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Bourgois' 1995 classic *In Search of Respect*: a tale of three readings

Philippe Bourgois' 1995 classic ethnography of street level crack cocaine dealing in New York (1) explores the impact of crack in this community through a focus on those who sold it and their lives within and beyond the reach of this drug. This classic review reflects on three readings of this text at three points in a single academic career to unpack the wide-ranging impact of this text.

Key words: Crack Cocaine, Ethnography, Gender, Ethics, Structure & Agency

Philippe Bourgois never intended to study drugs. He arrived in East Harlem, New York in 1985 planning to research poverty and ethnic segregation among Puerto Rican immigrants at the same time crack cocaine did. This substance profoundly impacted the area he called El Barrio, and forced a radical reorientation towards this substance. In this ethnography centred on crack house manager Primo and his assistant Caesar, Bourgois immersed himself in the social world of crack selling. And for Bourgois to explain this world it was necessary to look beyond it – to explore the meanings and experiences of racialised inequality, urban segregation, migration and the quest for dignity, autonomy and meaning in America. Indeed he noted that those he spent time with,

‘were not interested in talking primarily about drugs. On the contrary, they wanted me to learn all about their struggles for subsistence and dignity at the poverty line’ (p.2).

This is a book, then, about crack cocaine use and the everyday realities of selling it in New York in the late 1980s; but it is also a book about being a second-generation migrant, about being a man, and about aspiring towards the American Dream.

I have read in its entirety three times: the first in 2002 as I was preparing for ethnographic fieldwork with elite cannabis growers, sellers and consumers in Hawai'i; the second when I started teaching ethnographic methods and ethics in around 2010; the third, a more feminist reading, in preparation for writing this piece. Each reading has been different; each has shaped me as an ethnographer, a drugs researcher and a teacher. Each of these readings, and their implications for contemporary drugs research and the ongoing relevance of this text are explored in turn below.

The first reading took place alongside such ethnographies as Fiddle's *Portraits from a Shooting Gallery* (2), Preble and Casey's 'Taking Care of Business' (3), Agar's *Ripping and Running* (4) and Adler's *Wheeling and Dealing* (5). These early drug dealing ethnographies emerged as a response to then-dominant understandings of substance users as asocial, passive and pathologised. They showed me that drug worlds were rich, complex and worthy of study. But it was this ethnography of El Barrio's crack dealers which most profoundly shaped my thinking as I prepared to enter a community of growers and ask them to let me study them by showing me the possibilities of understanding drug use by looking beyond it, and helping me produce an ethnography as much about American counterculture as cannabis.

For example, in looking in detail at Primo's efforts to stop dealing crack Bourgois exposed the complex intersection of factors that made this difficult. His analysis was shaped by Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between structure (the social structures such as racism, patriarchy or economy that shape the options available to individuals) and agency (individual decision-making). Primo's attempts to escape crack dealing were hampered by a changing economy that increasingly only offered

degraded, low-paid work – and by the fact that he could earn more, wear what he liked, and spend his working hours surrounded by friends when selling crack. The structures that made ‘legit’ work difficult to access were intimately bound up in those that kept him ‘choosing’ to sell crack.

And Primo did see it as a choice. The book opens with him saying, ‘Man, I don’t blame where I’m at right now on nobody else but myself’ (p.1). Bourgois argues that in saying this Primo is articulating a key facet of American culture – that every individual is in control of their own future, and that every individual can (and therefore is to be held responsible if they do not) shape their own destiny. But Bourgois sees Primo’s efforts to exit crack dealing differently, and the result of the limitations on Primo’s options. The crack economy was one in which Primo’s lack of formal education, Puerto Rican accent and choice of clothing were not a barrier to employment. It was a career path that afforded dignity, autonomy and upward mobility – all those things, in fact, that make up the American Dream. For Bourgois, then, Primo’s choices were constrained, but they also demonstrated and expressed Primo’s agency – he had not fallen into crack dealing (only) because of a lack of alternatives but (at least at some times and in some ways) because of a positive choice to seek out employment that celebrated, rather than denigrated, that which he valued in himself.

