

A Study of Intra-Racial Violence Among Black Males:
A Matter of “Diss” Respect

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing qualitative methodology, this study examines how, from their perspective, a sample of lower-class black men ages 20-35 justify their participation in violent confrontations and define the concept of disrespect. The purpose of this study is to glean whether or not a relationship exists between the rationales offered for participating in violent confrontations and being “dissed.” This study also seeks to examine the interpersonal dynamics that compose a violent confrontation, shifting the level of analysis from macro-level arguments of the past. The research demonstrates that the rationales for interpersonal violence surround four themes: (1) Self-defense; (2) trespassing on territory; (3) acting in the defense of third parties; and (4) threatening behavior. It was declared by the respondents that the following actions were found to be disrespectful: (1) verbal insults/derogatory comments/mockery directed at the individual or a third party, openly or covertly; (2) being yelled at; (3) threats of physical harm or violence directed at the individual or a third party; and finally (4) physical infringements on personal boundaries and/or territories real or perceived. The findings of the study suggest that the actions identified by the respondents as their rationales for participating in violent confrontations are largely consistent with behaviors, verbalizations and/or gestures that they defined as being disrespectful. Findings deduced from this study resulted in the construction of a model of how disrespect potentially leads to violent confrontations. Subsequent to research this study contrasts its findings with the *subculture of violence theory* postulated by Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967), thereby demonstrating the need for an expansion of the initial corollaries.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to every black male with a dream and a desire to live outside of the confines of statistical prophecy. “Certainly we will disagree, but we must disagree without becoming violently disagreeable.”

– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. regarding the assassination of Malcolm X

In loving memory of Sir Walter Scott, Sr., Annie Bell Scott and Alexander Scott, Sr.

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People often remark that bad things happen to good people; a premise I have come to reject as I've become acquainted with the tenets of this life. Tests, trials and tribulation shall always be the shadow of men purposed to lead. There are hundreds of times that I could've asked off of this carousel of life. I realize now, that it was not to be so. It was the making of a story, grand it all of its proportions; a story to rival every fable that has ever been told the listening ear, eyes all aglow with anticipation. Misfortune and fatality surrounded me at every turn, and I could not carve out the reason for my existence, but I know now that it was all for my making. For as vast as my vocabulary has become, the word "quit" escapes me.

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FOREWORD

My earliest recollection of passage was so abrupt and disconcerting that it has found permanent residence in the inner-most parts of my mind...my memory. I was an awkward and unsure child, caught between antithetical realities that tortured my existence. On the one hand, I was the first and most loved grandchild, and had been coddled, spoiled and nurtured by my grandparents down in the eastern part of the state where everything was slow, until I attained the age of five. On the other hand, I was well read, knowledgeable of how to spell my African name and scheduled to return to a wildly city upbringing in Durham, NC.

At an early age, the books that I read were about Dr. King and Malcolm X and how they had been killed by assassin's bullets attempting to fight for the rights of Black people, and alternatively, how white America hated "us" just because we were black. I recall a woman asking me what I wanted to be when I grew up. At 5 years old, I responded that I wanted to be a martyr. She was astonished and told my mother; to which my mother remarked, "let someone else's child die for black people." At this point, I had surmised that if I could survive my own blackness, I would do something great for black America, even if it cost me my life.

My self-esteem was in shambles as a youth. Violence enveloped my life on a day to day basis and I found it hard to catch my breath. When I inhaled deeply and reckoned myself to a cause, I found the taste of tears in my mouth. I didn't understand violence at the time, so it was an experience of shock and dismay each time that I encountered my would-be friend. I recall being so confused and coming not only to loathe my

surroundings, but myself. I was always careful not to misstep. This paranoia and tentativeness was only exacerbated as I interacted with other children.

I learned quickly that violence was the preferable method of resolving problems, and that it was also a way to garner the “respect” of others. There was a kid named “Man” that would terrorize all of the children his age and younger, taking our lunch money and other valuables such as marbles. I remember envying the freedom he had, being able to run all over the neighborhood, having no curfew, hanging with the high-school kids and even cussing so freely and without consequence. I wished I was “Man.” He had failed his grade at least twice by the time I came to his attention, and I was no different from the rest. I was his victim. I even resorted to getting off at another bus stop, and trying to cut through the neighbors’ yards to avoid the inevitable.

