic male peer groups, and signal a commitment to law-abiding activities and conventional routines, putting others' needs before their own (Carlsson 2013, Fader 2023, Umamaheswar 2020). Black masculinities research has expanded even more widely since *Code's* publication, turning from a focus on the maladaptive failures of Black compensatory masculinity to increased attention to how they navigate hegemonic masculine norms and the agency, creativity, and resilience needed to do so (Williams et al. 2019, Young 2021). Finally, Panfil's (2017) groundbreaking analysis of gay-identified, mostly Black gang members who, like those in Anderson's work, responded to acts of disrespect through violence, demonstrates that their construction of masculinities was complicated by fluid performances of gender identity across social settings and audiences that were bound by heteronormativity. Her work reminds us of the need for an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1990) to understand the simultaneity of the overlapping positions across axes of power and privilege according to gender, race, social class, sexuality and gender identity, and ability (Collins 2002).

Labeling and Stigma

There is a fundamental difference between looking, acting, or being tough and committing acts of violence. Verbal and nonverbal communication, clothing and dress, and visual aesthetics can lead to scenarios where entire neighborhoods and communities are reduced to a stigmatized or deviant subculture. Anderson (1999/2000, p. 104) finds that youth from "decent" families must be proficient in street symbols and interactions, but outsiders may not make any distinction. The cumulative impact of this negative association carries significant weight; getting "lump[ed] with the street element" takes a psychological toll on boys. He elaborates on this in his later work, *Black in White Spaces* (Anderson 2022).

One legacy of Anderson's work has been to revive scholarly interest in stigma. Rios's (2011) ethnographic account of Black and Latino boys in Oakland, California, finds that they confront

criminal stereotypes in nearly every setting they navigate: schools, interactions with police or neighbors, corner stores, or while playing ball at their local community center. Being “misrecognized” as delinquents or gang members often leads boys to engage in “crimes of resistance,” short-lived and symbolic bursts of autonomy that ultimately serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy or, more positively, engagement in collective resistance within social movements. Recent work (Fader 2023) has found that, as this racial–criminal stigma extends into adulthood, men of color engage in acts of generativity, such as mentoring or community volunteer work, to challenge stigmatic labels and signal to others that they are good and moral men (for generativity as supporting distance from offending, see Jones 2018). As these examples suggest, contemporary ethnographies are less likely to focus on criminal involvement and instead focus on how the expansion of the criminal legal system is experienced by those who are most heavily impacted by police, courts, and corrections (see Rios et al. 2017). The resurgence of support for labeling theory in the 1990s can be partially attributed to Anderson’s groundwork, as well as to life course theory (Sampson & Laub 1993), which set the important precedent of identifying sources of structural stigma such as incarceration or felony records as a predictor of future criminal activity and a host of other negative outcomes (Pager 2003, Wakefield & Uggen 2010).

IT STARTS AT THE TOP: PLURALITY OF CODES

Reflecting on Anderson’s legacies leads us to consider how culture helps us understand why individuals or families facing similar structural circumstances have different experiences and outcomes in many realms, including violence. Nevertheless, subcultural criminology theories must be treated with care; as Small and colleagues (2010) note in their review of the cultural turn in poverty research, they may inadvertently or purposely transmute structural inequities into psychosocial pathologies and stigmatized cultural attributes. Indeed, there is a basis for critiquing *Code* for its reproduction of a particular kind of respectability politics and “talented tenth” (Du Bois 1899) discourse. One of the troubling implications of subcultural theory is that it attributes kinds of violence to kinds of people rather than correlating unequal structures and institutional failures with measures of violence. When taken to its logical extreme, the subcultural values and practices become conflated with specific neighborhoods, blocks, or communities, producing a form of cultural reductionism that equates racially segregated space with violence (Peterson & Krivo 2005, Sampson & Bartusch 1998).

