Civic Engagement within Minority Communities

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Abstract

Minority communities lack resources and are faced with social barriers that leave them vulnerable. These communities are often low income, poorly maintained neighborhoods and with community members that are not civically engaged. This literature review looks at the existing literature on civic engagement and positive community outcomes in minority communities. The method used for the purpose of collecting information on this topic was to make connections using 4 peer reviewed articles and their findings on community involvement from a marginalized perspective. Research showed implication for positive outcomes when minority communities collectively worked together and participated in civic activities. The articles reviewed indicated that minorities' civic involvement is related to overall community health and advancements.

Key words: Community, Resources, Civic engagement, Oppression.

Introduction

Communities of color throughout the United States are failing to thrive for many reasons. These communities are often low income areas that lack resources and community assets; and are faced with poor life factors. This literature review intends to identify how civic engagement of people in minority communities help increase sustainable positive outcomes and help create healthy communities. Often, minority communities lack civic engagement, which impacts their everyday lives. Whereas, actively engaging in civic participation as a collective community would create social change and tackle some of these disabling barriers.

Social Problem

Minority communities are often poverty stricken and lack basic community resources. There are fewer opportunities for minorities to thrive in the neighborhoods they live in. These communities have poorer education systems, experience poorer health outcomes and have access to fewer healthy options in regards to quality care and food. One reason to these disparities is systematic oppression. O'Neal (Chapter 3) explores acts of oppression within the US on people of color. She states that the impact of oppression on minorities results in disparities on income, education, health and within criminal justice of minorities in the US (O'Neal, Chapter 3). These vulnerable populations are often seeking resources and support through social services to address their needs. These barriers result in an array of problems, and they are often ostracized by main stream society. In addition, minorities are less engaged and involved in civic participation than their counterparts. Black communities reported less civic involvement then those in white communities (Mitchell et al, 1981).

Significance to Social Work Practice

This research topic is significant to social work practice because these disparities create various barriers to service delivery and client accessibility. Additionally, community health is related to the well-being of individuals and families. This is better explained by Bronfenbrenner Ecological Perspective. Also, bridging this gap in knowledge could better help social workers empower and advocate for civic engagement, implementing preventative strategies to addressing some disparities minority communities face through civic engagement.

Background

Minority groups experience different forms of oppression that create social barriers. How this relates to the social issue discussed is that these oppressive systems create barriers that contribute to poor community health. These barriers stem from a long history of racial inequalities and systemic oppression adapted in the United States. According to Young (1990), oppression can be divided into five categories. These categories as described are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (Young, 1990, p. 36). Systematic oppression can be described as the applied manifestation through attitudes and behaviors, policies and practices and values, beliefs and customs (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2013, p.27).

Whereas, social construction according to O'Neal (Chapter 2) demonstrates the way individuals think of themselves and others within a social environment. Social constructions also influence the way people behave towards one another in social environments. Historically, those in power had the money, they were privilege, and were the ones creating laws and policies. During this time Europeans became the dominant culture governing society. These privilege groups of people forced their social norms on minorities and created a society that benefited them; and exploited minorities for their gain. When looking at systemic oppression it is important to understand who these systems and institutions were meant to protect and serve.

Minorities had no rights; they were in no position to contribute to policies, structures or advocate for equality and inclusion. Oppression has been viewed as a colonial domination of a dominant group on those less advantaged (Young, 1990). Since then, this societal gap continues to create social barriers and systems that excluded minorities. Social construction is a key theory that helps example historical effects on minorities in a multicultural perspective that still effects people today (O'Neal, Chapter 1). It is important for minority communities to engage and participate in civic actions in order to combat these systemic barriers created generations ago.

Existing Literature

In reviewing the literature on civic engagement in minority communities there was positive implication in each study. The literature research questions were similar in terms of community involvement; however topics varied. Bloemraad and Terriquez (2016) looked at cultural engagement with community based organizations for advancing the health in immigrant and low-income communities of color. This study's' focus was to empower individuals by building civic capacity and self efficacy, encourage solidarity by building networks, and push for people to have a voice in policies that affect them (Bloemraad, & Terriquez, 2016). They looked at 13 low-income, predominantly immigrant communities.

