

# from the common thug to the local businessman: an exploration into an urban african american barbershop

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This ethnographic study investigates the social interactions that transpire in an urban African American barbershop, called Peanut's, located in a Southern city. The results of this study indicate that the urban African American barbershop has the potential to be a place where any number of activities can and do take place. Specifically, this study discovered three levels of the underground economy (i.e., legal, quasi-legal, and illegal) with each level reflecting a different degree of criminal potential.

My Saturday afternoon started off as it usually did: fighting for a parking space, waiting almost an hour to get into the barber's chair for my haircut, and enduring the bad breath of my barber. While receiving my haircut I noticed two men walking rather hastily toward the back of the barbershop where a set of barbers are located. Initially this was not suspicious because many customers are usually in a hurry

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to get in and out of the barbershop as quickly as possible, especially on Saturday afternoons. This situation became unique a few minutes later when the two men returned from the back room wielding guns and asking if anyone had seen a certain barber who worked at the barbershop. One of the gunmen yelled at the barbers, informing them to, "tell that dumb motherfucker he's a dead man. Don't nobody play with my Goddamn money!" Just as quickly as the men came in, they were gone. Oddly enough, this incident didn't leave any of the barbershop patrons shaken or scared, as judged by my cursory observation. We merely acknowledged to each other what happened and then proceeded to finish doing what we were engaged in before this situation began. In my case, it was receiving a haircut. (Wright 1997:1-2)

## INTRODUCTION

Barbershops are institutions where a variety of activities can, and often do, take place. They are places that men, and some women, visit to discuss world events, escape the loneliness of their homes, engage in games such as checkers or chess, or just receive a haircut. The opening vignette provides an example of the barbershop as being a place where one can possibly become engaged in activities and situations that extend beyond a mere haircut. This institution also may serve as a mechanism whereby individuals can renew contacts within the community if they live outside the area, and sustain friendship bonds already established if they live in the community. Serving as a haven where individuals can engage in sociable activities and still receive a haircut (Wright 1998), the barbershop is often a destination for "ghetto entrepreneurs." "Ghetto entrepreneurs" (Anderson 1976) are individuals who engage in illegal, quasi-legal, and illegal activities in an underground economy.

The underground economy consists of the selling of personal services or merchandise, whether obtained illegally or legally, that is not reported to the United States government in the form of taxes by those engaged in the activity. This definition of the underground economy is muddled because of the inability to definitively ascertain whether or not the individuals participating in this activity report their extra income to the government. We suggest, however, that because of the depressed economic state of

the community investigated, the hustlers described in this study do not report their earnings to the government.

The objectives of this investigation are to provide a descriptive sociological study of an urban African American barbershop (Peanut's Barbershop<sup>1</sup>, the research site), identify various entrepreneurial (hustling) activities that take place in Peanut's Barbershop, and place them in broader categories: legal, quasi-legal, and illegal, and offer multiple theoretical explanations for the various activities taking place within the setting.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Only two articles (Williams 1993; Franklin 1985) appear in the scientific literature that specifically investigate the urban African American barbershop. Unfortunately, these articles do not provide sociologically meaningful insight into the social interactions of ordinary African American men. Instead, one study presents a "car window" sociological view of an urban African American barbershop and the other study focuses on the alleged, negative language used primarily in African American barbershops. Neither of these articles investigate the social interactions or entrepreneurial activities taking place in their research sites. Such activities may or may not have taken place and we cannot unequivocally support or deny their existence. Our concern is that they are not reported in their research findings.

Louis Williams' (1993) study has a limited methodology, makes broad generalizations, and lacks an analysis of the social interactions of the men in Dennis' Barbershop, his research site. This study also lacks a thorough description and analysis of the urban African American barbershop.

Williams' (1993) methodology is limited because he only conducts "observation[s] over several hours over several days" (29). From these limited observations he concludes that the "black man's barbershop is the last place that a black child can learn to become a black man, and a black man can go to bond with other black men" (29). Williams' assertion that the barbershop is the last place where a black child can learn how to become a black man is overstated and based on limited information. His assessment also is questionable because it is based on an interview with one barber. Williams did not interview any children, young adults, or men

<sup>1</sup> All names and locations identified in this study have been altered to provide anonymity.

who frequent the barbershop to determine if, in fact, they learned how to become men through their interactions with older men in this barbershop. Thus, a major failing of this study is that it implies, if only remotely, that all black men relinquish their parental rights and that there are no male role models in the homes or families of many young African American men.

