

Probing the ghetto

Scientists find they are barely scratching the surface in efforts to understand patterns setting the ghetto apart

Conservative Vice Lords Inc. is a not-for-profit organization created to promote self help in our community. Our goals are to help people who need a last chance by beginning small business, training programs and community service programs, which we Conservative Vice Lords would control and manage. . . .

That statement came from a former Chicago gang, a group of some 8,000 to 10,000 young men, mostly in their twenties and early thirties, who still control a section of the West Side ghetto.

Once an old-style gang, the CVL has become a force for economic and social progress in its territory. With the

help of private foundation money, the CVL and two other Chicago groups have established a financial resources corporation, through which members plan to set up small businesses and plow the proceeds into community improvement.

There are other such former gangs in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Philadelphia.

They are Black Power in action, says Harry Cain, chief of the center for study of metropolitan and regional mental health problems, a two-year-old research-action program at the National Institute of Mental Health.

The center maintains informal contact with the CVL and Blackstone Rangers in Chicago, with the 12th and

Oxford Street Filmmakers Inc. in Philadelphia and with other city ghetto youth groups, most of them former street gangs. "We see them as being very hopeful . . . potentially useful organizations," says Cain.

It was, in fact, the Blackstone Rangers, cooperating with the police and authorities, that helped keep Chicago's South Side ghetto quiet last week, while the West Side erupted. "They didn't do it for establishment reasons or because they were asked to," says a scientist close to the situation there. "They did it out of their own concern for community conservation."

Such groups are one of the best sources of organizational strength in ghettos, critically short on organization. "Any concept of mental health has to include an element of mastery over the environment," Cain points out. "These people are trying to take the environment into their own hands."

The last word has not been said on Black Power, or on race, or on social conflict. Social scientists have only begun to study these issues with a range of research projects aimed at the ghetto. The answers will begin appearing later this year. (see p. 390)

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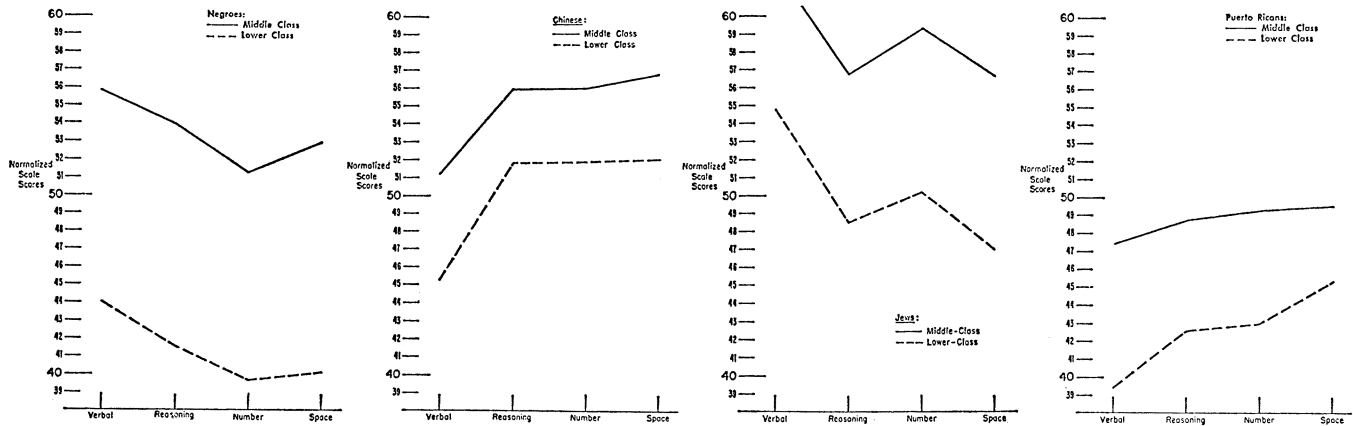
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C. J. CONNELL, Registrar



Stodolsky and Lesser

Ethnic groups show distinctive patterns of mental ability; curves within each group run parallel, regardless of class.

