
Fighting Poverty in the Inner-City of New York City

MONTE RIVERA, PH.D.

Sociology-Anthropology Department
Farmingdale State College

“In a modern state the actual ruler is necessarily and unavoidably the bureaucracy, since power is exercised neither through parliamentary speeches nor monarchical enunciations but through the routines of administration. Just as the so-called progress toward capitalism has been the unequivocal criterion for the modernization of the economy . . . the democratic state no less than the absolute state eliminates administration by feudal, patrimonial or other notables holding office in honorary or hereditary fashion, in favor of employed officials, who decide on all our everyday needs and problems.” Max Weber

In this paper I attempt to analyze the way a population of Puerto Ricans relate to the intrusion of bureaucracy in El Barrio, a low income community in New York City. Urban conditions limiting economic stability have been shaped by vast unemployment and the migration of manufacturing and retail job resources employing a considerable number of Hispanics. The effects of economic changes in the private sector has seen the rise of complex service agencies created by government funds to satisfy welfare needs of economically deprived groups. Although federal actions to reduce inequality in the 1970's is not a new idea (Whyte, 1943), what bearing do bureaucratic impingements have on minorities whose ethos is directed at human service exigencies in low income neighborhoods? Cloward and Piven (1972) point out, bureaucratic systems have altered community processes in problem solving and diminished the decision making ability of the poor Hamilton (1976) suggests the effects of independently funded agencies is a replacement of patron-client relations of agencies and party clubhouses with patron-recipient relations of agencies and residents in addressing social problems.

The analysis of community action and the economically disadvantage has paid minimal research attention to behaviors within the vortex of U.S. barrio communities. This paper will attempt to contribute to this neglected area of inquiry. A major empirical concern will be the extent bureaucratic and political apparatus function to remedy community disorganization in a Hispanic minority neighborhood. I shall refer to organizations formed by a minority group as a depiction of their economic status within American society.

The involvement of the public sector in low income environments has increased tremendously, with El Barrio census tracts receiving approximately 55% to 75% of the total area economy in various forms of government supplements. The stratification system of low income areas depend on substantial government allotments of food stamps, supplemental security income, Medicaid, welfare, federally financed housing, and public service employment. This increasing governmental role in the economic life of low status neighborhoods has lead one investigator to designate these areas as public sector communities. The growing dominance of publicly supported agencies in previous studies of Puerto Ricans suggests they play a major part in the expanding aspect of the public sector in communities. Rogler (1974) mentioned attempts to advance neighborhood services has shifted from the local system of political bossism to fit the distinctive bureaucratic qualities of Puerto Rican service agencies. Lopez (1973) argues that agency personnel have recognized the futility of community actions which last political support to mediate between funding bureaucracies and the extensive demands of community services. Others, Jennings (1977) suggest line of informal leadership and agency influence are developing and have thus far not fully developed in the New York Puerto Rican community. In what ways do the theoretical perspectives of Rogler, Hamilton, Cloward and others relate to conditions in our focal locality? I shall examine this question with observations of behaviors within service units which comprise a portion of the public sector character of El Barrio. Published historical data will supplement field observations.

The data in the study derive from fourteen months of research in a Puerto Rican community called East Harlem, but identified by Hispanics as El Barrio. I selected the community because of its historic role in attracting and acclimating Puerto Ricans to the rigors of American city life during the 1930–1950 migrating years. Today, the density and residential mobility of Puerto Ricans in the Greater New York Metropolis has resulted in numerous

other communities. Yet, many former residents continue to visit the “old block,” and current inhabitants place hope in the likelihood Barrio agencies will serve their social needs.

Primary data collection sites were the New York Experimental and Bilingual Institute (hereafter referred to as the Institute), and the Massive Economic Neighborhood Development, a community service bureaucracy created in 1965 (hereafter referred to as MEND). Field data was mainly collected through participant-observation for detailed case study. These units were selected because of their activism in local political affairs and MEND’s rapid bureaucratic growth in funded programs. Field work was undertaken through the interlocking network of agency members and allied groups which comprise action units. Participant observation was the most efficient tool in collecting data in a study of an organizationally mobile group of community activists. This was the best method to illicit data from respondents who are unwilling to reveal the extent of contacts in agency referral systems or campaign strategies.

