



On Being Black and Poor in a Small City

Peter Moskos

Reviewed: Waverly Duck, 2015, *No Way Out: Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 192 pages.

No Way Out, Waverly Duck's recent examination of how African Americans in an impoverished small city construct a social order, joins a long tradition of poverty research in sociology. In this review, sociologist Peter Moskos discusses why this book deserves to stand out in a crowded field.

No Way Out, by sociologist Waverly Duck, is the story of a neighborhood: a poor neighborhood, a black neighborhood, a neighborhood with public drug dealing, and also a stable neighborhood.

Somewhere between macro theory and micro-interaction—between the urban ghetto and global capitalism—Duck gradually got to know a neighborhood from a variety of perspectives over many years. Duck has written a gem of a meso-level ethnography describing in great and touching detail the people who live poor and black in the semi-urban post-industrial suburban decay that is all too typical in America.

No Way Out brings to mind *The Urban Villagers* (1962), Herbert Gans's ethnography of Boston's now long-gone West End neighborhood. The book has many of the same strengths and deserves to be equally well remembered. With clear, engaging writing and the presentation of a nuanced view of a community and its social order, Duck focuses on lower-income individuals in the context of a community that combines the individual-level analysis of Elliot Liebow's (1963) *Tally's Corner* with the working-class woes so well depicted by Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) in *Nickel and Dimed*.

By observing the extreme but avoiding the sensational, Duck looks at the entirety of one community: the criminals and non-criminals, the working stiffs, and those whose hustles have failed. The author does blame society for the problems in the neighborhood, but to his credit he does not fall back on rote denunciations of our neoliberal, racist, capitalistic society.

"Lyford Street," on which Duck focuses, is a microcosm of failed good intentions, malign neglect, and a dash of active hostility. Transformed over decades from white working-class to black and only partially working, many if not most residents live in extreme poverty and at some level are guilty of nothing more than being born into a neighborhood Americans can simply ignore.

From his role as semi-outsider/semi-insider, Duck provides a new perspective, and it works. He does not pick sides but sees the community in its entirety. Duck presents the facts, troubling at times and heartwarming at others, and keeps any ideological preaching to a refreshing minimum.

Young men, some of whom enter the drug-dealing world literally through no choice of their own, can't get a legitimate job. Some skills, such as filling out a job application, could be taught but are not. Other issues, such as not having a government ID, is a more ingrained problem exacerbated by disenfranchisement efforts. Even residents with "legitimate" jobs need to hustle to get by.

The best economic hope for those who grow up on Lyford Street is a stable low-paying job. But even this isn't enough to live on. Both college graduates and working-class residents face eviction and punitive traffic fines. The only children who manage in some way to leave the neighborhood attend school elsewhere and are never allowed to play outside. The rest—the majority—get by with poorly paying work, government subsidies, and the underground economy, particularly drug dealing.

Drug dealing as a fact of life

The enthralling descriptions of the illegal economy, drug dealing in particular, is essential to understand the neighborhood's living conditions. Duck places the dealers in the social and familial structure of the greater community. Groups in the neighborhood—even when playing different games by different rules—do not act in opposition to each other. Instead, they function as willing participants in the same arena.

Public drug dealing is a fact of life that provides social cohesion and brings much-needed income into the community, even if it is perhaps not as benign as Duck believes:

Drug dealers' integration into this neighborhood is even more complete than Sudhir Venkatesh found in Chicago, where residents and dealers have a cooperative relationship. In big cities, dealers seldom live in the places where they work, and their anonymity contributes to their security; they can appear from nowhere and disappear just as suddenly (p. 11).

Though many residents are “overwhelmingly opposed” (p. 11) to drug dealing, they understand the futility of the drug war, and, perhaps more importantly, the humanity of the individuals involved. There is a general tolerance of illegal activity because dealing does indeed provide income for people who have little, if any, legal alternative to provide for themselves and their families. And, of course, for neighbors, friends and relatives to actively go against drug dealers would be both a Sisyphean and dangerous task. In the end, people get along by proximity of place.

What Duck sees—the conclusions he presents, the real kernel of knowledge—is the order and function in what others might see as disorder. This isn't the usual functionalist conclusion that readers of critical criminology have come to expect. Duck does not buy into the standard academic trope that the downtrodden, given their situation, always act rationally. But rational or not, people do what they need to do in order to survive. And these residents have survived for generations.

Broken-windows theory reversed

Duck discusses the proverbial and literal broken-windows policy in the neighborhood not just as an unfortunate status quo but also as an active part of the functioning community. Drug dealing is part of the community and the community conditions reflect the drug trade:

Typical markers of drug dealing such as boarded-up windows and broken streetlamps were indeed prevalent. On Lyford Street, however, [the disorder of] these features were carefully maintained; streetlamps were regularly shattered after city workers fixed them, as drug dealers paid others to plunge the street into darkness to enhance their security. Trash played a similarly strategic role [to hide drugs and guns] (p. 12).

