Locking Down the South Bronx

Susan Belford[1]

Abstract: In this brief analysis is the intended beginning of a systemic integral analysis of the social systems and structures in use in the South Bronx, New York City. Informed by the writing of Jonathan Kozol as well as current articles in the New York Times, this analysis uses the systems theories of Talcott Parsons and Donella Meadows and the human identity work of Vern Redekop to understand the exterior and interior dimensions of systemic oppression as experienced by residents of the South Bronx.

Introduction

"Where we live, it's locked down… we can't go out and play" says 12 year old Jeremiah. (Kozol, 1995, p. 32) The theme of being "locked down" recurs throughout *Amazing Grace*. Kozol describes children being taken on day trips out of the borough only to burst into tears on their return; a Bronx school teacher notes that the aspirations of the young are "locked in" to a menial level "that suburban kids would scorn" (p. 125); freedom of movement and enjoyment of public spaces is "locked down" in the interests of security with barred gates and windows, check-points and "safety corridors" (p. 136); and in any twelve month period, in a Borough with a population of 1,203,789, approximately 130,000 men and women, 92 percent of them black or Hispanic, are "locked up" in the local 415-acre Ryker's Island prison or other city jails (p. 144). Kozol paints a compelling portrait of an oppressive urban social mechanism that appears to be dedicated to the "locking down" of a specific portion of the population, with horrendous results in terms of lives lost, blighted, and maimed. The horror of this is underscored when one realizes it is not ancient history; the current relevance of Kozol's narrative can be seen in a May 11th, 2010 New York Times headline that reads *Large stretch of Bronx highest hunger rate in the nation: survey.*

The social mechanism described by Kozol is best understood as a complex dynamic system in which "a set of things," such as the housing, health, education, and security bureaucracies, are "interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behaviour over time," (Meadows, 2008, p. 2) such as the "locking down" referenced above. Complex systems are rooted in social paradigms, "the shared social agreements about the nature of reality" (Meadows, 2008, p. 163). Systems that oppress, such as that operating in the South Bronx, breed conflict between individuals caught within the oppressive social system as well as between those within the system and those outside it.

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[1] Susan Belford lives in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. She is a mediator and group facilitator currently completing a Master's degree in the Civic Development and Systemic Transformation concentration in the Conflict Analysis and Engagement graduate program at Antioch University, Midwest. Jonathan Kozol's 1995 book *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* was the professor-assigned focus of a mid-term analytical writing assignment in the program's Structures and Systems of Conflict course. The assignment was to apply course concepts in analyzing real world material. This paper was submitted as that mid term analysis.

In order to generate a complete analysis of this complex system, it would be useful to adopt an integral perspective. For reasons of my context in writing it including time and space, I do not carry out a full AQAL analysis, but confine my analysis to the two sides of the four quadrant model. Although developmental levels cannot be ignored in analyses, I do not address them here because they are beyond the scope and purpose of this paper.

I will focus first on the "interior" of the integral model—the subjective and intersubjective cultural issues of myth, identity and belief that combine to generate the paradigms from which the "Bronx system" flows. Following this, I will examine the objective behaviours of the "exterior," first exploring some Bronx system dynamics at the meta level, and then examining particular aspects of the system, such as housing, to explore dysfunctions within and between structural sub-systems.

The discussion ahead requires the use of some particular terminology; on the interior subjective side, the terminology relates primarily to psychological theories of identity and belief; exterior objective terminology is largely that of the "systems" field.

Interior Subjective Definitions

Belief. Many authors (Cranston, 2000; Inglis, 2005; Kegan, 2009; Mezirow, 2000; Redekop, 2002; Taylor, 2000) include "beliefs" as one of several categories of experience that contribute to the development of identity, along with "values, culture, spirituality, meaning systems, relationships, history, imagination, and capacity to act that form the core of an individual or group" (Redekop, 2002, p. 23). These authors suggest that the purpose achieved by the belief system is the creation of a worldview by which individuals and groups make sense of their world; it is through the understanding created by this worldview that people come to make judgments and decisions about their own and others' behaviour. When certain beliefs are held by many, they become shared ideas, or paradigms, from which flow decision making and the development of policy.

