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A FEMINIST EXPLORATION OF VIOLENCE: HOW LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY SHAPE
PERCEPTIONS

by

Mckinna Wilts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies

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A Feminist Exploration of Violence:

How Language and Identity Shape Perceptions

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Abstract

Using research from across disciplines such as Criminology, Feminist Theory, and Social Psychology, the following paper presents a case for the restructuring of the present understanding of violence, victims, survivors, and perpetrators. The current definitions and understandings of each of these topics are narrow caricatures which results in the exclusion of many instances of violence.   I complicate our understandings of victims and of perpetrators, to allow people thought of as unable to perpetrate violence, to be held accountable and those thought as unable to be victimized to be believed.

Introduction

My original intentions for this research were rather selfish. This project started, as many of my academic projects do – with "how can I make this most applicable to me." I like to complete tasks that in some way relate to me. I find it easier to think and write, especially over a long time, about myself, my own experiences and things I have knowledge on. I also enjoy getting academic credit for the work I am already doing. Around the time I was supposed to pick a topic for my thesis, I had rededicated myself to working through an experience that I had a little over a year prior.

My new boyfriend understood intimacy was difficult for me. I am reserved and quiet and at twenty hadn't experienced much in regards to my own sexuality let alone exploring it with another person. He, much like a father who throws their child into the deep end of a pool to sink or swim decided for me, that the best way for me to get over it all was to face the fear head on. I remember feeling fear and pain above anything else. I never told him no, only that I was scared. After, I felt many things. I was conflicted because of course I wanted to be like "all the other college kids" but I also felt really upset and gross. I was scared and ashamed. My boyfriend must have realized that this experience didn't "fix" my intimacy struggles, or maybe he recognized the problem before I did because later that week he broke up with me. I didn't have the language to talk about what had happened, so I didn't. My friends saw the crying and self-isolation as the result of a breakup and nothing more.

My upset over the experience lasted much longer than the upset at the break up. I was tired of being upset, and I realized it was affecting my current relationships. I wanted to feel better, so, my original intention for this project was to create a workbook on healing. I wanted a step-by-step process on how to navigate the trauma and the difficulties of returning to normal

after an assault. I had started thinking of my experience as sexual assault, because I didn't have

anything better to call it, and because it was better than trying to convince myself it was nothing.

Even with a label I continued to keep my feelings a secret out of shame, but in a lot of ways out

of fear. Everyone knows what happens to the girl who false reports, and I hadn't fully convinced

myself I was assaulted, let alone anyone else. I already felt like a liar to myself; I already

blamed myself and I didn't want to risk getting those reactions from others as well.

While I knew my experience had left its mark on me, I never felt like it was quite bad

enough to seek professional help over. On bad days I would read various things online, but I

never talked about it with anyone. For me, a type of curriculum I could do alone was something

I needed. I had reached a point that I was uncomfortable, but not uncomfortable enough that I

could justify counseling or the like.   I know there are plenty of resources in a college town I

could have contacted but in my own mind, my experience wasn't that bad, my reaction wasn't

that bad, and I thought I could probably handle it myself. I reasoned that I didn't want to take up

the time and resources that could be used for other people who had it worse. I wanted a fix and

so I needed to create it. However, as I began my research, the literature on sexual assault didn't

apply to me. I couldn't find anything that applied to me.

I realized healing didn't apply to me, as least not in the way it was commonly being

talked about. I couldn't heal if nothing happened to me. I was frustrated, so at the

recommendation of my advisor I simply started reading things that I was interested in to reorient

myself. One of my friends had started a Maggie Nelson book called *The Art of Cruelty*, so on a

whim I started it too. It wasn't too far off from what I had been researching; it dealt with

violence at least. That book contained a watershed moment for me. There is a line I came across

about objective and subjective cruelty where Nelson theorizes that subjective cruelty – things

like slapping someone in the face, cannot even compare to the hurt caused by systemic injustices

– like microaggressions, that can cause someone to feel constantly unsafe in their own skin,

which is objective cruelty. It opened my eyes to the possibilities of events that can cause pain.

Things that aren't illegal, things we don't talk about, things there isn't literature on, can cause

immense pain. The ways humans can be hurt, and the ways humans can hurt other humans are

much more numerous than I had ever realized. I finally felt validated. After finishing the book,

I realized there was a dire need for a restructured understanding of violence and pain.

      The normative definition of violence has resulted in the silencing of countless voices and

stories, including mine. Our present understanding of violence is so narrow that many victims

don't feel entitled to their pain and trauma because we do not make space for variations of

experience. The victims of this "invisible violence" are left feeling even more isolated and

confused and as a result forced into burying or denying the reality of their pain. Feminist writers

rightfully take issue with the word victim, but for me, a person who wasn't even allowed the

community or lable of "victimhood" because my trauma stemmed from an act unrecognizable, to

me and many others, as violence, it's freeing to finally admit to myself and others that a moment

that "wasn't that bad" was in fact violent, and traumatizing. In that moment I was a victim and

my feelings after were real. People cannot "heal" (I use in quotes because that word should be

interrogated more) unless they understand and acknowledge their pain as real, which they can't

do if no one (including themselves) believes it's justified. How can one be traumatized when

nothing bad happened?

      While on the surface there may seem like only a small relationship to Gender, Women's

and Sexuality Studies (GWSS), in the discussion that follows I use a feminist lense that very

much aligns with the spirit of gender studies, by taking into account different identities and

structures that shape our understanding of violence. For me gender studies, as a department and as a group of scholars, doesn't study gender, sexuality, race, disability, religion, because of the quality itself, but rather the profound influence these identities have on power, and space within society. The realms of violence and pain are not impervious to the influences of power and oppression.

I also want to step back from my own experience and acknowledge that the point of all of this is that violence and pain are much more variable than we are lead, and would like, to believe. I have experienced violence that minimally traumatized me, and everyone should be allowed to experience things in different ways. An act doesn't need to ruin someones life to be worth talking about.   The point is to interrogate how this widespread definition of violence systematically ignores types of violence. This invisible violence often lays the foundation for more extreme versions of violence, because it dehumanizes, degrades, and strips autonomy from its victims.

To further explore how this definition marginalizes some violent experiences, I want to pull apart our everyday understanding of "perpetrator" and "victim/survivor." In a similar fashion to how some events are unrecognizable as violence due to the definition excluding them some people are unrecognized as perpetrators and victims. This shapes who is believed, and who is punished. This is an added layer which silences people and normalizes certain types of violence.

What is Violence?

My goals for this research are to shift the way we talk about and understand violence, I want people to understand how a "simple" definition effects very large systems and institutions and how integral violence is to US culture- we use normalized/invisible violence to maintain

power structures and we use invisible violence to dehumanize and legitimize more overt violence. I want to create an understandable representation of a violence hierarchy and a violence charm circle that our current understanding of violence created. I want to pull in feminist ideas of gender to explain why violence happens and I also want to pull in race and class to show how stereotypes influence the normalization and even expectation of perpetration and victimization. I also want to point out more language for people to use when talking about violence – implicit vs explicit violence, or overt/covert violence, the violence charm circle, invisible violence etc. I want to complicate our understandings of victims and of perpetrators, to allow people thought of as unable to perpetrate violence, to be held accountable and those thought as unable to be victimized to be believed. The following first section introduces the topic of violence by deconstructing the everyday definition, discussion of a hierarchy of violence, exploring types of pain, and then exploring several theories of why people perpetrate violence. The section that follows lays out the current ideas of victim/survivor and perpetrator to show how these constructions influence reactions and consequences to violence.

To answer large questions about violence, its results, its perpetrators, and its causes, it is imperative to start with the most essential pieces of the puzzle. The assumption of a universal understanding often leads to people talking past one another, which cause miscommunication and confusion. To start a dialogue about violence, we must first understand how people use the word "violence" and what it might mean to them. The next step would be to analyze how the single definition can influence the understanding and then determine how breaking away from a traditional understanding may better serve both practical and theoretical uses. An understanding of where and in what context the societal understanding of violence departs from a more capacious definition will also create a more salient hierarchy which privileges some instances of

violence yet causes others to be largely ignored. Words are inherently political, and realizing

their successes and failures allows for a larger and more accurate understanding of the topic.

Once an understanding of violence is created, a consideration of various types of violence can

happen. Only then can theories of why violence is perpetrated and who might become a

perpetrator of violence begin.

One basic definition of violence is "any behavior involving physical force intended to

hurt, injure or kill" (Widdows 2015). However, this definition can be qualified in several ways.