This is both a novel twist and affirmation of Wilson and Kelling's “Broken Windows” theory of disorder and order maintenance (1982). A certain level of disorder represents the functioning of the neighborhood. Where Jane Jacobs, on whose writing “Broken Windows” is based, sees disorderly “barbarians,” Duck sees collective efficacy.

In Lyford Street, unlike in more urban locales, dealers do not cater to local residents. Given the proximity to the interstate, buyers come from elsewhere to purchase powder cocaine. The street has been a major drug-dealing spot for more than 30 years. The identity of drug dealers is well known:

Born and raised in the neighborhood, not only do they contribute to the physical security and financial resources of others, but they also depend on social support from residents—not least their refusal to inform the police over illegal activities that do no harm to residents.

[...]

From the dealer's perspective, the drug trade is less an opportunistic way of exploiting weak social links and more about generating livelihoods, fostering social cohesion, and maintaining a positive relationship with the neighborhood (p. 13).

Duck may be slightly too optimistic here in describing an activity that, necessary or not, dooms future generations to a similar fate. But no matter the cause, drug dealing is deeply entrenched:

It is almost impossible for anyone from Lyford Street to avoid participating in the local social order; indeed, it would be foolhardy to try. As Mr. John explained, "I don't use drugs or sell them, but I'm in the world with them." Residents' strength of commitment to and level of participation in the drug trade rest on their limited job opportunities, inadequate educational programs, low property values, nonexistent savings, and a lack of public safety, all leading to deep financial and personal stress (pp. 139–140).

The war on drugs weighs heavy:

Arrests are made quite frequently. Yet the high number of arrests does not affect the availability of drugs. Nor does it change the fact that there is no other available occupation. For many residents, police intervention is an intrusion that creates chaos and danger, not order and protection. [...] Children growing up in the neighborhood are exposed to the practices of both drug dealing and police action from an early age, and most get caught up in both the social-order practices that facilitate and protect the work of drug dealing and the criminal justice system that sanctions them (p. 15).

The label "gang" is often linked to race and class rather than organized criminal activity. On Lyford Street, groups are organized by family and kin networks, and yet the "gang" label persists (p. 36):

Surprisingly few studies, however, have critically examined the process through which law-enforcement authorities construct a gang myth as an aid to prosecution in the community where gangs do not exist. Misconstruing crimes as gang violence when there are clear individual motives leads to their description by law-enforcement authorities and the media as "senseless" acts of "random violence" (p. 93).

For economic, familial, and even provincial reasons, the residents of Lyford Street are strongly attached to place. Duck estimates that at least a quarter of the inhabitants are related as distant cousins or through intermarriage or parenthood (p. 82). One occasionally raised question is why people simply don't move away. The answer, of course, is complicated. But it comes down to this: where would they go?

The limits of the culture of poverty

Using Goffman's (1983) "Interaction Order" as his theoretical base, Duck appreciates the importance of culture but also wants to limit its significance:

Their culture is not inadequate. It is adequate for the place and challenges they face. To change the local culture would require first changing the circumstances of poverty and isolation (p. 8).

The lack of reciprocity and the absence of meaningful interactions between the architects of social-welfare programs and those whom they are supposed to serve leads to misguided policies with regard to employment, housing, and criminal justice (p. 141).

In the end, Duck's knowledge and empathy come through in a warning to policymakers about this basically hidden community:

Outsiders neither interact with people in these communities nor perceive the conditions that exist there, while at the same time [they create] policies that simultaneously produce and punish them (p. 51).

Given his lengthy fieldwork, Duck is able to bring characters to life. Take Dave, a high-school grad who held a steady albeit low-paying job. Dave broke up with his girlfriend of eight years and a short time later was in another committed relationship:

When I asked Dave about the seriousness of his new relationship, he stressed that he had choices. Dave's perception of his position rested on the belief that competition among African-American women for the limited number of available black male partners made him a sought-after commodity (p. 99).

As Duck observes, this supports Wilson's (1987) "marriageable pool" argument. But Duck brings home the point in unforgettable fashion:

Dave was fascinated that I listened to talk radio, particularly NPR, which was always playing on the radio when he arrived [...]. I inquired how he could be in a new committed relationship so quickly. Dave replied, "Haven't you been listening to *Marketplace*? Pussy is at an all-time low" (pp. 100–101).

On a more serious note, Duck resists ideological blinders and does not succumb to the romance of criminal life when he describes community attitudes towards homicide and snitching:

The fact that community members often view killings as acts of justifiable homicide must be acknowledged. Legally, justifiable homicide would not be considered murder if local residents' views prevailed. When the killing is viewed as totally unjustified, individuals in the community are more likely to cooperate with law enforcement. Cooperation with a murder investigation follows a predictable pattern: the justifiability of the murder, consideration of the assailants' motivation, informants' concern for their personal safety, and the likelihood that the police will be able to solve the case are all factored in (p. 93).

In the end we're left with insight into and acknowledgment of a lively and interesting community some would prefer to ignore or blame.

The broader society may not like it, but one thing that history teaches is that the poor will not just roll over and die because it would be more convenient for the rich and powerful if they did so (p. 19).

This, as Duck rightfully observes in his excellent book, will not happen.

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