

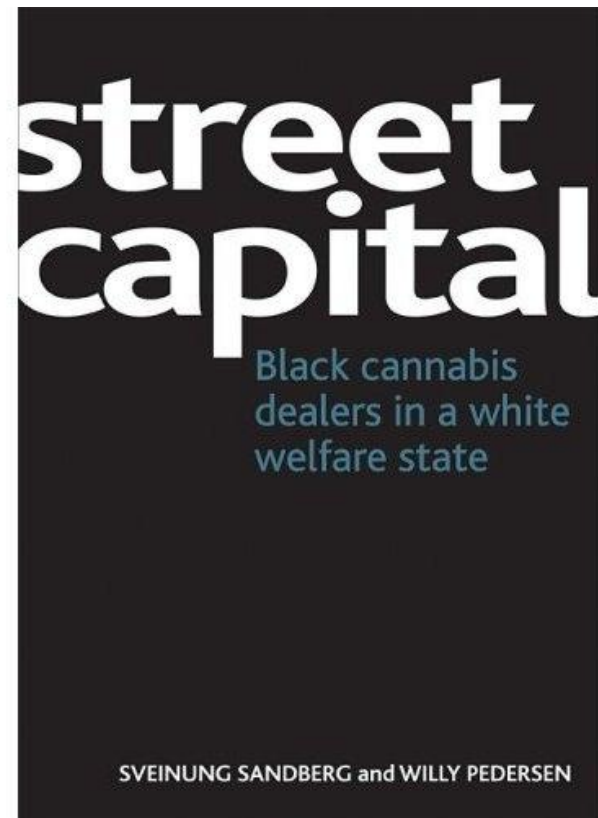
Street Capital: Black cannabis dealers in a white welfare state

Sveinung Sandberg, University of Oslo,
Norway



Data

- One-year fieldwork at a street drug market in Oslo known as "The River".
- In depth-interviews with 20 dealers, some of which were interviewed several times.
- Three groups, 17-30 year old, represent three 'trajectories':
 - a) Excitement seeking teenagers
 - b) Failed large-scale smugglers and dealers
 - c) Newly arrived refugees, mainly from Somalia



Street capital as distinction

We used to hang out there every day. That was while I lived at the youth institution. We headed straight to The River after school. You eat your dinner, you're full up, you push off down to The River. On Saturdays and stuff, we used to hang around from six to 12 at night. Then we'd go for a drink at a club, like. You have to make money, you know. Not everybody likes asking people for cash all the time. So while you're there, you make your own money.

- Daniel represents a group of relatively young ethnic minority dealers (15-23 years), from poor families, raised in Norway. They were excitement seeking, into hip-hop, someone still went to school.
- Subcultural capital and 'hipness' (Thornton)
- Protest masculinity (Collins)
- Conspicuous consumption (Veblen/Jacobs)

Street capital as status and power

It's been really difficult. Used a lot of speed; my mind's all fucked up. Physically too, I've lost weight. The whole family's noticed it, 'cause when you do speed, you get thinner. You start looking like a fuckin' junkie. It's obvious you're putting yourself on the line. You feel so tired, and weird, and you get paranoid. Three days on speed, like, you're in deep paranoia land. You can't sleep, and you hear voices, see things, think things. It happens I take roofies [Rohypnol] and hash just to wind down from the effect of the speed [amphetamine].

- Usman represents a group of older dealers (22-26 years) that had been involved in gangs and more serious crimes for years. They had lost their old contacts and had trouble with addiction and drug-related debt.
- Street culture (Bourgeois)

Converting street capital to money

I am staying here for several reasons. First, I don't have money. Second, I'm almost nobody. Because I don't have citizenship, I don't have my own clothes, a place that I can travel to, somewhere I can get a job. Nothing, nada, null. Actually, I'm nobody. The government, they just left me somewhere.

