Poor Urban Blacks and Community Participation

Charles Stevens
DePaul University

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ABSTRACT

     This research elaborates the concept of community participation
utilizing activities that reflect the experiences of poor urban Blacks.
The residents of a low income housing development are studied with em-
phasis on how these people involved themselves in community affairs and
how they interact with other tenants in their day to day activities. It
is largely a descriptive study, in that it attempts to uncover and explain
styles of participation that are not generally counted as meaningful par-
ticipation. Therefore criteria for participation is defined in a manner
to include some informal activities and other activities which seem to
correspond to the traditional view of the concept. Data for the research
were obtained with the use of a semi-structured interview guide and par-
ticipant observation.

INTRODUCTION

     Studies about poor urban Blacks very seldom deal with their poten-
tial for community participation. The research is generally segmented,
focusing on various aspects of Black culture and lower class life. Many
of the studies concentrate on life in the Black ghetto (Keil, 1966; Han-
nerz, 1967; Liebow, 1967; McCord, 1969), to show the contrast between

poor urban Blacks and other groups in society. Some of these reports accent illicit and illegal activities (Liebow, 1967), so the data are not easily discussed as meaningful participation. Other studies have focused on poor Black families with emphasis on the various strategies they use to cope with urban society (Jeffers, 1967; Hannerz, 1967; Hill, 1977; Stack, 1977). The organizing theme of these family studies is the fortitude that poor Blacks have, in spite of the adversity. Stack, for example, elaborates on the intricate domestic and kinship networks she uncovered in her study of a poor Black community. Other reports have depicted various informal activities in Black communities (Billingsley, 1972; Hill, 1977) used to support a Black family structure. Embedded in many of these studies are activities that could be viewed as community participation, but these researchers are generally more concerned about remedying the negative image of the Black family.

This research attempts to elaborate the concept of community participation to reflect the experiences of poor urban Blacks. Attention will be given to the activities to involve people in community activities beyond the general function of the family. The poor, in general, do not have as many outlets for participatory activities as other groups, therefore a large amount of their responses do occur through informal arrangements. These informal arrangements, nonetheless, assist people in obtaining certain goods and services at a community level, even though they don't become a part of a family network. Some poor Blacks, indeed, resist the close association of the family, although they might cooperate with other people to obtain certain needs. In some instances the activities of poor urban Blacks are similar to the participation of other groups, but in many instances they develop strategies in accord with their styles of living.

THE RESEARCH

This study was conducted with the residents of a low-income housing development in a midwestern city. Strategies used to collect data included field research and participant-observation. Along with field observations of various activities, a semi—structured interview guide was used to probe questions about people's involvement and lack of involvement in certain activities. The interviews were conducted with 50 residents in the development and this accounted for approximately 10 percent of the population. It is not a representative sampling as the purpose of the research was to attempt to understand various activities of people that could be defined as community participation. Prior to the research I had worked in public welfare and this experience had been primarily in poor Black communities. This previous experience and other involvement with poor urban Blacks (Stevens, 1978) provided me with some contacts and background for understanding participation of poor Black people.

The sample was obtained from an official list of the residents with the initial respondents being referred by the management and community leaders. As the research got underway respondents suggested other tenants to be interviewed, This snowball effect was used because it seemed to reflect various sub-groupings of tenants and varying styles of living. Community leaders, for example, suggested people who participated in their organization, while the management identified tenants with clean records. Other respondents generally suggested their friends and associates. Through this procedure along with participant observation I discovered that residents tended to form small clusters of informal groupings of tenants which were used in day to day activities and as a source for other important information. These vaguely defined groupings provided a basis for a response to what residents viewed as community problems. Later I was able to supplement the sample with certain kind of tenants who were omitted in the referral system.

The segmentalization of tenants appeared to be arbitrary yet it did explain the diversity in life styles of the residents. Attempts were made to include persons from these various sub-groupings in the sample as they seemed to be useful for individual tenants in obtaining basic

