The Exclusion Element of Gentrification: Emphasizing Intentionality in Community Development

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Abstract

When developing a community, gentrification tends to occur all too often during the process. Leaders orchestrating a project can have all of the best intentions but ultimately make pivotal mistakes that solely benefit the middle-class (and often white) citizens. Neighborhoods can develop and gain new shops, restaurants, apartments, community centers, and more, but, if groups of people in the community suffer, it cannot be seen as a success at all. Displacement of existing citizens is one of the largest issues surrounding gentrification, and often the people impacted are low-income people of color. In order to avoid more instances in which gentrification occurs, it is crucial to involve the existing residents in the community in which the project takes place as well as people in surrounding communities. This issue stems from situations in which city officials and project leaders rely too heavily on their outside knowledge as well as the consistent disregard for both the impoverished and minority groups in decision-making processes. In many instances, the overlooking of these groups of people directly impacts the displacement and unfair treatment of citizens who live in these areas of development.

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Gentrification, the process in which a neighborhood is reconditioned that often excludes those of lower income, is a common discussion in the urban development world. It is a subject that is constantly debated as many see varying elements and circumstances that constitute gentrification. Additionally, some view the process as having certain contributing factors while others see it as a natural and unstoppable system. Furthermore, many debate whether or not gentrification is an inherently negative process. A common element of gentrification about which people deliberate is the notion of displacement. Displacement occurs through gentrification when people are forced or strongly encouraged to leave their residences and neighborhoods in the name of progress and change. Some in favor of the process falsely argue notions, for instance, that neighborhoods that undergo gentrification have less crime or that anyone disadvantaged in the process is not comparable to the overall success that takes place. However, any change seen as successful is almost always at the expense of existing residents or those who are overlooked in the development process. Although there is no set definition of gentrification, the common theme of exclusion of lower-income and minority groups and advancement of higher-income whites overrules any argument of overall community benefit.

It is naïve to believe that an area can improve without the input of the people that know it best and without their benefitting from the development. Communities cannot truly develop without benefitting all groups of people involved, and this cannot be achieved without their contribution. In order to avoid gentrification in the modernization of communities, one must consider the contributing factors that affect low-income people, especially people of color, while
consistently benefitting higher-income, white people; in this way, it is crucial to act in a way that is improving communities with the existing residents in mind.

**Exclusivity in Community Development**

Although many argue that gentrification is a positive process, it often excludes many groups from the development. Because whites and middle-class people are seen as inherently superior in almost all circumstances, that group is seen as an ideal for which to strive. In this way, neighborhoods are more likely to be helped if they are majority white, whereas neighborhoods with a large minority population are likely to be changed drastically to model the white neighborhoods. These whitewashed neighborhoods remain this way due to systematic discrimination in terms of housing through frequent instances of redlining and only showcasing certain housing to minorities. While gentrification is often the product of well-meaning initiatives, too often the process reflects the white, middle-class ideal neighborhood.

**Majority White Neighborhoods**

Often times, neighborhoods are assisted more and engaged in development if they are majority white as opposed to having a large minority population. According to a Harvard Study (2014), neighborhoods that had initial signs of undergoing gentrification only continued if the population was at least 35 percent white; on the contrary, development decelerated or ceased entirely if the neighborhood was above 40 percent black (Reuell, 2014). This finding demonstrates that race is undeniably a factor in terms of which neighborhoods are being considered for improvement. Investment in neighborhoods is often related to the area’s demographics in terms of race and ethnicity as well as financial status. Additionally, Jackelyn Hwang asserts that neighborhoods have a “social hierarchy” in which the prosperous
neighborhoods stay prosperous and the struggling neighborhoods remain in that state as well; however, the neighborhoods in the middle of the spectrum can prosper or struggle, but it usually depends on the racial composition of the area (Reuell, 2014). The doctoral student’s analysis further emphasizes the crucial role that race plays in the development process. In an opposing argument, Richard Florida proposes that neighborhoods that are gentrifying are often more diverse across demographics than those that are not gentrifying (2015). However, this argument implies that there is a presence of white and middle-class people in the gentrifying neighborhoods which was likely the cause of the beginning of the development. Ultimately, as Harvard Social Sciences Professor Robert Sampson states, black neighborhoods “aren’t reaping the same benefits in the transformation of cities” (Reuell, 2014). This is due to the initial interest in developing neighborhoods being based on the existence of white and middle-class residents, portraying the area with sense of potential to prospective investors.

