Toward A Sociocultural Context for Understanding Violence and Disruption In Black Urban Schools and Communities

Linwood H. Cousins
Western Michigan University
This article examines violence and disruption in a Black urban school and community. The author argues that an unempowering framework of culture has restricted our understanding of violence and other social issues affecting Black schools and communities. From such a backdrop, a sociocultural framework is presented that captures the strain, solidarity, and contemporary emergences that are a part of school, American and Black culture, and a part of the context in which violence occurs in Black schools and communities. Broad implications are posited for human service policy, research, and direct practice.

Our actions and feelings are motivated by our perceptions of violence . . . fed by an unrestrained media (Curwin, 1995, p. 72).

The problem with violence is that most people . . . can't say what it is yet claim to know it when they see it. Other than to signal disapproval, the term "violence" makes it hard to discuss important problems calmly. It means too many things to too many people (Rozycki, 1994, pp. 87-88).

Introduction

Violence and disruption in American schools are long-term, ubiquitous and unrelenting problems (Merton, 1994; Newman, 1980; Tygart, 1980). Many American cities, communities, and schools have inter-related histories of violence and disruption (Friday and Hage, 1976; Hellman and Beaton, 1986; McDermott, 1983; Wallis, 1992). In fact, two important national legislative
events occurring in the last 30 years have situated these problems: first, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 as a part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty; and second, The Safe Schools Act of 1994, later modified into the “Goals 2000: Educate America Act,” (Congressional Quarterly, Weekly Report, Feb. 26, 1994, p. 481; p. 332). Both acts were aimed simultaneously at (black and low income) schools and communities faced with economic and political limitations, low academic performance and school participation, and high rates of crime and violence.

The Acts potentially situate violence as a “different” problem in black schools and communities. By different I mean that violence in black schools and communities is construed as a non-mainstream social and cultural phenomenon. As such, the Acts present a social codification that distorts the relationship between the mainstream and the schooling and community life of black, Hispanic, and other citizens below the middle-class. When such “difference” is central to public policy, it helps maintain ideological, social, and political patterns that subjugate black and poor people. Indeed, violence and school disruption are problems in many minority communities. However, these issues are often disconnected from their participation in the larger mainstream cultural hegemony. In particular is mainstream blindness to its own acts of violence and oppression. Selective blindness renders the mainstream complicitous in maintaining the status quo in society by implicating the subjugated as the site of “real” violence and incivility.

Purpose

Situated as such, this article presents a critical discussion and interpretation of violence and disruption based on the author’s research of a black high school and community. Particularly, I present an interpretation of violence and disruption that invokes their contextual and cultural nature in order to challenge partial and privileged interpretations of culture and aberration regarding black schools and communities. I argue that the violent behavior of any group needs to be interpreted within the context that engulfs their life. To understand and interpret violence in black schools and communities one must be able to comprehend the
situation in several contexts. First is the influence of the historical and contemporary relationship between black communities and the mainstream. Second is the shared meanings among black people which emanate from black people's worldview based on their cultural history and relationships with the mainstream. Third is that beneath the upsetting surfaces of violence are meanings of the cultural psychology of black and American people (Shweder, 1991). The third step also includes developing interpretations that teach about blacks and whites in their American sociocultural predicament, rather than about the moral and social aberrance of a single group. Moral and social aberrance are important subjects for investigation. But in the context of racial and social relations between mainstream and minority groups in America, conducting such investigations in a balanced way is elusive.

Culture is a major feature of social and situational contexts. Culture is the vehicle through which people give and receive meanings in their worlds. It is never absent from social situations, and any psychological or moral interpretation of human actions occur within the brace of culture (ibid.). Therefore, the order of this essay begins with a brief presentation of a foundation for a sociocultural context of violence in black schools. This is followed by a brief overview that aims to provide a historical context of the school and community. From there I present excerpts of violence and discourses about it by community residents and others.

