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Dissecting the Killing of Trayvon Martin: The Power Factor

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Abstract

Power is long-noted for influencing human behavior. The following article proposes that the drive to achieve personal power may have been a determining factor in what caused the death of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida.

Keywords: Personal power, social power, stereotyping, labeling, positions of power

I believe the killing of Trayvon Martin started long before he walked across the grassy area of the Retreat at Twin Lakes, a townhome complex in Sanford, Florida, with George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch captain close behind. It seems whether it is actual physical death or the disintegration of one's personal dignity, social issues such as stereotyping and racism often play a part. Another social issue that has been around since the world began that I believe played a huge role in the Martin tragedy and many tragedies that end in death is the *quest for power*.

Psychologists recognize that we live in a world with “extremely salient power differentials” (Lammers, Stoker & Stapel, 2009, p. 1543) even though it has been a challenge for researchers to agree on a universal definition of power. However, Lammers et al. argue that there are at least two kinds of power: social power and personal power. Social power is defined as the ability of a person to influence others and make them do things they would not do otherwise” (p. 1543) and can be found in relationships such as employer/employee relationships (Overbeck, 2010; Van Dijke & Poppe, 2006). For example, simply based on my position as an executive director, I do have the ability to influence staff, even around something as simple as showing up for work on time. Personal power can be defined as the capability to do what you want, when you want, and get what you want *without* being influenced by others. A good example is having wealth one with wealth is less dependent on others for basic needs. Guinote (2007a, 2007b, 2010) also put forward that power allows individuals to attain their desired outcomes (whatever those goals are) without difficulty and because the outcomes coincide with each particular situation, people with power have the ability to quickly adapt their thinking to meet the need.

The logic of my argument ascertaining that perhaps Zimmerman was on a quest to obtain personal power is partially drawn from some of the news accounts of the Martin/Zimmerman story. It appeared that, at one point, Zimmerman sought to become a police officer, he desired to own a hand gun and purchased one, and he became the neighborhood watch captain; all positions that can be said to have relationships with gaining some type of personal power. Thus, it seems two worlds collided in the backyards of the row of townhouses that day, a man possibly driven to have and exercise personal power, and an African American youth, already stereotyped and fitting the profile as Zimmerman shared with the policeman on the telephone, “...This guy looks like he’s up to no good or he’s on drugs or something. It’s raining and he’s just walking around, looking about...” (Milligan, 2012, para. 3). News accounts also shared Zimmerman had called 911 at least 46 times in the past six-years, with the content of the calls ranging from needing help with unruly children to suspicious-looking characters who primarily were African Americans (Francescani, 2012). This premise of the need to achieve personal power is also consistent with Van Dijke and Poppe (2006) who put forward that there is ample reason to anticipate that people are more strongly inclined to increase or secure their personal power than social power.

Furthermore, Cartwright (1959) argued that people who have a considerable amount of personal power are unimpeded and are self-governing. Lammers et al. (2009) also shared that because personal power means freedom from others, if it is conceptualized that way, it increases stereotyping. On the other hand, if power is seen as a responsibility over others it decreases stereotyping. And, power holders who view power as non-relational most often stereotype because there isn’t much reason to understand others.

Some cultural factors also promote a view that personal power is a tool to be used for moving forward one’s own personal agenda such as receiving accolades from others and efforts to maintain and push one’s power status in the minds of others. Lammers et al. further explained that, in contrast, other cultural values see power as having the tool to actually help and benefit others. Torelli and Shavitt (2010) shared that because the goals of the power-holder differ by cultural values, perceptions of power as a resource differ as well. Oyserman (2009) added that because cultural factors also influence the kinds of situations that people are normally exposed to, cultural thinking processes surface as effective ways to handle the incident at hand. Higher

powered individuals will be less motivated to make extra efforts to individualize people and get a clearer picture of what is really going on. Rather, they resort to automatic perception, specifically relying on familiar stereotypes.

Thus, based on the social/personal power theory, I conclude that with an opportunity present, Zimmerman's goal seemed to be to increase his personal power. Gaining social power as a neighborhood watch captain was at least one way to achieve that goal. Therefore, when Zimmerman first saw Trayvon Martin on the grassy knolls of the townhouse complex, he may not have simply witnessed a youth who happened to be African American coming from the store with a bag of Skittles and ice-tea. Instead he may have unconsciously recognized an opportunity to achieve his goal of becoming a man of notable power--and even more so, a man who was recognized by others as a man of power. The fight to achieve this status may have been the determining factor that prompted Zimmerman to take action in the manner that he did. This is not uncommon. History is fraught with accounts of ordinary people whose quest to obtain and retain power has driven them to commit the most baffling and heinous crimes.

Did Martin hide and jump out of some bushes when he found out Zimmerman was following him? Maybe, and maybe Zimmerman was severely frightened even carrying a gun, and that's understandable. When we are frightened, prudent decision-making capabilities are hampered. However, from my vantage point, Martin should be alive because Zimmerman shouldn't have followed him. For me, Zimmerman following Martin only lends itself to support the earlier argument that Zimmerman may have been on a quest for power.

Likewise, since Zimmerman did follow Martin, Florida's Stand Your Ground law may have served to perpetuate the connection of power and violence. The law enacted in 2005 grants immunity to an offender who sensibly thinks his or her life is in danger (Olorunnipa, 2013). However such a law leaves room for individual interpretation as to what *sensibly* means and thus deserves to be challenged. It should be totally repealed or at the very least, the language should be changed so there is no private interpretation. Even if Martin's main goal for traversing the complex was to commit a crime, it was the police's protocol to check out the suspicious situation. Even under Florida's Stand Your Ground law, which seems a tragedy within itself, Martin should be alive because had Zimmerman *not* followed him, Stand Your Ground would not be a factor in the incident.

The public may never know what really happened that day. Yet, the impact is felt around the world. An African American young man is dead by the hands of a neighborhood watch volunteer. As Lammers et al. (2009) contend "power has a strong influence on human behavior. It not only gives people influence over the world and other people but also has a wide range of strong side effects on cognition and behavior" (p. 1547). Additionally, Kipnis (1972) pointed out that people who have power think and behave differently from people who don't have it.

Personal power is an inescapable and important psychological phenomenon (Torelli & Shavitt, 2010) along with cultural factors. Therefore, research on power should definitely continue, particularly in regard to how it is conceptualized culturally. Additionally, as research has shown clear connections between violence and power, more understanding of this connection seems warranted. In this age of an ever increasingly violent culture, perhaps the results can help clinical and community psychologists to identify predictors and subsequently lead to the development and implementation of more prevention and intervention strategies.

It also seems vitally important that those who work with and care for children, including parents, have conversations around issues of personal and social power. For example, a place to begin might be discussing the implications of video games that are filled with violence and most always have a hero, the one figure left standing who represents the winner; a representation of personal power. And, the little I have glimpsed of these games, getting this power means the opponent is annihilated. Yet, through these games, we are seeing that the arousal of obtaining and retaining power is at the hands of very young children. Therefore, if we can help children to understand what we do know about power and its implications, whether true in this case or not, perhaps we can save another Trayvon Martin and another George Zimmerman as well.

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