Identity. The purpose of the identity system is to develop awareness of the meaning-maker— the one or ones with a belief system and world view. "Riceour argues that "dialectic between Self and Other is essential for identity." This means that we work out who we are in relation to others" (Redekop, 2002, p. 154) in a process of comparison and differentiation. We know ourselves in relation to what we know of others, and "it is through participation in community life that identity, meaning and self-worth are developed" (Dukes, 1999, p. 162).

Exterior Objective Definitions

System: A system is "an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something" (Meadows, 2008, p.11). Typically systems nest within other systems.

Structure: A structure is the way in which the elements of a system are interconnected to create an effect. Thus, structure can be seen as the source of system behaviour. In this instance, structure relates not only to the interlocking services provided to poor Bronx residents, but to the

structural relationship between those services and larger social, economic, and political policies in play in New York City and the nation.

Structural subsystem: Because each of the different social service bureaucracies or institutions which Kozol examines—health, housing, education, security, and economic structures—functions as part of the overall system structure and as its own discrete system, I have labeled these as "structural subsystems." Structural subsystems as I have described them are very different from the "Parsonsian" subsystems defined below.

Parsonsian subsystems: In his efforts to describe human society as a dynamic system, Talcott Parsons (1971) posited the existence of four overlapping subsystems relating to aspects of society. One of these, the "pattern-maintenance" subsystem, is concerned with the interior-subjective relations of the society to its cultural system. The other three subsystems are concerned with the exterior-objective. The "goal-attainment subsystem" or polity is concerned with the relations of the society to individual members. The "adaptive subsystem" or economy is concerned with the relations of the society to the physical world. The "integrative subsystem" or societal community, is concerned with achieving internal integration.

Interior Subjective: Identity and Systems of Belief

Kozol's work can be seen as a serious endeavour to "look for the ways the system creates its own behaviour" (Meadows, 2002, p. 4) Because the nature of the situation facing residents of the South Bronx appears to be a single, intractable and monolithic system, it is tempting to seek a single reason for it. Kozol draws a straight line between racism, racial segregation and conditions in the South Bronx, making a strong case that the primary reason for the continuing pervasive injustice he observes is the result of a belief system which consists of marginalization and racist attitudes toward non-white poor that allows people to "devalue other people's lives… and see as natural the shunning of the vulnerable" (Kozol, 1995, p. 186). Examples of this belief system—expressed by libertarian author Charles Murray as "some people are better than others and deserve more of society's rewards" (Kozol, 1995, p. 154)—can be found throughout *Amazing Grace,* for example, in the words of an ABC radio talk show host that "black people… multiply…like maggots on a hot afternoon" (p. 21) and in the fact that scarce funds have been made available to research "genetic links between IQ deficits of … children and their racial origins" but not to "remove lead poison (a known toxin that reduces IQ) from the homes and schools of children in the Bronx" (p. 156).

"The great luxury of segregation" is that it has become so "long-existing and accepted" that it appears invisible to all but those who suffer it. Those unaffected by it in their day to day lives can maintain a guilt-free stance and "insist that they are personally "imposing nothing on the people" of the South Bronx (p. 164). This capacity simultaneously to *deny personal racism while benefiting from systemic racism* is indicative of a fault line in the American identity, a "chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races" (Obama, 2008) that, rooted in history, is perpetuated by cultural myth.

The roots of America lie in a British colonial empire that took the land of subjugated native populations and transported people as slaves around the globe. Slavery was an established fact of

American culture before the United States became a country, and continued until the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. This long history of enforced racial difference is the ground from which the systems in the South Bronx grew and which nurtures them today. In writing about the black experience of colonialism, Franz Fanon eloquently expresses his despair of ever being understood, or being able to understand *himself,* within a cultural context that designates him as "the missing link in the slow evolution from ape to man" (Fanon, 1953, p. 1). Describing the bifurcated way that a black person understands his or her own identity—in relation to other blacks and, separately, in relation to whites—Fanon suggests that whites do not have a similarly fractured way seeing the Self; from their position of "superiority," they are able to define all others (Fanon, 1953). Gail Low, exploring white myth making in Victorian literature, notes that to ignore racist writing is to leave "untouched the psychic investments which determine the formation of the fictions that sustain the world we live and act within" (Low, 1996, p. 2). The cultural legacy is one in which whites are entitled and blacks victimized by a fractured, negative, internalized self image and modern American mythmaking has done nothing to alter these dynamics. In spite of the civil rights movement, the advent of Black Power, the increased television presence of blacks and the many genuine racial "firsts" of recent years, the paradigm of "indolent, warlike Africans" best enslaved for their own good (Low, 1996, chapter 3) prevails.