This article has important implications for the way human service providers and social scientists "conceptualize" school violence and disruption for black students and communities. Conceptualizations fundamentally bind the assumptions that guide social policy and social programs in issues like school and community violence and disruption. Social injustice and inequality envelope life for many racial/ethnic and economic minorities in this society. Social programs (policy initiatives, program administration, direct practice, research, and education) fail to enlighten, heal, and empower when they are driven by assumptions devoid of the recognition of such issues. Social scientists and human service providers can therefore benefit from the kind of conceptual clarity that allows them to locate and understand their roles in enterprises that reproduce injustice and inequality. A broad view of American culture, society, and the human condition demands
as much because the stubborn social problems that affect black Americans reflect and affect all Americans.

Foundations of a sociocultural context of violence in black schools and communities

An understanding and interpretation of violence in a sociocultural contexts begins with a definition of culture. Culture comprises maps of meaning which make things intelligible to members of a society or community (Hall and Jefferson, 1976, p. 10). Culture is a "shared organization of ideas that includes the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community and the meanings of community actions" (LeVine, 1985, p. 67). Culture shapes behavioral repertoires and frames of reference by operating like a "tool kit" of habits, skill and styles from which citizens construct "strategies of action" (Swidler, 1986, p. 273).

Culture also comprises symbols and metaphors that a given community utilizes to give meaning to and interpret their experiences (Geertz, 1973; Rabinow and Sullivan, 1987). Symbols in culture "summarize" powerful meanings that citizens possess, draw upon, and express in their daily lives. Symbols also "elaborate" individual and joint categories through which citizens understand and conceptualize the world, and with which they grapple for strategies of action toward culturally defined goals (Ortner, 1973; Swidler, 1986). Similarly, metaphors enrich "the world's meaning . . . [T]he significance of every term [e.g., violence, black urban public school and black community] that participates in a metaphor is transformed into more than itself . . . [It is transformed] into an icon of other things as well. . . . [and has] connotative resonance and affective power" (Rappaport, 1979, p. 127). The variably interpretive nature of life events in culture as a result of symbols and metaphors, strongly implies that violence and disruption in black schooling and community life may be seen differently within and outside of black communities. A sociocultural context must include room for such an understanding.

A sociocultural context entails the meanings and interpretations of experience that emanate from the conceptualization of culture above. It also includes the historical and contemporary social, political, and economic circumstances in which a given
group(s) exists. Cultural practices also occur within the confines of a bounded physical/geographical environment like the delineated territory of a city or neighborhood in relation to a particular institution like school. The physical, social, and sensory environment in which, for example, an ethnic, racial, gender, or social class group exists, interacts with that of outsiders. Such interactions become interdependent and forge the perceptions of all individuals and groups.

Relations with "insider-outsider" reference points, as is the general case between blacks and whites in America, comprise a politically and socially strained process. These processes shape economic, educational, and social relations among and between individuals, groups, and institutions (Ringer and Lawless, 1989). Consequently, a mainstream interpretation of the issues of concern in this article is generally filled with interpretations based on dominant symbols and metaphors that are used to define black people. Consider that public, urban, and black are terms that seem to operate with symbolic and metaphorical meaning in American society. These terms often become linked in daily practice with other terms like school and community. These linkages result in combinations such as public schools, urban schools, black schools, urban communities, and black communities. Together, they easily conjure stereotypes of violence, poverty, welfare, incivility, aggression, self-destruction and chaos, among other images of black urban culture. These stereotypes and images are problematic when they represent the entire school and community experience of black students in urban areas (Stark, 1993). And the pervasiveness of images and stereotypes based on such perceptions and stereotypes of black urban public schools and communities suggest mainstream social and cultural homogenization around a "racialized, black, Other." The "black Other" is perceived to largely exist outside of the cultural mainstream of educational and social values and mores in America (Dominguez, 1994; hooks, 1992).

An important conclusion flows from the above discussion. Namely, when violence and disruption are publicly discussed and negotiated as aberrant cultural differences in black schools and communities, the outcome tends to serve the perceptual needs of the mainstream (Feldman, 1994, p. 405). The mainstream detaches
violence from its own history and from the historical, contemporary, and local conditions of inequality that nurture anger, despair and violence in many black urban schools and communities. Mainstream perceptions that nurture such detachment are "conditioned by a perceived cultural distance" from blacks. Perceived cultural distance serves as an "anesthesia" and "fosters the inadmissibility of the sensory experience" of black Americans (ibid, p. 406). Consequently, the dominant political and social mainstream is unable to speak the truth about, accurately interpret, or see its own destiny in violence and disruption in black schools and communities.

