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Anthropological Quarterly, Vol. 52, No. 1, Special Issue: The Ethnography of Old Age. (Jan., 1979), pp. 39-48.

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Anthropological Quarterly is currently published by The George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research.

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ADJUSTMENTS OF BLACK AND WHITE ELDERLY TO THE SAME ADAPTIVE NICHE¹

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Within the adaptive niche of public housing for the elderly, Black and White residents make different adjustments. A comparison is made between the adjustments of Black residents in a building where they are the majority, Black and White residents in a building where the population is mixed, and White residents where they are the majority group.

This is a study of three residential communities of older people—specifically, three public housing projects for the elderly—and it examines both the internal characteristics of the projects and the characteristics of the surrounding neighborhoods, and the relationships between the two. Inasmuch as the study of community formation among the elderly—like other ethnography—may suffer from exclusive and undue emphasis on patterns and processes within the residential boundaries, the present approach is a useful corrective, as it calls attention to the possible effects of outside or environmental forces on both type and level of community. Our research compares the social organizations of three public housing projects for the elderly in Milwaukee, focusing on the ethnic makeup of their populations and its relationship to that of the surrounding neighborhoods. In effect, Milwaukee has thirteen housing projects for the elderly which, although they differ in important respects, are fundamentally similar in that they constitute a distinct and unique adaptive niche. This niche has six primary characteristics, three having to do with the population that occupies the niche and three with the setting.

First, the resident population consists of *high-density and exclusive* concentrations of the elderly. Secondly, residents are capable of independently performing the usual

activities of daily living, i.e., in bio-physical and behavioral terms, they can function with minimal dependence on others. Some individuals manage to continue as residents following a breakdown in health or mobility; whether or how long they manage to do so usually depends on support of spouse (if present), neighbors, or relatives. Thirdly, residents are drawn from only one socio-economic segment of the community's older persons—the *poor*. As to characteristics of the setting, first it is a special type of physical setting—an apartment complex or project, mainly of the high-rise type. Secondly, the projects are located in central-city urban neighborhoods, i.e., in areas with high levels of poverty, with crime rates generally above the mean for the city, and with variable access to food markets and other goods and services. Thirdly, it is an administered setting, managed by the municipal housing authority, under regulations and guidelines of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Among other things, the regulations involve significant rent subsidies for tenants, equal-opportunity rules of residence, and the promotion of democratically-elected councils of residents in each project.

Housing projects also differ in two respects: one, in the racial makeup of resident populations, and, secondly, in the racial composition of the adjacent neigh-

borhoods. The present research examines three of the thirteen public housing projects for the elderly which differ in terms of the racial composition of project residents and of the neighborhoods in which the projects are located.

The first project, which we will call Whiting Park, is made up almost entirely of White residents (97%) and is situated in a neighborhood which is also predominantly White. In the second project, Blackstone, Black elderly constitute the great majority of residents (80%) and the population of the adjacent area is also largely Black. The third housing project, Midvale, as well as its neighborhood, are both undergoing fairly rapid change in racial composition. Over the past several years, the proportion of Black residents of Midvale has risen from 25% to about 40% and the neighborhood in which Midvale is located has also been changing in the same direction and at about the same rate. Thus, in each instance, the racial composition of the housing project and of its neighborhood parallel each other. Whiting Park and its neighborhood are both predominantly White. Blackstone and its neighborhood are both largely Black. Midvale and its adjacent area are both mixed, with White residents of the project and the White population of the neighborhood each constituting only a moderate and steadily shrinking majority.

We should add that there is no instance anywhere in the city in which the racial makeup of a housing project and its local neighborhood do not more or less correspond to each other. Although the municipal housing authority follows equal-opportunity guidelines in assigning new residents to projects, applicants' patterns of choice apparently tend to produce correspondences between the racial composition of housing projects and their neighborhoods.