Many of the symbolic practices that Anderson documents are found in other subcultures. Anderson (1999/2000, p. 179) explicitly makes this point at the beginning of chapter five, in tracing elements of the code as far back as “biblical times: ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’” Moreover, the underlying logics of this code seem quintessentially American in their violence, patriarchy, and classism. Iterations of street codes are found anywhere we choose to look for them. They include proxemics, or how personal space is negotiated via eye contact, body language, and linguistic markers. They condition what some middle schoolers might learn about who is supposed to look away first when two sets of eyes meet. They arise at family reunions when brothers or uncles banter over who would win in a fight. They define the circumstances in which it is appropriate to shove someone at a bar (see Copes et al. 2013) or while playing soccer or basketball, or how to deal with bullies or aggressors in a high school hallway. They inform phrases like “you can’t whup me, though” and “yeah he’s nice, but can he fight?” Witty insults like “he’s all bark and no bite” and the statistical correlation between “fucking around” and “finding out” all reflect the social richness and open-textured vibrancy of interpreting Anderson’s code as something that helps to make sense of far more than urban Black youth and men in 1990s Philadelphia.

The authors are convinced that CoS is a testament to how violence begets violence and anti-social structures generate imperfect adaptations. We ask whether the code signals that violence is

indeed connected to subcultural expression while being culturally prevalent. Are corporate cultures that lead to widespread waste, fraud, abuse, and criminal prosecution not part of a broader and inferior value system? How can institutional anomie exist and not be registered at the interpersonal, social-psychological level? Is it reasonable to understand the inadequacy of institutional protections against gendered sexual violence as logically derived from patriarchal legal structures? Is the thin blue line, blue curtain, or code of silence for police, fraternity brothers, and mobsters alike not part of a broader culture of aggression, economically driven competition, and internal norms for how violence works? Anderson offers us a point of reflection for what codes mean, where and how we find them, and what might have been lost along the way between Anderson's qualitatively immersive and inductive approach to theory-building and deductive theory-testing.

Moreover, any patterned behavior, regardless of criminological relevance, is going to be associated with some kind of human [sub]culture and value system. In the context of Anderson's (1999/2000, p. 70) study,

...violent behavior is determined by specific situations, thus giving importance to the various ways individuals define and interpret situations. . . . The individual builds patterns as outcomes are repeated over time. Behaviors, violent or civil, that work for a young person and are reinforced by peers are likely to be repeated, particularly as the child begins to build a "name," or a reputation for toughness.

It would also be helpful to examine how CoS converges with American myths and hegemonic value systems that are normalized in nationalistic and implicitly or explicitly racist ideologies. Self-reliance, grit, and the imperative to never back down in the face of a substantive or symbolic threat are integral components of American national identity.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Twenty-five years of empirical testing has yielded substantial support for *Code's* key arguments but has also flattened and decontextualized the theory by reducing it to attitudinal scales.⁷ We propose that the CoS has likely outgrown its reductive categorization as a subcultural theory, particularly if subcultural theories continue to imply that interventions should be directed at a subpopulation, which invokes a sordid history of using logics of discipline and punishment to "civilize" othered subjects, particularly children, using systems of formal and informal social control (see Cunneen & Tauri 2019, p. 372; King 2017, p. 6). Theories that frame "othered" or stigmatized populations as a group to be "enlightened" or "reformed" deflect attention away from the racist, classist, and patriarchal systems and policies that generate neighborhood disadvantage and racial stratification in the first place.

We argue that the pressing issue of urban violence makes this an ideal time to refresh and reground the theory by resituating it within the contemporary landscape. Future research should (a) return to the field to determine what today's street code consists of and how it is transmitted, (b) explore the ecological context of the street code, and (c) investigate the positive functions of the code. With gun violence reaching crisis levels in many US cities, the time is ripe to engage in ethnographic field research that maps the structural, cultural, and interpersonal contexts in which street violence is either escalated or avoided.

One guiding question is whether a code of the street exists today, and if so, what its nature is. It is possible, even likely, that shifting structural conditions, including the removal and eventual

⁷This is not the fault of the authors of these studies but rather an inevitable result of operationalizing a symbolic interactionist theory using quantitative data. This is likely why labeling theory was considered "untestable" until the early 1990s (Sampson & Laub 1993).

return of large swaths of men from the most violence-ridden communities through mass incarceration (Clear 2009), have altered the rules around violence and the ways they are agreed upon and shared. Mass supervision, policing tactics, and the increase in street violence (as its own exogenous factor) have driven many men indoors to avoid the unpredictability of the street (Fader 2021, Haldipur 2018). Macro-level changes including gentrification and displacement, the changing nature of space and time use in the post-pandemic “work from home” era, rising wages and new opportunities in the legal labor market, and growing disapproval of policing as an institution may have separately or together changed the landscape of violence. Social media is another environment in which “beefs” may be generated or squashed (Stuart 2020). Although the academic speedup favors secondary analysis of data sets, funding agencies can help mediate this reward structure by earmarking grants for ethnographic research.

