

**Psychology of Violence: a Close Reading of the Suffering
Experience Imposed on African-American Women and
Children**

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Abstract

Violence is a phenomenon that threatens most of the people specifically women, regardless of ethnicity and social status. Abuse in the family, on the streets, and at work is color blind to some extent. Each woman is subjected to this in patriarchal cultures. Some researchers view violence as an issue that plagues people of color, particularly African Americans. Inequalities in ethnicity, class, and gender put black people at an elevated risk for many types of victimization.

Violence and injustice against African Americans are profoundly ingrained in history. African Americans, especially women, face multiple aspects of violence in their lives, including childhood sexual exploitation, intimate relationship violence, rape and sexual harassment and these aspects of violence affect them psychologically.

Violence is a pervasive issue that affects individuals from all occupations, particularly women, regardless of their ethnicity or social status. Abuse can occur in various settings, such as within families, on the streets, and in the workplace, and often transcends racial boundaries. Women in patriarchal cultures are particularly vulnerable to violence. However, some researchers argue that people of color, especially African Americans, are disproportionately affected by violence due to the intersection of ethnic, class, and gender inequalities, which put them at a higher risk for various forms of victimization.

Key words: Violence, African-American, Psychology

المستخلص

العنف ظاهرة تهدد معظم الناس وتحديداً النساء بغض النظر عن العرق والوضع الاجتماعي. سوء المعاملة في الأسرة وفي الشوارع وفي العمل عمى الألوان إلى حد ما. تخضع كل امرأة لهذا في الثقافات الأبوية. يرى بعض الباحثين أن العنف قضية ابتليت بها الملونون، وخاصة الأمريكيون من أصل أفريقي. عدم المساواة في العرق والطبقة والجنس يضع السود في خطر متزايد لأنواع كثيرة من الإيذاء.

إن العنف والظلم ضد الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي متأصلان بعمق في التاريخ. يواجه الأمريكيون من أصل أفريقي، وخاصة النساء، جوانب متعددة من العنف في حياتهم، بما في ذلك الاستغلال الجنسي للأطفال، والعنف في العلاقات، والاعتصاب والتحرش الجنسي، وتؤثر هذه الجوانب من العنف عليهم نفسياً.

العنف هو قضية منتشرة تؤثر على الأفراد من جميع مناحي الحياة، وخاصة النساء، بغض النظر عن العرق أو الوضع الاجتماعي. يمكن أن تحدث الإساءة في أماكن مختلفة، مثل داخل العائلات، في الشوارع، وفي مكان العمل، وغالباً ما تتجاوز الحدود العرقية. النساء في الثقافات الأبوية معرضات بشكل خاص للعنف. ومع ذلك، يجادل بعض الباحثين بأن الأشخاص الملونين، وخاصة الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي، يتأثرون بشكل غير متناسب بالعنف بسبب تقاطع عدم المساواة العرقية والطبقية والجنسانية، مما يعرضهم لخطر أكبر لأشكال مختلفة من الإيذاء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عنف، أمريكي من أصل أفريقي، علم نفس

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Introduction:

In the United States, the status of black women outlines many types of violence. Black women face high rates of violence, rape, and murder, even by intimate partners. Black girls and women often face institutionalized racism: they are violently punished in school, ensnared in the criminal justice system after enduring physical or sexual abuse, disproportionately exposed to racial profiling and police brutality, and imprisoned at levels well beyond their share of the population. Thus, black women specifically in their lifetime witness variable levels of physical violence. They often confront even higher rates of psychological abuse — including embarrassment, threats, name-calling, and over-control — than any other women do in general. This research tackles the various aspects of psychology of violence that African American face specifically women and children.

1. Intimate-Partner Violence (IPV):

Obviously, intimate partner violence and abuse is a major and pervasive societal problem that has profound consequences for particular people, their communities, and culture as a whole. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines IPV as "any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in the relationship, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors" (2002). Intimate partner abuse, also called domestic violence or battering of women, frequently includes a wide variety of violent actions, including "threats of violence against the woman,

emotional/psychological abuse, economic exploitation, confinement and/or control over activities outside the home (e.g., social life, working), stalking, property destruction, burglary, theft, and homicide” (Mahoney, Williams, & West, 2001, p. 145).