First, requiring certain intentions could leave out acts that most people would agree are violent

(Widdows 2015). For example, deadly car accidents are generally considered violent, but most

people would agree that in the majority of crashes no driver intended for any injury or harm to

occur when they decided to get behind the wheel. It is easier to condemn the perpetrators with

violent intentions, the person who runs down their cheating spouse, or even a perpetrator

behaving recklessly, the drunk driver, because it fits the dominant narrative, however the person

killed in the crosswalk because a soccer mom was distracted by what to make for dinner is just as

dead as the person hit by their jealous. Therefore, intention may be an indicator of something

being violent, and it may create a hierarchical understanding of violence, however, the absence

of it does not immediately dismiss the act as violent.

The requirement of physical force may also unnecessarily limit a total understanding of

violence (Widdows 2015). Blocking access to clean water kills people. The decision not to

provide clean water to people may come from signing off on a bill, public ignorance, or a

business memo - none of which use force to commit, or necessarily involves malicious intent, yet

the denial of life sustaining substances, which surely results in death, can be seen as an act of

violence. Most people would also be quick to label emotional abuse as a type of violence, but

the mechanisms of emotional abuse like fear, intimidation, isolation, degradation, can be enacted

entirely on a mental level. Physical force again is part of the hierarchical understanding of

violence, as well as pain, but is not a ruling out factor.

   The final piece of the definition calls upon the result of the behavior, which is that a

person is hurt, injured, or killed. However, assuming a normative understanding of what it

means to feel hurt or injured, as well as how hurt or injury comes about may also be

unnecessarily limiting and therefore needs to be interrogated. Violence often brings up thoughts

of bodies, or more broadly situations of flesh, which privileges and prioritizes injuries that

involve blood or bruises and very clear cause and effect relationships (Nelson 2012). However,

less explicit types of harm should be considered equally along with more visceral and fast acting

forms of violence. Mental or psychological harm, which is less often considered as violence, can

result in extreme negative psychological states, such as severe PTSD, which can be maladaptive

enough to affect participation in daily life. Not only does the potential severity make it a

legitimate form of harm, but also lower levels of mental harm are still real and can be used to

manipulate and restrict the actions of a person, or group of people (Scarry 1987). Mental harm is

cumulative in many ways, and in some cases can be slower acting. For example, even if the first

instances of misgendering, insults, and comments are not enough to significantly impact a

person, when hurled repeatedly, over many days, the mental pain and fatigue could compile and

increase. Behaviors that cause fear, grief, stress, hopelessness, or isolation over any time period

are harmful and cause injury (Scarry 1987). So, while bodily harm may be more readily called

to mind, mental/emotional harm must also be considered as well as harm that is more cumulative

and slow acting.

Assuming violence is one behavior or a specific behavior or one instance may also be an oversimplification. Having all the information would mean considering what actions lead to a behavior happening, how socially acceptable or normal the behavior is, where the behavior was learned, and how often it is repeated. Norms and stereotypes, which result in the normalization of violence, are also able to inflict mental harm directly on individuals within the stereotyped group. Stereotypes can cause a lot of anxiety for fear of confirming them. Alternatively, if they have been internalized, there is a potential of fear of breaking away from them (West, Donovan & Daniel 2016). Stereotypes exert control and therefore restrict freedom over the behavior of the group depicted (Harris-Perry 2011). While these are harmful and could be interpreted as violent, stereotypes can hardly be reduced to singular behaviors.

Now that every aspect of a basic definition of violence has been analyzed, what can we do? To start, there are some areas that the definition did get right. First, this definition does not put any focus on the number of players that violence needs. Most people understand violence as an interaction with a perpetrator or perpetrators, and victim or victims, and sometimes bystanders (Luckenbill 1977). Furthermore, this definition did not stipulate that perpetrator and victim must be different people. It allows self-harm to be included as a form of violence (Widdows 2015). The focus on resulting harm, death, or injury is also an important feature because the biggest indicator of violence (in a non-consensual context) is that it leaves the victim worse off than prior to the violence (Widdows 2015).

Important things to consider when thinking about violence are that it does not have to be instantaneous. Blocking access to food or water would not result in deaths on day one, but it eventually would. Something that results in injury, pain, or death is probably violence.

Thinking about the intentions behind a behavior may or may not indicate violence, and finally, harm is varied and can be both psychological and physical.

The dominant definition does explain a type of violence, but it does not accurately explain all violence. Using this normative definition without acknowledging that fact, allows many violent acts to remain outside of conversations about violence and more often remain invisible to the majority of people. This then creates a hierarchy of violence where priority is given to the violence that neatly fits. However, these non-prioritized instances of violence that fall ignored within the hierarchy both complicate and assist in a better understanding. Widening the definition of violence allows for other methods of prevention to be translated to different situations, as well as for a more thorough theoretical discussion. For the purposes of this thesis, trying to consider violence with only one static definition would be counterproductive, as the goal of the thesis is to create a space where new evidence and understanding can be presented and created.

Another piece worth understanding early on are different categories of harm. Social harm is a class of actions that causes mental or physical injury (Widdows 2015). When stereotypes are seen as violence, they tend to take place is the more social and public spheres. Political harm is similar to social harm. It is a class of actions taking place in a political sphere. Laws, stereotypes, norms, and assumptions, which are created on a political level, can normalize physical violence, take away resources, which result in bodily injury, remove protections from citizens, or any other number of things that can result in mental or physical pain(Widdows 2015). Spiritual harm is a class of actions that attack at person's belief systems. Cultural harm similarly attacks a person's identities.

Along with violence, the ideas of hurt and pain are also worth probing. As with violence there seem to be exceptions even to the most general truths. For the sake of drawing the line somewhere, consensual and enjoyable forms of pain and violence are real, but I'll take this up later. Pain exists on different levels, mental and physical, and to different degrees, and these can also intersect and work together as well. It is often the case that people feel sympathetic to pain. This means the greater the pain the more attention it gets. Prioritizing pains inevitably mean some are left out which is why understanding violence and pain has widespread implications. Prioritizing pain influences the layout of the hierarchy of violence. The fields of medicine, law, art, and politics all greatly influence how people talk about and understand pain and therefore helped cultivate that dominant understanding of violence (Scarry 1987).

Art creates lasting understandings of a subject. As such, seeing and hearing depictions of pain that might be more interesting to depict can create a public understanding about that pain. Therefore, the things that depart from this average public image may be ignored, or misinterpreted (Nelson 2012). In the same way that understanding violence solely in terms of the physical prioritizes physical violence over mental violence, viewing only visceral physical violence in art may create the public prioritization of visceral physical violence over all other types in other spheres beyond art. It is in these depictions and descriptions a hierarchy continues to form and be reformed (Scarry 1987). There has also been much discussion questioning the ethics of depicting pain and violence, as the voyeurism involved may dehumanize the object and desensitizes the viewer to other real-life pains (Nelson 2012). A cultural desensitization to violence means several things; first, that pain and therefore violence would be easier to inflict if there is no sense of guilt or real comprehension associated with pain (Hagan 2011). It may also create a society more tolerant to violence where violence is allowed to happen without much

social or legal backlash because the public has larger concerns in the political realm that there is less of a push to condemn and legislate violence.

The medical field works with pain. It also provides the language we use to describe pain. Historically, there has be a focus on controlling the more physical pains. For a long time, there was no understanding of the possibility for lasting mental and psychological impacts from trauma, but once medicine started being able to treat problems of the psyche, it legitimized mental pain. All of this is important because the ranking of pain on different dimensions and the accessibility of treatment can be influenced by how society understands pain. A societal understanding of identity also influences understanding of pain and treatment. For example, knowing which groups are more tolerant to pain, which groups hide their pain, and which groups are hypersensitive to pain influences pain management. Medical treatment legitimizes a person's pain. If it is not legitimized by the medical sphere, then often it is labeled as less severe and therefore there does not need to be concern (Scarry 1987).

Law and policy is the business of preventing and in some cases allowing and inflicting pain. That is where the things that are understood as most important can be allowed to continue, or be restricted, but the types of pain that come to this area are based on what type of pain is seen as the most detrimental, how much is happening, who is in power, who is funding what, and what group is experiencing it. Pain is political in the sense that in this realm pain can be used to serve a wide purpose. It is through each of these lenses that society learns what pain is worth creating and viewing, what pain is worth public attention, and what pain is worth caring about (Nelson 2012).

We discuss pain and learning to manage, prevent, inflict, and understand it are all still actively happening, yet our language for pain is underdeveloped. We cannot understand pain

because those feeling pain often cannot articulate it well, and those in complete pain do not have

autonomous use over their language (Scarry 1987). We describe our pain through a mediator,

when we are in pain and not communicating well. Otherwise, we work from memory. The

persons mediator tries to verbalize the pain in hopes of coming close to understanding it. While

we have a way to go to more fully understand pain, there are some basic principles we do

understand. First is that pain is not transferable or shareable. While secondary pain, which is the

trauma or pain that happens when finding out about another person's trauma or pain, can happen,

the original pain a person has can not be given to someone else to endure (Scarry 1978). Pain

can have different dimensions. There are different intensities and durations of pain and the way

pain feels can be different. Words like "throbbing", "burning", "aching", and "sharp" can all be

used to describe pain, and they also indicate different types (Scarry 1987).

