Ethnographic Perspectives on Health and Urban Poverty

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Outline

• Background on mentor’s work and anthropological approach
• Overview of three projects
• Details of three projects
• Overall themes
• Conclusion
Mentor: Philippe Bourgois

• Anthropologist
• Books and edited volumes about inner city poverty, violence, and drugs
• Articles in medical anthro, public health, and the humanities on social inequality, urban segregation, labor migration, ethnic conflict, homelessness, substance abuse, and HIV
• Writing a new book
Ethnographic Methods

• Participant-Observation
  – Organic relationships with research participants (subjects)
Structural Vulnerability

• “Defined as a positionality that imposes physical/emotional suffering on specific population groups and individuals in patterned ways, structural vulnerability is a product of class-based economic exploitation and cultural, gender/sexual, and racialized discrimination, as well as complementary processes of depreciated subjectivity formation.”

Structural Vulnerability

• Critique of Individual Agency
• Highlight disparities and identify socially structured patterns of poor health
Project Overview

1. Greening Vacant Lots
   - Neighborhood health and safety/quality of life

2. Prison Re-Entry
   - HIV risk-environment

3. Mental Health and SSI Disability
   - Service providers’ perspectives on SSI
Project 1: Greening Vacant Lots
Effect of Vacant Lots on Health and Safety

• Safety
  – Areas with greater physical disorder may lead to more crime

• Health
  – Community well-being; physical health; mental health
Can greening a blighted vacant lot make people feel safer and healthier?

http://www.uphs.upenn.edu/news/News_Releases/2012/08/vacant/
Significance

• Inexpensive, structural intervention that could reduce crime and improve health
Study Design

• double-blind RCT with hundreds of vacant lots
• control: remain as they are
• placebo: monthly trash clean-ups, nothing more
• treatment: cleaned, enriched with topsoil, graded, planted with grass and trees, enclosed with simple wooden fencing, and maintained monthly
• Cross-methodological
The Big “HOW?”

• Social mechanisms through which greening may affect crime and health
  – What is the meaning of a vacant lot in the lives of those living near to one?
Ethnographic Methods

• Went around Philadelphia and talked to people

http://nephiladelphiahomes.com/images/phila-dist-map.gif
Both Springy and Bee take great pride in their block, in its orderliness and physical appearance. They especially like the greened lots [...] Springy delightedly says that the greening gives them the feel of living in the suburbs. [...] Across the street from Bee’s house are 5 or 6 greened lots big enough to serve as a makeshift mini-football field, and in fact, she says it is used for exactly that sometimes, with the kids going out and throwing the football or other things there.
At the end of the block, there are abandoned railroad tracks on a slope covered by grass, dirt, and trash. Gwen also mentions that people had started complaining about a bad smell coming from the railroad tracks, so the police finally investigated and found two dead bodies (a baby and an adult) and dead dogs up on the railroad tracks. Gwen says that people dump their trash there often. [...] She explains that no one cleans up the railroad and no one else cares because it’s not their trash (and, presumably, because it’s not on their land), so it’s not their problem. The same is the case for the vacant lots on the block itself. Gwen says that people actually do clean the lots sometimes, but it is almost to no avail because Gwen explains that even when the lots are cleaned, people continue to dump trash still because, again, no one cares. People keep to themselves and mind their own business, Gwen emphasizes.
Xavier has a lot to say about some of his experiences at the railroad tracks. [...] he often takes his grandkids camping and hunting up there, though he is disturbed by the used needles laying around on the ground and the dopefiends that they encounter up on the tracks.
Field Note Excerpt – North Philadelphia

- “Livin’ large right in the heart of the ghetto”
- “Runnin’ the few poverty-stricken people out”
- “Where’s the benefit for the community?”
Observations

• Meaning of a vacant lot varies by the neighborhood and by the block
Project 2: Prison Reentry (BLOK)
Hyper-incarceration
Incarceration Rates in OECD Countries, (Most Recent Year, 2008-2009)

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<th>Country</th>
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<td>Iceland</td>
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<td>United States</td>
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Source: CEPR analysis of ICPS data
Significance

• 300% higher HIV infection rates among US jail inmates than the general population
• Decline in social services
• Difficulty linking to social services
Key Messages of BLOK

• You can live a healthy life
• Services are available to support you
• Activist work has put this in place
• You can be an activist for yourself and your community
Jabari tells Grace that she is a strong black woman [...] He tells her that [the system is] trying to take away that womanness, just as how[it’s] trying to take away the masculinity out of black men. Grace says she has had four boys, but one died. She is so used to having to play the man, and she is wondering if she should just put her Timbs back on and hustle because she has been used to playing both mommy and daddy. She says she does not know if she should walk like a man or like a graceful lady (and she gets up and demonstrates the difference). Jabari says that she should act like the lady she is, and she says, how I am gonna act like a graceful lady when I gotta be playing the role of the man too?
Project 3: Mental Health and SSI
Benefits for Disability

• Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
  – Receive benefits based on financial need

• Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)
  – Receive benefits if “insured” — worked long enough and paid Social Security taxes

• Increase in SSI recipients
SSI

• Means of last-resort survival
• Service providers
  – Perspectives and logistics of qualifying patients for SSI
• Mental health clinic
Perspectives from a Therapist

• “it’s a good thing, for the most part”
• It starts a cycle where it is the only choice for people who are uneducated or living in poverty
• Doctors misdiagnosing
• Lack of motivation/inspiration
• “The [This Area] Diagnosis”; When you’re born and raised in [this area] and your parents are born and raised in [this area] you don’t really know anything else
Themes

• Drug and alcohol addiction
• Sexual abuse
• Incarceration and trouble reentering after
• Anxiety/Fear
• Sleeping issues
• Lack of education
• Broken families
• Depression for various reasons, but largely due to unemployment, job insecurity/instability, housing instability
Lessons Learned/Conclusion

• Ethnographic methods to examine effects of social inequalities on health
• Consequences of structural vulnerability
• Pursue wider range of diagnoses and target more resources to help identify and overcome clinically invisible barriers to adherence
• Expanding health services research
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