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Which Way Out?

Favela as Lethal Hall of Mirrors

Introduction

This note offers a three-decade perspective on conditions that shape place, safety and voice in several squatter settlements of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The note describes the dangers of favela life and explores mobility, both socio-economic and geographic, for a second generation of low income families. Survey data show that social networks are an important mechanism of change, and that over time, networks have shrunk (i.e., lost capacity to function), making it more difficult for some residents to find their way out of a lethal environment. By seeing how network ties have broken down over several generations, we gain insight into the downward spiral of community dysfunction. This perspective leads to a question about the conceptual framework advanced in the seminal notes for this meeting: In the alchemy of social change, should our focus be on resilience or on something more like transformation and adaptation?

Background

The places analyzed here—favelas and suburban neighborhoods in the North zone of Rio de Janeiro—were subject of a study that covered several generations of residents and former residents.¹ Surveys showed that over three generations, many favelados have increased incomes, attained a wide array of consumer goods, and benefited from vastly improved infrastructure. Further, some second and third generation families have moved out of the favela. But even when they manage socio-economic or spatial mobility, subjects of the studies do not always achieve the safety, the status as “*gente*” (as “person” or “human being”) nor are they able to get the jobs they strive to attain. The most striking changes detected over the 30 years is a sense of hopelessness accompanied by a rise of drug-related violence and the attendant stigmatization of the favela. Also notable is the stubborn persistence of poverty, even for many of those who escape. At the same time, some who have risen in socio-economic terms while remaining *in* the favela find themselves trapped in a lethal environment.

Violent Insecurity

¹ The “Rio-Restudy” is based on longitudinal survey data, life histories, and participant observation of 750 households in three low-income communities in Rio de Janeiro, initially collected by Prof. Janice Perlman in 1968-69. With collaboration and support from the author’s unit at the World Bank, nearly 40 percent of the original sample was re-interviewed beginning in 1999, and an additional cohort of interviewees was added in 2001. The term ‘*favela*’ in Brazilian Portuguese, refers to a settlement whose residents (‘*favelados*’) have no legal title to the land they occupy. The term “*bairro*” means low-income suburban residential neighborhood. Hereafter these terms will be used as English terms.

Survey data reaffirm a general picture that already troubles the citizens of Rio. Close to 20 percent in each surveyed generation had some family member killed in “wars” that involve various combinations of drug dealers, gangs and the police. Robbery, muggings, and personal attacks have been experienced by someone in the family of more than half of respondents in all three generations interviewed in 2001.

The presence of police in the community makes matters worse, not better, at least in terms of perceived security of the residents. Nearly half the interviewees responded that both police and drug traffickers were responsible for committing acts of violence against the community. The distinction between community and state was drawn sharply and tellingly by young persons speaking in a focus group conducted by a local expert in community violence. The “state” is represented by the most visible form they know: the police. Young males in the focus group spoke in terms of the community, the “us”—the young, the understanding, and warm human beings—having to struggle against the “them”—the state, the cold, the uncaring, and the cruel.²

Stigma of Place

The larger society stigmatizes this repulsive battleground—mainly but not only the favelas—where drug-related violence takes place. When a favela resident applies for work, the job interview, indeed if one is arranged at all, does not last long. Once the place of residence is known to be a favela, employers no longer show interest. Interviewees recount stories of discrimination in many forms, from refusal of mundane requests for delivery of purchased goods, to refusals by taxi drivers to enter favelas, denials of credit in stores, reluctance on the part of friends to pay visits inside the favela.

In turn, it may be that the perception of residents to this rejection and to their own surroundings—like the proverbial hall of mirrors—is a critical factor in shaping their own understanding and strategies in life. Certainly the stigma of living in a favela is, at least in the eyes of nearly 80 percent of all three generations interviewed, the most important source of discrimination in their lives. Violence and stigma may also be a factor in shutting down mechanisms of change.

Changing Places

Geographical and socio-economic mobility are typical modalities of change, and despite the adversities of stigma and violence, both of these pathways are visible in the communities studied.³ Table One combines these two measures of mobility in relation to the children of subjects originally interviewed in 1969. We focus on this second

² Ignacio Cano, personal communication, August 2005. Wording is by the authors to paraphrase Cano.

³ Socio-economic status is a composite index used by the Brazilian statistical agencies. The index is composed of number of years of schooling of the interviewee, number of persons per room in the interviewee’s dwelling, and presence of various domestic goods, such as radio, TV, refrigerators, and cars or trucks. Geographical status refers to two types of housing, ranging from low to high. These are: 1) favela, illegal settlements which are violent and carry a stigma; 2) neighborhoods or “*bairros*” which refer to legal or quasi-legal suburban residential developments for low-income populations.

generation, mean age just over 39, because they are in the middle of their working years, earn nearly twice as much income per capita as their parents, and have moved through a significant part of the domestic cycle, having raised families of their own and confronted the opportunities and barriers of mobility.