Now with an understanding of the more theoretical side of violence, it is important to also

ground the situation in reality. What are specific acts of violence? Salient examples of violence

include murder, torture, intimate partner violence, rape, assault, slavery, robbery, stalking, and

war. Less acknowledged acts of violence include microaggressions, stereotypes, substance

abuse, eating disorders, and oppression. They all cause injury to a victim and also results in the

stripping of humanity, agency, and often is a form of control.

The cause or causes of violence are complicated. There has yet to be a one-size-fits-all

model to understand all types of violence or all types of perpetrators. Disciplines such as

criminology, psychology, and feminist studies have proposed many theories. Sometimes the

theories overlap, creating a more in depth understanding of crime and violence and sometimes

the contradictory theories can be applied at different times for different situations to create an

understanding (Hagan 2011).

One possible explanation for crime and violence comes from the idea of a group conflict model of the law. Criminologists proposed this theory to account for explaining how/why laws exist. This theory says that crime happens because not all members within a society agree about what is right and wrong and therefore some members ignore the legal designation prohibiting an act and participate in it anyway (Hagan 2011). Not all types of violence are illegal and not all crime is equally enforced. For example, microaggressions and even verbal abuse are not policed or perceived in the same way an aggravated assault would be policed or perceived. While this is about laws, it brings up the important point that people often have different values and beliefs regarding certain behaviors. Many laws--for example, abortion--still widely and hotly contested within the US. It shows how something can be normal and acceptable to some people yet be an absolute abomination to another person. If a behavior is not seen as wrong, then people will participate in it, especially if it is rewarding or reinforcing in some way. This behavioral pattern is applicable to violence.

We can also apply differential association theory, which focuses slightly more on people (Hagan 2011). It says that learning and social influences are an integral part of the reasons crime happens. The theory also says that there are a few elements necessary for criminal behavior to occur. First, there must be an excess of definitions favorable to crime as opposed to unfavorable. The piece also relates to an individual person's values system, which as stated earlier can be complex and varied. If someone learns values that designate certain behaviors as being necessary, normal, or at least not bad, then the behavior is seen as acceptable. The second piece of this theory is the learning of techniques. This is essentially the "how" of crime. An example of this could be assault or street fighting. One must first think physical fighting is acceptable or at least necessary before they participate, and second, they must know how to fight, or they

would be unable to participate. The final piece necessary for crime to occur is the opportunity. Opportunity means encountering a "victim" to perpetrate violence against, and a setting to use criminal techniques. Differential association theory also says that social structure plays a role in who learns these definitions and techniques and, therefore, who commits crime. Different upbringings within families, different media exposure, and different peer groups all influence a person's understanding of crime (Hagan 2011).

Labeling theory, focuses on why a specific person might be perpetrating crime and not someone else, and can be applied to violence as well as other criminal behavior. According to this theory societal reactions result in deviant behavior (Hagan 2011). The reactions can come from people close to the individual, like family or friends, but reactions can also come from larger organizations such as religious groups, schools, and even the criminal justice system. This theory says that criminal behavior works like a self-fulfilling prophecy and that once someone is labeled as criminal or grouped in with a class of people such as other criminal people, that it becomes easy to assimilate into that identity and start to believe it. The label of deviant or criminal causes a person to take on that role, which then leads to more participation in deviant behavior and even escalated deviance. This can be exacerbated by inequality and stereotypes in society (Hagan 2011). The theory further introduces the idea that violence is related to relationships with other people, and again involves the idea that different groups have different values systems. These themes come back in the next theories of violence and seem to really be an important piece.

Criminologists proposed another theory with violent crime in mind. The theory is called the subcultures of violence theory or sometimes the southern subculture of violence theory (Hagan 2011). It was originally created to explain why violent crime is more prevalent in areas

of high poverty but has been revised and now is often used to explain violence within the

southern United States. This theory focuses on more widespread patterns of violence, and not

necessarily why individual situations of violence occur. The theory explains that different

groups have different values. These different groups are referred to as subcultures. In some

subcultures, violence is more normal and accepted and that can happen for various reasons. The

example of the Southern United States cites the South's history of violence, including slavery

and much of the civil war. These very large and very violent time periods altered the values of

many living in the south. This can be seen with how highly guns are valued in the south. The

theory then says that violence is felt as a normal and necessary part of life. Therefore, people

within the subculture do not feel guilt or negative emotions around the use of violence, thus

causing violence to become more commonly used. These values are passed through generations.

Even if a person within the subculture is raised without these values, they can be picked up

through peer groups. These groups may use violence as a rite of passage or initiation type of test.

The demonstration of violence might also then be used to measure up and/or separate the "true"

people within the subculture or identity. It then becomes rewarding for someone to conform and

demonstrate their skill or comfort with violence for the sake of fitting in (Renzetti 2001; Hagan

2011). This theory could be generalized to other groups that also exhibit high levels of violence

perpetration.

Yet another theory, which in some ways relate to the subcultures of violence theory,

relies again on histories of violence. It is the idea that abuse is cyclical and is captured by the

catchy sort of therapy phrase "Hurt people hurt people (Renzetti 2001)." This theory is more

about micro-level interactions and is for explaining why specific people perpetrate violence.

Instead of working from the idea that violence becomes normal and acceptable after it has been

used, it works from the idea that being a victim of violence and not overcoming the trauma, or

not learning alternative coping behaviors can sometimes result in violence. It theorizes that

violence perpetration is a result of violent victimization. Violence is theorized as a method used

to cope with victimization, possibly due to regaining the feeling of control, in an attempt to

reverse the original victimization by becoming the perpetrator or attempting to feel better by

making another person feel worse.

There is another interpretation that theorizes that violence is used as emotion regulation.

If growing up with violence blocked the learning of other methods to express and control

aggression and other high levels of negative emotional states, then the person might use the

behavior that was modeled for them, which is violence (Renzetti 2001). With this theory,

violence is again a learned behavior that is supposed to serve a purpose for the perpetrator.

Another theory that attempts to explain violence points to the patriarchy, or a male

system of dominance, as the source (Renzetti 2001). A male system of dominance created a

hierarchy based on gender, which places the most masculine on top and the less masculine

further down. Masculinity is associated with men, so they tend to be towards the top with

women and genderqueer individuals also falling somewhere below. Individual differences

distinguish the order on a micro-level. The concept of masculinity becomes a standard that all

people are compared against. Masculinity is seen as the ideal gender and those succeeding at

performing it best receive privileges that others who deviate from this target do not receive. This

means there is clear incentive to perform masculinity that is strongest for men, but also available

to all people. This relates to violence because of the way masculinity is constructed.

Masculinity is often seen as relating to or embodying power and dominance (Katz 2006). It

means being strong, confident, and fearless, not being a victim. The paradigmatic man both

conquers and protects while showing rationality and stoicism at all times. Because of the emphasis on power and control, aggression is often a means by which to demonstrate masculinity and is often considered part of being masculine. This definition of masculinity also includes being able to take part in violence when necessary. The relationship between violence, masculinity and power could mean people of all types perpetrate violence and aggression in order to gain power and status. People often throw out the term "gendered violence", but as power is inescapably tied to gender and violence is often a tool of power, all violence can be situated within gendered and racialized contexts (Katz 2006). However, as I will point out later on, dis/ability, class, and religion are also tied to violence.

Hierarchies exist to rank and separate people, and violence can be used as a defining factor for ranking. There are many ways people can show status--such as through money and possessions, career, and education--but in the absence of these things or in groups that are more equal, all people have their bodies and their physical power that can be demonstrated (Hagan 2011). When status cannot be demonstrated it must be created. Physical violence is the proverbial trump card.

The theory of a male system of dominance greatly relates to the subculture of violence theory. The "subculture" of men has a values system that understands violence to be an acceptable and even valued form of interaction (McKelvey 2007). The use of violence is a standard that all members in the group are evaluated on. Not being able to fight, or not being willing to use violence, would raise questions and accusations about not being a "real man". This creates pressure to conform to the group standards and rewards one for doing so. Sports as well as the military can also be thought of as subcultures which may have a value system similar to, or related to, men and masculinity which could also have similar results.

