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REACTIONS TO THE STIGMATA OF INNER CITY LIVING

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problem of living in a stigmatized inner city community. The reactions of residents are categorized into "Four Moral Careers", and implications for the community of each career are discussed. Major attention is focused upon the "activist" career which aims to overcome the stigma of the community. The activists are discussed and described through the use of materials from intensive interviews of local community leaders who have tried to cope with the stigma of the area. Some suggested implications are made for the application of the ideas presented herein to urban research in general and the provision of social services in the context of stigmatized inner city communities.

There are many problems that residents of inner cities in America must face, and hopefully overcome. The usual litany of personal and collective difficulties reads; poverty, crime, discrimination, housing deterioration, etc.. These are all "obvious" problems. One might say that they are part of the "common sense definitions" of our central city neighborhoods.¹ There are many other problems. One that I feel is equally important to those noted above, but not quite so obvious, is the social "stigma" of living in an inner city community itself. A major difficulty of those who wish to provide services for inner city residents, and to motivate them to try to solve their problems, is to convince them that improving their own personal, or group, local situations is worth their effort. People who live in many city neighborhoods are likely to express the belief that improvement in their position in life must come with a respective geographic movement. This is not only a common perception of those who live in the poorest neighborhoods, but also of those who reside in what are considered "non-

elite" areas of the city in general.

Even cities, per se, are viewed by many as "traps" from which they must escape. This feeling promotes urban to suburban flight for the middle-class, as well as the constant intra-city migration of lower-class and minority group members, who appear to be incessantly moving away from themselves, or others who they see as equally "polluting".² They do this as soon as the opportunity presents itself: usually connected to the flight of higher status groups away from them- so the chase proceeds across our urban landscapes. A major consequence of this chase for lower-class and minority groups is that they seldom establish relatively permanent territorial bases from which to organize for effective political action. Such action could conceivably lead to better conditions for the groups involved. The "chase" also provides ample opportunity for abusive real estate practices and other exploitive economic activities that further disable inner city residents, and fosters the growth of large-scale urban deterioration and instability.³

INNER CITY STIGMATA

I am not suggesting here that people be falsely persuaded to stay in low-income ghetto areas, for example, because they are paradises. I am suggesting that there are many inner city neighborhoods on the brink of decay that are worth saving or preserving. Something must be done before they develop into ghettos due to the lowered evaluation of them in the eyes of the general public, and the indigenous people themselves.

Sociological theorists and practitioners are constantly on the look out for concepts that are useful in understanding, as well as solving, social problems. Erving Goffman has provided such a concept that has been extremely valuable in the area of social deviance, but until the present has not been applied to the area of "urban" problems. The concept is that of "stigma". Goffman noted that the term originated with the ancient Greeks who occasionally disfigured deviants in order to allow the general public to visibly recognize transgressors. The term evolved into meaning a bodily sign that exposes "something unusual or bad about the moral status of the signifier" (Goffman, 1963:1-2). Today the term has a wider meaning and is applied more to

the disgrace itself than the physical evidence of it. Stigma is then a negative dimension of personal identity, and it informs us (when we know about) of the decreased moral worth of the stigmatized person.

Social stigmata are not limited to "deviants" in the usual sense of the term, e.g. criminals, etc.. Living in a densely populated urban area is also deviant from the "normal", or at least the "expected" version of proper American community life. Our society's traditional anti-urban bias has a great deal to do with this negative perception of city life, but there is more to it than this. Nonwhites and the poor are also treated as deviants, and are stigmatized.⁴ When a city, or parts of it, become a home for such people the general anti-urban bias (pro-rural and small town) is given another dimension. Places that are classified as nonwhite or "changing" communities can be stigmatized as well as people. For example in Brooklyn, New York there is a large densely populated "Black" community called Bedford-Stuyvesant.⁵ Most outsiders believe that because it is Black, the whole area is one large, low-income ghetto, but it is not. There are many middle-class, relatively stable, architecturally and historically important areas within the boundaries of the larger community. These smaller neighborhoods almost invariably suffer economically, socially and politically because of the stigma placed on nonwhites and the territory they occupy. What people think they know about a community is often more dangerous to it than what they do know.