**Redlining and Other Discriminatory Practices**

Although it can occur in a variety of forms, exclusivity consistently derives from discriminatory practices such as redlining and selective showcasing of housing. According to a national study regarding racial and ethnic housing discrimination, housing discrimination continues to exist and can often be seen in a more subdued manner (Joice & Bavan, 2014, p. 4). Paul Joice and Meena Bavan give an example of this discrimination in a study concerning minority renters and homebuyers; specifically, the study found that white renters were more likely to be told about and shown more housing than minority renters and were sometimes even encouraged to see houses in neighborhoods with fewer white residents (2014, p. 4). In addition to these forms of discrimination, Alana Semuels (2015) includes other examples such as zoning
regulations and limits on property sizes based on number of family members. These forms of discrimination continuously exclude minority groups from benefitting from development in the same ways that white people do. To further defend this assertion, Kelefa Sanneh of The New Yorker claims that “even middle-class African-Americans live in markedly poorer neighborhoods than working-class whites” (2016). This knowledge dismantles both the reasoning that race is not a factor in this discrimination and that a household’s financial status secures them from these types of discrimination.

As a further example of how discrimination contributes to exclusivity, in her article concerning white flight from Syracuse, Alana Semuels (2015) describes the white population as having decreased a total of 70 percent between 1950 and 2010; in contrast, the black population grew almost ten times as large as the original population in 1950. She declares that even the massive exodus of white residents did not provide opportunities for the remaining and new black residents as racist and discriminatory practices such as redlining, refusal to give loans to own homes, and denial of decent job opportunities prevented any prosperity. In fact, the author notes a map created by the Homeowner’s Loan Corporation in 1937 which designated neighborhoods that primarily consisted of black residents to be “high risk for loans” (Semuels, 2015). In the example of the city of Syracuse, it is clear to see that only white people benefitted from the areas they lived in, whether in the city or the suburbs, as discriminatory practices prevented minority and poor groups from advancing in their environment. Furthermore, this displays the notion that white people are able to gentrify minority-heavy neighborhoods while minority groups are discouraged and prevented from moving or living in these prosperous neighborhoods. Thus,
these partisan policies and actions contributed, and continue to contribute, to the unequal effects of gentrification amongst marginalized people.

**White and Middle-Class Characteristics**

Exclusivity frequently exists in the presence of the idealization of white and middle-class characteristics during the development process. In contrast, the experiences and opinions of marginalized groups are consistently ignored or not seen as valid, even if the development directly affects their lives and communities. In a journal article discussing mixed income communities, Robert Chaskin and Mark Joseph (2013) present a rival argument to these initiatives when they suggest that the motive behind income integration is often for higher income residents to positively influence lower income residents. The authors proceed to state that “the presence of middle-class ‘role models’ who promote and foster ‘mainstream’ social norms and expectations” would have a beneficial impact on lower income people (Chaskin & Joseph, 2013). This viewpoint is extremely detrimental to any development process as it automatically diminishes poorer people (and often those belonging to a minority group). Moreover, to assume that middle class and white residents have lived the primary and mainstream experience further pushes the agenda that favors white and middle-class characteristics as this is consistently not everyone’s truth.

In accordance with white and middle-class characteristics being seen as superior, many U.S. cities that are viewed as successful (New York City, Boston, San Francisco, and others) are often gentrified and even white-washed to an extent. For example, Portland, Oregon is regarded as a progressive U.S. city, but few people realize the racist past that the city holds. In fact, the city continues to exhibit discriminatory traits that continue to disadvantage marginalized groups.
According to Alana Semuels (2016), an audit conducted in 2011 portrayed an alarming statistic regarding Portland landlords and leasing agents: they discriminate against 64 percent of black and Latino renters by raising rent, including unnecessary charges, and more. Portland, as the “ whitest big city in America” with only 6.3% of the population being African American and 72.2 percent being white, also has lower African American homeowner rates than the rest of the country and has a history of displacement of minority groups due to rising prices in the middle of the city (Semuels, 2016). It is important to acknowledge the mostly suppressed truths of seemingly prominent cities in the U.S. as this demonstrates the fact that white and middle-class characteristics and success are viewed with higher importance.