There is now, for instance, a debate brewing over the old concept of ethnology; it owes much of its renewed life to the emergence of black consciousness and the kind of independence the former gangs are showing.

The idea—that lower class Negroes are culturally distinct from whites—was once an instrument of white racism. Now it has grabbed the imaginations of both Black Nationalists and a number of social scientists who search for cultural differences while assigning no racial superiority or inferiority to them.

Scientists with a cultural view now challenge the bulk of poverty research linking ghetto life with social pathology. Instead they seek ethnic patterns to explain differences between whites and lower class Negroes in language and family structure. Middle-class Negroes are now being seen as people who have had to reject their own identity to enter a white-dominated culture.

"This is terribly exciting to black nationalists," says Dr. Stephen Baratz, a psychologist with NIMH's metropolitan study center.

"You mention cultural differences to a middle-class Negro and he will call you a racist. But ask a Black Nationalist, 'Why don't you be like us?' and he thinks you're a racist."

By not taking cultural differences into account, the social sciences have acted out a subtle form of racism, Dr. Baratz believes. "They have given the Negro a really unfair break by comparing him to whites when his intelligence and cognitive abilities are different from whites."

"Ghetto residents are going to discover that social scientists haven't done them any favors," warns Cain.

They have looked at the Negro family structure in ghettos and called it

pathological because it does not follow white patterns, says Cain. "All kinds of blame are assigned to it." But it is also possible that the family structure reflects a different cultural strain. Lacking a tight family unit, the child is able to spread out his family to a far greater extent than are whites. He finds foster uncles and aunts and these adults reciprocate. "There may be strengths in the ghetto that are not receiving any attention."

Similarly, Dr. Baratz and his wife, Dr. Joan C. Baratz, a linguist, propose that Negro dialect is not poor English, but a separate dialect, distinctive in structure and syntax.

Refusal of schools to recognize those differences have made poor readers out of children who could learn to read quite well, if taught standard English as a second language, they believe.

And the educational community was much attracted this year by a Harvard University study on the mental patterns of four ethnic groups—Chinese, Jews, Negroes and Puerto Ricans. Each group, regardless of classes within it, had its own distinctive pattern of mental abilities, Drs. Susan S. Stodolsky and Gerald S. Lesser discovered, and they conclude that the task may now be to provide ethnic groups with specific education which maximizes the abilities of each, "even at the expense of magnifying differences among the groups."

However very little research has yet been done to document serious cultural distinctions between white and black Americans.

On the other hand, a good deal of poverty-oriented research is around to link poor economic conditions, particularly underemployment of Negro men, with despair, broken families, disturbed children and other ghetto ills.

The poverty research may have been through white-clouded glasses, as cultural advocates claim; nevertheless, if the people of the ghettos share the values of the larger society, conditions there cannot be salutary.

They do share those values, argues Dr. Elliot Liebow, anthropologist at NIMH and author of "Tally's Corner," a study of Negro streetcorner men. The young lower-class Negro wants the same things a white man wants—a wife, children and the means to support them, says Dr. Liebow. The much talked-about disorganization in ghetto family life cannot be a valid cultural pattern, since the people themselves do not like it or want it.

The humiliated man on Tally's Corner and the proud man from Chicago bent on raising his community by the bootstraps seem from different planets. Instead they are from the same society. The sharp distinctions social scientists now see in ghetto life only indicate how little they really know about it.

On this kind of problem, the riot commission report casts little light.

As a social science document the commission report is weak, particularly in its understanding of ghetto residents; but as an expose of social injustice, it is powerful and it reached the public conscience at a critical point.

But now that the injustice has been exposed, there remains the deeper goal—the wiping out of racial barriers. That task will require research on broad social and educational fronts.

If the United States should commit itself to the task of building a peaceful integrated society, social science will become critical. But before policy makers and social scientists can work together, they may have their own conflicts to resolve.

P. McB.