

Galtung's theory of structural violence sociology essay



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Assess the strengths and weaknesses of Galtung's theory of structural violence. Violence has permeated human society ever since the beginning of time and has been instrumental in the subversion of countless individuals, resulting in multitudes of deaths and suffering. "Violence" exists as a highly debated core branch of knowledge within peace and conflict studies as it has a tendency of being "misrecognised" (Schinkel 2010: 3). Up till today, no single academic discipline has an all encompassing grasp on the complexities of violence (Schinkel 2010: 4). However, Galtung's theory of structural violence stands out, as it seeks to expand the conventional narrow definition of physical or manifestable violence to include violence as a form of "influence", an invisible force which acts to constrain human social conditions (Høivik 1977: 59, Galtung 1999: 2).

This paper will argue that Galtung's theory of structural violence will serve to reach its strongest potential for gaining insight into the complexities of understanding the roots of violence in the context of peace studies when viewed through a triangular approach. Our investigation will begin by analysing "violence" and how it is affiliated to "structural violence". Following that, a comprehensive discussion on Galtung's violence triangle will be presented in order to lead the discussion onto the strengths and weaknesses of Galtung's theory of structural violence. I shall conclude by asserting that Galtung's theory is excessive on a mundane level, but paramount in its contributions towards peace research studies.

Before we commence to critic Galtung's theory of structural violence, a reasonable understanding of "violence" is in order. What is violence? Are we able to define violence? Saint Augustine once noted with a condescending

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tone “ so long as I don't think about it (violence), I know what it is” (cited in Schinkel 2010: 5). This abstract approach attempts to explain the intricacies of violence without essentially mentioning what exactly consist in a “ violent” action, begging us to question if violence is only limited in a direct or physical framework. Indeed, social scientists seem to operate under a silent general consent that one does not need to define violence (Schinkel 2010: 17). When a student shoots a teacher in the face, the frankness of reality screams for us to quickly dismiss academic red tape and label the event as “ violent”. Willem Schinkel notes such a mundane “ pre-reflexive apprehension” of violence to be “ naively realistic” (2010: 5). If so, how are we to come to an accepted definition of violence? Virginia Held defines violence to be “ predictable, coercive, and usually a sudden infliction of injury upon or damage harming persons” (1997: 187). If we accept Held's definition, the hidden “ violent” nature of non-physical mental torture and humiliation brought about by a combination of name calling, extortion, stealing and vandalising of personal property, exemplified by a school bully would be cast into doubt.

Once again we are faced with the same question. What is to be considered the accepted definition of violence? In 1994, a group of social scientists initiated a comprehensive survey to analyse violent behaviour carried out by a certain number of post-discharge psychiatric patients, in order to come to some sort of conclusion on how gender differentials influence violence (Teasdale, Silver and Monahan 2006: 649-651). “ Violence” within the experiment was then narrowly defined as actions that resulted in “ physical injury or involved the use of a weapon, threats made with a weapon in hand,

or sexual assaults” (Teasdale, Silver and Monahan 2006: 652). Perhaps, this limited definition adequately fulfilled its purpose, which was essentially a conscious categorisation of different threat responses between man and women. However, under the pretext of conflict resolution, such a narrow definition will certainly not suffice. Thus, we see the limitations of adopting inadequate definitions and accord that the definition of violence can vary depending on its purpose within context.

Within the context of peace studies, structural violence overtly strives to connect the invisible violent “ influences” of institutions with social conditions leading to the loss or deprivation of human lives (1999: 29-37). It emphasises its focus on non-manifestable threats such as poverty and unjust social, political and economic structures in comparison to direct threats like knives and guns, while acknowledging both threats to administer similar dire consequences (Köhler and Alcock 1976: 343). It is a “ hybrid concept” which recognises the necessities of both theoretical rhetoric and empirical evidence (Høivik 1977: 59). A stronger emphasis is placed on the latter, so much so that if theory disagrees with statistics, theory has to be readjusted to fit the conclusions of research accordingly (Galtung 1999: 11-12). On the other hand, we also have to apprehend and be wary of the “ hidden” nature of violence that hinders empirical accumulation (Schinkel 2010: 5). Structural violence views that the agent of death is no longer conventional manifestable objects, but deadly “ influences” such as discrimination, exploitation and injustice. John Archer agrees and notes that a combine methodology of both quantitative and qualitative research is imperative for a more rounded understanding into the roots of violence (2003: 26).