The Bureau of Justice Statistics states “1.5 million women in the United States are physically assaulted by an intimate partner each year, while other studies provide much higher estimates than this” (Richie, 1996, p. 25). On the other hand, The National Violence against Women Survey reported that “approximately 22 percent of all adult women have experienced a domestic assault, while 52 percent of surveyed women have been physically assaulted at some time in their lives” (p. 26).

Heise and colleagues (1999) explore that most black women who have been victimized are implementing methods and strategies for the safety of their lives and their children’s lives. They argue that black women endure these violent relationships out of fear of retaliation, lack of alternate sources of economic support, care for their children, loss of family and friend support, shame or fear of losing custody of divorce-related children, and affection and desire for a change of lovers.

Violence against the African Americans especially women increase in the American society because of the spread some racist and bigoted thoughts such as the belief in white supremacy. The rise of IPV against black women is due to the unfair gender social norms, particularly those that connect notions of man to superiority, dominance, and aggression. In addition, poverty and low social status of black women; the weak legal retributions and punishments against IPV, and widespread popular approval of violence as a means of solving co-determination all contribute to violence against African American women. The World Health

Organization (2012) also states forms that explain violence against women as some men claim “the right to assert power over a woman and is considered socially superior; the woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together, and sexual activity (including rape) is a marker of masculinity”.

In fact, African American women are more likely than any other woman to experience extreme IPV victimization “while Caucasian women make up 11% of the persons living in persistent poverty in this country, African American women comprise 25% of the persons living in the same condition” (United States Census Bureau, 2006). Related to perpetrators of domestic abuse, black women with reduced wages and black women seeking public services reported high levels of sexual harassment. Female abused women are often at higher risk of intimate abuse. This cycle of abuse produces an environment that is incredibly unsafe for victims. Compared to black women who only encountered sexual assault, African girls who were both battered and assaulted were more likely to be exploited physically, and consequently they endured serious and possibly fatal physical aggression.

Besides IPV, black women face violence at work as they have a significant and terrible record of workplace sexual abuse. White and black people abused female slaves throughout the antebellum period when they served in the fields as well as in slave households. Since emancipation, segregation in employment has limited black women’s ability to work as domestic servants. Low pay and alienating job environments made many black women vulnerable to sexual abuse. It’s stated that “almost 75% experienced workplace gender harassment, defined as degrading or insulting comments about women as a group” (Carolyn, 2014, p. 11). Black women may be particularly prone to abuse by male

subordinates because of their lower position in a discriminating society.

IPV influences women's physical and mental wellbeing by overt mechanisms, such as injuries, and indirect routes, such as persistent stress-induced chronic health conditions. Hence, a history of abuse is a contributing factor to certain diseases and conditions. The effects of violence are severe, going beyond victims' safety and wellbeing and affecting the security of entire societies. Living in an abusive partnership affects a woman's sense of self-esteem and her desire to be a member of the community. While violence may have an immediate entanglement on health, such as injuries, becoming a survivor of violence often raises the possibility of potential ill health for a woman. Besides the impact of nicotine and drug consumption, becoming a survivor of abuse may be considered a major contributor to a number of illnesses and negative psychological conditions.

Women who live with aggressive partners constantly have a hard time attempting to protect himself or herself from abortion or illness. Violence may directly cause an unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. IPV also affects the emotional wellbeing of women who are exploited by their partners, as they experience more forms of tension, fear, and phobias than women who are not victimized.

2. Childhood-Abuse:

Federal and state laws define childhood abuse as "any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caregiver that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm" ("Child Welfare Information Gateway

2019”). Violence against Black Youth explores how child exploitation and neglect become manifestations of aggression meted out by people, organizations, and processes. Parents and caregivers traumatize children through intimate relationship brutality, infant exploitation, and neglect. In fact, the world in which the African American exists may be painful because of discrimination, prejudice, and other forms of injustice as they face Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA). Researchers Browne and Finkelman (1995) identified two confusing and overlapping kinds of CSA. One of them is “forced or coerced sexual behavior imposed on a child,” and the other is “sexual activity, whether or not obvious coercion is used, between a child and an older person, whether or not obvious coercion is involved” (Finkelman, 1995, p. 60).

