



## ***“Housing Project” in Comparative Perspective: Opportunity or Stigma?***

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I always remember when I first heard about the “project.” It was several years after I started to live in this country. The conversation went something like,

- “... even he doesn’t go near Charlestown.”
- “How come?”
- “it’s really dicey, you don’t wanna go there, ... those projects in Charlestown.”

Listening to the conversation, all I understood was that there are something called projects in Charlestown, and those are not the places where I want to end up. I was not sure if the “project” is a bar, or an isolated park, or some sort of construction job site. I let the conversation go without fully understanding it since I knew it was another one of those concepts that I could not get.

In fact, even after ten years that I have lived in the United States, my husband jokes that I am a “culturally challenged” person. While I perfectly understand the complex political or economical terms and concepts, expressions such as “Jello-shots”

or the relationship between police and donuts were simply missing from my comprehension. Even if I recognize certain words, I sometimes do not get why people are laughing at the moment and why the particular situation is funny.

I did not grow up in this country. I did not experience American school life or watch popular TV programs and talk about the favorite characters. I do not share the **meaning** arising from certain words or expressions. In his theory of **symbolic interactionism**, Blumer suggests that “the meaning of things arise out of the social interaction one has with one’s fellows” (qtd. in Wallace and Wolf 210). According to Mead, **gesture** is a basic component of social act, and because the meaning of it is shared by the social group, gesture is also an action that prompts further response (Wallace and Wolf 203). Gesture, then, becomes a **symbol** which individual gives meanings to based on their past experience and social interaction. Although I have seen much footage or read about life in the United States, I did not experience it on my own. I did not grow up seeing how other American people behave or how they expect me to react to a particular gesture. Thus, I still occasionally misunderstand or fail to comprehend the symbols which are, for people who have grown up in this country, reflections of their common social history.

Living in a different culture, I believe, is one of the only, and the best, ways to experience true **culture shock**. It is a great opportunity to realize how one’s belief is very much constrained by the society the person comes from. By submerging themselves in a totally unfamiliar situation, people for the first time can come to realize that the ideas or the expressions that seem so natural and fundamental are not necessarily shared in the entered world. Such realization is often difficult and an uncomfortable process. Besides, just like me, people are often forced to reexamine their identities after moving

to a different country. Many of them are pressured to conform to a new custom or habit, and the **resocialization** does not only mean adjusting one's behaviors, but it may also involve questioning of one's political or spiritual beliefs. Resocialization occurs when a person has to learn new norms, attitudes or values (Henslin 70). It is often a frustrating experience because the new values or norms are often contradictory to one's previously internalized ideas. In fact, Ayan Ahmed writes, in her article titled "The Complexity of Naive Acceptance of Socially Manipulated Beliefs," how she confronted her religiously based belief after moving to the United States from her native land Somalia (2003/4, 1). She suggests that during her resocialization process she felt **alienated** from both her religious belief and her newly found reality—the American life. For Berger and Luckmann "alienation is defined as a loss of meaning" (Wallace and Wolf 277). During her resocialization, Ahmed experienced the "disintegration of [her] socially constructed knowledge" (Wallace and Wolf 277). The "reality" which she had assumed through her interactions and knowledge of the culture in Somalia suddenly lost its meaning once she arrived in the United States.

Living in a different culture, however, does not mean one has to leave his homeland. For example, in his essay "'Asian': Just A Simple Word" (2003/4), Kuong Ly struggled to understand his multicultural background. He realized that, in general, Asian Americans are seen as **model minority**, the group which is depicted by the majority as studious and accepting conventional American values. He understands the **stereotype** that Asians are hard working and put high value on education to be one that is social constructed in the United States. Yet, Ly also knows that his ethnic group, Cambodian American, has the highest high school dropouts among other Asian population and puts less emphasis on education. American, Asian

American, or Cambodian American, depending on how he identifies himself, Ly recognizes that his socially constructed reality and his notion of **self** may differ. "How you define real?" Morpheus asks in the movie *the Matrix*. The fact is that the reality can be anything. It could be the one I consider to be real. Or it could be the situation that a majority believes to be the truth. In fact, Berger and Luckmann see the world "consist[ing of] multiple realities" (Farganis 332). Each time when a circumstance violates people's notion of authenticity, however, a discord or a culture shock occur and people scramble to comprehend their new reality.