Along with power, there are several other goals or reasons someone may use violence. Violence can be used to gain control over an adversary. Increased pain can increase the control. Violence and the threat of violence can also be used to maintain control over someone, or a group of someone's (Widdows 2015). They can be used as a preventative measure towards victimization. Demonstrating violence, aggression, or physical power, would make others less inclined to fight. Violence can also be used as a form of revenge (Widdows 2015). In the case of in groups and subcultures, violence may be ritualized in some ways or be seen as a group rite. It can also be used to express and regulate high levels of emotion. Violence can be an act of self -preservation. However, all of these things can really be seen as power and power relationships manifesting itself in different ways, which shows how essential power is to violence.

Violence is a complicated and broad idea, which clearly benefits from more attention and thought than just a basic understanding. Even the "simplest" ideas such as pain and harm become more complicated and nuances as they are interrogated. Using a single static definition of violence can result in the exclusion of acts that, when framed as violence, create a more complete theoretical and practical understanding. A cultural understanding of violence has widespread implications for who, and what, gets attention within the medical, legal, and artistic fields. A hierarchy of pain, harm and violence starts to form.

One single succinct definition contradicts a full understanding, as there is no way to encapsulate the full diversity of pain and violence within a portable set of words. An understanding of why violence happens is no simpler to obtain and many fields have valid theories in place regarding histories of violence, conflicting values, learned skills, and cultural power dynamics. Each compelling in its own way they can be combined and overlapped in ways

to create fuller and more complex understandings. This understanding both complicates and aids

in bigger questions about victimization, perpetration, trauma, and healing

Individuals and Violence

Language, like almost anything else, influences, and is influenced by culture. As seen in

the last section, language and our constructed understandings of words partially obscure real-life

instances of violence. It does so by making some things hyper visible and rendering other

actions invisible through normalization as well as through the creation of a hierarchy. The last

section pulled apart a dictionary definition of violence. That definition had two major parts. First

there are the behavior and the assumed results of the behavior. The second part is the people

involved. While our cultural understanding of violence generally emphasizes and surrounds the

behavior/event, and the results, the way we understand the people involved can also drastically

influence our understanding of both the violent act and the results. It also influences what

society codes as violence and what we code as expected or normative behavior and can

drastically influence our understanding of both the violent act and the results as well as affect the

behavior of people involved. This can affect the legislation, treatment, and punishment of

violence. If any of these parts, people, actions, results, in some way do not line up with cultural

understandings than it is more likely that the event will not be coded as violence. The first

section covered the event and the results, this section will cover the people involved and how our

construction of them can further hide violence.

I pointed out that the dominant narrative of violence says there are two different parties

involved in an act of violence. There is the person or people engaging in violence, often called

the perpetrator/s and there is a person or group of people that are on the receiving end of the

violence. They are the group of people that have had their agency restricted and are negatively

impacted due to restriction in a significant way. Typically, the language used to describe the

receiver/s are victims and more recently there has been a language revolution so that survivor is

now the prefered term for someone affected by violence. As a culture we have certain

understandings about the people that these labels describe. I will explore the idea perpetrators

and then turn to victims/survivors. I will complicate these ideas further by proposing instances of

perpetrator and victim being the same, such as in self harm, as well as instances that cause a

person to be perpetrating violence and be the victim of violence in one situation, such as is

common in war.   Similar to section one, I will explore the textbook understanding of the words

as well as the social and cultural understandings and implications of the language on our larger

understanding of violence, and then discuss why it all matters.

Perpetrators

The New Oxford American Dictionary defines perpetrator as "a person who carries out a

harmful, illegal, or immoral act" (New Oxford American Dictionary 2011). In this definition,

the label of perpetrator is the result of an action and has nothing to do with personality or

disposition. It also speaks in the singular about the act, suggesting that a person is a perpetrator

after one illegal, immoral, or harmful act. As with other definitions, pulling apart each word

often leads to more questions and ambiguity. First, morality is subjective and varies by person;

there is no standard which automatically weakens the word, and if morality is what is currently

underlying the label, then we should determine whose morals are being used as the basis of the

definition, and whether they apply to the person participating in the act. Also, as brought up

several times before, our language and understanding of 'harm' are not simple, succinct, or clear.

In fact, it is something that should be increasingly researched as its ties to violence are so salient.

What counts as harm, what is the experience of harm, what what are the effects of harm all need

to be assessed in order for a clearer understanding of 'perpetrator' to be created. If there are

indeed different levels/severities of harm, morality, and laws (which there are already clearly are

different legal levels/severities), then one could argue that there are, in fact, also different levels

of perpetrators. However, the socially sanctioned way that perpetrator is used and thought of

denies this complexity.

Our culture considers perpetrators to be monsters. This is based on a binary construction

of morality, and this duality transfers to people. They are good or bad with no space in between

for ambiguity or contradiction. Because of this, the word perpetrator takes on social

connotations such as good for nothing, not helpful to society in anyway, and skill-less. When

people are conditioned to believe that perpetrators, or any other identity, look, act, sound, or

appear in a certain way, even if it is an oversimplification or half truth, we use this as a marker to

identify them. So, in this instance, being labeled or seen as a perpetrator has more to do with

matching the social script than matching the textbook definition. In instances where someone

matches the social script, or that social script has been built into the construct of a particular

identity, that person is labeled a perpetrator even without carrying out any of the harmful, illegal,

or immoral acts associated with the word. On the other hand, when a person deviates from the

social construction of or social script associated with perpetrator, it is easier for that person to

avoid the consequences of the perpetrator label. A feminist intersectional analysis of the relation

between gender, race, class and ability reveals the identity of perpetrator to be constructed in

ways that privilege some and punish others.

The assignment and interpretation of the perpetrator identity is affected by gender, and

this is further complicated by an individual's race, religion, class, or ability. For white cis-men,

masculinity is a source of power and privilege (Katz 2018). Thus white masculinity can not

accurately represent the way Black men feel and express their own masculinity, and it can not

represent the standards that Black men are held to regarding their gender expression (Groner

2013). Within a cis-gendered world, moreover, white masculinity is most often associated with

males who are constructed as stoic, confident, and strong, providers/protectors, and most

importantly as the ones in control or 'the conquerors.' It is this last bit that associates aggression

and violence with masculinity. However, the provider and protector aspects also dissociate and

distance white masculinity from the identity of perpetrator because the aggression and violence,

specifically gendered violence, seems to exist under the guise of usefulness and purposefulness.

This distancing leads white cis-men's violence to be unrecognized and ignored. Black

masculinity and Latino machismo to an extend as well, are similarly associated with stoicism and

power, but the provider and protector elements are removed, and an element of cockiness,

inherent violence, and arrogance are added in. For these men, the elements that make the

violence/aggression of white cis-men seem purposeful or useful are removed, which makes the

aggression of men of color seem unnecessary and uncalled for, even though it is a gendered

requirement placed on them to 'measure up' to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity

(Groner 2013).   This makes men of color, particularly Black and Brown men, more closely

associated with the negative social script of perpetrator and builds the idea of perpetrator into

their identity. This pre-building of arbitrary elements into a socially constructed identity is

sometimes talked about as an always already aspect of identity for marginalized people. So, one

could say that Black men in the US are already always perpetrators, meaning the identity of

blackness on a masculine and male identified body automatically suggests the identity of

perpetrator. These already-always aspects are based on history, power relations within cultural

situations and spaces, and representations in the media. These always already identities restrict

the agency of the individuals in the groups they label as individuals bend to or away from these

scripts to avoid the label or internalize them in order to feel a sense of validation or control.

Femininity, much like masculinity, is constructed differently depending on the other

identities intersecting with it. White femininity, is constructed in many ways as the opposite of

white masculinity. Whiteness serves as a similar protection for women as it does for men, but

femininity offers even greater protections from being coded as a perpetrator due to femininity

being constructed as weak, passive, and fragile--all of which are much more closely related to

victimhood and victimization (Groner 2013). Because victim and perpetrator are constructed as

the opposite of one another and therefore mutually exclusive, white feminine women as

perpetrators are almost always framed instead as victims (McKelvey 2007). In U.S. culture this

causes the violence they participate in to be unrecognizable to many people and, in turn, silences

those they are imposing violence on. Unless one is a masculine woman. Of course, masculine

presenting women are largely ignored in this dominant narrative, but when discussed, they are

presented as a specific deviant or non-normative type of monster. The result is that those women

who participate in violent interactions can be more easily coded as monsters or aberrations.

Black women do not have the same protections from the perpetrator label as a result of

their femininity. The construction of Black femininity and Black womanhood is different than

white femininity. It is a difficult and complicated space to exist within. In fact, black women

are often constructed as being rather masculine, which complicates everything further (Harris-

Perry 2013). Black women are not constructed as passive, weak or fragile. It, instead, has much

to do with strength through difficulty, anger and passion. These traits are not associated with

victimhood, but they are also not associated with 'perpetrator' either.   The status of Black

women in American society places them in a marginalized space that can be manipulated and

reconstructed. For example, the Mammy stereotype as well as the Jezebel stereotype are

virtually opposites of one another, yet are both used to justify violence against Black women

(Harris-Perry 2013). The Sapphire or angry Black woman stereotype does construct black

women as domineering, emasculating and abusive, so they do not have perpetrator built into their

identity, but as discussed earlier, Blackness is constructed through history by white people, as

associated with perpetration and if a Black woman did participate in a violent action it would be

quick to be labeled as violence.

