

Ecosystem Perspective Has Been Used

Introduction

A community is defined as any social group that can assume any size. The members of this group have residence, in a particular locality; they share a government and usually have a historical and cultural heritage that is common to all. According to Meyer, in describing a community, the geographical area of that community is considered, and the members of this community determine this (1970). Environmental, economic and cultural/social features are also considered. In every community, there arise issues of privileges, power and oppression.

A community is a social structure whereby inequality already exists in its formation. The issues can be seen in the inequalities as well as biases in institutions, and they hinder the development of humans and jeopardize the communities' wellbeing. There is unequal distribution of wealth, power, education, prestige, health and more. This is due to the scarcity of these resources. These issues have resulted in certain adaptations by the community to survive. For instance, the level of one's income is a defining factor in the place of residence, kind of school attended, and access to Medicare just to name a few (Goldstein, 2001). They; thus, have to be addressed for the general good of the community.

Conceptual framework

The ecosystem perspective has been used to explain the different adaptations by the individuals, as well as the environment in the communities, and how all these adaptations are influenced by the different social phenomena. This perspective came about from the ecological theory and the General Systems theory in 1970s. The ecosystem perspective helps in the minimization of errors like oppression and domination patterns, as transactional realities and essential variables, in any social work studies (Meyer, 1988).

A Case Study of the Harlem Community

The Harlem neighborhood is a large community in the city of New York, Manhattan borough, falling in the northern section. It covers a total area of 10.03 km² and has a total population of 335, 109 as per the 2000 census. Of this population, 77% was Black (Central Harlem). West Harlem has about a quarter of the population being Black, while the rest is Hispanic. The Morningside Heights section of Western Harlem is mostly populated by Caucasians with numerous educational Institutions ("New York City Experts", 2013).

East Harlem was originally an Italian-American community caused by the immigration of the Southern Italians in late 19th century, but is now Hispanic. This is due to the Puerto

Rican migration, which begun after the First World War. This area has the most crimes in Manhattan. Harlem has always been a major center of residence, culture and business for African-Americans since 1920s. The name originates from Haarlem city in Netherlands (Smith, 2013).

Harlem was organized formally in 1658, initially being a village for the Dutch. There has been a series of cycles of booms and busts in the economy, with each cycle causing some significant shifts in the population. The Black residents started arriving in masses in 1905 due to the Great Migration. The Central and Western part of the city became a focus of Harlem Renaissance in 1920s to 1930s. However, many jobs were lost during the period of Great Depression and New York City became deindustrialized due to the 2nd world war, hence rates of poverty and crime increased significantly (“New York City Experts”, 2013).

In the late 20th century, the city was revived, and since then there has been an economic and social gentrification. The many social problems that had come up are still persistent though. Most of the population is supported by the government in terms of income, that is the West 34.9%, Central 43.3% and East 46.5%. The area is still predominantly black (Berg & Ostry, 2011).

Structural inequality in Harlem is influenced and seen in different areas. These are:

Income and Wealth Distribution

Income and wealth greatly determines lots of aspects of one’s life. For instance, it determines the kind of house you can live in, the area of residence, the kind of education you can access as well medical care access. The income and wealth distribution gap among the residents of Harlem has increasingly widened over the years. For instance, the mayor of New York has been rated as the 13th richest person worldwide (Forbes, 2013).

This wealth has come about as a result of his position in the society as well as his job occupation. As the mayor, he is entitled to privileges of all kinds and can easily access any social rewards. His job pays him very well, hence his family is well taken care of and his children have access to the best schools. They are able to access the best medical care; hence, they are in a better position for a prolonged life. These children; thus, have a better chance of excelling in life and becoming just as rich as their father. This is evidence of the influence of family ties to one’s social position (Forbes, 2013).

On the other hand, most of the population in Harlem depends on welfare programs to go through their days. This fact is sourced from the residents of Harlem themselves (Danny and Keisha in Jackie Robinson park, 145th & Bradhurst, Harlem). There are food stamps whereby one can shop for groceries for 20% off. There are free cell phones awarded to those individuals who are enrolled into the welfare programs, and there is also the Medicaid card for access to medical care (“Liberty Project”, 2012).

There also exist subsidized housing facilities for those individuals who cannot afford to own their own homes at their current wages. These programs exist to help support those individuals who cannot afford to access all these services at their income status. The individuals; thus, pay the state some amount of money for enrollment as well as renewal of these programs, to be able to enjoy them. However, there are certain requirements that one must meet to be able to renew for these programs. For instance, one can access the subsidized housing facilities after being homeless for 6 months ("Liberty Project", 2012). This is what Rebecca, a Harlem resident living in a hotel extension was told when she tried to get into the program after losing her job.

For the individuals who survive on welfare programs, especially the Black community, their access to education is rarely past the high school level because most of them cannot afford to pay for college. With this fact at hand, such individuals are disadvantaged, in the society, as they have fewer opportunities to make it in life. Most well paying jobs require good skills and knowledge, which can only be acquired at the college levels (Smith, 2013). This is a clear indication of how family ties play a major role in the privileges that one can access in the society.