Field research is also needed to examine the role (if any) of today’s “old heads” in transmitting norms or guidelines around violence or its avoidance. Harding (2009), for example, finds that youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely than their middle-class counterparts to socialize with older peers. Although the reputations of these older men can serve as protection for adolescent boys who must travel outside of the community for school, they also commonly present boys with cultural frames that are inconsistent with mainstream or conventional ideals and that compete with the socialization presented by parents. Gender dynamics are salient here, as female mentoring of girls is likely to transmit unique messages (Jones 2009, Muhammad 2022).

As mass incarceration has swept so many men into prisons from the kinds of communities described in *Code*, the “prisonized old head,” who is steeped in carceral culture and employs these frames to navigate challenges on the outside, has become an important source of socialization of younger men (Stuart & Miller 2017). The need to understand intergenerational socialization is particularly relevant as credible messenger programs become more popular, and these local experts have been used as violence interrupters, probation officers, and mentors for system-involved youth. Early evaluations have shown that credible messengers are effective in building rapport and reducing recidivism among youth (Harvell et al. 2018). More research is needed to understand the content of mentoring relationships (see Brotherington et al. 2023), including whether they are designed in part to facilitate code-switching across contexts and to uncover the less formal mentoring of urban youth by older residents (Fader 2023, Harding 2009).

A second area worthy of development is the ecological analysis of the spatial–social dimensions that may shape both culture and action surrounding street violence. Sharkey’s (2006) work, which draws on the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, is an important example of how a social-ecological approach adds to our understanding of how young people use the code to navigate dangerous terrain. He distinguishes between the “imposed environments” of urban youth (the structural conditions discussed by Anderson) and “selected environments” chosen by youth where violent confrontations can more easily be avoided. Street efficacy, or confidence in the ability to avoid street violence, is strongest among youth living in communities with prominent levels of collective efficacy or the willingness of residents to intervene to address local conditions that are associated with lawbreaking and violence. These youth select safer environmental spaces, engage in fewer associations with delinquent peers, and participate in less violence. Subsequent research has found that street efficacy reduces youths’ likelihood of victimization, particularly in the most disadvantaged communities (Gibson et al. 2014), as well as fear of violence (Yuan et al. 2017). Moreover, the content of this street knowledge includes awareness of how daily routines bring youth in contact with known offenders and capable guardians (Monteiro & Gebo 2022). This research aims to develop programmatic interventions that help youth distinguish between violence-prone and safer spaces and navigate both to reduce

opportunities for violent confrontations. The concept of street efficacy is one mechanism by which we can return human agency to the theoretical model of youth violence.

Given the overwhelming conclusion that the street code is neither race- nor urban-specific (Keith & Griffiths 2014, Matsueda et al. 2006, Moule & Fox 2021, Sampson & Bartusch 1998), it is worth exploring the benefits and drawbacks of racially specific theories of violence. Black men are discursively overrepresented as criminals (Russell-Brown 1998), and notions of racial inferiority that are baked into the history of criminological theories (Muhammad 2010, Peterson & Krivo 2005) are no less problematic by framing them as cultural instead of biological. Subcultural theories that focus on the unique criminal values or beliefs of Black youth or adults, even when acknowledging their structural sources, pathologize and caricature “ghetto” culture (Small et al. 2010), obscuring how violence is not unique but a widely accepted and celebrated aspect of US and many global cultures (Nightingale 1993). Identifying Anderson’s code with a racialized oppositional subculture can have life-or-death consequences because these ideas undergird the “us versus them” perspective taught in police academies (Sierra-Arévalo 2019), which is evident in the disparate rate of police killings of Black Americans (Edwards et al. 2018).