Another factor that intersects with race and gender which can have this always

already perpetrator element is religion (Selod 2014). In the current political realm, the religion

most often associated with this is Islam. The construction of Islam as a dangerous or radical

religion permeates many discussions in the U.S., from immigration and gun laws to education

and politics. These narratives can also intersect with social scripts that establish men of color as

dangerous. Believing that Islam brings out aggression only serves to strengthen an existing

belief about Islamic culture and religion as inherently violent. The men and women associated

with these social scripts, these always already perpetrators, risk longer and harsher punishments

in the legal and social fields, if they participate in a violent action. These scripts make invisible

the violence done to Muslims because of the binary and mutually exclusive ways the

victim/perpetrator dichotomy is set up. These assumptions intersect with race, because white

male Muslims, when not obviously being coded as Muslims, do not have the always already

perpetrator built in. "Muslim" is a racialized identity, and those not racially coding as such are

privileged (Selod 2014). Muslim women of any race are also not constructed as violent

perpetrators, but rather unfairly depicted as victims of their upbringing and culture (Haddad

2006).

Another intersection that plays a role in which some identities are associated with violence is socio-economic status/class, which is connected to occupation/skills. This relates to the binary social construction of perpetrators as no good. Upper class individuals, individuals with high social status or who are in important or in well-respected fields are often thought of as contributing to society, which directly contradicts the qualities associated with perpetrators (McKelvey 2007). Well-known celebrities, with perfectly curated images, have a status that makes many people feel a sense of closeness to them, and their publicness, humanness and exposure sets them apart from the 'monster' construct of a perpetrator. These beliefs about jobs, status, and money as somehow intrinsic to a person's personality or predisposition serves again to invisibilize violence by making it unrecognizable to others.

Neurodivergence is another identity that relates to the definition and interpretation of perpetration. In some narratives 'mental illness' is framed as related to, or conflated with, violence and perpetration, yet the narrative often infantilizes mentally ill individuals by stripping them of agency and therefore the consequences of their actions and/or violent interactions. Dominant groups perpetuate this narrative because being able to discuss perpetration and frame it as related to disability is often only possible for privileged identities. Neurodivergency is possible for all people but is not equally accessible in conversations regarding people who have participated in violent actions. This is not to deny or invalidate the areas of neurodivergence where the individual doesn't have agency or where events happen outside of their control but to see it as a tool used by more privileged groups to excuse or ease cognitive dissonance surrounding violence.

Somadivergent individuals and somadivergtency are not used in the same way as neurodivergency. Perhaps because the construction of somadivergency often defined as mobility

disabilities or a type of impairment is infantilized to an even greater degree, and the construction

is related to weakness and needing help. This is possibly related to ideas of violence being

centered on the body and physical harm, but that is a skewed idea of violence. Believing that

someone with a 'disability' is incapable of participating in violent acts is also wrong (Widdows

2015). Violence can be perpetrated through many means, many of which do not require physical

interactions, and somadivergent people are more than capable of participating in violence that

does require physical/bodily interactions. Coding somadivergent people as unable to participate

in violence contributes to under-reporting and invisibilized violence.

It is important to discuss the ways in which intersectional identities relate to ideas of

perpetration because these identities contribute to how violent actions are coded and understood.

There are no understandings of violent actions and interactions independent of the people

involved with them and analyzing how these understanding can influence how violence is coded

is an integral part of uncovering hidden violence--violence that is not reported as well as

violence that is so normalized it cannot be seen. Context provides a key frame for interpretation,

but establishing context depends on who is viewing and telling the story in relation to history,

power relations, cultural meanings and individual scenarios. Framing a particular group as an

already-always perpetrator means reactionary violence, self-defense violence, stigmatization, and

fear surrounding that group will increase. Interactions among groups will be informed by the

misguided notion that some people always already have the potential to be perpetrators and

others don't. This can cause violence against some groups to become more prominent but also

more hidden. Framing some groups as outside the definition of perpetrator hides the violence

perpetrated by them by reframing their actions as something 'other.' How we see and define

perpetrator can lead to underreporting, fear of not being believed, a sense of entitlement, or fear

of retaliation, depending on how one's identity conforms to or differs from the culturally

sanctioned definition.

There are even more identities that can and should be discussed in relationship with

violence and even more combinations of identities and intersections as well as a discussion of

how 'passing' individuals experience and fit into this schema, however I hope I provided a good

start and jumping off point for more thoughts and discussion.

A better way to frame and understand perpetrators, I argue, is to return to the dictionary

definition--"a person who carries out a harmful, illegal, or immoral act"—but with a feminist

intersectional lens. Bringing intersectional feminist analytical tools to this definition can help us

navigate away from the cultural stereotypes and social scripts I have discussed above that punish

some perpetrators and forgive others. My goal with this more complex reshaping of those who

participate in harmful actions is not to forgive or end punishment but rather to make sure

punishment/understanding/reactions are given/happening on equitable and fair grounds, not

based on predetermined and arbitrary beliefs associated with gender, race, class and ability.

Violence and violent interactions should not be treated as negative marks on a ledger that can be

automatically forgiven due to a positive balance in another area, such as being an athlete or

wealthy or a good person in another aspect of one's life, but rather as actions for which everyone

equally needs to be held accountable.

Victim

To start at the simplest, the New Oxford American Dictionary defines a victim as "a

person who is harmed, injured or killed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action."

On the surface, and with this definition, victim seems to fit very closely with the catch all nature

desirable when someone who has experienced any type of violence. The entire focus is on the

act and the act's results. The first interesting thing about this definition is the way in which it

contradicts the textbook definition of violence. Violence is thought of as purposeful or

intentional, however this definition suggests that victims can be created without intention and in

addition, that pain and harm can be created without intention. This definition legitimizes the pain

and trauma caused by events or harm that is traditionally not seen as violence. The second

interesting thing about this definition is the three types of results the cars of a person to become a

victim. The definition brings up harm, injury, and death, and as mentioned in the first section our

understanding of harm is limited and the same failures associated with an incomplete

understanding of harm affects our understanding of violence, and the continued incomplete

understanding of harm also affects our understanding of victims, survivors, and even

perpetrators. As with violence, victim has a whole host of societal meanings ascribed to it which

alter the meaning in a social sense.   In some ways the social definition is more important than

the textbook definition because that is the definition people call to mind when hearing the word

used, as well as generally what a person is thinking of when they use the word.

We think of potential victims, as passive, pure, "good" and they are also understood as

being innocent, in the sense that they didn't 'cause' their victimization, but also innocent in a

childlike and naive sense (Hockett 2013). There also seems to be a misbelief that certain people

are more victimizable than others, and others are unvictimizable due to the construction of some

identities as fitting more closely with these qualities than others.   During the victimization this

person would have fought in some capacity to stop the victimization from happening. They are

constructed as undeserving of the bad thing that was inflicted upon them. They are also thought

of in some ways as weak, as they were unable to prevent the victimization from happening. They

lack agency and control over their circumstance. It is because of this, that naivety it is also

associated with victimhood. They did not know any better and thus found themself in a bad situation. All of these qualities lead to the culmination of the belief that victims need help and support. People feel bad for and pity victims, and their lack of agency, their naivety, and their passivity means these people require outside aid in order to move out of this victim space (Sider 2005). This would be considered the 'benefit' of the victim label. It has the potential to attract attention and to garner help and support as well as a general call for punishment for the person/thing/action that caused the victimization (Hockett 2013). This is in some ways a label of validation that shows their reaction to the victimization is justified.

There is also an assumed/expected script for victims after they experience violence, which involves dealing with pain. Victims, which are delicate humans, are expected to be traumatized by violence, this trauma leads to emotional distress, which is manifested in tears, depression, anxiety, hypervigilance, heightened fear of re-victimization, missing work/school due to a lower level of functioning post-victimization, they will miss obligations. It is expected that victims are very obviously victims because they are "damaged" in some way from the violence an act accordingly (Hockett 2013). Victims, because of their innocence, and naivety prior to the violence will experience abrupt change in their view of the world. All of these qualities are important to note because deviations from these qualities means not all people are recognized equally as victims, not all people are believed as victims, and not all people can escape the perpetuation of never ending victimhood. There are social punishments for not following this script, such as the victim label being 'revoked.'