**Phenomenological sociology** encourages individuals not to take their social reality for granted (Wallace and Wolf 235). This theory alerts people to the danger of preconceptions and doubts the idea that everyday knowledge connotes absolute reality. James Farganis writes that such notion of reality arises from "tacit assumptions that are shared by participants in everyday interaction situation" (304). Having moved to the United States from Japan, my first few years in this country were exactly like times spent in phenomenological inquiry. My daily experiences at the time were similar to **breaching** experiments that Garfinkel has developed. Hearing about the "project" was one of them. For the first time, I realized that public housing is not perceived as positive social policy. Rather, at some level, it is considered as a source of problems. I never thought that any Japanese customs or policies were automatically universal or beneficial to other parts of the world. At the same time, I thought that the government funded housing only creates positive outcomes in society. After finding out the totally different view on public housing here in the U.S., I realized that I was only making assumption just as phenomenologists would point out.

I had never thought of myself as having a very traditional Japanese attitude, nor

was I raised to have such idea. In fact, in school, I was often reprimanded for lacking conformity and showing little effort to follow the set rules. At the same time, I realized that even simple customs, such as greeting or conversations at a checking counter, all consist of “unspoken rules” (Farganis 304). What I considered as normal behaviors after all were very much the products of Japanese culture that I internalized. The internalized ideas are so powerful that for a while after I came to the United States, I thought I was being discriminated against or I was doing something wrong. For instance, in the society where I came from presumption is taken rather seriously. For the Japanese, to overestimate is often considered as rude or even a lie. People are very careful and make a great effort to be as precise as possible if they are not certain about something. Consequently, if I am asked to wait for ten minutes to see a doctor, he will be ready in ten minutes to see me. If a store clerk says a certain product is in stock in three days, I can pick it up on the third day (and usually it arrives sooner than expected).

In the United States, however, such estimates often mean lucky guesses, and before I realized the different attitude toward the assumptions, I even thought people are deliberately misleading me. Blau states, in explaining **social exchange** theory, that “social exchange creates trust between people” (Wallace and Wolf 331). He also suggests that society is constructed upon people’s exchange of relationship, and “rewards granted served to strengthen social ties” (Farganis 264). On the other hand, “inadequate rewards lead to deterioration of social ties” and the “behaviors that elicit negative reactions [...] are not likely to be repeated” (Farganis 263). Consequently, in my view at the time, the mutual **trust** that I thought I had between the store clerks and me was violated. The exchanges that I experienced did not offer me **intrinsic rewards**, and I started to fear face-to-face

interactions with strangers. By having to deal with contradicting values or customs, and sometimes forcing myself to act differently according to the social **norms**, I have become more critical of the reality that I think I am in.

At the time when I first had the conversation I rarely visited the big cities, and had never seen the places called the project. I had no idea what that meant either. Even after I found out that it is a public housing, I still did not understand the stereotype and subculture that were created around the housing projects. According to symbolic interactionism, **language** is an important symbol. In addition, “the process of self-indication [is] essential to [such] interpretation” of symbols (Wallace and Wolf 206). In order to have a well functioning interaction, a language which processes shared meanings is necessary. Even though I speak and have good understanding of English, I only knew literate definition of the word project. Blumer suggests that during “self-indication, individuals point out certain stimuli to themselves and then interpret the appearance of the stimuli to themselves” (Wallace and Wolf 207). Wallace and Wolf also write that “to interpret and understand the meaning of the interaction, each of the parties must take the role of the other” (207). As a result of repeated use, the word “project” itself now has become a symbol to signify social dysfunctions rather than to explain what it is—public housing. In Japanese, housing development is called *dan-chi*. Whenever I heard about the public housings in the United States, in my mind, I interpreted it to word *dan-chi* which does not represent anything intrinsically negative. I never had a conversation about the public housing in the United States or discussed the problems with the place before. Thus, I never had an occasion to process and interpret what the word “project” symbolizes to others and to me.

In addition, my difficulty in understanding fully what “project” means comes

from the fact that I had not yet internalized the idea and the symbols. Even though people explained to me what the place is like, I could not understand what the words such as poverty, violence, or drugs and alcohol really signify when we talk about public housing. According to Wallace and Wolf, **internalization** is a process that legitimizes value and norms of society (281). The process does not happen over night. In fact, according to Berger and Luckmann internalization is the last stage of a dialectical process. The first stage is **externalization** in which people externalize their subjective ideas or meanings so that such beliefs become their social reality (Wallace and Wolf 278, 279). Then, in the moment of **objectivation** individuals see the reality as ordered and with set rules. The notion of the project as something negative was not in my socially constructed reality. Since I never heard of or seen the projects on my own, I did not have any subjective view toward it to make the idea my reality through an externalization. I also did not go through the process of objectivation; to see the negative view of project as an "objective fact." Thus, in my socially constructed reality, which I have created upon my interpretation and observation, the public housings were still an attractive social policy. Accordingly, I never internalized the concept the same way as most American people.