The invocation of the CoS as a racialized subcultural theory has real-world consequences. One high-stakes arena where this can be directly observed is in the criminal courtroom, particularly in cases where prosecutors use rap or hip-hop lyrics to establish a defendant’s guilt (Kubrin & Nielson 2014). Although lyrics are surely “discursive actions or artifacts that help construct an interpretive environment where violence is appropriate and acceptable,” violent ideation is found across a variety of artistic and multimedia expressions. It is not only rap or hip hop that offers “graphically detailed instructions for how to interpret violent, degrading conduct and in so doing create possibilities for social identity in relation to violence” (Kubrin 2005, p. 366). Although country music has similar themes, when identical lyrics were presented in experimental conditions, participants identified rap music as more literal, offensive, and in need of regulation (Dunbar et al. 2016).

On the other hand, the search for racially invariant theories runs counter to the heart of *Code*, which is firmly grounded in the Black experience, especially racial discrimination. In the search for racial invariance, criminologists may overlook important within-group differences. Pattillo (1999), for example, has challenged the purported racial invariance of social disorganization theory, arguing that it misses relevant features distinguishing Black middle-class communities from their White counterparts. We agree with Swartz & Wilcox (2018), who argue that *Code* contains important hallmarks of Black Criminology because (a) it goes beyond a macro/structural perspective to analyze individual responses to racism and (b) it acknowledges agency and diversity in how Black Americans experience and respond to discrimination (Penn 2003, Russell-Brown 1992, Unnever & Gabbidon 2011). Anderson’s practice of writing about Black men and boys, while identifying as a Black man himself, further operationalizes Black Criminology insofar as it breaks from the historical tradition of in-group experts making knowledge claims about out-group “others.” To properly reground *Code* for future use, we argue that race-neutral theories (or racial invariance tests of criminological theories) are likely to overlook the social and psychological effects of racism on aggression and street violence in specific temporal-spatial contexts. To this point, we highlight the numerous studies in this review that highlight how neighborhood disadvantage and racial discrimination, but not race, are significant exogenous predictors of violence (Berg & Stewart 2013; Peterson & Krivo 2005, 2010). It is after all racism, not race, that is the explanatory mechanism and should be named as such to avoid the simplistic interpretation that being Black is criminogenic (for methodological problems of using race as an independent variable, see Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008).

Resolving the conundrum of contextually and culturally specific attention to the Black experience and the tradition of pathologizing Black culture involves asking questions about the prosocial or adaptive functions of the street code. Street knowledge can serve as a protective factor against violence (Sharkey 2006). Moreover, it serves as an important psychological “site of resilience” for Black boys and men, whose mastery allows men to navigate structural barriers such as poverty and racism and retain a feeling of being “well, satisfied, or accomplished” (Payne 2011, p. 429). This framework, which explicitly employs a strengths-based lens for understanding human behavior, departs from typical treatments of adherence to street ideology as maladaptive, pathological, or self-defeating, which helps move away from the intellectually sanctioned deficit discourse of inferiority or reductionist “decent-street” distinctions.

Finally, if criminological theory is to continue modernizing the problematic concept of ghetto or street subcultures (Small et al. 2010), it must analyze the cultures that contribute to or inhibit violence seriously. To advance CoS theory and produce research that is relevant to youth violence policy makers and practitioners, it may be useful to draw on sociological perspectives, which conceive of culture as scripts or toolkits for action (Swidler 1986) or as frames of understanding and problem-solving (Benford & Snow 2000, Goffman 1974, Leverentz 2012). The United States and other countries are characterized by a culture of violence, valorizing and rewarding many kinds of violence (Nightingale 1993). We may learn much about the transmission of violent definitions or rationalizations by examining the culture of college fraternities, police departments, or corporate boardrooms. Moreover, it is important to move beyond monolithic representations of the culture of impoverished communities because much research demonstrates that they are culturally heterogeneous (Harding 2009) and that mainstream norms and mores around work, education, and childbearing have strong support (Edin & Kefalas 2005, Newman 1999).