- Hassan represents a group of non-returnable refugees, mainly from Somalia. In periods they lived on only 60 kroner a day. They were not allowed to work or study, had no formal education, spoke little Norwegian and did not have a social network.
- Multiple marginality (Vigil)
- Advanced marginality (Wacquant)





Subculture

- Subcultures are groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interest and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it. They may represent *themselves* in this way, since subcultures are usually well aware of their differences, bemoaning them, relishing them, exploiting them, and so on. But they will also be represented like this by others, who in response, can bring an entire apparatus of social classification and regulation to bear upon them (Gelder, 2005: 1).
- The Chicago School, 'deviance' (e.g. Whyte)
- The Birmingham School, 'resistance' (e.g. Willis)

Street Culture

- The anguish of growing up poor in the richest city in the world is compounded by the cultural assault that El Barrio youths often face when they venture out of their neighborhood. This has spawned what I call 'inner-city street culture': a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society. Street culture offers an alternative forum for personal dignity (Bourgois, 2003a: 8).
- Opposition and resistance

Bourdieu: Cultural capital and habitus

- Cultural capital is legitimate power. It is one of three forms of symbolic capital (recognised and legitimate authority). The two other forms are economic capital (money and property) and social capital (social networks).
- Habitus is the individual embodied system of dispositions that is produced by historical and social conditions. It is based on past experiences, and early as well as statistically common experiences are particularly important.
- Balances structure and agency
- Subcultural capital (Thornton): Distinctions between the ‘authentic’ versus the ‘phoney’, the ‘hip’ versus ‘mainstream’, and the ‘underground’ versus media”

Street capital

	Economy	Culture
Agency	a. Rational, economical individuals (Rational choice theory)	b. Strategic, symbolic individuals (Symbolic interactionism)
Structure	c. Economical structures (Marxism)	d. Cultural structures (French structuralism)

Figure 1

The relation between structure/agency and economy/culture in social scientific explanations. Examples of well-known theories in parenthesis

Street capital

- The concept of *street capital* attempts to balance economy/culture and agency/structure.
- It can capture the cultural capital of street culture: it is a form of legitimate power, it is relational and it has capacity to generate profit. As with Bourdieu's descriptions of cultural capital, the concept emphasizes the relational and situational character of street skills.
- It is fundamentally based on marginalization and the absence of cultural capital.
- Examples include: Experience with use and sale of drugs, violence, crime etc. but also skills that can be used in meetings with the welfare state apparatus.

Foucault: Discourse, subject position

- Statements are not “... pure creation, as the marvellous disorder of the genius” but belong to a system, or discourse (Foucault, 1972a: 146).
- A discourse can be defined as being “made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined” (Foucault, 1972a: 117).
- Subject position (Laclau and Mouffe 1985): Discourses define “the possible position of speaking subjects” (Foucault, 1972a: 122) and thus the subjects themselves.
- Foucault’s rather deterministic position has been challenged by more voluntaristic approaches to discourse and narrative. For example Swidler (1986), ‘cultural tool kit’.

Street capital and gangster discourse

- Gangster discourse is the most important linguistic practice in a violent street subculture where street capital is the dominant symbolic capital
- Street capital is knowledge, skills, and objects that are given value in a street culture.
- Street habitus can be conceptualised as the relatively permanent and sometimes unconscious dispositions of individuals devoted to street culture. It is the embodied practical sense that is seen in hypersensitivity to offences and frequent displays of violent potential.
- Gangster discourse both constitutes and is constituted by street capital. It is embedded in violent street culture but also upholds and constitutes the same culture.
- Gangster discourse is dependent upon embodied street capital to be effective.

Between the street and the welfare state



Between the street and the welfare state





Ali: I blame the Norwegian system

I: Do you have a girlfriend?

A: I've got a girl I like very much ... and I work hard ... getting a job, permanent job and that ... good pay. But it's hard, sometimes, very hard. Not many understand that about The River. You're out of work, got no wages coming in. And if you don't have money, 'cause everything you do in Norway costs money, innit. Wanna eat, gotta have cash. Pay your rent, gotta have cash. It's not like everybody you see there wants to be there, like, you know. It's like when you haven't got a chance anywhere else, 'cause the kids you see there, like, they think it's better than stealing, innit.

