

# “It’s Not Where You Live, It’s How You Live”: How Young Women Negotiate Conflict and Violence in the Inner City

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## Inner City Moral Code

The “code of the street” is defined by researcher Elijah Anderson as “a set of informal rules of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence” in the inner city.

- While Anderson’s work emphasizes the relationship between masculinity and the code, the code is not necessarily gender-specific.
  - Girls and young women can and do fight, which prompts the following research questions:
    1. What is the context of violence for young inner city women?
    2. How do young women negotiate conflict and violence?
    3. What are the consequences of these processes of negotiation?
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## Girls Fight

Through a multilayered program of fieldwork, the author of this article identified various strategies young women use to negotiate conflict and violence.

- Like their male counterparts, girls realize through observation and experience that violence is a potential tool to mediate the physical vulnerability they may experience in their everyday lives.
- Some young women, equipped with a history of fighting and winning, are invested in developing and maintaining a reputation as a “fighter.”
- The reputation as an able fighter also provides these young women with a sense of security and confidence.
- **Example 1:** Terrie is known as a fighter.
  1. Terrie’s cousin had been challenged to a fight and used Terrie to intervene and negotiate a settlement without a fight.
  2. An agreement had been reached, but the same girl challenged her cousin again the same day.
  3. This violation of their agreement was perceived as a sign of public disrespect and Terrie chose to challenge this young woman and engaged in a violent fight.
  4. She was suspended from school, but Terrie had maintained her reputation.
  5. In another incident Terrie used her reputation to stop an unfair fight and to protect the weaker, smaller girl from future confrontations by allowing her to let it be known that Terrie was her protector – this adds to Terrie’s reputation.

- **Example 2:** Danielle, who does not have a reputation as a fighter, has developed strategies to negotiate potential conflicts and avoid fights.
    1. She is careful in the way she presents herself to show she does not have a point to prove and doesn't want to fight.
    2. She does not react to every challenge with a challenge.
    3. She tries to talk out potential conflicts.
  - **Loyalty links:** One way that young women who aren't fighters are drawn into fights is through their "loyalty links" – when a friend is challenged you stick by and help your friend, which for Danielle was the cause of her one and only fight in 19 years.
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## Conclusion

In distressed inner city neighborhoods young women like Danielle and Terrie come of age against a backdrop of real and potential violence.

- They are often encouraged to be fighters and to be known as fighters for their own protection.
- If one is not a fighter then a lot of energy goes into negotiating potential conflicts.

**Note:** For young inner city women, being able to fight and being known as a fighter is, at times, the most reliable social resource available to them in their everyday lives.