Williams is correct when he asserts that the barbershop is a place where African American men frequent to bond with their fellows, but with one exception. The barbershop is not the *only* place where African American men congregate and enjoy the company of their peers. This activity can be found in churches, the front porch of a home, community centers, pool halls, and local businesses. What the barbershop provides is a mostly homogenous setting that permits men to engage in activities and conversations that could be viewed unfavorably by individuals unfamiliar with the patterns of social interaction that take place within its confines. Consequently, the absence of many women and European (white) Americans from the urban African American barbershop give the men who frequent these institutions the feeling that "this place is theirs."

Clyde W. Franklin, II (1985) argues that the urban African American barbershop provides an environment where sex-role stereotypes and sexist attitudes against women are encouraged and often filter to young children present in the barbershop. Franklin's two month study, that is more methodologically sound than Williams, leaves a void in the literature on African American barbershops because it lacks a focus on the social interactions that transpire within the barbershop and makes broad generalizations. Franklin's study focuses primarily on the language used in the barbershop and the "harmful" effect that it has on children. Despite this limited focus and the absence of empirical data citing the essence of barber-patron social interactions, Franklin overreaches his data by making sweeping statements such as "consistent exposure to such a setting can have harmful effects on growing and vulnerable minds" (978) and "few social settings in America today are more misogynist than the Black male urban barbershop, based on conversations observed in Bob's barbershop" (973). Thus, Franklin condemns the African American barbershop as a haven for women haters by making such statements. It is for these reasons that Franklin decided to end his patronage of a barbershop that he frequented for 14 years. Nevertheless, Franklin's conclusions are tenuous and highly problematic because they are based on the

observation of one barbershop. There may be some barbershops where patrons discuss women unfairly in conversations, yet it is also possible that there are others where the clientele are sensitive to and aware of the injustices experienced by African American women and therefore do not engage in demeaning epithets. Ultimately, these individuals may discuss topics other than “why we hate women” and “what it means to be a bitch” while getting a haircut.

The observations of Williams (1993) and Franklin (1985), although important in highlighting the sociological significance of the African American barbershop as a social institution, fail to discuss the urban African American barbershop in a manner that provides a comprehensive and systematic investigation because of the limited nature of their studies and their limited sample. Specifically, neither study attempts to describe the social interactions that transpire in the barbershop. Williams’ study falls short because it lacks a rigorous methodology and analysis. Franklin’s study is also inadequate because its basic premise, that every African American barbershop is a conveyor of hatred against women, limits the nature of his study. Furthermore, Franklin never attempts to describe the patrons who frequent the barbershop nor discuss the social bonds that may have been established between the men. Instead, he focuses on the sensational activities of “ghetto life” while ignoring the ordinary social relationships established in the barbershop.<sup>2</sup>

This study is designed to add to the existing literature on the urban African American barbershop by providing a systematic investigation into various activities that transpire within one African American barbershop that is more comprehensive than the studies reviewed. The results of this study are not generalizable, yet they do signal the complexity and diversity of urban African American barbershops.

## METHODS

In this study methodological triangulation (Denzin 1970) is employed. The qualitative research methods used are systematic sociological introspection (Ellis 1991), field observations, and in-depth interviews. The combination of these research techniques provide this study with a diverse range of data that could have

<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive examination of the social interactions that take place in one urban African American barbershop see Wright (1998).

been neglected or, perhaps, misinterpreted had only a single methodology been used.

Systematic sociological introspection (Ellis 1991) is a research method that allows the researcher the opportunity to use her or his memory for research purposes by reliving the emotions of a certain experience and presenting it as qualitative data. According to Ellis (1991), introspection "permits us to prompt and collect our own and other people's stories about the lived details of socially constructed experiences" (45). This is important for two reasons. First, it allows one the opportunity to relive and possibly manage memories of a traumatic event in a therapeutic manner (Ronai and Ellis 1989). Thus, a person who has experienced some kind of abuse or trauma, after some time has passed, can feel safe talking about, writing, or reliving the experience in a therapeutic manner. Second, introspection does not penalize the researcher because a certain event occurred years before their current research began. The lead author, through a reconstructed chronology of field notes<sup>3</sup>, reconstructed five years of experience as a barbershop regular and retrospectively took into account conversations, incidents, and activities that occurred in the barbershop during this time. The reconstructed field notes were recorded during a five hour span in which the author typed everything he could remember about the interactions and activities that took place in the barbershop during his time as a patron, not a researcher.

Field observations<sup>4</sup> were conducted from October 1996 to April 1997. During this time the lead author traveled to the barbershop about once every ten days to get a haircut and collect data. Visits to the barbershop usually lasted about one to one and a half hours. A conscious effort was made to visit the barbershop on the busiest days of the week (specifically, Friday and Saturday) and on days when business was slow (Monday and Wednesday). Employing this strategy enabled the researcher to collect data that reflected the barbershop environment at different times and with different clients.