THE MORAL CAREERS OF INNER CITY RESIDENTS

The possible reactions of individuals to neighborhood stigmata are our next concern. The examples employed in this section of the paper were gathered as part of a larger study of community organization I conducted (and am still conducting) in Central Brooklyn which began in 1969. The particular neighborhood I report on is called Vander-Parkview-Gardens.⁶ Between 1960 and 1970 the population of the area changed from one that was predominately white to one that is predominately nonwhite. During this time the neighborhood also began to experience some of the "expected" urban problems that are associated with racial turnover, such as block-busting and decreases in normal city services. These events provided me with the opportunity for recording and analysing the reactions of inhabitants (both dominant and newcomer) to

changes they actually experienced or merely anticipated. Fortunately for the community those that expected the worst (and some even would have welcomed it) have been disappointed. The reasons for the survival of the community are more extensively discussed in one of my earlier papers (Krase, 1974), but have to do in large measure with the activities of some of the people to be discussed below.

We might think of the patterns of behavior that result from living in a stigmatized environment as "moral careers". Goffman notes that: "Persons who have a particular stigma tend to have similar learning experiences regarding their plight, and similar changes in conception of self- a similar 'moral career' that is both cause and effect of commitment to a similar sequence of personal adjustments.", (1963:32). Different moral careers are essentially differential adjustments to the imposed stigma due to the fact that people who have the same stigma may not share other important social attributes.

I have discovered at least four general categories of adjustment to the stigma of inner city neighborhoods- "Four Moral Careers of Inner City Residents";

1. The Unaware- Some people, such as recent immigrants to the inner city, are unaware of their stigma, or if aware of it; they do not "appreciate" it due to a lack of socialization in regard to American community values. Others, like those who have lived in low-income ghettos for all of their lives, have so internalized their stigma that it is an unconscious part of their personality. Identity problems occur for them only on those rare occasions when they confront "normals". These are two types people who dissolve into the mass of the "polluted" of the city's worst slum neighborhoods. Some social scientists have "romanticized" their day to day lives, as earlier writers have written of the "obviously" contented European serfs, and in our own country; the "happy" slaves of southern plantation life.⁷ It should be noted that the adjustments that these people have made to their environments- their own cultures of community, have furthered stigmatized them, because the communities they they developed are viewed as "abnormal".

2. The Failure- The "failure" is the person who accepts the stigma of the neighborhood in which he or she lives, and

aspires to the community ideal, but who is unable to move away to "better" surroundings. Failures are also socially and psychologically unable to blend into the changing, or changed, community. The elderly are a major component of the residential failures in American cities today. Others are the unemployed, and people who are otherwise handicapped in their pursuit of the "American Dream".⁸ There are two dangerous types of "failures". One aims to destroy only the self. The other tries to destroy the community. Both types attempt to disassociate themselves from the "new" community, and to show through their actions that they are not a part of it- that they do not "belong" there. Listening to the conversations of these people on the sidewalks and in the local stores, they can be heard "talking down" the neighborhood and playing up its stigma. They also provide themselves with excuses for being "trapped" in the area such as; "I can't afford to move now, but when I get my raise..", and, "I'm only staying here because my rent is so low." The reason why some failures attempt to destroy the community by their talk or their actions is that to them "their" community has been polluted or desecrated. They engage in self of neighborhood flagellation as a way to atone for their sins and to purify the territory.⁹

These people in Vander-Parkview-Gardens cause community organizers and other activists a great deal of difficulty. They are the constant bearers of bad news about the community, and are unwilling to cooperate with improvement activities. They also mock the efforts of their neighbors to, for example, "fight city hall". One example of the destructive actions of failures might be instructive. In New York, and other cities, there has been a growth of block associations (small scale community organizations) in the inner city which engage in many activities to promote community spirit and to improve physical surroundings. On one block in the neighborhood an association scheduled a "sweep-in", e.g. a cooperative effort to clean the street and clean out basements. In order to do this they closed off the street to traffic, and they also had a party afterward to reward participants. Several "failures" who lived on the block complained to the police that the activity was a "public nuisance" and demanded that it be stopped.