But race is not the only divide within the American identity; prosperity is another. The propensity to blame the poor for their poverty was also inherited from the British Colonial Empire and embedded into the revolutionary new country. Belief in a "just world" in which an individual's actions are solely responsible for his or her economic fate gave rise to the economic ideas of Adam Smith's "invisible hand of the market" by which an individual "pursuing his own interest … promotes that of society" (Meadows, 2008, p. 106). Today, "while 13% of Americans live in poverty, many studies show that Americans typically believe that a person's ... economic status is due to something the person did or failed to do, therefore they deserved it or had it coming" (Coryn, 2002, p. 2). Instances of this paradigm are found in political scientist Lawrence Mead's suggestion that the poor are in their condition of poverty because of their own "irrational" behaviour (Kozol, 1995, p. 21). They are found in media discussions about the "apathy," "listlessness," and lack of good "decision-making skills" among the mothers of poor children. And these discussions are "divorced from any realistic context that includes the actual conditions of their lives" (Kozol, 1995, p. 180).

In addition to the above two belief systems, there is a third set of beliefs stemming from the revolutionary years, supporting democratic principles and equality. Coming in part from those oppressed by racism and disdain for the poor, this set of beliefs is buttressed by a sizable percentage of the rest of Americans and provides additional tension within the American identity.

Intractable conflicts around the globe have their roots in paradigms that blame poor conditions on their victims, who are the object of racial or ethnic hatred and disdain. "The hegemonic systems and structures perpetuated by these paradigms objectify the subjugated, cause them to internalize a negative self image" and deprive them of "the ability to move, perceive or act freely" (Redekop, 2002, p. 275). Violence has been for the most part forestalled in the Bronx by the actions of those who hold the "third set" of beliefs indicated above. However, the possibility for violence will remain unless action is taken to redress the balance between the dominant and

the subjugated. Part of that action includes seeing clearly the systems these identity conflicts generate.

Exterior Objective: Systems that Perpetuate Suffering

According to Parsons, institutions or structural subsystems of poverty, like those that generate wealth, embody and are legitimized by the values and paradigms of the society that maintains them, as "generalized" by the societal community's "pattern maintenance sub-system" (Parsons, 1971/2011, p. 195). The other sub-systems create institutions in response to these generalizations, which, at the meta level, operate nested within the larger national societal system of generalized values.

Meadows maintains that the behaviour of a system is generated by its own structures, and points to several basic "system traps" that cause systems to work in ways counter to what we expect. This logic can be applied at any systems level. At the meta level, I will limit my comments to two of Meadow's traps: "policy resistance" and "competitive exclusion."

Policy Resistance

In terms of the overarching national value system within which the Bronx system exists, the goals of the "Parsonsian sub-systems" of the societal community are at odds with one another. The goal attainment subsystem, or polity, fed by "third set" values relating to principles of democracy and equal opportunity has for decades taken action against racism through the desegregation of schools, affirmative action, the striking down of exclusionary zoning, and the passing of such mechanisms as the Community Reinvestment Act. However, the goal of the adaptive system or economy seeks to maximize benefit for those *already* operating effectively within the free market. Parsons notes that "money and markets operate...where spheres of action are sufficiently differentiated from ... moral imperatives." (Parsons, 1971/2011, p. 200). In other words, the "good policies" created by the polity are not necessarily "good business" as defined by the economy. This tension between competing subsystem goals gives rise to what Meadows calls "policy resistance" (Meadows, 2008, p. 113).

An excellent South Bronx example of policy resistance can be found in the housing structural subsystem. Measures enacted by the "polity" to support housing affordability for low and middle income residents saw the creation of public housing, in 1955, through vehicles such as the Mitchell-Lama housing program, by which local jurisdictions sold land at reduced cost to developers who received subsidized low interest mortgages and tax abatements in exchange for building affordable housing. The program allowed building owners, after twenty years, to leave the program and either raise rents or sell to other business interests. While this initiative may have been predicated on the notion that incentives stimulate the making of private decisions that contribute to the public good—a kind of subsidizing of the market's invisible hand—the actual result was the perpetual cycle of building and decay so clearly described by Kozol. On reaching the 20-year mark, owners regularly withdrew from the program and sold to parties who either increased rents or reduced their costs by cutting routine maintenance. When the buildings became completely derelict, they were razed and replaced with great fanfare with a new set of buildings. The latest of these is 1520 Sedgewick, which, after providing for 30 years 102 units of