Table 1 examines and compares the neighborhoods of the three housing projects. In each instance, the immediate census tracts in which the projects are located are regarded as reasonable approximations

of the projects' neighborhoods. Four variables, taken from census data, are used to describe each neighborhood. There are two measures of neighborhood or residential stability, percentage of the population living in the same house for the five years preceding the census, and percentage of housing units in the area that are owner-occupied. These two measures are available for 1960 and 1970. A third measure involves the neighborhood's racial composition—the percentage of Black residents. The fourth measure is that of the neighborhood's older-age segment i.e., percentage of the population 65 years of age or older. For the third and fourth measures, data are available for 1960, 1970, and 1975. Finally, to provide overall context, data on the same four measures are reported for the City of Milwaukee as a whole.

Looking first in Table 1 at the city as a whole, we note little change in residential stability between 1960 and 1970. At both time-points, about half the population lived in the same house for the five previous years, and about half the city's housing units are owner-occupied. The Black component in the city's population has increased sharply, from less than 10% in 1960 to nearly 20% in 1975, while the proportion of older persons has risen slightly.

For Whiting Park's neighborhood, one measure of residential stability (percentage of the population in same house for past five years) approximates that for the city as a whole and has remained relatively constant. On the second measure, however, the proportion of housing units that are owner-occupied has declined. In 1960, the area had no Black residents; by 1975, it had a few. As to elderly persons, in 1960 only 1 in 12 was 65 or older; by 1975, this proportion had increased to nearly 1 in 5.

The neighborhood of Blackstone is part of the city's Black ghetto. The figures on neighborhood stability are not in accord with the frequent characterization of the Black ghetto areas as residentially unstable. Between 1960 and 1970, the proportion of

persons living in the same house for the past five years increased—from less than 30% to over 40%. Although the percentage of owner-occupied housing units is not high—12%—it remained stable between 1960 and 1970. The proportion of Blacks in the population was high (80%) in 1960 and was even higher (88%) by 1975. A wholly unexpected finding is the large proportion of older persons currently in the area—from 1 in 12 in 1960 to 1 in 4 in 1975.

Midvale's neighborhood, in contrast with the other two and with the city as a whole, is changing with extreme rapidity and, residentially, is increasingly unstable. The proportions both of persons living in the same house for the last five years as well as of owner-occupied housing units dropped fairly sharply between 1960 and 1970, to the point that residentially the Midvale neighborhood is considerably less stable than the other two neighborhoods. In addition, during a relatively brief time-span, the area's racial composition changed significantly—from about one fourth Black in 1970 to nearly one-half Black in 1975. Also, as a result of the strong influx of young Black families into the area, the proportion of elderly persons in the neighborhood decreased during the same five-year period.

More of the original residents of all three buildings seem to have been White. Whiting Park has had a particularly stable population. The manager points out that in spite of the inevitable attrition by death or ill health, the character of the building seems to have remained almost the same. New residents fit into the pattern of the building, which she characterizes as independent, made up of people who can take the bus alone, shop for themselves, find their own friends. At the same time she encourages a strong buddy system for reporting illness or disability. In Blackstone, the strong network within the building is predominantly Black, although a larger proportion of the White residents were original "pioneers" when the building was new. In

Midvale, there seems to be a gap in the socialization pattern for new members because of the change in racial composition. Clearly, Whites have almost stopped moving into Blackstone. While Whites are moving into Midvale, the greater proportion of new residents are Black. This seems to represent the reaction of new tenants in public housing to the changing neighborhood; we may predict that as the Midvale area becomes more predominantly Black the proportion of new tenants who are Black will increase.

