

Ryan Luo

Prof. Hromadzic

ANT 185

30, September 2020

### Structural Violence and Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement is a direct response to centuries of violence on Black Americans. The movement itself is a living and breathing being, shaped by the lives, suffering and culture of those it represents. It demands justice for the Black Americans who have been targeted, affected, and killed by the violence against Black people that has been unfortunately ingrained into worldwide culture as a whole. The Black Lives Matter movement seeks to dismantle this culture of violence against Black people on every level and in every part of the world. It is a movement that is based in the U.S but has expanded beyond this nation, as Black people face violence and racism everywhere in the world. Exploring the violence that Black Americans face through the lens of structural violence is vital to understanding this cause and its importance to not only Black people, but all persons of color.

Violence, as it is commonly misunderstood, is not just physical in nature. Violence can come from any action, behavior or rule that comes from a dominant party upon a subordinate party. As explored in our discussion of Scheper-Hughes' definition, "Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim" (Scheper-Hughes 2004:1). In the sense of the Black Lives Matter movement, we often are quick to associate violence to just the police brutality and other forms of race-motivated physical attacks towards Black Americans. However, violence towards Black people extends far beyond the reach of physical violence. As Scheper-Hughes had described, violence can attack every part of a person, not just their physical wellbeing. Violence can be mental and damaging beyond the limits of physical recovery. In today's society we are able to explore and discuss more of how other forms of violence can affect marginalized communities in the U.S. As Professor Hromadzic said in her

lecture on violence, “And I think most people, especially with our shift in the United States, recognize more and more of these assaults and per person hood and this kind of mental suffering that many people experience and openly talk about. Many of us realize that this is the case when some decades ago it would be something you would have to argue more about” (Hromadzic Lecture 8 2020). The change in culture surrounding these more nuanced types of violence is what allows discussion of structural racism and structural violence.

Structural violence is the result of centuries of laws and cultural norms. Structural racism is defined by Henry Louis Taylor and Samuel Cole as “A distributive system that determines the possibilities and constraints within which people of color are forced to act. The system involves the operation of racialized structural relationships that produce the unequal distribution of material resources, such as jobs, income, housing, neighborhood conditions, and access to opportunities” (Taylor and Cole 2001:5). What this means for Black Americans is a system of inequality of access to the same quality of necessities to achieve what is known as the “American Dream”. This system was built off of centuries of racism and inequality for Black Americans. It means that while slavery does not exist today in America, the aftereffects of such are still very much a reality for Black Americans. It means that racism is still ingrained in the very makeup of our society, through the distribution of resources that are deemed necessary for success.

From the very beginning of a Black child’s life, the structure of our society and laws have made it harder for them to succeed. The organization of districts according to racial demographic and income known as redlining has made it so people living in these low income, predominantly Black populated areas have a harder time getting out. This has made it so school districts for these populations are underfunded and understaffed, making the education pipeline significantly harder for Black Americans living in these neighborhoods. To summarize from an interview with Gregory Anderson, the dean of the College of Education at Temple University, “You have this situation in which lack of homeownership and the lower property values contribute to poorer or underfunded schools. Then this is exacerbated by the fact that we have a pretty shameful history of redlining that kept affordable mortgages and home improvement loans out of primarily Black neighborhoods” (Temple.edu 2020). As Dean Gregory Anderson said earlier in the interview, the lack of funding for these schools was the result of racialized segregation of homes leading to poor communities of Black Americans to form. As a result, the property tax on their homes was much lower, leading to a lack of funding to the schools their kids had access to. The result of this

underfunding of schools is a lack of quality teachers and a lack of motivation for kids to try to do well in school. Without the proper funding, these schools also have a hard time feeding their students who often depend on these schools for a proper meal. This has heavily affected the educational pipeline in Black communities, making it extremely hard for them to escape this system of poverty and structural inequality.

According to their website, The Black Lives Matter movement “...was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer. Black Lives Matter Foundation, Inc is a global organization in the US, UK, and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives”(blacklivesmatter.com 2013). There is a lot to unpack from Black Lives Matter’s mission statement. Firstly is the matter of the full acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer on all counts. There is a clear hand that structural violence has on this decision. A study by the National Criminal Justice Commission which was highlighted in a literature review by the Battered Women’s Justice Project showed that “More specifically, studies of the CJS in general, and the CJS in Minnesota in particular, find a clear and pervasive pattern of racial inequality and bias that begins at the street level with policing, accumulates throughout the system, and culminates in massive disparities in incarceration rates” (Kearney 2003:6). This study shows the terrifying truth that racism is ingrained throughout the structure of the criminal justice system. The case of George Zimmerman’s trial and the leniency they gave him was a result of this structural violence. The racial inequality began on the streets where a white man had the right to shoot and murder an unarmed 17 year old Black teenager, and continued to where that same man was released without any charges. This racism and inequality in our justice system can still be seen today in the case of Breonna Taylor. The officers that murdered Breonna Taylor escaped punishment in the legal courts, with the most severe verdict being one of simply wanton endangerment of the neighbors. Not in the ten shots that the police officer fired into her home was the court concerned about Breonna Taylor herself, but rather her neighbors.

Exploring structural violence is vital to understanding the cause of Black Lives Matter as the movement is about getting rid of structural violence and white supremacy. An issue that can make it hard for white Americans to sympathize and understand the cause is the idea of blindness

to race and the normalization of whiteness. As Professor Hromadzic said in her lecture, “It operates as a norm, operates as a norm, as an unchallenged, normalized part of the US society. And it comes with all sorts of taste, preferences and dispositions being attached to that. So it's a norm, it's something that just oftentimes is so normalized, that goes around unquestioned, right? It doesn't need to explain itself. (Hromadzic Lecture 10 2020). As whiteness is seen as the norm in the U.S, it does not face the scrutiny and challenge of structural violence. Whiteness is able to exist without fear of the system acting and plotting against it. There are not centuries of oppression still affecting white culture and white people through unjust laws and improper access to resources. As this is what is seen as the norm and what they know as life, it can be hard for white Americans to understand what is happening to the minorities in America.

Structural violence's impact on the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole lies in the foundations of the system that has led to the suppression and disenfranchisement of Black people. Violence in itself can take many forms. Structural violence is one that is often invisible to those who cannot witness it, but an ever present danger for those who are subject to it. Ultimate success for the Black Lives Matter movement would mean the erasure of these systematic and structural acts of violence against Black people and reparations for the centuries that they have endured it.

## Bibliography

“About.” *Black Lives Matter*, 22 May 2020, [blacklivesmatter.com/about/](https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/).

Hromadžić, Azra. “Lecture 8, 9/16, Violence.” ANT 185. ANT 185 Lecture 8, 16 Sept. 2020, Syracuse.

Hromadžić, Azra. “Lecture 10, 9/23.” ANT 185. ANT 185 Lecture 10, 23 Sept. 2020, Syracuse.

Kearney, Gavin. *Literature Review: Structural Racism, the Criminal Justice System and Violence Against Women , Battered Women's Justice Project*, 2003.

News, Temple, and Gregory Anderson. “Systemic Racism Has Led to Education Disparities.” *Temple News*, 25 June 2020.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, and Philippe Bourgois. “Introduction: Making Sense of Violence.” *Philippebourgois.net*, 2004.

Taylor, Henry Luo, and Sam Cole. “Structural Racism and Efforts to Radically Reconstruct The Inner-City Built Environment .” *Thecyberhood.net*, 8 Nov. 2001.