This exploration of the ways in which drug use and drug economies inform and are informed by everyday struggles to make ends meet, form and maintain fulfilling relationships and live a meaningful life profoundly influenced my doctoral work. I spent a year in a community where I met only one person who did not consume cannabis on a daily basis where possible. I learned about plant genetics with young men seeking to develop their signature strain, watched helicopters hover overhead as police came down on ‘strings’, bundle up someone’s harvest and take it away. I went to parties where every guest was fed psilocybin-laced chocolate, watched DMT rituals and observed the elaborate measures growers took to protect their crops from aerial surveillance. But I also spent a time learning how to make compost, weeding food crops, and being educated at length on the errors of socialism and the virtue of libertarianism. Cannabis was present in, but not the focus of, almost all these activities. I wrote an ethnography that had just a single chapter explicitly focused on drug use but where there was at least one person high or trying to get high in almost every event described across its pages. This book inspired me to become an ethnographer who researched with people who took, grew and sold a lot of cannabis but whose primary focus remained on embodiment and counterculture, and to write an ethnography about drug users but not only about drug use; to write an ethnography that captured everyday hopes and struggles, values and choices and located drug use as only part of a wider process of embodying American counterculture.

The second reading came when I began teaching ethnographic methods and ethics. The bulk of *In Search of Respect* consists of extended extracts of recorded conversations on a wide range of topics with Primo, Caesar and others. This is a portion of a larger extract I use a lot in teaching:

Primo: When I first met you, Felipe, I was wondering who the hell you were, but, of course, I received you good because you sounded interesting; so, of course, I received you good [reaching for the cocaine]...

Benzie: [interrupting and handing me the malt liquor bottle] Felipe, I’m going to tell you the honest truth – and he knows it [pointing to Primo]. The first time I met you I thought that you was in a different way... But I would really rather not tell you [sniffing from the heroin packet with Primo’s key].

Philippe: [drinking] It’s alright don’t worry; you can tell me. I won’t get angry. (p.42-3)

I get students to track the cocaine, heroin and malt liquor as they shuttle between the three interlocutors. What should students contemplating ethnographic research ethics take from this? Primo and Caesar are evidently consuming consciousness-altering substances. Are they fit to give

consent? Like Donnelly (6), Bourgois does not dwell on the issue of consent: both note that in the context of ethnographic research where participant and researchers consume a range of drug and non-drug substances in varying amounts together over an extended period consent is more usefully understood as a process than event. And in his choice to invite Primo and Caesar to read and comment on the draft manuscript ('Ooh, Felipe! You make us sound like such sensitive crack dealers' (p.318)), Bourgois celebrates consent to represent over just moment-by-moment consent to collect data.

But what about Bourgois' own consumption? When asking students whether he can be a good ethnographer while drinking alcohol, they express varying views but tend towards an expectation that researchers should be sober. This ideal of researcher sobriety regardless of context produces what Blackman (7) calls 'hidden ethnography' (p. 700), in which the realities of consumption practices during fieldwork are masked because of a perceived 'disciplinary requirement, and an ethical demand, that the storyteller and the narrative should be "clean"'. As Donnelly explains in her candid account of her own use of alcohol while "drinking with the [roller] derby girls" (6), in communities where alcohol and other substances are used the decision *not* to consume substances with participants is as ethical and as consequence-laden as the decision to do so. She cites Moeran (8) on learning the need to participate in the drinking culture of the Japanese fire station where he worked to 'find out what was really going on behind the façade' (p.354), and the balancing act undertaken by Wilson (9) when weighing up the improved quality in his notes against the 'deteriorating relationships' (p.6) that came from his decision to stop drinking during fieldwork.

Researchers, then, are not always 'clean', and they make that choice for reasons of entry into the field and rapport but also simply because in the context of extended fieldwork you sometimes want to take off your 'researcher hat' (6, p.354). Thus it is significant that Bourgois chose to disclose his use of alcohol and to do so in ways that not only illustrated this substance's importance in gaining entry to the field (see pages 20-21) but also, as in the extract quoted above, for the pleasure of using that substance.

The final reading came as I wrote this, having become more firmly entrenched in feminist politics and analysis. There is a strong attention to gender in the text, specifically masculinity, and indeed Muehlmann (10) describes it as 'Probably the best-known ethnography that examines how the war on drugs affects masculinity' (p.317). But it is masculinity of a particular sort – working class and Puerto Rican. As such, the text has been cited as a forerunner to the intersectionality and attention to (racialised, and hyper-) masculinities that lies at the heart of much current feminist analysis both within and without the drugs field (10-12). But it has also been critiqued for 'accept[ing] at face value' the analysis offered by its protagonists that 'women crack users have challenged traditional gender roles and that patriarchal gender relations have been undermined as a result' (13, p.14, see also 14). This analytic causality – that it is women's entry into drug markets that produces a 'crisis of masculinity' (13, p.3) – matters because this 'crisis of masculinity' is then cited as explanation for gender-based violence by drug-using men towards women by both drug users and scholars, even in intersectional feminist analysis (see for example 15, p.1011). When male drug users justify gender-based violence as a response to women's entry into the public sphere, researchers are beholden to interrogate those claims further.