For pathways to a better life—“up” the socio-economic ladder or “out” from a favela, say, to a *bairro* (neighborhood)—significant fractions of the children of favelados and *bairro* residents remain poor. Most notable is that the proportions of low to high socio-economic status are nearly reverse images of each other in the favelas as compared to the *bairros*.

Table One
Typology of Mobility Children’s Generation
 (Percentage distribution by column)

Socio-Economic Status	Favela	<i>Bairros</i>
High	15.1	44.1
Medium	34.9	30.1
Low	50.0	25.2
N	106	127

Source: Survey results

Survey respondents with high socio-economic status but still living in favelas account for a significant fraction of all high socio-economic cases in the study. Families in this category have moved up the socio-economic ladder, but their progress is double-edged. They have increased tangible amenities (e.g., appliances, satellite TV); many houses have been expanded with multiple stories. Some of these households consist of extended family compounds. A few have occupied the same residence for several decades. The low fixed costs of housing and residence close to sources of employment are two of the chief advantages of living in favelas in the first place. But the onset of drug violence has changed the picture. A high proportion of the families state a desire to find a safer place to live.

Though some of these “up but not out” favela families may prefer to stay in the favela, it is more likely that they are impeded from moving out because appreciation in the value of real estate, upgraded from both public and private investments, cannot be converted on the market into private value. Property values in favelas may be suppressed because of the dangers and threats related to drug trafficking.

What about the other end of the spectrum, those who have moved to safer neighborhoods and have proper title? We see a converse pattern of compared to that of the favela group just discussed. A greater proportion of families in the *bairros* are better off in socio-economic terms, even though about a quarter of them fall into the lowest status category. They may be said to “out but not up.” These families have a proper address (i.e., less stigmatized) and though these residents have property title and greater security, a significant fraction is still stuck in poverty.

Life circumstances have changed radically during the adult lives of these families, with continuing migration, a decline in the urban economy generally, and the onset of drug-related violence. Conditions are utterly different in physical, social, economic and cultural terms compared to any generation in the past and to the socio-physical circumstances of each type of settlement. How then have some found a way out?

Secrets of Mobility—Embedded Mechanisms of Change

Of the many mechanisms of change—income growth, migration, political action, self-help organizing—social capital is often seen as an important factor. The survey data for the populations as a whole indicate a shrinkage of social capital, for instance, associational memberships has dropped precipitously and the perception of “lack of unity” in the settlement has increased with each generation, irrespective of place of residence.

Networks of exchange are a common denominator in social capital, one that is “embedded” in many ways into the social, political and economic fabric of a community (Granovetter 1973). Survey data indicate that the presence of external ties—social network links to outside the immediate neighborhood—is associated positively with socio-economic mobility (significant at .015 or better). The data also indicate (with similar significance) that favela residents are most likely to report narrow networks, of family and friends only, i.e., not outsiders.

These findings are consistent with Granovetter’s “weak ties” thesis which suggests in part that an enclave mentality sometimes takes hold of the poor, increasing their plight of being “stuck.” For these families, sources of information and knowledge contract inward into a small, immediate circle of family and friends, and this inward orientation can be self-limiting.

One question to be explored is whether such external ties can be promoted and, if so, whether more extensive bridging ties of this external or “weak” type would help to facilitate mobility. Evidence from elsewhere in Brazil (for instance, in a community development project of Rebeira Azul in Bahia) suggests that programs to facilitate civic exchange does have positive effects on community development.

Closing Observations

These observations open a sobering perspective on the idea of healthy communities, resilience and change. First, the cases suggest several ways out. Some move “up” in socio-economic terms and build a perimeter of protection; others move “out” into safer neighborhoods. For most still exposed to daily lethal violence in the favela, the hardening of the arteries of social exchange may be a contributing to a downward spiral. Voice in these places stays confined to narrow, somewhat insular channels. Policy interventions may help if they open new opportunities for change from outside the favela.

Second, the concept of resilience has limitations in these circumstances. Residents see the favela as a place to escape, a condition to be changed. It is more than a neighborhood for which resilience will help in recovery from floods or pandemics, as depicted in Wallace

and Wallace (2008). Nor do favelas have common ethnic and linguistic traditions that form the bedrock of social identity. Residents in the favelas referred to in this paper, like the billion squatters in the developing world, live in an open and kaleidoscopic world, often without a clear referent identity. For most urban squatters in the world, the issue is not so much resuscitating lost sense of self as much as it is having the resources to cope with adversity.

The challenge is to assemble many kinds of help, not merely social capital mentioned in this note. The conditions of the urban poor require a transformation of wider physical, social, and economic circumstances starting with improvements in security and sense of place. One key step on the way out for the poor would be to have clearer channels through which contacts and messages—both outward and inward—are able to travel far and wide.

References

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