3. The Achiever- The "achiever" accepts the stigma of the neighborhood and aspires to the community ideal, and has

the means to escape to a "normal" community. These people form the ranks of the "mass" or "staggered" flight from the neighborhood. They present a danger to the community in large measure because they care little about who replaces them. To them the area is already a "lost cause". Their slight sense of guilt for their part in the injury they do to the community is shown by their reluctance to let their "friends" know about their intention to leave. They talk down about the neighborhood before moving away, but their neighbors usually express surprise when they are gone. It is during this period; shortly before they move, that they often exaggerate the negative conditions in the area, and the positive qualities of other places.¹⁰ The actions of one such "achiever" that came to my attention might serve as an extreme, although not unusual, example.

The "achiever" was selling his house on a city block of one-family homes but refused to allow his neighbors, who had prospective buyers for the house, to contact his real estate broker. The seller was white and most of the neighbors were middle-class Blacks who were afraid that the building would be turned into a rooming house and thereby "ruin" their block. Selling the house to a speculator or a rooming house operator would not only bring a higher price, but such buyers also have an easier time raising money for the purchase price. The reason for their relative ease in purchasing homes is that Black or "changing" neighborhoods are invariably "red-lined" by banks. Ordinary people who could be an asset to a community are therefore virtually prohibited from moving into the area. The seller, convinced that the neighborhood had already "gone to the dogs", thought only of his own financial needs and sold the house to an agent who promptly converted the house for multi-family use. This type of conversion increases the density of a block and helps along the self-fulfilling prophecy about changing communities.

4. The Activist- The "activist", oddly enough, accepts the stigma of the area, and the ideal version of the American community. But, they differ from the others by trying to prove that the stigma is inaccurate, unjustified, or they endeavor to improve the community in ways that bring it up to the standards of the "normal". They use moral appeals to insiders and outsiders to help prevent the further deterioration of the stigmatized community. These actions can

take place on an individual, or organized group level. The individual efforts are inspiring; such as the Black woman I interviewed who swept her sidewalk and kept her property immaculate because she "knew" that her neighbors would be morally bound to follow her example. But, it is the organized efforts of community groups that hold out the greatest potential for maintaining inner city neighborhoods.

The methods for removing the stigmata are derived from the model of the ideal normal community. The activists, if we were to use Robert K. Merton's often cited structural paradigm, are not "Rebels" but "Conformists" (1968:185-214). In fact all except the "unaware" in the inner city accept the community values, or goals, of the dominant society, and the legitimate means for attaining them. The activists however, claim to be able to be "normal" in a "deviant" setting. In the stigmatized community though, it requires a great deal of effort and skill to "pull off" a normal performance because the stage on which the actors perform is full of ideological booby traps and obvious social discrepancies.¹¹

THE SPECIAL CASE OF ACTIVISTS

Because of the importance of the "activists" to the Vander-Parkview-Gardens community, and communities like it across the nation, I feel it necessary to discuss them, their actions and motivations in greater depth. Data on them was obtained via participant observation in the community for more than five years. (I was a local activist during this period and continue today as an "advisor in residence" to many community groups in Brooklyn.) Their activities are for the most part a matter of public record, but the most interesting and revealing data was gathered during intensive interviews of 15 community leaders. Each was questioned for a total of between six and 12 hours; two or more three hour sessions. The responses were taped, transcribed and later analysed. The quotes which follow are verbatim and therefore evidence grammatical errors. As in the case of the neighborhood name, all persons and places have been given pseudonyms. Because of space limitations I will focus on four of the most active and prominent community leaders.

In every case of community activism some real or imagined

negative change in the status of the community stimulated the person to engage in community actions. The same change sets off the movement of the "achievers" out of the area. Below are the encapsulated experiences of two local Black female activists:

Activist 1.; Well my husband wanted to buy and we went to the real estate people. I didn't care about the schools because my children were in high school and didn't have to go in the area. I was interested in seeing what kinds of people were outside, so I didn't look too much into the community when we moved in. The apartment house across the street is Puerto Ricans, Italians, Irish, all kinds... I didn't like the house but my husband said, this was something 'I really like'. So I said, 'alright', 'You don't like it, we can move again, that's all'.