goods and services. Persons from the following sub-grouping were inclu-
ded in the sample. The Community elites, a grouping of tenants identified
by other tenants and the management as community leaders because of their
active involvement in community affairs. Six of the respondents in this
grouping held offices in organizations such as Welfare Rights and Tenants'
Council. Five other respondents were involved in city wide councils and
advisory boards. The established citizens, a grouping of tenants who
had resided in the development between ten and twenty years. These per-
sons were generally described as the "settle people" because of their
tenure as residents. Owing to their length of residency these persons
were knowledgeable about the community and the community leaders. The
old folk, a grouping of elderly tenants (age 60) provided a visible sub--
grouping due to their advanced age. This sub-grouping was also visible
in local organizations and in their support of the community elites. The
young adults, a sub-grouping of tenants that ranged in ages from 18 years
old to 25 years old, provided a more transient sub-group. These residents
tended to resist formal organizations, although they were quite vocal with
their complaints to the management about the conditions of the housing
development. Official interviews were conducted with persons from the
various sub-groupings, but contact with the respondents also included a
variety of activities beyond the interviews. The ten month period of the
research contact with tenants included participation in community organiza-
tions, such as planning a program to explain food stamps to residents and
observing a political rally. Informal activities included social gather-
ings such as rap sessions and parties. This aspect of the research in-
creased the number of residents involved and these data were recorded as
part of field notes. The combination of the official interviews and obser-
vations provided data to understand how residents involved themselves in
the life of their community.

POOR BLACKS AND THE TRADITION OF PARTICIPATION

The notion of a "culture of poverty," which indicates that certain
poor groups are not equipped to participate in urban society has contri-
buted greatly to the dismal portrait of poor urban Blacks. As Valentine
(1968) informs us, this viewpoint can be traced to the earlier works of
leading social scientists prior to its formulation by Oscar Lewis (1959).
Given the conception of a "culture of poverty," one would not expect to
find poor Blacks involved in activities at a community level. Some social
scientists, on the other hand, have argued against the "culture of poverty"
viewpoint (Rossi, 1969; Roby, 1974; Cloward and Piven, 1974) suggesting
other reasons for the lack of participation of poor people. One important
omission in the discussions about participation of poor people is that
concepts, such as social participation and "citizen participation" are
biased in their traditional meanings and have not been updated to include
current illustrations and activities. Jon Van Til (1970) argues that
over time citizen participation has come to include the activities of
ordinary citizens, rather than holding to the interpretation of involve-
ment of civic leaders in an advisory capacity to a local planning agency.
This old view, contends Van Til, omits too large a portion of the urban
population. Definitions of the concept, nonetheless, retain a conserva-
tive element and the traditional view is upheld. Consequently, measures
used to depict citizen participation and social particiaption exclude
those activities and groups that are not a part of the established tra-
dition. The bias is generally in favor of a small segment of the middle
class who are involved in the narrowly defined activities. Poor people,
obviously, don't meet the criteria, as they are omitted from the activities
and the tradition. One could make the argument, it seems, that it is not
that poor people don't participate, but their involvement is not in accord
with the tradition. As a result many of their activities are not given

full credit as meaningful participation.

BACKGROUND

The basic assumptions used to guide this research emerged from my experiences with poor people via the social welfare institution and through my involvement in local community organizations. The initial experience can be traced to my employment as a social worker approximately twelve years ago. At that time I was engaged in the work of providing social services to clients who lived in areas generally described as poor communities. Many of these persons could be identified by the stereotype of welfare clients, "Slum dwellers" and the urban poor in general. Most of the people who lived in these areas required some assistance from public support grants and those who worked tended to have menial jobs. A professional observation of the community and its inhabitants suggested that the environment could be enhanced, if people would use the social services. One could easily get the impression that these poor people were not as well informed as other citizens (Galper, 1975), as they seem to have an "I don't know" attitude and a passive response to their existence. During the time there were several incidents and actions which led me to believe the people were not as passive as their verbalizations and attitudes indicated.

I can recall one illustration of the social agency's concern about the unemployable status of a client. At the time there were only certain reasons acceptable to justify a clients's unemployed status. To be un-employed did not jeopardize one's welfare grant, but if one could legiti-mately claim unemployment status it alleviated a lot of contact with the social agency. Several clients were able to provide an acceptable ration-ale for the unemployed status and the reasons were incontestable. Inter-estingly, these clients used similar reasons to explain their unemployed status. In another experience a woman, although she had received public welfare for only a short time, was able to explain the procedure necessary for resolving a problem with the social agency. Incidents such as these

began to raise questions, for me, about the potential of poor people. If they were really passive, as their verbalizations and attitudes suggested, how could they develop the "air tight" alibis or acquire information about the agency. All of the people were not as knowledgeable, but these events did suggest that, maybe people were not as docile as the agencies or literature would have you believe.