Families and infants who face CSA struggle in distinct respects. For one adult victim survivor, the hardest thing would be the anxiety that this trauma has profoundly and irrevocably caused, making sexual functioning unlovable for her. For another, it would be the ongoing tense interactions she faces with family members who have been engaged in violence or who have neglected to defend her. The hardest thing for one family whose child has been abused is to accept that they have neglected to secure their infant. For another family, their failure is to defend themselves from invasive and shameful experiences with child protection.

Moreover, children “feel ashamed because they have participated in taboo activities” (Aronson, 2005, p.154). Moreover, victims feel vulnerable to the offender's threats. The perpetrator can even commit humiliating actions with the witness, or financially compensate her for her participation, all of which raise her feelings of guilt. The responses of those who learn about violence will even blame the victim. Non-offending family

members feel embarrassed not to have been willing to secure their kids and to see their image of social normalcy ruined. The abused kid is also the simplest and most available option for their retribution, as families would blame the victim kid instead of blaming the offender.

Department of Health and Human Services stated, “Over 2,000 children ages two to 17 years of age revealed that one in seven children experienced abuse, with emotional abuse being the most frequent type reported.” (Finkelhor, 2005). The perceptions of exploited African American children in this community warrant special treatment considering the high levels of unresolved mental health issues and incidents of violence, especially for those children who live in poverty as African Americans and immigrants who came to the U.S. living in poverty and for centuries suffered from slavery and faced incredibly harsh treatment, which made the abuse of the African American children easy and without retribution.

3. Racial Violence:

Not only black women confront violence in a white male dominated society; but also, the black men and even children. Generally, African Americans exchanged memories of ethnic brutality that had accrued through segregation, civil war, and liberation. Moreover, if black people opposed white oppression, then white men might use aggression with potential protection from justice. Violence “carries a compulsive need for identity, simulation, and sanctuary. The struggle for power is social, cultural, and psychological. One of the primary characteristics of human interaction in our modern materialistic world is violence” (Wafaa, 2016, p.63). Almost until before the 20th Century, white men who murdered the black African Americans were rarely prosecuted because of the laws that protected and supported the white power.

African Americans are the victims of white lynchings. Lynching is a violent action that involves killing someone without a legal trial by a mob or hanging. It was a cruel public act committed by white people in the 19th and 20th centuries to scare and subjugate black people. It often conjures up images of black people being hung from trees. Lynching was the most successful denunciation of the racist brutality that made life so uncertain and terrifyingly unknown. If we consider lynching from the viewpoint of the people who have witnessed it, a lot of the trauma has arisen from failure to understand precisely how the white could influence their abuse. The perpetrators of racist brutality interpreted lynching not only as a rope- murdering by a mob, but also as the power to murder without fear of retribution. Lynching oppressed black citizens more efficiently by being so incredibly unpredictable, even beyond the description. Moreover, the political system in America assisted the flourishing of community-sanctioned abuse.

African-Americans learned in the wake of the Civil War that white southerners wanted to perpetuate themselves through aggression. Blacks withstood the constant danger to their survival. Black Americans are also known for most of American history that whites thought they had a right to murder them. In 1907, the African American poet, Lizelia Augusta Jenkins Moorer, complained that white men “will often raise a riot” and “butcher up the Negroes” to enforce segregation. She continued in her book *Prejudice Unveiled and Other Poems* (2012).

“If a Negro shows resistance to his treatment by a tough, at some station he’s arrested for the same, though not enough, He is thrashed or lynched or tortured as will please the demon’s rage, Mobbed, of course, by “unknown parties,” thus is closed the darkened page.” (p. 15)

As a part of the ordinary scheme of things, slavery allowed any white person who meets a black person in a public location, for example on a rural road, to ask to see or check the black person's pass, evidence that he or she was authorized to be off the property of his or her owner. Uncooperative blacks may be targeted or shot if they refuse to show their passes or justify themselves.

4. The Police Brutality:

Police discrimination and brutality in the United States appear in various ways as the unwarranted or disproportionate and sometimes unlawful use of force by U.S. police officers against citizens. The types of police violence varied from abuse and assault to torture and assassination. Many broader descriptions of police misconduct may include other types of maltreatment, such as wrongful arrest, bullying, and verbal and physical violence.