An important variable to be borne in mind during our analysis is that in all three housing projects, the resident population (both Black and White) is predominantly female, ranging from 76% female in Blackstone to over 90% at Whiting Park. Moreover, there is considerable variation in age in our sample whether this be viewed in terms of the range of ages among residents or in terms of proportions above and below the median age in each project. The age range covers a span of over thirty years—from under 60 to over 90—or more than a full generation. (Although residents ordinarily must be at least 62 years of age, some are younger. If one spouse meets the age-criterion, the other need not. Also, persons with certain disabilities are eligible even if below the age-minimum.) Overall, the median age of residents is just under 75. The projects differ in age composition. At Whiting Park, where virtually all residents are White, almost two-thirds are older than median age. At the other extreme, at Blackstone, half of the White residents but less than one-fourth of the Black residents are 75 or older. At Midvale, almost identical proportions of each race (somewhat over one-third) are in the 75-and-older group.

Given the ethnographic background outlined above we may fruitfully examine other factors that will enlighten our analysis. These include (a) those that summarize the residents' perception of the housing project and neighborhood (b) those that

show how residents organize themselves in associations or, more informally, in friendship and situational (e.g., the lobby) groups, and how leadership depends on these social networks (c) those that indicate patterns in leisure activities.

Residents of public housing for the elderly do not live in a single setting; rather, they are simultaneously located in three settings viz., apartment, building and neighborhood. Residents were therefore asked how *satisfied* they felt with each of these three settings and, also, how *safe* they feel in their respective neighborhoods.

Within each building, a gradient of decreasing satisfaction occurs. Most residents are highly satisfied with their apartments, somewhat fewer with the building, and fewer still with the neighborhood; those who feel very safe in the neighborhood are in the minority. However, there are also clear differences by building and race. In Whiting Park and Midvale, most White residents define their setting as consisting of *two* totally distinct domains: one, apartment *and* building, evokes a high level of satisfaction, while the other, the neighborhood, is one that few White residents either like or feel safe in. At Blackstone, most White residents perceive the setting as consisting of *three* relatively discrete domains, with apartment, building, and neighborhood respectively eliciting rather sharply declining levels of satisfaction.

Among Black residents of Midvale and Blackstone, although each of the three settings seems to constitute a somewhat different domain in terms of levels of satisfaction, the gradient of decreasing satisfaction as one moves from apartment to building to neighborhood, and to feelings of neighborhood safety, is not especially steep.

Clearly, Whites at both Midvale and Blackstone are distressed by their neighborhoods and feel unsafe in them. Blacks do not feel so beleaguered. Although Blackstone is in the most stable Black neighborhood, Blacks seem to prefer the Midvale area.

The neighborhoods surrounding the Midvale and Blackstone housing projects differ sharply for Black and White elderly. Adjacent to each of these projects for the elderly are large public housing projects inhabited by families—mainly Black with young children. Some Black elderly in Blackstone and Midvale have relatives—children and grandchildren—in the adjacent projects. Black children from the family housing projects play ball and ride bicycles on the lawns of Midvale and Blackstone; when they gain entrance to the projects themselves they are noisy, ride the elevators, etc. The activity, noise, and presence of Black children are distressing for White elderly residents, somewhat less so for Black elderly.

Although the proportions of Blacks among Midvale residents and in the neighborhood's population have recently increased at about the same rapid rate and are now at about the same level (about 40-45%), the apprehensions and complaints of White elderly at Midvale center almost exclusively on the neighborhood, not on the presence of Black residents within the project. What they fear are the changes, the unknowns, and the perceived threats of the outside environment, not the known and familiar neighbors, Black and White, within the building.

At Whiting Park, White residents express levels of satisfaction with and feelings of safety in the neighborhood not much higher than those among Whites at the other two projects. At the same time, Whiting Park residents benefit from a somewhat better set of relationships with their neighborhood than is true of Whites in the other two projects. Thus, Whiting Park serves in a limited way as a neighborhood center for elderly persons who live in the project's general vicinity; for example, Golden Age Club meetings at Whiting Park are attended both by project residents and by elderly who reside in the neighborhood. Also, although Whiting Park residents neither understand nor sympathize with the many

young people who have flooded the neighborhood in recent years, and whom residents refer to as "hippies," the so-called hippies provide voluntary assistance and services for project residents on occasion when asked to do so.