I will never forget, coming home at 12 years old, out of breathe and my mother standing at the door. “Where are you coming from?” “You ran home didn’t you?” “You got one more day to come home running, or crying because somebody beat your tail, and I am going to beat it again!” I went into my room and closed the door, and practiced fighting the air, and pillows. The next morning, I went to the bus stop, and challenged “Man” to a fight, and won. That evening on the bus, he was being teased about the loss that morning and tried to save face by engaging me in another confrontation. He lost again and again, because I began jumping on him at random over the years.

I learned at that very intersection in my life, several things about violence. Violence is the cessation of all verbal negotiations; violence garners respect for the winner, and marks the loser a target for further violence; violence is cyclical; violence is learned; violence gets you what you want without having to ask nicely; and the

consequences of violence seldom outweigh the benefit to the user. This is how I began to conceptualize violence, and how I used it to my benefit throughout my life.

By the age of 17, I was homeless, because a rebellious spirit would not allow me to pause for direction from anyone, especially a father that I resented perhaps more than I loved myself. I began breaking into newly constructed houses and abandoned cars for a few hours sleep. Stealing and selling drugs were the methods I developed to subsidize my survival. I used violence to solidify my standing in the streets, and was known for being able to handle myself, even when the odds were not in my favor. I began carrying guns, knives, and even a machete, which further imploded my reputation as someone who “didn’t give a f*ck”, and was “down for whatever.” The more outlandish the behavior, the more appealing, I thought. The key component to my survival at that time was aligning myself with others like me, and this is what I did. We were the kids that I shake my head in disbelief at today. Our appetite for unprovoked and retaliatory violence was egregious; this rebellion could not be quelled, for it raged within.

I had no reverence for death, and I often invited it, especially when a gun was aimed at my countenance. This was often the time during which I became the most emboldened. The pain of being nothing, of having no identity and hating who I was and could never be, consumed me. I joined the military and was later incarcerated there. This would be the first of many times. Though the incarceration was later adjudicated wrongful, it nonetheless introduced me to a more philosophical and intimate conception of what true violence was, and how it was contrived and manifest. It was here that an elderly white man told me why he had murdered his wife and castrated the man she was caught being unfaithful with. He said “justice by the hands of man is the most thorough.”

Those words have never departed my mind. As I think about all of the crimes that I have committed and all of the physical atrocity that I have exacted on another's person, I am left with the thought, that because I perceived that I had been wronged, and felt a myriad of discomforting emotions, who else could adequately administer justice that could quench my desire for retribution, or for that matter, heal my wounded pride? Surely, it could not be the same system that once regarded me as 3/5s of a man, or that permitted Jim Crow laws. How could a system that had been against me since I was forcefully brought to this country as an involuntary servant with any degree of altruism, defend my rights?

Imagine for a few seconds, being inebriated with revenge, and feeling that in one instance that you were a deity capable of swift, tactical and decisive measures against the grandest of your enemies. This is what drove me; a fury and a passion so deep that I had once believed that I was possessed by something not of this world. It frequently failed me how another man lay beneath my feet unconscious and bleeding. For years, I would envision "Man" taunting me as I poured out my wrath on the mirrored image of my aching soul. For me, violence was a language. It communicated my hurt, anger, frustration, envy, and hatred. Violence has its place, or we would not as a nation war against other countries. Violence has contextual meaning, in that sometimes it is the only language that can be understood, particularly when indecisiveness could err on the side of death. The problem with violence is that inherent in its facilitation, there must be a victim. With that being said, violence is most assuredly the gun that Black America has turned on itself.

