

# Editorial Structural Violence: Let`s Face It

Violencia estructural: seamos realistas

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Renowned African American essayist, author, and cultural critic James Baldwin (1962) famously reminded us that “not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced” (p.11). Learning to face and to name that which is in need of transformation, in need of justice, is in some ways the most difficult aspect of social justice work. This is both because we are trained from an early age not to see those injustices (especially when we occupy positions of social privilege) and because the most profound injustices tend to work at a level just below that which we can readily see, recognize, and name. Perhaps the real power of structural violence (sometimes known as institutional violence) is its very invisibility or its ability to skim along just under the surface of the social and individual consciousness, the way it is inextricably part of the warp and weft of society is such that to recognize the violence inherent in our structures and institutions is to question (and to some minds, threaten) the very foundations of a way of life.

Recognizing structural violence requires us to ask uncomfortable questions about our own complicity in unjust institutions and patterns—both in the present moment and generationally—that we are not necessarily called upon to ask when naming and opposing interpersonal violence. In my own context (southern United States), this discomfort all too often leads to a devolving spiral of what-about-isms, white fragility, listing of one’s own axes of oppression or anti-oppressive *bona fides*, and general shutting down of conversation. At its worst, it leads to the raft of critical race theory bans that swept the United States in 2020 and 2021, to more revisionist history, and to even further systemic silencing of voices most targeted by institutional violence in the first place. And yet we cannot begin to remedy the grievous harms wrought by structural violence until we name it.

It is perhaps not surprising that people have difficulty seeing—or accepting—the face of structural violence when so many also struggle with the faces of interpersonal violence. While most folks in my geographic and cultural context would probably tell you, for instance, that sexual assault or domestic violence are wrong and should not be tolerated, those same people struggle deeply when the person accused of such violence is someone they know personally or someone for whom they have deep respect or affection. (There is something to be said about the power of parasocial relationships in the way that fans of Johnny Depp, for instance, flocked to his defense and quickly painted Amber Heard as the perpetrator of the violence in their relationship.) As the #MeToo movement and its offspring have gathered momentum within the US and elsewhere, accusations have touched celebrities beloved for their (supposedly) progressive values. Such accusations are often countered with victim blaming, questioning of accusers’

veracity, and the same tired collection of domestic violence and rape apologetics that are all too familiar. It is not a leap to suggest that people who defend, for instance, Johnny Depp or Woody Allen, are similarly defensive of accused perpetrators in their own personal circles. If it is difficult for someone to accept that their brother, favorite aunt, or good friend is capable of violence, how much more difficult is it for them to accept that *the society itself that they live in and benefit from* is committing violence on an ongoing basis? It is not challenging to see how easy it is to turn one's head when the alternative is confronting an unpleasant, worldview-shattering truth face to face.

Even those who are willing to condemn interpersonal violence when it is committed by a beloved or admired figure, however, may struggle to confront and condemn institutional and structural violence. This is not because they do not believe, for example, that racism or homophobia is wrong, but because they lack a framework to understand how these injustices can occur with a lack of individual animus, how they can be the work of otherwise good people, and how they can persist in an era when we supposedly know better. These folks are quick to recognize that a white woman shouting a racial slur is seen as a racist act; where they struggle is to understand that an entire system can perpetuate racism without a single slur ever being thrown. In the absence of individual bad actors, the individualistic paradigm that prevails in the United States sputters and fails—one cannot account for oppression without individual oppressors. In this way, structural violence also defies that standard, individual-focused solutions so many favor, give the entire department a one-day diversity training; fire the officer who used “excessive force” on an innocent person; hire a person of color to head the all-white project. None of these solutions addresses structural violence: that the organization itself hires only white men past a certain level of management; that policing in the US is deeply steeped in racist history and relies on the enforcement of inherently racist and classist codes; that the project in question is staffed entirely by white folks because the *entire division* other than a few support professionals is white.

Perhaps the strongest factor in people's resistance to naming, facing, and condemning institutional violence is that it requires us to see that *systemic and institutional violence wear our faces*. We must acknowledge and reckon, with our own complicity with these violent systems, with the ways in which we directly and indirectly benefit from them, and the ways in which we directly and indirectly uphold them, the ways in which we directly and indirectly excuse them. The only way for us to transform inherently violent systems and structures is to stare, unflinchingly, into their faces. And the only way to stare, unflinchingly, into the

face of inherently violent systems and structures is to take a long, hard look into the mirror.

That brings me back to Baldwin: Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

Let us face ourselves together.

## References

Baldwin, J. (1962). "As Much Truth as One Can Bear". *The New York Times*, 14 January, Section T, p. 11.