Due to the already existing constructions of identities, for example, race, gender, sexuality, religion, size, age, disability, which I break into the categories of neuro-divergent and soma-divergent, it is easier to see "victim" on certain bodies compared to others, meaning even if

they appear to follow this script of victim, some part of their identity does not allow others to code them as victims and therefore not receive the 'benefits' of the label. Because of this, being recognized as, and being allowed to claim the identity of "victim" becomes a privilege for some (McKelvey 2007).

Similarly, some identities are "already and always" cast as victims, and victim is built into the construction of the identity. They are in some cases allowed the collect on the benefits of 'victim' but because it is a constant part of their identities construction, it may lead to some desensitization and therefore ignoring of victimization. So "victim" becomes a source of further oppression even without an instance of violence occurring. When a label is enforced on someone who doesn't want it, it strips away agency which silences voices, and contributes to invisibilized violence. In addition, it may cause a fear of the label, which stems from fear of confirming stereotypes, which leads to the avoidance of the label all together, and this could be a contributing factor to under reporting of overt violence, and the acceptance of covert violence. Not reporting then forces the individual to forgo all of the positive aspects that come along with the victim label (West 2016). This will be expanded on during specific examples. The use and meaning of victim changes depending on the setting, as well as who is involved in the labeling.

For example, white femininity is often constructed as fragile, passive, naïve, and often put into the position of the person to be cared for and looked after. There are clear parallels between this construction and the social construction of victims, and for this reason it is not at all a stretch for people to believe and for people to understand white women as victims (McKelvey 2007). They are a privileged group. This in some ways is a positive because white women will in theory then have to push less if they have been victims and there is less of a struggle to be believed. However, it is not that simple.

On the other hand, they could be one group which can be perpetually shrouded in an aura of victimhood which is one type of agency restriction. To emphasize how easy, it is for white women to be codes as victims, one only has to look as far as the women soldiers in Abu Ghraib, photos surfaces of women committing acts of violence against men. The women were perpetrators of violence, the 'opposite' of victims and yet one dominant understanding of how these women could do such a thing, was that they are victims of culture, victims of patriarchy or other situations (McKelvey 2007). This perpetual victimization of white women is seen in cultural ideas and stereotypes that white women need to learn self-defense, not go out at night, take their ponytails out in parking garages, carry their keys between their fingers, and so on (Stanko 1995). These ideas passed from peers or by parents serve to remind women of their status as potential victims. This is also seen in the stereotypes surrounding manners, modesty and politeness. Each of these embody femininity and failure to conform to femininity may result in breaking away from 'victim' status which can result in blame for the victimization. This blame and fear of blame has been cited as a reason for not reporting victimization, leaving the violence to remain hidden.

Black women are constructed in an entirely different way than white women, yet they are held to similar and unattainable standards of femininity, which they are equally punished for not achieving.   The stereotype such as Jezebel, Mammy, and Strong Black Woman all influence the way people see Black women. The strong black woman stereotype largely contradicts the social construction of victim because victims are not strong nor are they active. This contradiction might make it so that black women feel less comfortable identifying themselves as a victim which then my lower reporting rates as well as lower the amount of black women that seek help for victimization. It also might result in less people believing a black women woman who comes

forward about being victimized. However, this is complicated this is further complicated by the type of violence and the person has been subjected to. If the violence isn't coded is violence and there's less likely to believe the victim and if the perpetrator isn't code it is a perpetrator than the violence as well as the event may also not be coded as violence. The Jezebel and Mammy stereotype both specifically affects sexual violence. One over-sexualizes Black women and the other strips Black women of their sexuality entirely. When Black woman face sexual violence and are seen as hyper-sexual then a situation of non-consent is unimaginable and therefore there can be blame as well as disbelief for the 'victim's' story. If a Black woman is coded as asexual and faces sexual violence then there is more disbelief and at times an appearance as if the person should be thankful as if the violence comes from a place of wanting to help (Harris-Perry 2013).

On the other side of this is masculinity. Masculinity is constructed as the opposite of victimization, and in fact being victimized is seen as being stripped of masculinity. It is for this reason that all types of masculinity or all types of people who code as masculine, present as masculine, and identify as masculine, could have issues identifying themselves as victims and have issues with outside individual seeing them as victims. This would mean that their victimization or their struggles with violence might not be taken seriously and they might not get help because they are denied the privileges of the label, and they might not want to seek out help for fear of ridicule, disbelief, shame or fear of losing this part of their identity (McKelvey 2007) .

This is heightened for men of color, and many other intersecting qualities because they are already in a place of needing to "prove" their masculinity more than white men, as white masculinity is considered the ideal. When we live in a society that demonizes certain identities such as a particular race then that social demonization is at odds with the potential to be a victim

this then denies those groups aid after victimization as well or even any sort of recognition for their victimization.

Disability is a particularly difficult identity to tackle. This is partially due to the large disparities in diagnosing nuro-divergent people. Class affects diagnoses because it requires money time and access to medical professionals in order to receive a diagnosis as well as in order to receive treatment. However, because in some ways diagnoses provides "proof" of a mental illness and depending on other intersecting disabilities this proof is seen as more or less important. This comes more into to play for perpetrators them for victims, for example a white perpetrator is more likely to be seen as mentally ill which is what resulted in the perpetration than a Black perpetrator, which are more often seen as perpetrating violence because they are simply a thug/bad apple/criminal. So, in one sense being able to claim the identity of nuro-divergent is a privilege, However, in a mainstream lands disability is often largely left out of the conversation. However, because of the way disability is framed in the US is having lack of agency lack of control and largely innocent as they as disability is a naturalized phenomenon which we see is people not having any Control over there is a strong relationship between disability and victim.

However, this is another identity which is an always already victim. Victim is part of the way in which disability is constructed in mainstream understandings they are victims of their disability, however there's also many statistics about mistreatment stemming from differences or relating to differences especially for those with divergences which require aids. victim is pre-determined in this case as well, and a source of negativity, but on the other hand when there is an instance of violence taking place there is generally a outcry and a reaction from the public, if and when it gets public attention because they are like "double victims" and it is seen as especially

upsetting.   However, the term victim is also used to further strip agency and to create an air which allows for discrimination silencing of their voices and infantilizing and condescending the group as a whole.

All the complication with labeling and the added meaning, following the social script, and the added difficulty for some groups to even be recognized as victims stops people from seeking out help after victimization. This could be for many reasons for example that they don't want this label as they see it as a weakness, the might not see themselves as the "right" victim because they weren't totally innocent or they don't look or act or appeared the way that victim is currently constructed, they can't follow the social script, and in addition, it may not be a conscious understanding, if one has really internalized this idea of 'victim' then the violence they experienced may be invisibilized to even themselves. There that's where this idea of "not so bad" events come from. There violence scene is not worthy enough to report or to get help for because they are victimized or traumatized in the way we see in the media or in our social minds. There also certain social groups that we see more like his victims than others or at least is having less agencies and other social group

'victim' is another part of of this construction of what violence needs in order to be recognize and acknowledge and when the people and their actions and reaction both before and after a violent occurrence break away from the construction of 'victim' and the scripts associated with it, the person is punished by having their voices silenced. This can happen on a wide scale which serves to invisiblize violence, in ways that violence happens that isn't coded as violent, but there is also violence that happens and goes unreported and undealt with. This violence then serves as a foundation for more extreme/overt violence.

Survivor

Victim and survivor are two different words, with different meanings and implications, yet to the general public, they are assumed to mean the same things, and in many areas of research, are often used interchangeably, yet in feminist circles, and academic areas that specifically cover trauma, and violence, these two words are quite polarizing and have been the result of much debate due to their social connotations. It's important to keep in mind that all words in someway it will create caricatures if they are attempting to describe a person. The nature of language is to be limiting and words have to be specific enough to communicate an idea, but culture and individuals also aid in creating stereotypes/caricatures by not using precise language, not thinking beyond the barriers of language, and not allowing individuals the right to define their own lived experiences, because the nature of people, is to be unique and complex and varied. In addition to the limitations of language, dominant groups create more connotations on a social level for each word. The point of this is not to entirely condemn language, but rather to encourage people to think more deeply about using precise language, consider the things that language and words evoke beyond their literal definitions. The hope is for a future filled with more for precise language, as well as for individuals to consider what is hidden by language and what is hyper visible and why the culture and language does this. Because of all of the issues with the word 'victim' feminist groups, advocates, and some people who work closely with ideas of 'pain' and 'healing' offerent up another word that could be used in its place. The word that is preferred by some is survivor.

The increased use of survivor is a reaction to the issues of 'victim,' which are the removal of agency and infantilism and strict social script that comes along with it, survivor is not without its problems. As I did in the last few sections, I will pull apart the 'textbook' and social definitions of this word and break down how it silences and invizibilizes violence and restrict the

growth of someone who has dealt with violence in order to hopefully promote more precise language and ways of thinking about people that are affected by violence as well as to just be more thoughtful regarding language and social connotations and expectations.