The concept of structural violence is essentially useful as it is an attempt to expand the existent spectrum of traditional physical threats into the realm of intangibles which is paramount towards deriving underlying causes of violence. However, structural violence by itself is strictly limited if it does not even recognise immediate visible threats. Therefore, instead of adopting a singular or bilateral approach, Galtung advocates a triangular mode of understanding violence and proposes cultural violence, structural violence and direct violence to be the corners of this unique triangle (1978: 208). It is this distinct triangle that sets "Galtung's theory of structural violence" apart from the other theories of "structural violence". The purpose of the triangular approach is mainly to stress on the multifaceted nature of violence. Under Galtung's perspective, Cultural violence, structural violence and direct violence can all be interlinked into one another to allow for a more complete understanding on the origins of violence in the world (1999: 29-34). This particular approach permits us to analyse patterns of mutual reinforcement or escalation within conflicts and assists us in identifying "corners" where we can break the triangle in order to put a halt to violence as a whole (Galtung 1978: 487-489).

A thorough analysis of Galtung's violence triangle is in order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Galtung's theory of structural violence. An examination of either cultural violence, structural violence or direct violence separately as singular approaches sets themselves up from the beginning to be easily criticized due to the objective nature of theories (Høivik 1977: 59). If we approach the violence triangle as an entirety, its vastness and multifaceted nature would overwhelm the need for structure. Therefore, so

as to investigate the linkages between the three different types of violence, I shall be adopting a more bilateral approach by exploring connections between cultural violence to structural violence and direct violence to structural violence.

Galtung notes " behind all this (violence triangle) is cultural violence" (1999: 2). If we are to view Galtung's perspective of violence as a vertical ladder instead of a triangle, it will begin with cultural violence on the top, structural violence in the middle, followed by direct violence (Galtung 1999: 2). What is cultural violence? Cultural violence are prevailing attitudes and beliefs within culture which we are acquainted with since adolescence in our everyday life that makes direct and structural violence seem right or at least acceptable (Galtung 1990: 291). Under the steady flow of time, cultural violence creeps into our daily lives without our realisation and changes attitudes towards what is thought to be the acceptable usage of violence (Galtung 1990: 292-295). One should note that when we speak of " culture" within cultural violence, we do not refer to entire cultures but to certain " aspects of culture", such as media, religion, ideology, language, art, and empirical science (Galtung 1990: 296-301). Douglas Kellner writes that " Media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and its deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil." (cited in Held 1997: 201). It is not difficult to imagine what harm this " aspect of culture" propagates as a dominating power of " influence" with its constant barrage of materialistic advertisements and violent media which an average individual is exposed to in today's modern society. With respect to the

violence triangle, "aspects of culture" can be seen as the legitimizing source for both direct and structural violence (Galtung 1990: 294).

Susan Rakoczy notes that a patriarchal religion such as Christianity breeds cultural violence as it systematically degrades women's dignity and position in society by associating God with a male and by preaching women's inferiority through ancient decrees found in the Bible (2004: 29; Galtung 1999: 40-43). Religion gives males the perception that they have a legitimate role granted by God to discipline women when there is a need for it. However, one should also note that such scenarios are often subjected to the character of the individual and should not be lumped together as a group, giving the false impression that all Christian husbands abuse their wives. This is an excellent example of how an "aspect of culture" legitimizes "influence" and builds institutions like churches, which unintendedly promote structural violence by nurturing patriarchal beliefs which are arguably generally accepted by the public in most Christian societies.

Structural violence can be perceived in the fundamental hierarchy of the church's ladder of office, as seldom females are offered key positions of leadership in the church, even though they are ordained according to their religion (Rakoczy 2004: 33). The aforementioned sexist phenomenon can be directly linked to dominant patriarchal sentiments found in such societies, so much so that such an oppression goes unquestioned due to the effects of "cultural violence". One can even argue that western patriarchal beliefs to a certain extent had an influence in the war in Afghanistan when the media painted Afghanistan's women to be insecure and needed protection by

western men, leading to further “ direct violence” (Ayotte and Husain 2005: 112).

By now, we should have a familiar grasp with the concept of “ direct violence”. To reiterate, it is the visible and physical threat that takes the manifestable form of guns, bombs, knives, etc which are non-recognisable by strict structural violence conventions. Neoliberal policies as an agent of structural violence have been identified by scholars to be clearly aggravating “ direct violence” through its implementation, directly causing the uprise of extreme poverty, unemployment, social stratification, inequality and animosity around the world (Olivera and Furio 2006: 104; Sanchez 2006: 178). The seriousness of the issue is not to be easily dismissed as Gernot Köhler and Norman Alcock noted in 1965, fourteen to eighteen million deaths were attributed to structural violence, while direct violence had a comparatively lower death rate of roughly a million (1976: 350).