Violence

The above conclusions extend beyond a focus on black people and support a reconceptualization of violence generally. To begin, I suggest that violence is a matter of interpretation. Just consider the epigraph at the beginning of this article, especially in the context of recent reformulations of the term violence and what it connotes. Reformulations are outcomes of social changes in meanings and perceptions. One example is violence's reappropriation as a "public health" issue (Brendtro and Long, 1995; Elders, 1994; Prothrow-Stith, 1991; Soriano, et al., 1994). In another example violence is interpreted as representative of generally undesirable, oppressive social, economic, and political practices at the level of the individual, group, institution, and culture (Van Soest and Bryant, 1995).

On one hand, we might all agree to consider violence a "harm-giving act" or an "act of contested physical hurt" (Riches, 1991, pp. 286, 293). On the other hand, inescapable questions such as when, where, who and what—in other words, the context (political, moral and otherwise)—figure seriously into the employment of the term violence. Essentially, even when violence clearly connotes harm-giving, this is not all that is being referenced. One merely need reflect on acts of war—and concomitant justifications of it; or wife-battering (domestic violence) and changes in public interpretation and legal repercussions. Is violence present in a prize fight, fights during a hockey game, hazing in a college fraternity, TV cartoons, and killing in self defense? Are middle
and upper-class boys who destroy property and or engage in group sex with a young woman engaging in acts of violence or are they "boys being boys, benignly sowing their seed"? Contrast that with whether or not working-class boys with the same behavior are "unprincipled oversexed animals, low-life thugs, hoodlums and niggers"? In addition to harm-giving, the examples above suggest that interpretations of violence are often centered on motive, intent, and racial, class, and social status.

In the final analysis, context and circumstance frequently disappear from descriptions and explanations of violence in black schools and communities. Context and circumstance are also frequently absent or distorted in media discourse, social policy, and scholarly research outcomes. For example, while epidemiological statistics reveal alarming rates of violence, many politicians, human service providers, and social scientist are suspiciously numb regarding the complex and variably interpretative nature of violence. Moreover, circumstance and context notwithstanding, it is quite paradoxical that, by and large, most Americans do not consider violence as normative or socially acceptable, yet they continue to believe that violence is increasingly ubiquitous (Thornton, 1990, pp. 227, 223; Just, 1991). Such revelations affirm Feldman's (1994) notion of "cultural anesthesia" cited earlier, and contribute to the following propositions regarding violence and sociocultural context:

1. To consider an act violent is to impose or privilege one interpretation among competing interpretations; it is the case of presenting a sort of "commentary" after the occurrence of a particular incident in question (Riches, 1991, p. 286; Thornton, 1990, p. 224);

2. Perpetrators generally do not describe their actions as violent, but rather as a response to a perceived injustice, and as goal directed behavior that is meant as justified retaliation, self-defense, or as "just desserts" (Thornton, 1990, p. 225);

3. Thus, considering an act violent is often pejorative, for violence is an act without a particular meaning or categorization until one is assigned;

4. Yet, we live in a "morally-figured" society that provides a
set of values by which we might determine whether or not an act of harm-giving is normative or socially acceptable;

(5) Still, skin color, ethnicity, gender and social class and status figure, however subtly, into all evaluations of violence or perceived harm giving acts.

It may seem reasonable to reach consensus that fighting and other acts of harm-giving in black schools and communities are harmful and inappropriate. But it is equally reasonable to consider the full connotation and meaning—sociocultural context—of disruptive and harm-giving acts in these respective settings. To begin flushing out an interpretation of school violence and disruption that recognizes sociocultural context and the construction of meaning as outlined above, I present a brief historical portrait of Community High and Village Park.