Initially, the Great Migration (1916–70) of African Americans developed the interactions between African Americans and urban police departments from the rural south to urban areas of the north and west, especially after World War II. Most white Americans including white police departments opposed the presence of African Americans and responded to their growing numbers with hostility. Northern police forces, representing the prejudices of many whites, operated under the belief that African Americans, and particularly African American males, had an innate propensity towards illegal activity, something that demanded continuous monitoring of African Americans, limited their activities, and segregated them for the interests of white defense. By the mid-1950s, many local police forces had largely re-conceived their roles as shielding whites from blacks.

The forms of police brutality against African Americans appeared in the form of unlimited physical assault and excessive use of force. They also included illegal arrests, verbal abuse such as ethnic slurs and threats, sexual harassment on African American women, and police homicides such as police killings of civilians.

Police violence has been a reason for much of the race riots sparked by ethnic dissension or hatred that erupted in urban America during the 1960s, including the 1965-Watts Riots and the 1967 Detroit Riots. The Miami section of Liberty City erupted in 1980 over the killing of an unarmed African American by police. Eighteen people were killed, and some 1,000 were arrested during the three days.

The Los Angeles Riots of 1992, now deemed the deadliest race disturbances in American history, were sparked by Rodney King's attack by Los Angeles police officers and their resulting acquittal on allegations of assault with a deadly weapon and unlawful use of force. The 1992 Los Angeles violent protest was a significant outbreak of violence, looting, and property destruction in Los Angeles that initiated on April 29, 1992, in response to the acquittal of four white Los Angeles policemen who were related to the severe beating of an African American motorist in March 1999. More than 50 people were killed, more than 2,300 injured, and thousands were arrested as a result of several days of rioting. Approximately, 1,100 buildings were destroyed, and massive property destruction reached about \$1 billion, making the riots one of American history's most devastating civil disruptions.

In 2014, the lethal shooting of an unarmed African American adolescent, Michael Brown, by a white cop in Ferguson,

Missouri, and a great jury's ensuing choice not to prosecute the official on criminal accusations incited revolt in that city.

In 2020, thousands of demonstrators have protested across America against the shock over the passing of the African American George Floyd, recorded as a Minneapolis police officer squeezed a knee to his neck for almost nine minutes while Floyd was being bound and lying face down.

Christina Pazzanese, Harvard Staff Writer, stated in the Harvard Gazette (2012) that many African Americans have been overwhelmed by the grief, misery, and trauma of George Floyd's killing by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. The worrying regularity of these tragedies, and the frequent news coverage, have taken a toll on people's emotions. A groundbreaking study published in Gazette in 2018 by David R. Williams, Florence Sprague Norman, and Laura Smart Norman, Professors of public health and chair of the department of social and behavioral sciences at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, revealed that police killing of an unarmed African American resulted in days of poor mental health for black African Americans living in that state for the next three months after that murder. This critical issue proved that there are about 1,000 police killings per year on average, with African Americans accounting for a disproportionate 25 percent to 30 percent of those. According to this study, the accumulation of these painful days over the course of a year was comparable to the rate experienced by diabetics.

What these professors sought to do was to determine that the killing of civilians by the police had negative consequences not only for the victim's family, immediate family and friends, but also for society as a whole. They studied every police shooting in America over a three-year period from 2013 to 2015 and then

linked it, in a quasi-experimental way, to CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] mental health data in each state. In addition, they found that every police officer who shot an unarmed black person was associated with worse mental health for the entire black population of the state where the shooting occurred over the next three months. This negative effect is related to both the sense of unfairness and the vulnerability it fosters.

5. African Americans and Social Inequality:

John Michael has claimed in *Identity and the Failure of America* (2008) that identity in the United States has frequently taken “shape and shifted in moments of crisis marked by a constitutive conflict between a national promise of justice and those who indicate or embody the injured identities that prove that the nation has failed to make that promise good” (p.4). In fact, power relations and social and racial conflicts have formed the American identity. African Americans have struggled historically in this identity-forming phase because they were excluded from receiving the national pledge of justice that is implicit in American identity. Today, in spite of the views of the Civil Rights Revolution, after the inauguration of the first African American US president, legal equality does not correlate with real equality and justice (Michael, p. 99). It has stated in *Black Victims of Violent Crime 2011* that 24.7 percent of those living below the poverty line in the US are black, according to the 2008 Census Population Profile Highlights on Poverty. Family Violence Statistics, a 2005 Bureau of Justice Statistics survey, reports that 12.1 percent of the US population were African Americans between 1998 and 2002, but they made up 13.6 percent of all victims of family violence. The study further reveals that blacks accounted for 12.7% of the American