El Barrio has a historically changing function relative to other city neighborhoods during the past five decades. It provided a low rent residential area for Irish, Jewish, and Italian workers employed in large industrial plants and retail stores in the city. Currently the locale is increasingly inhabited by low income Puerto Ricans and to a smaller extent Blacks, a large proportion of whom are unemployed. In a sense, a community is what it does, and much of what it does can be grasped by studying episodes of action.

The aggravating unemployment condition of El Barrio lead to an episode of action in the creation of the Bilingual Institute, an adult school. It was established in 1971 by federal and city community development funds to service unemployed and underemployed adults in occupational training, higher education, and job placement. Later in 1973 the school’s funding was augmented by federal CETA (government manpower training) monies. One indication of the differential importance of public funds in the formal differential of Barrio life may be reflected in the role of MEND in channeling the building process of new programs. Sponsorship for the Institute proceeded through an existing functional alternative, MEND’s formally organized action channels which guided funding consideration. MEND’s high level staffers have been involved in civic struggles as an organizing feature of urban life, and their representational capabilities in public bureaucracies are extensive.

Frequently they negotiate funding support, forming and preserving linkages with persons in positions of official authority through complex ties. Few groups in the community have personal access to vast reservoirs of funding resources. In 1976, MEND's formal structure had 14 organizations, and 19 funded programs comprising these units were created through ties to existing channels. Today the anti-poverty sector is the largest industry and employer of minorities in El Barrio. Thus, the formal eradication of poverty is big business, and Puerto Ricans are tacitly proceeding to build service institutions to subserve these functional requirements.

Cloward and Piven (1972:12) said community-based bureaucracies require control of expertise, and MEND's endorsement of the Institute was a crucial factor in extending the agency's control of internal affairs. MEND leaders used the school personnel framework as job placements or job training grounds for many unemployed political workers. In the building process of the bureaucracy, jobs were awarded to persons with technical skills, but most were dispensed due to the structure of power arrangements. MEND's structural constraints allowed little deviation, or allied political leaders would have imposed sanctions had they attempted to employ persons from non-affiliated groups. This principal was demonstrated by the action of clubhouse or agency chiefs once they had control of any funded program. Sponsorship in the creation of new programs translated into managerial domination by the sponsoring agent. The task of sifting job resources was directed by the New Era Democratic Club, the club of MEND and locally allied organizations which allocate jobs to dedicated campaign workers after electoral offensives. Managerial status in community action programs was usually preceded by a commitment for political involvement in the organization and external agency sponsored activism. School administrators in the Institute employed as environmental agents (Azumi, 1972), supplied and integrated school volunteers in coordinated actions dealing with dispose of environmental needs through employed subordinates. These agents considerably reduce the autonomy of units to select priorities, procedural methods, and limit the range of variation in Institute functioning to the dictates of the "agency family."

The main conception of agency and political interplay is explained by a Barrio activist in saying "organizational efforts in community action were meant as patronage opportunities for the cadres of ghetto political groups and we are capitalizing on that circumstance in this community." Government anti-poverty funds sustain this organizational character and the overlapping

structure of power relations among groups. Since 1971, MEND's political apparatus has greatly developed its ability to displace elective leaders of political clubs which lack the manpower resources and supportive alliances. From 1972 to 1976 they were able to elect two district leaders, one state assemblyman, and seize control of local institutional bodies (local school board, community planning board, and health planning board) of El Barrio. Since the formation of the New Era Club (originally it consisted of a unified coalition of groups), members have been appointed to a multitude of municipal and state positions in human service offices. The club acquired these placements by locally endorsing city, state, and national Democratic aspirants to elective office. Government appointees were able to influence allocation decisions of funding budgets in favor of Puerto Ricans in the MEND alliance. The merging of political forces has coalesced a range of groups and ideologies. The East Harlem Community Corporation (an anti-poverty agency) has a leadership composed of registered Republicans, have a clubhouse latently allied with the New Era, and use Republican Party routes to bring funded programs to the community. MEND is a delegate agency of the Community Corporation, receiving over on third of its funding budget. Party loyalty is emphasized to extra-community political groups, but internally party labels are insignificant and sharing of agency job resources are distributed to individuals regardless of party affiliation. Thus, for Puerto Ricans in this political network of organizations, it made no difference in Democrats or Republicans were elected to office in Washington, Albany, or city hall because either they would benefit economically. Party label in these allied groups function to the extent their capacity to broaden government anti-poverty allocation is politically maximized.