Well first of all it was mixed...and at the time it was nice, but what happened was people began to move out. The first time I was there it looked like a community because it was a mixture, and you could see the beautification; the scenery. The people seemed to be getting along fine. They were friendly. They were sitting outside and when you passed they said, 'Hello'. You could see the families...at the beginning it was clean...everybody was trying to out do the other by keeping it clean. So after we moved in things changed. People began to get careless.

Activist 2.; I moved into the area because I was informed the area was a strictly static inter-racial area. After we were here a while I began to notice more whites moving out and I became concerned because I was originally from 'Bed-Stuy' (Bedford-Stuyvesant), which was a beautiful area, still is, but the minute a black family moved in, a white moved out, or ten moved out...An I didn't want to see this happen to this area because we had so much invested in the area to see this happen.

Although as we would expect, the white families who would purposely move into an "integrated" community would be likely to exhibit the moral career of activism, the fact remains that they must deal personally with the problem of their chosen community's stigma, as evidenced in these excerpts from interviews:

Activist 3.; Everything was good (after they moved in), although the reactions one gets from Queens' residents when one says that one is moving to Brooklyn are so horrendous, and so depressing. And 90 percent of them are euphemisms for one thing (Blacks). From the postman to the man in the delicatessen: 'Brooklyn?', 'What kind of neighborhood?', 'How is it over there?', and just constant wherever we went we got that. The guy who took down the lighting fixture; 'Is it all right over there?'

Reactions of Friends: They all have been very impressed and we think that we scored a few points. They're impressed with the block. Of course we made a big issue of showing them the block. And they are impressed, obviously with; number one the house, number two the price, number three the block, and number four that our child is in public school, and that the whole neighborhood seems to be working, and maybe it isn't quite a blackboard jungle or whatever.

Activist 4., Reactions of Friends: So far only about four or five people have given me praise. One of them is a typical suburban couple who live now in the city, but can't wait to move into the suburbs because New York is so bad, and the suburbs are so good. So they would never move into the city. Another is the type that would want to live in the Canarsie or Mill Basin areas (two all-white Brooklyn neighborhoods)...You know, with flashy furniture and wall-to-wall carpeting and that sort of thing. 'You have to have a Cadillac.' And, they would not want to live here because it is not a fancy area, or a well-known area.

A lot of them are afraid. Right away they think that because there are a lot of blacks living here that it has to be full of drug addicts and dangerous to live here, and automatically they figure that the homes are broken into.

Although many of the kinds of things that activists in the Vander-Parkview-Gardens area engage in are similar to those of community groups in any location, the ultimate goal of community projects here is somewhat different. They are designed to combat the stigma of the community in order to convince stable families to remain and to entice "suitable"

replacements to move into the neighborhood. The ideal "normal" American community is organized, clean, beautiful and has a venerable history. The activists plan community events such as meetings, street fairs, demonstrations, etc.. They have a community newspaper to spread the "good news" about the area, as a counterforce to the bad news that is so much a part of city life. They organize tree plantings, beautification contests and block sweeps. They research the history of the community and seek out local notable residents to bring proper recognition to the community. All these things they do with the hope that their "significant others", and themselves, will believe that their community is worth saving.¹² The following is, I believe, indicative of the desired effect of the activists' efforts. Commenting on what she believed a house tour accomplished for the welfare of the community, Activist 2 responds:

For one thing this is beautiful area, and it convinced people that the houses weren't shacks, and that this wasn't a decrepit area...We are an inter-racial community. We are, and still are, stable, middle-class, and of course we have our poor people too...but, the people who did buy into the area, the blacks that buy houses, they have improved on them, which I have been told by whites who have remained; that they have improved on the houses both inwardly and outwardly.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

In providing financial and other social services to residents of the inner city it is important to realize that these people live in a negatively defined social environment. This environment affects their self and group image as well as their motivations, and methods, for self improvement, when the opportunity for improvement arises. To some degree comprehensive and lasting solutions to their problems require the upgrading of their situations, not only physically and objectively, but symbolically and subjectively as well.