With the coming of the Welfare Rights movement the participation of poor people was more clearly evident (Piven and Cloward, 1971). In these local and indigenous organizations the poor had leadership roles, especially in poor Black communities. The activities of these groups, to a large extent, resembled the traditional view of participation and indicated that poor people do participate in formal organizations. A closer observation of these activities indicated that only certain people were involved in these organizations (Leven, 1968). People such as those described in the earlier illustrations could not be found in these community organizations. One could interpret their lack of presence in "their" organizations as general apathy or lack of interest in the environment. On the other hand, if one considers the ingenuity that goes into the efforts of the welfare clients to explain why, "I can't work", the response does not seem to be a random or individual one. It could also be interpreted as a response that has been worked out within small groups at a local level by people who share common problems, a collective response used by people to re-solve what they considered to be a community problem. This kind of a response could serve an important function for people in poor urban communities in meeting certain needs and obtaining services. These acti-vities are internal to the lives of poor people, so they don't get counted as meaningful participation. While all activity can not be viewed as community participation, it seems that there are more activities that could be used to explain the participation of poor people.

DEFINITION OF CONCEPT

Traditionally, social participation has come to mean the formal involvement with voluntary associations and other designated institutional structures in a rather specific manner. For this investigation the traditional use of the concept is not rejected; rather, it will be expanded to encompass the use of local and indigenous structures as well as the formal organizations. Social participation will be defined as the shared activities and interactions people use as a channel of communication to obtain goods and services needed to sustain themselves as well as others as a part of society. The concept will therefore include the ability to share meaningful information with others regarding the use of services, whether it is transmitted through informal procedures or through traditional outlets for participation. The volition of the respondent is crucial, since the concept will be distinguished from other forms of participation by its purposeful intent and orientation to services people use.

STYLES OF PARTICIPATION

Two major styles of involvement seem to be prominent among the inhabitants of poor Black communities. One style of participation can be characterized as a professional form of involvement. This is the form that is associated with the elite and traditional model of participation. Persons involved in this procedure often hold official positions in formal organizations as the activities tend to have a career orientation. Social network participation, the second style of involvement is characterized by participation in various informal activities that do not always have a formal structure. In some instances there is an overlap as "career participants" become involved in the networks to enhance their positions in formal organizations. Social network participants on the other hand, sometimes use formal structures to obtain needed services. A discussion

of these procedures can elaborate some of the ways poor people involve
themselves in community affairs.

The career participant can be defined as one who uses involvment as
a professional activity. Participation for this person, in keeping with
Becker's concept of career (1963), is a sequence of movements from one
position to another similar to an occupational system. The person makes
a special effort to become involved in community affairs in a very visible
manner, as this activity becomes a part of one's existence. It is a
career. In middle class communities career participants serve on the board
of directors of various organizations and their names appear on the letter-
head of various civic organizations.

In poor urban communities there are not many outlets for this kind
of participation. Career participants among the poor can be found in the
organizations of the poor that do exist, nonetheless. The Welfare Rights
organization is perhaps the most obvious illustration for this form of
participation. In this community "career participants" maintain the offi-
cial offices in this formal structure as well as provide a cadre of people
who are instrumental in carrying out the daily operations. While their
names are not engraved on official stationery they are known throughout
the locality for their active community participation. Other places
"career participant" can be found include the tenant council, senior
citizen groups and, in this community, one career participant is involved
in an official political organization. Most of the time these persons
are very articulate and knowledgeable about different aspects of their
community (Stevens, 1978) and their activities generally resemble that of
their middle-class counterpart.

These persons generally have attachments and connections beyond the
locality and in some instances they are used as representatives for the poor.
During the observations of this community career participants were located
on a city wide planning committee for public housing as well as on a Mayor's
commission for social services. Although the reputation of poor "career

participants" extend beyond their immediate locality, they remain dependent upon other poor people to maintain their careers. Career participants, in this sense, need the support of their neighbors, friends and associates who reside in the locality. They can acquire support through local informal networks as well as by their deeds as leaders. In many instances these leaders have charismatic qualities and receive unquestioned support, as one resident explained about some of the local leaders, "...they are a part of us and they just understand how we feel..." If for some reason these career participants are not able to maintain this respect they jeopardize their standing in the community. One community leader, for example, lost her credibility when the residents learned that her son was involved in serious delinquent activities.

Everyone does not want to be a career participant and there are only a few places where such positions are possible. Through informal arrangements, however, other inhabitants in poor communities do have some control over their indigenous leaders. If the career participants don't produce in accord with the expectations of others at a local level they do not receive their support. People will simply ignore the leadership of the career participants. This response can be observed in some instances when people resist patronizing certain community programs and activities developed for their benefit. Residents in the development refused to use a local community center, for example, as a form of protest about the inadequate facilities and lack of initiative on the part of community leaders who were responsible for the center. Mrs. Jones makes a comment to express this sentiment.

> ...most of the people I know 'real well' don't use that center. Our kids play in the house and visit each other. See, the people up there can't control these 'bad kids'. They are just too wild. So we have to keep our kids at home or it will cause more problems.