Elective, government appointees, and party contacts have referred vast sums of monies in funded programs to El Barrio. The viability of these support mechanisms prompted a program planner of MEND to comment "man, we're up to our ears in projects and programs, at times being obliged to turn down informal offers by the reps of funding sources. The Neighborhood Crisis Center of the Human Resources Administration has often been offered, but we don't see that service as a major concern," at a later date they did take the offer! Great success in seizing service funds in the Barrio has encouraged Puerto Ricans to be increasingly directed toward local influentials (Merton, 1968). In acting as locals, funding rewards comprising the major element in the economic structure of El Barrio has guided agency efforts in service issues as locals.

Local patterns of influence were oriented toward quantitative aspects (meet and service more recipients) in programs as an important precondition for agency growth.

Often, some clubhouse members were viewed by leaders as “rising stars” in the political horizon of El Barrio’s future. The struggle of “rising stars” was not limited to external arenas, but intense competition for positions of authority occurred between subordinant “rising stars” and chiefs of agency formal structures. MEND leaders encourage these struggles to keep intermediate and lower level administrators at top efficiency performance. At any point agency operations are subject to the pressure of political groups and therefore it is difficult to separate administrative affairs from politics. Inter-agency conflicts over leadership representation were controlled by informal structural rules which require they exercise challenges within the “organizational family” and preserve positive external behaviors. Thus, controls mediate the degree competing members comply in endorsing their elective and appointee candidacies for external positions, exchange awards for local service achievements at civic affairs, and publicly court media coverage. These constraints yielded MEND and its affiliate’s great advantage in managing threats by rival community service and political groups.

Community-wide challenges have usually come from the New World Democratic Club, the political arm of the East Harlem Tenant’s Council (a local service agency) and the Caribbean Democratic Club, two Puerto Rican community foes. MEND had conflicts with the Tenant’s Council over competition for local anti-poverty funds, and conflicts with the Caribbean Club (a clubhouse created over 50 years ago) over MEND’s intrusion in the electoral and institutional political affairs of the area. These conflicts are symbolic of the political cleavages between competing non-aligned organizations. The East Harlem Tenant’s Council usually receive support from public sectors where the reform wing of the Democratic Party and Liberal Party candidates are in positions. Also, major corporations (Chemical Bank and ITT) or social welfare agencies (Urban League or Community Service Society) allocate grants to finance Tenant Council programs. The chief distinction between a small bureaucracy (Tenant’s Council) and a large bureaucracy (MEND), both locally based, in ethnic activism is power. Through the factor of program acquisition, both organizational groups may rise or fall in the community status system. The Caribbean Club had no noticeable programs and held vested interests in running electoral candidates and administering campaign offensives, being the oldest Puerto Rican club in the community, if not the city. This club lost

considerable status and political ground when MEND repeatedly defeated a member who was veteran district leader and controller of party patronage.

Local foes of MEND conduct Quixotic voter registration drives and run candidate slates in electoral and institutional body campaigns. They compete to gain institutional body positions and greater status as territorial service agents, or regain a political reputation. These groups possess less "pulling power" in distributing economic rewards to members and mainly mobilize for the purpose of protesting the deficiencies in community services of "over politicized agencies." If Blau's (1964) view of the incentive of organizational behavior are "voluntary actions of individuals which are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring in return," meager economic rewards by the Tenant's Council and the Caribbean Club has not induced members to maintain the high group activism as MEND in local affairs. This process of exchange contribute to the degree agencies survive or expand control of locally relevant tasks in service programs.

