

Talking About Structural Inequalities in Everyday Life

reviewed by Eric Weiner — July 18, 2016

Title: Talking About Structural Inequalities in Everyday Life

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Ellen L. Short and Leo Wilton's *Talking About Structural Inequalities in Everyday Life* is a collection of well researched and provocative essays embodying what C. Wright Mills famously called “sociological imagination” (2000). The book advances understanding of the relationship between our private troubles and social structures when taken as a whole. It pays attention to the psychological impact of living in a world where the dominant culture is structured at an institutional level by the intersecting ideologies of white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy, xenophobia, and misogyny. Some institutions that play a formative and reproductive role in the continuation of these intersecting ideologies are schools, health care, finance, media, law, and government. The essays generally take up the challenging task of showing the connection between structural inequalities experienced at a sociological register and the more personal and private expressions of white supremacy, misogyny, patriarchy, xenophobia, and heteronormativity that inhabit the landscape of everyday interactions. One of the most significant contributions that the authors make to our understanding of these complex issues is their focus on the psychological effects of navigating structural inequalities and living within an interpersonal environment of hostility, exclusion, and dehumanization.

In Chapter One, the author discusses how the white supremacist idea of black rage unfairly pathologizes an emotional state that is completely reasonable from another perspective in light of the injustices and indignities that people of color might feel living under the regime of white supremacy (p. 4). By pathologizing the rage some people of color feel about the structural effects of white supremacy, the institution of white supremacy not only absolves itself from any responsibility for causing that rage but more perniciously erases the idea that white supremacy exists in the first place. One of the great challenges this book confronts is showing how power works at a structural level to create and reproduce inequalities while representing meritocracy as the dominant ideology within these structures. The authors work to explain the psychological impact and mental health environment that exists within violent social structures without pathologizing people who are suffering from various psychological conditions like depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and addiction.

Another challenge of exercising a sociological imagination is moving dialectically between specifics and generalizations. The authors understand the need to address the nature of one's experience within social structures while also generalizing beyond the individual. This leads the authors to acknowledge both the heterogeneity of Latin, Caribbean, and African cultures while also making more generalizable analyses about the effects of immigration policy, ethnoviolence, and mental health care.

Talking About Structural Inequalities in Everyday Life is a coherent collection of sixteen chapters divided into three parts. Part One is the largest section and deals primarily with structural inequalities, race/ethnicity, and mental health. Aside from the issue of black rage, there is a meta-ethnography concerning African women coping with trauma (p. 25) and how “intersectional microaggressions” (p. 55) manifest themselves in the workplace and destroy any sense of fairness of opportunity. This part also explores how microaggressions compromise the mental health of Latinas/os such as “higher levels of anxiety and depression and poor behavioral control and positive affect” (p. 67) and how intimate partner violence in African American women's lives is “‘hidden in plain sight’ and, ironically, is so hyper-visible and pervasive it has become ‘obscured, routinized, and thereby legitimated’” (p. 86). It also examines how we can create intervention programs like The Project Sister Circle to “address the socio-emotional needs of adolescent Black/African and Latina middle school girls in an urban context by interrupting negative social and health trajectories” (p. 104).

Part One examines how media engages in a form of ethnoviolence when it manufactures representations that “denigrate and distort Black/African descent women in visual and artistic contexts (p. 129) and how these forms of ethnoviolence can be a significant “source of psychological distress and trauma” (p. 133) but are too often ignored or dismissed by professionals working in the mental health community. This part also chronicles how black transgendered communities organize and resist pernicious structural inequalities and how black same gender practicing men's communities in post-apartheid South Africa can be helped by instituting a “holistic approach that incorporates a focus on structural violence” and engaging in “a human rights framework that addresses the effects of social structures that disenfranchise communities” (p. 176).

Part Two, “Structural Inequalities and Institutions,” is comprised of four chapters dealing with a diverse range of subjects. Chapter

Ten addresses the complexities involved in taking an account of and finding solutions for the educational disparities within Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. It concludes that it is a matter of social justice that we work “toward critical methods of disaggregating and analyzing Asian American data” to “contribute to more effective implementation of promising [pedagogical, curricular, and counseling] practices” (p. 200).

There is probably no better example of structural inequality and white supremacy than the modern prison industrial complex described by some scholars as akin to “neo-slavery” (p. 207). Chapter Eleven builds on the work of Michelle Alexander’s important book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012) by arguing for “the creation of a new system that resists, confronts, and expels those foundational constructs associated with this neo-slavery, this neo-Jim Crow, this racialized hyper-incarceration” (p. 216).

Chapter Twelve transitions the book into a conversation about deficit models of analysis and college graduation rates of black males. The school to prison pipeline suggests educational and juridical structures combine for a powerful social formation that controls the life trajectories of men and women of color. How do researchers, administrators, health care professionals, and teachers rationalize the struggles and failures of poor students of color by appealing to literature that represents black identity as singular, criminal, dangerous, inferior, and needing remediation?

Chapter Thirteen confronts the disciplines of anthropology and psychology for constructing a discourse of assessment and intelligence owing many of its rationalizations to the era of European colonization. “While many test developers claim that the most popular measures utilized in our profession have attained a semblance of cultural validity, the research methods used to support this conclusion problematically focus on linearity and consistency in the absence of context” (p. 243). This recognition of the importance of context in the assessment of intelligence but also treatment of psychological disorders would be a radical move for fields of study that have historically viewed the process of contextualization as a liability rather than an asset of knowledge construction.

Part Three, “Organizational and Group Dynamics and Structural Inequalities,” consists of three chapters addressing complex theoretical issues associated with structural inequality, ideologies of oppression, modernity, mindful enlightenment, and morality. Chapter Fourteen tackles the persistence of the idea of race and how “[m]odernity made racism possible. It also created a demand for racism” (p. 274). Chapter Fifteen delves into the role of voice, group relations theory, feminism, and black feminist standpoint theory. The authors situate their discussion of these complex theoretical discourses within the context of the spectacles surrounding the interrogation of Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas-Hill hearings in 1991 and the case against Dominique Strauss-Kahn for sexually assaulting Nafissatou Diallo in 2011. Hill and Diallo are linked by their “act of giving voice to their victimization” (p. 287) and giving voice in this chapter builds on the work of Audre Lorde and bell hooks by conceptualizing voice as a potentially subversive force that works to disembowel the white supremacy and misogyny that normalizes itself within dominant formations of law and government.

Chapter Sixteen asks readers to consider complex ideas about the relationship between victim and oppressor such as how do caste systems and other structures of domination serve the “needs” of society? Serving these needs is a bizarre and deeply unconscious collusion of victim and oppressor that does not allow a transformative breakthrough. Individual insights are powerful but these alone do not lead to transformation of systems (p. 327), and this important idea moves the author to think about spiritual work and its relationship to our conceptions of the individual and learning theory.

The collection of essays in *Talking About Structural Inequalities in Everyday Life* is powerful and thoroughly researched. All of the essays focus on some of the most insidious and historically intractable problems of modernity. I would have liked to hear more about structures of finance and the ideology of neoliberalism as forces within the intersectional matrix of identifications that are discussed. I would also have benefited from an index at the end of the book. But these are minor quibbles regarding an otherwise exceptional collection of provocative and timely essays about structural inequality, intersectional identifications, and mental health.

References

Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press.

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