**Negative Effects of Exclusion**

There are many negative effects of excluding low-income and minority groups from the development process. A common result of gentrification is the displacement of these groups when property rates rise and they are no longer able to afford to live in their neighborhood. This is largely due to the system that is perpetuated in urban development that primarily benefits the white middle class. Because of this, the opinions, problems, and views of minority and lower-income people are habitually ignored or overlooked. As a result, the overlooked people often do not benefit or see any change as successful in terms of their situation. With immediate exclusion present in the process, it is extremely difficult to foster any true sense of community once the development has occurred, further damaging the neighborhood or the existing residents.

**Disadvantages of Exclusion**

Exclusion frequently displaces and otherwise disadvantages existing residents throughout and following the development cycle. In his article regarding gentrification and displacement,
Richard Florida (2015) claims that gentrification impacts the most powerless people the most intensely. He then adds to this argument saying that, while disadvantaged people do not always leave gentrifying neighborhoods, it is more probable that they move to poorer neighborhoods with fewer opportunities. Joice and Bavan (2014) present the notion that neighborhoods that have more opportunities and great amenities are often too expensive for lower income people. This situation is not familiar to the most prosperous residents who can choose to live in areas with the best environments and opportunities and from middle class residents who can choose to stay and benefit from the gentrification or move to cheaper housing that is still in fairly affluent areas (Florida, 2015). The lack of options for lower income people in response to gentrification demonstrates how they are frequently disadvantaged in the process. Often times, lower income people are forced to leave their homes if their neighborhood is considered to have potential for growth, and even poorer neighborhoods continue to be neglected and abandoned (Florida, 2015). This correlates to the argument that neighborhoods are only initially assisted if they show potential or opportunities for higher income and white families. In response to opposing arguments that suggest that gentrification does not directly cause displacement of people, Kelefa Sanneh provides a reminder that the constant possibility of eviction leads to higher moving rates amongst poor households, thus often masking the effects of gentrification on these households (2016). It is difficult to measure how both poor and minority families are affected by gentrification without fully understanding the ways in which they are disadvantaged in our society by systematic discrimination.

**Overlooking of Marginalized Groups**
The opinions, problems, and perspectives of low-income and marginalized groups are often overlooked, contributing to the various negative effects of exclusion in the development process. A primary example of this overlooking can be seen in an article written by Alana Semuels (2015) about the city of Syracuse as she notes that predominantly African American areas were automatically considered “slum land” that was destined to be developed and reinvented. This quick and presumptuous label eliminates any possibility of collaboration with the residents in these areas as this outlook views residents simply as areas rather than people. The negative effects of this outlook can be fully observed in the instance of Syracuse obtaining funding from the 1956 Federal Highway Act. City leaders ignored the fact that the highway would sever a strong, African American community and split the city of Syracuse in half and instead fought to make the highway a reality (Semuels, 2015). This complete dismissal of the opinions of the residents in that community illustrates how frequently this occurs and how it consistently disadvantages lower income and minority communities.

Another example of the overlooking of individual needs of marginalized groups can be seen in the instance of black gentrification. According to Loretta Lees (2016), black gentrification is often overshadowed by the idea that white people always cause gentrification; however, black gentrification is due to “structural conditions different to whites” such as limited options in terms of housing as well as other racial discriminatory practices. Lees argues that the entrance of the black middle class begins the process of the white middle class further gentrifying the area. This presents a dangerous situation in which it becomes convenient for the white middle class to combine the interests of the black middle class and lower income black people. This assumption ignores the fact that their interests are frequently, and often drastically,
different from one another’s. In the instance of black gentrification, the white middle class ignores the notion that there are different needs amongst the black community in terms of socioeconomic status. In many instances in community development, the views and needs of marginalized groups are blatantly overlooked, leading to an exclusion of these groups in the process.

Loss of Community Aspect

A loss of community aspect routinely stems from exclusive practices in terms of community development. This is often due to a lack of effort in maintaining community or considering what an existing community finds valuable and important. Many times, developers intend to increase diversity in terms of race and economic status but do not evaluate ways in which to foster a sense of community. In Joice and Bavan’s (2014) article, they discuss the importance in providing possibilities for community members to interact and form relationships amongst all groups. No matter how positive the intention of diversifying is, without specific means of creating or maintaining a community aspect, it is difficult for a strong community to exist.