Oppression discourse

- Personal stories of unemployment, racism and psychosocial problems, often combined with more general stories about government and city council unwilling to help.
- The morale is that everybody would act in a similar fashion under similar circumstances.
- Oppression discourse creates sympathy by constructing parity between the speaker and the audience.
- Drug dealers utilized the discourse to justify drug dealing, both in self-talk and in meetings with the welfare state apparatus.
- Projecting an image of the oppressed individual can be a source of dignity. Shifting the blame to external causes removes responsibility. Oppression discourse, however, comes with a definite dilemma:

The speakers have to see themselves as victims.

Chris: No one's fucked me up yet

I: But were you strong, did you know how to fight?

C: No.. ehh.. but I was fast

I: Fast. You hadn't learned to fight or been to a gym or something like that?

C: Yeahh, you learn to fight when you are bashed

I: But you hadn't been to a gym?

C: No, no. I have never, ever been to a fucking gym in my life, see. The street is the only place I've been.

I: [laughs] 'The hard way' [in English], then..

C: [Suddenly aggressive] I have learned how to kill people from watching movies, man! Like this 'ere glass [raises his glass]. You smash it in into the 'motherfuckers' [in English] face. So fuck off!

Smuggling from Sweden

I used to bring it over from Sweden. We had this dual car system. One of them had to look awesome, got up so as to look conspicuous, loud music, fucking suspicious. And the other had to be a fucking queer fanny car.... So you tune up two BMWs, premium styling in red lacquer for the top, and suspicious in the extreme. Loads of foreigners inside.... So you give customs something to keep them busy and you drive a little Opel Corsa, with 100 kilo right behind. They think, “Hang on, there’s a couple of sports cars there filled with youngsters. That means trouble.” So they flag them down – never fails. And behind there’s you sitting driving a little Opel Corsa with 100 kilo weed up your arse. And you just drive on, right into Norway. They do it every day.

Gangster discourse

- Includes a series of personal stories emphasising how hard, smart, and sexually attractive the young men are.
- The morale is that the dealers have more exiting and rewarding lives than members of conventional society.
- Gangster discourse creates fascination and fear by constructing disparity between the speaker and the audience.
- Drug dealers utilized the discourse to get self-respect and respect from others, and it dominated their meetings with other young men on the street.
- Gangster discourse can be interpreted as a response to economic and social exclusion as well as a way to avoid the degrading position of the victim. The tragic paradox is that it further escalates the processes that engendered their marginalization in the first place.

Interdiscursivity

I: So you're having a good time. Are there only boys there?

RP1: Well, often, we'll call some female friends, or (laughs)

RP2: You mean whores (laughs).

RP1: Whores? Why do you use such a word?

RP2: Okay, but that's how we talk. It's not to be disrespectful. That's just how we talk, you know.

RP1: No. You talk like that. I don't (both laugh).

Interdiscursivity

- Our thesis: Offenders oppression discourse has inspired neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957) and their gangster discourse has inspired the conceptualisation of a violent street culture (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967 Anderson 1999, Bourgois 2003 etc.)
- However, these traditions and forms of speak have seldom been seen combined.
- My study reveals that street drug dealers are 'bilingual'. They need to be gangster-like in order to be successful on the street, and they need to know the discourses of welfare organizations to obtain the help made available by the state and charities.

The importance for criminology

- Interdiscursivity and "inconsistent answers" is common in criminological research (also in survey research): But it is often downplayed in analysis in order to present a coherent story.
- In this way we cultural tensions, complexity and ambivalence is often left out. Detailed language studies is necessary.
- Questions we can ask: What is emphasized in a narrative? Why? How is it done? And using which discursive repertoire?
- Instead of always searching for "the truth" one can pay attention to the multitude of stories research participants tell. These are taken from the social context and can teach us a lot about people, culture and society.
- For example: Managing the shifts between oppression and gangster discourse are an important part of what can be coined the *street capital* of a benevolent welfare state such as Norway.