"A person who survives, especially a person remaining alive after an event in which others have died, the remainder of a group of people or things, a person who copes well with difficulties in their life" is the definition of survivor according to the New Oxford American Dictionary. With this definition, the first point to discuss, is the use of 'survives' within the definition of survivor, this adds another layer of possible confusion and the potential for definitional conflicts, even if it is only clarifying syntax. This then raise even more philosophical questions about what it means to survive. For example, is there any sort of expectations for the quality of life that is hooked to survival or is it just a biological or medical survival being discussed, and if so, this contradicts the last clause, which is that a survivor is a person who deals with conflict well. So, for this definition, it seems that to be a survivor - the survival that is being discussed is of a good quality.

I think this last section is most indicative of its use in the US especially for violence, and sexual violence. However, its use naturally depends on the person using it and the context. It can be used it as a blanket term, exactly like victim. However, it is used more often as a conditional term, only for those for whom it fits, or a goal identity after victimization. Being a survivor is what happens after you have been a victim, but you have reached a point that you have dealt with the trauma associated with victimization and are in a good place regarding the violent event. The word survivor brings forward this assumption that person being described is done with the healing process. They are strong, handling everything well and back to normal (Hockett 2013).

The issue with this definition then is that it becomes an imposition or expectation of people who have been impacted by violence. Instead of replacing the word victim, it becomes an idealized victim-type that results in shaming those who do not claim to be a 'survivor' because it is implied that they don't measure up or conform to the script of survivor. It also silences those who do claim the identity of 'survivor' by not allowing them to deviate from this script of strength and normalcy. Once there is an expectation of strength and normalcy, reaching out for help or admitting weakness becomes even more difficult than it already is. It is this imposition that can be considered a type of violence in itself. Similar to a stereotype, or micro-aggression, it restricts the agency of those who have experienced violence by creating a standard and setting the expectation that those who have experienced violence must at some point reach and transcend their victimization and be okay again as an ideal victim type, is just as problematic as the word victim itself.

Because the identity of survivor is dependent on first being a victim, it invizibilizes violence in the same ways 'victim' does and is related to identities in a very similar way as the word victim. Survivor, because it is more of a niche term, goes along with those who claim it, and those who claim the identity are those who have the resources to come into contact with a group or person who believes in the use of survivor over victim, making it, at least at this time, a privileged identity type.

While the definition and uses of "survivor" and "victim" are not worlds apart, they are still clearly different words. Victim focuses on results of a behavior: injuries, harm, and death, which, would appear to fit more closely with what it is commonly used to mean; however, this continues to invisiblize violence because of how we understand harm, and the way certain identities have been constructed. Survivor on the other hand appears more positive because it

focuses on moving past violence. surviving despite something bad or harmful event. This is what sparks most of the controversy; the negative aspect of "victim" and the positive aspect of "survivor" are pitted against each other.

Survivor and victim are often thought of as situated on a continuum. You're a victim after the instance of violence first happened but to goal is to become a survivor, because that means you're over it. The imposition of strength denies people access to help. We help victims, but survivors don't need the help because they're doing so well. There's also less thoughts of innocence being tied to survivors. We don't feel sympathetic for survivors, they are just like anyone else. It's an enforced Strength which is just as problematic as stripped agency. It is in some ways a short-term word, because it describes a person in the instant or the instant after the violence takes place. It may not intent to extend out in time or to continue to describe a person beyond that instance of violence (Hockett 2013).

Clearly, there are problems with both of these words. There is always going to be issues with simplifications. Conversely, each of these words also have important strengths and uses. The point is to break down this binary people often construct between them as well as the arbitrary associations with various identities, and to have a better understanding of or rather a more complicated and complete understanding of people who have dealt with this restricted agency and with violence. Once this happens we will be step closer to revealing hidden violence and tearing down the ways in which people and violent actions are put into hierarchy. As these ideas become less internalized, the stigma and feelings of invalid pain will hopefully cease, and people who have dealt with all types of violence will have one less boundary in their way and be able to seek out help more freely. All people should have access to help should they need and want it.

Blurring Identities

To further complicate ideas surrounding the people involved with violence and the actions associated with them this next section will be devoted to instances which blend together the perpetrator or the person performing the violence and the victim/survivor or subject of the violence, in some form. It is a misconception to believe that perpetrators cannot be victimized or that victims cannot be perpetrators. This stems from their construction as somehow the antithesis of each other. Instead of being associated with personality qualities, both should be associated with events/actions that a person has been involved with and these should not be positioned as mutually exclusive.

The first set of behaviors that blurs this line between performing violence and being the subject of violence is self-harm. Self-harm can take many forms including drug use, cutting, eating disorders, hair pulling, scratching, and emotional self-abuse. Each of these, when coming from one person to another, could be easily interpreted as violence; however, with the overlapping of the person performing the act and the person receiving or being the subject of the act, the violence gets lost. This is unfortunate because without being coded as violence, there's less attention paid to self-harm and the theories which are applied to violence don't get applied to it, an application which could help develop preventative measures. Another potential reason why self-harm is not coded as violence is that it more often is done by women whereas stereotypically violence is often assumed to be perpetrated by men, and aggression tends to be thought of as the realm of men (This is part of the reason there is such stigma around men who self-harm.). Women who cut, as an example, are often thought of as depressed and feeling hopeless and sad. If their acts of self-harm were instead thought of as impulsive acts of aggression to feel control, it would be less difficult to interpret them as violent (Widdows 2015).

Another area in which these two assumed mutually exclusive categories overlap are in situations where the perpetrator is simultaneously being victimized. A very salient version of this would be soldiers in active combat zones. It should not come as any surprise that soldiers perpetuate violent acts during war. It is the actual job of soldiers, and while it is treated seriously and is usually legal and sanctioned by the government, it is still violent. It's also widely understood that soldiers are often taxed mentally as a result of the violent actions they are forced to take part in. This results in PTSD and other anxiety disorders being very commonly seen in veterans. These long term negative consequences resulting from instances of perpetration can be seen as a type of victimization, as perpetrators victimized by their own perpetration. Veterans are further victimized by the lack of care regarding their mental health after returning from combat (McKelvey 2007). This is complicated by the assumed separation between victim and perpetrator because, in this case, the victimization is both self-inflicted and contractually obligated. It is their job to be violent and then deal with the mental toll, but because of the sanctioned/accepted perpetration, the perpetrator is viewed not as innocent but also not guilty of anything - at least not in a legal sense, but perhaps in a moral sense, depending on personal values. So here we have a non-innocent victim (a contradiction) who was victimized by their own perpetration (another contradiction), which they are not guilty for perpetrating (a third contradiction). All this puts them in a contradictory space rarely acknowledged by others, which is a further victimization because they receive no help for the toll this takes.

Another area in which they overlap is self-defense. In acts of self-defense, the violence acts in a cyclical manner. First there is a 'perpetrator' attempting to do something violent to the 'victim' but the victim manages to stop the violence by using violence against the perpetrator. This essentially switches these two roles around (Luckenbill 1977). The victim perpetrates a

violent action preemptively or in reaction to the violent thing that is happening to them, yet they

are not coded as a true 'perpetrator' because they do not fit the social definition, regardless of

fitting the textbook definition of one. The resulting interpretation of self-defense, as violence or

as an avoidance of violence, depends on context and the people involved.

The Violence Equation

In the first section, I have broken down three parts to violence: The occurrence, the

victim, and the perpetrator. The first is the occurrence is the single action or chain of actions or

inactions that causes harm and restricts agency. There is a definite hierarchy to these

occurrences. This hierarchy of occurrences plays an important part in making certain kinds of

violence invisible. Some actions are condemned, legislated, and taken seriously, while others are

normalized and ignored. The next part centers on the people involved. It is important again to

remember that these rolls can overlap and be the same person, or be groups, not directly related

to people, or any combination of these. Both the victim and perpetrator, have social connotations

which are created through the history and identities of those most often assigned with them.

These social connotations contribute to this phenomena of invisible violence by over-

representing some populations (the criminalization of men of color as perpetrators, while not

criminalizing white men for similar offenses) and the under-representation of some populations

(the 'strong Black women' whose victimization goes unpublicized {Say Her Name, Me Too}

while white women's stories get credit as inspiring whole movements {Alyssa Milano and 'Me

Too'}). For this section violent and violence will mean slightly different things. Violent is a

label for these occurrences and exists on a spectrum. Violence is how the interaction is

perceived. For instance, homicide is always violent; however, when the context is included or

say the death is the clear result of self-defense, the interaction isn't necessarily seen as violence. Pushing someone is violent, pushing them out of the way of an incoming car is not violence.