Armed with a disdain for authority and an internal mechanism for justifying my own actions, violence made me feel a power that was foreign to me; that was outside of my grasp. For me, violence was the great equalizer, as I would see fear well up in the eyes of white America as I approached. I had reasoned that black men walked around like shadows of real men who were white. But finally, I was no longer Ellison's "invisible man." White America knew full well who I was...an angry black **man**, with no conscience, that had not made any acquaintance with remorse. I was the reason white women clutched their purses, and white cops drew their guns first and asked questions later. I was a menace to society and America's nightmare all rolled into one, informed by the true doctrine of militancy and rebellion; nothing could stop me.

As I have matured academically, spiritually and emotionally, I have, at different junctures in my life made attempts to give rhyme and reason to why I behaved as I did. It seems a universe away, but yet harkens to me as an old friend who is deceased but bares resemblance to a man in the grocery store. Am I that far removed by intellectual jousting and calendar years that violence is no longer proximate or a real entity in my repertoire of coping mechanisms? Were it feasible to avoid younger versions of myself in the windows of yesteryear, I would retort, "yes", but, my contact with such a life remains intimate. I have yielded to the adage of the homeland; that once one has been taught, he must return to the village, and teach them. My blackness has no price, and with this work, I barter nothing but the truth for its rightful place in scholarship. I am hopeful that civilization might one day overtake the ghettos and housing projects of today, but it is not within the purpose of this America. So, violence must be. Violence must spill from the

hands of black youth into mainstream white America from time to time, to escalate the volume of deafened cries of dehumanization, disenfranchisement and abject poverty.

I do not come bearing attractive words in order to romanticize violence, but to offer a perspective drenched in candor as rich and as vivid as the day when DuBois (1903) penned *The Souls of Black Folk*. Life beneath the “veil” insured that my pathway into manhood would not be illuminated, and promoted the belief that my upward mobility would necessitate it being instead littered with the bodies of my peers. We had always been taught, and a grave number of us believed that, according to statistical prophecy, there was no life for a black man beyond the age of 22. I suspect that is why we find men living their lives as boys, occupying their time with trinkets and toys, and making little use of their cerebral capacities and potential. On my 22nd birthday, I had finally ended the tail-spin of spending the previous three birthdays locked behind the steel bars of this country’s penal institutions. I recall asking myself, “now what do I do?” I had lived my life on a day to day basis, with an immediacy, and in constant anticipation of death, fully aware that it was at my heels, and its’ stench had pervaded my breathing, and then....nothing.

My rage was fueled by the fact that I knew that I could never be President, that I had wasted good grades, and would never realize my dream of practicing law, and that given the right police officer and the wrong street, my life could be abbreviated, and no one would give a damn. Sure, my family would mourn and my friends would shake their heads and offer their fond memories, but whose life would change? My name would have probably appeared on someone’s arm as a tattoo, but there is no time to stop dying in the “hood.” The cycle of black death is urgent and without pause. Our circumstance,

our laws, our lives and deaths are meaningless to the world at large. I sometimes drift away too far away *faces* and wonder if kids like “Man” are still alive. Did he survive his blackness? What happened that our paths merged in childhood, and then so swiftly thrust us into different places, different strata, and different realms of thought? Did “Man” ever become a real man?

I daydream the same as when I was a child about saving Black America. Can anyone really do that? Would you elect me for martyrdom if I died at the hands of another black man, now knowing that for which I believed my life was purposed? What becomes of a man that takes a retrospective analysis of his quest for manhood and doesn't like what he sees? I have created more questions for myself than answers. With every day that comes and goes, the genocide of black men by the hands of other black men makes my soul ache until I gasp for good clean air, partly because it is senseless, and partly because **I know** that it is senseless. I imagine sometimes that when I draw breath now, it doesn't taste like tears as it did when I was a boy. In this abyss of nothingness and pain every black boy wants desperately to be a man, but hasn't a clue of how to embark on such a journey. He wants respect but is deafly afraid of being disrespected. He is a warrior because, there is war being waged on the inside of him. He is the sum of all fears, things hoped for, but seldom seen; he is the manifestation of hurt, harm and danger, longing to belong and fitting in nowhere, at least nowhere that matters. **He is my mirror image.**