Since the publication of Anderson’s *Code*, there have been entirely new forms of socialization and world-making on the Internet and through social media platforms. Social media profiles and digital avatars simultaneously reflect parts of our nondigital selves while also enabling the exploration of other identities and realities that create distance between our physical presence and our online presence. The sociological and criminological richness of *Code* is evident in its extensions into this online milieu, which to date, focuses on gangs and deviant-labeled subcultures. As Moule et al. (2017) point out, technology such as social media and group texts create new opportunities for group identity formation, the quick diffusion of information, and reliving exciting events long after they have ended. One question is whether these technologies exacerbate in-person violence or serve a more regulatory function. Stuart (2020) examined the extension of the street code into virtual settings by studying social media pages used by gang-identified youth in Chicago. Although it is commonly assumed that social media accelerates street violence when online challenges between members of competing groups result in real-life acts of retaliation, he found that most posts did not result in violence. Nevertheless, social media posts by his participants did conform to Anderson’s thesis that portraying toughness is a performative goal of gang-involved social media users who identify with elements of street life. Posing for photos with guns, for example, was a means of communicating “masculine authority” (Stuart 2020, p. 193). Moreover, discrediting a competitor’s online presentation of self eroded the boundary between their front-stage online and real-life backstage presentations. Without the typical audience segregation necessary to pull off a performance of toughness, the digital world threatens to expose competing roles and identities, such as student, parent, employee, or a human being who deserves to be seen as a full and complex person and not the armored or tough persona they feel they must be.

The material features of a society influence the cultural details of human groups more than the reverse. This orientation can help prompt reflection on the role of socioeconomic class and material security in shaping who has a chance of subscribing to “decent” family values in the first

place. In a study of racism and its embeddedness in everyday life, Rawls & Duck (2020, p. 34) found that families who had material security were best situated to nudge their kids away from elements of street life that bring legal precarity and increased risk of violence or legal system exposure.

Four families on the street had managed to raise their children without contact with the drug scene. They did not do this by being “decent,” however. Rather, they had the resources to keep their children off of the street. . . . Their families had cars, so they did not even have to walk down the street. This lifestyle was expensive. It did not matter what the families’ values were or what they did behind closed doors; their ability to keep their kids off the street protected them.

Just as material needs and concerns shape culture and values, violence—and theories to explain it—is similarly guided by material facts. The role of lethal technologies (i.e., firearms) warrants continued attention, as gun violence is fundamentally distinct from other kinds of homicide and assault. If young people, particularly men and boys, were able to easily access motorbikes or sports cars that go from 0 to 60 mph in 3 seconds and have top speeds of 180+ mph, it might be reasonable to expect a public health crisis in the form of disproportionately high injuries and deaths with motor vehicles for both direct participants and nonparticipants alike. Motor vehicle accidents would be a “when, not if” question. Rather than technologies of transportation, we can plainly focus on instruments of death. What makes the United States exceptional is that relative to other countries, access to lethal weapons is far easier. Guns are too easy to use, too indiscriminate, and too effective. Drive-by stabbings that harm innocent bystanders are virtually unheard of. Young men and boys would not stab, hack, or bludgeon each other to death as an easy substitute for using guns. Moreover, police in the United States are structurally situated to expect the presence or potential use of a firearm in any police encounter. It seems entirely out of place to think about violence reduction as a subcultural question, as K-12 educators and institutions of higher education increasingly offer active shooter training and invest in target-hardening measures. A society in which guns are pervasive is, by definition, a society where violence and the threat of violence are omnipresent. Part of *Code*’s legacy is the attention to macro-, meso-, and micro-level explanations and interventions. By situating *Code* as a form of cultural adaptation, Anderson invited readers to become not only more curious but also more demanding on the question of whether the state can mitigate or eliminate the conditions that make such adaptations necessary in the first place. Comparative criminological research could be helpful because subcultural theories obfuscate how violence (in both acute and structural forms) is deeply embedded across all segments of US culture and US institutions.

As *Code* reaches its quarter-century milestone, we reflect on the politics of memory and the contingent nature of disciplinary history, a practice that “encourages reflexivity, teaches us where our ideas came from, and gives us a sense of where we are going” (Rafter 2010, p. 339). We conclude this review with a proposed correction to how the CoS is remembered, given Anderson’s original text. Subcultural theories place the burden of locating crime-related phenomena in the value system of the crime-impacted community, not the broader social structure that generates maladaptive or antisocial values and relationships. Categorizing the code as a subcultural theory exempts White institutions from any contributing role in the situation, explaining Black violence in a way that obfuscates the history and ongoing impacts of institutional racism and economic inequality in American society.

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