Another reason that I had trouble understanding the meaning behind the project is that I have always perceived the public housing as a positive aspect of society through my own experience. I myself grew up in a public housing in Japan. I remember having many friends who lived in the same apartment or in houses next to the development. The public housing is the only home that I know of. In fact, my parents still live in the same apartment where two of my siblings and I were raised. Of course, the Japanese idea of public housing is very different from its American counterpart, and it is important to make the dis-

inction. In Japan government subsidized apartments are everywhere and they are often very well kept. Almost any good size town has its own developments. Usually they are just barely enough for a family of four, but such housings are very popular for young nuclear families as a stepping stone to purchase their own house. Most young tenants consider public housing as a tool which enables them to attain **upward social mobility** by saving money for their own house or better education for their children. Even though housing developments in Japan are aimed for low-income people, living in the developments does not signify poverty. Instead, it only reflects individuals' planned or willing conscious choices. Thus, there is no stigma for living or growing up in the housing developments in Japan.

In addition, for stronger community building and for the benefit of the local businesses, public housings are often viewed as advantageous. People consider that such housings provide good environment for children and its surroundings. The housing developments frequently appear in the dramas or movies to depict ordinary family life. Nearby small businesses profit from a large population of young family as well. Therefore, when a small town hopes to attract young professional families, it often invests in construction of new public housings. The differences of imagery associated with housing development in Japan and the United States is stark. Once I realized what the housing project means in this country, however, I became very intrigued to know more about it.

Contrary to the positive views on public housing development in Japan, general attitude toward its American counterpart is troubling. I believe that the project reflects numerous problems and dysfunctions of society from domestic crime to failed government policies in the United States. First of all, the **manifest function**, anticipated and apparent purpose, of public housing is

to assist unprivileged people and provide them opportunity. Nevertheless, the system is overwhelmed by its *latent function*. According to Merton, latent function is unintended consequences of social phenomena. The aspects such as stigma, stereotype, and criminalization of people in the projects seem to overshadow the original purpose. As the result, public housing in the United States further disenfranchises unprivileged people and it creates bigger gap between the residents and the rest of society.

Compared to Japan, the United States has clearer social *stratification* which is the “rank order of social status” (Dahrendorf qtd. in Wallace and Wolf 121). In most communities, there are sections known to have expensive elaborate houses and others where it is considered not preferable to live. The location where people live, in this country, generally signifies their *social class*. Weber suggested that social class is a group of people who share similar life chances, opportunity, and economic condition (Farganis 116). In major cities, housing development often retains its place in the lowest in the totem pole. In Weber’s view, the project itself becomes a significant characteristic of a social class. First, people who are living in the public housing have economical hardship. For instance, in Massachusetts, people who are eligible to live in state public housing “earn no more than 80 percent of area median income” (State of Massachusetts). Moreover, from their more than 20 percent smaller income, the tenants must pay up to 32 percent of it as their rent. This is considerably different from many Japanese public housings in which, for instance, the monthly rent of 3 room apartment my parents live in ranges from only \$90 up to \$120 which is well below 10 percent of low to moderate income. According to the U. S. Census, the overall average households in the country spend roughly 33 percent of their income for housing. It indicates that people in the projects who are

already financially disadvantaged still have to spend the same ratio of their income as the rest of the population.

The cost of housing compared to income has been rising sharply as well. In fact, Stegman writes that:

the national median housing wage is what a household would have to earn to pay the HUD Fair Market Rent on a two-bed-room apartment using no more than 30 percent of its income. In 2000, that figure was \$13.87 an hour, compared to the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour. (65)

*Relative poverty* is a poverty measured by lack of access to wealth and income compared with the rest of population. People who are eligible to live in public housings are already in or close to relative poverty. Since the government fails to mitigate their burden on housing, the residents suffer from an additional financial difficulty. The tenants in the projects often lose their chance of upward social mobility due to such economical hardship. Consequently by gathering disadvantaged families in one particular location and failing to provide adequate service, public housings become a *social institution* (structured system that functions to serve social needs or reflect ideas) that further highlight social class.