Sociocultural Context of Community High and Village Park

The basis of these data is an 18 month ethnographic study of a predominantly black urban high school and community—Community High and Village Park (pseudonyms)—which experienced difficulty with violence and disruption during the 1992-93 school year and beyond. Located in Newark, New Jersey, Community High was once the center-piece of Village Park. During the study Community High had approximately 1300 students. Newark is a densely populated northeastern city with approximately 275,000 residents, over half of whom are black (African-American, African, and African Diaspora peoples). Village Park has approximately 58,000 residents, and may be characterized in terms of a sociocultural context constructed from the confluence of race, class, economics and politics. Such a rich alchemy allowed, among other outcomes in Village Park, solidarity and strain in most areas of life: race and class identity; religion—Christianity, Nation of Islam and Orthodox or Sunni Muslims; gender relations and roles; and participation in educational systems (Curvin, 1977; Price, 1980). In this context, during the 1991/92 academic school year, Newark’s school system reported 1900 complaints of thefts, drugs, fights, and trespassing. The local school board allocated $7.5 million for security, and subsequently employed a “Rapid Response Team” of police officers and school
security personnel to respond to violence and disruption in the city schools. During the 1992/93 school year, I observed the presence of the Team on many occasions at Community High.

Until the 1950's, Village Park was the home of predominantly middle and working-class Jews and other Whites (Cunningham, 1988). During a transition period (White flight) in the late 1950's to the early 70's, there was an influx of a great number of middle-class and working-class blacks with high educational and economic aspirations. Among other factors, many blacks were attracted to Village Park by large single and multiple family homes, manicured lawns, clean and safe tree-lined streets, and schools with excellent academic reputations. Official demographics notwithstanding, the community is currently comprised of mostly middle and working-class individuals and families, and an increasing number of individuals and families who are financially dependent upon public assistance.

Despite the tangible presence of a black middle-class, the character of Village Park and Community High was perceived by "outsiders" as largely "lower- and working-class." These perceptions imply limited educational aspirations and achievements, as well as lifestyles and values counter to mainstream standards. Community insiders and outsiders say that such characterizations are associated with increasing poverty, crime, and disruption in the schools and the community. Students painted a mixed picture of Village Park and Community High. Some students said it is a good school and community with lots of friendly people. Others said it is a good and bad place to live and go to school. Several Community High students even referred to Village Park as "a ghetto suburb almost. It's like all black, and it's like everybody 'round here got a little money" (Cousins, 1994, p. 110).

The local particularities that emerged for Village Park residents based on the confluence of factors cited thus far are the simultaneous presence of social and cultural radicalness, ambivalence, and precariousness. Comprising a major tint in the residents' cultural frame of reference, these three features manifest themselves as follows: through activities and attitudes affirming black identity and black culture; through social and verbal assertiveness that often crosses over into aggressiveness and hostility; and, very importantly, through a pervasive sense of mistrust toward "outsiders," who largely comprised white people, but
also black people who are ambiguous on the overlapping matter of their racial and social class loyalty. Residents of Village Park (if not all of black Newark) therefore join with Julius Lester's observation of "the very absence of confidence among African Americans in the solidarity of life itself" (1994, p. 367).

Students and violence in Community High

Presented below are excerpts of scenes of violence and disruption that were observed by the author while he was a participant-observer in Community High and Village Park. I attempt to interpret these scenes in a manner that demonstrates the sociocultural contextualization of violence and disruption as argued in this article. In addition to approaching violence and disruption as interpretable, the excerpts refer to violence and disruption in terms of behavioral acts that interfere with prescribed routines, and as acts that do, or attempt to do, physical harm to persons or property. Moreover, all acts of violence in the school and community are generally disruptive, but not all disruptive behavior is violent. In the view of the majority of students, school staff, and community members, however, both violence and disruption are nevertheless undesirable.