Another tenant, Mr. Brown also verbalizes displeasure about the community
facility.

>...I don't really approve of the people
they have in charge of that center. They
don't know how to handle the kids. I
heard other people talk about that place..
. they say the same thing. So we have
decided to keep our children away from the
center until the people up there know what
they are doing...

The non-participation was a deliberate response to a specific problem. It
is a signal to indicate to community leaders that their plans are not in
accord with others in the locality.

The passive response is one way of dealing with a problem when people
do not believe a particular activity holds a solution to a problem. In
another illustration tenants, who had been active in a local organization,
refused to attend a meeting in which a politician was a speaker because
of his poor service record. This response was not a formal activity of a
group, however, tenants had talked about the meeting and decided to stay
at home. Community leaders were surprised since they had no warning that
residents were going to boycott the meeting. Since responses of the poor
are not always verbalized openly, the leaders in these communities must have
a shrewd knowledge about their constituents to anticipate their actions.
Career participants need the support of other poor people, so they must
be sensitive to their demands. Although leaders may have knowledge and
insights about problems they have to adjust their activities to fit within
the context of other poor people or jeopardize their careers.

From an outsider's view such responses as indicated in these illustra-
tions can easily be misunderstood. The response of passive resignation
could very well be viewed as no response. It leaves one with the impression
that poor people have little interest in resolving problems. Social planners,
social service workers and other "caretakers", misinterpret this activity

when they are not aware of the internal struggles in a poor community
(Galper, 1975; Gans, 1965). Viewed from the internal perspective, such
responses are used to deal with conflicts between different elements in
a community. The passive response, while it might not be the best approach,
has a purposeful intent in terms of solving a problem. It alerts the lead-
ership of weaknesses without creating additional problems for individuals.
Given the restrictions placed on the urban poor such a response is not
unusual. The interpretation of the activity as deviant and the negative
categorization that frequently accompany it, however, clouds the under-
standing of the styles of living among the urban poor. Richard Ball
(1968), in an interesting article about the poor of Appalachia, argues
that a response, such as a passive resignation, is an adaptation to what
people believe to be an insoluble problem. In certain conditions of pover-
ty, Ball found that people from a problem sub-culture as a survival strategy.
The response to the environment in the sub-culture is, in some instances,
non-rationalistic as it is used to cope with an insoluble problem. In
these illustrations the passive resignation has a purposeful intent, although
it is not productive in resolving the problem.

Social network participation places emphasis on the maintenance of im-
portant social groups and associations, rather than participation as a rou-
tine. This form of involvement suggests that participation in community
affairs is characterized by vested interests. Briefly stated, people par-
ticipate because it is necessary to do so, to maintain contacts with
associates to sustain relationships in their daily living. Interactions
and activities serve a dual purpose; they connect people to informal group-
ings for day to day activities; and, they help people in obtaining goods
and services in the local community and the community at large. Whether
the action that results becomes a part of an organization, or whether it
remains as an informal procedure depends on how people believe a problem
can be resolved. The response of passive resignation, it seems, is an
illustration of an action that occurs as social network participation.
Although the action was not officially a boycott, through various informal

interactions, people decided not to attend the meeting or use the community
facility. Social network participation tends to correspond to the way
poor people live and how they utilize local resources. It takes into account
the various informal groupings people use in their day to day activities.

Career participants and elites, we have stressed, need a public forum,
other people, sometimes, obtain services with less fanfare. Involvement
with formal organizations is, in some instances, disruptive to one's style
of living. Illicit activities and quasi-illegal behavior, often, dictate
that some people maintain a low profile. Secrets about family composition
and income number among the reasons why people don't want to have a public
image. Formal organizations to a large extent, one could argue, have not
been productive for the poor in resolving these local community problems.
One respondent, for example, was accused of a crime because of her involve-
ment with a community orgainzation. The resident reported an incident to
the police, in accord with the objectives of the organization, and was later
held as a prime suspect for the crime. Some of the other tenants were not
surprised as this respondent had been told the organization was not the way
to resolve the problem. Due to these problems many poor people avoid the
formal structures and rely on smaller groupings and associates, where they
feel more secure. Implied in social network participation is that activi-
ties have a productive outcome on the one hand and that interactions main-
tain one's contact with local networks on the other.