In-depth interviews were conducted with four members of the barbershop: Pete, an African American man approximately 65 years old who is the owner of Peanut's Barbershop; Walter, a

<sup>3</sup> A reconstructed chronology of field notes refers to the recording of a person's memory to be used as data. This can be accomplished by documenting one's lived experiences through in-depth interview, recording of a persons experiences on paper, or a computer, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Approval from the university to conduct this research was not required.

32-year-old African American barber; and Chris and John, two African American male barbershop patrons aged 26. The taped interviews, gathered after the researcher's status was known, lasted from 30–45 minutes. The interview questions centered around the community where the barbershop exists, friendships established in the barbershop, the perceived class of the people who frequent the barbershop, and events that take place in the barbershop (e.g., What has been the biggest change in this community? Have you ever become friends with someone as a result of being his barber? What types of jobs do your customers have? Describe any interesting activities or events that have taken place in or around Peanut's Barbershop.). Interviewees also were encouraged to discuss other issues they believed important to understanding the urban African American barbershop and the community in which it is located.

#### PEANUT'S BARBERSHOP

This study was conducted in a Southern city located deep in the American South with a population of over one million people. It is the home of a urban university and relies on its "old South" dependence upon a major river, agriculture, and commerce to stimulate its economic growth. While most inner city structures in this Southern city are deteriorating, the suburbs are experiencing an increased population and economic boom. The inner city, specifically, an area between the Mississippi River and a thriving highway, can best be described as dilapidated and in ruins. Although these facts persist, Peanut's Barbershop continues to thrive in this area. Peanut's Barbershop is surrounded by several businesses and condemned houses. Across the street from Peanut's is a thriving chicken restaurant, an auto parts store, and a church. Inside Peanut's Barbershop, opened in 1965, are seven barber chairs stretching down an aisle about 30 yards in length. Fifteen chairs are lined against the opposite wall for waiting customers. The floor is made of red tiles, except for about ten white pieces that form a cross in the middle of the aisle between the barber and customer chairs. The cross symbolizes the owner's religious faith.

The establishment of Peanut's was not Pete's first entry into the barbershop business. From 1954 through 1964 he operated, with the help of a couple of partners, two different barbershops

in the Funky Town area.<sup>5</sup> However, Pete's desire to own his own barbershop led to the establishment of Peanut's Barbershop. Peanut's Barbershop is a house that has been molded into a barbershop. Pete currently lives on the second level of the two story building.

Having appeared on national television programs, been the subject of documentaries, featured in newspaper articles, and appeared in movies, Pete has established quite a name for himself in his profession. Burning his patron's hair is what has garnered him so much attention. The purpose of burning a patron's hair, according to Pete, is to get rid of the loose ends that are left after a haircut. Pete learned how to burn hair as a young man growing up in the Deep South.

How I learned to burn hair was ... momma used to kill chickens in the country. When they scald them and pick all the feathers off, it would still be some fuzz left. I burned the fuzz off and that's how I got the idea for that.

In addition to being an excellent barber, Pete also is concerned about the uplift and revitalization of his community. Pete's leadership role in the Funky Town community led to his being sworn in as the mayor of the Funky Town area of this Southern city.

You see I talked to [a local newspaper] and told them that I didn't get my 40 acres and a mule and I wanted me a town. That's how I got the ball rolling. The city council and the county commission named this particular part of town after me ... which is about eight blocks long and four blocks wide. I got sworn in by two judges. I was sworn in as mayor of Funky Town. They passed a resolution and named it after me, which had never been done before.

This was primarily a ceremonial gesture without any official power attached to the status.

<sup>5</sup> Individuals who are high on drugs are often described as being in Funky Town. Some residents of this neighborhood use the term Funky Town when asked where they live because, according to drug dealers that come into the barbershop, this area has the highest amount of drug usage in the city. Despite knowing the negative meaning associated with the concept Funky Town, many residents use the term endearingly while inside Peanut's Barbershop and outside the community.

One of the activities that has garnered Pete so much adulation from residents of Funky Town and the larger city community is his insistence on creating economic opportunities in his barbershop for neighborhood children and young adults. To keep them from stealing and in order to secure money, Pete allows some of the neighborhood children to run errands and sweep hair off the floor for a minimal wage paid by either Pete or the barber who sent the child on the errand or asked them to perform a particular chore. This is part of Pete's effort to be a role model to the kids in Funky Town.

What happens is, if you let a kid work for his money, so he can buy his candy, ice cream, cookies, or whatever he wants, he won't have to take things. That's why I try to let different ones work at different times. Each barber that works for me they pay them to clean around their chair, or station. They sometimes send them to the store. They get chips for going there. They get quite a bit of change for running errands and picking up stuff.