Once the projects become a social institution that symbolizes poverty and other stereotypes, the negative perception of it spread widely and deeply among the rest of the population. Many people who are lucky enough not to experience living in the project often suggest the tenants are the cause of the problems. For example, according to *labeling theory*, “the labels people are given affect their own and other’s perceptions of them” (Henslin 150). Thus, once individuals are labeled as they are people from the project, society, as well as

the residents themselves change their behaviors accordingly to such a reputation. In addition, according to the notion of *self-fulfilling prophecy*, once predictions, such as hardship in the project or difficulty to be successful, are made, people act toward the predictions and cause them to happen. For many people, living in the project, which is aimed to support unprivileged individuals, itself becomes a disadvantage, and causes a vicious cycle of poverty and hardship.

Moreover, according to the *rational choice theory*, people are considered to be “rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals” (Wallace and Wolf 294). Even scholars apply the idea of rational choice theory to the housing problems in the United States. For instance, in his article explaining why subsidized housing is unnecessary, Howard Husock, at the Kennedy School of government at Harvard University, reasons that people who “can’t afford anything [...] may be the result of bad life choices and the wrong values” (par. 11). Such sentiments totally ignore the facts regarding the people who live in public housing. In fact, Stegman states that:

the majority of public housing residents are not welfare-dependent single women with children. Almost a third (32 percent) are elderly, and another 16 percent are [...] people with [...] disability. (68)

In addition, individuals like Husock claim that housing issue is a part of free market capitalism, and poor people also benefit from it. Husock suggests that market driven system is the answer to creating affordable housing (par. 14, 15). He writes that similar to used cars, used houses, when new homes are built, get “passed along to those of more and more modest means.” (14)

*Capitalism*, based on private ownership of capital and free competition is often

cited—like in Husock’s writing—as beneficial to society. Marxists, however, oppose the idea suggesting that capitalism exploits workers and the capitalists accumulate wealth and power at the expense of working class. Consequently, *conflict theory*, based on the notion that society is a result of constant struggles among classes, can also shed light on this housing issue. In fact, contrary to Husock’s suggestion, construction of a new house normally does not benefit unprivileged people to acquire cheap place to live. Instead, as a general trend, the price of housing goes up much faster than inflation and wages, leading to lack of affordability of housing, and what Marxist theory calls workers’ *alienation* from their labor power and lives. The movie *the Big One* explores the ordinary every day people who suddenly find themselves without job with no fault of their own, but due to the actions of profit driven companies. The movie focuses on *multinational corporations* that downsize their facilities or move their factories to overseas for pursuit of larger profit. People, who worked for such companies their entire lives, are left without any options or skill to be competitive in the ever shrinking labor market. Thousands of people lose their jobs every year, and instantly, they are forced into poverty. Unlike Husock’s assumption, “bad life choice and the wrong values” have nothing to do with the housing crisis of these laid off workers (par. 11).

Conflict theorists also suggest that as a part of their alienation, working families are manipulated into and pitted against one another. For example, rather than fighting against the unfair favorable treatment that government gives to large corporations (such as tax incentives), individual citizens blame poor people (such as living in the project) for welfare or Medicare expense. Marx called such attitudes as modes of *false consciousness* in which the working class people are manipulated into seeing society as what the ruling class wants

them to believe. *Class consciousness*, on the other hand, means the way people in a class realize the true condition that they are in. The multinational corporations that oppose raising the minimum wage, or move the factories to overseas for their own advantage, hope to conceal workers to achieve their true consciousness. Thus, in order to keep working families content, the capitalists induce false consciousness to the working class, telling them that the problems in society are caused by poor people themselves, such individuals who live in places like housing projects.

Even after I realized the problems surrounding public housing in this country, I still believe that it is an important function and it can have a positive effect in society. Before actually helping low-income people, however, their stigmatizing and stereotyping about public housing have to be eliminated. Numerous studies have shown that “living in a high-poverty neighborhood can undermine the well-being of families and children, and that affordable housing alone cannot revitalize a distressed neighborhood” (Brookings Institution 4). Although internalized ideas are difficult to change, when more researches and their findings are exposed, stereotypes about the project may be erased eventually. In addition, because of lack of affordable housing and decent jobs more people face the reality, and hopefully realize that subsidized housings are important and practical to everyone. I feel fortunate to have grown up in Japanese housing development. I know first hand how society as a whole can benefit from such a social policy when it is applied properly.

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