# Addressing structural violence: Reforming our perspectives

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Structural violence is a condition in which groups of persons are harmed by general and persisting situations not of their own choosing; from which most have no real way of escaping. Great harm, including death, and limits on the actualization of potential are the result. Three frequently contributing major causes of structural violence to be reviewed in this chapter are poverty (with resource inequality), sexism, and racism. El Salvador is used as an example. The practical theological strategy suggested here is: 1) in any context under study, raise the question of whether structural violence might be involved and give consideration of the effects of structural violence a priority even in the midst of other negative causes; 2) seek remedies against structural violence; and 3) augment the agency of the persons negatively affected. Reforming our perspectives is required to move us from focusing on small but deadly brushfires while missing the firestorm of structural violence, which deadens our social landscapes.

## Introduction and definition

In this chapter, I will introduce and elaborate on the concept of structural violence and examine some contributions to the concept's development. Then I will look at the relationship of structural violence to poverty, sexism, and racism. Afterwards, I will describe and discuss the situation of the Central American country of El Salvador. Finally, I will suggest that we practical theologians reform our perspective on problematic situations by heightening awareness of structural violence, by working to eradicate it in general, and by giving individuals means to escape its effects. This paper does not contend that the whole world is structurally violent. What is argued here is that in certain circumstances using structural violence as a template may reform our understanding of those situations and hopefully offer a path to some remediation.

Structural violence, a most serious type of social injustice, is a condition in which groups of persons and even nations are harmed by ongoing general situations not of their own choosing, from which most

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have no real way of escaping. It is like having one's foot stuck in a tar pit; one can be fed but one cannot escape. People are simply trapped in the shadowy life-shortening convergences of negativity, living fewer years, with worse health, and not achieving reasonable fulfillment of their human potential. Most simply put, structural violence is 1) harmful, often lethal, 2) not immediately obvious, 3) involuntary, 4) generally unavoidable in its effects, 5) severely diminishing of the potential of certain groups of persons, and 6) often longstanding (cf. Ho 2007).

I argue here for a reform in the way we view many dire human situations. Structural violence must be recognized as causal in certain of them. Exacerbating certain serious situations are the interaction and intersection of factors such as historical conditions (e. g. colonialism, slavery, rich-poor dichotomy), biological situations (e. g. endemic malar-

ia, drug resistant tuberculosis, un-remediated toxic conditions, lack of clean water, malnutrition), and discriminatory attitudes (e. g. racism, sexism, the rich-poor dichotomy). These can exist hidden from view because they are either unrecognized or presumed to be "normal." Examples of the presumption of "normality" include: "There will always be poor people," "The woman's work is in the home," and the popular association of certain ethnic groups with gangs, crime, and drugs. Some examples of situations of structural violence are the general situation in the country of El Salvador (discussed below), Haiti, many iterations of the social situation of women, the Russian penal situation, many other penal systems, the crime ridden poorly resourced Chicago neighborhood of Englewood, the isolated living situations of certain groups of indigenous peoples, and even homes for dependent children in which order and "having a good attitude" are the dominant principles rather than the complete human development of each resident child.

## Developing the concept of structural violence

Johan Galtung, the Norwegian social scientist credited with first using the term "structural violence," described it as "the avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or, to put it in more general terms, the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would be otherwise possible" (Galtung 1993, 1). Physician and anthropologist Paul Farmer elaborates extensively on structural violence, drawing from his analysis of situations in (among others) Haiti, Russia, Rwanda, and Peru. He has been responsible for making more visible the notion of "structural violence" in *Pathologies of Power* (2003) and other writings. In exploring structural violence and drawing on Galtung, Farmer, and other theorists, I will consider it first as structural, then as violent, followed by the characteristics of being hidden and "normal."

## Structural

Structural violence is hidden in structures rather than being inflicted by a specific individual or group of individuals. Andrew Dilts notes that public atten-

tion focuses on "bad apples" and "responsible parties" (2012, 192). But he contends that violence cannot be accounted for only by a "liability-based model of agency and force" (2012, 191). In situations of structural violence, power is unequally distributed, and so also the ability to trade in goods, educational opportunity, etc. Characteristic of structural violence is exploitation (where some profit more than others), leading to premature death for some, leaving others in a permanent involuntary state of poverty (illness, etc.) and segmentation, in which the "underdogs" are only allowed a limited view of the reality in which they exist (Galtung in Müller n. d.). Dilts points out that "[m]embers of the Occupy movement have pointed directly to the forms of systematic violence and domination inherent in wealth and income inequality and demanded an end to economic and political domination" (192). They have been met by naked violence and brutality by opponents, including governmental ones. Indeed, stability and tranquility often mask deeper and more pervasive violence. According to Matthew Mullen, structural violence is "built-in" systematic vulnerability and dehumanization (Mullen 2015, 462). He argues that in dealing with transitional justice the central focus should be structural violence rather than courts and commissions. Otherwise, in some way, the violent structures will continue, e. g. daily life in South Africa.