Race is also a determinant of some privileges in the society. Some areas of residence are purely for certain races; for example, the Morningside Heights is purely for Caucasians. This also happens to be the area with most colleges, hence only a few Blacks can access both the good houses and education (Berg & Ostry, 2011).

According to the Bureau of Statistics (2012), the wages of the top 1% of the wealthy population increased by 8.2% between 2009 and 2011. Contrary to this, the wages of the bottom 90% reduced by 1.2% within the same period. Most of the population has low paying jobs and hence the purchasing power of these individuals has been cut down. In fact, the Bureau of Statistics has made an estimate that out of every 10 jobs, 7 of them will be low paying over the coming decade.

This factor has been brought about by the reduction in the number of labor unions. These unions are what were used by the workers to negotiate better pays, and demand for claims from the employees. This decline has caused the middle class population to shrink, and the share of the 90% lower population in the prosperity of the nation to also decline. The inequality of income distribution is a result of the power of the rich few who happen to be the employers (Smith, 2013).

Taking an example of Wal-Mart and McDonalds, these are some of the biggest employers in the entire country. These corporations; however, prohibit any labor unions among their employees. They have contributed a great deal to the increase of jobs that pay very low wages; barely enough to sustain a decent living in a city like New York. The employees have no power to demand for raises and so these wages are stagnant at the same low levels. This has resulted in a great decrease in the purchasing power of a majority of these workers. For instance, an employee at Wal-Mart is paid \$8.81 on

average; a third of the workers work for 28 hours weekly or less, meaning that most of them cannot even qualify to apply for benefits from the state (Reich, 2013).

The workers; thus, have to struggle to fend for themselves even if it means working two jobs. This is quite unfortunate since Wal-Mart earned \$16 billion in 2012, meaning it could very well pay their employees better, but this huge profit went to the shareholders only. They use their power to oppress their workers and gain from their sweat. Furthermore, without the labor unions, companies cannot be penalized for any breaking of laws of labor. As of 2012, the 6.6% of those workers in private sectors had labor unions down from 6.9% in 2011 (“Bureau of Labor Statistics”, 2012). This is a form of protection for the owners to oppress the workers and get away with it.

The US has increasingly enforced laws against labor unions since 1950s. However, the oppression and misuse of power in the society will ultimately cost the entire community. This is because a big part of the economy is driven by the purchasing power of consumers. If the 90% does not have enough to spend anymore, then the profits of the top 1% will ultimately reduce too. It would be better for the rich to have small percentages of profits, in an economy, that is prosperous rather than have big portions of profit in an economy that is stagnant. Ultimately, they will not have any profits at all. They should; therefore, encourage labor unions whereby the workers will also earn better from the nation’s prosperity, spend more, and make them profits. These unions are very important as most of them put up affordable houses for their members, especially those who do not qualify for the welfare programs. This would go a long way in elevating the entire community (Smith, 2013).

Criminal and Justice System

The Criminal and Justice system has also manifested in equalities in its operations. According to statistics, of the 35% arrests that have been made in relation to use of drugs among the Black community, 55% of these cases were convicted of the crime and there is a 70% rate of incarceration (Kearl, 2012). These rates are very high as compared to the rates of arrests for the whites, as well as the convictions made on the few cases of arrests. Race and ethnicity; thus, play a major role in one’s social status in different communities.

The dominant community usually receives fair treatment with the law. The dominant community could thus use its power to manipulate circumstances into favoring them in the event of a crime. For instance, the white individuals are rarely followed into shopping malls to be monitored. The Black individuals however, are associated with criminal activity, and are followed into any such places like shopping malls. Moreover, most Black people are major suspects of crimes just because they happened to be around the scene of crime when it went down. This is especially so in an area like Morningside Heights where there are very few Black people (“New York City Experts”, 2013). This is clear indication of the oppression in the society, based on one’s race and social status.

This has prompted many individuals to engage in crime since they feel that they will be arrested anyway, so they had better be arrested for something. They sometimes do so to get back at their employees, or any person who showed any biasness to them. They also may rob the rich due to the inequality in their living conditions, as a means to try and keep up. If the Criminal Justice System made some adjustments to the way the different communities are handled in the hands of the law, then this would reduce the crime rates in the community. A place like East Harlem has got the highest rates of crime due to the living conditions ("New York City Experts", 2013). However, most of these crimes are not reported by witnesses as they fear being victimized for those crimes due to their race.

Local Politics and Business

Being connected to the powerful in society has its privileges. For instance, there are lots of investors who seek for opportunities to set up businesses, but only get these permits depending on who they know in the society. The local politicians enable the process of license acquisition to be fast and smooth, knowing that they will gain something from the business. Moreover, the criminal gangs (the mafia) that exist in Harlem are protected by the local politicians. In the event that they are arrested, they will contact these politicians who will contact the police and secure their release without any charges being pressed. In return, these mafia groups fund the campaigns of the local politicians and push for them to be in power ("New York City Experts", 2013).

