

# Symbolic Violence

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## Definition:

Symbolic Violence, a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu, is the harm caused by some to others because of the relative power differences between individuals and/or groups in a society. It also explains the way in which each group, in at least some way, accepts the power difference and associated harm that is 'allowed' to exist because of these power differences being seen as something 'normal.' In many cases, this 'acceptance' is not something consciously done. Nonetheless, symbolic violence is a harmful effect that sometimes happens when hierarchical power differences are misrecognized as something 'natural.'

This also creates a cycle where symbolic violence helps to perpetuate the *reproduction* of social inequalities, which in turn helps to continue symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997; Moore, 2004). Economic, social, and cultural capital are all passed on, or reproduced, in a way that normalizes the symbolic violence experienced by individuals from non-dominant groups. Similarly, some argue that symbolic violence, although not physically enacted violence, can create an environment where physical acts of violence performed by those with power to those without power go unchallenged or unchallenged (Thapar-Björket et al., 2016).

## Significance:

Holmes (2013) focuses on experiences of symbolic violence in the ethnography, *Fresh Fruit Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*. Holmes follows Indigenous migrant workers as they cross the border from Mexico into the United States and for one year as they migrate to different places on the West Coast to pick fruit. *Fresh Fruit Broken Bodies* illustrates the unjust treatment of individuals in many areas of life. For example, appalling living conditions; experiences crossing the border; and treatment by landlords, bosses, doctors, educators, and even community members in everyday places like grocery stores. Holmes also draws attention to instances where someone who is being oppressed does not 'fight back' against wrongs, or accepts certain wrongs as 'the way it is.' Symbolic violence even shows up in how individuals end up experiencing mental health related issues like depression, alcoholism, and judging oneself with personally harmful emotions.

Holmes describes symbolic violence as "each group understand[ing] not only itself but also the other to belong *naturally* [emphasis added] in their positions in the social hierarchy. For example, the powerful tend to believe they deserve the successes they have had and the powerless have brought their problems on themselves" (p. 44).

In education, symbolic violence is a serious concern because of structures and policies like standardized testing, stratification and tracking, breaking up community schools, and controlling

curriculum. This perpetuates the dominant culture and disregards, blames, and in some cases even vilifies non-dominant cultures.

Gast (2018) used the idea of symbolic violence to explain how teachers and Honors students make and normalize assumptions about non-Honors Black students' interest in, and potential for success in, academics. In addition to automatic assumptions about students, their parents, and most people from their neighborhood (in relation to academics); there was also a tendency to discipline/punish Black students at higher rates than white and Asian American students when the same behaviors were observed (e.g. phones out in class, talking in class, etc.). Gast referenced Bourdieu and Passeron's work in her study, showing that symbolic violence is seen in, "every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 4).

### **Examples which illustrate symbolic violence:**

- A person from a marginalized group presents ideas in a meeting, starting with words that belittle themselves or the ideas. For example, "these are *just my* ideas," or "these are probably not very good, but here are some ideas."
- Society communicates to someone that *harm happened to them* because of how they were dressed, or someone *chooses to not report violence they experienced* because of their own clothes or state of intoxication.
- A suicide that was caused by someone accepting a personal belief of unworthiness that has been communicated and perpetuated by society.
- While there is debate as to whether or not Harriet Tubman said the following quote, which has been written with different wording in different places (Biography, 2019; Reuters, 2023; Ung, 2018), the idea it captures represents the harm of symbolic violence. "I helped free a thousand slaves. I could have helped free a thousand more, *if only they knew they were enslaved.*"

### **References and Resources:**

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