The commitment in social network participation is to the maintenance
of the groupings of people who share mutual perspectives about life. It
is within this association with others like themselves that people develop
some degree of confidence. Participation remains an action of a group, but
it is the activity worked out in these informal groupings that take priority.
Therefore, a response is not necessarily a formal procedure. This form of
activity can be deceiving as it might appear to be an individual response,
rather than a group activity. One respondent, for example, resolved a
problem with the public school when she had a personal conference with the
principal of the school. While it was an individual encounter, this parent

had been well informed by other parents in the locality about how to proceed in resolving the problem. The request for the conference with the principal was not based on his authority in the school, it was inspired by the parent's involvement with others who had experience with the problem. In a discussion about the problem, the respondent was informed by an associate in this manner.

> ....don't talk to the teacher, go to the principal. That is the only way you can get results. I know what I'm saying. Talk to Miss Jones, down the street she will tell you the same thing. Talk to him and you won't have any more trouble with the school...

The people involved in this activity, of course, do not view it as a form of participation. The information is important, nonetheless, in obtaining a community service, as well as assisting a friend. When the activity resembles traditional participation it is not necessarily defined as community participation. Several residents, in another illustration, organized ad hoc group to resolve a problem with the local utility company. An outgrowth of this action was the improvement of the service for the entire community. The people involved in the activity, in retrospect, do not view the experience as community participation. These participants insist they were involved in the activity because of their friends and associates. Social network participation does not contradict the traditional view of participation, as the illustration indicates, it does suggest that the ideology of social participation is not always a part of the involvment.

SUMMARY

In this study several activities and events have been used to describe the participation of poor urban Blacks. It does not suggest that

other index of participation. Such activities could include interactions
between neighbors and others through informal networks when the communi-
cations have a purposeful intent, but they also include activities that
result in actions when the issue of intent does not arise. The involve-
ment that result from these informal activities may give the appearance
of an individual action; such as individual demands one may make of a
welfare worker. The individual negotiations with larger institutions,
such as public schools and police may also result from involvement through
informal activities. While these experiences seem to be individual en-
counters with the various structures they are frequently inspired by
associates and through local networks. The action is carried out by an
individual, but it is a product of the interaction with others and there-
fore fulfills the criteria for participation.

SPECIALIST SERVICES:
     The purpose of these activities is to provide people with knowledge
about specific problems and "expert advice" about agencies and services
they use. It is a consultant service provided by certain knowledgeable
tenants. Since these activities are geared to assisting people obtain
leverage on social institutions they may be a part of a formal outlet as
well as informal arrangements. The community elites and "career partici-
pants" frequently serve in these specialist roles. The tenant who was
able to explain to other tenants how to negotiate with the project admin-
istration to obtain a larger apartment is also a community consultant.
To acquire this specialist or consultant title one most "set up shop"
similar to other professionals who are involved in a specialist - client
relationship. Such activities require unique talents. Given the invest-
ment necessary for such an operation, specialist or consultant activities
qualify as participation, even if the advice does not lead to the resolu-
tion of the problem.

such activities occur only among Black people, nor that all activities
are considered as community participation. The criteria used to depict
participation were determinde through observations of various activities
in the locality. Nevertheless, there is a pattern to the involvement
and there are certain requirements that must be fulfilled in order to
be considered participation.

The activies and interactions used to describe participation are
those procedures that have a purpose and lead to a particular action.
The purpose of the involvement is related to the enhancement of the ser-
vices people use with an action that is believed to correspond with the
improvement of the services. To a considerable degree, participation, in
this research, is related to the procedures people use to get things done
to improve their conditions and surroundings or to improve conditions of
others. The styles of participation discussed in this research can be
observed in the following activities.

FORMAL ORGANIZATION:
The involvement of people in formal organizations when the activities
of these organizations are explicitly concerned with the enhancement of
the community qualify as participation. Involvement in such activities
as a tneant's council and a local community organization easily meet the
requirement of participation. In some instances people in poor communities
develop ad hoc groups around a particular problem, although they are
not officially sanctioned groups. The actions of these groups resemble the
activities of formal organization, except they don't have an advertised
public presence of a more traditional structure. Many times people involved
in these ad hoc ventures do not consider their activities as community
participation. Success is not a standard used to judge participation, it
is the purpose of the involvement and how the interaction is used.

INFORMAL ACTIVITIES:
The involvement of people through informal activities with others,
when the communications are related to the services people use, is an

REFERRAL SERVICES:
    Closely related to specialist activities are referral services.
This activity is a more indirect procedure than other activities.
Referrals are based on one's ability to direct other persons to re-
sources that will help them with their problems. The appropriate
resouce may be a specialist or it might be a more traditional resource.
It is an important service because of the communication that is trans-
mitted. These activities qualify as participation because of the
information that is passed on during the interaction. The actions that
result from the interactions can be distinguished from small talk, or
casual conversation by its utility in regards to the services people use.

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