This kind of immunity to the law has caused crime to be prevalent in the community, whereby the locals are the sufferers. They are the ones who will buy the drugs being sold by those gangs, and get shot on the streets. These mafia groups, as well as politicians are usually linked to particular families. The activities of the families are passed on from generation to generation. The families know each other and look out for each other for as long as they are mutually beneficial to each other. They are; however, very quick to sell out other smaller families or individuals and frame them to take the fall for their crimes. This is a clear misuse of power and oppression of those whose families have no high social status (Hartman, 1978).

Beliefs and Attitudes

There is a negative attitude towards the criminal justice system. As stated earlier, some Black Folks engage in crime due to the belief that they will be held responsible for the crime anyway, as the Black community is associated with most crimes. As for the welfare programs, some have a positive attitude towards them. They believe that they are actually entitled to them, that the city should take care of them. They don't think they can manage on their own in the city given the oppression, power abuse and inequality. However, some residents believe that these programs are there to keep them in poverty. Some people in the program get comfortable knowing that they will be taken care of by the state, and so they become lazy. Others might try to find jobs but the employers will not give them benefits like house allowances, once they know that they

are in welfare. They also know that such people are desperate for money and so they will take whatever job at whatever payment so they give the lowest wages. This has kept people from bettering themselves due to the low income, and they believe that the system wants to keep them in poverty. The employers also tend to believe that some of the people on welfare are unprofessional and unreliable hence their state of living, so they don't hire them (Liberty Project, 2013).

Adaptation by Residents to the System

Over time, the residents of Harlem have adapted to the way the structural inequality affects them, and have opted to make the most of it. For those residents whose wages are too low to afford decent houses or apartments and good food daily as well as the necessary Medicare when needed, They have enrolled into the welfare programs, some run by the state and others by the city. These programs help in survival. Once in the programs, some of them engage in fraudulent activities. For instance, some sell their food stamps to shoppers so that they can shop at 20% of on groceries. Others hide assets and wealth to get onto the Medicaid program. These cards could them be borrowed by anyone for a price, such that one card could be serving lots of people. The community is actually taking full advantage of the programs. On the other hand, those who have power and connections have taken advantage of the system, to oppress the less fortunate for their own gains. These are the people who provide most of the employment for the residents (Liberty Project, 2013).

Change in Demographics

The community at Harlem has been experiencing change in demographics. White folks are now residing in Harlem (22%) which used to be a purely Black residence. The Hispanic community which was confined to East Harlem is now at its record high (27%) of the Central Harlem population. The number of Blacks has been reduced to 4 out of 10 residents in greater Harlem. This has been a good adaptation by the people since the community needs this mingling, to eradicate or limit the inequalities in the society; especially those caused by race. This way, people now look at each other as equal citizens, and so opportunities are more or less equally distributed among the entire community. This has been a major boost in the development of the community (New York Times, 2010).

Conclusion

Public Opinion: It is clear that in Harlem community, there are structural inequalities, some of which people are born with, and some of which are caused by the changes in society. The views on welfare programs as well as the criminal justice system were collected from interviews of residents of Harlem, by the Liberty Project. These people were randomly picked from the streets and parks by the correspondents of the Liberty Project, and were asked to give their opinions on the issues. Karen (downtown Manhattan near Nike store) was one of the people who wanted to get out of welfare,

study further while working 2 or 3 jobs, so as to take better care of her kids. She felt the program was holding her back on her potential. Rebecca (living in an extended hotel) felt that the system kept people poor. Most people who wanted to get housing had to be homeless for 6 months first to qualify. Thus most people went homeless so as to get into the program, which increased poverty. However, Danny and Keisha (Jackie Robinson Park-145th & Bradhurst), thought the programs were good and of great help, since most people couldn't do without them (Liberty Project, 2013). If these issues of oppression, inequality and misuse of power could be addressed, then the community would be at a better place to encourage prosperity for the good of all.

Strengths: Despite all the social issues facing the community, it also has its strengths. Harlem is rich in culture due to the many different types of people. The culture is diverse and hence there is quite a good coexistence of these communities. There has been good progress on relations between the different races, especially the Whites and Blacks. This has been a model community for other parts of the world for this reason. The different cultural groups also tend to stand for each other and look out for each other. An example are the Latinos and Blacks, they stick up for each other being the less privileged mostly among the entire community. There is thus a sense of belonging by members of such groups and they are proud of their race. This is a step from the past where some communities were looked at with shame e.g. the slaves. The Harlem community is thus an excellent example of how people should coexist in the any part of the world, for the benefit of the entire community Laura Murray, a white medical student, moved to this neighborhood and says she felt a bigger sense of community than anywhere else in the city (New York Times, 2010).