Violence and disruption are a part of a "Sphere of Trouble" in Community High and Village Park. Violence in this sphere is a powerful tool of youth and symbolizes the power to "discomfit" and the power to "pose a threat" (Hebdige, 1988, pp. 17-18; Cousins, 1994, p. 198). Like Hebdige's observations of youth in the Sphere of Trouble, young people at Community High make "their presence felt by going 'out of bounds,' by resisting through rituals, dressing strangely, striking bizarre attitudes, breaking rules, breaking bottles, windows, heads, and issuing rhetorical challenges to the law" (1988, pp. 17-18):

On any given day one could observe small groups of boys leaning against the walls in the hall, posturing as I have seen them do on their street corners. Some wore dark glasses, black or brown high-top Timberland boots, oversized jeans—without the belts—hanging low on their hips, and a defiant, but cool, demeanor. Adding even more menacing flavor to their appearance was the afro hair style of the 60's and 70's, which was gaining rebirth among young people
School administrators, most of whom were black, were indeed troubled by the student poses in general, and specifically regarded their manner of dress as the "jail house look."

The scenes above represent a sort of symbolic violence—against norms and standards of "taste"—in addition to being generally disruptive in the school. School staff were not equally troubled by student poses, but all were very concerned about the impact the students' investment in "posing practices" would have on their classroom attitudes and performance. Many teachers therefore required these students to "leave their attitudes (or poses) in the hall" as they crossed the threshold of the classroom. Conversely, many students saw posing practices as simply tryin' to be cool and tough, just simply the way they like to dress and act. They said their behavior and posing practices did not mean that they were trying to be criminals. Many others said that their way of dressing is "simply a trend." Schools scenes continue:

Walking along the hall corridor south of the cafeteria, I noticed several students running toward the opposite corridor. I followed them. I was being pushed and shoved from behind by students who were trying to get a view of a fight that was occurring between two boys. I had met one of the fighters. Both were seniors. The one that I had met, Charlie, was often engaged in conversations about bettering himself and his community. But at the same time, he presented himself as tough—"not a punk," as the students would say. Charlie was not a person to let people walk over him and push him around. Many students shared Charlie's view but not all of them acted on their view as Charlie did.

Charlie and his counterpart were throwing punches at each other, trying to push each other's head against the floor with all the strength that they could muster as they twisted their bodies together like twine. They were encircled by a ring of students locked arm-in-arm as they chanted in unison to the rhythm of the fighters "hee—ho, hee—ho, hee—ho." The ring of students were locked arm-in-arm to prevent any outside intrusion by school authorities into what they considered, according to one student, "a fair fight, [because] it's one-on-one." The employment of rules of fairness ("it's one on one") in an otherwise violent situation seemed contradictory, but all too common. Several minutes passed before the fight was stopped. I was greatly troubled by this entire scene and decided to immediately go
home and think about what all of this meant. I was an outsider of sorts trying to understand the insider view and meaning of things they did and said.

On another day, two girls were observed fighting. I learned that the girls were fighting because one of them had “ran their mouth too much” at the other. This event eventually led to one of the girls and her friends forming a posse of a group of about ten students. They proceeded to chase the other girl around the school so that they could beat her up. They ran through the halls—up one floor, down to another—as several teachers looked on in what appeared to be despair and helplessness. Some teachers yelled for the students to stop, but this was unheeded. The fight was considered “just desserts” by some of the students because, as many girls and boys believed, “you shouldn’t say something you can’t back up.”

As one can see, the students were quite successful in disrupting prescribed norms of school, breaking rules, breaking heads, and posing a threat to authority. They acted within the context of their interpretation and beliefs of what their interpersonal transactions meant and required in social terms. And it is increasingly the case that in schools young women are as involved in violence and disruption as young men.

To be sure, the students posed, fought, and acted with an attitude, as adolescents generally do. Collectively, the students’ behavioral practices and attitudes reflect the received social and cultural importance of establishing and maintaining respect in social and interpersonal situations. To an extent, such an ethos is shared by many in the mainstream. However, the particular style and attitude of their actions are resonant of the particular strain, tension, and collective identity of their racial and class-based community. One must add to this the specific flavor that is given to actions and attitudes as a result of living within a bounded geographic space. Finally, the students expressive and aesthetic styles also reflect the taste of their generation. Their tastes mirror popular culture norms or what some community insiders and outsiders consider the current ominous symbols and rituals of mediums like rap and hip hop music and entertainment. Many school staff, however, acted as guardians of personal taste and social norms. They perceived such student tastes and actions as far more pernicious and disruptive than they indeed were in school. In fact, one could say that a class war around taste (i.e.,
dress, language, attitude) ensued for the entire 1992/93 academic year at Community High. We continue this dialogue below with a brief focus on violence and disruption beyond the school walls.