An example of a loss of community aspect can be seen in Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein’s Better Together (2003) in which the authors discuss both successful and ineffective instances of community development. The authors devote a chapter of the book to discussing a project in Chicago to reinvent and improve the libraries in the city. For one library, the goal of the development was primarily to unite two juxtaposed areas: Cabrini Green, a predominantly lower-income African American community, and Gold Coast, a predominantly white middle class community (p. 36). Putnam and Lewis continue to discuss the intentionality of the project
and how every detail seemed to have been deliberated over to create opportunities for everyone (p. 37). However, despite their intentions and initial triumph, the population of adults in Cabrini Green began to decrease as residents of the community began to leave (p. 41). The number of adults leaving reflects their perception of the library development favoring the people of Gold Coast. Even amongst all the improvements and positive actions, Cabrini Green establishments and residents began to disappear, signaling a lack of a community aspect. The authors describe this occurrence by saying, “[I]mprovements that help bring members of a community together sometimes also disrupt or sever old ties” (p. 42). However, any new improvements must benefit everyone involved and maintain existing positive culture; true development efforts in any area should strive to maintain these relationships and communities to create an inclusive and fulfilling environment for everyone.

**Ways in Which to Create Community Inclusivity**

When considering the potential causes and effects of gentrification as well as the exclusion of poor and minority people, it is crucial to identify ways in which to develop inclusive communities. First, it would be beneficial to show concern and assist neighborhoods in which minorities and lower-income groups are the majority before it is in the interest of white, middle-class people. Too often development begins occurring after white, middle-class groups move into the area or show interest out of selfish motivation. This undoubtedly leads to the primary focus being on the views and interests of the majority group rather than the existing residents who are often the minority groups. Communities that truly develop and grow successfully do so in a way that incorporates the ideas and perspectives of all those living and working in the neighborhood.
Successful change does not occur unless the entire process is inclusive to everyone involved and maintains or encourages diversity in community and thought.

**Showing Initial Concern**

In order to create an inclusive community, it is crucial to demonstrate initial concern for majority low-income and minority neighborhoods before there is a presence of white or middle class residents. In his article debating gentrification, Kelefa Sanneh claims, “The call to save a neighborhood is most compelling when it serves as a call to help a neighborhood’s neediest inhabitants” (2016). This frame of mind is crucial to the success of a community development project in that it signifies that the ultimate goal is to benefit those who are the most disadvantaged. When speaking at Pratt Institute during a lecture for Black History Month, Spike Lee voiced his disdain for the gentrification occurring in New York City: “‘[W]hy did it take this great influx of white people to get the schools better? Why’s there more police protection in Bed Stuy and Harlem now? Why’s the garbage getting picked up more regularly? We been here!’” (Coscarelli, 2014). His contempt for this gentrification process demonstrates how neighborhoods are frequently only assisted when it is for the benefit of the white middle class. Furthermore, Lee titles this phenomenon the “‘Christopher Columbus Syndrome’” in which the white middle class seems to believe they have discovered these communities in which people are already existing and living (Coscarelli, 2014). When there is no interest in helping these underserved communities prior to the existence of white residents, there is an obvious neglect of marginalized communities occurring.

According to an article written by Richard Florida (2015), a study conducted in 2014 showed that there are 10 neglected and poor neighborhoods and 12 neighborhoods that fall from
stability for every neighborhood that is gentrified in the United States. This statistic illustrates the lack of consideration for many poor and struggling neighborhoods before development can lead to benefit for the majority group. Additionally, according to Joice and Bavan (2014), neighborhoods continue to be segregated due to the high housing rates of communities that have better amenities, including strong education, lower crime rates, and more. The fact that these amenities are usually only available in neighborhoods with a higher white population as well as higher rates demonstrates that people are more willing to help more developed communities rather than neighborhoods with higher low-income and minority populations. This attributes to the argument in which there is a need to show more initial concern in low-income and minority neighborhoods to prevent this issue.