Walter, a barber at Peanut's Barbershop, adds to Pete's statement by asserting that:

We're putting a few dollars in their pockets so they don't have to steal. They can come in here and sweep hair off the floor and we'll give them a few dollars. [We try to] keep 'em around us and try to show them an atmosphere where they wouldn't be out seeing the dope dealer. We don't want them to portray [the dope dealer]. We want them to work for what they get.

In addition to supporting young children with opportunities to make legal wages, Pete also serves as the legal guardian for a mentally challenged 35-year-old Black man who is a constant fixture in the barbershop. Bud, at 5' 9" and 130 pounds, runs errands and completes chores similar to those of the young children. A discussion with Walter reveals that Bud was once "one of the smartest dudes in Funky Town. He even had a full scholarship to attend [a local university]." However, the summer before he was to enter college, Bud attended a party where someone "slipped him a mickie." According to Walter, "after that he lost all of his common sense" and is now unable to independently provide

for himself. Consequently, he receives help from the government. Walter says that Pete "gives him little pieces of [the money Bud receives from the government] when he needs it" and takes care of Bud's daily living arrangements. Since Bud is unable to fully care for himself, Walter said "that's why we help him out."

Barbers playing a role in the economic and physical uplift of their community is a tradition that dates back to slavery and the reconstruction era (Du Bois 1900; Hogan and Davis 1951; Wier and Marszalek 1977). This specific barbershop provides economic opportunities to this community that are not available or cannot be obtained from social welfare agencies. Specifically, Pete provides employment for youth too young to officially garner a wage because of child labor laws and for a mentally handicapped adult male who may experience difficulty gaining employment through regular procedures. In addition to extending a helping hand to the neighborhood children and young adults in need of financial help, Pete also allows older community residents engaged in the underground economy to "get their hustle on" in his barbershop.

In an earlier paper the different levels of social interactions discovered in Peanut's Barbershop are described (Wright 1998). However, because the focus of this study addresses the underground economy no discussion of these processes will be identified. Our attention will now shift to an analysis of the underground economy existing at Peanut's Barbershop.

## UNDERGROUND ECONOMY

A visit to Peanut's Barbershop can be very rewarding if you happen to stop in at the right time. The depressed economic state of this Southern city, where the median income in 1989 was \$27,132 and 65% of African Americans, compared to 33% of whites, earned less than this amount (United States Bureau of the Census 1990), demands that some individuals create a "hustle" to earn money for themselves and their families. Hustling, as used in this paper, is not synonymous with the way the concept is used in other sociological literature. For example, Polsky (1967) refers to hustling, in a pool game, as the ability to take advantage of an unsuspecting and inexperienced pool shooter by implying, in part, that the "novice" is really on equal par with the "expert."

An alternative conceptualization of hustling is referred to as "hustling the streets." Elijah Anderson (1976), in his classic urban

sociological investigation *A Place on the Corner*, clarifies the concept “hustling the streets” when he introduces a hoodlum named Tyrone who “claims he is a part-time pimp and hustler of the streets. Occasionally, [Tyrone] works for a Chicago tree nursery or works on construction. When in great need of money [Tyrone] has been known to hire himself out for day labor, but he usually hustles and pushes dope” (131). Anderson more clearly defines this concept when discussing Oscar; another ‘hoodlum’ who engages in “hustling the streets.”

Oscar is a kind of entrepreneur ... he makes his rounds attempting to sell “hot” record albums, rings, watches ... When the goods are really “hot,” he display[s] the [brand name] labels and price tags, attempting to sell the items at “half” the price marked, though ordinarily he gets less than half. Group members call this kind of entrepreneurship “hustling,” a term that may refer to anything from robbing and sticking up others to gambling, fencing, and “sellin dope.” Group members use it most often to describe a person who seems always to be “out to make some money off o’ somebody” (134).

Thus, hustling as defined in this paper and similar to Anderson’s usage, is the selling of a persons’ service or procured goods to either supplement their regular income or serve as their sole source of income.

### The Process

The goods sold in Peanut’s Barbershop are often difficult to classify as being legally or illegally obtained. Consequently, it is possible to acquire expensive, albeit stolen, items for half their normal cost. Chris reveals that, “you have people coming in trying to sell T-shirts, earrings, and tapes. In [this] part of town everybody is trying to hustle to make a living.” Peanut’s Barbershop is often crowded with sellers attempting to “get their hustle on” or sell their merchandise. On those days, customers like John, an African American male aged 26, “walk around the barbershop to see what the local vendor is selling.” As Walter puts it:

There are so many people that come into the barbershop and that’s what [ghetto entrepreneurs] see. They see a lot of people there and they say well I can go in there and sell ...

maybe 200 people might see those products. You might get ten to buy. People like to come in and sell products where people are at. In a barbershop . . . in a week about 200 people may come in. Where there's people, there's the possibility of making a sell.

