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TRUTH IN LOVE

Who Has an Answer?

By Parris J. Baker
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Editor's note: Following is the eighth in a series of articles on violence in Erie, Pennsylvania.

In the aftermath of the recent violent assault of author Ahmed Salman Rushdie, which occurred at Chautauqua Institution on August 12, concerned attendees frequently asked, “where was security?”[1] Ironically, Sir Rushdie, an Indian-born, British American, was preparing to give a speech on America as a haven for exiled writers when he was stabbed repeatedly by his accused assailant, Hadi Matar. A similar question, “Where was the National Guard?” was asked during and immediately after the attack on the United States Capitol building in January 2021. Fortunately, the primary targets of the insurrection, then-Vice President Mike Pence and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, were not harmed, though five people died during and after the siege and more than 130 officers were injured.

The tranquil and idyllic communities of Chautauqua, New York and Highland Park, Illinois, the sacred spaces of worship found in synagogues located in Pittsburgh and Poway, California, and the innocent environments found in elementary schools such as Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut and Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas are no longer sanctuaries or safe havens from violence. Reality has suddenly shattered assumptions of community invulnerability to violence. Even federal law enforcement buildings in various locations across America are being attacked.

Unlike the placid suburban neighborhoods where violent crime is seldom experienced, violence has become synonymous with and an accepted cultural condition of racially segregated urban communities. Less accepted are the historic narratives that describe who and what constructed segregated communities. Culpability for neighborhood violent crime belongs with the assailant, regardless of race or ethnicity. However, we must thoroughly assess the ecology as well as the person-in-environment relation to “proximal gun violence”[2] if we are to plan and design effective intervention and gun violence reduction strategies.

The federal government has been forthright and complicit in the social and political engineering of segregated residential localities. Within these communities there are numerous correlates to community and neighborhood violence. Understanding the relationship between and among the constructs will help to identify environmental risk and protective factors associated with community violence. The interactive effect between environment and people requires rigorous study, fewer theoretical constructs, and evidence-based interventions. Various factors prior to the commission of violent crime need to be better understood.

In segregated African American communities, violence is thought to be centrally rooted in themes related to poverty and pain, defenselessness and discrimination, and inferiority and identity. One of the primary purposes of violence by African American males is to acquire personal and interpersonal power and respect. Historically, many violent behaviors were designed to execute human agency, achieve self-determination, and to escape the whims of white men who valued black men’s labor but despised black men. Fredrick Douglass affirms the latter perspective in his remark, “The white man’s happiness cannot be purchased by the black man’s misery.”

To conceive the emancipation of enslaved Black people from slave owners, who were determined to maintain slavery, without Black people using violence to achieve freedom would have been naïve. White slave owners possessed and exercised ultimate hegemonic control over the life and death of black bodies, male and female. All attempts for freedom were met with direct, decisive, and demonstratively brutal punishment. Again, Frederick Douglass asserted, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”[3]

The struggle of Black Americans to acquire power and respect is a “cornerstone” theme found throughout American history. From the Revolutionary War, through the Civil War and Reconstruction, the establishment of Jim Crow and Black Code Laws, the resistance and rebellion experienced in the Civil Rights Movement, leading to the present Black Lives Matter Movement all contain the desire for power found in human agency and respect acquired through ascription or achievement.

Power is an ontological construct with many correlates, such as coercion, control, force, and authority. The vision of enslaved Africans brought to America, whether conscious or unconscious, was to move from the states of powerlessness, potentials, and future possibilities to manifested realities, self-determined outcomes, and self-actualization. Respect is the feeling of esteem and sense of admiration. For African Americans, this value is extremely important to a group that was defined and reminded daily of their impotence and inferiority.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. shared his perception of the changing image and identity of black people in his speech, *The New Negro of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story*[4] to the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund on May 17, 1956:

