Book Review

The Book reviewed: Duck, W. (2015). No way out: Precarious living in the shadow of poverty and drug dealing. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 192 pp. $25 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-226-29790-3.

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Pre-publication version 2017

Published in

International Criminal Justice Review, *33*(8), 1144-1162

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1177/1057567717737352

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Author's note

The views expressed by Ehsan Jozaghi in this book review are those of the author, and they may not necessarily express the views of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research or the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Caimen Yen for providing feedback on this book review. The contribution by Ehsan Jozaghi on this book review was supported by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research Postdoctoral Fellowship (201511MFE-358449-223266).

Professor Waverly Duck's No Way Out: Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing is not only a classic example of how to conduct excellent ethnographic research, but it also highlights and challenges the public common misconceptions about previously known social theories associated with poor and disadvantaged communities in a North American context. Professor Duck's approach to ethnographic research, as demonstrated through his 7-year research commitment in a community he pseudonymously labeled "Bristol Hill"—a predominantly African American, disadvantaged, and marginalized neighborhood—is a primary example to many graduate students or junior researchers on the process of conducting proper observational qualitative analysis and ethnographic research.

Professor Duck's initial research questions stem from his role as an expert witness, which required evidence to support the societal influences that contributed to the serious crimes for an African American defendant on death row. Professor Duck's analysis parallels my own extensive research on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) community. My initial research began as a very modest goal of completing a qualitative research project for an undergraduate course, which eventually led to my first peer-reviewed publication and subsequent degrees (Jozaghi, 2012a, 2012b, 2015).

Similar to Professor Duck's method in his subsequent ethnographic project in "Lyford Street" located in the Bristol Hill neighborhood, which was reliant on several key informants, volunteering within the area itself, in addition to other forms of community activism, I began my research through the use of key informants and volunteering within the small 10-block neighborhood on East Hastings Street in Vancouver. This particular area in the DTES not only contains many of the factors that contributed to increase in vulnerabilities, disorders, and chaos Professor Duck identifies in No Way Out but also houses one of North America's largest illegal open drug markets, with 5,000 active customers contributing to the drug trade on a daily basis.

Both Bristol Hill and Vancouver's DTES share similar historical backgrounds in terms of social and economical demographics. Following World War II, both neighborhoods felt the effects of the global economic strain, resulting in a decrease in local employment opportunities. By the early 1980s, the Bristol Hill neighborhood had become a racially segregated space, and the DTES neighborhood was now a refuge for unemployed who were drawn to the community for cheap housing, liquor, and later, hard drugs (Jozaghi, 2014).

From an outsider's perspective, both neighborhoods could be characterized as completely non-functional, infested with crime, disorder, deadly violence, and gang-related activities. The accounts and records from media and police in both Bristol Hill and the DTES would align with Shaw and McKay's (1942) social disorganization theory as applied to the study of crime within urban areas. In theory, social disorganization is the inability of an area to establish social cohesion, which can help prevent and deter criminal acts from occurring in these spaces (Andresen, Brantingham, & Kinney, 2016).

Social disorganization theory states that factors such as social and economic deprivation, family disruption, ethnic heterogeneity, and population turnover contribute to an increase in violence and disorders that are reflected in both neighborhoods (Sampson & Groves, 1989). However, Professor Duck's ethnographic work, in addition to my own research on Vancouver's DTES, has revealed that these areas are not the dysfunctional ghettos as stated by these theories. Rather, acts of crime and violence in both neighborhoods are not senseless or random but have a certain order, expectation, and practice that appear to be determined by the "unwritten rules" that influence these particular spaces.

The unwritten rules practiced in communities such as Bristol Hill or the DTES aid residents in coping with many of the factors associated with these marginalized areas: economic hardship, lack of legitimate job opportunities, the constant threat of criminalization, fragile social networks, and few resources to protect them against the strong arm of local or federal laws and regulations. As Professor Duck explains, "these men [and women] make sense of their lives by incorporating the local order in their communit[ies and founding] . . . workable solutions to the problems they face that could be easily be incorporated by policy makers" (pp. 123–124).

Chapter 7 of No Way Out introduces the story of a young mother, identified under the pseudonym "Benita." Like Benita, many of the mothers who I have met in Vancouver's DTES struggle with numerous factors, such as financial stability, legal counseling, and drug dependence. Unfortunately, very few individuals with professional experience are capable of resolving or aiding their personal issues. Both communities can be described in terms of Elijah Anderson's (1990) strain theory. According to Anderson (1990), a "ghetto's" economy is influenced by low job prospects, social assistance (e.g., welfare), food banks/stamps, lack of affordable housing, and the "illegal/informal economy" within its borders.

The occurrence of crime and disorder in both neighborhoods is linked to each area's historical and social contexts, revealing how the war on drugs, in addition to the war on the poor, has contributed to a lack of legitimate opportunities and aided in the flourishing of the underground illegal/informal economy. Thus, the residents in both

neighborhoods are surviving "by any means necessary" (Duck, 2015, p. 146). Many of the residents, like Benita, see themselves as having the potential to be "whatever [they want] to be. [They] just don't have the tools to get over that barrier . . . [or] even attempt to go on" (Duck, 2015, p. 147).

When presented with the findings conducted by these mainstream theories, it is not surprising that very few people outside the neighborhoods of Bristol Hill and Vancouver's DTES can appreciate or comprehend how its residents navigate, conform to, as well as resist the highly sophisticated unwritten rules of each locale. The social hierarchy and organization that exists in these marginalized spaces are structures that individuals in mainstream neighborhoods would otherwise classify as "socially disorganized" or "dysfunctional."

In summary, Professor's Duck ethnographic approach—which includes detailed field notes, photographs, and interviews labeled as "interaction-order-approach"—not only introduces different ways of understanding disadvantaged and marginalized communities but offers few practical solutions for policy makers to resolve the problems that many jurisdictions are currently facing in North America.

The situations reflected in the cases of Lyford Street and East Hastings street are clear examples of failed health and criminal justice policies, which place residents at a greater risk of incarceration, shorter life expectancy, and increased violence. I hope that the changes recommended in Professor Duck's text, in combination with my own research, will make it possible for people in communities like Bristol Hill and the DTES to thrive and succeed both socially and economically in today's society. As Professor Duck reminds contemporary readers, we must learn from the past, as "one thing that history [can teach us] is that the poor will not just roll over and die"; rather, they possess the potential to thrive as much as privileged society will acknowledge and allow (Duck, 2015, p. 30).

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