Violence and adults in the school and community

Violent situations are filled with cultural meanings for a given group. One is hard-pressed to find any single meaning that represents the beliefs and values of the entire group. Therefore, through acts of violence one sees the multiple meanings attached to life as it is felt and practiced in the school and community. I turn to brief excerpts from the school and community to expose a variation in thoughts, perceptions, and responses regarding violence in Community High and Village Park. The first discourse occurred at a community meeting of citizens, politicians, police officers, neighborhood associations, ministers and others. They were meeting to discuss the prevalence of violence and some remedies for their community.

One city councilman stated that “if they are old enough to do the crime they have to do the time . . . you can't play with young people any longer.” After meeting with applause from the audience, he said, “Don’t call me if your son is arrested for hanging-out on the corner at two, three, four in the morning!” A young black minister stated “Do not call me to help your son if he has robbed a church member, stole a car, or whatever. Reclaim your community . . . take a stand against crime!”

One gentleman turned the responsibility for these troubled youngsters back into the lap of the community. He is an older minister who has lived in the community for forty years. He said that “The youngsters giving us problems are our youngsters.” Slightly aligning himself with this minister was an approximately fifty year old man who said, “We have the clergy, politicians, and the law (the police), all that we need. But what about poverty here? Crime efforts will not bring hope, stop the hurt [that is due to poverty].”

The school staff, like the community members, were not in agreement on the meaning and cause of violence and disruption either. And they consistently cited the permeable nature of the boundaries between school and community life that were penetrated by violence and disruptive behavior. Below is a discourse that represents their view on this matter:
In one discussion, a school administrator, a black man, stated that the violent and disruptive student behavior in school "reflects community norms and how we (black people) don't care about one another at a certain level." Another black administrator, without disagreeing, noted however that the community of Village Park in which the school is located, "is not all that bad" compared to an adjoining community and school.

In another dialogue is a teacher who attended Community High and lived in this community until recently. He was seen by the administration as being too closely aligned with the students. He spent a lot of his personal time working with troubled students. He said to me that "we have to understand the students' situation and help them accordingly. School is where they come to socialize," to hang-out and chill. He went on to say that the students have nowhere else to be, especially with the depleted resources for social programs in this community.

Although the school faculty and community members had various and sometimes competing views about the source and meaning of violence and disruption in Community High and Village Park, they all believed that violence is a problem. Below I attempt to apply a broad sociocultural interpretation to what has been stated about violence and disruption thus far.

Conceptually, I return to the propositions presented earlier regarding symbols and metaphors in culture, as well as the interpretive nature of violence. That is, violence and disruption—in urban black schools and communities as an arena of cultural practice—connote and are interpreted as harm to persons and property. Or the acts could be interpreted as mean-spiritedness and as vulgar and uncivilized behavior and attitudes. Some or all of these interpretations could be applied to most acts of violence in America, depending on who is doing the interpretation. However, black citizens and communities have the additional burden of racial meanings applied to their acts of violence. Interpreting violence through lens coated with racial meanings obscures underlying issues of psychological, social, and economic powerlessness and resistance. Instead, such obscurity contributes to partial understandings that foster the perception of wide-spread aberrance in black communities, black families, and black schools—in essence, black culture.
What could we learn if we focused on violence as one of the ultimate expressions of oppression and powerlessness for groups and communities perceiving themselves as excluded from full society (Trafford, 1992)? We could learn that young black people (and perhaps their communities, schools and families) are invisible except when their presence is a problem. We would learn that although black youth subculture is at play, their subculture derives and shares a substantial amount of meaning with the black community from which it springs. For example, while many black citizens hail and prize social respect, as do the students, not all or even most would predictably engage in a physical fight to defend such possessions. Additionally, although some analysts say black youth dominate American popular culture, not all black citizens, not even in a single bounded community, share the same interpretation and vision of popular culture expressions in music, clothing, and expressive behavioral styles (Patterson, 1994).