This passage reveals that people come to the barbershop not only to receive haircuts, but also to socialize and check out the vendors. Thus, the captive audience of barbershop customers makes this a place where ghetto entrepreneurs may visit to sell their goods.

Ghetto entrepreneurs cannot enter Peanut's Barbershop from "off the streets" and begin selling their merchandise. There is a process that one must go through before he can hawk his goods. Permission to engage in the underground economy must be received from Pete. Ghetto entrepreneurs can get Pete's permission by simply identifying what products will be sold in the barbershop and asking him if they can be allowed to "work this area."<sup>6</sup> Pete, we suggest, does this to assure that, to his particular knowledge, no illegal activity takes place in the barbershop. To acknowledge that he is giving permission to sell goods that are illegally obtained would clearly undermine the official image (i.e., community activist, solid citizen, successful businessman, etc.) that he enjoys, and potentially could result in his becoming discredited within the community or incarcerated. According to Walter, Pete doesn't charge sellers for promoting their goods in his shop. This is perplexing considering the high rental fees Pete charges his barbers for the luxury of "owning" a chair in his barbershop.

After receiving Pete's permission to "work the shop" the sellers then engage the waiting customers in a show and tell of their merchandise. With waiting customers on the left side and barbers and their clients on the right side, the businessmen walk down the small aisle of the barbershop asking if anyone wants to buy something while swaying from side to side displaying their wares. The seller will sometimes interrupt a customer's haircut if he believes he can make a sale; however, sellers generally wait until the haircut is finished before initiating or finalizing any transaction.

During this investigation the lead author wondered if some of the merchandise being sold was stolen. After repeated visits to

<sup>6</sup> These data were received from Walter, a barber at Peanut's Barbershop. The senior investigator chose not to ask Pete questions concerning the underground economy taking place in his barbershop for fear that access to the research setting would be revoked and/or a request that the data collected at this juncture not be used in the manner that it now exists.

the barbershop and discussions with barbers and customers who purchased merchandise from and knew the ghetto entrepreneurs personally, it was discovered that, in fact, much of the merchandise was stolen. Additionally, it was discovered that employees and “regulars” who encouraged potential customers to purchase some of the products being sold often received benefits such as extra or free items or reduced prices on some of the more expensive products sold. It is from these interactions that the categorizations of the underground economy emerged. The underground economy operating at Peanut’s Barbershop is divided into three areas: legal, quasi-legal, and illegal.

### ***Legal***

Individuals selling legal items are working on a commission for someone else or are self-employed selling their own products or services. Examples of legal sellers are a shoe shiner, pager salesman, cellular phone salesman, and an artist selling his work. Additionally, during the warm months there is a gentleman who sits in the front of the barbershop and asks every customer entering the shop if they would like to have their car washed while they get a haircut. On a good day this gentleman will wash up to 20 cars. Nevertheless, most of the underground economy takes place within the barbershop.

Upon entering Peanut’s Barbershop customers are greeted by a small framed, 42-year-old African American man who operates a shoe shine stand. The lead author often experiences mixed emotions when viewing this hustle. Reflecting upon conversations with his grandmother, he remembers talks in which she asserted that during the days of her youth the job of a shoe shine boy was one of the more common occupations available to African American men. Often the connotation associated with this occupation is that of a possibly undignified person performing a menial yet quite legal, task. This shoe shiner displays an aura of dignity and pride while performing his job. The shiner also repairs shoes. His ultimate sales strategy is to display shoes recently cleaned or repaired attempting to convince potential customers to let him clean or repair their shoes. The shoe shiner’s location is strategic in that once a customer enters Peanut’s Barbershop they must either choose to sit in the shoe shine stand area immediately before them or veer to their right to enter the area where the barber chairs are aligned and a majority of the underground economy and haircuts take place.

While receiving a haircut one morning a gentleman came into the barbershop and approached the lead author and his barber. He asked if we owned cars and we both said yes. He pulled out a business card and told us that he changed oil in cars and trucks and that he was the only person in the city who would come to someone's home or job to change their oil. After we told him we didn't need an oil change he left. Not all sellers entering the barbershop are that easily discouraged. Essentially, the legal sellers don't use a hard sell as much as sellers in the next area.

