



Web of Control

By Paul Kivel

Each sphere of the buffer zone contributes to an overall web of control that is devastating to communities of color and serves to keep them out of mainstream institutions. School teachers, counselors and administrators often monitor youth of color closely, isolating them in “special needs” classes, writing them up as behavior and discipline problems, suspending them readily and then blaming their families for not caring and their communities for being dysfunctional.

Social workers monitor and intervene in families of color much more readily than they do in white families. Because of system-wide assumptions that people of color are more likely to scam programs for unneeded benefits and because of limited program funding that requires staff to deny benefits to as many as possible to save money, people of color often face more scrutiny, more paperwork, harsher personal treatment and greater levels of rejection than comparable white people. Limited language proficiency, inadequate educational background, lack of access to public transportation, childcare and other resources prevent many people of low income from access to needed services. Low-income people of color are more likely to face a host of these barriers, and, in addition, to be treated as undeserving and suspect.

Social service providers are also more likely to intervene quickly in the affairs of families of color by calling the police, child welfare and protective services. Children of color are far more likely to be removed from their families by child welfare and protective service workers, and are quicker to be laced into residential programs and foster care.¹ police, sheriffs and immigration officials monitor communities of color with great intensity leading to racial profiling, illegal deportations, police brutality, disproportionate citations and arrest rates for petty crimes such as traffic violations, alcohol and marijuana use, prostitution, loitering



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and being a public nuisance.

Apartment owners, real estate agents, bank loan officers, security guards, Bureau of Indian Affairs staff, youth recreation program staff, public and state parks staff, small business owners, store clerks² — there are literally tens of thousands of white people whose jobs have the function of monitoring people of color and limiting where they can be and what they can do. Although studies show that many exhibit unintentional and unconscious discriminatory behavior, there are many apartment owners, real estate agents and bank loan officers who try to be fair and unbiased in their practices. Overall, however, these professions and the system of housing allocation they are part of do a very efficient job of keeping housing in the United States highly segregated.³ The surveillance and punishment of people of color by people in these jobs is enhanced by the many ordinary white people who informally monitor the people of color around them for “suspicious” activity and report their observations to police, immigration officials, housing authorities, school principals, shopping mall security guards and social welfare workers.

These routine white interventions into the lives of people of color are assaults not just on individuals, but on families and communities. The combination of racism in the school, child welfare and criminal/legal and immigration systems devastates children and adults, literally separates and destroys families and makes strong neighborhood, extended family and community networks fragile and unsustainable. Massive societal intervention in the lives of people of color perpetuates intergenerational patterns of disadvantage, vulnerability to violence and economic exploitation.

In African American, Native American, Arab American and in immigrant Asian American and Latino/a communities, the fate of individuals, families and communities are linked. When individuals are harassed, profiled or beaten by the police, when individuals are denied benefits by immigration officials, when children are disproportionately disciplined by school authorities, when children are unnecessarily taken from families and placed in foster care, when people of color are treated unfairly and disproportionately incarcerated by criminal justice authorities, normal human relationships are disrupted, the social capital⁴ of the community is seriously diminished and the ability to obtain social services is decreased. No one is unaffected. When the media use the negative impact of such community attacks to further reinforce negative stereotypes and justify policies by blaming those under attack, such racial mistreatment is seen as normal and acceptable to white people. For example, even though there is much evidence that African American and Latino/a youth are systematically pushed out of schools, the media portray the problem of lack of family support, violence in the community or lack personal effort, reinforcing stereotypes of people of color as uncaring, violent and lazy. Teachers and administrators can then avoid



responsibility for their contribution to a school system that operates in a racially discriminatory manner.

White people are almost never subject to reprimand, much less more serious consequences for regular, routine and pervasive patterns of racial discrimination that they personally commit. Even police officers who murder innocent and unarmed black youth rarely receive serious consequences. Whatever level of racism a white person exhibits, we are generally quick to minimize and individualize the damage done, and to attribute their action to inexperience, an accident, a temporary lapse in judgment or extenuating circumstances so we can exonerate and forgive them. This allows us to avoid holding them accountable and avoid examining their role (and ours) in maintaining the web of control over communities of color.

The Buffer Zone

- Is the work you do part of the buffer zone--either taking care of people at the bottom of the pyramid, keeping hope alive or controlling them?
- Historically how has your job, career, profession, or occupation developed relationship to communities of color? What impact has it had on different communities of color at different times?
- How have people in your line of work protected white power and privilege and excluded people of color?
- Have you noticed individual acts of racism or patterns of racism in the organization or system in which you work?
- How have individuals and communities of color resisted these action either from within your work/occupation/profession or from the community?
- Who are white people who have challenged racism in your work?
- Who benefits from the work you do--people at the top of the pyramid, people n the buffer zone or people at the bottom?
- How can you take into account the impact of the wen of control (the entire system of racism) on people of color when you interact with them and when you look at organizational and institutional policies?
- What will you do to become less of an agent of the wealthy and more of an ally to people of color?
- *Am I an agent of the racism that reinforces the racial hierarchy, do I work as an ally to people of color, or are there elements of both roles in my work?*
- *How can I become more of an ally and less of an agent?*



The cumulative impact of the pervasive, everyday web of surveillance, control and enforcement on the lives of people of color should not be underestimated. They always have to operate within white organizations and institutions, are subject to white authority figures and are vulnerable to disrespect or worse from white people around them. Our compassion and our anti-racist action should be guided by our understanding of how this web of control works. Buffer zone jobs are the largest category of working- and middle-class jobs and are necessary in our society. People go into the helping professions to serve the community and provide needed services. Police officers, nurses, teachers and social workers are routinely honored for their work and dedication. But just because the intent of social service providers and others in buffer zone jobs is well-meaning does not exclude them from accountability for the impact of what they do. Racism is currently built into the structure of the buffer zone, and therefore those white people without an explicit anti-racist commitment and practice, despite their best intent, will be acting as agents of the ruling class in maintaining the racial and economic status quo. To quote Taiaiake Alfred (substituting the word racism for colonialism): The challenge, and the hope, is for each person to recognize and counteract the effects of [racism] in his or her own life, and thus develop the ability to live in a way that contests [racism]. We are all co-opted to one degree or another, so we can only pity those who are blind or who refuse to open their eyes to the [racial] reality, and who continue to validate, legitimate, and accommodate the interests of that reality in opposition to the goals and values of their own nations.⁵

Notes

1. See Dorothy Roberts. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*. Basic Books, 2002 for extensive documentation of the impact of racist practices on communities of color.
2. Even white National Basketball Association referees were found in one extensive review of their calls by the NBA to be systematically biased against black players.
3. National Fair Housing Alliance. *Unequal Opportunity: Perpetuating Housing Segregation in America*, 2006 Fair Housing Trends Report. 2006. [online]. [cited February 20, 2011]. mvfairhousing.com/pdfs/2006%20Fair%20Housing%20Trends%20Report.PDF.
4. “Social capital is the intangible good produced by relationships among people, as distinguished from the tangible skills, resources, and



knowledge that constitute human capital.” James S. Coleman.
Foundations of Social Theory. Harvard, 1990, p. 98.

5. Taiaiake Alfred. Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous
Manifesto. Oxford, 1999, p. 73.



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