Consequently, then, we could learn that a shared racial and class consciousness gives the appearance of the condoning of violence among black citizens in black communities and schools. Such consciousness does indeed contribute to group solidarity but not a monolith of thoughts and beliefs, as inferred above. Again, culture provides a “tool kit” for constructing strategies of action, not necessarily a single “tool” and single “strategy” (Swidler, 1986). Shared consciousness, furthermore, can force a fusion of interests across institutions that might otherwise maintain rigid boundaries—i.e., schools, churches, mosques, family and so forth (Fantasia, 1988; McNall, et al., 1991; Sullivan, 1989). However, an application of a culturally contextual analysis to violence in black schools and communities also contributes knowledge and understanding about mainstream and minority roles and perceptions in the maintenance and functioning of such institutions.

Once more, why is a balanced and culturally informed interpretation of violence important? I offer a final set of examples and their implications in reply. One of the most extreme acts of violence involves the use of guns. Guns simultaneously represent violence as power and powerlessness. As such, guns have increasingly become a part of the “Sphere of Trouble” in Village Park and Community High (Cousins, 1994, p. 201 and Chap. 7). The final excerpts below serve to capture the societal proliferation
of the technology of destruction—guns—and notes how guns have turned an already and always troubling space of adolescent contestation in Community High and Village Park (and urban and rural high schools and communities in general) into “zones of terror and death”:

Arriving at school after a day's absence in late September, I was engaged in a conversation describing how school was dismissed early due to the presence of a gun in school, allegedly an Uzi. The halls were buzzing with conversation and anxiety about this shocking but inevitable incident. According to the faculty and students, guns are increasingly showing up in Community High. In the second half of the school year, students were increasingly scanned with metal detectors as they entered the school each morning. One teacher matter-of-factly questioned why I would remain in a situation like this if I had a choice. He made it known that he was getting out as soon as he could and that I should too. Others also expressed their ambivalence about their commitment to these students and this Black community. Their main concern was for a safer and more productive academic environment. More often than not, however, many went about their duties systematically and with flatness of emotion as they hoped for the end of another school year.

In a senior History class, four young men, with other classmates listening in, discussed episodes of shootings that occurred the previous night in their neighborhood and involved young men that they know. The teacher—a firm, consistent and effective woman who was no stranger to this kind of dialogue, but tired of its frequency in her class—asked the boys, “For once, can’t you get your minds off the streets and talk about everyday stuff.” One of the boys responded, “This is everyday stuff where we live.” We all fell silent. She systematically went on with her History lesson.

The above excerpts, combined with the others that preceded it, capture the essence of violence in its subjectiveness as both felt and lived. Violence in such a context confronts reductions of the lives of these residents to narrow terms of morality and racial and social deviance. I end this section with one last piece that symbolically and metaphorically summarizes and elaborates the experience and interpretation of violence and disruption in this school and community.

The outcome of lethal violence in school and the community, and powerlessness in the face of it, are exemplified in the follow-
ing: (1) the daily presence of security guards patrolling the school halls and posted at the front door of the school with medical detectors; (2) administrators mingling intrusively among the students to discourage or prevent fights as the students left school
or lingered in front of the school with their friends; (3) police stationed in front of the school to face the students as school ended each day; and (4), more poignantly, the erection of the "Gone Too Soon Memorial." The first three circumstances constitute almost total surveillance, while the fourth perhaps tells us why.

The "Gone Too Soon Memorial" was dedicated to deceased students and peers. It imbued hope for the end of deathly terror and violence. Hanging on a wall along the east corridor of the first floor of the school, the memorial comprised a 24x36 poster with the names of deceased youths. Their names were hand-written in magic marker in almost every available space. The "Gone Too Soon Memorial" is symbolic and metaphoric. It captures the material and metaphysical results of a school and community caught in the throes of violence and disruption. The Memorial captures these citizens hopes and losses, and, in the broader view of things, simultaneously positions these residents right alongside and at some distance from most other Americans. In more ways than is stated in this article, the issues of black people in Village Park and in America in-general simultaneously share important social and cultural space. This joint condition encapsulates and transcends the social, political, and economic relations of race, class, and ethnicity in or out of the context of violence. Many Americans know that Village Park and Newark do not stand apart from other cities and communities in terms of facing violence and disruption in schools and beyond, as noted in the introduction of this article. However, many more need to know and understand that black schools, communities, and cities exist within a sociocultural context shared in varying degrees by other urban communities (Celis, 1994).