### Quasi-Legal

When individuals sell products that cannot unequivocally be identified as legitimate business acquisitions or stolen items, they fall into a gray area or the quasi-legal category. Examples of the products sold in this area include socks, clothing, tools, tennis shoes, and costume jewelry. Almost every weekend a seller comes into the barbershop attempting to sell tennis shoes. No one knows if the shoes are stolen, or if they just happen to be a size too large or small for the original owner. On one occasion a different seller came into the barbershop with tennis shoes that everyone suspected was stolen. The shoes were possibly stolen because local television stations had been airing stories about a train carrying tennis shoes that had been burglarized. The train contained an undisclosed number of brand name tennis shoes, each valued at more than \$150 each. Consequently, when the seller came into the shop everyone suspected their origin. Many of the potential customers strongly adhere to Thomas and Thomas' (1928) idea of defining the situation as it exists in a person's social location. Thus, if the items are stolen, the customers do not want to be apprized of that fact. The barbershop customers only want to know if they will receive a good deal on the price of the shoes because the seller is trying to get rid of the merchandise as quickly as possible. This enables the customers to enjoy the perks of a crime without being directly involved in the perpetration of the act. If either the customer or the seller, but more particularly the customer, readily admits his knowledge of the item(s) as being stolen, and if it becomes known to law enforcement should an arrest be made, then the customer is subjected to arrest and being charged with receiving stolen goods—a felony in most jurisdictions. In this case, it was suspected but not verified that the shoes being sold by the ghetto entrepreneurs were stolen.

Sellers in the quasi-legal area use hard sells more than the previous category. The hard sell is a sales strategy where the seller aggressively attempts to hawk his merchandise or service for the most money possible while pestering the potential client. Similar to Frederick E. Webster's (1983) straight rebuy buying situation, the objective of a seller using this strategy is to "create dissatisfaction with the [regularly purchased] product offer[ed]" (67) while "[moving] the buying situation to a higher level of complexity" (67). Thus, a ghetto entrepreneur informs the potential customer of the possible benefits gained from purchasing his product as opposed to the legitimate acquisition of similar items. It is assumed that if a seller has illegal items, he will not haggle too long with a person because he wants to get rid of the merchandise as quickly and quietly as possible. However, if a seller has legally obtained his merchandise, he is more likely to haggle with a customer in an attempt to "juice the fool for his ducks," (i.e., beat the customer out of his money) than if it was illegally attained. The sellers in this area often shift their style of salesmanship based upon whether or not the potential customer is aware of the possible legal/illegal attainment of the merchandise.

### *Illegal*

Individuals in this area sell items that are clearly illegally obtained or stolen (i.e., leather coats, movies, and music tapes). The sellers in this area are often referred to as boosters. Boosters are individuals who possess stolen credit cards or checks, and use them to purchase expensive items in the local malls, or elsewhere, and then sell them at a fraction of their suggested retail price. In earlier literature, boosters engaged primarily in shoplifting. A booster would take particular orders from customers and go about securing the requested items from a grocery store (e.g., cigarettes, meat, etc.) or department stores (e.g., cologne, leather jackets, etc.). However, with technological advances and the ease by which credit cards and checks can be illegally obtained or stolen from the owner's mailbox, boosting has become a more sophisticated illegal enterprise. In December 1993, a booster came into the barbershop attempting to sell five \$500 leather coats for \$300 each and ten \$400 brand name purses for \$200 each that were obtained with stolen checks. The products being boosted were sold in a matter of minutes and in a matter of months the woman was prosecuted for forgery. The customers knew the products being sold were stolen; however, they also knew the value of the product and,

since Christmas was a couple of weeks away, a nice gift could be purchased for a relatively cheap price.

Bootleg music tapes also are sold by businessmen in the barber-shop. Bootleg music tapes are dubbed copies of original songs sold for half the price of the original. It's illegal because neither the company holding the copyright, nor the artist, receives the revenues normally procured had the items been sold in traditional outlets. Individuals selling bootleg tapes usually solicit customers sitting in the barber's chair or they approach patrons as they are leaving their cars in the parking lot. Observations of bootleg music tape sellers indicate the usage of both the soft and hard sell strategy. Seemingly, the type of sales strategy depends upon whether or not the seller is hustling for a large or small sum of money for that particular day. Data from interviewees indicate that, "What kind of music do you like, brother?" is how they begin their sales pitch. If one is hesitant in answering their question, they will attempt to pester the potential customer into buying their product. If after a couple of minutes their attempt to sell the product has failed, they simply go on to the next person.

A third area where the entrepreneurial activities occur in Peanut's Barbershop is the store. The store is located in a room directly adjacent to the area where the barber chairs are located, or in the main area of the shop. The store is managed by a 45-year-old African American male named Joe. In his younger years Joe sold drugs in the Funky Town area; however, in an effort to please his mother, according to Walter, he stopped selling drugs and began managing the store in Peanut's Barbershop. The store contains items such as illegally stitched baseball and football hats, framed pictures, and brand name clothing. Chris says that "local vendors sell things such as the Tommy Hilfiger watches which have never been made with the copyright ... and things like the Nike athletic gear. You'll find anything in the [store] from watches to shirts to incense. You name it, it's there. From tapes, it's there." Each of these items are protected by a patent indicating their authenticity—as the designer label suggests high quality and increased status. However, entrepreneurs who engage in the selling of these fake products recognize that American youth and some adults desire the statuses associated with these named designers but cannot afford, or are unwilling to pay, the asked price for these items in department stores. From the perspective of the seller and buyer, functional needs are met. The seller makes money from distributing illegal items and the buyer is able to make a fashion

statement by displaying outward status symbols. We argue that among one's peers authenticity is not an issue. Even the poorest person is exposed to the actual cost of these items by viewing commercials on television or visiting local malls. Individuals also are aware of the item's value and are equally aware of their inability to possess these items legitimately. Therefore, this type of entrepreneur serves a real purpose.

