

*How do people's experiences of authority differ, depending on their identity or their socio-economic or racial background? Should the law, institutions or people in positions of authority or power, change in order to address these differences and, if so, how?*

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"All animals are equal but some are more equal than others"

- George Orwell, Animal Farm

Your race, class, education, financial situation, gender, sexuality will undoubtedly affect your treatment in life and experience with authority. The question is why this is still the case in 2021 and how do we trace the roots of this insidious problem in society and work towards a fairer playing field for our citizens. In a world where our differences are increasingly being praised to be something that makes us unique it can be easy to ignore the fact that these differences are still reasons for why people are persecuted in the real world. There has been an increase in far-right extremist groups around the world as well as leaders possessing such ideology: Rodrigo Duterte, President of the Philippines, Bolsonaro, President of Brazil and, Donald Trump to name but a few. Having people in power with such rigid political views can lead to the oppression of minorities as their protection is both compromised and undermined by the ingrained discrimination within the system.

Before addressing this issue we need to recognise the present-day crisis in authority, shown by the increase in the prison population resulting in overcrowding, increased drug use, self-harm and suicides within our prisons. Furthermore we need to seriously question the aims of a legal system that is criminalizing increasing numbers of people victims of a crisis in mental health where resources are scarce and inevitably adding to an increasingly mentally ill society. Is this the inevitable consequence of a failing capitalist system?

The very concept of authorities creates an automatic hierarchy where people are bound to be above others. From this, problems then arise where we prioritise certain things, we pit people against each other based on the argument 'who's more useful?' Although this is inevitable, it becomes an issue when this becomes the main mentality of the authorities: to weigh a person's worth on their supposed usefulness to society, thus creating an ingrained prejudice against those that, ultimately, the authorities have failed. For example, Kelley Williams-Bolar a black single mother in social housing, who used her father's address on school applications is criminalised, ending up serving over a week in

jail, put on probation for 3 weeks, required to complete 80 days community service and pay \$30,000 back in tuition. Her crime: aspiring for better education for her children. And yet we accept the elitist 2 tier public school system, where we acknowledge that money can and does buy you better education and a fast track to societies positions of authority. Here, the law failed to take into any consideration the many factors that led to this woman's actions and when the practice of law becomes so regimental that it lacks basic human empathy it is then that it fails to protect the most vulnerable.

Whilst the goal of the penal system should be, therefore, to protect the vulnerable why is it that those most in need are those who tend to be less inclined to trust the authorities? The enquiry following the Stephen Lawrence case found the police to be “institutionally racist”[1]and it's a known fact that black people in the UK are more likely to be stopped and searched (in fact, 9 times more likely [2]) compared to white people despite searches of black people being less likely to detect crime than those conducted on white people. Unfortunately, the powers that run our country and educate our citizens, such as the judicial system and even universities, share this history of institutionalised racism and deep-rooted classist ideals and therefore people's experiences with them are bound to differ. To expect these communities that have been traumatised by decades of police brutality, by intimidation tactics and used as political pawns to completely trust in these systems immediately is ignorant. As this disproportionate mistreatment occurs, this distrust will continue to spread further into future generations.

As experience with the authorities begins very early on, children quickly learn how to obey authority so as to not suffer the repercussions. However, for those with mental health issues or those coming from a lower income background it's not as easy to follow these rules. A child with mental disorders such as ADHD or autism will need extra support in comprehending social cues let alone following complex academic rules. A universal lack of understanding and tolerance towards these issues often leads to these children being cast aside and labelled as ‘problem children’. This will make a child's school life unnecessarily difficult and could lead to exclusions, meaning less lesson time, creating a hole in their studies, resulting in worse grades and ultimately less opportunities in life. For those from a lower socio-economic background, it is harder to completely adhere to academic rules due to exceptional family circumstances which can vary massively from domestic violence to being carers for other family members. This can lead to being unmotivated at school, due to being preoccupied with countless things like; financial situation, unwillingness to go home, anxiety over family members... things that, for these children, matter more than studies. Naturally, this can lead to outbursts of frustration deflected towards other students or even teachers and once again, these children can end up alienated, their experience with education affected for life.

Despite this, looking at recent legislation in the UK sadly we seem to be regressing. The massive cuts to legal aid made in 2013 means access to legal representation is once again patchy if not non-existent for the financially disadvantaged. The cases that are no longer eligible for legal aid include divorce, welfare benefits, child contact, housing and unemployment laws which all disproportionately affect the poorer members of society.

To combat this problem and create a more level playing field for all members of society we need to take many crucial steps. Firstly, it's necessary to begin with the education system. Children who are already suffering need to stop being labelled as 'problem kids' as an excuse to cast them aside with lazy tactics such as expulsions and begin a more humane approach to prevent these children being set on the road to criminality.

Secondly, we need to question whether the petty criminality which takes up much of the magistrate's courts time could not be handled in a way more beneficial to society. An outdated fine system, which further drives financially struggling people into a spiral of debt, further criminality, depression, and mental health problems is simply counterproductive. In contrast, sentencing community service and probation as well as further alternatives such as structured community programmes will aid our society by providing carers, youth workers, community centres run by the council. An expanded and revitalised community service could give structure, experience, and skills to the previously criminalized and would serve not only as emotional healing to prevent reoffending but also as an innovative way to help the community.

Thirdly, there must be more diversity within not just the legal profession but authorities in general. We do not live in a perfect society and differing environments and differing identities will inevitably affect a child's education as well as adapt the way they respond to consequent encounters with authority later in life. Undermining or ignoring these people's differences, whilst seemingly progressive, can lead to serious consequences. Prejudices such as racism, ableism, or classism can arise as it's much easier to superficially inspect a community and consequently label them by their stereotypes rather than consider the differences throughout life that have led an individual to this point. Those from similar backgrounds may, of no fault of their own, lack the ability to comprehend their client's experiences and operate solely on very fixed legal procedures. A system with people from a wide range of communities will be able to provide more of a sense of compassion and understanding to certain clients such as Kelley Williams-Bolar who simply wanted a better education for her children. The aim being to begin to restore certain communities' lost faith in the judicial system as they see themselves represented in the authority figures and legal system that exists to serve them.

With a more varied profile of judges from all sectors of society a wider life experience pool and a more humane legal system should emerge. Hand in hand with a decriminalization of behaviour linked to addiction where drug and alcohol addiction is seen as an illness in need of treatment rather than a crime, we could create a more positive progressive society where your treatment by the authorities is not dependent on any aspect of your identity.

[1] – *Steven Lawrence enquiry- 1998 W. Macpherson*

[2] – *Vikram Dodd, 'Met police "disproportionately" use stop and search powers on black people' The Guardian sat 26th Jan 2019*