As for Blackstone, while its Black residents enjoy a fairly active and involved social life, within and outside of the building, the White minority does not. White residents at Blackstone are a remnant group; they are older than Black residents, take little part in organized activities except cardplaying, and are relatively isolated within the project and neighborhood.

Church Membership and Other Formal Social Participation

Church participation, both in terms of membership and attendance, differs greatly between races. For Blacks, church activities are the major mode of social participation; Blacks who neither belong to nor attend church are very unlikely to belong to any other groups, either within or without the housing projects. While church activity may be important to Whites, it does not appear to be quite as central to social participation. Whites who are not church-oriented may maintain other activities, and their involvement in such other activities is higher than that of Blacks.

Not only do Whites and Blacks differ in the centrality of church membership as a measure of all social involvement, but the churches to which they belong are different and represent different religious sub-cultures within American religious life. In our sample, most Whites are Catholic or Lutheran, both liturgical and non-pietist churches which have been associated with strong ethnic sub-cultures. Almost all Blacks belong to pietistic groups, which regulate other forms of social activity as well as the strictly religious. Participation in formal organizations varies among the buildings and between races. In general, the

elderly in low-income housing are not a group of joiners; a high proportion belong to no formal organizations. Although Golden Age clubs meet within the housing projects, only one out of six respondents belong to them. The highest proportion of organizational members is found among Whites at Whiting Park and the lowest among Blacks at Midvale. The proportion of Blacks who are active is highest at Blackstone, but is half the proportion of church participants.

Patterns of Friendship and Help

The nature of friendship, and its development among elderly women, is a topic in itself and outside the scope of this paper. Lopata (1973) suggests that the role of friendship has been inadequately developed among elderly women, especially those of limited education and resources. Rosow (1967) finds that "high-density" housing for the elderly may reduce by at least one half the residents who state that they are friendless. Although our population has many things in common and should find congenial friends rather easily, from 5% to 13% of respondents say that they have no friends on the floor on which they live. On the other hand, a larger percentage state that they are friendly with "everyone on the floor."

The picture is not completely clear, but it appears that Blacks at Blackstone and Whites at Whiting Park have the strongest networks of help and friendship. We have witnessed phone calls, exchanges of visits, and helpful and encouraging support. New residents at Whiting Park are encouraged to find a "buddy" who will make security checks, and building personnel are briefed to follow up on even a hint that someone may be ill. Friends may share much leisure time together.

Help patterns likewise differ greatly. Some residents find satisfying roles (and sometimes extra income) as runners of errands, seamstresses, providers of domestic

help or sick-room care; others remain isolated and neither ask for nor extend help. Some other residents are able to remain outside institutions only because of the help of neighbors and friends.

Other networks are formed by residents who are drawn together by their interest in a central or strategic site. Each building has a number of seats available in a lobby which is air-conditioned and which enables those seated there to oversee visitors, watch and greet other residents as they check their mail boxes, and in general to be aware of the comings and goings from the office. Some residents seem to feel that they have a right to a particular corner and spend much time in the lobby. For some residents, the lobby seems to be a "back-stage" area; they may appear in curlers and house slippers. For others, this is "low-class" and "common;" when they appear in the lobby they are neatly dressed for center stage, in which their dress and demeanor are parts of a public performance.

There are also sex differences in lobby sitting. In Whiting Park the lobby group is composed entirely of White women. Men are scornful of "those old biddies." At Midvale and Blackstone, the lobby groups include both men and women but are largely Black.

In warm weather, residents use benches outside the Whiting Park project. At Midvale, there are no benches but residents bring folding lawn chairs outside and sit on the lawn. Usually these are Blacks, who tolerantly watch the children from the family projects playing ball on the lawn. White residents believe that the fence between Midvale and the family project should be higher and keep the children out. Thus, those who take places at the interface between project and community are primarily Black at both Midvale and Blackstone.