"much desired, affordable housing for working-class families" has seen, under new owners, the number of housing code violations increase by more than 600 percent (Medina, 2010). The goal of the polity to provide affordable housing didn't take into account the dictates of the market economy by which business seeks to optimize advantage. This same dynamic occurred within city owned housing: the goal of providing affordable housing for the poor was undermined by the need for "efficient use of resources" or reassignment of resources to other purposes. Policy resistance is also reflected in health and education, whereby the polity goals to increase well-being are undermined by "management of resources" that continually cuts budgets for staff and building maintenance or diverts funding to other needs.

Competitive Exclusion

Simply put, competitive exclusion allows the "rich to get richer." Meadows explains that this system trap is "found whenever the winners of a competition receive, as part of the reward, the means to compete even more effectively in the future" (Meadows, 2008, p. 127). In *Amazing Grace*, this dynamic in most eloquently illustrated through the 1994 budget cuts for residential services such as sanitation, building inspection and pest control throughout New York. These cuts, which bankrolled tax cuts for the wealthy, hastened urban decay in poor areas and threatened public health with piles of garbage, uninspected buildings and a major increase in the rat population. (Kozol, 1995, pp.100, 107, 109). Inhabitants in wealthy areas were lauded for their ability to purchase sanitation services privately through "improvement districts." Inhabitants of poor areas, unable to create "improvement districts," were blamed for spiraling neighbourhood decay.

Competitive exclusion is also evident in New York City's public school system. Between 1989 and 1992 "a billion dollars was cut from the city's school budget" with the result that the children from one Bronx school had no building to attend and were "housed in an abandoned skating rink that had no windows" (p. 153). During this same period, $150,000,000 was spent to build the "dazzling new structure" of Stuyvesant High school, an elite public school that overwhelmingly serves "the children of Manhattan's Upper East Side." Competitive exclusion in the school system continues today, with Stuyvesant parents (who are able to contribute $300,000 annually to the school) having been recently awarded the right to qualify for federal financing reserved for the poorest schools (New York Times, 11/05/2010). By mechanisms such as this, "inequitable distribution of income, assets, education, and opportunity" is perpetuated and the poor receive a

> disproportionately small part of government expenditure... Ideas and technologies come to them last. Disease and pollution come to them first. They are the people who have no choice but to take dangerous, low-paying jobs, whose children are not vaccinated, who live in crowded, crime-prone, disaster-prone areas. (Meadows, 2008, p. 129)