For Farmer (2005, 41) structural violence is

'structured' by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire—whether through routine, ritual, or, as is more commonly the case, the hard surfaces of life—to constrain agency. For many, including most of my patients, and informants, choices both large and small are limited by racism, sexism, political choice, and grinding poverty.

Farmer's two most well-known examples are from Russia and Haiti. In Russia, lengthy detention before trial results in prisoners being exposed to drug-resistant tuberculosis, which they later transmit to their families after release. In Haiti, without consultation, the government expropriated land from farmers for a dam to provide hydro-electric power. People who lost their farming livelihood had no alternative but to head to Port-au-Prince for work, eventually resulting in the spread of abject poverty and HIV-AIDS in the region of the dam.

## Violence

Galtung points out that, as a result of structural violence, life is shortened from what it would have been had one had the world's average amount of resources. One lives fewer years and in a diminished state of development of potential. Avoidable pre-mature death is a type of violence. As Farmer et al. (2006) put it, structural violence describes "social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way." Harmful social structures, supported by stable institutions and regular experience can be invisible. Unequal access to resources, political power, education, health care, and legal standing are examples of these potentially lethal structures, says Farmer, following Galtung.

Forensic psychiatrist James Gilligan says that structural violence is the cause of more deaths than war, accidental death, homicide, and suicide together (1996, 110). It operates continuously, independent of individual acts, individuals, and groups, and is normally invisible (192). He focuses strongly on socio-economic causes. The gap between rich and poor produces more than 14 million deaths per year (195). 20% of the world's population is absolutely unable to provide for itself nor do anything about it (287–288). Gilligan (2009, 253), drawing in part on Hannah Arendt, notes that there is a certain connection between structural violence and individual violence in the sense that the more power people have, the less they need to resort to individual violence.

## Structural related to interpersonal

Interpersonal violence (e. g. murder, the killing of civilians in war, especially domestic abuse, etc.) certainly co-exists with structural violence, but the two concepts must be kept separate, as Joshua M. Price (2012) indicates. Kathleen Ho (2007) notes that with violence that is obviously a violation of individual human rights, one can name the violators, while with structural violence those responsible are less easily identified. Total focus on interpersonal violence obscures the underlying causation of structural violence. Interpersonal violence can result from structural violence, as those unable to prosper in the current structure inflict violence on those "below" them, and so on (cf. Price 2012). Violence flows down the power grid; one diminishes one's own humiliation by humiliating those "below" one.

## Hidden and normal

The social factors must be simultaneously considered but are "differentially weighted in different settings and times" (Farmer 2005, 42–43). As Linda Green notes, Farmer is able to use "structural violence" to make visible the social machinery of oppression, keeping the historical sources of oppression in view (Green 2004, 319). Without keeping the causes in view, the structures of violence become simply "given," a "normalization" of oppression (Farmer 2004, 317). Farmer is comfortable with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" and sees structural violence as both "structures and structuring" (Farmer 2004, 315). It constricts the agency of its victims and determines the allocation of resources. It socializes for scarcity, exemplified in the Haitian proverb, "A full belly means trouble." Yves Winter (2012, 192–3) highlights that structural violence can be invisible but also visible in the sense of being commonplace, inherited across generations, taken for granted. Philip Bourgois (2009) describes how structural violence can be expressed in a climate of interpersonal violence, leading to a "normalization" of violence, and thereby the obscuring of structural violence.

We will now briefly review three factors frequently contributing to structural violence: extreme poverty, sexism, and racism.

## Extreme poverty and income inequality: cause and result of structural violence

Eight individuals have wealth and control of assets equal to the economically ranked bottom half of the world's population. Many in the "lower half" are caught up in what Bourgois (2001, 12) calls the "global sweatshop economy." Economic powerlessness is a kind of structural violence which leads to misery and pushes people into further structurally violent situations. Thousands flee from the extreme poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, 5,000 African refugees drowned in the Mediterranean Sea last year, 700 of them children. The drowning deaths have economic remote causes in home countries as well as proximate causes in unsafe predatory "migration industry" exploitation. This migration from central African countries and its causes and the ensuing disasters on the journeys can well be described

as a structurally violent situation. The vulnerability is endless and almost circular.