Leadership

Leadership can be viewed as an individual characteristic, or as the result of the

social networks operative within a community. We would see leadership as a combination of these two. Where the housing project has strong, well-developed networks for social interaction, strong leaders seem to be produced. Where a project has two competing or opposing networks, the role of the leader is much more difficult.

Both Blackstone and Whiting Park have remarkable women as leaders. They are outgoing personalities, committed to service within the building, and keenly aware of responsibility rather than privilege as the central requirement for leadership. In both buildings, the leaders have become rather adept at dealing with the Housing Authority and with managers. This has been true for leaders at Whiting Park through several changes in leadership personnel.

For example, Mrs. Norris, in Whiting Park, spends several evenings a week in the common room in order to keep in touch with rumors, gossip and needs of the residents. Mrs. Swenson, of the same project, will go from apartment to apartment to explain an issue which is to come up for a vote by the residents, such as a request to use the common room for church services. Mrs. Jones, in Blackstone, is probably the best educated and most outgoing Black woman in the housing projects. She is active in volunteer work as well as in projects involving the residents and has been able to present the needs of her building effectively to the Housing Authority.

Mrs. Shepherd, in Midvale, has been president of all organizations since Midvale was first opened. In the past she has been a very effective leader, able to push politically for those things which the residents needed. At present, leadership in Midvale is very difficult because of the transitional stage in which the population of the building finds itself. Mrs. Shepherd has not been able to enlist new residents, whether Black or White, in her support network, and she depends increasingly for support on only a small clique of early residents.

Lesisure Activities

Each building has certain excursions, usually by bus, in which all members may share. Although some residents are not interested, or are not well enough for long bus trips, these excursions are usually patronised by both Blacks and Whites. This is particularly true at Midvale, where participation in other activities such as the Golden Age club is primarily White, but where attendance at bus trips to shopping centers and to points of interest is indulged in more or less equally by both Black and White.

Similarly, patrons of hot lunches provided at minimal cost in the building common rooms are usually both Black and White.

Finally, we would be unfair to the residents, especially at Midvale, if we did not emphasize that relationships among neighbors living on the same floor are frequently pleasant and courteous. Residents stress the agreeable nature of these relationships.

The major recreational activity within the housing projects is card-playing, both at Golden Age clubs and among small groups of friends. It turns out, however, that card-playing is much more an activity of White than of Black residents. At both Blackstone and Midvale, twice as many Whites as Blacks play cards regularly, and at Whiting Park, a very high proportion (66%) of its White residents are regular card-players.

Drinking patterns seem to represent male-female differences in recreational activities. If women dominate social life within the housing projects, some men can assert themselves by finding their own social life in taverns in the area. Heavy drinking by residents has never been a major problem in Whiting Park, which has very few male residents. (The manager states that only one instance of alcoholism has occurred, and the offending tenant was evicted.) In both Midvale and Blackstone, heavy drinking by male residents is mentioned as a problem by managers and tenants.

In Midvale, residents may be quite tolerant of heavy drinking by residents of their own floor, whom they know personally and find to be courteous and inoffensive when sober. It is the drinking of the unknowns on other floors which is a problem. While Black women—most of whom are good, sober church members—may see drinking among males as undesirable, White women tend to see it as frightening.

Summary and Discussion: An examination of the three public housing projects for the elderly has revealed that they are similar in important respects. The resident population of each project is dense and exclusively elderly. It consists largely of a female world in which widows predominate. It is poor but in the main can function more or less independently. In addition, the settings are "high-rise" apartment buildings, located in central-city urban neighborhoods, and are administered by agencies of local government operating under federal guidelines.

Each of the projects chosen for study is located in a neighborhood that differs in racial composition, and the resident population reflects the neighborhood in each instance.

It is tempting to think of two of the projects—Whiting Park and Blackstone—as, in some respects, different subcultures, with Midvale representing the intersection of two subcultures. Whiting Park residents display fairly high levels of activity and social participation within the building and in the neighborhood. Its residents are virtually all White, over half of whom have occupied the building since it was opened. The relative stability of Midvale, unlike either Whiting Park or Blackstone, presents an instance of racial change and mix which is still very much in flux. It differs sharply from the other two projects in that its neighborhood is much less stable; the local population is shifting from a largely White neighborhood to one which, it can safely be predicted, will soon be largely Black. Furthermore, the resident population has

been shifting in the same direction and is now over 40% Black.

