

Over the years, institutions, researchers, and policymakers have made various attempts to “improve lives” in public housing. They have tried to design programs, run multiple focus groups, collected data, and more. The people in my projects are not showing up to these focus groups - and it’s not because they don’t care. Not showing up is a systemic pattern due to certain people running these conversations while not speaking their language, not understanding their reality, or their intersectional needs. Every person has their own life and tends to need different things. When you start to look deeper, you question who can actually access or utilize these research initiatives when you have a home to watch over, a child, and Government Assistance requirements to maintain the household. Historically, we’ve been excluded for so long as if we don’t belong, creating a sense of self-exclusion from these research initiatives due to them being labeled as things “only white people do”.

The projects are not one story—they are subcultures. When people who don’t live in NYCHA talk about “the projects”, they talk about it as if they are the same, under one umbrella of stereotypes, but each development has its own history, alliances, oppositions, and norms that outsiders don’t know or see.

Take the Lower East Side, a home to multiple NYCHA developments along the East River. Within just a few blocks, you have two very different worlds—the Baruch Housing units with million-dollar East River co-ops sandwiched between what we call “up the hill” projects. The socioeconomics of our districts are so visible and quite frankly unacceptable. They sit barely a half a mile apart, yet there is a decade-long rivalry and gang violence between them, while the co-ops in between live in comfort, seemingly oblivious to the realities around them.

Outsiders see a cute community with kids playing outside, neighbors sitting on benches. Yet, I see what they don’t see. They don’t see the invisible borders where we learn things early: which staircase not to use, which block means trouble, which faces mean you keep your head down. We see boundaries you don’t cross, and tensions you learn about by the time you’re in elementary school.

So, when a “yuppie” walks up with a clipboard in hand, they have no idea of any of this. They assume all kids can answer questions freely. They assume the community will open up. The reality is that the projects have their own norms and rules, where people who didn’t grow up here won’t understand the silence, the guardedness, the coded speech, or the ways people protect themselves.

The Projects vs. The Perception

Visitors love to romanticize NYC by saying things like, “You’re so lucky to live in Manhattan!” “It’s the city that never sleeps!” What they don’t know is what living in Baruch Housing in Manhattan is like. It is not the same as living in a Manhattan high-rise. My one-bedroom Manhattan apartment in NYCHA fits 8 people. Our struggles are not the same. Growing up in the projects often means growing up low-income, overcrowded, with policing, community trauma, and the constant pressure to survive in a city that calls you “privileged” simply because of your ZIP code.

Code-Switching and Interactions with Institutions

Everyone’s experience is different, in my eyes. After moving away from the projects, I struggled to figure out which code-switching personality belonged to me. A youth of code-switching to be respected by my predominantly white high school so I could secure opportunities that I would not have had in my neighborhood. However, every day I returned home to a life that looked nothing like the one I had at school, surrounded by family and community members whose realities were very different from my classmates’ and even mine.

Every space had a face. If I wanted to be respected by doctors, I had to prove my pain or discomfort and express my pain in a specific way to be believed and treated. At home, I was the only daughter, sweet and innocent; In school, funny and adventurous.

When people from the projects navigate institutions daily, such as schools, hospitals, welfare offices, courts, CUNY, and law enforcement, these systems expect a certain vocabulary, tone, and way of presenting yourself. Many of us learned to code-switch because we had to. However, not everyone can. And kids? Most haven’t learned how to yet. So, when a researcher who is viewed as an outsider comes in with academic language and questions worded like a survey, seeking in-group knowledge, communication tends to become a barrier.

This barrier doesn’t just make the interaction uncomfortable; it makes the data inaccurate. People

will tend to change how they talk, shut down completely, or respond with what they think the researcher wants to hear. Sometimes, to even participate in these surveys, you have to prove that you live in NYCHA. That requirement alone is inaccessible. Many people in the projects are illegally doubled up or living in overcrowded apartments—something NYCHA workers see and either choose to ignore or punish legally. As a result, many residents are automatically excluded from participating, even though they are directly affected by the issues being studied.

Often, the people who end up participating in these research projects are those already involved in community initiatives in the neighborhood, along with their mutuals. What researchers often do not know is that many initiatives funded by NYCHA, and run by community members, tend to support people they personally know, rather than the community as a whole.

When they do support the whole community, they allow people who do not live in the community to strip resources, leaving the community with little to nothing. Meanwhile, researchers walk away believing they captured the “truth,” when in reality they captured code-switching stress, confusion, panic mode, and responses that don't represent the community.

Kids in NYCHA start life already balancing multiple worlds. Many grow up being a type of bilingual without even realizing it - switching the way they talk depending on who they're talking to and where. They go from a high-pitched goodbye with a hug and a kiss before being sent off to school, to a deep voice, slang, and handshakes. Sometimes, even a change in their walk. They might switch back to a softer voice at home, adopt a polite but more assertive tone in places like the doctor's office, and continue adjusting their behavior as they move between different environments. These rules do not just live in the projects - they follow you around when you interact, especially with different institutions.

This process is often not supported, but rather socially acquired and taught subconsciously. We often don't realize we have this skill or how powerful it is. Instead, kids and adults are often penalized or misunderstood by outsiders who read their communication style as “aggressive,” “ghetto,” “uneducated,” or “noncompliant,” especially if they are unable to code-switch - a skill that should not be a necessity. These misinterpretations seep into research, policymaking, education, justice systems, and life outcomes.

Conclusion

What could possibly benefit the community may be more along the lines of a psychosocial and linguistic research that approaches the projects, where the researchers themselves are from the projects.

When researchers share that lived experience, they can enter these communities and have conversations that feel normal. People are more likely to speak honestly when they are not forced to translate their lives into academic language, work through their academically formed questions, or act a certain way for outsiders. This kind of research would reflect how people in the projects actually think, speak, and navigate the world.

Beyond research, we need to mobilize people in the projects by helping them grow and achieve their dreams. People from the projects do have access to low-cost or free college, trade school, and training programs, but there are restrictive requirements such as age, a focus on high-demand fields, and an intense need to keep up with while in the program.

The moment someone gets a job whose income exceeds the eligibility threshold, their benefits are taken away, and their rent goes up—leaving little to no room to save or continue pursuing their goals. This is the main issue. Advancement becomes something that is policed and punished rather than supported. Because of this, many people with degrees remain in NYCHA - not because they lack ambition, but because staying is the only way to keep stable housing, health insurance, and other living necessities.

Right now, this isn't the same for all. Some people want to stay - and they have the right to do so (and are often supported in doing so as long as they maintain eligibility and requirements), but those who do not want to stay are not supported equally. This reality discourages people from pursuing bigger goals, such as owning a home, having more space, or working in their dream career.

Until systems are changed to support growth without compromising basic security, people pursuing dreams outside the projects will continue to face the hardships that come with leaving NYCHA.