Implications and Conclusion

I return to the epigraph quoted at beginning of the article (Curwin, 1995; Rozycki, 1994). First, besides signaling complex subjectivities, the epigraph also implicates multiple players in the process of interpreting violence—namely, media, as well as actors-as-participants and actors-as-observers. Schools and communities are likewise complex, interdependent, and subjective sociocultural territory (Allen-Meares, 1993; Giroux, 1992; Mintzies, 1993; Constable et al., 1991; Winters and Easton, 1983). Therefore,
employing culture and a sociocultural context as frameworks in the analysis of violence in black urban schools and communities means embracing Miglore's proposition that "viable solutions to violent behavior must come from a better *understanding of real-life situations* in our schools" (1994, p. 64; Wax, 1993; italics added). Essentially, interventions for school and community violence and disruption that empower must be conceptualized in a manner that capture the contested and fluid social and racial context in which these institutions exist (Swidler, 1986; Foley, 1990; Mickelson, 1994; Wax, 1993).

How are we to proceed with such admonitions? The predicament of violence and disruption requires the construction of social interventions that give greater weight to the realities associated with the strained lived-experience between and among all parties: teachers, students and families; helpers and helpees; as well as school, community, and society at-large (Phelan, Davidson and Cao, 1991; Proctor, Vosler, and Sirles, 1993). Competing social values and immobilizing social-economic-political contexts must be accounted for and reflected in psychological, economic, political, and social interpretations of the experiences and perceptions of citizens like those in Village Park. Such a complex psycho-social-cultural circumstance has been central to the life and work of Harry Aponte (1994), among others (Adams and Nelson, 1995). Based in culture and centered on the recognition of the culture and values dialectic between practitioner and citizen, Aponte recommends that we engage in what I call a "therapeutic confrontation and negotiation ethic" while working in a partnership stance with citizens (see especially chapters 1, 3, 4 and 9 for discussions which render principles of action beyond the narrowly defined micro context of human services). When social action proceeds according to such principles, it effectively nullifies unproven, but generally accepted, social, cultural, and educational notions of difference. These notions of difference are often based on misguided biological, social, cognitive, and geographic or spatial characteristics associated with race, ethnicity, gender and class.

Substantial action requires not only a partnership between human service providers and those with whom we intervene, but also an investment in learning what societal, institutional, and interpersonal meanings are infused in violence and related
features of schooling and community life. Elaine Pinderhughes (1989) offers such a model that easily compliments Aponte's and reaches into the cultural threshold of "difference" at the levels noted here. Several programs aimed at mediating problems of violence in schools have taken these admonitions into account and have learned that peers, parents, school faculty, as well as community/neighborhood members and organizations are very necessary partners in understanding schools and community influences (Greif, 1993; Arons and Schwartz, 1993; Levy and Shepardson, 1992; Tolson et al., 1992; Moriarty and McDonald, 1991). In a partnership stance with schools, communities, and citizens, and in a reflective stance regarding the basis of our commonalities and differences, human service providers can therefore purposefully assist in the development and implementation of effective educational and human services.

Finally, educators, researchers, program administrators and policy developers who are involved in human services might continue to engage direct service practitioners in organizing and presenting experiences from their work in schools and communities that suffer with violence and disruption. The inclusion of the grounded experiences of practitioners facilitates the generation of knowledge, as well as relevant research questions and agendas. These outcomes provide relevant content for human service education, curricula, training, policy development, advocacy, and the administration of social programs around issues of violence and beyond. In the end, when violence and disruption in black schools and communities are interpreted in a sociocultural context as espoused in this article, we may all realize that the destinies of all Americans are interwoven.

References


Black Schools and Communities