In these exchanges and conflicts community action agencies and environmental operatives have instituted new power relations in the deployment of economic benefits within the competitive organizational milieu of El Barrio. Variant types of relations, each serving different functional requirements sustain local bureaucratic systems. Patron-recipients relations, demanding people subscribe to agency services, replenish the economic benefits of programs by bridging the gulf between service accomplishments and refunding objectives. Some resident's ender recipient pools as favored members of the "MEND family" seeking community services as a retribution for past political work. Moreover, the need for a sufficient number of recipients by programs, is more efficiently met by administrators through exchange with other MEND subunits or allied agencies than through independent recipient finding methods. One unanticipated consequence of patron-recipient ties was the recruitment of interested recipients to volunteer in community-wide civic and political involvement.

Patron-client relations, requiring allegiance and agency actions in the group's interest, was the primary means by which MEND preserved the growth and cohesion of working parts within the bureaucratic apparatus. The basic course of action in inter-agency behaviors between MEND and allied groups is patron-client, and services to agencies is patron recipient. Both processes play a vital role in linking the furthering of local agency programs and political goals.

☉ Summary and Conclusion

In El Barrio bureaucratic systems were based primarily on differential control of jobs and government funded resources by political groups working through local service agencies. Three important mechanisms which continued control of the majority of public funding agencies in the hands of a few political bureaucrats were domination of elective offices, institutional bodies, and extensive contacts in funding sources. This dominant position severely restricted the outflow of funds to rival organizational groups based in the community.

I have been dealing with a limited number of aspects in this inquiry. My concern has been to analyze the major interorganizational relations which account for the way a population of ethnic minorities treat economic conditions in a low income neighborhood. While the community activism of the 1960's in the inner-city centered on protests and demands for economic equality, the 1970's appear to assume a reform and conformist position. Service to the community and service to the dominant political structure are the value orientation of members of this Puerto Rican community. Roglers (1974:66) statement that ethnic activism focuses on minority collective problems, not discrete personal problems; seeks to bridge the gulf by extending agency services into the ethnic community, not piecemeal favors; and its aim to mobilize the ethnic community into broader coalitions of civic involvement, is correct, even in the larger urban milieu of El Barrio.

Few residents of El Barrio underestimate MEND's power in lining up support for campaigns in addressing service issues, or political conflict. This perspective however, stems in great part from the inability of local competitors to triumph politically in the community arena. Otherwise, the MEND alliance will continue its territorial coverage of services by exploiting the economically deteriorating character of a neighborhood for their own expansionist interests.

This inquiry has essentially taken the view of the relationship of community service organizations and its structure of inter-bureaucratic and political arrangements. In future research, of particular promise is comparative inquiries in the political and bureaucratic ties of different although interacting classes or organizations. How different are the degrees of control, cooperation, or conflicts between economic, cultural, religious or governmental complex organizations and satellite units? And what are the consequences of variations

in organizational groups for the internal structure, decision-making, and exchange processes of different types of agencies? A participant-observer, although under other conditions other methods are useful, could examine the organizational interrelationships of large hospital and subordinant neighborhood health clinics, or health outreach programs? Systematic research into the interactions among divergent formal organizations and ethnic groups may unearth detailed knowledge about the nature of relations within and between the vast assortment of institutions in society.

☉ Privatization

The neoconservatives during the 1980's until today have elevated the roll that community based organizations play in meeting the needs of the urban poor. During the period of Ronald Regan and George Bush Presidencies, many great programs were eliminated or severely slashed. In many ways these self help local efforts by grass root groups changed the patron-recipient relations or what Ferdinand Townies would call serving the "public interest." Serving the public interest meant providing child care, health care and housing rehabilitation functions that also relied on a political role know as patron-client relationships which were common among political machines of both the Democratic and Republican parties in American communities and towns.

The new guidelines from Neoncons from Washington, D.C. and Albany, New York emphasized a move toward privatization which charged the consumers of county self help services to paying customers. Using job related or public sector health plans (i.e. Blue Cross & Blue Shield, Medicaid & Medicare, etc) to pay for health services at local clinics or hospital outreach programs. In the case of child care centers, privatization stipulated local people pay for day care enrollment. The charter school movement to a high extent of probability followed this fee paying behavior for the families of charter school students. In many ways this behavioral change reflects the view of a transition to Ferdinand Townie's conception of "Self Interest." In other words, the organizational view of self help groups now require that we will help you if you become available to be served, and we will now charge money and profit from this service interaction.