**Develop Relationships**

In addition to showing initial concern for marginalized neighborhoods, neighborhoods cannot be truly serviced without the development of intentional and personal relationships with existing residents and stakeholders in the area. Chaskin and Joseph (2013) argue that, while there is often agreement about general improvements needed from the development process (such as education and safety), what is considered desirable or not in a neighborhood can greatly differ between races and classes. This can lead to “an increasing tendency to censure legal behaviors (barbequing in public, fixing cars on the street, playing loud music in public) that some . . . find distasteful” (Chaskin & Joseph, 2013). In this way, white and middle class opinions and views are immediately assumed correct and superior over any opposing views, excluding many from the conversation regarding potential change. Because of this, it is essential to form relationships with all constituents to make sure that all needs and opinions are heard and understood. As
previously mentioned, Joice and Bavan (2013) emphasize the importance of presenting opportunities to form community relations rather than simply diversifying an area. In this way, relationships can be formed before and throughout the development process. Furthermore, Richard Florida (2015) describes the need for “people-oriented policies” to assist marginalized groups in all areas of improvement. In order to have intentional procedures enacted, it is essential to have critical and intentional conversations with existing residents and minority groups in order to fully understand the needs of everyone involved.

Give Autonomy

To fully include marginalized groups into the development process, it is important to incorporate the ideas and visions of these residents and to give them autonomy and an influential role in the process. Putnam and Feldstein (2003) illustrate a strong example of community involvement in the development process in their telling of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in Boston, Massachusetts. This neighborhood was completely unstable, having been damaged by white flight and abandonment and ravaged by trash, fires, vacant lots, and more (p. 76). In response to the neighborhood’s condition, members of all ethnic groups in the Dudley Street community created the neighborhood initiative, a completely relationship-based strategy that focused on the neighborhood’s needs, holding community meetings that directly involved all neighborhood members (p. 81). Not only did residents take initiative in the process, but city leaders, lawyers, social workers, and others were able to admit lack of knowledge or fault and give autonomy to the neighborhood residents (p. 82). This was crucial to the success of DSNI and instigated a culture of trust, relationship building, and listening to stories in order to foster an inclusive program.
The authors note that the leadership of the neighborhood residents “refuted the common myth that the residents of the Dudley area and places like it do not really care about their neighborhood (and the implication that their indifference and neglect created the local problems in the first place)” (p. 85). Much of the language surrounding gentrification implies a lack of interest from existing residents and places a substantial amount of blame on them, but this initiative provides insight to the lack of truth in this sentiment. As a result of this program, trash and abandoned cars were removed, a community center was built, and more (p. 85,92); notably, all of this was able to occur while preserving the affordability of the neighborhood as this was an essential element to the Dudley Street residents (p. 88). Due to the emphasis on relationship building and a large sense of investment within this initiative, the authors state that the area “is developing out of the existing assets of the area and the values of the people who live in it” (p. 90). This truly captures the essence of what community development should entail if residents of all races and socioeconomic statuses are included and given autonomy in the improvement of their own neighborhood. Lastly, in the aforementioned Spike Lee lecture regarding community development and gentrification, he wisely proclaimed, “You have to come with respect. There’s a code. There’s people” (Coscarelli, 2014). It is crucial to consider Lee’s words throughout the development process as the foremost concern should be listening to the needs of the existing community and allowing their leadership every step of the way.

**Conclusion**

In order to be adequately informed and aware when working with community development, it is imperative to have a full understanding of how to avoid gentrification and excluding community members. Despite the fact that gentrification often results from positive
intentions to develop neighborhoods into thriving communities, the lack of inclusion of lower-income and minority groups and the focus on white, middle-class groups hinders any real success. Additionally, when looking to desegregate and diversify neighborhoods, it is essential to consider the factors that lead to gentrification so as to avoid harming existing residents. Often progress is interpreted in a way that benefits certain people, leaving others neglected and underserved. While there is no set definition of gentrification, the common theme of excluding lower-income and minority groups and advancement of higher-income whites overrules any argument of overall community benefit. Because of this, it is crucial to take into consideration the ways in which people are systematically excluded from development that is relevant to them and the negative effects this has on both the people and the neighborhoods in order to truly create successful change. Developing intentional and sincere relationships with community constituents is necessary in order to adequately understand their needs in terms of development and to build a system of trust. Neighborhoods cannot fully develop and prosper without this sense of inclusivity and fostering of diversity and collaborative contribution during the community development process.
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