One also can find first run movies in the store. This process needs only a worker and a video camera. Data reveals that the "businessmen" send "employees" into movie theaters with hand-held video cameras and have them record entire movies on their first day of release. The businessmen then produce mass copies of the movie for further distribution in the barbershop and other outlets for ten dollars each, or two for fifteen dollars. Some viewers of the tapes assert that if you don't mind the occasional crowd noise, ringing pagers or telephones, crying babies, or constant outbursts of profanity, bootleg movies are a good buy. If one totals the cost of attending a real movie with a date and adding the price of gas, popcorn, drinks, and candy, then the decision to choose a bootleg movie, and all the while reducing total expenditures, appears to be a rational choice when one factors in socioeconomic conditions. Once again, the company that owns the movie copyright and the artists are impacted by this infringement and are cheated out of potential income. There are no data indicating that the companies or artists cheated out of their revenues seek to prosecute ghetto entrepreneurs. The authors suggest that the corporations or individuals cheated out of potential income refuse to take legal action because they were either not aware of the illegal activities or believed the level of copyright and trademark theft, in this case, to be too small to pursue legal recourse.

The sellers in this area occasionally go for the hard sell more than the previous sellers because they are trying to get rid of merchandise that could result in their arrest. It is the illegal seller's hope that the hard sell strategy will produce a large profit and deplete their supply of merchandise in minimal time. Sometimes these sellers don't have to work extremely hard to sell their items because customers know that the product received is of fine quality, based on past experience, and usually at an affordable price. Other times, the seller is forced to hustle extremely hard in an effort to convince the potential customer of the value and benefit of his product.

The data presented in this study indicate that a variety of activities take place in Peanut's Barbershop (e.g., the threatening presence of

armed gunmen, the establishment of friendship bonds, an informal community outreach program, an underground economy, and a place where one can receive a haircut). Thus, scientific attempts aimed at explaining or understanding the activities taking place in Peanut's Barbershop require a variety of perspectives. Joseph (1995) suggests that "much of the research on delinquent behavior tends to focus on one theoretical explanation of that behavior. Such [a] restrictive focus has not only resulted in limited explanation of delinquent behavior, but it has also obscured the similarities between theoretical approaches" (486). We agree with Joseph and argue that such limited theoretical explanations are not limited to delinquent behavior, but other forms of deviance as well. Consequently, this investigation incorporates various scientific explanations for the activities present in Peanut's Barbershop.

## CONCLUSION

The purposes of this paper were to identify some of the activities transpiring within and near Peanut's Barbershop and offer multiple sociological theoretical explanations for some of the activities identified. The activities classified vary in nature and constitute a part of what we call the underground economy. Based on observations and interactions with the owner, patrons, and barbers at Peanut's Barbershop, three types of entrepreneurial activities emerged: legal, quasi-legal, and illegal.

Legal entrepreneurial activities consisted of items being sold by individuals either working for themselves as a means of supplementing their income or working for someone else as part of a legal enterprise. Included in this category are pager salesmen, cellular telephone salesmen, artists selling their works, car washers, and so forth.

Quasi-legal entrepreneurial activities include items that fall within a gray area. These items are difficult to classify because their status cannot easily be established. Some items included in this category are clothing such as socks and tennis shoes, costume jewelry, and tools.

The third entrepreneurial category, illegal, includes items such as counterfeit music tapes, first run movies, and expensive clothing such as leather coats that clearly known to be stolen.

Given that three types of entrepreneurial activities (i.e., legal, quasi-legal, and illegal) emerged, it is essential to place these activities, theoretically, within a larger sociological context. The

explanations that follow are not exhaustive, but we believe are reasonable in light of the data.