The Mechanics of Structural Subsystems in the South Bronx

Thus far, I have addressed system dynamics at a meta level. In this section, I will examine the functioning of three structural sub-systems that Kozol describes—housing, health and education— and the ways that these interact to contribute to the growth of hopelessness, illness,
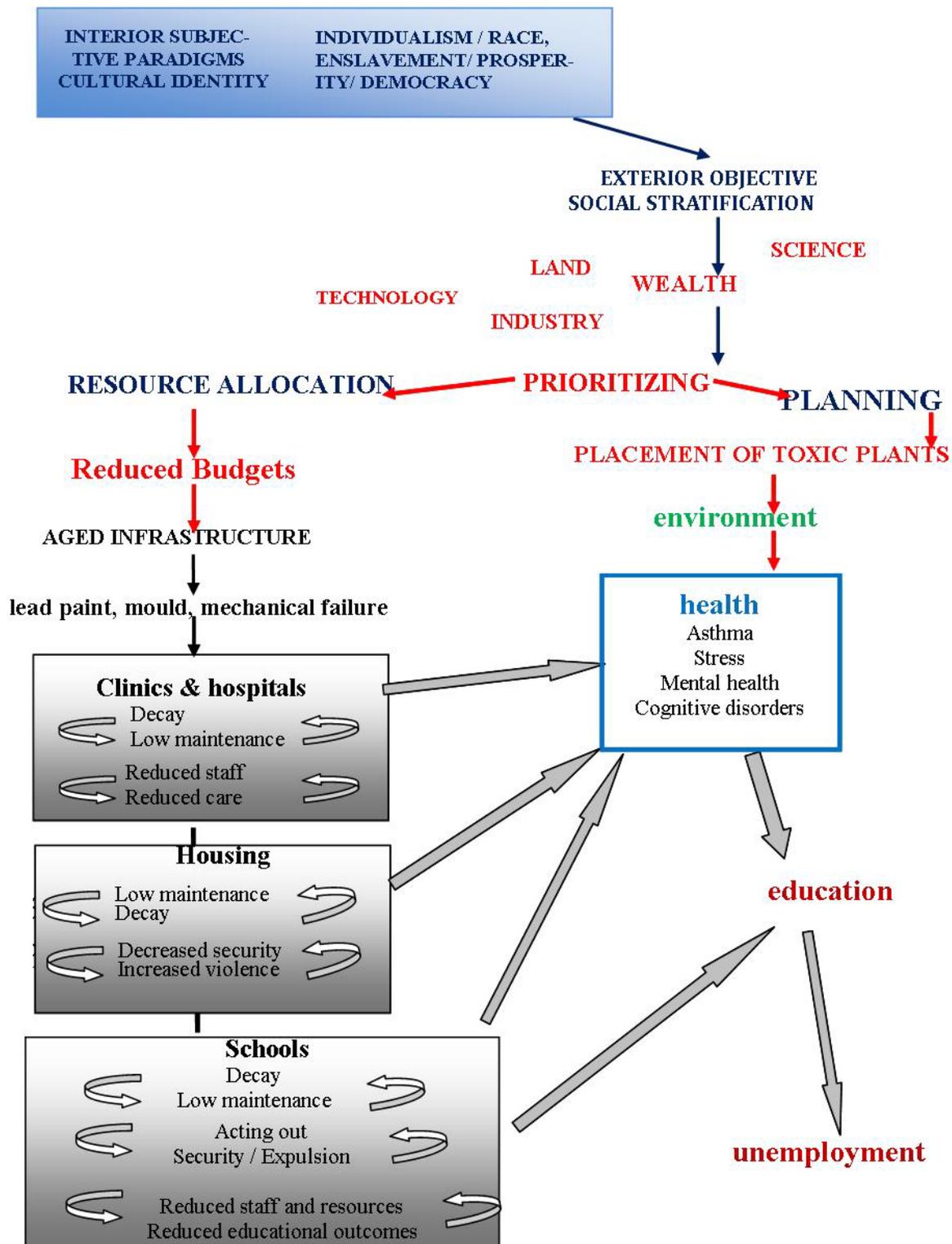
INTERIOR SUBJEC-TIVE PARADIGMS CULTURAL IDENTITY   **INDIVIDUALISM / RACE, ENSLAVEMENT/ PROSPER-ITY/ DEMOCRACY**

EXTERIOR OBJECTIVE SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

SCIENCE

LAND   **WEALTH**

TECHNOLOGY

INDUSTRY

RESOURCE ALLOCATION   **PRIORITIZING**   **PLANNING**

Reduced Budgets   **PLACEMENT OF TOXIC PLANTS**

AGED INFRASTRUCTURE   **environment**

lead paint, mould, mechanical failure

Clinics & hospitals
Decay
Low maintenance
Reduced staff
Reduced care

health
Asthma
Stress
Mental health
Cognitive disorders

Housing
Low maintenance
Decay
Decreased security
Increased violence

education

Schools
Decay
Low maintenance
Acting out
Security / Expulsion
Reduced staff and resources
Reduced educational outcomes

unemployment

Figure 1. South Bronx Grinder Detail

illiteracy and poverty. Each of these subsystems has the creaky feel of Gotham city-style bureaucracies: paperwork is lost, errors are made, functionaries cut corners and clients are given confusing, contradictory or simply wrong information. Each displays what Meadows would consider serious systems traps; chief of these is the phenomenon of "race to the bottom" (Meadows 2008, p. 122). Briefly put, this happens when a negative evaluation of a system is met, not with corrective action, but with lowered expectations which further reduce action, and the system drifts gradually downward in a vicious cycle. This system trap can be seen in the progressive cutting of funds to maintenance budgets in the public housing and the education systems and in staffing budgets of education and health systems. Some of these dynamics are captured in Figure 1.