The cultural equation often looks like this: 'a violent occurrence' + 'a perpetrator' + 'a victim' = violence. The violent occurrence finds meaning only with an understandable perpetrator and an understandable victim. When one or more of these parts deviates too far from accepted social norms, it becomes less and less likely for the occurrence to be coded as violence. It is for this reason that many of the examples from the last section, which blur these three elements, are not coded as violence. Let's break apart some well known examples to illustrate how this equation works.

First the murder of JonBenet Ramsey, a widely publicized murder in the US, is easily coded as violence. The story is of a very young white pageant girl, raised in an affluent family is found to be missing one morning and a ransom note is found by her parents, after the police arrive at the Ramsey home, JonBenet is found deceased in their basement. To this day the case is still discussed and many theories float around, but it is still unsolved. As far as the equation, Murder + JonBenet + and unknown perpetrator = easily coded as violent. Each of these lines up with the normative understanding of violent actions and violence. JonBenet is a 'privileged' victim type, meaning, she is easily coded as victim due to the intersections of youth, whiteness, femininity and class. As the perpetrator is unknown, media and individuals can easily construct this unknown person as a monster with no redeeming qualities, talents, or uses because there is no information to suggest otherwise. It perfectly fits the standard model.

Another example, which further complicates the equation, is Brock Turner's rape of an unconscious white woman. The dominant discourse surrounding violence puts rape in a spot that is less than, murder, even though they both deal with the body. This could be because at times

sexual assaults do not leave physical marks and inflicts more psychological than other forms of

damage. It is not uncommon for the discourses around rape to label women as 'asking for it' due

to clothes, intoxication level, being in a public space or any number of arbitrary factors. This

further separates women from the victim identity and aids in the construction of rape as natural

and the fault of the victim, not something to concern larger institutions. The 'victim' in this case

is a white woman, which is a privileged victim type, however she was college aged and,

compared to the youth of JonBenet, is seen as less innocent and thus less pure victim. To add

more context, the woman was unconscious due to alcohol; for some, this strips her of her

innocence and naivety and places her even further from 'true victimhood.'. Brock Turner, on the

other hand, is a privileged perpetrator type; he is a white, educated, student athlete and very

affluent. These qualities are far away from the "bad apple/monster" that is a 'true' perpetrator.

Because of these complications, the Brock Turner case was hotly debated in the media, with

some seeing what he did as violence and others placing it, as his father famously said, as "20

minutes of action." Because of his privileged status, the perpetrator was hit with a very light

prison sentence, further showing that the violence he enacted on his imperfect victim was viewed

by the judge (and probably others), as a lesser type of violence.

Another example which brings forward more complications would be the interactions of

police officers and Black men, that result in the deaths of the Black men. To pick one of many

cases, Stephon Clark, an unarmed Black man carrying only his cell phone in his family's

backyard, was fired at twenty times, and hit eight by two police officers in Sacramento, on

March 18th, 2018, this resulted in Clark's death. The police officers claimed they opened fire

because they believed Clark pointed a gun at them (Berman 2018).   'Police officer' is obviously

a broad and different category than previously discussed because it isn't an identity like gender or

class—it's a job. Albeit a job that is highly gendered and associated with the working class. It still is not an identity that one is born into. It is a choice, and not a permanent one at that. However, the status of police in American society contributes to the way people view their actions and their relation to violence. The police are widely represented in the media and by the government as heroes, complete Good Guys, with very strong morals that exist to serve and protect the people in their communities (which communities actually buy this representation is another story). This is the antithesis of the perpetrator construct and thus makes it very difficult for the two to overlap. Black men, on the other hand, as discussed earlier are often portrayed as dangerous delinquents, subversive, and 'perpetrator' is already-always built into their identity. Because of the belief that perpetrator and victim are somehow mutually exclusive, it becomes difficult for black men to be viewed as victims, so when their victimization comes at the hands of someone who only serves and protects, i.e. the police, strong biases take over. These biases create victim blaming and reinforce the idea that bad things only happen to 'bad' people (Hockett 2013). The belief that good people (themselves) won't fall prey to the same type of fate at the hands of the police is a mode of mental self-preservation (Hockett 2013). Seeing events such as shooting of Black men by police as accidents or unfortunate tragedies instead of looking at the systematic nature of their occurrence shows how deeply police are protected from perpetrator status.

So why does this matter? What happens when someone isn't coded as violent or something isn't coded as violence? First, without the label of 'violence' certain interactions don't gain the focus and attention that 'violence' would gain. When certain behaviors aren't punished either legally or socially, they are normalized, which allows them to be continued and accepted. This acceptance of actions that restrict agency and cause harm leads to further consequences for

the receivers of the actions, especially if the harm is done on a systematic level based on identity.

This harm can compound because usually it isn't one isolated or random event; it happens due to

an already existing level of acceptance of harm against particular marginalized communities by

people from 'dominant' communities. Normalized occurrences of violence, like micro-

aggressions, serve as forms of degradation. These further the loss of individual agency for those

within marginalized groups and affect how people both inside and outside the specific

community think. It positions those inside the community to accept their unjust treatment and

question their own experiences, and those outside to further buy into the normalization and

perpetuation of violence. However, it doesn't stop there. Once a community routinely is

subjected to actions which remove their autonomy and degrade them, a foundation forms for

more explicit violence against them, such as physical abuse, murder, assault, and hate crimes. So,

this is why this all matters: coding something as violence can culturally delegitimize it, and once

the acceptance and normalization of violence is removed the foundation on which many explicit

levels of violence are built can crumble with it. This, of course, will not stop violence in its

tracks, but more thoughtful understandings of how violence is situated within larger structures of

power can give us a clearer understanding of why it happens, why it continues to happen, and

possible ways to reduce it.

Conclusion

This honors thesis has been the longest project I've ever taken on. While the formal

research and writing were one year, in order for this project to exist it has pulled on information

that I have learned both in my gender studies classes in the last four years as well as information

and perspective gained from experiences I've had throughout my entire lifetime. Some of the

hours, months, and days of research were difficult and at times scary. There are weeks where I

became hyper aware of my vulnerability as I walked at home late from my food service job or in the dark around my college campus. It's not to say that I believe these places to be dangerous now, they are not more or less dangerous than they were before my research, or that something had happened, but I became hyper aware of the violence that I had experienced and could experience again. Nothing had changed, but I had changed, and the way I saw my surroundings changed as a result of my newfound understanding.

My education tells me that my experience as a woman qualifies me to speak on issues of violence and that is right, but it is also wrong. My experiences as a human qualifies me to speak on issues of violence. All people have seen participated in or have been on the receiving end of violence. There is an incredible amount of ways in which humans are capable of hurting each other and being hurt. As a woman, I have of course had experiences of violence that were based of gendered systems of power. I was a receiver of violence, a 'victim' a 'survivor' whatever language you want to give to those experiences, but my ability to speak about violence also stems from my privilege gained by being a white (passing) woman, I am much more easily allowed to claim the identity, of victim and survivor, than masculine identified people, or people of color, and I have also been privileged with attending a university that has given me the funding, the time and the space to research, form ideas and then semi-coherently articulate them.

Doing this research, and finally having a grasp on the different appearances that violence can take, has been absolutely invaluable to me. I have finally made progress with understanding my own experiences and my reactions to my experiences. I still don't have a single word or a neat way to communicate my identity in regard to the trauma and interactions that I have dealt with, but I have begun to unpack what it all means. The most freeing thing that I've experienced is the understanding that I don't need a single word to be my identity in regard to my

experiences. I don't need to identify with victim, survivor or any other word in order for me to take myself seriously and my hope is that I don't need any of those words for other people to take me seriously either.

I have a lot of ambition for the effects of this research because I first and foremost hope that its benefits extend beyond the impact that was made in my own life. I hope that language and the social connotations that come with certain language is continual interrogated. I hope that more attention is paid to different types of violence which is now labeled somehow less important or not recognized as violence at all. I hope no one is ever gas lighted into believing that their experience was somehow not serious enough or not worthy of attention or help dealing with. I hope this work shifts the center, and that people who have experienced violence can be believed regardless of their identities and the assumptions created by those identities. I hope that those who participate in violence are also punished in an equitable manner, and not more or less severely because of their identities and the assumptions that those identities create.

My goal is not to frame all violence as equal or to argue that all violence should be punished equally. Punishment in this country has traditionally unfairly impacted marginalized groups and I don't believe criminalization is the solution. I also don't believe recognizing the broad and diverse experiences of violence somehow dulls or dilutes a movement working to stop violence in all of its forms. My argument is not for total pacifism either, but rather a thoughtful, complicated, and unrelenting pursuit for equity in access to care and treatment, punishment, both socially and legally, and attention for those involved in violence.

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