Often contributing to severe poverty and economic inequality is corruption. While occasional dictators have brought stability to countries, more likely is the corruption which skims off significant monies for the winners of elections. Another instance of corruption is many workers not receiving their fair share of the profits of their work. Rampant bribery at all levels also contributes to and perpetuates structural violence.

Attempts at foreign aid and at charity may provide immediate relief but can contribute to the continuation of the structural violence which accompanies extreme poverty. Foreign aid is both military and also infrastructural (roads, sewage treatment) as well as immediate relief (food, water, blankets). There is some help, but there may be problems with the "help." Tim Reid (2006) raises the question of whether lack of donor oversight contributes to the support of structural violence, using violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo by Rwanda and Uganda as his prime examples.

## Sexism (gender Inequality) is and contributes to structural violence

Much violence against women can be interpreted both as interpersonal and structural. Women suffer from the effects of colonialism, poverty, certain immigration laws, forced sterilization, forced birth control, machismo accepted as a way of life, trafficking, prostitution, the "glass ceiling," rape, rape as a weapon of war, and femicide (cf. Mukherjee, 2011). The structural dimension of much violence against women is usually ignored. Price (2011, 2, 30) contests the notion that violence against women is homogeneous in nature and mostly domestic. Yes, there are often serious efforts to punish perpetrators, but this action by government does not include the input of women victims. In this commonplace approach, class distinction effects are removed, as is violence by agents of government, and even indirect actions like failing to protect women from pimps and traffickers. Prostituted women are punished rather than their "clients." Racial profiling, prison growth, and campaigns against immigrants get divorced from the study of violence. The structures are made invisible. The second half of 2017 has brought to public attention a remarkable and tragic number of sexual crimes against women by power-

ful men, leading to revelation of the scope of the issue of the abuse of women in the United States.

According to information from the Institute for Women's Policy Research, women in the United States overall currently earn 82% of men's weekly paychecks, for black women 68%, for Hispanic women 62%. Median earnings for women are lower in 18 of the 20 most common jobs for women (Swartz and Jones 2017, 35). The gap is projected to end by 2056 for white women, for black women in 2124, for Hispanic women in 2248. This is an example of the intersection of race, gender, and income.

## Racism as a widespread dimension of structural violence

The very notion of race has political and categorizing dimensions. It moves from pigmentation and ethnicity to a stereotyping structure. It leads from colonialization to enslavement and disenfranchisement. Of course, racism is an exercise of power. The path is from description to restriction in any exercise of power. The phrase in the United States' Declaration of Independence "All men are created equal" literally does not name women and was presumed not to include enslaved persons brought from Africa (again, the intersection of race and poverty in structural violence). It is reasonable to conclude that the motivation in the recent U.S. presidential election included a certain vigorous implicit energy against persons of Middle Eastern and African origins as well as persons immigrating from Central America and Mexico. One can also surmise that persons from Ireland and Poland who have overstayed their visas were not a strong motive in the vote. Efforts to repeal certain parts of the voting rights acts in the United States as well as the way certain voting districts have been constructed are often related to restricting the effectiveness of the votes of persons who are of African American and Latino/a origins, and ultimately to structurally violent effects.

Three other examples can further expand the dimension of racism. Interestingly, Polly Walker (2003, 37) describes the violence done to indigenous people as academic researchers force both indigenous persons and even indigenous researchers to use defined Western methodological frameworks when describing their knowledge and experience. Demanding Western categories in a variety of settings is structural violence. In a second example,

Lykes (2001, 161) attributes the violation of the human rights of all Guatemalans to a structural violence embedded to protect the civil-political rights of a small elite. Indigenous people in Guatemala were viewed as "subhuman," justifying quasi-genocidal treatment of these Maya people. The recent characterization of many African countries, Haiti, and (perhaps) El Salvador as [obscenity] countries by the elected president of the United States is a racist promotion of the continuation of structures and inadequate resources which lead to diminished human development and longevity.