Sanchez argues that under a neoliberal system, the systematic exploitation of the middle- and working- class coerces populations to turn to “ radical violence” or to what we understand as “ direct violence” by provoking strikes and demonstrations which has the potential to turn bloody (2006: 179; Gitelman 1973: 2). Similarly, as social conditions deteriorate, the poor and the young turn to criminal violence through “ youth gangs, criminal mafias and drug cartels” to obtain what they need by robbery, kidnapping, carjacking, etc which can be seen as forms of “ direct violence” (Sanchez 2006: 179). Structural violence not only exploits, but also incites the manifestation of physical violence by the poor and suffering to be employed as a tool for basic survival (Sanchez 2006: 179-181). However, people do not

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turn violent just because they are poor, but because they are deprived of basic resources. In other words, Galtung's theory of structural violence guides us a step forward into the realm of social and resource inequality, where the rich have many and the poor have few.

Critics on the strengths of Galtung's theory of structural violence suggest that Galtung's theory sets itself up as too wide of a definition (Schinkel 2010: 39). For an ordinary person, violence is people getting beaten up and being tortured in a physical or visible manner, not the well meaning all-encompassing surreal vision that Galtung has provided us with. Does this entail that Galtung's violence triangle theory is pointless? As we have discussed earlier, I believe the justification lies in how we approach his theory within context. On a mundane level, without any doubt, the practice of Galtung's violence theory would indeed be excessive. However, in relation to peace and conflict studies, Galtung theory of structural violence is an essential stepping stone towards world peace. No longer can future academics investigate " violence" without first considering the hidden " influences" linked by cultural and structural violence that have subtly ingrained itself unto non-suspecting individuals. Inequality caused by social structures is postulated to be the core culprit for " violence" all around the world (Miliband 2005: 39-41). As we have earlier analysed, Galtung's violence triangle strongest contribution is that it opens up debate for further inquiry on to the actual roots of violence.

If social institutions, the perpetrators of structural violence, are pinpointed to be the major source of inequality and hence " violence" in the world, can we do without them? Bill Gates Sr disagrees and notes, " Success is a product of <https://assignbuster.com/galtungs-theory-of-structural-violence-sociology-essay/>

having been born in this country, a place where education and research are subsidised, where there is an orderly market, where the private sector reaps enormous benefits from public investment. For someone to assert that he or she has grown wealthy in America without the benefit of substantial public investment is pure hubris" (cited in Miliband 2005: 44). Nevertheless, there is still a pertinent need for social institutions and the economy to exist, so as to provide society with public safety, resources, education, infrastructure, health and welfare. How are we to negate inequality if social institutions are to stay? Levine argues that inequality stems from the extreme concentration of " power", such as income and resources which are allocated in the hands of the elite few (2003: 127). Therefore, the solution is clear. " Power" has to be redistributed. This is the core concept of Dawn Brancati's book *Peace by Design*, where she advocates political decentralisation to solve conflict and secession issues around the world (2009: 29-64). Perhaps the best institutional structure is an egalitarian one, whereby employee and employer " power" relations are more democratic.

It is no surprise that Galtung's theory of structural violence contains a few subtle weaknesses. Levine notes that all theories no matter how polished, encompasses innate assumptions and prejudice (2003: 126). The foremost weakness within Galtung's theory is that it is " faceless". By " faceless", I mean that the theory does not recognise individual human characteristics but carelessly categorises society into such as " the poor", " the rich", " the haves" and " the have-nots". It is common understanding to acknowledge that if we place several people under similar circumstances, each individual will react differently. The same logic of inconsistency applies when we

analyse violence. One of the core attributes of structural violence is its unique ability to recognise violent “ influences” such as stress. However, Galtung’s violence triangle theory does not take into account how different individuals would respond to different stress levels (Linskey, Bachman and Straus 1995: 4-5). Would the individual manifest direct violence towards others, such as rape, homicide, interfamily assault or turn aggression inwards to acts of suicide, smoking and the abuse of alcohol? Wilkinson notes that stress in early life like the loss of one’s parent, domestic conflict, etc can have dire consequences on the individual’s mental and physical health (2005: 185-188). We can envision the concept of humanism spreading its effect, as different characteristics and upbringing of individuals would process stress in varying fashions. This gives the impression that Galtung’s structural violence is humanistically idealistic.

Idealised society is arguably in the minds of most peace researchers. It is due to the anticipation and firm belief that the possibility of this utopian view is feasible, that Galtung’s theory of structural violence was introduced in the first place (Høivik 1977: 60). However, human beings are too unpredictable, stubborn, impulsive, unreasonable, erratic, etc to fall perfectly into comprehensive theories. Not only is the individual easily swayed by internal emotions such as stress, humans are also influenced by immediate external social scenarios. The circumstance which I am specifically keen on is the “ bystander effect”, the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim which is not on the forefront of Galtung’s violence triangle. Research proves that with greater number of witnesses to an emergency event, the less likely single individuals are to help (Levine 2003: 128). It seems as though with the

myriad of irrational social behaviour, we can never be able to predict how human beings would react when exposed to violent “ influences”, the best cause of action is to minimise “ violence” from its roots.