It is in the interactions among the systems that the harm is really done, however. The downward spiraling housing system situates children in mouldy, lead contaminated apartments, causing them to suffer serious physical and mental health conditions, which contribute to cognitive impairments and absenteeism from school, which ultimately results in withdrawal from school. Likewise, lack of medical facilities exacerbates health problems from the home and school environments and further damages educational prospects, and, ultimately, employability.

Each of the subsystems are nested within meta systems flawed by policy resistance and competitive exclusion, which yields an overall planning system that perpetuates the creation of substandard housing and locates harmful industrial installations within residential communities, increasing harms to health. The action of these systems together is not unlike a meat grinder, except that the output of the South Bronx grinder (Figure 2) is recycled as future generations of people.
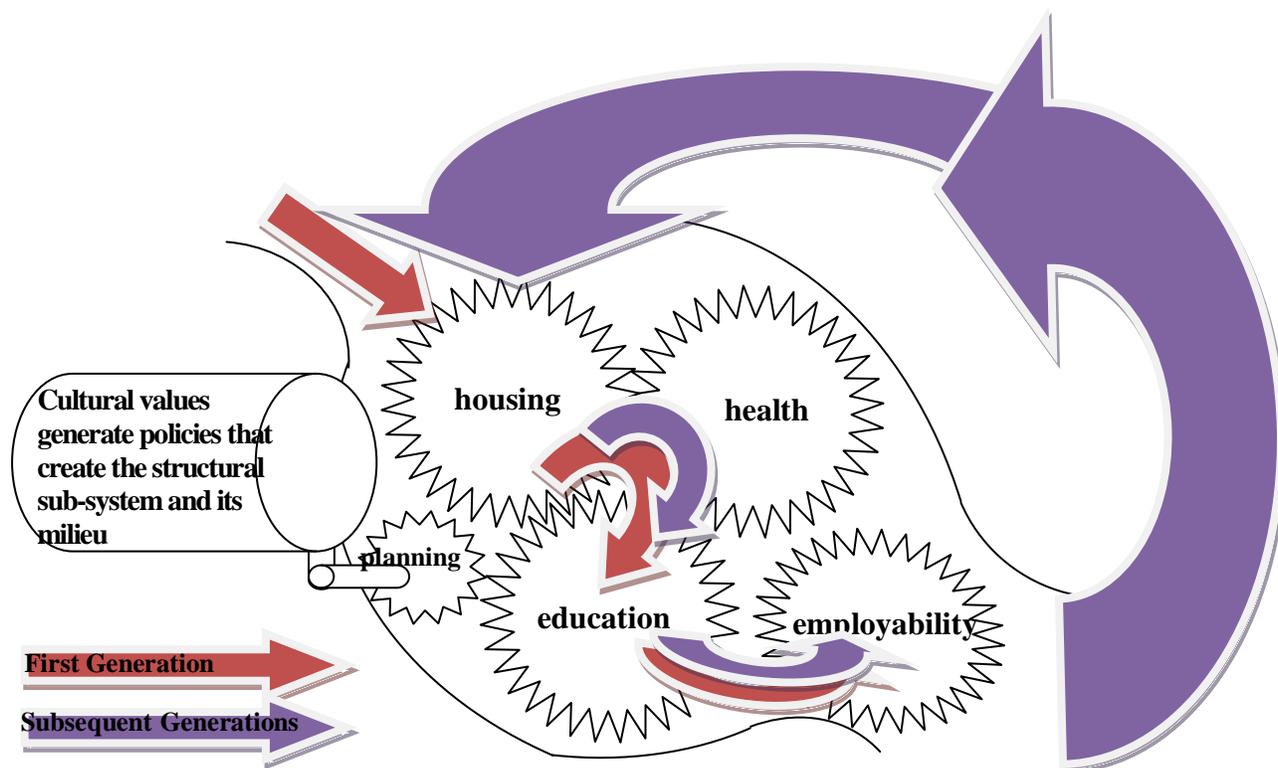
Figure 2. The South Bronx Grinder

Conclusion

The transformation of complex systemic dysfunction such as that in the South Bronx can only be achieved with lengthy, careful, integral attention to the whole system that reconciles the interior-subjective paradigms of race, prosperity and democracy within the American identity and restores coherence among the society's subsystems. With dialogue and discourse gaining popularity across the country,   it may yet be possible to eradicate the notion that the horrendous "Bronx system" is simply illustrative of a system doing effectively what it was designed to do.

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