## El Salvador as an example of structure of violence

1I have visited the Central American country of El Salvador 60 times since 2007. 6.2 million people live in this lush green mountainous 8,124 square mile rectangle on the Pacific Ocean, enjoying warm water and warm air all year. But El Salvador's history is tragic. On January 22, 1932, a peasant-led, largely indigenous rebellion was suppressed by government troops, resulting in the deaths of 30,000 coffee growing *campesinos* (CISPES 2016). 132 government troops were also killed. The bloody civil war between government troops and guerillas from 1980–1992 killed 75,000 persons, 85% of whom were innocent civilians. In 2015, 6,600 Salvadoreans were murdered. If this is projected out, citizens have about a 1 in 20 chance of having their lives ended by murder. The current violence is attributed to the 34,000 gang members (*Mara Salvatrucha* and their rivals *Calle 18*), some of whom learned much of their trade in Los Angeles before being deported after the 1980s war. This is an example of Gilligan's theory that in a context of structured violence, victims (jobless, hopeless gang members) exact violence on those weaker than themselves. The recently announced planned 2019 deportation by the United States of another 200,000 currently legal United States resident Salvadoreans can only increase structural violence in El Salvador through unemployment, social destabilization, and loss of significant external monetary remittances.

The 14 rich families of the coffee growing past have given way to eight rich sectors in the economy, where 113,000 owners receive 75% of the results of labor and the 2.5 million workers only 25%. The bottom 20% of the population receives only 3% of capital; this puts El Salvador among the 20 countries with the largest rich-poor gaps. El Salvador has many empty factories. Remittances from family members working outside of El Salvador have been a steady 17% of the GDP over the past ten years. (The GDP is 98th in the world.) 31% of the population lives below the poverty line, although unemployment is only 7%. 52% of tax revenues come from a Value Added Tax, which stresses the poor in particular as a percentage of income. While the gangs have some involvement in drugs, their main industry is extortion, from the small home owner paying $70 per year for "collaboration" and the owner of a small central city restaurant $150-$500 per month (Source: personal conversations). For the owner of a small business the expense of "rent" makes it hard to make a profit, impossible for many "mom and pop" *pupusa* (filled corn tortilla) stands. A factory job, similar to work in the fields, pays $6 per day if you can find employment and qualify. The secondary school completion rate is 34.8%. Beside the difficulty of finding employment in general, there is the added difficulty of university graduates finding employment in their fields of study.

The world's highest rate of femicide is found in El Salvador, which also has five cases of domestic abuse every day, with many more unreported (Brigada 2016). Gangs use sexual violence to bring fear to communities. Only 1% of violent crimes against women result in convictions. Collection of child support from absent fathers is rarely accomplished. But it is hoped that a 2016 law, setting up courts specifically for crimes against women, will begin to change the situation.

El Salvador is a situation with many contributors to structural violence: the gross gap between the few rich and the many working poor, massive corruption in government and through the gangs, inadequate security, the high risk of being a victim of gang violence, the gender inequality of women raising children without support from fathers, machismo, the subtle racism experienced by the poor and indigenous, and privilege for those with European and Middle Eastern roots. Lifespans are shortened by murder, limited health insurance, and poverty. The attitude is that it will always be this way because it has been this way so long. Most of the population is "stuck." Trying to escape to the north – to the United States – is a road of large payments (e.g. $8,000) to "guides," robbery, extortion, rape, kidnapping, brutalization in Mexico, with little likelihood of successful entry and achieving one's goal of a better, safer, and gang-free life (cf. Vogt 2013).

## Practice

Besides reforming the way we think about negative situations in which groups of people are "stuck," I would like us to consider a plan of action. Our focus can be on three aspects: highlighting structural violence; remedying structures; and aiding affected persons.

### Highlighting structural violence

In any problematic context under study, I suggest raising the question of whether structural violence might be involved. The focus should not just be limited to interpersonal violence. Considering structural violence should have priority even in the midst of other negative causes. Observe situations carefully and then judge what might be "underneath." Are there traps which limit the freedom of the actors? Individual actions often will be futile against structures.

Depending on "free will" explanations for most actions, on "virtue" or the lack thereof, on real freedom of choice, or on the de-contextualized efficacy of the individual leads to ignoring or downplaying the tight hold that structures have on people and situations. The temptation in any situation may be to blame individual actors. But in fact structural violence overpowers most actors. (Fourteen-year-olds in El Salvador tell me they are not free because of the ubiquitous, unpredictable lurking of murderous extortion gangs and "independent" robbers.) Most humans are not as free as we think they are.