Thus analysis matters, and political-economic analysis can itself be read as a form of male (analytic) privilege. As Page and Singer (16) have noted, Bourgois' political-economic analysis is important because it provided a corrective to culturalist analyses. However political-economic analysis has a blind-spot: the body. Bourgois' analysis attends, importantly, to the political and economic structures that both hem in his participants' choices and present those choices as free and autonomous. But this means that pharmacology and the interaction between substance and body is

downplayed in his analysis (14). This neglect of the body negates the emphasis placed on bodies and pharmacology in 'commonsense' understandings of drug use – particularly in the light of the pervasive fears at the time of his writing that crack's effect on foetuses would produce a (racialised) 'bio-underclass' (13, p.56). In such a reading, men's experiences of substance use may be shaped primarily by political and economic structures, but until the problems of women's drug use are no longer framed primarily in terms of their maternal role, such a luxury cannot be extended to women's drug uses.

This is, then, a rich, textured ethnography of a group of Puerto Rican immigrant men, who during a period of economic decline for the working classes in which 'legit' jobs were becoming harder to get, ended up making a living selling crack to the community around them. It has been rightly critiqued for neglecting the body, and rightly celebrated for rejecting 'culture' as its primary explanatory framework. It is an early example of the utility of Bourdieusian analysis in drugs research. The impact of this text has been wide and varied, but I will focus here on just three interlinked concepts which all draw on this text for their conception and development: Wacquant's marginality, Sandberg's street capital, and Singer's syndemics.

Wacquant uses this text as an illustration of how 'durably marginalized' groups emerge. They come about when a decline in opportunities for paid employment combines with the need to earn money to produce 'parallel circuits' between 'legit' work and the 'informal economy'; these 'parallel circuits' contain few points of contact, entrenching those in the 'informal economy' further in it, with ever fewer options to change track (17, p.71, see also 18-19).

Sandberg (20) uses Bourgeois' (1) discussion of 'inner city street culture' as response to 'the anguish of growing up poor in the richest city in the world' (p.8) to develop the form of cultural capital he calls 'street capital' (p.43). Like Bourdieu's cultural capital it can be converted into economic capital – but unlike Bourdieu's cultural capital, it is not transferrable: the skills and knowledge required to succeed as a street-level drug dealer cannot be used to move, to borrow Wacquant's language, from one economic circuit to another (20, see also 21, 22).

And part of the reason for this is the centrality of violence to street capital. Like Wacquant on marginalisation or Sandberg on street capital, Singer notes the intertwining of violence and substance use. Singer (23) developed 'syndemics' as a biosocial analytical framework for examining persistent multi-morbidity in marginalised communities, taking SAVA (substance abuse, violence and AIDS) as his starting point to demonstrate how disease, everyday practices and structural inequalities produce population-level suffering. In various articulation of syndemics, Singer (24) has cited this ethnography in his presentation of SAVA, noting in particular the way it illustrates substance use as a form of 'self-medication of the emotional injuries of structural violence' (p.152) (see also 25).

All three scholars draw attention to violence not only as a form of interpersonal interaction but to its structural forms – that patriarchy, systematic racism and class prejudice come together to perpetuate ongoing myriad harms towards drug users such as those described by Bourgeois. Unable to access mainstream forms of capital, new localised forms of capital emerge. However, as Bourgeois foreshadowed in all of these analyses, drug use as the 'material base' (22) of this form of cultural expression ultimately harms the communities within which it emerges – not only do people lose their homes, relationships and lives to these substances, but the necessary violence required to maintain one's street sales territory produces a 'culture of terror' impacting whole communities, including those who dissociate themselves from the drug trade and drug use.

This is a book which, like any text, is flawed, but is one that has played and continues to play its part in both the development of intersectional drugs research and Bourdieusian analysis sensitive to the way drug users and sellers are both trapped by but also autonomous actors within local drug worlds. It provides a powerful explanation of why members of a single community act in ways harmful to themselves and those around them and why their opportunities to do otherwise are so limited. It refuses to sanitise the awful things these men do to others and experience themselves because, ultimately for Bourgois '[t]he depth and overwhelming pain and terror of the experience of poverty and racism in the United States needs to be talked about' (p.18).

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