First, although we have shown that different types of activities take place in Peanut's Barbershop, the relevant question is why? This is a complex question and does not lend itself to an easy explanation because Peanut's Barbershop is a legitimate business located in a dilapidated area of town. Additionally, its owner enjoys a level of respectability in the larger community and his possible involvement in questionable community activities could complicate this issue. In this instance we offer that this relationship, at one level, is akin to Goffman's (1963) frontstage/backstage theoretical notion. Pete, the owner, particularly to the larger community, has an image to uphold because, after all, he has been sworn in as the mayor of Funky Town. Although this gesture was symbolic in nature, it speaks to the assessment others in this Southern city have of him. Because he is held in such high esteem by the larger community, he must present himself as an honorable man to the outside world. He must therefore present an image that he is above reproach. One way to accomplish this is to adhere to a different set of norms—a set that requires him to put on another face when not in the larger community. From this perspective, Pete puts on a face that is acceptable to the people of Funky Town but unknown to those of the larger community. This face and the associated norms prevalent in Funky Town allows vendors to sell items of questionable origin in Peanut's Barbershop. In this situation, a different image of Pete emerges—behavior compatible with Goffman's backstage. Although the norms governing Pete's behavior in Peanut's Barbershop are different than those associated with the larger community, he must strike a delicate balance. One way this balance is achieved is through the granting of permission to allow items to be sold in his barbershop. Since Pete does not inquire into the legal status of items vendors seek to sell, he is in effect giving tacit approval to their behavior, be it legitimate or illegitimate. On the other hand, should any vendor be arrested for selling stolen goods while in Pete's barbershop, he can argue that he had no knowledge about the status of the items and was only attempting to facilitate the industrious efforts of "ghetto entrepreneurs." This, we argue, is consistent with Scott and Lyman's (1968) classic work on "accounts." Particularly in this situation, Pete's response would be similar to the description of an excuse. In a similar vein, Becker (1963) informs that one way to be certified as a deviant is to be caught in the act. Although Pete is engaging in discreditable

behavior by allowing goods of questionable origin to be sold, he seeks to not become discredited (Goffman 1963). If, in fact, Pete's barbershop is busted and an arrest is made, one line of defense that Pete may use is the amassing of moral credit as a mitigating circumstance for his behavior (Pfuhl and Henry 1993) by calling attention to all of the good that he has done for the community.

A second line of analysis must address the role of customer and vendor. How can their behavior be explained? Recall, that Peanut's Barbershop caters to clients from all walks of life—from the common thug to the local businessman. Obviously, from a strictly legal standpoint, the more affluent customer potentially has more to lose socially and economically than the less affluent; however, both potentially have much to gain. Specifically, all types of customers can purchase highly desired items at a fraction of their cost if purchased in Peanut's Barbershop and not legitimate outlets. In this case, we assert that customers are willing to take the risk of buying stolen items because they have weighed the potential risks against the perceived benefits. A major risk associated with purchasing stolen goods is arrest and the loss of status. If a decision is made to buy an item or to sell items, we argue, the individual has determined that the likelihood of arrest is so low and the potential for gain so great that a rational decision is made to enter the exchange. In this instance, a rational choice has been made (Clarke and Cornish 1985). The affluent customer procures the desired item at a reduced cost while the less affluent customer gets the desired item and its accompanying status at a price they can afford. Additionally, the seller is able to dispose of the items at a profit. If all goes as planned, the exchange is a win-win situation for all. One factor that may facilitate this process is time. The amount of time spent in the barbershop is dictated by the customer and vendor; therefore, the probability of anything going wrong can be minimized. The customer and vendor have some control over whether to spend a long time in the barbershop, thus increasing the risk of arrest, or to spend a small amount of time in the barbershop, decreasing the risk of arrest. Beyond the time variable, the sales tactic used also plays an important role. The more questionable the status of the item to be sold, the more likely the vendor will employ different strategies in an attempt to unload his goods. The more illegal the item, the greater the need to unload it quickly even if the margin of profit is diminished.

There are other probable explanations for the behavior described in this paper; however, this is one attempt to provide multiple

sociological theoretical explanations for some of the activities taking place in one urban African American barbershop. As with most research, this project has its shortcomings. First, the data gathered were collected from only one urban African American barbershop. We do not know if similar findings would be discovered if the research was conducted in rural areas or other metropolitan areas. The results of this study are not generalizable, yet they signal the complexity and diversity of urban African American barbershops and highlight processes previously not discussed in the scientific literature and unique to this particular social institution. Second, to clearly situate the behavior we have classified as legal, quasi-legal, or illegal, requires a discussion with vendors about how the goods were obtained and why they are selling them in this barbershop. A discussion with the owner, Pete, about his knowledge of the vendor and goods to be sold also would be desirable. If Pete is knowledgeable about the illegality of some of the goods sold in his barbershop, it would be interesting to discover the strategies he uses to cover his involvement in this activity beyond the granting of permission and his "don't ask don't tell" policy. Finally, a comparative study of this phenomena is warranted. For example, are similar activities carried out in white barbershops? If yes, are the processes similar or dissimilar? If it does occur, why? These and other sociological questions relative to the entrepreneurial activities that may transpire in barbershops should inform future research.

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