The majority of the people who reside in Vander-Parkview-Gardens are not poor and disadvantaged, yet they suffer because their community has been stigmatized. One need only magnify several times, the problems of these people in order to understand what people who live in low-income and minor-

ity group ghettos (including public housing) suffer due to their location. "Problem" families and individuals need residential stability. Their constant relocation creates overwhelming difficulties for children, for example, who jump from one school to another, often in mid-term, and are required to make new friends at every landing along the way. The stigma of their neighborhoods also reduces the desire of people to make lasting friends and neighbors who are so important for day to day living among the poor. Given the stigma of some local communities it is not surprising that frequently in such areas, despite their social class and ethnic homogeneity, there is little social solidarity. People are not planning to stay in the community, but are hoping to move away. One does not build personal and family ties to a neighbor who is seen as "undesirable".

Low-income housing is ipso facto stigmatized and undesirable for those who live in it. The constant failures of low-income housing projects in American cities testifies vividly to the lack of concern that residents have for what outsiders believe they should be "grateful". Living in low-income housing is a constant reminder that one is a "failure". The institutional look of the projects, even if brand-new or innovatively designed, cannot hide the fact that they exist for those who could not "make it" on their own. The general stigma of public assistance has therefore an environmental corollary. Familiarity with the ideas presented in this paper should be helpful to practitioners who are often faced with the apathy or hostility of low-income, or minority group people, toward their local environment. They cannot be expected to take pride in a community that has been defined and labelled as a "community of failures".¹³

Also, others who are similarly trapped in residences such as nursing homes, orphanages, etc.. can be expected to have equivalent negative reactions and attitudes toward their physical and social surroundings. It is only the "defeated" person for example, who does not try to escape from his prison, or does not try to destroy it. The effectiveness of half-way houses and other "community facilities" for the treatment of social problems also should be reconsidered in the light of the ideas presented herein. It does little good to provide community-based residential facilities or treatment centers in already stigmatized areas, and one should realize that the facilities themselves are stigmata for those

who use them, and for those who live nearby. It is quite understandable therefore that residents who think well of their community (activists as one type) will fight against the "invasion" of social service facilities into their community space.

The aim of this report has not been to offer easy solutions to the problems I have raised. I only wish that my discussion will serve to stimulate research and debate, and perhaps through further research and investigation, viable solutions will be found. Ultimately the stereotypes of inner city and minority group communities must be changed via the judicious use of the media, and the educational institutions, and that the "real" problems of crime and deterioration where they exist be corrected. If not, the self-fulfilling prophecy of racial or ethnic change, and "inevitable" deterioration of city neighborhoods will continue to operate to the detriment of the poor, the near poor and even the middle-class. If unchecked the process may turn whole cities into "communities of failures".

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1. For a discussion of "common sense constructs" see Schutz (1962:3-47).
2. In the Hindu "jajmani" system one is polluted (spiritually injured) through contact with persons of objects belonging to a lower caste.
3. For a discussion of these problems see: Grodzins (1958). See also: Clark and Cadwallader (1973), Packard (1972) and Rossi (1955) for the causes and effects of residential mobility in American society.
4. See especially Clark (1965) for black neighborhood stigma.
5. For a recent treatment of this area see: Manoni (1973).
6. "Vander-Parkview-Gardens" is a pseudonym.
7. See Oppenheimer (1969: 54-55) for a discussion on the idealization of peasant and ghetto life.
8. For a discussion of "failures" in the pursuit of the "American Dream" see: Chinoy (1955) and Sennet and Cobb (1972). For more on people who feel "trapped" in urban neighborhoods see: Lyford (1966).
9. For a classic analysis of the role of the "sacred" and ritual in the establishment and maintenance of human settlements see: Coulange (1975).
10. See Carp (1975) for changes in the perception of the residences of the elderly when they are given the chance to move to a different place.
11. For a discussion of "traps" as related to Goffman's notions of the "descredited" and the "descreditable" see: (1963:3-5).
12. The moral careers of "activists" take on the aspect of a "calling" as discussed by Weber (1963:3).
13. See for example: Fried and Gleicher (1961), Lewis (1966) and Schorr (1966).