Bloemraad and Terriquez (2016), argue that organized civil groups connect individual actions, policy changes, economic structures and social hierarchies. This literature suggests that civic engagement and psychological empowerment of this marginalized population resulted in positive effects on participants' mental health, and reduce the likelihood of substance abuse and violent behavior (Bloemraad, & Terriquez, 2016). Lastly, Bloemraad and Terriquez (2016) conclude that civic infrastructures are critical to part to cultural engagement and positive cultural

health. Limitations to this study include the use of only youth participants and there was no non-controlled group to compare.

Mitchell et al. (1981) examined the differences in the use of community resources and networks and the experience of community life of black communities and white communities. They found that black participants in their study reported less community satisfaction and were less civically engaged. In addition, black community members reported less community strengths, relied greater on informal resources and had more service-related community deficits (Mitchell et al, 1981). The inactive citizens in black communities displayed less satisfaction then inactive members in white communities (Mitchell et al, 1981). This research is limited because they excluded other minority groups and only focused on two specific communities. They also relied solely on self-reports and there was a gap in sample size of black and white citizens.

Ohmer et al. (2016) looked at strategies to preventing violence in disadvantaged communities by building collective efficacy and improving community health. This research found that minorities need to first build social cohesion and gain informal social control in their communities in order to resolve issues. In addition, they found that the presences of collective efficacy help change community norms and decrease violence and make for better health outcomes. Relevantly, the method used to combat the social issue was a community-based intervention.

During this 6-week intervention phase an important component was developing community partnerships with community-based organizations and residents to build capacity among the residents (Ohmer et al., 2016). Researchers found implications for community growth by getting residents involved and engaged with external resources (Ohmer et al., 2016). Limitations include having no compared group and there was no follow up to see how residents were doing after the

intervention. Also, this intervention took place in an area that was undergoing gentrification. There are no indications to any existing changes that played a part in the outcome.

Lastly, Lardier (2018) researched the use of empowerment in regards to youth development, well-being and activism among minority groups. They found that psychological empowerment and related empowerment were predictors to community participation and an individual's sense of community (Lardier, 2018). Community participation had a positive direct effect on both ethnic identity and psychological empowerment. Limitations to Lardier (2018) research are that minority groups looked at were only from Black and Hispanic groups. As well as he strictly focused on youth and excluded older adults.

There is literature on each independent and dependent variable of the research question. However, studies are limited in answering the specific question of civic engagement of minorities and positive community outcomes. Based on the studies reviewed researchers discuss implications of civic engagement, however they were related to various contributing factors. While some research viewed civic engagement a social context. Furthermore, the findings did implicate positive indications that communities of colors benefit from working collectively across most settings to overcome social barriers within their community.

Implications to Research

Each article gives a new perspective to civic engagement within minority communities. For example, Mitchell et al. (1981) states that the role of the individual within community services systems could affect resource utilization, and the experience of community life. This indicates community roles have an impact or how resources are utilized and how members see their community health. Additionally, Bloemraad and Terriquez (2016) say that education and privileged social positions is often an indicator of civic participation. They also suggest that

change comes from working collectively especially in marginalized communities. Also that the use of community based organizations help better health outcomes and promote long term future civic and political engagement (Bloemraad, &Terriquez, 2016). Interestingly, Ohmer et al. (2016) suggest that before civic involvement minority communities must first develop collective efficacy. Community members must identify shared norms and values in order to work together to create change. They also must build trust with one another to gain social capital (Ohmer et al, 2016). Lastly, Lardier (2018) suggest that minorities psychological components play a big part in the outcome of community participation as well as how citizens view what being a community is.

Apply to Practice

This research will help social workers better understand how civic engagement effects minorities. Also, this gives implications for civic planning that identify strategies to address community concerns, by promoting community participation and cohesion. Incorporate civic learning and capacity building when organizing group activities and encourage communities' organization to be more involved with residents. Also, bring findings during community forums such as town hall meetings and even start up meeting in these communities that may not conduct them. Advocate for more public awareness on community developing and the inclusion of minorities. According to the American Psychological Association, civic engagement can be defined in several ways. A relevant example they provide is the collective actions of individuals to identify and address issues they face within their community. In conclusion, civic engagement comes in many forms such as voluntarism, involvement in electoral participation, and other efforts to directly address problems. As a social worker, bringing public awareness and empowering minorities can lead to social changes in across the country.

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