One suggestion is that donors to charities should expect more than short–term solutions and should raise the question of underlying causes. Without such a reform of donor concerns, there is little promise of the radical change necessary to eradicate relevant violent structures which lead to shortened lives and frequent misery. Attention to structural violence itself may lead to attention to its roots, and with enough attention perhaps to action against causal factors.

### Remedying structures

When one begins to think of structures instead of individual actions, a transformation of perception takes place and one understands in a new way. Finding deep causes may lead to the possible intersected building blocks of solutions.

We can begin with the notion of the dignity of the human person and its implications. The roots are found in religious and/or humanitarian principles. The tribalism of "some are better than others" is the great impediment to ending structural violence. Structural violence thrives when the good of the other does not matter (e. g. hedonism, self-interest, "make America great again"). Religions can contribute by promoting peace and human solidarity and rejecting nationalism and tribalism. But one sometimes must choose between one's religious and humanitarian values and one's nation or tribe. Two Catholic tribes committed genocide against each other in Rwanda; tribalism overran religious faith and community. And in situations where religion is a subset of nationalism, structural violence can be a result. Where patriotism is used as an argument against non-violent protests of racism, structures of violence endure.

All violations of human rights – civil, judicial, political, socio-economic, group, educational, developmental – need attention. Let nothing trump legitimate human rights. When human rights are ignored for the sake of some presumed other good, the "greater good" is inevitably structural violence (e. g. dictatorship for the sake of order). Concessions to culture (e. g. genital mutilation) are expressions of structural violence. Sectarian partisanship inevitably redounds against the particular sector. All specific instances of the violation of the human rights of individuals need attention. This is the most widely identified guide to justice.

In dealing with humanitarian crises, immediate relief should be provided, but accompanied by questions about underlying causes. Simple maintenance can result in in the repetition of crises. (One may ask about the dilemma that humanitarian aid relief may take away attention from the enduring causes of structural violence.) Deaths and suffering from Haitian hurricanes and earthquakes require immediate relief but the poor construction related to earthquake death tolls and the global warming which increases the damage from an earthquake or hurricane are dimensions of structural violence.

The economic issues must be addressed. Let us keep focus on the ethical implications of neo-liberal positions. The rich-poor gap is associated with violence and other problems in individual countries. One hundred years ago, Pope Leo XIII said, "To possess superfluity is to possess the goods of others." Fighting words today! Slavery and racism are called the American original sin. Perhaps sexism goes back to the Garden of Eden. But sin can be overcome with grace.

## Aiding affected persons

Non-violent social movements should be supported, with a focus on empowering the participants. Small gains can be part of building a road.

We can accompany those living in the midst of structural violence in any way possible. Seek remedies which will mitigate the effects of structural violence in general and augment the agency of the persons negatively affected. But do not see these as more than temporary interventions and respites.

Hopefully, we will listen to persons who we realize are in the midst of structural violence. Strengthen and empower them with our attention and any help we might provide. Identify "heroes" and leaders and protect them. The non-violent opponent is considered more dangerous by some repressive governments.

Paradoxically, certain programs to alleviate the suffering resulting from structural violence can in fact perpetuate the structurally violent system, especially when a "normalization" ("this is the way it always is") is the result and the underlying structures remain. Support those who resist dubious "normalization."

We must support refugees and work toward improvement of situations that cause persons to become refugees. Treat migrants humanely, realizing that immigrants improve the economic and demographic situations of countries to which they migrate, as well as remit needed monies to their countries of origin. Fight the "harmful immigrant" and "potentially dangerous refugee" generalized falsehoods. Cultivate hospitality. Realize that improvements in central Africa and in Syria will decrease "necessary" migration.

## Conclusion

The concept of structural violence provides an opportunity to re-evaluate the way we look at situations which are very difficult for much of the world's population. It can reform the way we look at the rough spots in the human situation. It can move us from implicitly blaming the victim to awareness of the fact that for many people life is "beyond their control." Using the specific insight of structural violence can bring an "aha" moment to our analysis of situations and our quest for immediate, intermediate, and long term solutions, together with some of the means to move forward. Initial compassion can

be migrated to vision and planning. Melinda Gates (Gates 2017) notes our shared humanity: "Whatever the conditions of people's lives, wherever they live, however they live we all share the same dreams." With a reform of our perspective, we can replace "Why don't they get themselves out of it" (cf. Price 2012, 121) with "We can move together against the deadly shackles of structural violence."

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