The White residents are much less satisfied with the Midvale neighborhood; hardly any Whites feel safe there, and interviews with them reveal a high level of apprehension over changes taking place in the surrounding area. On the other hand, this is a preferred neighborhood for Black residents, most of whom are very satisfied with it.

While the neighborhood is changing in racial composition, there is a certain lag in that there are White churches, both Catholic and Lutheran, within walking distance of Midvale. Blacks must still leave the area to attend church.

Both Whites and Blacks at Midvale have lower levels of social participation by all our measures than do their respective counterparts at Whiting Park and at Blackstone: some activities, e.g., Golden Age Club, card playing, are dominated by Whites; others, e.g., the lobby group, are predominantly Black. Still others, such as bus trips and the hot lunch program, draw participation from both groups. On each floor there is spontaneous and usually

friendly interaction between Black and White residents.

Leadership since the building was first opened has been White. However, Midvale is now marked by a degree of factionalism which sets it apart from the other two projects. Community formation is no doubt easier among members of the same subculture, when initial commonalities extend far beyond age. The subcultures of Whiting Park and Blackstone are also reminders of the variation within our elderly population, and the influence it will have on their use of public housing. Midvale, however, suggests the possibility of community formation among old people of various cultural backgrounds, as ethnic boundaries are being crossed in both informal and formal spheres. Both daily neighborly contact and desirable organized activities seem to promote more frequent and harmonious interracial contact than is common outside the project. This is at the same time evidence for the existence of the social organization aspect of community at Midvale, and an indication of its distinctiveness from the world outside.

TABLE I

Selected characteristics of neighborhoods (census tracts) of the 3 housing projects for the elderly and for the city of Milwaukee, for 1960, 1970 and (for 2 measures) 1975

Housing project	Neighborhood (census tract) measures	1960 [*]	1970 ^{**}	1975 ^{***}
Whiting Park (97% of project residents are White)	% of population in same house last 5 yrs	46	45	--
	% housing units that are owner-occupied	24	16	--
	% of population Black	0	1	2
	% of population 65 yrs of age & older	8	15	19
Blackstone (80% of project residents are Black)	% of population in same house last 5 yrs	28	41	--
	% housing units that are owner-occupied	12	12	--
	% of population Black	80	81	88
	% of population 65 yrs of age & older	8	19	24
Midvale (in 1973, 25% of project residents were Black, by 1975, 40% were Black)	% of population in same house last 5 yrs	30	21	--
	% of housing units that are owner-occupied	16	8	--
	% of population Black	26	26	45
	% of population 65 yrs of age & older	8	15	11
Milwaukee city as a whole	% of population in same house last 5 yrs	47	53	--
	% of housing units that are owner-occupied	48	47	--
	% of population Black	8	15	19
	% of population 65 yrs of age & older	10	11	11

* U. S. Bureau of the Census. Census tracts, Milwaukee. 1961.

** U. S. Bureau of the Census. Census tracts, Milwaukee. 1972.

*** City of Milwaukee. Special Census. 1976.

NOTES

¹ The research and studies forming the basis for this paper were conducted pursuant to a contract between the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the National League of Cities. The substance of such research is dedicated to the public. The authors are solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements or interpretations contained herein.

The research was sponsored by the Urban Observatory, University of Wisconsin Extension

Division, with the cooperation of the Department of Anthropology and the School of Nursing, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

Data were gathered in three ways: through (a) standardized interviews with a large random sample (nearly 40%) of the residents; (b) intensive ethnographic interviews with a small number of informants; and (c) numerous observations of varied aspects of life and interaction in the housing projects and adjoining neighborhoods.

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