In time many Negroes lost faith in themselves and came to believe that perhaps they were inferior. The tragedy of physical slavery was that it gradually led to the paralysis of mental slavery; the Negro's mind and soul became enslaved. So long as the Negro was willing to accept this 'place' assigned to him, racial peace was maintained. But it was an uneasy peace in which the Negro was forced patiently to accept injustice, insult, and exploitation. Truly it was an obnoxious negative peace, for true peace is not merely the absence of some negative force – confusion, tension, war – but the presence of some positive force – justice, good will, brotherhood. For years the Negro accepted this negative peace. Then something happened to the Negro. The Negro masses began to reevaluate themselves. They came to feel that they were somebody ... Their religion revealed to them that God loves all of his children, and that the important thing about a man 'is not his specificity but his fundamentum,' not the texture of his hair or the color of his skin, but the texture and quality of his soul. With this new self-respect and new sense of dignity on the part of the Negro, the South's negative peace was rapidly undermined. The tension which we are witnessing in race relations in the South today is to be explained in part by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of himself and his determination to struggle and sacrifice until the walls of injustice crumble.

Enslaved Africans were never called by their birth names, identified by their tribal names, or allowed to name their children. Derogatory and disparaging

names and defining terms were assigned to the entire groups: boot, boogie coon, darkie, Sambo, shine, schwartz, jungle bunnies, jigaboo, coloreds, Negroes, pongo, spade spook, and the most offensive n----- . Unfortunately, many African Americans adopted some of the same perceptions and accepted the psychological projections that were taught to most Americans through macro-level socialization institutions such as education, religion, law, medicine, and the United States government.

W.E.B. DuBois posed an important and confrontational question in his seminal book, *The Souls of Black Folks*[5] when he asked, “How does it feel **to be** a problem?” Not to have a problem but to be the problem. Such has been the case with African American males; to be perceived and treated as the problem. Many of the descriptive labels used in contemporary education, psychology, sociology, and criminology literature regularly referred to Black males as “the problem” and labeled them at-risk, dangerous, deviant, endangered, extinct, uneducable, uncontrollable, hyperaggressive, hypersexual, thugs, uncivilized, remedial, and in crisis.[6]

Why do Black people kill other Black people? This is an important axiological and investigative question, one that requires serious consideration and moves the conversations beyond the quick and convenient cliches. Internalized self-hatred, socialized violence, or “cool pose” provide some answers. Moreover, the question, “Why do Black people kill other Black people” is no more important than the question, “Why are there mass shootings in schools, supermarkets, synagogues, and suburbia, USA?” The answer is, “I don’t know” and I am convinced that very few authorities on violent crime have a clue. If there is an answer, I would question why, given those revelations, violent crime remains so persistent in poor urban communities.

What I do know is that my piece of the puzzle is to keep working, to keep writing, to keep asking difficult questions and then keep searching for those elusive answers. My piece of the puzzle is to educate white and Black people about the value of building interpersonal and epistemic trusting relationships; to identify environmental conditions designed from racist structures and institutions and then begin the hard work of dismantling those structures and institutions.

I’m not sure what your piece of the puzzle is, but I do know that someone reading this essay has a piece of the puzzle that fits perfectly with my piece and when we get together (*What a day of rejoicing that will be!*[7]), the picture of communities without violence will be two pieces closer to becoming a reality.

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/13/business/rushdie-stabbing-attack-chautauqua.html>
2. Rowan ZR, Schubert CA, Loughran TA, Mulvey EP, Pardini DA. Proximal predictors of gun violence among adolescent males involved in crime. *Law Hum Behav.* 2019 Jun;43(3):250-

262. doi: 10.1037/lhb0000327. Personal communication (August 17, 2022) with George Morgan III.
3. Frederick Douglass delivers speech at the 23rd anniversary of “West India Emancipation” at Canandaigua, New York on August 3, 1857.
4. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/new-negro-south-behind-montgomery-story>
5. DuBois, W.E.B. (1903). *The souls of Black folks*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, USA Inc.
6. Murrell, P. (2002). *African-Centered pedagogy: Developing schools of achievement for African American children*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
7. Lyrics from When We All Get to Heaven.
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