population in 2002, but 39.9% of all murder victims; this number rose in 2005 as blacks accounted for 49% of all murder victims (Harrell, p. 3). Data directly related to African American women is much harsher: the (2007) study on intimate relationship abuse in the US by the Bureau of Justice Statistics explains that domestic violence was 1.5 times higher for black women than for white women and 6.5 times higher for white men. Family abuse involves aggravated intimate partner assault, murder, kidnapping, burglary and basic assault offences. It may be claimed, as inferred from this evidence, that the African American female identity is one of the 'injured identities' listed by John Michael (2007). Ethnic, social and gender inequality have hurt America, but they were more literally impacted by militant abuse. (Michael, 106).

Jamila Taylor, the director of Health Care Reform and senior fellow at the Century Foundation, stated in a report in 2019 called *Racism, Inequality, and Health Care for African Americans* that African Americans and other oppressed groups are disproportionately affected by the disparities in the American healthcare system. These inequalities and disparities explain why some communities experience poor health outcomes, unequal access to treatments, and gaps in health insurance coverage.

The percentage of African Americans in The United States population is about 13.4%. African Americans have greatly improved in American society during the decades after the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968. The Economic Policy Institute reports that educational attainment has greatly grown as more than 90% of African Americans aged 25 to 29 have completed high school. In addition, they currently graduate from college at higher rates than before. Although there have been improvements in terms of income, African Americans continue

to be paid less than white Americans for the same profession. Moreover, about 40% of African Americans are homeowners, and percentage has not changed significantly since 1968. (Taylor, p.1)

For centuries, African Americans have experienced racism in American society. It is mentioned in Taylor’s report that racism has a great impact on African Americans' social stratification, mental and physical health. Racism appears clearly in the unequal access to healthcare and creates obstacles to the economic opportunity. The healthcare system is not excluded from promoting discrimination and prejudice towards African Americans as this includes the use of African American bodies in medical experiments, differences in pain management and treatment for African Americans compared to whites experiencing the same health problems, and racial bias in estimating healthcare costs. (p.9)

According to the poverty rate, there is a huge disparity between African Americans and whites, since African Americans are more likely to be poor than white Americans are and less likely to have a full-time worker in the household. Janelle Jones reported on the Economic Policy Institute website “The poverty rate among African Americans was 20.8 percent in 2018, higher than for any other racial or ethnic group in the United States, and more than twice the poverty rate of white Americans”. That is because when African Americans apply for a job, they are more likely to get low-salaries and low positions without essential benefits like paid time off and health insurance. (p.1)

6. The physical and Psychological Sequelae:

Violence upon the African Americans is traumatic, as its physical and psychological effects do not pass by time and cause

a lot of psychological problems that harm the following generations as it is stated in *Violence Against Black Bodies* (2017) that “the violence experienced by black youth is historically based, structurally supported, and reenacted by familial networks” (p. 72). In this way, the field of trauma spans time, body, regional field and significant moment. A sequence of horrific incidents is much more important in defining the abuse endured by those who have to survive in the ruins. No amount of time, number of laws, or colorblindness declarations will cure the brutality of racism and the injustice of oppression related to implicit and explicit violence against black bodies.

Irresolvable violence induced by injustice mutates into the consciousness of leaders and is reinforced in the structures of communities. The unusual and unfair are considered normal and ordinary. That is the case where brutality is part of the day-to-day operation of local, state, and federal planning offices, as demonstrated by the continued influence of race-based discrimination in the U.S.

Carolyn M. West mentions in *Violence in the Lives of Black Women* (2014) that black survivors of violence can suffer a range of mental health disorders, including dissociation, low self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Most black survivors often suffer from psychiatric disorders, generally described as depression, despair, drug use, anxiety, fatigue, and somatic symptoms, or they may commit suicide. Suicide women attempters were more likely to have experienced a history of physical, mental, and sexual violence in their childhood and a history of physical and emotional harassment by spouses. Black victims, especially women, turned into alcoholics as drinking may assist suppress reminders of violence, whereas heavy drinking may be an attempt to alleviate anxiety. (pp. 34-35)

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